Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

Academic Affairs and Student Affairs as Co-Educators: A Student Life Cycle–Socialization Alignment Model for Student Success

Scott King

scott.king@udc.edu

University of the District of Columbia Community College

Research Article

Keywords: student success, academic affairs, student affairs, student socialization, student life cycle, belonging, institutional alignment, higher education

Posted Date: November 26th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11625911/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

This conceptual article argues that student success should be understood not only as the product of student effort or isolated academic and support interventions, but also as an outcome of institutional design across the student life cycle. Although higher education scholarship has long recognized the importance of collaboration between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, the literature provides less clarity about how such collaboration can be organized across the sequence of a student's institutional experience. To address this gap, the article develops the Student Life Cycle–Socialization Alignment Model, an original framework that connects four institutional phases—pre-arrival, arrival, residency, and departure—with four socialization processes—anticipation, encounter/integration, metamorphosis/assimilation, and sustained socialization. Drawing on student involvement, student success, organizational socialization, belonging, institutional collaboration, and equity-minded design scholarship, the model proposes that Academic Affairs and Student Affairs function as co-educators whose alignment shapes the coherence of expectations, opportunities for integration, development of academic and institutional identity, and transitions beyond enrollment. The model advances four propositions: (1) cross-divisional alignment before enrollment increases expectation coherence; (2) alignment during arrival supports the transition from anticipated expectations to lived institutional experience; (3) sustained alignment during residency supports belonging, academic identity, and persistence; and (4) alignment across the full life cycle produces cumulative effects that are more consequential than episodic collaboration. The article further argues that alignment is an equity mechanism because institutional ambiguity places greater burdens on students who enter without extensive tacit knowledge of higher education. The article concludes with implications for institutional leaders and a research agenda for empirically testing the proposed relationships.

1. Introduction

Institutions of higher education continue to face pressure to improve learning, persistence, completion, and equity while responding to changing student demographics, financial constraints, accountability expectations, and increasingly complex student needs. Yet student success is often pursued through interventions that are divided by institutional function: Academic Affairs is associated with curriculum, instruction, and academic standards, while Student Affairs is associated with advising, engagement, student development, and support. This organizational division is historically understandable, but it can produce a student experience that is less coherent than the institution intends.

The central problem addressed in this article is therefore not whether Academic Affairs or Student Affairs contributes to student success. Both do. The problem is whether the two divisions intentionally align their educational roles across the sequence of the student experience. Research on academic and student affairs collaboration has shown that collaboration can support student success and holistic learning, but collaboration may vary substantially in form, intensity, leadership, and purpose (Leary et al., 2022; Commodore et al., 2018). More recent scholarship likewise suggests that institutional innovation

and student success depend on structures that connect people, practices, and organizational levels rather than on isolated programs (Pokidina, 2026; Mearman et al., 2026).

This article advances the argument that Academic Affairs and Student Affairs should be understood as co-educators across the student life cycle. The term co-educators is used here to emphasize that learning and student development are not confined to the classroom and that the institutional messages students receive from academic and student affairs units jointly shape how they interpret expectations, relationships, support, belonging, and responsibility. The argument extends existing collaboration scholarship by locating that collaboration within a temporal framework: alignment is not simply a relationship between two divisions; it is a continuing institutional condition that must be maintained as students move through different phases of enrollment.

The article develops an original Student Life Cycle–Socialization Alignment Model. The model connects four institutional phases—pre-arrival, arrival, residency, and departure—with four socialization processes: anticipation, encounter/integration, metamorphosis/assimilation, and sustained socialization. The terminology intentionally connects the classic organizational socialization sequence of anticipation, encounter, and metamorphosis (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) with higher education scholarship that emphasizes integration, belonging, persistence, and student identity (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 2012; Weidman & DeAngelo, 2020). Sustained socialization is added as a conceptual extension to emphasize that students continue to interpret and apply institutional learning through transition and departure rather than reaching a simple endpoint at graduation.

The guiding question is:

How can Academic Affairs and Student Affairs be intentionally aligned as co-educators across the student life cycle to support student socialization, belonging, learning, persistence, and completion?

The contribution of the article is threefold. First, it reframes academic–student affairs collaboration as a lifecycle-based institutional design problem rather than a collection of episodic partnerships. Second, it integrates institutional sequencing with socialization theory to explain how alignment may produce cumulative effects on students' experiences. Third, it positions institutional alignment as an equity mechanism because unclear expectations and fragmented systems can impose greater navigation costs on students who possess less tacit knowledge of higher education.

2. Conceptual Approach and Theory-Building Method

This article is theory-building conceptual scholarship rather than an empirical study. Its purpose is to synthesize established perspectives and develop a framework that generates propositions for future research. Conceptual scholarship is particularly appropriate when a field contains related bodies of research that have not yet been sufficiently integrated to explain a phenomenon or guide institutional action. Recent work in Innovative Higher Education demonstrates the continued value of conceptual

frameworks that synthesize multiple theoretical perspectives to explain institutional change and student experience (Pokidina, 2026; Lebioda, 2026).

The conceptual synthesis proceeded through four stages. First, the article identified a conceptual problem: higher education scholarship recognizes the value of academic–student affairs collaboration and student socialization, but these ideas are rarely organized into a single lifecycle-based framework that specifies where alignment occurs, what each division contributes, and how alignment may accumulate across time. Second, foundational and contemporary scholarship was examined across five domains: student success and persistence; student involvement and belonging; organizational socialization; academic–student affairs collaboration; and institutional change and equity-minded design. Third, recurring constructs were categorized around institutional phases and socialization processes. Fourth, the constructs were integrated into the Student Life Cycle–Socialization Alignment Model and translated into propositions that can be examined empirically.

The model is not presented as a causal theory that has already been validated. Rather, it is a conceptual explanation of plausible relationships among institutional alignment, socialization, and student outcomes. Accordingly, causal language is avoided where empirical evidence is not yet available. The model proposes directional and cumulative relationships that future empirical research should test.

This distinction is important. The original manuscript described the student life cycle as having a “direct and determinative” influence on socialization. The revised framework instead treats the life cycle as an institutional structure through which opportunities, expectations, interactions, and resources are organized. Students remain active interpreters of those experiences. The model therefore recognizes both institutional agency and student agency: institutions design conditions, while students interpret, negotiate, and respond to those conditions.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Academic Affairs and Student Affairs as Co-Educators

The division between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs is deeply embedded in the organizational structure of American higher education. Academic Affairs traditionally carries responsibility for curriculum, instruction, faculty work, assessment, and academic standards. Student Affairs encompasses a broad set of educational and developmental functions, including advising, orientation, engagement, residential education, career development, student support, and leadership development. Although these distinctions provide organizational clarity, they can also create separate professional cultures and accountability structures (Kezar, 2006; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

The educational consequences of that separation become visible when students encounter inconsistent institutional messages. Students may be told that academic support is important but experience support services as disconnected from courses; they may receive recruitment messages emphasizing flexibility while encountering rigid processes after enrollment; or they may receive advising guidance that is not

aligned with curriculum sequencing. Such inconsistencies are not merely administrative inconveniences. They shape students' interpretations of what the institution expects and whether the institution is coherent and trustworthy.

Research on academic and student affairs partnerships provides a foundation for reconceptualizing the relationship. Commodore et al. (2018), examining collaboration at Norfolk State University, found that coordination between academic and student affairs could contribute to retention and degree attainment, particularly in an under-resourced institutional context. Leary et al. (2022) similarly found that collaboration in residential learning communities is best understood as an ongoing, interdependent process organized around holistic student learning. Vail (2024) further emphasizes that sustainable collaboration depends on institutional culture and the creation of spaces where academic and student affairs professionals can work meaningfully together.

These findings suggest that collaboration should not be treated as an occasional mechanism for implementing a program. Instead, collaboration can be understood as an institutional capability. The co-educator concept developed here extends that idea by asking where that capability must be deployed across the student life cycle and how its effects may accumulate.

3.2 Learning Extends Beyond the Classroom

Student learning is shaped by more than formal classroom instruction. Astin's (1993) theory of involvement emphasized the importance of student engagement in educationally purposeful activities, while Kuh (2008) demonstrated the importance of high-impact practices that connect students to learning, relationships, and institutional expectations. Advising, orientation, co-curricular engagement, leadership development, and other student affairs functions can therefore be educational rather than merely supportive.

Recent scholarship continues to emphasize this integration. Tracking High-Impact Practices across campus, for example, requires institutions to coordinate information and engagement beyond individual academic units (Schneider et al., 2026). Similarly, recent work on learning evidence ecosystems frames assessment as a partnership among institutional actors rather than a responsibility isolated within a single unit (Good et al., 2026). These developments support the premise that student success requires institutional coordination around learning rather than the preservation of strict functional boundaries.

The co-educator model consequently does not imply that Academic Affairs and Student Affairs perform identical roles. Instead, it proposes that they have distinct educational responsibilities that must be mutually intelligible to students. Academic Affairs establishes academic expectations, curricular pathways, learning outcomes, and disciplinary learning. Student Affairs helps students interpret institutional expectations, build relationships, develop identities, access resources, and apply learning in contexts beyond the classroom. Alignment occurs when these contributions reinforce rather than contradict one another.

3.3 Student Socialization in Higher Education

Organizational socialization provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding how individuals learn the values, norms, expectations, and behavioral patterns associated with an organization. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) conceptualized socialization as a process through which newcomers encounter and adapt to organizational environments. In higher education, socialization theory has been extended to explain how students learn academic and professional norms and how their experiences shape identity and development (Weidman et al., 2001; Weidman & DeAngelo, 2020).

The classic sequence of anticipation, encounter, and metamorphosis is particularly relevant to higher education. Students enter with expectations formed before enrollment. During encounter, they compare those expectations with institutional reality. Over time, some students adapt to institutional expectations, develop confidence, and internalize patterns of behavior and identity. However, socialization is not necessarily linear or complete. Students may simultaneously accept some institutional norms and resist others, and different groups may experience the same institution differently.

Recent research on undergraduate academic socialization reinforces the importance of time and context. Farnese et al. (2022) demonstrate that academic socialization develops across time and is influenced by students' interactions with their educational environment. Weidman and DeAngelo (2020) likewise emphasize that socialization is shaped by relationships, contexts, and the diverse pathways through which students encounter higher education.

The present model therefore adapts—not replaces—the classic socialization sequence. Anticipation corresponds to the pre-arrival period. Encounter is connected to arrival and is interpreted here as a process of integration because students are testing expectations against lived experience. Metamorphosis is connected to residency and is interpreted as a process of assimilation in which students increasingly understand institutional expectations and develop academic and institutional identities. Sustained socialization extends the model into departure by recognizing that students continue to make meaning of their educational experiences as they transition to employment, further education, transfer, alumni engagement, and other post-enrollment contexts.

3.4 Belonging, Student Success, and Institutional Design

Student success has increasingly been understood as more than persistence alone. Belonging, academic identity, engagement, learning, and students' capacity to navigate institutional systems are interconnected dimensions of the student experience (Tinto, 2012; Strayhorn, 2019). The institutional environment matters because policies, communications, advising practices, instructional expectations, and opportunities for engagement communicate what students must do to succeed and whether they are recognized as members of the institution.

This perspective shifts attention from a deficit model of student persistence to an institutional design perspective. If students receive confusing information, encounter contradictory processes, or cannot determine which unit is responsible for solving a problem, the institution has created a navigation

burden. Such burdens can be particularly consequential for first-generation students and others who enter college with less access to tacit knowledge about how higher education works.

Recent scholarship supports this institutional-design orientation. Wu et al. (2025) argue that transparent and consistently applied program structures can advance equity. IHEP (2024) similarly identifies student experience and belonging as important dimensions of postsecondary learning, persistence, and completion and emphasizes the role of institutional policies and practices in shaping those experiences. DeRosa (2023) provides additional evidence that advising can contribute to academic outcomes indirectly through validation and belonging.

The implication for the present model is that alignment is not merely an efficiency strategy. It can be an equity strategy. When academic and student affairs units communicate consistently and coordinate expectations, students have fewer institutional ambiguities to decode. When they do not, students with greater institutional knowledge may be better positioned to compensate for fragmented systems.

3.5 Institutional Innovation and Cross-Divisional Alignment

Innovative Higher Education has recently published conceptual and empirical scholarship emphasizing that meaningful institutional innovation depends on relationships among structures, actors, and processes. Pokidina (2026) proposes a multilevel framework for institutionalizing teaching and learning innovations and argues that structural conditions and agentic efforts must reinforce one another. Mearman et al. (2026) similarly use a co-evolution perspective to examine how institutional change becomes embedded and sustained. Good et al. (2026) frame institutional assessment as a partnership model rather than an isolated technical function.

These studies are relevant because student-success reform is itself an institutional innovation problem. An institution may create an early-alert system, redesign orientation, expand advising, or introduce high-impact practices, yet the innovation may remain fragmented if the units responsible for different parts of the student experience do not coordinate. The present model therefore treats Academic Affairs–Student Affairs alignment as an institutional infrastructure for student-success innovation.

The key conceptual move is from programmatic collaboration to lifecycle alignment. A university can have many successful partnerships and still provide students with a fragmented experience if those partnerships are disconnected from one another. Lifecycle alignment asks institutions to examine whether the messages, expectations, processes, relationships, and supports experienced by students form a coherent sequence.

3.6 Conceptual Gap

The literature establishes several important propositions: students learn through academic and co-curricular experiences; socialization occurs through interactions between individuals and institutional environments; belonging and engagement influence student success; and collaboration between

academic and student affairs can strengthen educational outcomes. What is less developed is a framework that integrates these ideas around the temporal structure of the student experience.

The gap is therefore not an absence of research on collaboration or socialization. It is a lack of an integrated model specifying how cross-divisional alignment may operate across multiple stages of the student life cycle and how early alignment may shape later experiences. The Student Life Cycle–Socialization Alignment Model addresses this gap by treating institutional alignment as cumulative and by specifying distinct contributions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs at each stage.

4. The Student Life Cycle–Socialization Alignment Model

The Student Life Cycle–Socialization Alignment Model consists of two parallel but connected sequences. The institutional sequence contains four phases: Pre-Arrival, Arrival, Residency, and Departure. The socialization sequence contains four processes: Anticipation, Encounter/Integration, Metamorphosis/Assimilation, and Sustained Socialization. The sequences are connected by the institutional actions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, whose alignment shapes the coherence of the student experience.

The model does not claim that students move through these processes in identical or irreversible steps. Students may move backward, experience multiple cycles of integration, or encounter institutional changes that require renewed adaptation. The four phases are therefore best understood as organizing periods rather than rigid developmental stages.

Figure 1 and Table 1 summarize the model.

Figure 1. **Student Life Cycle and Student Socialization Process Alignment Model.** This author-developed model illustrates how the student life cycle directly shapes student socialization across all phases, with early alignment or misalignment compounding over time.

Table 1
Student Life Cycle–Socialization Alignment Model.

Student Life Cycle	Socialization Process	Academic Affairs	Student Affairs	Primary Alignment Outcome
Pre-Arrival	Anticipation	Academic expectations, pathways, placement, program requirements	Recruitment, orientation preparation, advising, support messaging	Expectation coherence
Arrival	Encounter / Integration	Course expectations, faculty interaction, early academic support	Orientation, advising, tutoring, engagement, early alerts	Reality–expectation congruence
Residency	Metamorphosis / Assimilation	Curriculum coherence, instruction, assessment, academic advising	Belonging, engagement, identity, leadership, persistence support	Belonging and academic/institutional identity
Departure	Sustained Socialization	Credentialing, capstones, learning outcomes, transition preparation	Career readiness, alumni engagement, transfer/post-completion support	Transfer of learning and sustained affiliation

4.1 Pre-Arrival → Anticipation: Creating Expectation Coherence

Pre-arrival begins before students formally enter the institution. Recruitment, admissions, financial-aid communications, placement, advising, program websites, orientation materials, and conversations with institutional representatives shape what students believe college will require and what the institution will provide. This is the institutional context in which anticipation develops.

Academic Affairs has responsibility for communicating the academic architecture of the institution: degree requirements, program pathways, course sequencing, academic standards, learning expectations, placement criteria, and faculty roles. Student Affairs contributes by contextualizing those expectations within the broader student experience through advising, orientation, engagement, support services, and transition programming. If the two divisions communicate different expectations, students may begin with an inaccurate mental model of the institution.

For example, a recruitment message may emphasize flexibility while academic policies require rigid sequencing. A student may be told that tutoring is available but receive no indication that faculty expect

students to use it proactively. Orientation may emphasize belonging without explaining the academic behaviors required to participate successfully. These are alignment problems because the institution has communicated multiple versions of what it means to be a successful student.

The model proposes that pre-arrival alignment produces expectation coherence. Expectation coherence does not mean that students know everything before they enroll. Instead, it means that the major messages students receive are mutually reinforcing and sufficiently transparent to allow students to form realistic expectations.

Proposition 1. Greater alignment between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs during pre-arrival is associated with greater coherence between students' expectations and institutional expectations at entry.

The equity significance of this proposition is important. Students who have family members, prior educational experiences, or social networks that provide tacit knowledge may be better positioned to interpret ambiguous institutional messages. Transparent, aligned communication reduces the extent to which students must rely on such informal knowledge.

4.2 Arrival → Encounter/Integration: Connecting Expectations to Experience

Arrival is the period in which students encounter the institution as a lived environment. The classroom, advisor's office, residence or online learning environment, student organizations, technology systems, and administrative processes become concrete expressions of the institution's promises.

The classic socialization concept of encounter is especially useful here because students compare what they expected with what they experience. The present model adds integration to the label because students are not simply comparing expectations; they are beginning to establish relationships and patterns of participation that connect them to the institution.

Academic Affairs shapes encounter through first-term courses, syllabi, assessment, faculty-student interaction, attendance and participation expectations, and academic support. Student Affairs shapes encounter through orientation, advising, tutoring, student engagement, transition programs, and early-alert processes. Alignment requires these functions to reinforce a common understanding of academic responsibility and support.

Consider academic help-seeking. If faculty communicate that using tutoring is a normal component of learning while Student Affairs frames tutoring as an optional service for students who are already struggling, the institution sends contradictory messages. Likewise, if advisors recommend course sequences without understanding curricular prerequisites or if orientation communicates policies that differ from classroom practice, students must resolve institutional contradictions themselves.

Proposition 2. Alignment between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs during arrival supports the transition from anticipated expectations to coherent lived experience, increasing opportunities for student integration.

Alignment at this stage should also be responsive. Early-alert systems, advising, and faculty communication should not merely identify students who are struggling; they should help institutions identify where institutional expectations and student experiences are diverging. This reframes early intervention from a student-remediation activity to a feedback mechanism for institutional learning.

4.3 Residency → Metamorphosis/Assimilation: Developing Belonging and Identity

Residency represents the longest period of the student life cycle and the point at which repeated institutional interactions can become patterns. Students encounter multiple courses, instructors, advisors, peers, policies, and co-curricular opportunities. The cumulative nature of these experiences makes alignment particularly important.

Metamorphosis, in the organizational socialization tradition, represents change as newcomers adapt to an organization. In the higher education context, assimilation should not mean conformity to every institutional norm. Rather, it refers to the development of sufficient understanding, confidence, and institutional literacy to participate effectively while retaining one's own identity and agency. This distinction is essential for equity-minded practice.

Academic Affairs contributes through coherent curricula, transparent degree pathways, consistent academic expectations, meaningful feedback, faculty engagement, and integration of advising with academic planning. Student Affairs contributes through relationships, engagement, belonging, leadership development, career development, and other educational experiences beyond the classroom. The co-educator model requires these contributions to be connected.

Belonging is especially important during residency. Students are more likely to persist when they experience the institution as a place in which they are recognized, supported, and capable of succeeding (Tinto, 2017). However, belonging should not be treated as a stand-alone student affairs outcome. Academic experiences, advising relationships, classroom climate, and institutional processes all communicate whether students belong.

Proposition 3. Sustained alignment between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs during residency supports the development of belonging, academic identity, and institutional self-efficacy, which in turn create conditions supportive of persistence.

This proposition also explains why episodic collaboration may be insufficient. A successful orientation program cannot compensate indefinitely for confusing degree pathways. A strong advising program cannot fully compensate for inconsistent academic expectations. A robust student organization cannot

compensate for a curriculum in which students cannot see a coherent path to completion. Alignment must therefore be embedded in everyday institutional operations.

4.4 Departure → Sustained Socialization: Connecting Education to What Comes Next

Departure includes graduation, transfer, employment, further education, and other transitions out of the institution. In conventional lifecycle models, departure can appear to be the endpoint. In the present framework, departure is both an outcome and a transition.

Academic Affairs contributes through capstone experiences, assessment of learning outcomes, credentialing, career-connected curriculum, and opportunities for students to articulate what they have learned. Student Affairs contributes through career development, transition programming, alumni engagement, leadership development, and support for students who transfer or continue their education elsewhere.

Sustained socialization recognizes that students continue to interpret their educational experience after formal enrollment. Graduates apply institutional learning to professional and civic contexts. Transfer students carry institutional expectations into new environments. Alumni relationships can reinforce or challenge how former students understand the value of their education.

Proposition 4. Alignment across departure processes strengthens students' ability to connect academic and co-curricular learning to post-enrollment goals and supports sustained institutional affiliation.

This proposition also creates a feedback loop. Post-completion outcomes can inform the institution about whether the expectations and learning experiences established earlier in the lifecycle were coherent and useful. In this sense, departure becomes an assessment point for the entire model.

4.5 Cumulative Alignment and Institutional Coherence

The central theoretical claim of the model is that alignment is cumulative. A student's experience at one stage becomes part of the context for the next stage. Coherent pre-arrival messaging can support a successful arrival; successful arrival can support integration; integration can create conditions for belonging and identity development during residency; and these experiences can influence departure and post-completion transition.

The reverse is also possible. Misalignment can compound. An inaccurate expectation may produce a difficult arrival. A difficult arrival may reduce engagement. Reduced engagement may weaken relationships and belonging. Weak belonging may increase the likelihood of stop-out or departure without a strong connection between learning and future goals.

The model does not claim that early misalignment inevitably causes attrition. Student agency, external circumstances, finances, family responsibilities, labor-market conditions, and many other factors

influence student outcomes. Instead, the model proposes that institutional alignment is one potentially important condition that shapes how students experience and navigate those factors.

The distinction between episodic collaboration and lifecycle alignment is therefore fundamental. Episodic collaboration asks, “Are Academic Affairs and Student Affairs working together on this initiative?” Lifecycle alignment asks, “Do students experience a coherent educational environment across the sequence of their institutional journey?”

5. Theoretical Propositions

The four propositions can be summarized as follows:

Proposition 1

Greater Academic Affairs–Student Affairs alignment during pre-arrival is associated with greater coherence between student expectations and institutional expectations at entry.

Proposition 2

Academic Affairs–Student Affairs alignment during arrival supports the transition from anticipated expectations to coherent lived experience and strengthens opportunities for integration.

Proposition 3

Sustained alignment during residency supports belonging, academic identity, and institutional self-efficacy, creating conditions supportive of persistence.

Proposition 4

Alignment across departure processes strengthens students’ ability to connect academic and co-curricular learning to post-enrollment goals and supports sustained institutional affiliation.

Cross-stage proposition. Because the four stages are connected, cumulative alignment across the student life cycle is expected to have greater explanatory value for student experience than isolated instances of cross-divisional collaboration.

6. Alignment as an Equity Mechanism

An important extension of the model is its treatment of alignment as an equity mechanism. Higher education institutions often assume that students arrive with sufficient knowledge to interpret institutional language, processes, and expectations. Yet students differ substantially in the amount of tacit knowledge they possess about how college works. First-generation students, transfer students, adult learners, and students navigating unfamiliar institutional systems may encounter higher navigation costs when information is fragmented.

The equity argument is not that these students are inherently less prepared. Rather, the argument is that institutions distribute the burden of interpretation unevenly when expectations are unclear. If a student must determine independently which office can solve a problem, whether tutoring is expected or remedial, how a degree pathway works, or how academic and co-curricular experiences connect, the institution has transferred part of its organizational complexity to the student.

The model therefore proposes that institutional alignment can reduce unnecessary navigation burdens. Transparent communication, consistent terminology, coordinated advising, shared data, and cross-divisional ownership can make institutional expectations more visible and predictable.

This argument is consistent with recent scholarship emphasizing the role of institutional structures in advancing equity. Wu et al. (2025) argue that clear, transparent, and uniformly applied program structures may provide a more sustainable route to equity than approaches that focus exclusively on individual bias. Recent work on psychosocial relationships between minoritized students and postsecondary institutions likewise emphasizes the importance of institutional conditions rather than locating student experience solely within individual characteristics (Lebioda, 2026).

The equity dimension should not, however, be reduced to a checklist of services. The deeper issue is whether the institution has designed its systems so that students with different levels of prior institutional knowledge can interpret expectations and access educational opportunities without unnecessary ambiguity.

7. Leadership and Institutional Practice Implications

If the model is correct, institutional leaders should move from asking whether Academic Affairs and Student Affairs collaborate to asking where alignment is weak, how students experience that misalignment, and who owns the correction.

First, institutions should establish shared student-success outcomes. Persistence, completion, learning, belonging, and successful transitions should not be treated as the exclusive responsibility of one division. Shared ownership does not eliminate role clarity; it establishes collective accountability.

Second, institutions should map the student journey across divisions. A lifecycle map can identify every major student-facing message, decision point, handoff, support opportunity, and policy from pre-arrival through departure. The purpose is to identify contradictions and gaps rather than simply inventory services.

Third, institutions should establish cross-divisional governance for high-leverage moments. Recruitment and onboarding, first-term experience, gateway courses, academic advising, early alerts, major changes, stop-out re-entry, career transition, and graduation are examples of moments where Academic Affairs and Student Affairs should have shared design responsibilities.

Fourth, institutions should align data. Academic and student affairs professionals frequently have different information about the same student experience. A co-educator model requires appropriate mechanisms for sharing information while respecting privacy, ethical standards, and institutional policy. Shared data should be used not merely to identify students who are at risk but also to identify recurring institutional barriers.

Fifth, leaders should use student voice as an alignment diagnostic. Students can identify contradictions that institutional units do not see because each unit experiences only part of the student journey. Focus groups, journey mapping, surveys, advising feedback, and qualitative interviews can reveal where institutional expectations diverge from lived experience.

Sixth, leaders should treat collaboration as an organizational capability. Recent scholarship on institutional innovation emphasizes that change is more likely to endure when structures, resources, leadership, and local agency reinforce one another (Pokidina, 2026; Mearman et al., 2026). The co-educator model similarly requires more than goodwill between professionals. It requires governance structures, shared measures, time for collaboration, leadership support, and resources.

8. Directions for Future Research

The model is intended to generate empirical research rather than serve as a substitute for it. Several research strategies could test and refine the propositions.

First, longitudinal research could examine whether students who experience greater cross-divisional alignment during pre-arrival and arrival report greater expectation coherence, belonging, and persistence later in the lifecycle. Such research could combine student surveys with institutional process data.

Second, mixed-methods research could examine the mechanisms through which alignment operates. Quantitative measures could assess perceived institutional coherence, advising quality, belonging, and persistence, while interviews could identify the specific institutional messages and interactions students use to construct meaning.

Third, comparative institutional research could examine whether the model operates differently across institutional types, including community colleges, regional public universities, research universities, minority-serving institutions, and small private colleges. The model should be treated as potentially adaptable rather than universally identical.

Fourth, research should examine whether alignment has differential effects across student groups. The equity proposition could be tested by examining whether institutional coherence is particularly consequential for first-generation students, transfer students, adult learners, and other students who may encounter different levels of institutional familiarity.

Fifth, organizational research should examine the conditions that enable co-educator alignment. Relevant variables may include leadership structure, shared governance, relational coordination, data

integration, resource allocation, and institutional culture. This would connect the student-level model to scholarship on institutional change.

Sixth, future research should examine negative cases. Institutions may have strong collaboration but weak student outcomes, or limited formal collaboration but strong student outcomes. Such cases would help identify boundary conditions and prevent the model from becoming an overly broad explanation of student success.

Finally, empirical research should test whether alignment is better understood as an additive, interactive, or cumulative process. A central question is whether the effect of alignment during residency depends on the quality of earlier stages. If so, lifecycle alignment may have explanatory power beyond models that examine isolated interventions.

9. Limitations of the Conceptual Model

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the model is conceptual and has not been empirically validated. Its propositions represent theoretically grounded expectations rather than demonstrated causal relationships. Second, the model simplifies a complex and nonlinear student experience into four institutional phases. Students do not experience college in identical sequences, and many students move in and out of institutions, programs, and roles. Third, the model focuses primarily on Academic Affairs and Student Affairs and therefore does not fully incorporate other institutional actors such as enrollment management, financial aid, information technology, institutional research, athletics, or external partners. Fourth, the model does not attempt to explain all determinants of student persistence and completion. Financial conditions, work, family responsibilities, health, social context, academic preparation, and broader structural forces remain important.

These limitations are not reasons to reject the framework; they define the conditions under which it should be tested. The model is intended as an organizing framework that can be refined as empirical evidence accumulates.

10. Discussion

The Student Life Cycle–Socialization Alignment Model contributes to higher education scholarship by bringing together ideas that are often discussed separately. Student success research emphasizes persistence, completion, engagement, and belonging. Socialization research explains how students learn norms and interpret organizational environments. Academic–student affairs collaboration research demonstrates the value of cross-divisional partnerships. Institutional innovation research emphasizes the importance of structures and actors working together. The model connects these traditions through the concept of lifecycle alignment.

The first contribution is theoretical. The model proposes that institutional alignment is a condition through which socialization occurs. Rather than treating socialization as primarily an individual process,

it emphasizes the institutional sequencing of expectations, interactions, and opportunities. This shifts the question from “How do students adapt to college?” toward “How does the institution structure the conditions under which students are asked to adapt?”

The second contribution is organizational. The co-educator concept challenges the assumption that Academic Affairs is the educational division and Student Affairs is a support division. The model does not erase functional distinctions. Instead, it argues that both divisions have educational responsibilities and that students experience the institution as a whole. This is consistent with scholarship defining collaboration as an interdependent process oriented toward holistic learning (Leary et al., 2022).

The third contribution is temporal. Collaboration is commonly examined as a relationship or programmatic strategy. The present model treats alignment as something that must be maintained over time. This temporal perspective helps explain why an institution may have excellent individual programs while students still experience fragmentation.

The fourth contribution is equity-oriented. If institutional ambiguity creates navigation burdens, then alignment can reduce those burdens. This shifts equity from a focus exclusively on targeted programs toward a broader question of whether institutional design is transparent and coherent for students with different levels of prior knowledge.

The fifth contribution is practical. The model gives leaders a way to diagnose student success problems across the lifecycle. Rather than asking which intervention is missing, leaders can ask where institutional messages diverge, where handoffs fail, and where students are expected to compensate for organizational fragmentation.

Recent publications in Innovative Higher Education reinforce the relevance of this approach. Conceptual frameworks addressing institutional innovation, student–institution relationships, campuswide high-impact practices, and institutional assessment demonstrate that the journal continues to value scholarship that connects conceptual development with institutional practice (Pokidina, 2026; Lebioda, 2026; Schneider et al., 2026; Good et al., 2026). The present article extends that conversation to the relationship between academic and student affairs and to the temporal organization of student socialization.

11. Conclusion

Student success is often pursued through programs, services, and interventions that are individually valuable but organizationally disconnected. The central argument of this article is that students experience none of these units in isolation. They experience an institution. The coherence of that experience is shaped by the degree to which Academic Affairs and Student Affairs communicate, coordinate, and share responsibility across the student life cycle.

The Student Life Cycle–Socialization Alignment Model provides a conceptual framework for understanding that process. It connects pre-arrival with anticipation, arrival with encounter and integration, residency with metamorphosis and assimilation, and departure with sustained socialization. Across these phases, Academic Affairs and Student Affairs contribute distinct but interdependent educational functions.

The model's central proposition is not that institutional alignment guarantees persistence or completion. Rather, alignment creates conditions that can make learning, belonging, navigation, and persistence more attainable. Misalignment can create additional complexity that students must absorb, while alignment can make institutional expectations more coherent and support more accessible.

The framework therefore reframes student success as both a student experience and an institutional design challenge. It also reframes Academic Affairs and Student Affairs from separate service domains into co-educators whose work is most effective when students experience it as one coherent educational environment. The next step is empirical: testing whether lifecycle alignment predicts student experience and outcomes, identifying the mechanisms through which alignment operates, and determining the institutional conditions under which the model is most effective.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Scott King is the sole author of this manuscript and was responsible for all aspects of the work. This includes conceiving the study and identifying the conceptual problem it addresses. The author designed the theory-building approach and carried out the integrative literature synthesis across the five domains: student success and persistence, student involvement and belonging, organizational socialization, academic–student affairs collaboration, and institutional change and equity-minded design. The author also developed the original Student Life Cycle–Socialization Alignment Model, its four propositions and the accompanying table, and created Figure 1. The author wrote the original draft, revised the manuscript in response to peer review, and read and approved the final version. The author takes full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

References

1. Astin, A. W. (1993). What matters in college? Four critical years revisited. Jossey-Bass.
2. Commodore, F., Gasman, M., Conrad, C., & Nguyen, T. H. (2018). Coming together: A case study of collaboration between student affairs and faculty at Norfolk State University. Frontiers in Education, 3, Article 39. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2018.00039
3. DeRosa, E. L. (2023). Academic advising’s hidden role in fostering validation/belonging leading to improved grades. NACADA Journal, 43(2), 121–135. https://doi.org/10.12930/NACADA-22-43

4. Farnese, M. L., Spagnoli, P., & Livi, S. (2022). Undergraduates' academic socialization: A cross-time analysis. British Journal of Educational Psychology, 92(4), 1239–1255. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12497
5. Good, M. R., Lambert, L. A., Kush, J. M., et al. (2026). Building a learning evidence ecosystem: A partnership model for institutional assessment. Innovative Higher Education. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-026-09910-8
6. Institute for Higher Education Policy. (2024). How student experience and belonging interventions can support strong postsecondary outcomes. IHEP.
7. Kezar, A. (2006). Redesigning for collaboration within higher education institutions: An exploration into the developmental process. Research in Higher Education, 47(7), 831–860.
8. Kezar, A., & Holcombe, E. (2017). Shared leadership in higher education: Important lessons from research and practice. American Council on Education.
9. Kuh, G. D. (2008). High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
10. Leary, M., Muller, T. M., Kramer, S., Sopper, J., Gebauer, R. D., & Wade, M. E. (2022). Defining collaboration through the lens of a Delphi study: Student affairs and academic affairs partnerships in residential learning communities. The Qualitative Report, 27(3), 664–690. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5276
11. Lebioda, K. (2026). Psychosocial blossoming: A conceptual framework for humanizing relationships between racially/ethnically minoritized students and postsecondary institutions. Innovative Higher Education, 51, 1443–1466. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-026-09895-4
12. Mearman, A., Peasland, E., & Tallontire, A. (2026). "How did you get the change to stick?"—Exploring a change process in a UK university via co-evolution. Innovative Higher Education. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-026-09890-9
13. Pokidina, V. (2026). Just innovation is not enough: A multi-level framework for institutionalising teaching and learning innovations in higher education. Innovative Higher Education. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-026-09942-0
14. Schneider, K. R., Barulich, D., & Hyde, M.-M. (2026). Tracking high-impact practices: A systematic process for campuswide engagement. Innovative Higher Education. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-026-09902-8
15. Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students(2nd ed.). Routledge.
16. Tinto, V. (2012). Completing college: Rethinking institutional action. University of Chicago Press.
17. Tinto, V. (2017). Through the eyes of students. Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 19(3), 254–269.
18. Van Maanen, J., & Schein, E. H. (1979). Toward a theory of organizational socialization. In B. M. Staw (Ed.), Research in organizational behavior(Vol. 1, pp. 209–264). JAI Press.

19. Vail, C. M. (2024). The culture of small institutions: Unique spaces for meaningful and sustainable collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs. New Directions for Student Services, 2024(188), 59–76. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20537
20. Weidman, J. C., & DeAngelo, L. (Eds.). (2020). Socialization in higher education and the early career: Theory, research and application. Springer.
21. Weidman, J. C., Twale, D. J., & Stein, E. L. (2001). Socialization of graduate and professional students: A perilous passage? ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, 28(3).
22. Wu, J., Guzman, L., Patt, C., Eppig, A., & Mendoza-Denton, R. (2025). Can program structure advance equity in graduate education? Innovative Higher Education, 51, 241–263. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-025-09808-x

Figures

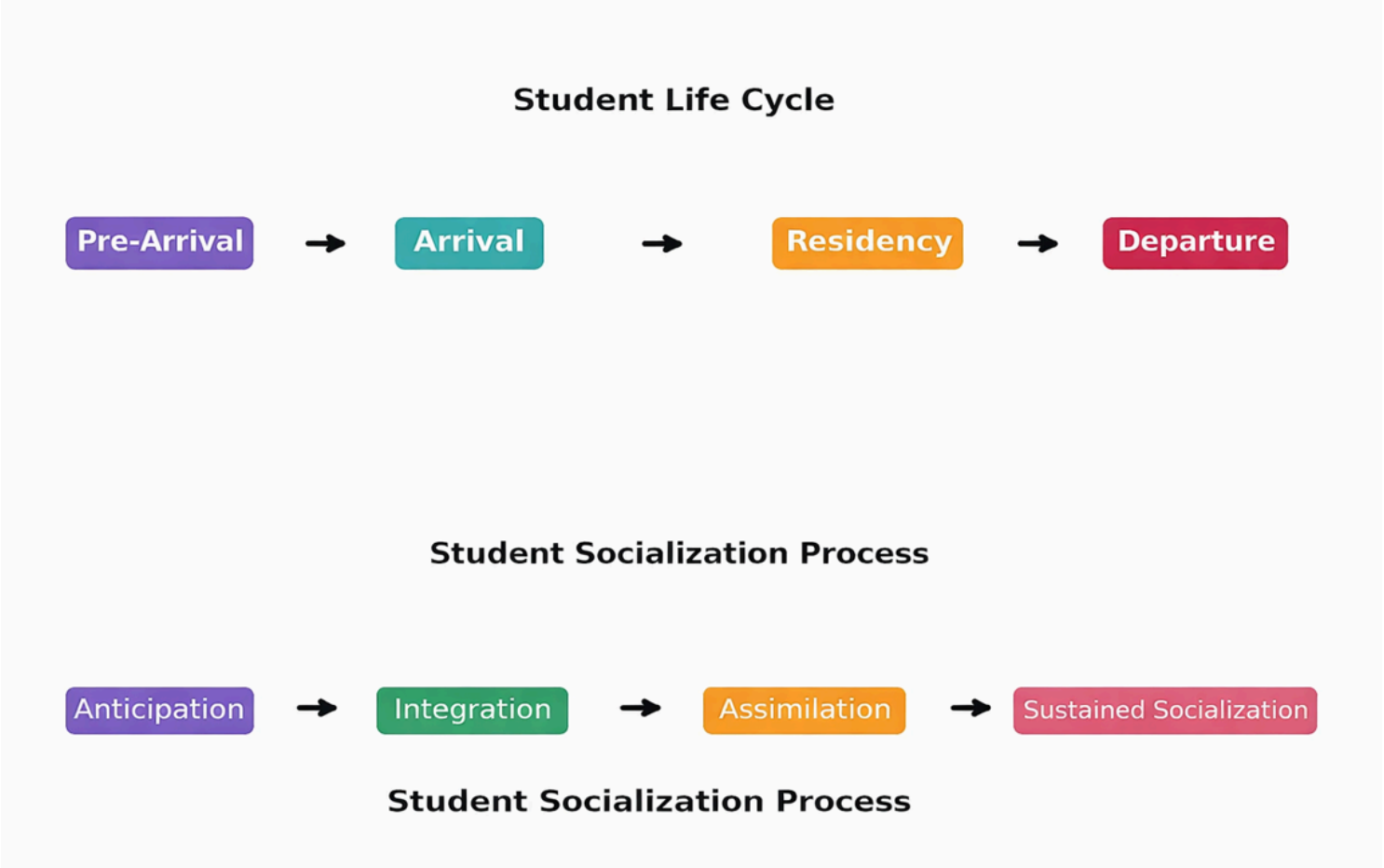

Figure 1

Student Life Cycle and Student Socialization Process Alignment Model. This author-developed model illustrates how the student life cycle directly shapes student socialization across all phases, with early alignment or misalignment compounding over time.