BEYOND THE SYLLABUS: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE PERCEIVED QUALITY OF AN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

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This study posits that the perceived quality of an educational program transcends the syllabus, depending critically on an institution's social and cultural infrastructure. It reframes the "survey fatigue" as a symptom of students' weak connection to the institution, arguing that a truly supportive environment is built through integrated, not merely aligned, institutional practices. Therefore, the key to unlocking better data and getting a higher perceived program quality is investing in the social and cultural infrastructure, fostering a true sense of community and belonging.
Keywords: educational program quality; survey; supportive environment; sense of belonging; social and cultural infrastructure.

ПОЗА НАВЧАЛЬНИМ ПЛАНОМ: РОЛЬ СОЦІАЛЬНОЇ ТА КУЛЬТУРНОЇ ІНФРАСТРУКТУРИ У СПРИЙНЯТТІ ЯКОСТІ ОСВІТНЬОЇ ПРОГРАМИ

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Щороку заклади освіти інвестують значні ресурси в опитування студентів, проте часто отримують поверхневі дані, позначені низьким відсотком участі. Цей феномен зазвичай пояснюють «втомою від опитувань» або іншими когнітивними стратегіями, при яких респонденти докладають мінімум можливих зусиль. Проте, ця стаття стверджує, що таке пояснення є неповним, оскільки розглядає студента як окрему одиницю, а не як члена конкретної академічної спільноти. Вона досліджує гіпотезу про те, що ключем до отримання змістовних даних з опитувань та підвищення сприйнятої якості освітньої програми є розвинута соціальна та культурна інфраструктура закладу освіти.
Виходячи за межі навчального плану, як переліку освітніх компонентів, це дослідження аналізує, як неакадемічні фактори, такі як активні студентські організації, менторство, відчуття спільноти та інклюзивні заходи, виступають фундаментальними рушіями залученості здобувачів вищої освіти у життя університету. У цій статті розглядається зв'язок між цими елементами та готовністю студента надавати автентичний зворотний зв'язок, використовуючи як аналітичну рамку фундаментальні теорії соціальної та академічної інтеграції. Особлива увага приділяється розгляду цих теорій та досвіду їх сучасних впроваджень у розвинутих демократичних країнах. Наведені приклади відомих існуючих студентських опитувань оцінювання викладання які демонструють, що загальна задоволеність й академічна успішність

студента залежать від його цілісного досвіду із закладом освіти де він навчається.
Це підтверджує центральну тезу статті: якість освітньої програми є невіддільною від якості соціальної інфраструктури та освітнього простору, у яких вона впроваджується.
Ключові слова: *якість освітньої програми; опитування; освітній простір; відчуття приналежності; соціальна та культурна інфраструктура.*

Every year, educational institutions invest significant resources into surveying their student body, seeking to gauge satisfaction, identify areas for improvement, and measure the perceived quality of their programs. Yet, administrators and researchers are often met with a frustrating paradox: the data they collect is frequently shallow, marred by the very disengagement they hope to understand. Young people, when faced with these mandatory questionnaires, often exhibit a predictable pattern of "satisficing" – a cognitive shortcut where they provide the bare minimum of effort through straight-line responses, vague one-word answers, and rushed completions [1]. The common explanation for this behavior points to a generalized "survey fatigue", a rational response to the oversaturation of data requests in their digital lives [2].

Beyond these cognitive strategies, a more fundamental reason for minimal effort is often a profound lack of interest in the subject matter itself. The topics of many institutional or administrative questionnaires – ranging from feedback on services they rarely use to generic data collection – can feel abstract and disconnected from their daily lives and passions. Young people are capable of deep focus and detailed work when engaged in activities they find intrinsically motivating, such as mastering a video game, creating digital content, or contributing to a cause they care about. In stark contrast, a mandatory questionnaire often feels like a bureaucratic hurdle or an unwelcome interruption. The static, linear format of most forms offers none of the interactivity, immediate feedback, or gamified rewards that characterize the digital platforms where they voluntarily spend their time, making the task feel not just mandatory but terminally dull.

For modern youth, specifically Generation Z, these factors are amplified by their unique digital environment and cultural expectations. As digital natives, they are inundated with constant requests for data, feedback, and engagement from countless apps, websites, and institutions, making any single questionnaire feel less significant. This generation places a high value on authenticity and transparency; if the purpose of the questionnaire is not communicated or if they are skeptical that their feedback will lead to genuine change, they are unlikely to invest meaningful effort [3]. Furthermore, having grown up with fast, intuitive, and frictionless digital interfaces, they have little patience for poorly designed, lengthy, or repetitive forms. When a mandatory task feels like an inefficient use of their time, their default response is to complete it as quickly as possible to move on to more engaging or rewarding activities.

And while not incorrect, limiting the existing problem only to the reasons above is critically wrong because it treats the student as a generic respondent rather than a member of a specific academic community, and their perceptions are shaped by this holistic experience The truth is, a student's response to a survey is not merely a reaction to the questionnaire itself; it is a direct reflection of their relationship with the institution asking the questions. The weary resignation and low-effort answers are often symptoms of a deeper disconnect – a feeling of being an anonymous number in a bureaucratic system rather than a valued member of a community. When a student feels detached from the social and cultural fabric of their program, a request for feedback is perceived not as an opportunity for genuine dialogue but as another

impersonal transaction that brings nothing to the table. This perception transforms the decision to participate thoughtfully into a calculation of social exchange, where if the perceived benefits and trust are low, so too is the effort [4].

This study aims to investigate and assess the impact of an institution's social and cultural infrastructure on students' perceptions of educational program quality. This article argues that an element often relegated to the periphery, the social and cultural infrastructure, is the key to unlocking not only meaningful survey data but also a higher perceived program quality. Moving beyond the syllabus, it will explore how non-academic factors, such as robust student organizations, accessible faculty mentorship, a tangible sense of community, and inclusive campus events, are not merely "nice-to-haves" but are fundamental drivers of student engagement. It will also examine how these factors are measured. The study will demonstrate that when students feel seen, supported, and integrated into the life of their program, their perception of its overall quality soars. This aligns with foundational theories asserting that social and academic integration are critical for student satisfaction and persistence [5]. Consequently, their willingness to participate authentically in its improvement follows suit. Investing in this infrastructure is therefore not an extracurricular expense, but an essential strategy for creating an educational experience that students truly feel invested in.

Existing publications predominantly focus on conventional indicators of educational program quality, frequently examining factors such as faculty qualifications, available equipment, curriculum design, and financial investment [6]. However, these studies often present findings derived from the unique context of their own institutions, potentially limiting generalizability and offering a somewhat unidirectional perspective on what constitutes a high-quality educational experience [7]. This traditional approach often overlooks the profound, yet less tangible, influence of the broader institutional environment, leading to a gap in understanding how students' lived experiences outside the classroom fundamentally shape their overall satisfaction and perceived value of their education.

Vincent Tinto's Student Departure Theory, first articulated in his 1975 paper "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research", provides a powerful framework for understanding why students leave college [5]. Drawing inspiration from sociologist Émile Durkheim's work on suicide, Tinto argued that student dropout is not an isolated event but a longitudinal process rooted in the student's degree of integration into the institution's social and academic communities. He proposed that for students to persist, they must successfully separate from their past communities (family, high school friends) and become incorporated into the life of the university. This incorporation occurs along two critical dimensions: academic integration (engagement with faculty, intellectual development, and positive classroom experiences) and social integration (making friends, participating in extracurricular activities, and feeling a sense of belonging). According to Tinto, when a student fails to integrate into one or both of these systems, their commitment to the institution and the goal of graduation weakens, making departure significantly more likely.

The most profound impact of Tinto's work was in how it fundamentally changed the way universities think about student attrition. Before Tinto, the prevailing view placed the blame for dropout almost entirely on the student. The narrative was that students left because of individual deficits – they lacked the academic ability, motivation, financial resources, or the right personal background. This "student-blame" model absolved the institution of any significant responsibility. Tinto's theory reframed the conversation entirely, shifting the focus

from the characteristics of the student to the characteristics and actions of the institution. The critical question was no longer simply "What's wrong with the student?" but rather, "In what ways did the institution fail to engage this student and foster a sense of belonging to a particular community?".

This theoretical shift had massive practical implications, forcing universities to look inward and recognize their active role in student retention. If a lack of integration was the problem, then the solution was for institutions to create structured opportunities for it to occur. This led directly to the development of many of the student success initiatives that are now standard on university campuses, including First-Year Experience (FYE) programs, living-learning communities, undergraduate research opportunities, faculty mentoring programs, and proactive advising centers. In essence, Tinto's work provided the "why" that compelled higher education to move beyond simply admitting students and start taking responsibility for creating an environment where they could connect, thrive, and ultimately persist to graduation.

Tinto's work laid the foundation for decades of research, and contemporary studies have expanded upon his model, adapting it to a more diverse and complex student body. George Kuh's extensive research on student engagement is a direct intellectual descendant of Tinto's theory. Kuh identified specific "High-Impact Practices" (HIPs) – such as first-year seminars, undergraduate research, and learning communities – that are proven to increase student integration and, consequently, retention and success [8]. Furthermore, modern scholarship has refined the concept of social integration into the more psychologically nuanced "sense of belonging". Terrell Strayhorn's work emphasizes that for students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, feeling like a valued and respected member of the campus community is a fundamental human need and a critical predictor of persistence [9]. In this light, a student's rushed and uninterested response to a questionnaire is more than just poor data; it is a potential indicator of their lack of integration and belonging. It signals that the institution has not made a compelling case for why that student's voice matters. Therefore, understanding these small acts of disengagement is crucial, as they reflect the very challenges of connection and commitment that Tinto, Kuh, and Strayhorn identify as being at the heart of student success.

While, as mentioned above, Tinto provided the foundational "why", Alexander Astin's Theory of Student Involvement delivers the practical "how", providing a direct and measurable link between a university's resources and its student outcomes [10]. Astin's theory is quite simple: the amount of physical and psychological energy a student dedicates to the academic experience is the single best predictor of their learning and development. The more students invest in their studies, in clubs, in interactions with faculty, the more they get out of their education. The key insight is that the university's role is to create the conditions that encourage this investment. To explain this, Astin developed his Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) model, a framework for assessing institutional impact [11]. Inputs are the characteristics a student brings to college. Outputs are the desired results, from graduation to personal growth. The crucial component is the Environment, which encompasses everything the institution provides: its policies, programs, faculty, facilities, and culture. A well-equipped gym, accessible faculty office hours, a new wellness center, and funding for the debate team are all part of the Environment. Astin's theory argues that the value of these resources is only realized when they are activated by student involvement. A state-of-the-art library is useless if students don't use it. This framework provides administrators with a clear mandate: the effectiveness of any resource, policy, or program should be judged by its ability to increase student involvement.

The connection is direct: a university invests in a resource (Environment), which creates an opportunity for students to engage (Involvement), which in turn leads to positive results (Outputs) like higher grades, increased satisfaction, and improved retention. Alexander Astin's Theory of Student Involvement remains a foundational framework in contemporary educational science. Scholars consistently apply his model to assess how co-curricular involvement shapes critical aspects of the first-year experience, such as student engagement, persistence, and overall success. Such publications are critically important because they provide the empirical evidence needed to guide institutional practice [12].

Synthesizing the perspectives of Astin and Tinto is not merely an academic exercise; it is the key to unlocking a more accurate understanding of educational quality. Astin's framework, centered on the actions of involvement, and Tinto's model, centered on the feeling of integration, together form a powerful argument against the siloed evaluation of student life. One theory describes the behavior, while the other describes the resulting state of being. Consider the practical implications: A student's decision to attend a professor's office hours (an act of academic involvement, per Astin) is often influenced by their confidence, which may have been built through positive social interactions with peers (a factor of social integration, per Tinto). Conversely, a student feeling disconnected from their peers (poor social integration) may lack the motivation to invest energy in challenging group projects (low academic involvement), leading them to rate the course, and by extension, the program, poorly.

Thus, these theories collapse the distinction between the curriculum and the campus community. They reveal that the social and cultural infrastructure of an institution is not an optional add-on or a secondary service. It is the very stage upon which academic engagement plays out. Both Astin and Tinto lead us to the same truth: a student's experience is a singular, integrated phenomenon. Their satisfaction and persistence are a direct reflection of how well the institution supports them as a whole person, not just as a learner in a classroom. To assess the quality of a program is to assess the health of this entire ecosystem.

The traditional way of assessing students' academic experience in many countries has long been the familiar end-of-semester survey, often called Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs). Its questions are predictable and sharply focused on the transactional aspects of a single course: "Was the professor prepared?", "Were the learning objectives clear?", "Was the workload appropriate?" This micro-level analysis, while offering some feedback, treats an educational program as just a collection of interchangeable parts and people. It critically fails to recognize the student as an individual navigating a complex social and administrative system, with research often questioning the validity of SETs as a measure of teaching effectiveness or overall program quality [13]. This model assumes that a student's opinion of a biochemistry lecture is completely separate from their experience with the dean's office or their sense of belonging in the dorm. This limited perspective has proven insufficient.

Researchers and administrators conceded that the most important outcomes, like student learning, satisfaction, and the very decision to persist until graduation, could not be explained by course content alone. It became clear that the conditions for learning were just as important as the instruction itself. The focus had to shift from a narrow post-mortem of individual courses to a dynamic, holistic diagnosis of the entire student experience. This shift is best exemplified by the development and widespread adoption of comprehensive survey instruments like the American National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and its British counterpart, the UK Engagement Survey (UKES). These are not simply longer course evaluations; they represent a

different philosophy of measurement altogether. Their aim is not to judge a single teacher but to capture the texture and quality of a student's entire educational journey. They are built on the premise that learning is not a passive reception of information but an active process of engagement with faculty, with peers, and with the institution itself [6]. By asking students to report on their interactions, sense of support, and feeling of community, these surveys implicitly validate the central argument of this article: that the quality of an educational program is inseparable from the quality of the social and cultural infrastructure that surrounds it. They are the official recognition that the student experience is, and always has been, integrated.

The *National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)*, often pronounced "Nessie", used by hundreds of universities across North America, functions as a powerful diagnostic tool, assessing the actual behaviors of students and the institutional practices that are known to correlate with learning, persistence, and success. Its core philosophy, inherited directly from Astin, is that what students do during college is far more important than who they are or how they feel at any given moment. This is precisely why NSSE deliberately avoids asking students if they are "satisfied" and instead asks them what they do. This methodological choice is the key to its power and utility. First, satisfaction is a poor proxy for learning. A student can be highly satisfied with an easy course that demands little effort and yields minimal growth, while another might feel temporarily frustrated by a challenging course that pushes them to their limits, yet is profoundly educational. Second, behavioral data is actionable, while satisfaction data is not. If students report low "satisfaction" with faculty, administrators are left guessing at the cause. However, if students report that they "never talked about career plans with a faculty member" or "never received prompt or feedback on their work", the institution has specific, tangible problems to solve. Subsequently, these behaviors are not chosen randomly; decades of research have proven their strong correlation with desired outcomes like critical thinking, problem-solving skills, time management, and graduation. To capture this, NSSE asks students a battery of questions about how frequently they engage in specific activities, from their study habits to their interactions with peers and faculty. These individual responses are then aggregated into several key Engagement Indicators (EIs), which provide a clear picture of the student experience. Institutions use this data for strategic planning, accreditation, and, most importantly, to address equity gaps. The most sophisticated users disaggregate their NSSE results by student demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, first-generation status, socioeconomic background). This allows them to see if the institution is serving all students equitably or if specific populations are experiencing less engagement or support, providing a data-driven roadmap for targeted interventions [14]. This approach moves from analyzing the well-being of one student to the more critical questions about different groups of students. For now, the NSSE questionnaire includes more than 100 items, which summarize the large amount of information using ten engagement indicators that cover four major themes: *Academic Challenge* (Higher Order Learning; Reflective and Integrative Learning; Learning Strategies; Quantitative Reasoning), *Learning with Peers* (Collaborative Learning; Discussions with Diverse Others), *Experiences with Faculty* (Student-Faculty Interaction; Effective Teaching Practices), *Campus Environment* (Quality of Interactions; Supportive Environment).

In 2024, approximately 1 million first-year and senior students from 373 institutions (362 in the US, 5 in Canada, and 6 in other countries) were invited to participate in NSSE. Of this population, 187,229 students responded to the survey. First-year and senior students were about equally represented among the respondent population. NSSE's sampling methodology

calls for either a census of all first-year and senior students or a random selection of an equal number of students from each group, with sample sizes based on total undergraduate enrollment. Census recruitment is available via email, in which students get a survey invitation and up to four reminders. NSSE 2024 U.S. respondents include 89,335 first-year (50%) and 89,254 senior (50%) respondents [15].

Among the EIs, the *Supportive Environment* indicator has garnered significant attention in contemporary research because it directly measures the institutional climate that underpins student well-being and belonging. This indicator assesses students' perceptions of the institution's commitment to their success and the quality of their relationships with students, faculty, and staff. For example, a study by Rocconi [16] found that the quality of student relationships with others on campus – a key component of the *Supportive Environment* indicator – was significantly related to first-year students' grades and their intention to return for a second year. This is affirmed by the latest local research about the positive effects of thorough adaptation of first-year students on the Faculty of Engineering and Technology in Poltava State Agrarian University through the study of "University Education" – a subject almost solely designed for this purpose [17].

In the UK's higher education landscape, the *National Student Survey (NSS)* and the *UK Engagement Survey (UKES)* represent two fundamentally different philosophies of measuring the student experience. The *National Student Survey (NSS)* is a high-profile, annual survey of final-year undergraduate students across the United Kingdom. Its primary purpose is to gather honest feedback about their course and their learning experience at their university or college. It is run by the Office for Students (OfS) on behalf of the UK's higher education funding and regulatory bodies, including the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, and the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland. Its results directly influence university league tables and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), focusing on summative questions of satisfaction, essentially asking students, "How satisfied are you with your course?" The NSS is open to nearly half a million final-year undergraduate students from all publicly funded higher education institutions in the UK. Students are asked to respond to a series of questions on a four-point scale covering various aspects of their student experience. The results are used as data to identify areas of strength and weakness in universities and colleges, helping them to enhance and improve the quality of their educational provision. The NSS measures *Supportive Environment* through several themed sections. Questions directly related to this are found under sections of Academic Support, Student Voice, Learning Community, and Mental Health. In 2024, just under 346,000 final-year students responded that they are at least 70% satisfied with different types of support on their campus [18].

In stark contrast, the *UK Engagement Survey (UKES)*, operated by Advance HE and based on the US model, is a voluntary, low-stakes diagnostic tool designed for internal institutional enhancement. It can be deployed to any year group and asks formative, behavioral questions about engagement, to understand the processes of learning, student-faculty interaction, and the nature of the supportive environment. Ultimately, while the NSS provides a public-facing verdict on what students feel, the UKES offers insight into why they feel that way, directly measuring the health of the social and cultural infrastructure that underpins learning. This distinction is critical, as it highlights that to improve the satisfaction measured by the NSS, institutions must first diagnose and enhance the engagement processes captured by the UKES [19]. The survey's power lies in its detailed *Engagement Indicators*, the component

that moves beyond simple metrics to probe the very heart of a student's connection to the institution by explicitly measuring their sense of belonging. This is assessed in two key ways. First, the survey asks direct questions, such as asking students to rate the extent to which they feel they are part of a community at their institution. Second, and just as importantly, it triangulates this feeling through a series of questions about the quality of relationships. Students are asked to evaluate their social interactions with their peers, the support they receive from academic staff, and the helpfulness of administrative staff and student services. By combining a direct question on belonging with these indirect measures of social integration, UKES provides a robust and nuanced picture, validating the premise that a student's feeling of community is not a peripheral concern but a central, measurable component of a high-quality educational program. The findings from the UK Engagement Survey 2022 offered a stark diagnosis of the post-pandemic student experience, with its most resonant theme being a persistent and troubling "belonging deficit". The data of 10,915 participants revealed that while students often rated formal aspects like "Effective Teaching Practices" relatively well, the *Supportive Environment* indicator remained a critical area of concern. Students reported feeling less connected to their peers and their institution, often describing their university life as more "transactional" than communal. This challenge was not felt equally, with the data highlighting a widening gap for groups like commuter students, who reported lower engagement and belonging due to fewer opportunities for informal social integration that builds community. Furthermore, the findings pointed to a weakness in "Student-Faculty Interaction", indicating that the vital relationships that bridge the formal curriculum with a sense of academic community were not fully reestablished [20].

The *Student Experience Survey (SES)* is a core component of the Australian Government's Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) suite of surveys. QILT provides a comprehensive picture of the student life cycle, from commencement to employment. The survey is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, but is administered by the Social Research Centre (SRC), an independent research agency. The SES is open to all currently enrolled undergraduate and postgraduate students at Australian higher education institutions, including universities and non-university providers. The survey uses a series of "focus areas" or scales to measure the student experience in Skills Development, Learner Engagement, Teaching Quality, Student Support, Learning Resources, and Overall Quality of Educational Experience. Students are asked to rate their level of agreement on a four-point scale. A specially dedicated scale, Student Support, measures students' ratings on feeling part of a community of students and staff, the quality of support services (e.g., health, counseling, careers), ease of access to student support services and administrative services, and academic advice. Publicly available data from 2023, segregated by study field or university, shows that 253,588 students responded to the SES, including 72,229 responses from international students, across a total of 134 Australian higher education institutions, amounting to 37,5% response rate. According to its results, students have historically rated their sense of belonging to their institution relatively low at both the undergraduate and postgraduate coursework levels. In 2023, 46,3% of undergraduates and 48,5% of postgraduate students rated their sense of belonging positively. These ratings have yet to return to the ratings seen before the pandemic, which averaged around 51% to 53% positive. Undergraduate student ratings of the *Student Support and Services* focus area also declined in 2023. This appears to be influenced

by domestic students whose ratings declined at the undergraduate (71,2%) and postgraduate coursework levels (75,5%) [21].

While Ukraine does not have a single, unified national student survey akin to those used in the USA, UK, or Australia, the principle of systematic student feedback has become a mandatory and foundational component of our higher education system. This transformation is primarily driven by the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA), which was established to align Ukrainian universities with European standards and promote a culture of student-centered learning. Under this framework, student feedback is a non-negotiable requirement for any academic program seeking accreditation. Rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all national survey, NAQA requires each university to develop and implement its internal system for gathering student input. These internal surveys must cover such key areas as the quality of teaching, curriculum relevance, learning resources, and administrative support. Crucially, the process does not end with data collection; institutions must demonstrate to NAQA's expert panels how they analyze this feedback and use it to make tangible improvements. This "closing the loop" principle is central to the system's design. The student voice is further amplified through the mandatory inclusion of student representatives on the official accreditation panels that evaluate university programs. Despite this monumental progress from the post-Soviet era, the system still faces significant challenges. The legacy of a hierarchical academic culture and bureaucratic formalism means that some institutions may treat surveys as a box-ticking exercise rather than a genuine tool for improvement.

At Poltava State Agrarian University, a systematic approach to surveying is employed to gather critical feedback for quality assurance. The university deploys both regular (scheduled) and irregular (ad-hoc) surveys, each designed with a specific purpose to yield reliable sociological data. This framework gathers perspectives from key constituencies across the entire institutional ecosystem. Feedback from the student lifecycle is captured through several distinct surveys. An applicant survey gauges the effectiveness of recruitment efforts and information channels. The most extensive surveys are administered to current students, evaluating satisfaction with educational programs, the quality of teaching and resources, the fairness of assessments, and adherence to academic integrity. Finally, a graduate survey assesses the long-term value of the education by focusing on labor market readiness and the relevance of acquired competencies to their professional careers. Beyond the student perspective, the university actively solicits input from other stakeholders. A survey of faculty and academic staff gathers information on the institutional climate, academic freedom, and opportunities for professional development. Furthermore, surveys of employers, industry partners, and other stakeholders provide essential external validation, assessing how well graduate skills align with labor market demands and identifying areas for collaboration. Data is collected primarily through online questionnaires and interviews. And while this comprehensive feedback system provides robust data on academic quality, curriculum relevance, and professional outcomes, its focus remains narrowly defined. A critical analysis shows that the surveys thoroughly investigate the mechanics of the educational program but only slightly touch upon the broader concept of a *Supportive Campus Environment*. Key indicators of the holistic student experience (sense of belonging, student well-being, quality of peer and extracurricular engagement) are not central areas of inquiry, only touched on through separate faculty surveys [22].

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While widely used in some Western systems, the practice of systematically gathering student-centered feedback on the quality of the campus environment is not a universal standard in higher education, as its implementation is often hindered by a system's core structure, priorities, and cultural norms. In nations with highly centralized and state-controlled university systems, such as the People's Republic of China, institutions are primarily accountable to government ministries. Consequently, they prioritize state-mandated metrics like research publications and contributions to national strategic goals under initiatives like the "Double First Class" plan, leaving the holistic "student experience" as a secondary concern with little public-facing accountability [23]. Similarly, in many developing regions across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the urgent mission is the "*massification*" of higher education to expand access for a growing population. This emphasis channels limited resources toward building physical infrastructure and hiring faculty, often leaving the development of robust student support services and the complex systems needed to measure their effectiveness as a lower priority [24]. Furthermore, traditional academic cultures, historically seen in countries like Japan, can present cultural barriers; a strong hierarchy and power distance between professors and students can make the concept of formal, upward evaluation from students seem culturally inappropriate, despite recent pushes for reform [25]. Finally, the market structure itself plays a critical role. In countries like the Republic of India, featuring a vast and unevenly regulated private higher education sector, many institutions are driven by commercial incentives. Without the pressure of mandatory national surveys or strong government oversight, their focus naturally gravitates toward marketing and enrollment rather than the significant, long-term investment required to build and systematically assess a truly supportive student environment [26].

The failure of higher education institutions to systematically collect feedback on the supportive environment is not a passive oversight but an active source of harm that creates and perpetuates negative conditions for students. Without comprehensive data, systemic problems like inadequate mental health support or poor advising remain invisible, often dismissed as individual failings rather than institutional responsibilities. This lack of insight disproportionately harms vulnerable students who rely most heavily on formal support, thus reinforcing social inequity. Furthermore, this data vacuum leads to ineffective resource allocation, with funds often directed toward prestige projects instead of addressing students' real needs. On a personal level, when students feel unheard, it erodes their trust and discourages them from seeking help, fostering a cycle of disengagement that contributes to attrition. Ultimately, an institution that doesn't listen cannot learn or adapt, resulting in a stagnant and unresponsive educational environment that provides a lower quality of education for all.

This reality gives rise to the central dynamic of this study: *The Crossover Effect*. This is the process by which a student's experience within the university's social and cultural infrastructure, a domain traditionally managed by student affairs or unions, directly influences their perception of the academic program, the domain of academic administration. This is not a vague correlation but a direct causal pathway that operates in defiance of traditional university structures. The administrative silo that separates student affairs (tasked with keeping students happy) from academic administration (tasked with making them learn) exists only on an organizational chart, not in the mind of the student. This disconnect is the source of profound institutional blind spots. To correct this vision and provide a practical framework for institutions, one must deconstruct this Crossover Effect into its constituent parts. It can be

understood through three primary mechanisms: one rooted in emotional psychology, another in cognitive science, and a third in the very definition of learning itself.

The first and perhaps most pervasive mechanism of this effect is rooted in a fundamental principle of human psychology: our emotional states are not neatly compartmentalized. This phenomenon is best understood through the lens of what Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman [27] terms *"System 1" thinking* – our fast, intuitive, and emotional brain. When faced with a complex question, such as "How good is this educational program?", System 1 often substitutes an easier question: "How do I feel about this place right now?". This substitution gives rise to the *Halo Effect*, a cognitive bias where our overall impression of a person, place, or organization casts a "halo" that colors our evaluation of its specific attributes. When a student has a positive experience within the university's social fabric, this generates a powerful, positive halo. Consider a student who has found a strong friend group through a university-sponsored club, feels supported by their Student Union, and finds the campus beautiful and welcoming. When this student encounters an academically rigorous course with a demanding professor, their positive emotional baseline acts as a buffer. They are more likely to interpret the challenge as a valuable learning opportunity rather than a sign of institutional failure. Their sense of belonging fosters academic resilience. Conversely, a student struggling with loneliness, feeling like an outsider, and perceiving the campus as cold and bureaucratic will have a negative halo, a persistent, low-grade sense of grievance. For this student, the same demanding course is not a challenge to be overcome but a confirmation of their negative feelings, when the academic frustration is amplified by social misery. Consequently, when filling out a survey, their low rating of the course is not a pure reflection of the education process or teaching staff; it is an expression of their overall unhappiness. The low rating he gives the course is a proxy for his entire negative experience, a phenomenon we might call the *misattribution of dissatisfaction*. The work of student affairs and unions in creating a supportive social environment is not merely about student morale. It is a strategic function that directly manages the perceptual lens through which the education process is viewed. By fostering a sense of belonging, universities create the positive affective state that allows the academic enterprise to be perceived charitably, constructively, and fairly.

The second mechanism is less about emotion and more about the finite nature of mental bandwidth. *Cognitive Load Theory* posits that our working memory – the mental space where we actively process information – has a limited capacity [28]. For deep learning to occur, this capacity must be dedicated to understanding, connecting, and storing new concepts, a process known as *germane load*. However, this precious mental energy can be hijacked by extraneous cognitive load, the effort wasted on navigating poorly designed systems, overcoming unnecessary hurdles, and coping with non-academic stressors. A student struggling with loneliness is not just sad; they are expending significant cognitive resources ruminating on their social isolation. A student confused by a convoluted financial aid process is dedicating mental energy to deciphering bureaucracy instead of homework. A student navigating a serious roommate conflict without support is draining their cognitive reserves on stress and anxiety. Each of these problems, which in theory fall squarely within the purview of student affairs, imposes a heavy extraneous cognitive load. An effective social and cultural infrastructure, therefore, functions as a real cognitive load reduction system. A well-run orientation program reduces the load of navigating a new complex social or physical environment. Accessible and responsive mental health services provide strategies to manage the load of anxiety and

Вип. 3, 2025
Збірник наукових праць
Уманського державного педагогічного університету

depression. Efficient administrative offices (admissions, financial aid, housing) minimize the mental energy wasted on logistics. Clear communication channels ensure students aren't spending precious cognitive cycles trying to figure out who to ask for help. By systematically reducing these extraneous burdens, students directly free up the cognitive resources needed to engage fully with their academic work. In this light, a well-run student government or comprehensive first-year experience program, like a "University Education" course, is a prerequisite for effective learning as it clears the path for the mind to focus on the syllabus.

The final mechanism challenges the very definition of the curriculum itself by reframing what we consider to be a "learning experience". The traditional view sees the curriculum as the formal collection of courses in a student's educational plan. The word often used for everything else is "extracurricular", a term that inherently diminishes its value by defining it as being "outside" of the core mission. A more holistic and accurate view recognizes that a vast amount of learning, often the most practical, transformative, and memorable, happens in the co-curricular space. Already mentioned above, "High-Impact Practices" (HIPs) [8] are almost always facilitated, funded, or supported by the specific student infrastructure. These activities are not supplementary; they are essential pedagogical spaces where theoretical knowledge from the classroom becomes an applied skill. This co-curriculum acts as a scaffold, allowing students to practice and internalize formal learning in a dynamic, and often lower-stakes, environment. For example, a Business student elected treasurer of a student organization doesn't just learn budgeting; they must create a proposal, defend it, track expenses in a spreadsheet, manage money flow for events, and handle the social dynamics of a team with competing priorities. This single role provides more practical financial management experience than an entire textbook chapter. A Political Science student in the Debate Team hones skills in argumentation, rapid research, and public speaking far beyond what a single seminar presentation can provide. An Engineering student who joins a robotics club learns about teamwork, project management, troubleshooting under pressure, and sourcing materials – all critical professional skills even if not explicitly listed on their course syllabus.

When a student has these transformative experiences, they do not compartmentalize them. The pride and confidence gained from successfully leading a club project spill over into their classroom participation. In their mind, it is the university that gave them these opportunities. When they later report high satisfaction with their educational program, they are referring to this entire ecosystem of learning, not just their lectures. Therefore, when student infrastructure supports these programs, it's not just keeping students busy or improving retention; it's acting as a co-educator, delivering an essential part of the university's educational mission and profoundly shaping the perceived quality and value of the degree itself.

The journey from the flawed mechanics of traditional surveys to the intricate workings of the student psyche reveals a truth that is both simple and profound: the student experience is indivisible. Yet, the dominant operational structure of most universities is built on a contrary, and ultimately false, premise of the separation of the academic mission from student life. For the student, there is no separation. They do not perform a careful emotional calculus, separating the quality of their seminar discussion from the quality of their psychological support. The university is a single brand, a total environment where a brilliant, inspiring lecture in the morning can have its positive effects completely erased by a dismissive, bureaucratic encounter at the financial office in the afternoon. The intellectual stimulation of a challenging curriculum can be utterly overshadowed by the heavy cognitive load of chronic loneliness or the anxiety

of navigating a confusing dorm system. These are not separate experiences; they are additive and subtractive forces within a single, unified perception. This disconnect is the source of profound institutional drawbacks. When a dean sees declining satisfaction scores for a program, the default response is to investigate the curriculum or the faculty. They may completely miss that the root cause is a poorly managed dorm situation, a lack of social spaces for commuter students, or a faculty culture that feels exclusionary. The survey data is not wrong; it is just being misinterpreted through a fractured administrative lens. When a student rates their program quality, they are not just evaluating their professors. They are assessing the entirety of their journey: the ease of navigation, the sense of community, the quality of support, and the fundamental feeling of being valued as a person, not just a "client". To continue operating under the illusion of separation is to misunderstand what students are telling us fundamentally.

The following recommendations provide a blueprint for this work, a philosophy championed in foundational reports, such as Learning Reconsidered, which called for an integrated approach to student learning and development [29].

The impetus for the most significant and enduring institutional change must originate from executive leadership. Presidents, rectors, deans, and chancellors hold the authority to elevate inter-divisional collaboration from a desirable goal to a non-negotiable priority. This requires two fundamental shifts in institutional practice. First, leadership must transition from an allied to a fully integrated planning model. It is no longer sufficient for academic and student affairs divisions to maintain separate strategic plans that merely align; they must engage in a mandatory, joint strategic planning process that produces a single, unified institutional strategy. The goals articulated within this plan must be inherently cross-functional, reflecting the reality that student learning is a complex and holistic process that occurs both inside and outside the classroom. Second, this integrated strategy must be reinforced with structures of shared accountability. To ensure joint initiatives are effective, leaders should implement co-owned performance metrics. This can be further institutionalized through a model of "braided funding", where a portion of the budget is pooled into a common fund. Access to these resources is restricted to collaborative projects, which fundamentally alters the organizational dynamic from one of division to one of shared investment in student success.

At the tactical level, academic management must re-conceptualize its roles to extend beyond curriculum management and embrace community building. They are uniquely positioned to foster what Schlossberg [30] identified as "mattering" – the critical student perception of being noticed, appreciated, and needed. To achieve this, one must engage in two key practices. First, they must consume holistic data, moving beyond departmental course evaluations. Program directors and deans should actively request and analyze disaggregated institutional data, posing a critical comparison of supportive environment scores across different faculties. This practice aligns with the existing need [31] for a more evidence-based approach where data informs meaningful enhancement, not just accountability. Second, leaders must forge proactive partnerships with student affairs divisions and unions. This requires shifting from a reactive problem-solving model to one of proactive integration. Such initiatives might include co-sponsoring events, establishing a dedicated lounge for majors, or arranging for health counselors to hold office hours within the department, thereby reducing barriers and signaling a unified commitment to student success.

Concurrently, the university's data infrastructure must evolve to reflect this integrated understanding of the student experience. Institutional researchers should function not merely as

data collectors but as narrative builders who shape the institution's self-perception. This involves designing surveys to measure the *Crossover Effect* directly. For example, rather than asking about academic advising and sense of belonging in separate items, a better question would assess their internal relationship. Complementing large-scale survey data with qualitative methods such as focus groups, interviews, and observation is crucial. The mixed-methods approach provides a more complete and actionable understanding of the student experience by illuminating the context and narratives behind the numbers [32].

Building upon the foundational framework established in this study, future research could pursue more granular, context-specific investigations. There is a pressing need for in-depth, mixed-methods case studies of institutions that have successfully cultivated a strong social and cultural infrastructure. Such studies would move beyond theory to document the practical strategies and leadership decisions that facilitate genuine collaboration between academic management and student affairs. This approach aligns with calls for new, richer methods and a more holistic understanding of complex phenomena, like student thriving. Furthermore, large-scale comparative analyses are essential. Future work could explore how the impact of social infrastructure varies across institutional types and academic disciplines, recognizing that the factors shaping belonging for STEM students may differ significantly from those for students in the humanities [33]. This line of inquiry would help institutions move beyond one-size-fits-all solutions and toward targeted, evidence-based interventions.

A second, equally vital avenue for future research lies in establishing a clearer causal link between specific interventions and student outcomes. While this article posits a strong correlation, longitudinal studies are needed to map the developmental trajectory of belonging across a student's entire academic career. By tracking a single cohort from matriculation to graduation, researchers could identify critical inflection points and their long-term impact on students' institutional relationships. This aligns with research demonstrating that student engagement is not a static state but a dynamic process that evolves [34]. To strengthen causal inference, future work could employ quasi-experimental and experimental designs. For instance, researchers could implement a targeted mentorship program for a randomly assigned group of first-year students and measure its effects on belonging, academic persistence, and survey engagement against a control group. Such rigorous evaluations, often referred to as randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in educational research, provide the strongest evidence for what works, allowing institutions to make high-impact, resource-efficient investments in building a truly supportive environment [35].

In conclusion, the quality of a university cannot be measured by its academic offerings alone. It must also be judged by the robustness of the systems it has built to ensure its students can connect, belong, and thrive, making its social infrastructure an indispensable part of its core educational machinery. The university's investment in social and cultural infrastructure acts as a catalyst, creating opportunities that directly invite student involvement. This translation from opportunity to action happens because these investments reduce barriers and signal institutional values. When a university builds a new pool, funds a diverse array of student clubs, or hosts regular cultural events, it is doing more than just providing amenities; it is creating accessible, low-friction ways for students to connect. A student doesn't have to build a community from scratch; the institution should provide a legitimate, structured space for it to flourish. This tangible support encourages students to get involved because they see that the institution values their co-curricular life and is actively facilitating it. This involvement, in turn, profoundly

affects a student's perception of the quality of their academic program.

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