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The Holistic Model of Higher Education Success (HMoHES): The Intersection of Networking, Leadership, and Education

Haley Blount Pierson[1], Amanda Aguilar[2], Tara Tietjen-Smith[1]

[1]School of Kinesiology, Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, LA, USA
[2]Department of Kinesiology, The University of Alabama in Huntsville, Huntsville, AL, USA
Email: blounth@nsula.edu

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Abstract

Higher education faces mounting pressure to prepare graduates who possess not only academic competence but also the leadership, networking, and communication skills needed for successful workforce integration. This paper introduces the Holistic Model of Higher Education Success (HMoHES), a theoretical framework that reimagines the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework for the contemporary higher education and workforce landscape. HMoHES reframes CoI's cognitive, social, and teaching presences as Leadership, Networking, and Education. The intersections among these elements yield Communication, Commitment, and Connection, which together cultivate Holistic Development. Applicable across disciplines, the model offers faculty and administrators a practical framework for intentionally embedding leadership opportunities, networking experiences, and educational engagement throughout curricula. The paper outlines applied strategies for implementation, including peer mentoring, faculty-student relationship building, and structured face-to-face experiences, and discusses anticipated outcomes such as improved student and faculty retention, enhanced career readiness, expanded social capital, and a stronger sense of belonging. As a theoretical starting point, HMoHES calls for future empirical research examining its effects on skill development, networking, retention, and long-term career readiness, positioning holistic student development as a multidimensional, interconnected process essential to preparing graduates for meaningful personal and professional impact.

Keywords

Interdisciplinary Collaboration, Connection, Communication, Relationships, Student Success

1. Introduction

True higher education does not simply transfer knowledge; it activates it. The modern student thrives at the intersection where education builds the foundation, leadership sparks the purpose, and networking creates the highway to impact. Anonymous

Higher education is experiencing rapid and multifaceted change (Clark et al., 2025). Ronald Barnett (Barnett, 2000) coined the term *Supercomplexity* to describe "a milieu for the proliferation of frameworks by which we might understand the world, frameworks that are often competing with each other" (p. 409). He applied this philosophy to higher education, believing that the state of higher education institutions was a product of a supercomplex world that is constantly changing. Institutions are expected to fulfill their missions of educating students, cultivating knowledge and critical thinking, and preparing graduates for professional life in an environment of rising external pressures (Kumar, 2024). Federal policy reforms (e.g., changes to student loan programs and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives), shifting public perceptions of the value of a college degree, financial pressures, continued growth of online and hybrid learning, and, most recently, the emergence of artificial intelligence, have all created unique and complex challenges for colleges and universities (Brookings Institution, 2026; EDUCAUSE, 2025; Gallup, 2025; Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025). At the same time, growing expectations around workforce readiness are forcing programs to rethink how they prepare graduates (AACU, 2024), potentially moving beyond traditional approaches toward a more comprehensive model of personal and professional development.

Student success should no longer be defined solely by high academic achievement. To be workforce-ready, students also need training in leadership, communication, collaboration, adaptability, networking, and more. Employers consistently report that these intangible skills are more significant in hiring and predicting long-term success than GPA alone (Succi & Canovi, 2020; Jones et al., 2016). Similar research on graduate employability suggests that while academic performance remains an important predictor of success, soft skills may contribute more substantially to workforce readiness (Succi & Canovi, 2020). This widening gap between what employers value and what traditional pedagogy emphasizes highlights the need for higher education programs to reevaluate their curriculum and measures of success.

Additionally, a curriculum focused on holistic development may improve retention. Existing research shows that students who feel academically and socially connected to their institution are significantly more likely to remain enrolled and complete their degree (e.g., Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012). The same holds for student engagement. Students who prioritize relationship-building inside and outside of the classroom and remain academically and socially engaged throughout their college experience are more likely to stay enrolled and complete their degrees (e.g., Sá, 2023; Tinto, 2023). A curriculum designed to promote con-

nection and holistic development may also support department and institutional goals for retention and completion.

Students enrolled in higher education programs may be well suited to benefit from a holistic curriculum, as most graduates enter highly collaborative professions that require strong interpersonal skills with patients, athletes, coaches, administrators, educators, and community partners (e.g., Meiners & Wisdom, 2020). Success within these professions depends on technical competence as well as leadership, communication, relationship building, and adaptability. The educational setting serves as an ideal location to cultivate these complementary skills.

The evolving landscape of higher education calls for a framework that extends beyond traditional classroom preparation. Institutions should intentionally implement more applied personal and professional competencies alongside core disciplinary knowledge. In response, this paper introduces the Holistic Model of Higher Education Success (HMoHES), a theoretical framework that integrates leadership, networking, and education to support comprehensive student development in today's higher education landscape. While the framework has implications across a range of disciplines, it may be particularly relevant to kinesiology, where students are preparing for professions in which collaboration, communication, leadership, and relationship-building are fundamental to long-term career success.

2. Toward a Holistic Model of Higher Education Success

This paper introduces the Holistic Model of Higher Education Success (HMoHES) designed to support students, faculty, and administrators in kinesiology and related disciplines. The model is a modified version of the Community of Inquiry Framework (CoI; Garrison et al., 2000), originally developed to guide blended learning design and practice. The authors described blended learning as "the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences" (p. 87), which at the time of publication was still a somewhat novel concept. Following the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web in the 1990s, online education became increasingly attractive to universities seeking to advance their educational missions in more cost-effective, convenient, and technologically superior ways (Palvia et al., 2018). The CoI Framework sought to provide an orderly and rational roadmap to understanding the nature, purpose, practices, and principles of true blended learning (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). **Figure 1** is a diagrammatic representation of the original CoI Framework (Garrison et al., 2000).

3. Examining the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework in Relation to a New Model

The CoI theoretical framework (Garrison et al., 2000) represents a process of creating meaningful learning experiences through the interdependent intersectionality of social, cognitive, and teaching presence. The original construct was guided by a practical inquiry model designed to assess critical thinking and reflection in a computer conference environment.

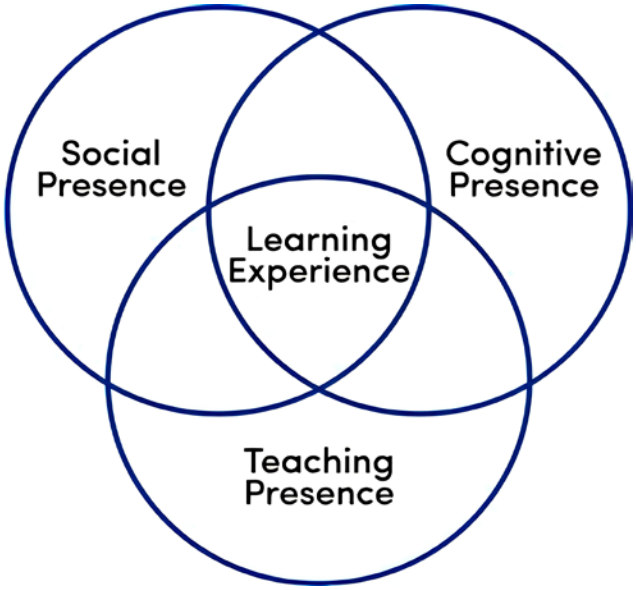


Figure 1. Community of inquiry framework (CoI; Garrison et al., 2000).

The Holistic Model of Higher Education Success (HMoHES) does not simply replace the original parts of the CoI with direct equivalencies; rather, these concepts are reinterpreted and expanded to better align with today's higher education and workforce demands. This approach reflects evolving educational, social, and professional realities, making the changes more than a one-to-one mapping; they represent a theoretical transformation informed by CoI but adapted for broader, holistic student development. Below, we present the following adjustments and additions as the new Holistic Model of Higher Education Success (HMoHES; **Figure 2**).

3.1. Cognitive Presence → Leadership

Cognitive presence refers to "the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry can construct meaning through sustained communication" (Garrison et al., 2000: p. 89). Cognitive presence in CoI emphasizes constructing meaning through critical thinking and reflection, largely as a cognitive, technical process. The categories of cognitive presence include the following: a) triggering event, b) exploration, c) integration, and d) resolution. This element of the CoI Framework supports the development of higher-order thinking skills through critical thinking, collaborative learning, and reflection in a blended learning environment. The ability to enhance cognitive presence is essentially being taught as a technical skill.

In today's higher education settings, we propose that *leadership* is a more modern lens through which to examine cognitive presence, to shape meaningful and equally beneficial learning experiences (i.e., leader to follower, follower to leader) that focus more on the development of soft skills. The CoI Framework does not acknowledge that cognitive presence is a process that happens due to interaction

with others (Garrison et al., 2000). We posit that leadership behaviors facilitate and sustain that process.

Leadership refers to a social influence process in which leaders attempt to motivate followers such that individual, group, and organizational goals are achieved (Liden et al., 2025). Leadership development is a proven way to increase a vast number of soft skills, skills that may be widely lacking in today's higher-education students (Luo & Li, 2025). Ngang (2012) identified several leadership soft skills that are important in higher education, including teamwork and collaboration, communication, initiative, commitment, and personal development. Thus, elements of collaboration and higher-order thinking remain present, but with less focus on learning outcomes and more on personal and professional development, both of educators and of students.

HMoHES proposes leadership as a lens to view this cognitive process, recognizing that meaningfulness and learning happen through social influence and interaction, involving motivation, collaboration, and soft skills development (Liden et al., 2025; Ngang, 2012). Leadership adds the relational and motivational dimensions absent in purely cognitive terms. Leadership is a broader, applied concept encompassing and transforming cognitive presence into a socially interactive and developmental process.

3.2. Social Presence → Networking

Social presence is defined by the CoI Framework as the ability of learners to project themselves socially and effectively into a community of inquiry (Rourke et al., 1999). The original context of *social presence* in the CoI Framework applied to a learner's perceived social identity in an online learning environment. Looking at social presence from a broader and modernized higher education lens, the HMoHES proposes that *Networking* better reflects the social, educational, and leadership-centered needs of today's college students, which implies intentional, goal-oriented relationship building and exchange of resources (Spann et al., 2025).

This expansion of social presence to networking is supported by the Relational Cultural Theory (RCT; Miller, 1976, 1987). RCT is a feminist theory initially examining women and how they were characterized in psychology. It was eventually applied to the workplace, where traditionally male-dominated theories (Erikson, 1950; Levinson et al., 1978) related to holding oneself separate from others, whereas women seemed to thrive through relationships, mentoring, and community-building (Miller, 1976, 1987). Since then, RCT has been applied to replace leadership structures such as top-down hierarchies in the modern workplace with collaborative, mutually beneficial, and less rigid structures (e.g., Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Kress et al., 2025). This shift reflects the importance of mentorship, social capital, and professional relationships essential for career success emphasizing collaborative, connective workplace models over isolated social identity. Networking broadens social presence into an active developmental and career-oriented function beyond initial online social identity.

Networking has been defined as building intentional relationships through resource exchange, collaboration, and skill development (Spann et al., 2025). Networking may be viewed as both a personal and professional means of creating support systems, information networks, and contacts crucial for career and personal success (Seibert et al., 2001). Successful networking may be used as a career progression tool, with emphasis on social capital, mentorship, and leadership opportunities; networking is a significant predictor of career success (Blount Taitano, 2016). Networking should include mentorship, a cornerstone of social presence. Career networking continues with social impact, employee well-being, and employee engagement considerations, all placed at the forefront of rising workforce demands.

3.3. Teaching Presence → Education

Teaching presence is "essential in balancing cognitive and social issues consistent with intended education outcomes" (Garrison et al., 2000: p. 101) and involves the design and facilitation of students' educational experience. This piece of the CoI Framework focuses on effective teaching strategies [in blended learning environments] such as facilitating and engaging in meaningful discussions, developing and providing instructional resources that support varied learning styles, and offering additional support as needed to deepen student comprehension. The reimagined HMoHES recognizes the value in teaching presence, as defined by the original COI Framework, but reframes this piece of the model simply as *Education*, whereby a broader definition of education and the educational process, specific to present-day higher education, may be applied.

In this context, education is defined as a structured, advanced learning process that equips students with specialized knowledge, skills, and competencies for professional, academic, and personal growth (e.g., Gachino & Worku, 2019). HMoHES replaces this with a more expansive concept of education as a structured, holistic process that includes intellectual, personal, and professional growth (Gachino & Worku, 2019). This frames teaching as part of a total educational ecosystem supporting whole-person development rather than just course delivery. A holistic pedagogical approach to education supports an *engaging* process, complete with in-depth study, critical thinking, and influential teaching as the core elements. With blended learning no longer a novel concept, but rather a common practice, redefining teaching presence in this way frames the educational process as a whole-person concept.

3.4. Learning Experience → Holistic Development

As online education and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) continue to expand, face-to-face student enrollment has declined to the point where students are now expressing concerns over valued instruction and the validity of their degrees when there is little to no face-to-face interaction with professors and peers (e.g., Palvia et al., 2018; Vieriu & Petrea, 2025). Soft skills (that are inherently learned through

face-to-face interactions) are lacking, as universities traditionally focus on subject-specific expertise and fail to emphasize critical interpersonal and cognitive competencies of communication, leadership, and teamwork (Luo & Li, 2025). As employers increasingly prioritize job candidates who can adapt to rapidly evolving job markets, where automation and AI are leading the way, educators must also adapt teaching methodologies in a way that focuses not only on domain-specific skills and theoretical knowledge, but also on those soft skills that, together, will produce diversified graduates who are better prepared for today's workforce.

Supporting a more holistic approach, self-determination theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2000) is a psychological framework that explains human motivation and personality by focusing on our innate growth tendencies and basic psychological needs. These needs include autonomy, competence, and relatedness. SDT helps to frame motivation (both intrinsic and extrinsic) in cognitive and social development while focusing on individual differences. Similar to RCT in its focus on social and cultural factors like relationships, SDT also includes *autonomy*, or the feeling of control over your own actions and decisions, and *competence*, which is a sense of mastery and perceived effectiveness. These three factors "enhance versus undermine intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and well-being" (Ryan & Deci, 2000: p. 68).

However, while CoI acknowledges the interdependency of interaction with others, supported by both social engagement and instructional facilitation, cognitive presence is primarily framed with a focus on critical thinking and knowledge construction as a cognitive process that benefits from social and teaching support. The emphasis tends to be on cognitive skills and the intellectual inquiry cycle (e.g., triggering event, exploration, integration, resolution) rather than on the social influence or relational dynamics that motivate and sustain these processes. In contrast, the HMoHES framework extends this understanding by using leadership as a social influence process that actively facilitates and sustains cognitive presence. The model highlights how leadership behaviors, such as motivating, guiding, and engaging others, are crucial not only for cognitive development but also for fostering the soft skills underpinning effective collaboration and personal growth. This perspective enriches the cognitive presence concept by integrating the relational and developmental dimensions that are implicit but less emphasized in CoI.

Focusing on the *Holistic Development* of each individual requires student-centered content design, emphasis on faculty development, and continuous evaluation and improvement efforts (Vela et al., 2024). While technical skills and academic knowledge are still a vital component of higher education and career readiness, movement towards a more holistic approach to education will place a greater emphasis on the soft skills many graduates are reportedly lacking as they enter the workforce (Cheang & Yamashita, 2023; Luo & Li, 2025). Thus, the need for a reimagined Community of Inquiry Framework (CoI) is essential; the HMoHES expands the CoI Framework by proposing that measurable learning extends beyond cognitive development to include the intentional integration of leadership

development, networking experiences, and transferable educational experiences that collectively contribute to student success and the development of the whole person. Thus, the distinction lies in HMoHES elevating leadership as a central mechanism by which cognitive presence emerges and thrives through active interpersonal interaction, whereas CoI situates cognitive presence within an interdependent triad but primarily emphasizes the cognitive process itself supported by social and teaching presence.

Please see Figure 2 for a representation of the new model.

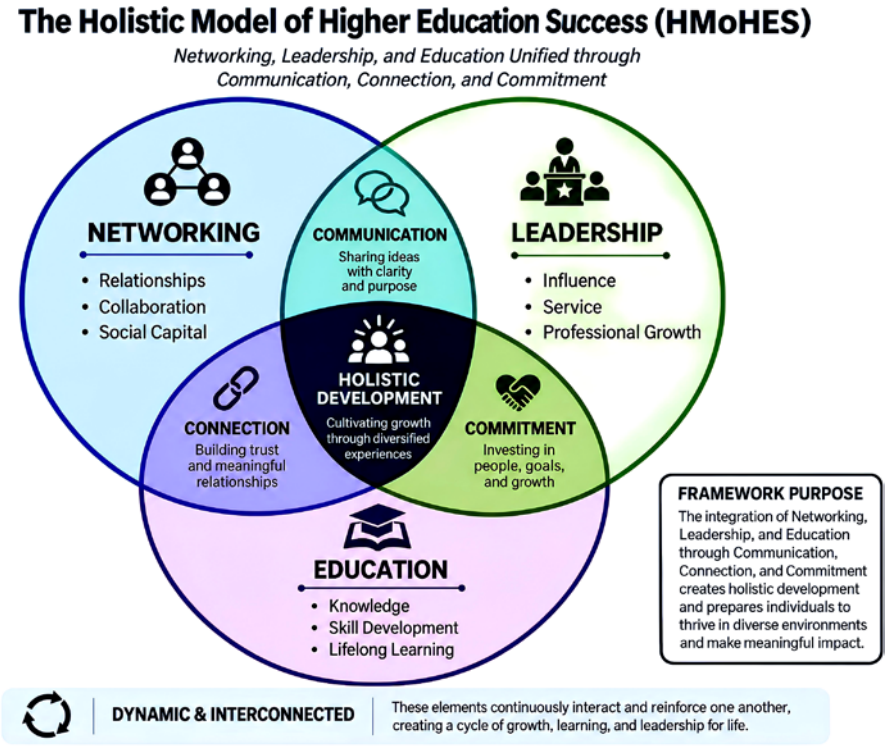


Figure 2. The holistic model of higher education success (HMoHES; Blount Pierson et al., 2026).

HMoHES may be understood as an extension and reimagining of the CoI framework, not an entirely independent model. It builds on the foundational ideas of CoI but evolves them to meet the needs of contemporary higher education challenges. By shifting focus toward leadership, networking, and holistic education, HMoHES addresses limitations in CoI related to workforce readiness, soft-skill development, and deeper personal/professional integration. The HMoHES is not a simple renaming of the CoI but a conceptual transformation that responds to the complexities of modern higher education and workforce preparation.

4. The HMoHES: Intersection of Skills

4.1. Leadership + Networking = (Authentic) Communication

We proposed that the intersection of leadership and networking cultivates effec-

tive, authentic communication skills, which are critical for academic success, collaboration, and professional interaction. In the CoI Framework, the connection between cognitive presence and social presence is defined as *supporting discourse*, the dynamic intersection where open communication, expression, and collaborative inquiry shape the learning climate (Garrison et al., 2000). Carnegie Mellon University (2024) defined discourse as "the practice of listening and speaking on a topic of shared interest or concern with intention to promote understanding, knowledge-building, and community engagement" (p. 1). In this context, purposeful communication and open expression, without fear of judgment, are key elements of success in academic settings, where the term discourse is more commonly used. Garrison & Akyol (2013) further identified three categories of social presence to include affective communication, open communication, and group cohesion, thereby supporting the translation of the overlapping connector in the reimagined HMoHES to a simplified *Communication*. The reimagined HMoHES conceptualizes the connection between cognitive and social presence as communication, using the term as an overarching concept that encompasses all processes involving the exchange of information, rather than limiting it to social discourse.

Communication is a key aspect of leadership development (Salsabila et al., 2025) and connects directly to the Networking piece of the framework, known as social presence in the CoI Framework. The methods and means by which people can and/or are expected to communicate today differ vastly from the time when the CoI Framework was created. Furthermore, studies show that one of the most important soft skills that employers value is communication, which consistently proves lacking in recent university graduates (Cheang & Yamashita, 2023). Thus, highlighting this skill as a key piece of the HMoHES makes logical sense.

4.2. Leadership + Education = Commitment

We propose that enhanced leadership development within educational programs strengthens students' and faculty's commitment to academic goals, personal growth, and professional development, leading to increased persistence and retention. The synergy between leadership and education fosters mutual commitment between educators and learners, supporting deeper learning experiences and perseverance in academic and career goals.

The connector between cognitive presence and teaching presence in the CoI Framework is *selecting content*, which refers to the actual course content professors and instructors choose for their courses (Garrison et al., 2000). Faculty members establish learning objectives, select and organize content, design activities, pose challenging questions, facilitate discussion, provide feedback, and help students connect ideas. These actions stimulate and sustain the cognitive processes necessary for deeper learning. Importantly, teaching presence does not mean that the instructor simply delivers information, but that the instructor serves as a designer, facilitator, and intellectual guide who helps students move progressively toward more sophisticated understanding.

In the HMoHES model, this concept, combined with leadership, is transformed into the term *commitment*, which is reflective of the two-way commitment needed between students & professors for educational understanding and success. Commitment may be defined as "a force that binds an individual to a course of action of relevance to one or more targets" (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001: p. 301), where the force that is experienced is a mindset. Research supports the concept that "academic and social integration, commitment and persistence have been positioned as important predictors of student retention, achievements, and success" (Griep, 2022: p. 1900). The process of selecting content should be dependent upon the students' learning needs and outcomes and requires commitment to the evolving learning process and workforce needs.

4.3. Networking + Education = Connection

We propose that intentional networking opportunities that emphasize mentorship, collaboration, and social capital development increase meaningful connections between students, peers, faculty, and industry, thereby improving students' sense of belonging and engagement. Combining networking with educational engagement creates authentic relationships and trust among learners and educators, enhancing social integration and student retention.

Effective leadership in higher education requires educators to move away from a highly structured style of leadership to a more collective, collaborative, and non-hierarchical style of leadership focused on connection (Amey, 2006). The HMoHES combines the skill of networking with the value of education, focusing on the emphasis of connection, rather than *setting climate*. In the CoI Framework, setting climate refers to establishing the trust, safety, and open communication necessary for learners to project themselves as real people in an online learning environment. The goal is to create a climate where students can comfortably engage in deep, collaborative dialogue. The term *connection* builds on setting the climate and takes it a step further, reinforcing that piece of the framework but creating a two-way emphasis on the actual connection between learners and instructors alike.

In today's digital landscape where the means to *connect* are so vast and readily available, students are actually amidst what some researchers have referred to as "an epidemic of disconnection" (McMurtrie, 2022: p. 1). Some researchers attribute students' cognitive detachment and disengagement to the lingering effects of extended online learning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been associated with feelings of isolation, anxiety, and reduced engagement with learning environments (Rajan et al., 2024; Kinzie, 2023). Others argue that increasing financial pressures and the growing perception of higher education as a transactional exchange have weakened students' sense of connection to their institutions and educational experiences (e.g., Rahal & Shaw, 2023). Educators must focus on meaningful ways in which to create *authentic* connections with students, peers, and business/industry to reverse this trend. University administrators need

to collaborate and work together with people, foster networking opportunities, and sustain educational priorities if they want to create successful leaders (Ngang, 2012).

4.4. Communication + Commitment + Connection = Holistic Development

We propose that the integration of Networking, Leadership, and Education through Communication, Connection, and Commitment supports the evolution of holistically developed individuals and cultivates growth through said practices, while fostering diversified experiences. The combination of communication, commitment, and connection mediates the development of holistic competencies, resulting in improved student retention, enhanced career readiness, expanded professional networks, and increased overall student well-being and sense of belonging. Additionally, building relationships through mentoring experiences enriches each individual. These elements of the HMoHES continuously interact and reinforce one another, creating a cycle of growth, learning, and leadership, which prepares individuals to thrive in diverse environments.

Modern workforce environments are more demanding than ever and are increasingly requiring diversely prepared candidates, with particular emphasis placed on those who possess valuable soft skills. Employers note that they would rather, and can more easily, develop the necessary technical skills in new hires than spend time trying to develop common workplace etiquette and personal attributes that they are commonly lacking (Cheang & Yamashita, 2023). One of the most compelling research studies to support the need for holistic development was conducted in 2023 and examined 30 years of research articles and government reports about employability. Through this systematic literature review, the researchers (Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023) found that problem-solving, communication, teamwork, adaptability, and willingness to learn were among the most frequently reported skills that employers identified as desirable in new hires. The study simultaneously found that recent college graduates lacked these skills, implicating a disconnect between what universities impart and what today's workforce demands. The HMoHES directly addresses the need to bridge this gap and provides a viable solution to align academia with current and future workforce needs.

Research on work readiness also shows that in addition to soft skills, employers are evaluating new hires based on personal attributes and qualities (Cheang & Yamashita, 2023). Often referred to as *people skills*, qualities such as being able to work well with others, empathy, integrity, authenticity, and respect for others are noted as desirable (Liptak, 2005). Higher education institutions should be mindful of this when implementing and evaluating curricula and assignments, such that students are able to develop the desired soft skills (such as efficient and professional communication), as well as personal attributes and qualities. Developing students from a holistic-person approach, using the HMoHES as a guide, will

leave graduates better equipped to meet today's changing workforce needs and will prepare them for long-term career trajectories. Holistic educational approaches that integrate academic content with professional competencies enhance students' knowledge, critical thinking, and transferable skills essential for workforce readiness.

5. Application for Higher Education: Suggested Practices

Leadership opportunities in higher education should not be limited to students holding formal leadership positions. Students may gain leadership skills and practice in a variety of ways. Opportunities should be provided for students to develop leadership identity through coursework and on-campus experiences, skill-building through on-campus resources and practical, applied exercises, and an ethos for lifelong learning (e.g., Almazovaite et al., 2024). Some implementation examples are on-campus leadership opportunities, leadership courses or modules in existing courses, encouraging involvement in student organizations, increasing access to career and service learning, organized participation (or course assignments related to) civic engagement, formalized peer mentoring, and access to a variety of professional development opportunities on topics such as career preparation and ethical decision-making.

The HMoHES places an emphasis on networking and leadership opportunities, which may be more effective in face-to-face settings (Baumann & Utz, 2021). Higher educators should facilitate networking opportunities both within and outside of the classroom in order to prepare students for post-graduation employment and achievement. Networking requires a more active approach by both students and educators, going beyond social presence and forcing direct engagement and connection.

Several possible applications may be used in higher education. For instance, the development of peer and faculty-student relationships, development and expansion of mentoring programs, expansion and connection through alumni networks, support for attending external conferences and meetings, expansion of internships and career connections, involvement in student organizations, increased interdisciplinary collaboration within and outside the university, and development of community partnerships. To ensure equitable access to these opportunities, institutions should make efforts to reduce financial and logistical barriers that may prevent some students from participating. This may be done by seeking grants or scholarships for conference registrations and travel, by bringing alumni back to campus for open-access advising and networking, and by ensuring that networking and mentoring opportunities are communicated broadly and made accessible to all, regardless of students' financial resources or connections. Such intentional institutional support can help prevent networking and mentoring opportunities from reinforcing existing differences in students' social and financial capital. Providing these experiences will help students develop social capital, helping them successfully navigate their time in college and the transition to their ca-

reers.

The proven advantages of face-to-face learning are evidenced through group interaction and active participation of students, which support the development of specific professional, personal, and social skills not acquired through online settings (Marco-Fondevila et al., 2022). Workforce readiness research also supports the position that in-person, on-site experiences are needed in order for students to develop the necessary soft skills and attributes that are currently lacking in today's college graduates. Many university curricula attempt to address this need by making an internship a requirement for graduation; however, employers consistently report that students show up to internships unaware and underprepared (Cheang & Yamashita, 2023). Students must learn the importance of understanding ideas and situations like workplace dynamics, challenges of the profession, how to conduct themselves during meetings, etc. before entering their internship unprepared to handle such expectations. Therefore, assignments and field experiences that require face-to-face interactions should be implemented throughout curricula. Examples may include in-person business meetings, job shadowing, customer service experiences, interviews, and focus group sessions, all of which require clear and consistent communication, which reflects back on the HMoHES intersection of networking and leadership.

Some examples of ways to help students improve networking skills and practice include hosting a career day, implementing a resume writing workshop, setting up participation in mock interviews, and opening access to external experts in the form of guest speakers, advisory panels, and field trips. Others include providing opportunities for observation of people working in their chosen career field, support for attending conferences with faculty, and access to workshops to develop networking skills.

Commitment to people, goals, and growth are essential for holistic development (Ng et al., 2016). Students should be willing to persist, invest, and take ownership of their own personal development. This growth comes in the form of commitment to academic goals, community, leadership, lifelong learning, personal growth, and profession, including practicing resilience. All of these may be developed in the higher education context through coursework, taking on responsibilities, and participating in a variety of experiences. Having knowledge and skills but lacking resilience and commitment does not necessarily produce success. All of them together may result in a strong professional identity with motivation and persistence that culminate in lifelong learning.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Student success can no longer be measured solely by academic achievement. As higher education navigates a complex and rapidly evolving landscape, students need more than content knowledge to excel in their professional lives. The Holistic Model of Higher Education Success (HMoHES) is designed to support faculty and administrators in integrating leadership, networking, and education to pro-

mote comprehensive student development in today's higher education landscape. Rather than viewing these elements as independent initiatives, the model treats them as interconnected components of a holistic educational experience. When leadership, networking, and education are intentionally embedded throughout a program's curriculum, measurable improvements may be achieved in student retention, career readiness, and students' sense of belonging (Muraco et al., 2025).

Several outcomes are expected from the application of HMoHES. First, improved retention for both students and faculty is expected. Existing research (e.g., Sá, 2023) supports the idea that students who feel more academically and socially engaged with their institutions are significantly more likely to remain enrolled and complete their degrees. The same rationale extends to faculty. Educators who experience genuine collaboration and connection with colleagues and students are less likely to disengage or depart from their institutions.

Second, the model is intended to enhance career readiness by intentionally developing professional competencies that are highly valued by organizations today. Employers increasingly emphasize soft skills, including leadership, teamwork, communication, adaptability, and critical thinking, as essential to success in the workplace (Succi & Canovi, 2020). By inserting opportunities to develop and practice these skills into the curriculum, students will be better prepared to transition into their careers with the interpersonal and professional skills necessary for long-term success.

Third, the model intentionally positions networking as a skill that is deliberately developed rather than a byproduct of routine interactions. By intentionally integrating networking within the curriculum, the model strives to expand the professional networks of both students and alumni, strengthen mentorship relationships, increase social capital, and cultivate a more active alumni community that supports students throughout their academic journey and beyond.

Finally, the model is anticipated to improve the students' sense of belonging. Current research (e.g., Strayhorn, 2022) showing that a sense of belonging directly supports student persistence and engagement over time motivates the creation of a curriculum grounded in relational and inclusive practices.

While the HMoHES offers a comprehensive framework for supporting student development, its application and effectiveness may vary widely across disciplines, institutional types, instructional delivery modes, and student circumstances. Different fields of study may emphasize distinct competencies or pedagogical approaches, requiring tailored adaptations of the model. Similarly, resource availability and institutional priorities can influence the feasibility of implementing face-to-face leadership and networking opportunities, particularly in large, public, or lower resource institutions. Additionally, the growing prevalence of online and hybrid education poses challenges for replicating face-to-face interaction benefits, necessitating innovative virtual alternatives. Diverse student backgrounds, including socio-economic status, cultural differences, and life responsibilities, affect access and engagement with networking and leadership activities. Therefore, while

face-to-face experiences are valuable, HMoHES acknowledges the need for flexible, context-sensitive implementation that respects the diversity of learners and institutions.

Higher education success is a multidimensional and developmental process in which education, networking, and leadership interact through communication, connection, and commitment to produce holistic student development. These elements are mutually reinforcing rather than independent; growth in one domain can facilitate growth in the others, creating a dynamic cycle of learning, engagement, leadership, and lifelong development. Consequently, holistic student development emerges not from any single educational experience, but from the cumulative and interconnected experiences students encounter throughout their higher education journey. The conclusion of applying the HMoHES is that higher education success extends beyond academic attainment to encompass the development of individuals who are knowledgeable, connected, communicative, capable of leadership, and committed to lifelong learning and meaningful contributions. This results in improved quality of life and satisfaction, which is also a logical outcome.

The World Health Organization (2026) defines quality of life in terms of "an individual's perception of their position in life relative to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns" (p. 1). Higher education and finding fulfilling career paths result in increased health and well-being, financial stability and security, personal fulfillment, civic engagement and social connection, and broader, healthier life outcomes (National Association of Independent Colleges & Universities, NAICU, 2021), which is the ultimate goal of higher education and the application of the HMoHES.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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