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# The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Community College Educational Leaders

## *The Restorative Powers of Mentorships*

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### Abstract

Educational leaders at the community college seek to achieve institutional missions and personal visions at the college, yet are faced with increasing challenges such as those exacerbated by the pandemic (i.e., decreasing enrollment, state accountability for graduation rates, limited budgets, and faculty job satisfaction). For leaders at the community college to become effective leaders in a post-pandemic world they must develop their social and emotional intelligences (SEI) to overcome challenges with vitality and not succumb to burnout. Developing growth-promoting mentorships is a source of SEI development because it offers emotional restoration through spiritual encounters. The leaders' spiritual well-being is directly linked to their SEI. When educational leaders innovate opportunities to form mentorships and support social and emotional wellbeing of faculty and students, the community college will thrive in the face of future challenges and constant uncertainties. This paper contributes to the gap in the literature for innovative approaches for supporting the emotional well-being of educational leaders at the CC. The unique contribution is through the focus on the power of the mentor-mentee relationship as a spiritual encounter.

### Keywords

community college – educational leadership – social and emotional intelligences – wellbeing – mentor

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## Introduction

Community colleges (CCs) are known for their open access policies in which they offer educational opportunities to millions of people who aspire to achieve academic, vocational, and even personal goals (Atwell et al., 2022; D'Amico et al., 2022; Hartman & Burmick, 2023; Raby et al., 2023; Prial et al., 2023; Wang, et al., 2022). The institution's mission statement reflects the priority to serve these students and are supported by practices and procedures aimed toward equity and the needs of a diversifying global community (Sánchez-Moreno et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2023). In the US, CCs are two-year institutions funded by the city and state that offer associates or career and technical degrees. This undergraduate education also provides students with assistance in obtaining their GED, technical certificates, and help students transfer to four-year colleges or institutions. Many states offer eligible students free tuition education. Faculty are required to have master's degrees or certain credentials to teach, in which there are full-time and adjunct faculty.

Almost 50% of all post-secondary students are enrolled at a CC—an institution that increases access to higher education (Atwell et al., 2022; Jabbar et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2023). CCs are foundational in US higher education, as they are the beginnings of many students who are first-time in college, economically underserved, people of color, women, minority, or unprepared students enter higher education (Hernández, et al., 2023; Hines, 2023; Wickersham et al., 2023). These unique institutions of higher education are an affordable way to attain upward social mobility for underserved minority and marginalized communities (Wassmer & Galloway, 2023).

The CC is an institution designed to empower their community through education, in which the diversity of student demographics and challenges need to be addressed if this mission is to be achieved. According to Gantt et al. (2024) “Students with historically marginalized identities and those from underprivileged backgrounds often face unique and increased challenges as compared to their more privileged peers, while remaining underrepresented within much of the historical literature on higher education and psychology” (p. 1). Given this situation, there is a call to rework CC policy and programs in order to engage the long-term effects cause by the pandemic, “As communities across the country continue to feel the burden of social and economic uncertainty, it becomes more difficult for community colleges to address the holistic needs of their students, including but not limited to food, housing, technology, and childcare needs” (Burmick & Duran, 2022, p. 124). Most CCs seek to engage holistic development of students, which means that educational leaders must focus on students' holistic needs within their relevant contexts and

challenges. To support students in actualizing potentials, leaders that support emotional needs by incorporating the wealth that multicultural communities cultural bring into the college will achieve greater levels of institutional success (Jabbar et al., 2022; Stone et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2023).

### Rising Challenges

Educational leaders at CCs must be sensitive to the issues of equity and social justice if they are to create meaningful change for students that experiences barriers to academic success when social uncertainties or racial injustice is present (Burmicky & Hartman, 2023; Rodriguez & Escobar, 2023; Yi & Nauk, 2024). CC students face barriers such as insecurities with housing, food, or even experience homelessness (Loofbourrow & Sherr, 2023; Terrile, 2023). The educational leaders of CCs must become aware of the changingness of the global community (e.g., global politics, markets, rising AI technologies) and how it affects the lives of students. This means to create partnerships within the community to face barriers of student success together, while the leader is faced with declining enrolment and the changing needs of the global job market.

The mission of the CC is sometimes incongruent with state or federal policies. The challenges to creating equitable higher education can come from state or local policies or politics—which influence the classroom experience. CC leaders are in a space to where they are held accountable and also face the realities of students they serve. To make equity a final goal may be insufficient because it limits the focus of the leader to a sole factor. Instead, there are a multitude of factors that prevent students from accessing education, from structural to personal challenges, which impact academic success and degree attainment (Wright-Kim et al., 2024; Wladis et al., 2024). Barriers such as racial or linguistic discrimination are most often experienced by minority students, which leaders come to know as a unique feature of the CC student demographic (May, 2023). There may be faculty, staff, or leadership that are not helpful or even detrimental to these students by engaging them as categories or through a deficit lens. This is the result of a discord between the mission statement of the CC and what takes place in daily practices.

The CC's policies and procedures may not support the changing needs of marginalized students, in which these practices reaffirm barriers, if not create new ones. Groups that have been excluded need to be identified sensitively and brought into the CC mission and policy. CCs must make minority and marginalized communities' part of the decision-making process, where they are

given leadership across the organization (Hartman & Burmickey, 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2020). These dialogues are important because they bring in diverse perspectives and needs of the community and can work to deconstruct the systemic structures of inequality. Building empathic relationships and acquiring knowledge of inter- and intra-national policies are important for faculty to understand and engage students' holistic needs, especially emergent bilinguals, first-generation, immigrant, minority, hidden population, and undocumented students (Burmickey & Duran, 2022; Bush et al., 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Student success extends beyond their time at the CC, and must be measured in lifelong well-being, goal attainment, and contribution to the community. The journey through higher education and its lifelong influenced are influenced by the CC's organizational culture and leadership (Bush et al., 2023; Jabbar et al., 2022). If those in leadership positions do not value features of emotional intelligence such as spirituality, then it will be largely absent if not devalued in daily decisions and long-term initiatives. Contrarily, if there is a value placed on transfer success, then elements such as peer and institutional support will be available. Yet, CCs with higher transfer rates may have more resources or even may serve students that experience more social or cultural advantages (e.g., higher family income). Navigating and succeeding at degree plans and transfer policies are difficult for most, especially so for first-time in college students who need additional support (Bahr et al., 2023; Wassmer & Galloway, 2023). Many CCs place students in tracks or pathways that may not reflect their career or personal vision, or long-term educational goals—where only 1/3 of students have been shown to successfully transfer to four-year institutions and complete a bachelor's degree within 6 years (Jabbar et al., 2022). Leaders are left to explore factors to engage that will help students transfer to a four-year institution and complete the degree, where many have overlooked spirituality as a factor to increase rates.

Leaders take care in understanding students' experiences in and out of the classroom to promote lifelong success and development. Yet, the growing challenges and uncertainties can be too much for one person. The pandemic saw the prevalence of crisis leadership, which is as Marchant et al. (2024) described, "an urgent situation requiring immediate and decisive action by an organization or leaders of the organization" (p. 2). Although the pandemic has ended, many continue this leadership style. Educational leaders are required to engage and manage uncertainties that disrupt the fundamental workings of the school, which consequences are high for the institution, reputation, and all involved. The pandemic was responsible for making educational leadership a top priority for understanding how crisis leaderships affect learners, staff, and the community (Bailey & Gibson, 2024; Rodriguez & Escobar, 2023).

Crisis leadership during the pandemic may have been necessary, but the costs were significant to educational leaders. A study in Wales and Northern Ireland's senior school leaders during the crisis leadership period of the pandemic shown that the majority reported excessive workload or work hours, lower wellbeing, emotional disturbances such as depression, exhaustion, psychosomatic symptoms, all of which females were prevalent for such reports (Marchant et al., 2024). Because of the job demands, many leaders sacrificed leisure or personal activities for work, including sleep. The pressures have caused greater rates of attrition, because the post-pandemic educational system has placed greater stress in financial and educational policy. Leadership had to make critical decisions in moment's notice during the pandemic, and now face new protocols and policies which they must implement. The negative effects on leadership impact the wellbeing and educational quality of students.

With greater demands, leaders' personal and professional resources are spread thin. Educational leaders at the CC are seeking to support faculty, staff, students, and communities adapt to the incessant changes and challenges that are the reality of a post-pandemic world (DeVona & Weiner, 2024; Gómez-Leal et al., 2022; Pellitteri, 2021; Sánchez-Moreno et al., 2015; Nachman et al., 2024). However, the challenges such as recruitment, turnover, retention, rising accountability, mandates state changes, decreasing enrollment, and low resources are causing leaders to experience excessive amounts of stress (Tran et al., 2020; Wassmer & Galloway, 2023; Wickersham et al., 2023). Furthermore, educational leaders experience greater challenges and workloads the more they remain in the position, and they must adapt, which typically takes away from their personal time (Heffernan & Mills, 2023). Leaders are expected to respond to issues during personal time and must always be addressing the issues that pop up—there is no wonder that burnout is common (Karaevli, 2024).

The incessant demands and challenges that CCs face require educational leaders with developed social and emotional intelligences (SEI), who can manage emotions during crises, aware of their intensity, and lead the school swiftly and with sincerity (Gómez-Leal et al., 2022; Marchant et al., 2024). School leadership is dependent upon a leaders' ability to express, manage, and understand their emotions (Bao, 2024; Pellitteri, 2021). Furthermore, emotion awareness and management are key to wellbeing during periods of crisis leadership and time thereafter—which will affect the success of the leader and institution through the challenges and uncertainties (Midha, 2021). How one engages the emotional storms are important for the wellbeing of the person, which translate into the effectiveness of the leadership. Some may try to push back and force their way through the most intense storms, while others with the wisdom

of nature, know it proves best to turn their boats' engines off during a typhoon and learn to sail with the waves, lest the boat capsizes.

These increasing institutional and social demands and stressors are exhausting educational leaders' resources and abilities to cope and perform. The intensity of the leadership position continues to take its tolls on physical and emotional wellbeing, causing many to lose job satisfaction and decrease performance, with official states of emergence subsided since the COVID-19 pandemic, the caustic effects of severe emotional disturbances continues to burnout leaders, continuing to take an emotional toll years after.

### **The Social and Emotional Intelligences Factor**

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a psychological concept that can be useful for educational leadership because it helps achieve professional goals through building growth-promoting relationships, learning, resilience, motivation, and adjustment (Benjamin et al., 2024; Jowsey et al., 2024; Madvari et al., 2024; Pellicteri, 2021; Robinson, 2024). College leaders must effectively work with the community, parents, faculty, staff, and students, and are responsible for decisions that affect the social workings of the school. All decisions are influenced by emotions and must be managed with mindful awareness. EI helps leaders adapt so that interpersonal encounters can be navigated with empathy. Studies have found that EI skills were correlated to positive emotional climates of the classroom, less issues with classroom management or maladjusted behaviors (Wang & Wang, 2024). EI also has a significant relationship with decreased teacher burnout and increased job satisfaction (Postigo et al., 2025). Educational leaders must facilitate the development of EI to benefit teachers, staff, students, and most importantly, themselves.

Yet, modern conceptions of EI are limited to Western cultural paradigms that are based in an industrial, reductionist, and often exclusive model, in which emotions and relationships are cogs in machines, designed for a purpose, and are limited to humans (in which there is a hierarchy based on trait/ability value) (Filipponi et al., 2024). Although there is currently increased attention and interventions for educational leaders, faculty, and students to develop their EI, the burnout and turnover rates continue to rise (Li et al., 2024b). The problem with EI trainings for CC leaders is that EI contains phenomena that cannot be reduced to tactics or behaviorist reductions. This makes the mentorships that are forcefully develop within the leadership team, faculty, and school to be at best, superficial or based in an emotional transactional model. Emotional phenomena, such as empathy cannot be contained to a static definition or

standardized tactic, because it is an indefinable phenomenon. There are features of empathy that continue to be discovered (i.e., cognitive and affective channels), increasing the complexity of the concept. Rather, there needs to be a guide for educational leaders to explore their own social and emotional capabilities, which opens perspectives to the ways in which emotions and meaning create a personal world paradigm.

Taking care of one's own SEI development has social implications, especially as it transforms the world paradigm of the leader. The EI paradigm through a multicultural humanistic psychology theoretical lens, opens the conceptions to the guiding processes known as the social and emotional intelligences (SEI), which are an organism's capacity to grow aware of personal and social emotional experiences, regulate emotional states, discover spirituality, expand empathic depths and understanding that emotions reflect the organism's infinite relationships with the world. This means exploring freedom of choice and cultivating growth-promoting relationships (Author, 2021; 2023; 2024a; 2025). SEI is not a finite conception but a guide; a path in which to include areas of EI that have been overlooked, such as spirituality, and opening the paradigm to new ways of being within one's relationships with others and the world.

On core feature of SEI, that is most pertinent to effective CC leadership is spirituality. Simply defined, spirituality is a being's experience of transcendence beyond the conception of self to realize the infinite relationships that one has with the universe—where existential meanings are realized in the moment. Spirituality is not religion, but religion may offer spiritual experiences. The SEI depend upon spirituality because it is the nature of relationships, emotion, and *Being*—one finds their deepest sense of self when they are connected to the universe (Bhandari et al., 2023; Rzeszutek et al., 2017). Spirituality can be discovered in a myriad of encounters, such as with nature, animals, weather, plants, and other people—in which this case exists in the growth-promoting mentorship. Spiritual experiences foster empathy, emotional awareness, meaning-making, solitude, decision-making abilities, and regulation of emotional states (Watts, 2017). Research has discovered that humans may not be alone in their spiritual needs and experiences, as other primates demonstrated similar behaviors/emotions (Bekoff, 2007).

Spiritual connections and development is highly influenced by the educational contexts, in which a leaders' level of spirituality is a major influence for establishing an environment conducive to SEI growth. This will not only affect the institution but also have wider reaches into the community through students (Gómez-Leal et al., 2022; McNickle & Morris, 2022). Their empathic relationships with staff and faculty offers support optimal job performance. This means developing trust and motivation to help others reach new poten-

tials. Also, the SEI promote an exploration of emotions, within the self and others—and help others do the same. The awareness of emotions is critical for educational leaders to build relationships through channels of empathy.

Managing emotions is always essential for the educational leader because, they are held to a high standard of professionalism and personability in which they are a role model for all, and cultivate each relationship (Parrish, 2015). Knowing how to express emotions and helping others express/manage is important during times of stress, and helping people achieve equanimity. In conflict situations, emotional communication and awareness is important, as the leader can help others reappraise negative emotions to find motivation to learn something new. Developing SEI promotes adaptive coping methods, where stressors are leveraged for outcomes that align with values and long-term goals (Pellitteri, 2021).

The quality of development and growth of SEI has been found to have a positive correlation for the success of leadership with the people and culture of the institution (Boyer, 2010; Gómez-Leal et al., 2022; Parrish, 2015). Educational leaders at the CC provide protective factors to faculty's social and emotional well-being through empathic dialogue, modeling emotion regulation, and mentoring in a way that forms hope (Pellitteri, 2021). Leaders facilitate the development of SEI for everyone involved in the school through various leadership styles in order to promote an environment of learning and growth (Li et al., 2024b). SEI can help others share the strategic vision by helping them become a meaningful part of its achievement.

### *Fostering Mentorships*

CC leaders are challenged with bringing student peers and faculty together to form mentorships, when compared to universities; because the CC usually has fewer facilities, residence halls, and programs that socialize and make students part of the campus culture (Hernández, et al., 2023; Prial et al., 2023). There is also the challenge of bringing leaders and faculty together in a mentor relationship. Most CC students are there because of family, work, or other responsibilities, which limits their time and participation (Lackner, 2024). Faculty are also pressed for time with greater workloads and demands (Velez & Holstun, 2022). CC leaders must identify programs that do not require much equipment or space to function and can be adapted to bring students and faculty together easily (Wassmer & Galloway, 2023).

Faculty and student encounters are key factors for success and growth of each person. When faculty establish growth-promoting mentorships through empathy and sincerity outside of the classrooms, in ways such as extracurricular activities, they empower students with self-esteem and can offer meaning-

ful guidance (Hernández, et al., 2023). Educational leaders can address many maladaptive issues for students by engaging families and local communities, which provides a better understanding of their challenges and reinforcing school values (Cruz-González et al., 2021). The more faculty can empathize with students and know their challenges the better the college can serve them.

The empathic connection can redefine what student success means and how to achieve it, as it explores challenges, meanings, and goals with humility. Whether students take a career and technical education or meta-major degree path, one must realize the social and emotional aspects of learning, development, and discovering one's own vision. Faculty also have social and emotional aspects that are critical for job satisfaction and high-quality instruction. For this, educational leaders can empower the development of SEI through culture—which is socially and emotionally charged. Culturally responsive mentoring is based upon humility, empathy, and fairness, so that the relationship is sincere and meaningful, and the CC student feels empowered to have such support (Author, 2020; Gantt et al., 2024; Hines, 2023). Thus, culturally relevant pedagogies and andragogy must be continuously part of the professional development or college programs. This will allow the leadership teams to become more sensitive to the challenges to provide meaningful support and conditions for people to learn and succeed.

### **Growth-Promoting Mentorships**

Leadership habits affect immediate goals, such as interpersonal relations, collaborating, or long-term ones, such as inspiration, generating and working toward a vision, or affirming people's accomplishments (Pellitteri, 2021). Mentorship has been studied and applied to many leadership and academic institutions (Villasenor et al., 2021). In addition, coaching is also popular, but is a short-term, goal directed type of relationship. Mentoring has been understood as a long-term relationship that seeks to offer guidance to others' development, that can also mean inculcating values, norms, and habits for which to help another develop. The challenge with this definition is that it may be a bit anachronistic, because the of the pace at which global integration and cultural diversity are currently changing the paradigm. How might one mentor another from a different cultural paradigm without devaluing cultural identity, meaning-making processes, and values for which resonate with their self? Amid rapid diversification, educational leaders have the unique opportunity to redefine the meaning of mentorship, innovate opportunities for which they can flourish, and personally experience its restorative powers.

From an SEI paradigm, mentorship is based in a growth-promoting encounter in which there is a unique relationship that exists or was created between two organisms, where there is a mutual or singular intent from them to proactively support the realization of the other's inner potentials, affirm their value, transcend older ways of being, and provide the support necessary for the other to explore their inner directions and utilize inner resources to realize the success of a long-term goal (Author, 2021; 2024; Rogers, 1989). The power of mentorships has historically been given to the mentor, and there is a deficit view for the mentee; however, in a growth-promoting mentorship, the power is shared but in unique forms. The mentor provides resources or what the mentee needs but in doing so will irreversibly be changed as a person from this relationship. The mentee's presence is equally as influential as the mentor, so that power is shared and reciprocated. This encounter is growth-promoting for each involved.

The growth-promoting mentorship is not one formed out of deficit or unfulfilled need, where one person uses the other to fulfill an emotional utility; rather, it is one formed out of curiosity, a desire to go beyond the self and discover something new, where the mentor seeks to cultivate something unknown in another that is equally as curious. Mentees that need external direction or values should seek the care of a psychological professional, because for educational leaders, the potentials of mentorship are within relationships in which the person is satisfied in their basic, psychological, and emotional needs. When needs outweigh the potentials of the mentorship, it will ultimately fail and the decision to collaborate on how to rebuild or leave the mentorship must be considered.

Relationship failure may be greatly due to the level of empathy that exists within. Empathy is critical for the mentorship, as it is the gateway into the emotional meanings and experiences of the other person (Brumovska, 2024; Tyson McCrea et al., 2024). This sense of knowing or understanding deepens the quality of the relationship by opening one's perspectives to different meanings while strengthening connections in commonalities. Empathy is not a tactic, but a way of being in which the channels of perspective taking, and emotional stimulation allow the mentor and mentee the connections that are within a spiritual realm.

No mentorship, just as any encounter can succeed without mutually established rhythms, rituals, agreed upon limits, and how to engage failures in which to provide opportunities for growth of each person (Moustakas, 1995). The relationship promotes an important aspect of SEI, which is self-esteem and empathy, because through failures, the support offered and the safety within the relationship encourage growth. This might mean seeking new re-

sources, information, or limits to accomplish certain goals. Although failure in a mentorship may appear scary for each person, it is the process of facing the unknown, failure, intimidating, and scary things of life that will build the confidence needed to develop other areas of SEI, such as emotional awareness or management (Chen, 2019; Salzman & Halloran, 2004). According to Rogers (1942), “The individual and not the problem is the focus. The aim is not to solve one particular problem, but to assist the individual to *grow*, so that he can cope with the present problem and with later problems in a better-integrated fashion” (p. 28). Supporting the growth of individuals sometimes means letting go of the categorization, labeling, or diagnostic procedure in order to engage the person in the here-and-now. The relationship can only be growth-promoting if it is established in the here-and-now, and this is where the restoration for leaders is held.

To unlock the restorative powers of mentorship, each must let go of pre-conceived notions, facades, or images that will hold one back from being-in the encounter with the utmost sincerity. This may mean leaving behind ways of perception, challenging certain meanings, and opening one’s perception to something entirely new. When these conditions are present the growth-promoting mentorship can decrease physical and emotional suffering, as well as disease (Matthews et al., 2022).

Holistic support in mentoring supports SEI development, as mentors can offer guidance on habits, career support, and belonging to the CC campus (Gantt et al., 2024). This relationship can be within administrator-faculty, faculty-student, staff-staff, or even student-community youth. The potential to form the growth-promoting relationship can be amongst stakeholders in the college, that are altruistically motivated, either within or outside their professional role. As a role model, mentors can offer academic or personal support that comes with credibility and empathy. This works especially well when CC students can identify with the mentor, as having commonalities of culture, experience, or identity. The depth and quality of the relationship will determine how the mentor can help the student meet their SEI needs. Small check-ins go a long way for making an impact and developing a growth-promoting relationship. Educational leaders must work to help young adults find healing from previous trauma, especially for minorities, because trauma removes dignity and humanity (Bush et al., 2023). The SEI are foundation for engaging these communities with sincerity and empathy. Leaders that innovate programs or spaces for faculty and students can be leveraged to affirm diverse identities and values. When microaggressions or racial barriers are removed, potentials actualize.

### The Restorative Nature of Mentorships: Spirituality

One of the most important and often overlooked aspect of SEI is spirituality. Spirituality has been disregarded by sciences, such as biology, neuroscience, or physics, partly because of the dominance of Western science's influence of rationalism within the cultural paradigm. The dominance of Western science has historically subjugated the values and knowledges of indigenous peoples (e.g., American Indians), who appreciated the existential foundations of relationships and emotions through spiritual connections (Trafzer & Jenkins, 2017). All facets of SEI (e.g., emotion regulation, empathy, awareness, decision-making) are developed by spirituality, which is a major factor for decreasing the negative effects of stress and emotional disturbances (Pandya, 2024). The mentorship is a connection between two individuals, which are not separate from the universe, and thus holds that emotional relationship which helps one transcend the notion of self.

Just as the SEI, conceptions and definitions cannot hold the nature of phenomena, in which spirituality is no different. According to de Pater et al. (2021), "Spiritual values are, in a sense, living things, which cannot and should not be reduced into a singular paradigm" (pp. 218-219). There are different perspectives and paradigms for what spirituality is and how best to cultivate it within a relationship (Eng, 2020). Spiritual meanings of a relationship may reflect cultural paradigms, but the spiritual experience within a mentorship transcends cultural paradigms. Conceptualizing where two people meet beyond the selves is difficult to describe because it does not adhere to rationalism or rest on cognition. Certain cultures have created semblances of spiritual rituals (i.e., human or animal sacrifices), but these are charged by religious organization, psychological disturbances, politics, racism, ethnocentrism, or ignorance, to name a few. These are not related to spirituality, but an expression of disturbances or psychopathologies.

To safeguard against a superficial or commercial form of spirituality, people must learn to listen to their emotions (i.e., emotional awareness) as a means to explore what spiritual meanings they could create. The spiritual state within a mentorship can be experienced overtime or in a moment of awe—a sudden awakening to something beyond the self. The subjectivities and contexts are important to consider, yet the common denominator is that for restorative spiritual experiences in the mentorship, the entire being is involved.

Contrary to arguments that the spiritual state detaches one from the self, it is very much all of the self. Both selves are fully present in the mentorship and the sincere encounter does not take one away from the self, only the cultural paradigm and conceptions. What is different is that "Detachment means

to have neither regrets for the past nor fears for the future; to let life take its course without attempting to interfere with its movement and change, neither trying to prolong the stay of things pleasant nor to hasten the departure of things unpleasant” (Watts, 2003, p. 10). This sense of detachment is important for aligning one to the perception of the impermanent stream of life, in which all emotional phenomena reside. The constant changingness of everything is not something outside the person, but the very nature for which connects them to the universe. Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (1995) described that,

When views of “I” and “mine” are extinguished,  
Whether with respect to the internal or external,  
The appropriator ceases.  
This having ceased, birth ceases. (p. 48)

For the CC educational leader, the sense and quality of spirituality in their SEI is a major factor for sustaining holistic wellbeing during times of crisis leadership, pressures, social change or unrest, and the increasing challenges of managing the school and leading institutional goals (Bhandari et al., 2023; Radhika et al., 2020; Vazifeh doust et al., 2020). The growth-promoting mentorships that the leader has with faculty, students, and community members are protective factors against emotional disturbances because they develop SEI (Ibrahim et al., 2019). Not only will the mentorship be a protective factor for leaders, but it will also be for young adults and children against the long-term effects of negative stressors or trauma (Hariharan & Kapoor, 2020; Rzeszutek et al., 2017; Warner et al., 2020). The spiritual encounter has been shown to protect against gene deterioration (i.e. telomere length), immune system function, and decreased emotional disturbance symptomology (i.e., anxiety, depression) (Prescott et al., 2022).

The restorative powers that spirituality holds for the growth-promoting mentorship promote adaptive coping methods because it calls forth other aspects of SEI, such as emotional regulation, decision-making, self-awareness, empathy, and solitude to change the leaders’ paradigm for choosing how to be as a leader. The growth-promoting mentorship aligns one to the impermanent stream and flowing nature of life, because the deepest and sincerest of encounters can only reside in the here-and-now. This is the place in which the educational leader will draw upon inner resources, creativities, innovation, and emotions in which to find guidance, healing, and strength to serve mentees and to achieve their visions. To get hung up on obstacles, destructive habits, limited visions and perceptions, and empty ways of being is to deteriorate, and

the educational leader can become restored in the mentoring encounter, because it resides in the flow, just as

True goodness is like water;  
it nurtures everything and harms nothing.  
Like water, it ever seeks the lowest place,  
The place that all others avoid. (Tzu, 2021, p. 8)

Taoism is an important spiritual philosophy in which helps one understand, or even, remind one, to the nature and power of being alive (Watts, 1975). To grow as a person means cultivating SEI, and this will result in becoming an effective educational leader. Chinese philosopher of the Tao, Lao Tzu described that,

The wise recognize the limits of their knowledge;  
the foolish think they know everything. (Tzu, 2021, p. 71)

This open mind is imperative in current times, as the uncertainties and diverse needs of the community increase. To explore mentorships with wonder, the educational leader may begin to realize that the toughest challenges are not overcome by force, but by flexibility, flowing, and being open to new paths, because

A living being is tender and flexible;  
a corpse is hard and stiff.  
It is the same with everything—  
leaves and grasses are tender and delicate,  
but when they die they become rigid and dry.

Those who are hard and inflexible  
belong to death's domain;  
but the gentle and flexible  
belong to life (Tzu, 2021, p. 76)

The restorative powers of spirituality in the mentorship happen when one or both involved are attuned to existence as it is, where they are the universe at play; inexhaustible vibrations in a constant flow. There is no meaning but experience, because all concepts are lost, and the person encounters that which is of itself—the nature of existence (Watts, 1966).

## Innovating Opportunities for Mentorship

Leadership in the mentorship means becoming a facilitator, one that brings people and resources together in which spiritual encounters blossom (Cruz-González et al., 2021). There is a need for programs that foster mentorships of this nature at the CC, where young adults, faculty, and other professionals can come together in a safe space (Rasmussen et al., 2020). Literature on how to train mentors, enact mentoring, and develop the relationship with CC students has not been thoroughly investigated, and are mostly contextually dependent (Gantt et al., 2024). Students encounter peers and faculty, which are critical factors for CC engagement, motivation, and meaning (Priol et al., 2023). Mentoring is a powerful factor for students, staff, and faculty to feel valued in the institutional goals—this is a source of motivation, retention, and success. Students' sense of belonging with their peers in the CC is critical for engagement and degree completion (Martinez & Munsch, 2020). Clubs and academic programs provide an avenue for mentorships to form naturally. Educational leaders can utilize this space as a way to promote mentorships and ultimately experience the restorative powers of spirituality.

The CC is an opportune place because it provides safety, easy access to schedules, and people that are naturally altruistic. Innovative strategies to develop mentorships may seek to engage faculty or students with the local elementary schools in an after-school program. The mentorship holds the potential to help youth and faculty develop their potentials, and youth in the community to learn from positive role models. Innovation for growth-promoting mentorship programs inspires people to “experience professional freedom, break a few moulds, move ideas around, network energetically with like-minded thinkers, give extra time and effort to the joy they experience in their work, and find ways to enable their students to feel excited about and connected to their learning” (Hargreaves, 2024, p. 97). Innovation is based upon an open mind, in which spiritual connections that have always existed are realized, and new ones can be greeting with empathy, sincerity, and presence.

The leadership at the CC must have a strong relationship with the school personnel to implement the intervention successfully in order to navigate intra- and inter- program and school contexts (Author, 2021). The program must fit into the school contexts and offer meaningful services. Working with the school staff and leadership can help recruit children, promote the program, and identify and overcome conflicts of time or accessibility. Innovation fit is a term that Rasmussen et al. (2020) described as “the organizations' and the individual's understanding of how the intervention incorporates the values, purpose, and service providers' tasks and responsibilities” (p. 729). If the pro-

gram is not welcome at the school or CC, its success will be limited and the restorative powers of the mentorship will be diminished. The educational leader's SEI are integral for the implementation and facilitation of the innovative intervention. They must be able to make decisions and be sensitive to the diversity of beliefs, values, and attitudes of all involved, while also being able to adapt it to changing needs.

Community members and families of students are important to involve in CC activities because they support the students' goals and visions (Yi & Nauk, 2024). This can be done by hosting community workshops, dialogues, and strategies where stigmas can be managed and reduced. Leaders cultivate intercultural relationships through empathy, value, and congruence, in which they facilitate the natural processes to form mentorships or engage in activities designed to support SEI (Anderson et al., 2024). If the program fits into the school, then the group will be willing to sustain it long-term.

More research is needed to understand how innovative programs' organization and process affect the SEI development of leaders, faculty, students, and youth. Knowing what factors support or occlude spiritual growth and development are important, while also accounting for school contexts and leadership resources for social and emotional development. How the program resonates with the school culture and values is important to know as one adapts methods to meet the needs of the group. Full autonomy can hinder the program and level of satisfaction because it can lead to greater levels of stress, yet when full autonomy is given a space or place within the leadership role, it can produce feelings of empowerment and motivation (Rasmussen et al., 2020; Sobierajski et al., 2022). Understanding people's level of need for autonomy and direction is important for tailoring it to actualize their spiritual development.

### A Case Study

In 1983, professor of psychology James D. Smrtic began an afterschool program at Mohawk Valley Community College (MVCC) called Kidz n' Coaches—where undergraduate volunteers plan and carry out prosocial group activities for emerging children to support their self-actualization (Author, 2021). This program was self-funded by prof. Smrtic for several years until MVCC adopted it as part of their institutional organizations for students. Funds support the activities of the program, such as materials, fieldtrips, as well as providing snacks for the group to satisfy the hunger need. The after-school program meets once a month, for two hours, a semester. Activities are planned by the Coaches, which include recreation, field trips, noncompetitive sports, innovative games, etc.

The CC students act as the Coaches, in which they lead the program's activities for roughly 20 children. Growth-promoting mentorships happen spontaneously within activities and throughout the year.

Kidz n' Coaches is innovative because prof. Smrtic based it upon the principles of humanistic psychology—where the Coaches create the conditions in which self-actualization and flourishing are possible. The methodology is meant to learn from the group's values, interests, and challenges so that the program serves the current group, instead of serving a static theory of the program. The young adults experienced guidance from prof. Smrtic and had the freedom to form empathic relationships with children. This supports the actualizing tendencies of both young adults and the children as the group is created from a unique human dynamic. As the program director, prof. Smrtic would choose an ambitious and successful Coach to designate as the Head Coach—the student takes on a role of lead facilitator to coordinate logistics in regard to Coach planning, event execution, and cultivating the dynamic in a humanistic sphere. The Head Coach and program director share a growth-promoting relationship that transfers to through the group. The Head Coach will transition when they graduate, and the program director will choose a new one for the coming year. When the events take place, an observer cannot discern between Coach, Head Coach, or program director because the entire group is involved in creating the experience.

Volunteer Coaches have noble intentions to help children and also to see what they are capable of. Yet, Kidz n' Coaches is not without challenges. Kidz n' Coaches has had many challenges, such as overinvolved parents wanting to be Coaches, uninvolved parents not bringing their children to events, or even events that did not work. Prof. Smrtic engaged these challenges with leadership, as he would allow the group to understand where the challenges were. His relationships within the program were important, as he facilitated the group to innovate way to overcome the challenge. Offering resources and support, prof. Smrtic would coach the young adults on how to adapt the program when needed. From this experience, incoming Coaches would learn from veteran ones, having a sense of continuity within a methodology that evolves with the group. For example, when the group learned that some children could not attend on certain nights due to religious education, they simply moved the times and days. Or if there was a child member that had matured out of the program but remained, the Coaches learned how to help the person decide it was time for a new adventure. There have been other issues of location, food service, dating between members, and so on. Yet, these are learning opportunities for the group—building a new sense of community amongst children and young adults. There is a deep sense of aligning the group to the Tao, where

each person is within the stream and each problem but a rock to bring within and keep moving forward.

The demographic of the children and Coaches has changed each decade because the city has an active refugee center, which has made multiculturalism a reality for this program, because it reflects the changing demographic of the city. Most of the children in the program are from municipal public housing, in which refugee families reside. Kidz n' Coaches is based in humanistic psychology and has a deep sense of cultural humility in order to learn with each person that comes into the group; the person is the greatest resource for the program's success. When children came dressed in clothes that reflected their culture, the group did not single anyone out. Rather, the dynamic of the group accepted the differences; the children would not make a spectacle out of it, but naturally question with curiosity and empathy within the natural interactions. The driving force of growth and change has and continues to be the relationships within the activities.

As an educational leader of this after-school program at MVCC, prof. Smrtic created a space in which college faculty, students, and local children experience sincere encounters. The group functions are much like a Gestalt, to where the spiritual restoration of each person's wellbeing happens all at once. In an October event, the Coaches decided to take the children to a local pumpkin patch. Most of the children do not spend much time in greenspaces and are confined to urban settings. The Coaches engaged the event in a way that allow the the group to experience the pumpkin patch, instead of just looking for a pumpkin. They allowed people to explore and experience the trees, grass, and fields covered in pumpkin growth. The Coaches were right with the children, in which their presence was the facilitator of the child's spiritual connections with nature. With the altruism of the Coaches, children experienced a space created by people that wanted to experience self-actualization for others and themselves. Although Kidz n' Coaches may appear quite simple, it is innovative because it creates spiritual connections amongst a group of children and young adults—taking them beyond self-actualization. The innovative nature to create a space in which educational leaders can restore the well-being of youth, CC students, and themselves as leaders has global effects within the college and community.

Although prof. Smrtic has retired, Kidz n' Coaches continues experience success under the leadership of new professors. For his innovative program and decades of service, MVCC inducted prof. Smrtic into their Hall of Fame. In addition, the program continues as Kidz n' Coaches-El Paso at a CC located in a bordertown in the southwest, serving predominantly Latinx students and faculty, and emerging children.

## Conclusion

Innovative programs succeed if the educational leader crafts a clear vision to develop strategic plans to achieve it. Hargreaves (2024) recommended that they need to have three components: having a clear philosophy that gives meaning and direction, a structure or framework in which to implement and succeed at achieving the vision, and fostering the habits and norms that will bring people together to achieve this mission. Educational leaders, faculty, staff, students, and youth in the community need a sense of healing and support in their emotional wellbeing, especially spiritual wellbeing.

The CC leader faces new challenges in the post-pandemic world, and their SEI are key for building relationships and creating innovations in which to address the needs of students in the community. Leaders that actively develop SEI have a wealth of resources for achieving the mission of the CC. However, the workloads and stressors can decrease holistic well-being. The spiritual wellbeing revitalizes all areas of the SEI. Mentorships are a unique relationship, in which if formed with developed SEI open up potentials for spiritual encounters.

Spirituality is a feature of the SEI that support one to enter the Tao, or flow of the stream of existence. To remain flexible is essential as leaders face uncertainties and challenges that require responsive solutions unique to a post-pandemic world. They do not get hungup on how things have been done but engage this challenge in the present moment. Skills and conceptual knowledge in educational leadership are important, but when the leader is faced with an obstacle, they must be willing leave behind old knowledge and concepts. In the here-and-now is the restorative flow of the Tao, and the person discovers personal resources for innovation.

CC leaders have the opportunity to open spaces and opportunities for growth-promoting mentorships to develop in ways that unlock the restorative powers of spiritual connections with others. In the post-pandemic world, the culture of the CC must prize innovation to overcome challenges and make changes, while also being adaptable and flexible (Wickersham et al., 2023). Educational leaders will thrive in the constant waves of uncertainty and challenge, as the growth-promoting mentorship becomes a source of endless spiritual awakening. From this path, one opens their perspectives for who and what mentorships can entail, and perhaps begin to encounter other forms of life, such as animals or nature, with sincere openness in the here-and-now.

## Data Availability Statement

No original data from human subjects was used in this paper. Rather, this paper utilized data from peer-reviewed journal search engines, such as Academic Search Complete. This paper is intended to be conceptual, and thus does not have a data set associated with it.

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