

 VIEW FROM THE TOP

Leading with the Platinum Rule: Engagement Principles for Students and Staff

By Joseph Mews

College leaders continue to face significant challenges with student and staff attrition, prompting research into the core reasons for reduced retention and, ultimately, student completion. These concerns are especially troublesome for enrollment management leaders who work tirelessly to meet enrollment and completion targets while maintaining a committed, quality staff to meet the fluid student needs and preferences. Research shows that the experiences and satisfaction levels of students and staff are deeply intertwined. Therefore, effective engagement and relationship management strategies centered on both groups' interests and desired experiences are crucial. One approach that can aid this work is incorporating the principles of the Platinum Rule, which advocates treating others how they want to be treated. The Platinum Rule builds on the Golden Rule, which most are familiar with, by taking personal engagement to the next level, including the core principles of empathy, personalization, communication, and flexibility. By incorporating the principles of this rule, leaders can enhance the performance and satisfaction of both students and employees, realizing the potential advancements of both groups. This article provides a qualitative analysis of existing evidence and literature on the Platinum Rule's core principles and best practices for leaders to consider when developing an approach to maximize the potential of staff and create an environment where students can flourish.

A recent report by Gallup and the Lumina Foundation (2024) on the state of higher education showed that a college degree or credential still holds significant value. However, at the same time, institutional access barriers and lack of engagement leave more than one-third of students considering stopping out, a severe concern for college leaders and their enrollment management and student success executives. These attrition concerns are especially troubling, considering that only 60 percent of students who enrolled in college earned a college credential within eight years of graduating high school in the most recent reports (Palmer 2024).

In another recent report, Strada (2024) found that students without a clear career purpose are at a higher risk of not completing their educational path. It is also clear that financial challenges continue to be a significant barrier, with 25 percent of current students at risk of stopping out or being dismissed due to tuition costs. First-generation students, in particular, are more likely to consider leaving their programs compared to their continuing-generation peers. The primary reasons for considering departure include financial difficulties, motivation or life changes, and mental health challenges (Mowreader 2024). Students and their families want multiple contacts, flexible access to services, and clear and jargon-free information throughout the academic journey (Bermejo 2023; Goble, *et al.* 2021; Ruffalo Noel Levitz 2023). With these fluid concerns and preferences, it is more important now than ever to be present and intentional with students through every communication and interaction.

Beyond student engagement, there is also a growing need to improve relationship strategies with the faculty and staff who play a significant role in the student journey. A recent study by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) found that aside from filling positions, the second most significant challenge for staff and supervisors is maintaining morale, a direct result of low engagement (Fuesting and Schneider 2023). This CUPA-HR study also highlighted the desire many staff have for flexible work arrangements, improved compensation

and benefits, and opportunities for new challenges and collaboration with others (Bichsel, *et al.* 2022).

It is clear that in the dynamic landscape of today's higher education, leaders face the challenge of creating an environment where students can thrive while optimizing staff commitment, expertise, and ongoing development. After all, professional staff are often the front line of the college, working directly with prospective, incoming, and continuing students, directly impacting student matriculation, persistence, and completion. Essentially, this boils down to effective engagement strategies and healthy relationships between leadership and employees, and most importantly, between employees and students. This is where the Platinum Rule and its core principles come into play. Focusing on empathy, personalization, communication, and flexibility is a powerful leadership strategy that centers the attention on the needs and interests of students and the staff we count on to support them, laying a foundation for positive interactions and successful outcomes (Alessandra and O'Connor 1996; Goleman, *et al.* 2002). The following sections detail the importance of relationship management, the core principles of the Platinum Rule, and best practices for college leaders to enhance staff performance and prioritize student interests and preferences.

Relationship Management

With the growing use of sophisticated communication, task, and progress-tracking software platforms utilized across colleges—especially in enrollment management—strong relationships with prospective, incoming, and current students are more critical now than ever. Today's students and their supporters have unique expectations for communication, support, and engagement, with a wide range of variables at play, such as their level of academic and social preparedness, program and career interests, financial aid and affordability, navigating the physical and virtual infrastructure, extracurricular activities, and campus safety. This short list only scratches the surface and looks wildly different across student profiles when considering the differences between traditional and adult learners, residential

and online students, and first-generation and continuing-generation students. These are a few of the most prominent examples that highlight the fluid nature of student motivations and concerns and the importance of establishing a solid foundation for relationship and support management where these differences are embraced, and all students can thrive and flourish in their respective pursuits (Mews 2020).

The Platinum Rule

The Platinum Rule shifts the focus from self to others, advocating for a situational approach based on others' needs and preferences rather than just our own beliefs. Unlike the Golden Rule, which suggests treating others as we would like to be treated, the Platinum Rule requires a deeper understanding and consideration of individual needs and desires. This approach is particularly relevant in higher education, where unique populations with varying backgrounds, experiences, and aspirations interact daily. Understanding these core elements—empathy, personalization, effective communication, and flexibility—fosters a supportive environment that promotes academic and social growth.

Applying the Platinum Rule in higher education involves rethinking traditional leadership and student engagement approaches. Instead of a one-size-fits-all strategy, leaders must develop a nuanced understanding of their communities' unique needs and preferences. This shift requires a commitment to continuous learning and adaptation, ensuring that policies and practices remain relevant and practical. Applying the Platinum Rule to daily operations, college leaders can create a more responsive and dynamic institution that meets the evolving needs of its members (Gallup-Lumina Foundation 2024).

The Platinum Rule also emphasizes the importance of cultural competence and sensitivity in all interactions. Understanding and respecting cultural differences is essential for building strong communities in a globalized educational landscape. Leaders prioritizing cultural awareness can develop a more welcoming environment, encouraging students and staff from

unique backgrounds to feel valued and supported. This approach enhances individual experiences and contributes to the institution's success by promoting a richer, more collaborative community (Bermejo 2023).

Empathy

Empathy enables college staff to understand and respond to students' shifting emotional and academic needs, promoting a sense of belonging and well-being. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), empathy helps students build strong relationships, which can significantly impact their academic success and mental health (APA 2022). Moreover, empathy encourages pro-social behaviors such as cooperation and support among peers, which are essential for creating a positive and collaborative campus culture (Jiang, *et al.* 2021).

College staff can incorporate empathy into their engagement strategies by actively listening to students, understanding their unique challenges, and providing personalized support. For instance, first-generation students often face additional stress due to a lack of familial experience with higher education, while continuing-generation students might not encounter these specific challenges (Greater Good In Education 2022). Traditional students typically enter college directly after high school, whereas post-traditional students may juggle responsibilities such as work and family, requiring more flexible support systems (APA 2022). Additionally, online students might struggle with feelings of isolation compared to their residential counterparts, necessitating virtual engagement strategies that promote connection and community (Jiang, *et al.* 2021). Recognizing these differences, college staff can tailor their approaches to meet the distinct needs of each student group. For example, offering mentorship programs for first-generation students can provide guidance and reduce feelings of isolation. Flexible scheduling and childcare services can support post-traditional students. Implementing virtual office hours and online community-building activities can help online students feel more connected. These strategies demonstrate empathy and as a result, enhance student

satisfaction, retention, and success (Greater Good In Education 2022; Jiang, *et al.* 2021).

It is also important for college leaders to demonstrate empathy toward their staff as it fosters a supportive and trusting work environment, which is crucial for their well-being and professional development. Leaders who consistently demonstrate empathy can recognize signs of burnout and address them before they lead to disengagement or turnover (Center for Creative Leadership 2024). This proactive approach helps staff maintain a healthy work-life balance, reduce stress, and increase job satisfaction. Furthermore, empathetic leaders build stronger team relationships, enhancing collaboration and morale (McCarthy and Misiaszek 2022).

Leaders can infuse empathy into their engagement strategies by actively listening to their staff and showing genuine concern for their personal and professional challenges. This can involve regular check-ins, supporting personal issues, and showing compassion during loss or hardship (Friedberg 2024). This approach helps address immediate concerns and develops long-term loyalty and commitment to the institution (Bonterre 2023).

Ultimately, empathetic leadership leads to improved staff development and better student support. When staff feel supported and understood, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated in their roles, which translates to better student interactions and support services (Van Bommel 2021). Empathy from leaders helps create a positive organizational culture that prioritizes the well-being of staff and students, leading to a more effective and responsive educational environment.

Personalization

Prospective and current students have diverse backgrounds, needs, and expectations, necessitating tailored approaches to their academic journeys. Personalization can significantly enhance students' academic performance and satisfaction by addressing their unique challenges, strengths, and interests (Nguyen, *et al.* 2024). For instance, first-generation students often face distinct barriers, such as limited access to resources and mentorship, compared to their continuing-generation peers.

Colleges can help bridge these gaps and promote equity in higher education by providing personalized support, such as dedicated advisors and targeted workshops.

College staff can bring personalization into their engagement strategies through various methods. One practical approach is using data analytics to understand individual student needs and preferences. Staff can create customized support plans and communication strategies by analyzing data on student behavior, performance, and feedback. Additionally, leveraging technology such as AI-driven chatbots and personalized learning platforms can provide students with real-time assistance and tailored engagement. Another essential strategy is the development of mentoring programs that connect students with faculty, peers, or professionals who share similar backgrounds or academic interests, creating a sense of belonging and support (Smith, *et al.* 2022).

Understanding the unique differences between various student demographics is crucial for effective personalization. Traditional students may require different engagement strategies than post-traditional students, who are often older, working, or part-time learners. Similarly, online students face different challenges than residential students, such as the need for robust virtual support systems and flexible learning options. For instance, online students benefit significantly from interactive and accessible digital resources, while residential students might benefit more from in-person workshops and community-building activities. Recognizing and addressing these unique needs, college staff can create more effective and inclusive engagement strategies that support all students.

College staff need personalized leadership to feel valued and supported in their professional development as well, which enhances their ability to support students effectively. Personalized leadership acknowledges each staff member's unique strengths, aspirations, and challenges, fostering an environment of psychological safety and belonging. This approach empowers staff to take initiative and contribute more effectively to their roles (De Smet, *et al.* 2023). Leaders can build a more engaged and motivated workforce through recognition of individual contributions and tailored development

opportunities, ultimately benefiting the entire institution (Joubert 2020; Mews 2019).

Leaders can incorporate personalization into their engagement strategies by creating a culture of open communication and feedback, which helps understand their staff's personal and professional needs. This includes regular one-on-one meetings, personalized professional development plans, and mentorship programs catering to staff members' individual growth trajectories. For example, providing leadership training and development opportunities within the institution can help staff acquire new skills and prepare for future leadership roles, making them feel more invested in their work and the institution's success (Baker 2023).

Personalization in leadership supports staff development and improves the overall organizational culture, leading to better student support. When staff feel personally recognized and supported, they are more likely to exhibit higher levels of commitment and job satisfaction. This positive environment translates into better student service, as motivated and engaged staff are more likely to go above and beyond in their roles. College leaders can enhance the performance and well-being of their staff with adaptive leadership strategies, creating a ripple effect that enhances the quality of education and support provided to students.

Communication

Clear, timely, and relevant information helps prospective students make informed decisions about their educational pathways. For current students, ongoing communication is essential for their academic success and well-being. College staff can incorporate effective communication strategies by utilizing multiple channels such as emails, social media, and personalized messaging systems to reach students where they are most active (Nguyen, *et al.* 2024). Additionally, providing tailored information that meets the unique needs of various student groups can develop a stronger sense of belonging and support, which is crucial for student retention and success (Nguyen, *et al.* 2024).

For example, the communication needs of first-generation students may need more guidance and support

with clear explanations of academic policies, financial aid options, and campus resources. College staff can address these differences by creating targeted communication plans that offer additional mentorship and resources for first-generation students while providing enrichment opportunities for continuing-generation students (Nguyen, *et al.* 2024). Another example is with post-traditional students, who often require more flexible and accessible communication, acknowledging their responsibilities aside from school (Kelchen 2018). Similarly, the needs of online and residential students necessitate distinct communication approaches. Online students may feel isolated due to the lack of physical campus presence and benefit from consistent virtual engagement through discussion forums, video calls, and online communities (Kentnor 2015). On the other hand, residential students may rely more on face-to-face interactions and campus events to stay informed and connected. With a better understanding of specific communication needs of these unique student populations, college staff can create more inclusive and supportive educational environments.

Tailored communication from college leaders is also essential for staff development as it fosters a supportive and engaging work environment. Effective communication promotes clarity, reduces misunderstandings, and aligns staff efforts with the institution's goals. This personalized approach ensures that each staff member and team feels valued and understood, contributing to a positive organizational culture (Gallo 2022; Van Diggele, Burgess, and Roberts 2020).

Leaders can improve communication by first understanding their staff's interests and ideas. Regular one-on-one meetings, feedback sessions, and surveys can help leaders gather valuable insights. Additionally, adopting various communication channels—such as emails, face-to-face interactions, and digital platforms—ensures that messages are delivered in a manner that resonates with different staff members. Leadership training programs that develop communication skills and emotional intelligence are also crucial. These initiatives enable leaders to better connect with their teams and establish an environment of trust and collaboration (Van Diggele, Burgess, and Roberts 2020).

When staff members feel supported and understood, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated. This heightened engagement translates into better student support services, as staff members are more equipped and willing to go above and beyond in their duties. Effective communication also helps identify and address issues promptly, ensuring that the institution remains agile and responsive to the needs of its community (Gallo 2022).

Flexibility

Students juggle various responsibilities in today's dynamic and fast-paced environment, including work, family, and personal commitments. This is particularly true for post-traditional students, who often return to education later in life while managing jobs and families. The need for flexibility is even more pronounced among first-generation students who may face additional challenges, such as a lack of familial support and understanding of the college experience. Unlike continuing-generation students, who often benefit from the guidance of family members familiar with higher education, first-generation students might need more tailored support and resources (Nguyen, *et al.* 2024). College staff can address these unique needs by providing flexible advising hours, personalized mentoring programs, and accessible support services. For instance, virtual advising sessions can ensure that students who cannot visit campus during regular hours still receive the necessary guidance and support. This approach enhances the learning environment and helps build a sense of belonging among first-generation students.

The distinction between online and residential students further underscores the importance of flexibility in engagement strategies. Online students require different engagement tactics than residential students, who have more direct access to campus resources. For online learners, flexible communication methods, such as regular check-ins via email or virtual meetings, and collaborative online platforms can enhance their engagement and connection to the institution (Smith, *et al.* 2022). On the other hand, residential students may benefit from flexible on-campus resources like extended

library hours and extracurricular activities that accommodate varying schedules. Recognizing these unique differences, staff can create a supportive environment that meets the needs of all students and enhances their sense of belonging.

College staff also need flexibility from their leaders to manage the increasing demands and complexities of their roles effectively. Flexibility in the workplace can lead to improved job satisfaction, reduced burnout, and enhanced productivity (Ferdous, *et al.* 2023). Leaders who recognize and accommodate the unique interests of their staff can create a more supportive and inclusive work environment, which is crucial in enrollment management roles, where the staff are often tasked with balancing administrative duties, student engagement, and personal responsibilities. Leaders can adopt policies allowing flexible scheduling and professional development opportunities tailored to individual needs. Research has shown that flexible work arrangements can increase employee engagement and retention (Kumar, *et al.* 2023). For example, implementing a hybrid work model can enable staff to manage their time more effectively, reducing stress and allowing them to focus on critical tasks. Additionally, offering personalized professional development opportunities can help staff members grow in their roles and feel more valued, which can translate into better student support.

When leaders provide their staff with flexibility, it can significantly improve morale and satisfaction and ultimately improve the support they provide to students. When staff members feel supported and valued, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated in their work, which can enhance their interactions with students and improve student outcomes (Ferdous, *et al.* 2023).

Conclusion

The principles of the Platinum Rule offer a framework for addressing the core challenges of student and staff attrition in higher education. Through empathy, personalization, communication, and flexibility, college leaders can establish a culture that promotes student and employee achievement. This approach enhances student engagement and success and creates a positive

and collaborative organizational culture that empowers staff to perform at their best. As higher education institutions navigate an increasingly complex landscape,

applying the Platinum Rule can serve as a guiding strategy for achieving sustainable success.

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About the Author



Joseph Mews

Joseph Mews, Ph.D., is the Vice President of Enrollment & Student Affairs at Lake-Sumter State College (FL), where he oversees key areas such as academic advising, athletics, early college programs, financial aid, records, recruitment and enrollment

services, and student and career engagement. With extensive experience in higher education administration, Dr. Mews has dedicated his academic and professional focus to student development, organizational leadership, strategic planning and assessment, and change leadership. He is an active member of several profes-

sional associations and has contributed to the field through teaching, presenting, publishing, and designing content. His expertise as both a practitioner and scholar informs his leadership and commitment to advancing student success.