



KEY TAKEAWAYS

# Building Student Community



THE CHRONICLE  
OF HIGHER EDUCATION

WITH  
SUPPORT  
FROM

**insidetrack**



# Building college communities where every student belongs

Across higher education, students flourish in environments where they feel they belong — yet many are struggling to find that sense of connection. In the past 6 months, **nearly one in three students (32%) has considered stopping out**, and almost half (49%) cite emotional stress as the primary reason. Behind every number is a student trying to navigate not just their course load, but a world that feels increasingly uncertain, polarized and isolating.

What gives me hope is the extraordinary dedication I see among institutional leaders who are reimagining what community can look like — especially for students who've historically felt unseen or unsupported. As the conversation in *Building Student Community* made clear, belonging doesn't happen by accident; it's something we create, intentionally, together.

At InsideTrack, we build that connection through the proven power of coaching. InsideTrack applies our human-powered, tech-enabled approach to:

- **Support your students** to develop confidence, self-efficacy and a sense of purpose
- **Strengthen student engagement** with institutional resources and programs
- **Tailor outreach** to resonate across your diverse student body
- **Identify barriers** early and surface insights to improve systems
- **Empower your staff** to deliver more holistic and efficient student support

We're honored to be part of the conversation with *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and with institutions across the country who are doing this work every day. Together, we're reinvesting in human connection, reimagining support systems, and redefining what student success looks like in today's higher education landscape.

See how **InsideTrack Coaching** can help your students — and your staff — thrive.



*Ruth Bauer*

**RUTH BAUER**

President, InsideTrack

**insidetrack**<sup>®</sup>

*Transformative change, powered by coaching*

**INSIDETRACK.ORG**

# Building Student Community

Key Takeaways From a Virtual Forum  
Presented by *The Chronicle* and InsideTrack

## MODERATOR



Jasper Smith  
Staff Reporter,  
*The Chronicle*

## SPEAKERS



Christopher C. Catching  
Vice Chancellor for Student  
Affairs, North Carolina  
Agricultural and Technical  
State University



Amelia Parnell  
Chief Executive Officer and  
President, NASPA

The 2025 academic year began during a period of technological upheaval and political divisiveness, and observers say today's students appear more disconnected from each other than those in previous cohorts. It's a dynamic that's harmful to learning, efforts to build community on campus, and overall student well-being.

To explore this culture of disconnection — and how colleges can strengthen the bonds between students — *The Chronicle* held a virtual forum, “Building Student Community,” on October 20. The following comments, edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full discussion, watch the recorded webinar [here](#).

**JASPER SMITH:** What’s driving this disconnection among students?

**AMELIA PARNELL:** First, they have many opportunities for solo activities. With their phones, they can be “connected” to thousands of people through social networks. This isn’t necessarily bad, but if it precludes them from being fully immersed in a campus experience, it can lead to isolation. Second, these are stressful times for many people. They need time for themselves, but it can lead to feeling disconnected.

**CHRISTOPHER C. CATCHING:** Many students who are now toward the end of their collegiate experiences were in high school — or even middle school — during the pandemic. Some of this social isolation comes from when they were learning virtually, outside of a community. We saw whiplash when everyone came back to campus — a desire to re-engage and reconnect. We’ve focused on things that have always worked, like exposing students to clubs and organizations. Residence life has always been a foundation for student engagement.

**PARNELL:** Sometimes students don’t know what’s available to them. That’s when colleges need more intentional and strategic communication about opportunities to take part in activities or join groups.

**SMITH:** To what extent is today’s political climate shaping how students are interacting — or maybe avoiding interacting — with one another?

**CATCHING:** Depending on the region or type of institution, it’s impacting students in a variety of ways — presenting a challenge to creating a sense of belonging, connection, and community, which is extremely important in uncertain times.

**“We’ve focused on things that have always worked, like exposing students to clubs and organizations.”**

**PARNELL:** For many students, college may be the first opportunity to be immersed with peers who might not think the same way they do or have the same priorities they have. It can be hard to have a conversation with someone whose views are different, but college is a place where those views should be respected and discussed.

There are also varying student expectations about what college should be in this political environment. Some students would say, “I want my college to take the same political positions I have.” Others would say, “I’m just here to learn.”

**SMITH:** Given the political climate, how can colleges create, maintain, and strengthen initiatives to help students find a sense of belonging within their cultural identities?

**CATCHING:** We need to continue to invest in student-life experiences — making connections around identity and common purpose, including through fraternities, sororities, learning communities, civic-engagement opportunities.

**PARNELL:** Look at what former students have gotten out of various experiences — what’s worked well and what hasn’t. To bring it back to communication, say to students, “Here’s what you might enjoy participating in, based on what you’ve shared with us about your identities.”

**SMITH:** As a member of Gen Z, I know from my own college experience that students want to go to events — but not to anything “cringey” that might get them made fun of in a group chat. What types of events do you think work well? How do we measure success in building community among students?

**CATCHING:** New-student orientation programming sets the tone. We collect data during onboarding experiences, including by asking questions as simple as “Do you intend to stay at this institution?” Of course, students will spontaneously build community if you create a safe environment for them to do so.

**“There are also varying student expectations about what college should be in this political environment.”**

We also just had “The Greatest Homecoming on Earth,” as we call it, here at North Carolina A&T, which is about symbolism and tradition. We believe in opportunities for students to connect with educators, alumni, and prospective employers. Those kinds of events work extremely well. Over the course of my career, I’ve seen a great shift toward programming focused on mental health and wellness, which has been received well by students, too. Often they’re coming to campus seeking those opportunities.

**“We have so much to offer that you may be unaware of, so let us show you some of those things.”**

**PARNELL:** Whenever you design a program or community space, there needs to be discussion of whether it’s attracting students and giving them productive opportunities. We do all sorts of surveys and look at our budgets to see if we can scale successful programs.

Students coming to us in 2025 have different needs than those who came to us in 2015 — or even five years ago during the pandemic. We should always be updating our assumptions about what’s needed. Are we offering programs and services flexible enough for online students who never come to a campus?

**SMITH:** What happens when colleges don’t intervene — or intervene only passively — to foster community among students?

**CATCHING:** We see increases not only in isolation but in depression and anxiety. Students may question whether they belong or whether they can succeed. Proactive engagement is essential, starting in the classroom, particularly with first-year students in seminars, for example.

**PARNELL:** It’s critical to consider the process by which — and the timing in which — we intervene. Maybe it’s “I’m reaching out because I happened to notice you haven’t been engaged with this.” It can be inviting to say, “We have so much to offer that you may be unaware of, so let us show you some of those things.” The wrong framing is “Everyone else is doing this except for you, which must mean you’re not taking college seriously and you don’t belong here.”

In addition, predictive modeling can be used to figure out which students need a nudge in certain ways, but models don't always get it right. Some students may not want to be nudged. Still, we have ample evidence that more connected students are more likely to succeed, so we do our best to intervene.

**SMITH:** What are some helpful definitions — and measurements — of community on campus?

**PARNELL:** That's tricky. I don't have a working definition of community. Maybe that's my homework. I think of communities as places where you can find people with similar interests and goals — those who like esports, for example, or are studying history. Community building happens over time.

**CATCHING:** It might come from your floor in a residence hall. It might come through athletics, research, or studying abroad. Students from New Jersey might tend to gravitate toward one another if they're all in college together in North Carolina.

**SMITH:** How can colleges better engage students with specific identities such as those who are first-generation or parents?

**PARNELL:** If a student has a son or daughter they're taking care of, it's important to consider whether the timing of certain programs is aligned with their child-care needs. There's also a balance to maintain on these issues. You don't want to say, "I'm only inviting you to this event because you're first generation." Students have multiple aspects to their identities. But you might say, for example, "I see that you're from Florida, and we have some cuisine from your part of the country." It's always nice to feel like someone personalized an experience for you.

**“I think of communities as places where you can find people with similar interests and goals — those who like esports, for example, or are studying history.”**

**SMITH:** Many international students today can't return to campuses in this country — or are scared to stay enrolled at their colleges. How is that reality informing student-affairs decision-making?

**CATCHING:** It's essential to provide the support those students need — and to have them on your radar even if you have a small population of them. Along with graduate students, they often can get overlooked.

**PARNELL:** There's a paramount role for colleges' liaisons with international students, who can proactively say, "Here's what you can expect us to do to provide safety and resources and respond to your needs." Those liaisons should also be advocates, talking with senior administrators to make sure they can actually deliver on their commitments.

**SMITH:** I've heard from many administrators and experts who say the ongoing surge in enrollment at historically Black colleges and universities comes from Black students seeking a stronger sense of belonging and community, especially as many institutions are moving away from diversity efforts. How is this moment reshaping the role of student-affairs leaders at HBCUs?

**CATCHING:** The formula of building community on campus and with alumni has worked at HBCUs since 1837, when the first one — Cheyney University of Pennsylvania — was founded. That's part of their value proposition, including connecting with faculty and staff members, many of whom may have attended the institution where they work. There's a pride in these institutions that permeates everything, so students immediately feel like they're part of something special with a larger purpose.

**“It's essential to provide the support those students need — and to have them on your radar even if you have a small population of them.”**

There's also a tradition of social mobility. We disproportionately serve students from backgrounds with limited resources. There's a high level of student success and engagement at HBCUs, and employers want to recruit talent from these institutions.

**PARNELL:** I don't know that I've ever been celebrated on my learning journey the way I was as an undergraduate at an HBCU, surrounded by examples of Black physicists, pharmacists, and engineers. I hadn't been exposed to that before. When you come to college and realize you share an identity with all these successful individuals — and that you're on a journey to join them in success — you can't beat that.

I also liked that my roommate knew where I could get really good hair products. Sometimes you just need someone who gets you. You can find that on another type of campus, too, but I don't take it for granted.

**SMITH:** What else gives you hope about how colleges can rebuild community?

**CATCHING:** One thing that makes me hopeful is the intense interest in higher education, even if it can also present some challenges for institutions. It gives us the opportunity to revise, reframe, and improve the ways we support students. It can be a challenge at times to hire in student affairs, but there are many folks who are invested in and passionate about their work.

**PARNELL:** Companies want to invest in solutions, too. Artificial intelligence is here to stay, and I'm optimistic about leveraging technology to build community. I've been to 24 different campuses so far this year, talking with hundreds of student-affairs professionals. Their commitment is inspiring.