



TRANSFORMATIONAL ALIGNMENT: A THREE-PILLAR MODEL FOR BREAKING SILOS AND EMPOWERING STUDENT SUCCESS

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Abstract

Rising mental health concerns, equity gaps, and calls for “belonging” have increasingly placed expectations on colleges and universities to prioritize improved student retention and completion rates (Lipson et al., 2022; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024). Several programs to encourage student persistence, such as “advising initiatives, early alert systems...,” and high-impact educational practices, have spread rapidly across institutions. Siloed structures continue in many contexts; therefore, students lack the benefit of a cohesive approach to their success (Gardner Institute, 2026; Jacobsen, 2025). The Three-Pillar Transformational Alignment Model described herein presents a framework to align shared ownership of leadership roles among students, faculty/staff in building integrated, relationship-rich success ecosystems for students – grounded in equity leadership and organizational learning (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Holcombe et al., 2025; Kezar et al., 2025). Building on an integration of Astin’s and Tinto’s theories on involvement and integration; and contemporary literature on mentoring, inclusion, wellbeing, and advising, the model presents findings on five alignment dimensions recurring in the literature across multiple areas: communication, coordination, ownership, follow-through, role clarity (Afzal et al., 2024; Kandiko Howson et al., 2024; Mondisa et al., 2024). Two scenarios, providing ‘real picture’ illustrations of success ecosystem, are provided to compare and contrast representative outcomes for students in a siloed versus an aligned success system, along with implications for model implementation and assessment referenced to frameworks, “Transforming the Postsecondary Experience (TPE)”, PASS, student success analytics (Chawla & Lane, 2024; EDUCAUSE, 2022; Gardner Institute, 2026). These findings offer the potential for future testing and adaptation for use in institutions aspiring to greater coherence in the context of student success and equity-minded initiatives.

Keywords

Student Success Ecosystems, Transformational Alignment Model, Equity-Focused Leadership, Integrated Student Support Systems

Introduction

The rising expectations for colleges and universities to bolster student retention, persistence, and completion, coupled with increasing mental health issues and calls for inclusive, belonging-centered environments, demand a systematically ordered and organized conceptualization of the intended work of institutions (Lipson et al., 2022; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024). To this end, there is a demand for conceptual models to help institutions discern and organize their activities in a coherent and deliberate manner rather than through impulsive program-building.

The need for this focus is underscored by publicly available frameworks and initiatives. The Gardner Institute’s Transforming the Postsecondary Experience (TPE) and Inside Higher Ed’s article on the ACCESS framework address the problems of siloed approaches and the need for a comprehensive redesign of the undergraduate experience at the institutional level (Gardner Institute, 2026; Jacobsen, 2025). At the same time, the prevailing evidence shows worrying trends in student persistence and retention, particularly among historically

marginalized populations, whereby institutional arrangements too often work against, rather than in support of, the student experience (Lipson et al., 2022; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024). In this context, there is an evident lack of conceptual clarity about how institutional leadership, faculty, and staff can contribute to a coordinated, integrated student success framework with an explicit equity focus.

With this foundation, the current article introduces the Three-Pillar Transformational Alignment Model as a conceptual framework uniquely designed to unify leadership, faculty, and staff efforts in student success. Building on decades of research in student engagement, integration, mentoring, and equity-focused leadership, this model stands out by translating theory into a comprehensive, role-based alignment approach. Its unique value lies in streamlining diverse practice-based frameworks into a coordinated structure that fosters collaboration across institutional roles.

Conceptual Problem: Siloed Structures and Fragmented Support

While evidence-based practices have grown – including high-impact educational practices (Kuh, 2008) and active learning (Deslauriers et al., 2019) – most institutions currently adopt innovations as additional practices rather than as a core part of a seamless system (Brownell et al., 2015). As a result of independent initiatives from academic affairs, student affairs, and administrative units, students and employees face “operational sprawl” (Jacobsen, 2025) – competing initiatives and services that are difficult to navigate (Gardner Institute, 2026). Therefore, the institution's organizational structure does not support the integrated nature of students' formal and informal learning and living engagement.

Qualitative and conceptual research also sheds light on how staff and faculty perceive barriers to collaboration, such as role ambiguity, time constraints, and misaligned expectations (Graziano, 2022; Phillips & Snodgrass, 2022). These obstacles might disrupt collaboration across units, undermine student engagement, and foster cultural environments that encourage units to operate in parallel rather than in partnership. Additionally, belongingness and engagement research suggest that disjointed experiences erode motivation and commitment, especially among students already navigating systemic barriers to success (Pedler et al., 2022; Tinto, 2017). Ultimately, these bodies of research suggest a conceptual gap: the institution's internal structure and culture do not actively promote the integrated, relational engagement that scholarship indicates is vital to student success.

Public frameworks further support this diagnosis. TPE is clear in their guidance to institutions to move from “disconnected initiatives” to “harmonized, institution-wide redesign” of the foundational postsecondary experience (Gardner Institute, 2026, para. 22). The ACCESS framework takes a similar position in detailing the pitfalls of siloed programming, providing a conceptual framework to better nexus how recruitment, retention, support, and advancement work in concert with one another (Jacobsen, 2025). These findings lay the groundwork for the concept model proposed in this document, one that seeks to accentuate alignment rather than additional, supplementary programmatic offerings.

Theoretical Foundations for Transformational Alignment

The Three-Pillar Transformational Alignment Model draws on established theories of student success and recent research in mentoring, inclusive practice, and equity-minded leadership. Astin's Student Involvement Theory states that learning and persistence depend on the quality of energy students invest in their education, especially through interactions with peers and faculty (Astin, 1984, 2014). Student-faculty and student-staff involvement are vital to the model; therefore, faculty and staff are key actors because they engage with students daily.

Furthermore, Tinto's student departure theory and student outlook also shed light on another aspect of integration essential for student persistence: academic integration. Students' perceptions of building a coalesced model throughout their institutional experience and of seeing faculty and staff respond to their needs in a manner that fits together also contribute to a persistent outcome (Tinto, 1993, 2017). However, when students do not perceive the support to be coalesced and unified for them, ultimately affecting their ability to persist, it results in attrition. In this sense, students facing academic and financial problems are more likely to drop out if they receive non-unified responses.

Recent studies of relationship-rich education, mentoring, and well-being help develop these theories. Felten and Lambert (2020) state that relationships lie at the heart of student wellbeing and achievement, and institutions must purposefully create relationship-rich ecosystems. Extensive reviews of the mentoring literature and investigations into mentoring ecosystems indicate that integrated, multilayered mentoring structures work best with diverse students (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Mondisa et al., 2024). Systematic reviews of student wellbeing and academic support services confirm that academic and wellbeing services must work in unison to produce the most significant outcomes (Kandiko Howson et al., 2024). Taken together, the research theories present a case for conceptual frameworks that demonstrate how multiple roles can be interlinked to enhance relationships, belonging, and well-being at scale in academic settings.

In addition, several systems-level frameworks, such as TPE, PASS, and student success analytics, also contribute to applying a systems lens to the design and delivery of equity-focused initiatives. TPE calls for a thoughtfully designed and coherent two-year college experience; PASS prioritizes alignment across state policy and institutional decision-making; and student success analytics encourages data-informed decision-making to promote equity (Chawla & Lane, 2024; EDUCAUSE, 2022; Gardner Institute, 2026; Sova & SHEEO, 2025). Each of these efforts supports the infrastructure needed for institutional transformation. However, they provide a means to determine how leadership, faculty, and staff can organize and align their roles to support these efforts. The Three-Pillar Model fills this gap.

Alignment and Shared Equity Leadership as Central Constructs

Alignment and shared equity leadership constitute the first two core constructs of the Three-Pillar Transformational Alignment Model. Alignment is “the extent to which the structures, practices, and relationships of efforts across leadership, faculty, and staff are interwoven in pursuit of a shared set of student success priorities.” The state-level work of PASS demonstrates how agency and higher education institutions align their efforts through shared goals, policy mapping, and networked learning communities (Chawla & Lane, 2024; Sova & SHEEO, 2025). On the campus, “TPE calls for cross-functional teams of stakeholders to engage in sensemaking, collaborative design, and ongoing improvement that prioritizes aligned changes instead of isolated programmatic fixes” (Gardner Institute, 2026).

Shared equity leadership takes the notion of alignment a step further by creating a collective imperative around equity. Holcombe et al. (2025) define shared equity leadership as a model in which leaders across roles participate in shared decision-making, self-reflection, and culture change to advance equity, rather than being the responsibility of a single office/role. Equally, Kezar et al. (2025) promote mechanisms to shift the institution's inner workings toward learning and culture change as part of institutional imperatives and processes to move away from episodic reform. Both notions inform the Three-Pillar Model's concept of shared responsibility for student success and focus on the behaviors of leaders that reinforce or disrupt silos.

As a concept, the Three-Pillar Transformational Alignment Model outlines a systemic, structural, and cultural approach to facilitating transformational change across the three pillars (policies and processes, data, norms and expectations around shared equity leadership). Unlike tools that call for restructuring organizations or focus only on the culture of their leadership as a change agent, this model is premised on ideas that embrace both change levers.

The Three-Pillar Transformational Alignment Model

The Transformational Alignment Model incorporates three pillars that promote holistic student success. One of the pillars is Leadership, which includes senior administrators and governance that envision, allocate, and shape school policy. Faculty focus on curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, and they are the ones who see firsthand students' academic and personal experiences (Astin, 2014; Koch, 2025). Staff includes academic and non-academic advisors, financial aid, holistic counselors, and student affairs officers, among others (Afzal et al., 2024; William Paterson University, 2021).

Across these domains, five recurrent dimensions for alignment emerge:

1. **Communication:** The clarity, timeliness, and bi-directionality of information about student needs, progress, and support options. Misaligned systems often lack mechanisms for ensuring that information flows across units and roles (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Gardner Institute, 2026; Jacobsen, 2025).
2. **Coordination:** The presence of structured processes and routines for jointly planning and executing responses to student needs. Without coordination, interventions are duplicated or contradictory, and students receive partial or inconsistent support (Chawla & Lane, 2024; Gardner Institute, 2026).
3. **Ownership:** The distribution of responsibility and accountability for student success outcomes. In siloed systems, ownership is often assigned to discrete offices, whereas shared equity leadership models emphasize collective responsibility across roles (Holcombe et al., 2025; Kezar et al., 2025).
4. **Follow-through:** The degree to which referrals, alerts, and action plans are tracked, completed, and evaluated. Breakdowns in follow-through lead students to “fall through the cracks,” even when services exist (Jacobsen, 2025; William Paterson University, 2021).

5. **Role clarity:** The extent to which leaders, faculty, and staff understand their specific responsibilities and limits in supporting students, including when and how to collaborate with others (Afzal et al., 2024; Graziano, 2022).

The Three-Pillar Model is a framework that aims to realize the transformational alignment that directly impacts student success. The model proposes that student success is related to the transformational alignment across all three pillars on these five dimensions. The model can be used conceptually (a) to identify misalignment, (b) to provide a framework for strategic planning and professional development, and (c) to guide the development of data systems and governance structures.

Case 1: A Siloed Response to Student Need

Take, as an example, a student struggling in a gateway course, increasingly anxious, and experiencing financial hardships. In a siloed institution, faculty submit early alerts without follow-up or resolution, advisers are poorly equipped to guide students beyond class selection and degree progression, financial aid addresses compliance or billing-related issues as though these were unrelated to emotional or performance challenges, and counseling and mental and behavioral health resources do not see the academic implications (Koch, 2025; Jacobsen, 2025). Each actor attends to a narrow slice of the student experience, and no one feels responsible for connecting the pieces to help the student succeed.

This is an example of misalignment on all five dimensions; communication is one-way and insufficient, coordination is unordered, ownership is everywhere and nowhere, follow-through is not monitored, and role clarity is absent. Students who experience such systems will interpret the institution as either chaotic or apathetic; this is associated with lower levels of motivation, belonging, and persistence (Pedler et al., 2022; Tinto, 2017). Conceptually, this case illustrates how misalignment across the three pillars leads to fragmented support despite the institution's broad service landscape. Illustrative Case 2: Transformational Alignment in Action

In an institution employing the Three-Pillar Transformational Alignment Model, the aligned environment creates the same student scenario. The institution's leadership employs explicit student success and alignment goals, informed by TPE and PASS, and governance strategies that are cross-functional and student-success council-based (Chawla & Lane, 2024; Gardner Institute, 2026; Sova & SHEEO, 2025). The institution's leadership has made investments in shared equity leadership development and clearly prioritized student success in strategic planning and budgetary commitments (Holcombe et al., 2025; Phillips & Snodgrass, 2022).

Professional learning opportunities are developed and offered consistently to faculty to support topics of inclusive pedagogies, recognizing student challenges early in the process, and leveraging advising and support networks (Alnahdiet et al., 2022; Brownell et al., 2015; Koch, 2025). Advising, financial aid, and other support staff operate according to well-defined workflows that provide clarity around when and how to collaborate in response to early alert notifications; the work of these individuals is supported by a student success analytics framework and advising technologies (Afzal et al., 2024; EDUCAUSE, 2022; Keetch & Cuevas, 2026).

Once the faculty member files an early alert regarding the at-risk student, a "turn-taking" follows among the involved parties: advisors follow up, financial aid staff obtains the student's financial and interpersonal data, whether contact with counseling or mentoring personnel is needed is ascertained, etc. (Afzal et al., 2024; Mondisa et al., 2024). There is clear communication, shared accountability among units, and follow-up based on agreed-upon metrics (e.g., time to contact, completion of identified action steps, student self-reported feelings of support, etc.) (EDUCAUSE, 2022; KandikoHowson et al., 2024). The student receives a coordinated, relationship-rich network of responses, and the administrative leadership obtains aggregated data for continued assessment and improvement of structures and policies (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Gardner Institute, 2026).

Figure 1
The Three-Pillar Transformational Alignment Model
A Coordinated System for Student Success

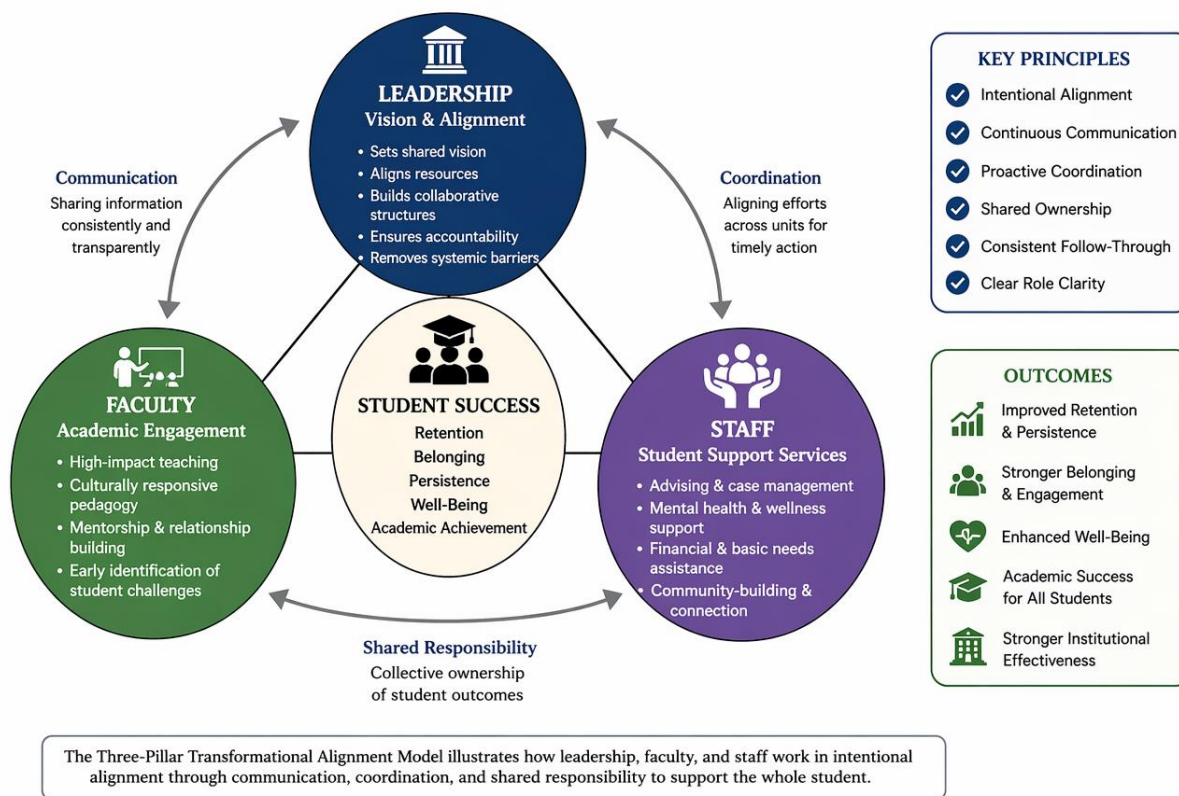


Figure 1 The Three-Pillar Transformational Alignment Model

Note. Created by the author with assistance from ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2026).

Implementation and Assessment Implications

While the Three-Pillar Transformational Alignment Model is a conceptual model, it is accompanied by practical avenues for use and examination. Institutions can pursue alignment audits (or examinations) and consider factors such as communication, coordination, ownership, follow-through, and role clarity between leadership-faculty, leadership-staff, faculty-staff, and so on. Institutions can also pursue mechanisms for professional development, leadership training, and advising practices that highlight the key areas around alignment and integrated professional development that are highlighted in this model, which are based substantially upon evidence-based practices from research in the fields of mentoring, inclusive teaching, and appreciative advising (Afzal et al., 2024; Keetch & Cuevas, 2026; Mondisa et al., 2024).

Next, both the outcomes and processes can be assessed by student success analytics frameworks. Colleges can measure more traditional indicators, such as retention and completion, as well as alignment-related measures, such as cross-unit response times, early alert resolutions, and multi-office interactions (EDUCAUSE, 2022; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024). Like the proposal for student wellbeing and belonging research, assessment plans should include qualitative and survey measures for the students’ experiences of support and integration (Kandiko Howson et al., 2024; Pedler et al., 2022).

Scholarly Contribution and Future Directions

The Three-Pillar Transformational Alignment Model contributes to the student success literature primarily as a conceptual framework that integrates theory and practice into a role-based alignment structure. It extends existing frameworks such as ACCESS, TPE, PASS, and shared equity leadership by specifying how leadership, faculty, and staff roles intersect around five alignment dimensions and by offering language and categories that can be used in institutional analysis, planning, and research (Chawla & Lane, 2024; Gardner Institute, 2026; Holcombe et al., 2025; Jacobsen, 2025). The model invites future empirical work to test and refine its propositions in diverse institutional contexts, including community colleges, regional comprehensive universities, and minority-serving institutions.

Future research might, for example, explore how alignment across the three pillars relates to students' perceptions of support, belonging, and institutional care, or how shared equity leadership practices influence ownership and follow-through in student success initiatives. By providing a clear conceptual vocabulary for these dynamics, the Three-Pillar Transformational Alignment Model aims to support institutions in moving beyond siloed interventions toward more coherent, relationship-rich, and equity-centered systems of student success.

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