RESEARCH PAPER

Overcoming adversity: The strengths of care leavers in Australian higher education

Lisa Andrewartha* & Andrew Harvey
La Trobe University, Australia

Young people who have spent time in out-of-home care, including foster care, kinship care, and residential care, rarely access higher education. Those who do enter university often face financial constraints, mental ill health, and academic under-preparation. These educational challenges and barriers have been well documented but less emphasis has been given to the strengths possessed by care leavers who successfully access higher education. In this paper, we analyse the firsthand accounts of care leavers in Australian higher education. Our findings highlight how care leavers can bring particular qualities, skills, and mindsets to higher education which help them to succeed despite extreme challenges, and which could be harnessed more broadly by institutions. We argue that better understanding of the challenges, experiences, and strengths of care leavers could benefit all students on campus.

Keywords: higher education; care leavers; out-of-home care; student equity; widening participation

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Introduction

In Australia, and across the Western world, young people who have spent time in out-of-home care, including foster care, kinship care, and residential care, rarely access higher education (Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha, & Luckman, 2015; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Mendes, Michell, & Wilson, 2014). These young people are locked out of an education system that is linked to improved employment and earning potential (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016). Research from the United Kingdom (UK) shows that the minority of care leavers who do progress to higher education face barriers to success including high rates of financial, psychological, academic, and relationship stress (Jackson, Ajayi, & Quigley, 2005). In Australia, however, a dearth of research means comparatively little is known about the experiences of care leavers in higher education.

To address this gap, we conducted a major Australian research project, *Recruiting and supporting care leavers in Australian higher education* (Harvey, Campbell, Andrewartha, Wilson, & Goodwin-Burns, 2017). The research was led by La Trobe University in partnership with Federation University of Australia, Queensland University of Technology, and Western Sydney University. The project involved a multi-state, cross-institutional analysis of care leavers in Australian higher education. One component of the project comprised in-depth interviews with 35 care leavers in higher education. In this paper, we report on an analysis of the interview

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*Corresponding author. Email: L.Andrewartha@latrobe.edu.au

data with a specific focus on the strengths that many care leavers bring to higher education.

We begin this paper by providing the international and national context of care leavers in higher education. Targeted research, policies, and legislation within the UK, in particular, has led to rising access and participation of care leavers at university. We discuss the risk associated with research into care leavers, as with some other under-represented students, of focussing only on the educational barriers, difficulties, and challenges faced. While understanding such barriers is crucial, it is also necessary to understand the ways in which many care leaver students are overcoming challenges through their resilience, determination, empathy, and other capacities. After setting the context, we explore the findings from our own original research which focussed on firsthand accounts of 35 care leavers in higher education across eastern states of Australia. Our evidence highlights how care leavers can often bring particular qualities, skills, and mindsets to higher education which not only help them to succeed despite typically challenging and unwelcoming environments, but which could be harnessed more broadly by institutions. We argue that transitioning from a deficit model to a richer understanding of the experiences of care leavers, including their strengths, has the potential to benefit all students on campus.

Context

Out-of-home care refers to the placement of children who are unable to live with their families with alternate carers, often due to abuse and neglect (Victorian Department of Human Services, 2007). Out-of-home care includes foster care, kinship care, residential care, family group homes, and independent living arrangements (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare [AIHW], 2017). Approximately 46,500 children and young people live in out-of-home care in Australia, and a substantial proportion come from low socio-economic status, regional, and/or Indigenous backgrounds (AIHW, 2017; State Government of Victoria, 2012). Many young people in out-of-home care confront specific educational challenges from an early age, including placement instability and disrupted schooling (Bromfield, Higgins, Osborn, Panozzo, & Richardson, 2005; CREATE Foundation, 2006; Fernandez, 2008; Townsend, 2012). It is important to recognise that young people in out-of-home care comprise a heterogeneous group, and not all young people in care face educational disadvantage. Nevertheless, the relatively low school achievement and completion rates of young people in out-of-home care have been well documented (AIHW, 2007: 2011). A large-scale study found that over a third of young people in care did not obtain an educational qualification (Fernandez et al., 2016). Inadequate schooling was also highlighted in *Bringing Them Home* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997)*,* the landmark report based on the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

The term 'care leavers' can be used to refer to people who spent time in out-of-home care before 18 years of age and subsequently transitioned out of the system (Harvey et al., 2015). Legal protection and formal assistance from state governments typically decrease or discontinue at 18 years of age (Creed, Tilbury, Buys, & Crawford, 2011; Victorian Department of Human Services, 2007; Mendes, 2009). Care leavers are at increased risk of homelessness and unemployment (Johnson et al., 2010; McDowall, 2013; Thoresen & Liddiard, 2011). No robust data are available on the number of care leavers in higher education in Australia. It has been estimated, however, that only one per cent of Australian care leavers transition into higher education, compared to 26 per cent of young people in the general population (Mendes et al., 2014).

There has been extensive research into the higher education experiences of care leavers in the UK. Jackson et al. (2005) conducted the first major research project to highlight the poor higher

education outcomes of care leavers. This project, titled *By Degrees: Going from care to university*, tracked 50 care leavers through the British higher education system over a five-year period, using in-depth interviews to identify the barriers and enablers to their aspiration, participation, and achievement. At the point of application to university, care leavers reported a lack of information and advice about universities and courses, and uncertainty about the financial and accommodation support available. While studying at university, care leavers with inadequate financial support participated in a large amount of paid work. The authors noted the resilience, determination, and resourcefulness of the care leavers at university, many of whom faced financial, psychological, academic, and relationship stress. The subsequent cross-national project, *Young people from a public care background pathways to education in Europe* research project (YiPPEE), found there was comparable educational disadvantage among care leavers from England, Denmark, Sweden, Hungary, and Spain (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). This large-scale project was conducted by a multidisciplinary team of social scientists and included secondary analysis of national datasets and interviews with professionals and young people.

The *By Degrees* report was the catalyst for further research and policy and legislative advancement which has significantly increased higher education access and support for care leavers in the UK (Department for Education, 2014). Universities have responded by including care leavers within their access agreements, and monitoring their participation and outcomes for accreditation and evaluation purposes (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014; Office for Fair Access, 2015). In England, this proportion of care leavers in higher education increased from approximately 1 per cent of 19 year old care leavers in 2003 to 6-7 per cent of 19-21 year old care leavers in 2014 (Department for Education, 2014). This figure demonstrates significant improvement over time but remains well below the 40 per cent higher education participation rate of young people in the general population (The Centre for Social Justice, 2015). Furthermore, evidence from the UK shows that some care leavers are reluctant to disclose their care leaver status to fellow students, support staff, or academics for fear of prejudice (Jackson & Cameron, 2014).

In contrast to the United Kingdom, few Australian studies have explored the experiences of care leavers in higher education. Jurczyszyn and Tilbury (2012) interviewed 13 young people in Queensland who were in care or leaving care. The researchers found that interest in higher or further education amongst this group was facilitated by carers, teachers, and youth workers who encouraged educational aspirations and had high expectations. Mendis, Gardner, and Lehmann (2014) interviewed 18 university-educated, Caucasian women who had spent time in out-of-home care and found that experiences depended on personal capabilities, such as resilience and motivation, as well as individual care circumstances. Michell, Jackson, and Tonkin (2015) detailed the resilience of 14 care leavers who had overcome many barriers to succeed in higher education 'against the odds'. Similarly, Wilson and Golding (2016) described their own unique paths from care to university. While the above studies provide some important insights, they focus on relatively small samples of care leavers. A recent literature review concluded that "we know strikingly little about the experiences of care leavers who enter higher education in Australia" (Mendes et al., 2014, p. 249).

To redress the dearth of local research, Harvey, McNamara, Andrewartha, and Luckman (2015) conducted the first Australian project to map the higher education sector in relation to care leavers. The project, *Out of care, into university*, included an examination of relevant education and child protection data sources, a survey of public universities, and interviews with community service organisations. Findings highlighted the lack of data collection, policies, and programs targeting care leavers in higher education.

To investigate these findings further, Harvey, Campbell, Andrewartha, Wilson, and Goodwin-Burns (2017) conducted a follow-up project, *Recruiting and supporting care leavers in Australian higher education.* The project included institutional data collection and advocacy which enabled development of important new methods of measuring access and success of this group. Another important component of the project was 35 in-depth interviews with care leavers in higher education. Several interview themes were evident, including common experiences of financial hardship and anxiety and other mental health issues. The interviews revealed a low uptake of institutional support, including both financial support and counselling services, and a reluctance to deal with institutional bureaucracy. The care leavers held high levels of resilience, adaptability, and determination, but were being marginalised by systems that rewarded 'inside knowledge' of the higher education system (Harvey et al., 2017).

Our previous research has highlighted how the out-of-home care sector is often marked by the "soft bigotry of low expectations" (Harvey et al., 2015, p. 6). Those who surround children in out-of-home care, including social workers, teachers, guardians, agency workers, and para-professionals, often hold little belief in the capacity of the children to transition to higher education, and maintain few resources to assist in raising the educational knowledge, aspirations or expectations of those in care. This culture of low expectations impacts upon educational achievement and subsequent access to higher education, and may reinforce existing structural and psychological barriers. For the few care leavers who do transition to higher education, a legacy of low expectations often persists, and educational challenges remain multiple and severe. Despite the gravity of these challenges, many care leavers do succeed not only in accessing higher education but in successfully navigating and completing their degrees. The ability of many care leavers to overcome extreme barriers has been under-researched, but the limited research that has been undertaken suggests that these students may bring strengths and persistence from which universities could learn.

Historically, the experiences of groups under-represented in higher education have been conceptualised in a way that implies deficit (Harvey, Burnheim, & Brett, 2017). Identifying and understanding the particular strengths of marginalised students, however, has been a concern of Critical Race Theorists in the United States for many years (see for example, Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005; Yosso 2005). Similarly, exploring the particular strengths of care leaver students enables us to reframe their identities and experiences. Rather than simply being seen as a marginalised group within higher education, we need to understand the ways in which many care leavers address that marginality, resist deficit conceptions of their experiences, and navigate a university culture that is often unwelcoming and incompatible with their own backgrounds and views. By understanding these strengths and strategies we can obtain a more accurate and positive profile of care leaver students, and also work to address broader stereotypes and institutional cultures (Harvey, forthcoming).

Method

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to capture the experiences of care leavers accessing and participating in higher education. A broad, multi-pronged approach to interview recruitment was adopted by each participating university, using institutional websites, newsletters, posters, social media, and word of mouth. It was generally difficult to reach care leavers, as they comprise a small and often invisible group in higher education. The universities with the most varied and extensive recruitment campaigns had the most success.

A total of 35 interviews were held across the four partner universities, in three different states. As part of the interviews, participants were asked to reflect on their own strengths and to identify

ways in which their care background was beneficial to their university studies. In this paper, we specifically focus on these self-identified strengths. Table 1 presents a summary of participant characteristics.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed for content and themes using an interpretative phenomenological approach (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This approach involves detailed examination of how people make sense of life experiences, and is useful when investigating complex and emotionally-laden topics. Analysis was bottom up in nature, with themes generated from the interview data rather than the application of a specific theoretical framework.

Table 1: Participant characteristics (n=35)

		Number	**Proportion**
Gender	Male	6	17%
	Female	29	83%
Age	18 to 20 years	4	11%
	21 to 25 years	9	26%
	26 to 30 years	9	26%
	31 to 35 years	5	14%
	36 to 40 years	4	11%
	Over 40 years	4	11%
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	Yes	5	14%
	No	30	86%
State	New South Wales	2	6%
	Queensland	13	37%
	Victoria	20	57%
Time in care	1 to 5 years	16	46%
	6 to 10 years	8	23%
	11 to 18 years	6	17%
	Missing data	5	14%
Multiple out-of-home care placements	Yes	11	31%
	No	24	69%

Findings

Qualitative analysis revealed a range of strengths held by care leavers in higher education, including high levels of resilience and adaptability, independence and maturity, determination and self-motivation, social awareness and emotional intelligence, and experiences and insight relevant to specific areas of study. These strengths were used by many students to overcome

well-documented difficulties of disrupted education, challenging financial and family circumstances, and an institutional culture often perceived as incongruous or even hostile.

Resilience and adaptability

A major theme to arise from the interviews was the high level of resilience among care leavers. Many of the participants had histories of family dysfunction, trauma, disrupted schooling, and poverty. Half of the participants identified as having experienced mental ill health, most commonly anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress. One third of the participants had experienced homelessness at some point. Participants described how living through hardship had increased their general capacity to recover from, and adapt to, difficult and changing circumstances. Approximately one third of the participants reported that having high levels of resilience and adaptability had helped them to access, and succeed at, university.

Several participants reported that previous hardships had helped them place relatively minor concerns about university study into perspective which reduced unnecessary stress. This mindset was described by three participants. Trish[1], for example, noted, "Resilience I think is a big one because you don't *sweat the small stuff* [i.e. worry about trivial matters] when you've come from this kind of background". Chloe also stated:

> I've seen a lot of things, and I know life can be really stressful – and I know people who have a lot worse things going on than essays and deadlines. I just feel lucky that I even have the opportunity to study really.

A number of participants specified that during their time in care they had learned to be adaptable and resourceful which had helped them adjust to the demands of university. As Chris explained:

> I feel I can pretty much adapt to most situations. So you know, knowing that time put in equals results, you know, doesn't really matter what it is, that, kind of, can really be applicable to a lot of different things.

Independence and maturity

Many care leavers had increased levels of independence and maturity relative to other university students, regardless of actual age. Of the participants who were younger than 25 years old, most (90 per cent) had transitioned to university straight from secondary school. Approximately half of these younger students reported having a greater level of independence and maturity than their similar-aged peers. These students described how spending time in care had required them to become self-sufficient from a young age, which was a useful quality at university. As Brooke, aged 18, said, "I've been pretty independent since I was in care really or since I first started to be in care". Having spent time in care, often with a history of adversity, had given these students a level of maturity beyond their years. Dale, aged 18, noted:

> I'm more mature and ready for these kind of environments. I think it's more life experience, despite being the same age like you've done more, the rougher your life has been you get a little bit more mature and you get more understanding of how the world works. Whereas other people they come there and they're like 'oh okay I'm just gonna go to uni and I'm gonna go partying and stuff' and they don't realise that they can't do that, this is not like high school or anything.

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[1] Pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper.

Of the participants who were aged 25 or older, most (80 per cent) had not entered university straight after secondary school. Approximately one third of these older participants spoke of the benefits of this extended trajectory. The benefits included entering university with an increased understanding of themselves and the 'real world', and having a greater focus on their future plans. Samantha, aged 36, explained:

> Because I'm older now and I have so much life experience that I can see beyond the immediate and the struggle my classmates who are 19, 20 and 21 years old. About time management, about insecurity of friends, and even knowing who they are - I don't struggle with it at all because I've dealt with all of that and I'm on the other side of it.

Older students also described how having more adult responsibilities and work experience had given them a more accurate view of life beyond university. When discussing other students, Isaac, 29 years, stated "I think because they lack real-life experience. They have no idea what the real world looks like. Like, when you graduate and start working…They don't know what that means".

Determination and stubbornness

Many care leavers had been determined to attend university despite many barriers, and to work hard to succeed at university once they were there. Approximately one quarter of the participants identified determination as a personal strength. The determination to attend university was often evident despite the sometimes low expectations from influential people such as teachers, tutors, carers, and/or case workers. Piper explained that "There is a big assumption that kids that come out of care can't function on their own, or won't be able to achieve anything". She described how low expectations had been placed on her from a young age, as illustrated by her tutor's reaction when she expressed a desire to sit a scholarship exam for a prestigious high school:

> I told her that I'd like to sit the scholarship exam for [the school]. The first thing she told me was "you're aiming too high, you're not good enough for that". You can imagine that made me more stubborn, I sourced out the scholarship exam myself and I sat it. And I actually got in...

Alex described a similar tenacity when speaking more generally of her background in care:

> It made me really frigging stubborn and determined to do what I want to do, even when other people say 'oh no you can't do that' or, you know, 'oh that's usually for younger people'. Yeah kind of a determined stubbornness that's like 'screw you guys I'll do what I want to do'.

Determination was often coupled with self-motivation to work hard to succeed once at university. As Isaac stated, "I'm more self-motivated to do study than a lot of other students. I try my best to get the best results I can, but a lot of other students aren't like that". Often increased motivation was linked to a desire to improve future prospects after a history of hardship. As Asher explained, "I am motivated to change my life, whereas other people don't have the same drive – mostly because they just don't know how hard it can be". Olivia also expressed the same attitude:

> So there's quite a lot that I'd like to do in my lifetime but I know that each thing, like, you've just got to take it one day at a time and each thing will come. It's just

persistence and effort pretty much.

Social awareness and emotional intelligence

About one fifth of the care leavers described having high levels of social awareness and emotional intelligence[2] relative to other students. These students were more aware of the difficulties that individuals can face on a day-to-day basis, and had a greater understanding of emotions in themselves and others, often because they had been exposed to various negative situations and behaviours. One of the most commonly described outcomes of this awareness was an increased level of empathy. Grace explained, "It made me more understanding of difficulties people could face, I definitely feel like I'm much more of an empathetic person because I've seen and been in situations that are really unpleasant". Eliza also stated "Sometimes I just struggle to understand how people aren't aware of the humans around them or some people come across really cold as well or, just yeah, naïve potentially". In some cases, increased empathy also led to improved interpersonal skills and ability to interact with others. As Amy explained, "I guess to have personal experiences, like going to different homes, you learn how to kind of deal with different people and deal with conflict maybe a bit better...".

Relevant experience and insight

Approximately one fifth of students described how their care background had given them skills, experiences, and mindsets that were useful to their specific areas of study. About half of the total number of participants were enrolled in Nursing, Social Work, Behavioural Science, Human Services, and Psychology degrees. Such degrees focus on physical and/or psychological wellbeing and prepare students for roles in the 'helping professions'. Jenny, who was studying Nursing, noted "…you've just got a bit more of an open mind, you're not so judgemental on people and that's good with nursing and child care as well". Casey, who was also studying Nursing, stated:

> I feel like having a bit of a background in dealing with a lot of mental illness, and I saw a lot of other kids in foster care, I can have a bit more empathy for why people might behave a certain way…I don't just look at the external behaviour that you see sometimes, there's always more to the story.

When discussing personal strengths, Sophie, one of the participants who identified as Aboriginal emphasised her cultural background more than her care background. This student focussed on the value of bringing a cultural understanding to university and sharing this understanding in classroom discussions and presentations.

> I start some doozy debates too because I always come from an Aboriginal perspective, and some of the folks in the classroom are, like, they don't cope when you start putting it in that cultural perspective and reflecting it back to them. You know because they're coming mainstream, they're coming white fella way and I'm coming black fella way. Well I meet in the middle...

A number of participants had undertaken Social Science subjects, which focus on the study of human society and social relationships. They saw it as useful to have direct experience of the systems being studied, where some other students had misperceptions. As Alexis stated:

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[2] Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2000) define emotional intelligence as "the ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in the self and others" (p. 396).

> We were looking at Social Science, and having lived in that system, they made certain assumptions about people in foster care, people who were out of home, people who drank alcohol at young ages, and I'm like you guys, 'No, like, this is not what it's like'...

Other participants also spoke more generally about the benefits of bringing a different perspective to university study. For example, Cara, who was studying Arts, reported:

> Another advantage I guess would be that, in the particular discipline that I have chosen to focus in on, thinking about the world from a different perspective is actually probably the basis of the entire Bachelor of Arts. So yeah there's that, if you're looking for a bonus in a crummy situation, there's that.

Discussion

Our findings focussed on the strengths that care leavers bring to higher education by drawing on the firsthand accounts of care leavers. From these accounts it was evident that care leavers have many personal strengths, including high levels of resilience and adaptability, independence and maturity, determination and self-motivation, social awareness and emotional intelligence, and relevant experiences and insight. Often these strengths had evolved through exposure to disruptive, difficult, and negative events.

Some of the strengths we identified are consistent with the limited Australian literature on care leavers in higher education. In particular, studies of care leavers who have attended university have provided evidence of resilience, determination, and self-motivation (Mendis et al., 2014; Michell et al., 2015; Wilson & Golding, 2016). Mendis et al. (2014), for example, found that a number of their sample of care leavers displayed these strengths, categorising them as the 'Determined' group:

> The Determined group represents the quintessence of childhood resilience in the face of adversity demonstrating agency, courage, determination, perseverance, and helpseeking behaviour. They did not have a significant adult encouraging them to get an education, nor did they expect this. In childhood and adolescence, they knew how to employ their strengths to their advantage, but also enlisted adult support when needed. They were strongly motivated, developed a goal of going to university in adolescence, and overcame significant barriers to realise this goal. (p. 7)

More broadly, our findings align with the work of Critical Race Theorists who have highlighted the strengths of marginalised students that often lie unacknowledged or unrewarded within the academy (Yosso, 2005). Understanding the strengths of care leavers can help not only to address specific, established stereotypes, but also to reform the culture and values that the academy rewards (Harvey, forthcoming). In this paper we have focussed specifically on the identities, strengths and challenges of care leaver students, but our findings have wider implications for institutional culture and understandings of groups marginalised within higher education.

Care leavers, and other 'non-traditional' students, have the potential to improve the university experience for all students. Research shows that a diverse student body can provide a more stimulating and creative intellectual environment (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005). Our own research confirms that care leavers often enter university with a collection of experiences, ideas, and perspectives that differ from those of other students. Care leavers, for example, often

commence university from a background of adversity, typically having faced poverty, disrupted schooling, and broader societal challenges (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Rather than viewing these differences as problematic, they could be viewed as having both social and academic value. The experiences and knowledge of care leaver students, if shared, could lead to increased social awareness and critical thinking skills among other students, and may even encourage them to question their biases and expand their worldview. To be effective, however, the educational benefits of student diversity need to be well understood and sensitively incorporated into university curriculum and pedagogy.

Our findings also have very specific implications for university staff and students. Evidence from the UK shows that care leavers can be reluctant to disclose their care leaver status for fear of prejudice (Jackson & Cameron, 2014). An increased understanding of care leavers and their strengths has the potential to reduce such prejudice, and the fear of it. Care leavers who are better understood may be more willing to self-identify to fellow students, academics, and support staff. Indeed, group identity has the potential to be framed as a positive force. A UK website called Propel encourages care leavers to inform universities of their status in order to access extra information, guidance, and support (Who Cares? Trust, 2016).

There are several limitations of our research worth noting. The small sample size, while the norm in qualitative research, limits the generalisability of the results. Furthermore, our sample comprised a small proportion of male care leavers (17 per cent). There are no national or state data on the demographic characteristics of care leavers in higher education, so we cannot assess whether this gender distribution reflects the population under study. Our sample does not reflect the Australian out-of-home care population under 17 years of age, however, of which approximately half are boys (52 per cent) (AIHW, 2017). There are many factors that could explain our gender imbalance, such as the general tendency for male care leavers to be under-represented in volunteer studies (Jackson et al., 2005) and the relatively high proportion of female students in higher education.

Conclusion

Care leavers often face extreme challenges to participation and success in higher education, including disrupted schooling, financial hardship, mental health issues, and a culture of low expectations. The academic potential of care leavers is frequently overlooked and their presence in higher education undervalued. Our evidence highlights how care leavers can bring particular strengths to higher education that often enable them to overcome extreme challenges and barriers. The care leavers in our research possessed high levels of resilience and adaptability, independence and maturity, determination and self-motivation, social awareness and emotional intelligence, and experiences and insights relevant to their areas of study. By increasing awareness of these strengths, we can obtain a more accurate and positive profile of care leaver students as an asset in higher education. The strengths of care leavers, and other under-represented students, could also be harnessed more broadly by institutions through modified pedagogies and practices. A diverse student body can create an inspiring and productive university environment which has the potential to benefit all students on campus.

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