

RNL NC
ALTERING the
LANDSCAPE

Redefining Student Success: Establishing a Culture of Care for Generation Z

Dr. Dawn M. Nail, Executive Director
Center for Academic Excellence
North Carolina A&T State University

Who is Generation Z?



Digital Natives

Born between 1997 and 2012, the first generation to grow up fully immersed in internet culture and smartphones

Values-Driven

Prioritizes inclusivity, mental health awareness, social justice, and financial security

Accountability Seekers

Expects transparency from institutions and actively pushes for systemic equity reforms

Generation Z in Higher Education



Flexible Learning

Prefers personalized education experiences that blend digital and traditional methods



Wellness Support

Expects robust mental health resources as fundamental, not supplemental services



Purpose-Driven

Seeks education with clear connections to social impact and career relevance



Defining Student Success

Academic Achievement

Strong grades, course completion, and degree attainment.



Personal Growth

Development of identity, values, and well-being.

Engagement

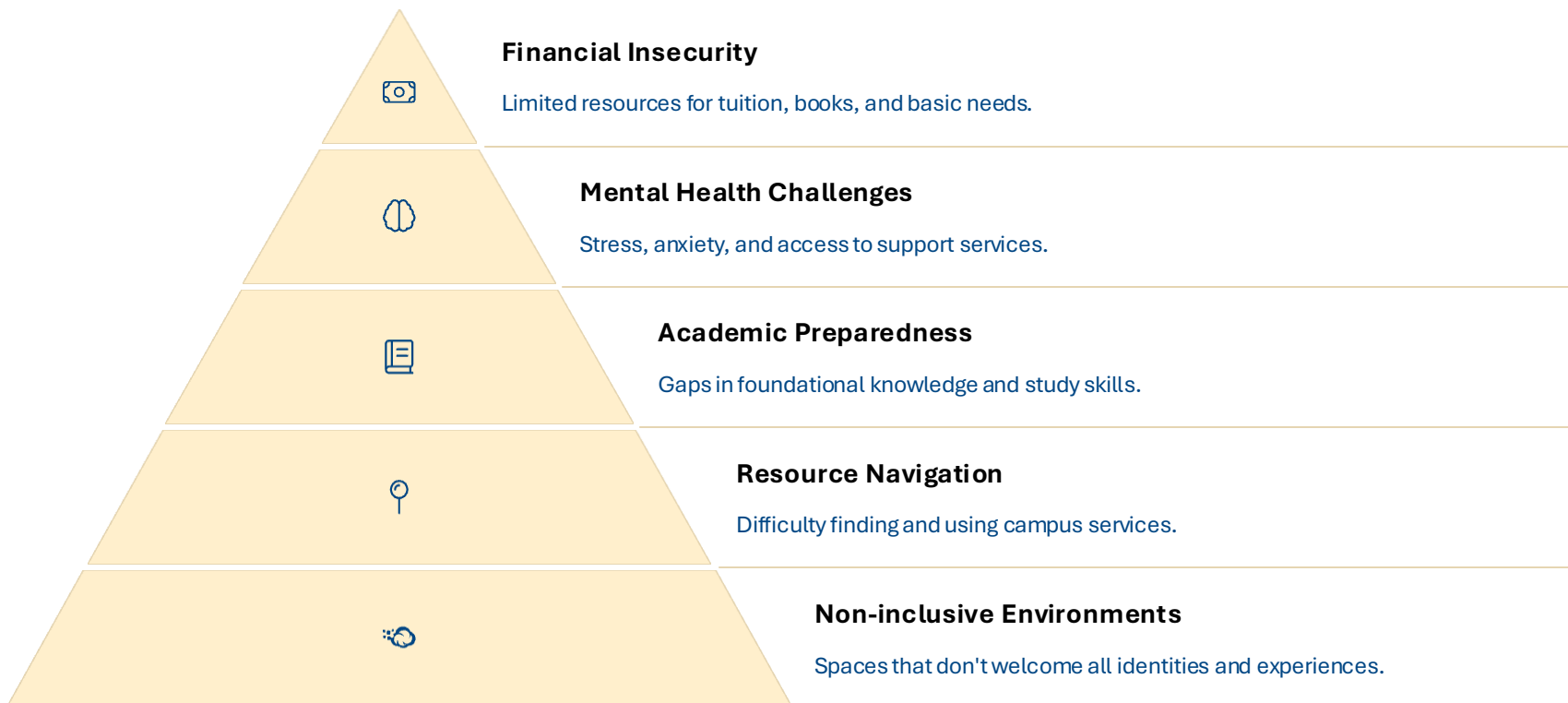
Strong sense of belonging and community connection.



Career Readiness

Skills and experiences that prepare for future employment.

Common Barriers to Student Success





Challenging Traditional Norms



From Standardized

One-size-fits-all education models with rigid structures and assessment methods



To Personalized

Holistic student support systems that adapt to diverse learning styles and needs



To Caring

Breaking down departmental silos to create comprehensive networks of support

Building a Culture of Care

Mental Health Focus

Integrated wellness services accessible to all students, with proactive outreach and reduced stigma



Student Voice

Meaningful inclusion of student perspectives in governance and institutional decision-making



Inclusive Spaces

Equitable policies and physical/digital environments where all identities are welcomed and celebrated



Responsive Training

Faculty and staff development in cultural competence and trauma-informed approaches





Technology and Personalization

Adaptive Learning Platforms

AI-powered systems that adjust content difficulty and presentation based on individual student progress and preferences

Digital Support Networks

Comprehensive platforms integrating advising, tutoring, mental health resources, and peer connections in one accessible interface

Data-Informed Interventions

Ethically implemented early alert systems identifying students who may benefit from additional support before challenges become crises

Affordability and Access

\$37K

Average Debt

For 2022 college graduates with
student loans

52%

Basic Needs Insecurity

Students experiencing food or
housing insecurity

38%

Financial Concern

Students who consider dropping
out due to costs

Transparent Aid Pathways

Simplified financial aid processes with proactive outreach to first-generation students

Basic Needs Support

Campus food pantries, emergency housing, and transportation assistance programs

Innovative Pricing Models

Income-share agreements, subscription models, and employer partnerships

Community and Belonging

1 — Orientation & First Year

Intentional community-building programs connecting students with peer mentors and affinity groups from day one

2 — Midpoint Development

Student-led organizations and collaborative learning spaces designed for both academic and social connection

3 — Approaching Graduation

Alumni networking and career communities that extend belonging beyond campus boundaries and into professional life



Sustainability through Student-Centered Models



Student Well-Being

- Holistic support for mental, physical, and social health

Academic Success

- Improved retention and graduation rates

Institutional Health

- Financial stability through student satisfaction

Community Impact

- Stronger partnerships and social contribution

Case Study: Aggie CARES – Campus Access, Resources, Engagement, and Support

Background:

Gen Z students at NC A&T voiced increasing challenges around affordability, mental health, and belonging. Aggie CARES was developed as a cross-functional initiative to address these concerns.

Key Strategies:

- Centralized Basic Needs Hub (food, housing, emergency funds)
- Embedded mental health support and wellness programming
- CARE Navigators for holistic, personalized support
- Faculty/staff training in trauma-informed, inclusive practices

Results:

- 23% increase in students accessing basic needs services
- 12% improvement in first-year retention
- 88% of students report feeling 'seen and supported'

Student Quote:

“Aggie CARES made me feel like I belong here—not just as a student, but as a person.”



Conclusion: Rising to the Challenge

Generation Z isn't just passing through our institutions—they're transforming them. Meeting their needs requires us to redefine success as care, connection, and community.

As educators and administrators, we face a pivotal choice: adapt our practices to support this generation's unique needs or risk becoming obsolete. The institutions that thrive will be those that embrace this culture of care not as an added service, but as their fundamental purpose.





Dr. Dawn M. Nail, Executive Director

Center for Academic Excellence

North Carolina A&T State University

Email: dndavis3@ncat.edu

Phone: (336)285-4133

