

**BRIDGING CAPITAL GAP: FACULTY AS ACADEMIC
AND LIFE CASE MANAGERS FOR FIRST-
GENERATION STUDENTS**

Comment [GF1]: Reviewer 2 -
appreciated the title suggestion, it is
clearer

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Abstract

First-generation and low-income students tend to enter higher education with capital gaps compared to their peers. Capital can be defined as resources that provide a productive advantage to someone. The purpose of this collaborative autoethnography is to explore the changing role of faculty as they manage student capital gaps as a student case manager. Collaborative autoethnography utilizes narratives, vignettes, and experiences to examine social concerns.

Through the reflexive analysis of three faculty members, an added attribute is applied to the faculty, the student case manager. The reflexive analyses examine school initiatives, student/life balance, and the understanding that student case management is used to fill capital gaps some students have when entering higher education. Narratives suggest that faculty fulfill the dual role of academic and life case manager. Academic case management has faculty coordinating aspects of student interactions with the educational institution. At times, academic case management concerns lead to performing life case management. Here, the faculty coordinates aspects in the students' lives that impact, on some level, their academic life. The findings suggest that from a policy perspective, faculty can address academic case management through course preparation and provide resource management for life case management issues. Institutionally, there needs to be an acknowledgment that faculty manage these two areas by bridging capital gaps to encourage student success.

Keywords: first-generation, capital, case manager, collaborative autoethnography

Comment [GF2]: Addressed Reviewer 1 added method

Comment [GF3]: Reviewer 1 added distinction between ACM and LCM

Comment [GF4]: Reviewer 1 added for policy and institutional significance.

Comment [GF5]: Reviewer 2 - additions were also mentioned by the second reviewer and addressed

Introduction

Social, cultural, informational, and navigational *capital* are key concepts in first-generation (FG), working-class, and second-generation college students research (Convertino and Mein, 2020; Brookover et al. 2021). This discussion suggests that the “capital gap” be examined through the first to sixth years of college (fifth and sixth years are considered graduate and professional school). Including the fifth-sixth years suggests that “capital gaps” affect more than has been conceived. However, to bridge these “capital gaps”, faculty appear to have taken on the role of student case manager (SCM).

Comment [GF6]: Reviewer 1 regarding lit synthesis - I believe comprehensive literature will provide the reader a better understanding of the breadth of capital that is included in case management.

The “Capital Gap” in Education

Bourdieu (2021) suggests that anything can be considered capital. Further, Bourdieu suggests capital creates a differentiation in power. The “capital gap” appears to be significant with FG students. The FG student is described as having no parent or guardian with a bachelor’s degree (Acevedo & Lazar, 2022; Raghavan et al., 2024), and Rosales et al. (2024) further note this group may include a parent or guardian with some college but no degree. The literature examining FG, working-class, and second-generation college students focuses on informational, navigational, cultural, and social capital. These capitals occur in academic and life spheres.

Social capital is a central concept in examining first-generation and low-income (FGLI) college students. Raghavan et al. (2024) applied social capital theory, which highlights the networks of relationships. Convertino and Mein (2020) expanded on this application by suggesting that social capital was associated with college readiness. This capital was identified as navigation, rigor, study skills, and home support. This connection is supported by Musawar and Zulfiqar (2025), who added critical thinking, mindset, and knowledge of higher education norms and culture, and by Leary et al. (2023), who included notetaking, time management, and test-taking in college readiness. Based on these aspects of capital, the faculty student case management coordinates students’ capital. For example, a student who had access to writing centers in high school may need less faculty support to identify writing resources than others.

Comment [GF7]: Reviewer 1 - case management justification.

Social capital has been addressed through an asset-based perspective. Martin et al. (2020) identified two approaches: expressive social capital, which encompasses differences in physical and mental health and life satisfaction, and instrumental social capital, which was described as a resource-based form of social capital. Here, the authors point to person-based social capital in the expressive and structurally based, as in the instrumental. We also see social capital as relational (Luedke, 2020).

The relational aspect of social capital has been examined in research by Sims and Ferrare (2021), as they compared rural first-generation (RFG) students and urban first-generation (UFG) students. The research indicated UFG students had more resources and opportunities than RFG students, though RFG students understood the need for social capital. Neither group viewed themselves as disadvantaged. UFG had more options in curriculum and mentorship through career prep and tracking programs. However, RFG, understanding the need, looked to the community for mentorship. The scope of this research does not explore this specific difference in FG students, but does indicate differences within the group. When Sims and Ferrare (2021) discussed family and hometown, they introduced the concept of resistant capital. This area was similar for both groups. Resistant capital was defined as training students to build skills and challenge inequality, including motivation, recognizing the lack of knowledge, and, particularly, RFG students’ resistance to labels. Payne et al. (2023) also found that FG students pushed back against the deficit narrative. Both groups wanted to improve their economic status. RFG students

had pressure to do better, no jobs, and going back home meant failure (Sims & Ferrare, 2021). UFG students benefited more from going back home, and saw it as safe and a place for summer jobs and internships. RFG students had fewer social connections in college. Social capital was developed through hometown professionals and school mentors. Sims and Ferrare's research suggested FGLI students were not a homogeneous group.

Additionally, Wyatt et al. (2024) suggested the existence of temporal capital which could be a byproduct of social capital. Wyatt et al.'s (2024) investigation into medical students introduced the concept of time famine. Time famine was described as having too much to do and too little time and was seen as a form of capital that contributed to success between FGLI students and their peers. They observed time as a hidden factor in organization and planning. The medical students described time as a form of control and a commodity. Time famine could be an important aspect of social capital for FGLI students, especially regarding work outside of school and family obligations. Here, faculty as SCM, would require performing aspects of case management such as discussing with students their academic and life realities, and creating a plan of student success.

Comment [GF8]: Reviewer 1 justification for case management

Comment [ST9]:

Brookover et al. (2021) appeared to be one of the few studies that looked at FG high school students who were college-bound. They brought up concepts such as perseverance and resilience. Their findings showed that a positive parental impact occurred when parents were involved in planning and setting academic standards. The barriers highlighted by participants included a lack of social, cultural, and economic capital. It appeared high school students understood they lacked these capitals before they went to college.

Reid and Moore III (2008) identified two themes of social capital: prep that helped with success and lack of skills. First, the following helped with success: challenging English classes that developed writing, AP classes, and learning a language. These provided academic rigor. Second, the following is a list of skills the participants found lacking: cultural capital, not being prepared for large classes, study skills, time management, math, sciences, writing, scholarship opportunities, and not taking school seriously. Additionally, Byrd and MacDonald (2005), exploring older than 25-year-old FG students, suggested self-advocacy was important for success. Self-advocacy can be class-based and perhaps something that these older students have developed. Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods* pointed to middle-class children learning to challenge authority more than lower-income children do. Additionally, Reid and Moore III (2008) provided recommendations for implementation during high school that included study habits, critical thinking, time management, reading, high expectations, problem-solving, parent information nights, and academic planning.

The literature indicates that college student participants who reflect on their high school experience suggest a "capital gap" to varying degrees when they enter college. This article will examine how faculty perform case management to fill the gap. Our collaborative autoethnography adds another crucial perspective to understanding how "capital gaps" are addressed in higher education.

Faculty as Student Case Managers

To address the "capital gap," faculty who manage the resources available to students for success results in faculty adding to their role. Biddle (1986) referred to role theory as the concept that individuals with various social identities and situations behave differently and predictably within those specific contexts. Biddle (1986) suggested there are generic suppositions to role theory: expectations create roles, these expectations are learned, and individuals are aware of the

expectations within the roles. These role assumptions suggest that faculty understand the expectations of their roles based on their identity and status as faculty. However, the role of faculty is changing and, as a result, aspects of case management are becoming expectations of faculty. Colomy and Brown (1995) supported this assumption by stating that roles are ever-changing, negotiated, and constructed by those who take on the roles.

Within the social work profession, case management is described as working to optimize client functioning and well-being and provide and coordinate resources (Apgar, 2025). A case manager (CM) will help a client understand their situation, create a plan, and provide resources within their environment. Apgar (2025) highlighted five activities involved in case management: assessment, planning, linking, monitoring, and advocacy. Within the context of academia, the agency is the educational institution's administration. The practitioner is a faculty member. The client is the student. Assessment is conducted through an initial biopsychosocial interview. The CM seeks to gain a picture of the client's social, biological, and psychological life. The CM tries to understand the client's lived experience. Once there is an understanding of the client's lived experience, the CM and client create a plan to address the presenting problem. Linking to resources is used to begin addressing the immediate crisis. The client is monitored by the CM to assess if resources are helping the client. Advocacy refers to the CM advocating for resources to be available to the client.

The role of faculty CM can also be associated with Schademan and Thompson's (2016) concept of cultural agent, which the researchers found to be key for (FGLI) students. Schademan and Thompson defined the faculty cultural agent as one who aids students in navigating between home and academic life. Additionally, they examined the faculty and students' perspectives. The faculty seemed to perceive students as lacking college preparedness and were unsure of how to address it. However, faculty seem to understand that FGLIs experiences were multifaceted and long-term. McCallen and Johnson's (2020) findings suggested that faculty play a role in terms of intellectual and navigational capital and resources. Ironically, the student perspectives required faculty to coordinate campus resources and classroom pedagogy, as CMs do. Schademan and Thompson's (2016) research supports this research analysis in how faculty address what students seem to most need in the dual role of academic and life case manager.

Methodology

A collaborative autoethnography was utilized to investigate aspects of student case management in higher education. Autoethnography is the foundation of this collaborative work where reflexivity is used to connect the personal experience to a larger societal context (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). Adams and Hermann (2020) described three aspects of autoethnography: "auto," referring to personal experience; "ethno," referring to the beliefs, practices, and identity of the group in question; and "graphy," referring to the interpretation or analysis of what is presented. Researcher reflexivity is conducted through critical analysis of vignettes, experiences, events, and impact points (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). This culminates in bringing a familiar story to other insiders and bringing outsiders to the insider's lived experience (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). As this research begins exploring the student case manager (SCM) role in higher education, it is the vignettes, narratives, and experiences of the collaborators that will help others outside of higher education to understand the role of some faculty and bring validation and naming to faculty who already are experiencing this role.

Reflexive Analysis through Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE)

Where autoethnography focuses on an individual reflexive experience and analysis, CAE approaches involve a group perspective. A group of researchers pooling their experiences creates a larger data set to examine this line of inquiry (Chang, 2022). CAE involves two or more researchers who collaborate to explore a common research topic. This research, which was approved by the University's IRB (IRB-2025-771), brought together three researchers from distinct disciplines: sociology, social work, and teacher education. Within CAE, the researchers have shared experiences regarding student CM (Chang, 2022). This research followed Chang's (2022) prescription of data collection and analysis. The researchers, individually, collected narratives, vignettes, and experiences that reflected aspects of SCM. The researcher wrote the experiences that most reflected aspects of case management. Once written, the researchers collected the data, the individual data were pooled together in a larger data set (Chang, 2022). The process was iterative, involved the researchers in focus group conversations and developed insight to further the analysis. All researchers were involved in every aspect of coding (Chang, 2022). This step was reflected through several months of individual collection and focus groups, the researchers pooled their narratives, vignettes, and experiences to create a dataset. The researchers used the five aspects of case management to pull out the most relevant examples. We read each other's experiences and, through questioning back and forth, identified the experiences that seemed to point to the two emerging themes: academic case management (ACM) and life case management (LCM).

The credibility and trustworthiness of this qualitative approach were addressed in several ways, though with the understanding that it is exploratory research and the beginning of conceptualizing faculty as ACM and LCM. Cope (2014) suggested that credibility is achieved when the data truly represent the participants' experiences and representations. In this case, the researchers were the participants, and, by reading and discussing our various experiences, the narratives were similar. As Chang (2022) suggested and the researchers followed, to ensure dependability, the researchers were involved in all aspects of data collection and analysis. As a result of all researchers taking part in all aspects of the research design, confirmability was achieved where the analysis represented the participants' experiences, not their bias (Cope, 2014). Though CAE was used, transferability can be achieved in a broad sense. The research is able to be applied to other settings and groups (Cope, 2014). Cope's (2014) last area of trustworthiness and credibility is authenticity. Authenticity was achieved through the researchers' reflexive narratives and experiences.

Comment [GF10]: Reviewer 2 - this was added to address IRB and the last paragraph in the methods section addresses credibility and trustworthiness

Comment [GF11]: Reviewer 1 - the additions in the rest of the paragraph address a clearer trail.

Comment [GF12]: Reviewer 1 - this paragraph addresses credibility and trustworthiness.

Midwest University

Midwest University is located in Ohio and is a regional campus founded in 1967 (Midwest University, 2026). We have a satellite campus, "the Regional Campus," located approximately 90 miles north of the Main Campus. We are an open- enrollment campus that admits about 95% of undergraduate applicants, and we are ranked in the #392-434 range by U.S. News and World Reports (2023) annual survey of national colleges. The university reports having 11,924 students across the two campuses (Midwest, 2026). Nearly 70% of our students come from the 16 contiguous counties that are anchored by the Main Campus and the Regional Campus. Over 25% of the domestic student body is classified as a minority student and 13% are international students; the majority of the diversity is on the Main Campus. Nearly a quarter are non-traditional students (25+ years old).

In-state undergraduate students at WSU pay \$12,872 in tuition and fees, while graduate students pay \$14,726 (Midwest University, 2026). Forty-three percent of Main Campus and 37% of Regional Campus students receive PELL grants (Midwest University, n.d.). Fall-to-Fall retention rates for first-time enrollees range from 40% (Main Campus part-time) and 68% (Main Campus full-time) to 14% (Regional Campus part-time) and 61% (Regional Campus full-time). The most recent data on six-year graduation rates of full-time, first-time, undergraduate students is 42% for the Main Campus and 44% for the Lake Campus.

Findings

Author 1 Reflexive Analysis

My narrative will focus on the first-year seminar (FYS) course at the regional campus and my experience as a Master of Social Work student.

Midwest University intended to initiate a FYS course to address “capital gaps.” Over the past three to four years, different Provosts have attempted 3-1-Nocredit versions of the FYS course. Currently, the course is undergoing further changes required by SB 1, Ohio legislation, which requires a civics class. Aspects of FYS will be integrated within the required civics class. The FYS suggested the following curriculum to address the “gaps”: goal-setting, navigating the college experience, resources, note-taking, time management, physical, emotional, and mental well-being, purpose and grit, and informational and communication skills.

These are a mixture of academic and life capital gaps, as a result, the faculty become ACMs and LCMs. Each week, a combination of these gaps was to be addressed through lecture, activity, and discussion. As the literature suggests, these skills would improve student success. However, the unintended result is that the faculty now has to fill the ACM or LCM role. As an ACM, I would teach students how to navigate college norms, learning systems, and note-taking, and show them how to access school resources. As an LCM, and more disconcertingly, faculty were to help with mental health and at-home concerns with little training. Many colleagues, after initiatives such as suicide and mental health first responder workshops were taken, felt they were ill-equipped to handle such life issues.

However, FYS or not, faculty still perform ACM and LCM. As a predominantly online faculty, I performed ACM-related tasks focused on course management. My goal was to provide as detailed a syllabus and learning management system (LMS) course shell as possible. But it never seemed to be enough. Though this generation of students seemed capable of navigating the internet, LMSs may not be part of that navigational capital. I also teach college credit plus (CCP) or dual credit students. The variation of students impacts the type of ACM I will perform. Therefore, as an ACM, the detailed syllabus and LMS course site seemed to have addressed much of the navigational and informational capital gaps I have seen across students. However, I have come to terms with the fact that I cannot catch everything, and as questions arise, I include them in the syllabus. The LCM I perform is addressed through emails about an overwhelming home life, mental health, emergencies, and work. Often, they inform me of life events that affect their school performance. Generally, I give them more time to complete their coursework, which seems to address most issues. There have been a few times when I have directed students to wellness services and suggested working with their advisor if they need to drop a class. In either ACM or LCM, time is limited, and the larger capital gap is not being addressed, so I triage the student issues and move forward.

During this time, I chose to enroll in the Master of Social Work (MSW) program to advance my professional development. I noticed that students appeared to exhibit similar “capital gaps” to those I had encountered among undergraduates.

The program comprised students who either came from the workforce or directly from an undergraduate program. The “capital gaps” still required faculty to be either the ACM or LCM. The bigger faculty role was serving as the LCM. Many of the students were completing the MSW while continuing their jobs and family life. In fact, during this time, my father died, and I had to notify my instructors to understand their protocol in the situation and what they counted as absent. However, as a tenured professor, I was aware of the instructor protocols and made my decisions. I understood the program's navigational capital. In addition, LCM seemed to focus on completing program requirements and on understanding that students could not leave their jobs for financial reasons. “Capital gaps” still exist in graduate programs where temporal capital became more of an issue, with students needing to balance life, work, and school. It seemed that many in my cohort would be first-generation post-graduate college students, and ACM was similar to undergraduate concerns, such as writing and course rigor.

Author 2 Reflexive Analysis

As a social worker, I am used to doing CM. Prior to joining the academy, I spent 5 years in clinical practice and three years as an agency administrator. During the pandemic, the CM role became part of my academic role, where, as a faculty member, I was asked to assess students' needs, link them to services, and ensure those services support their functioning and well-being. Faculty have been mandated to attend workshops on suicide prevention, Narcan use, mental health first aid, and active shooter training. These training sessions have been superficial and appear more concerned with accreditation or liability issues than with preparing faculty to acquire a new skill or to close any “capital gaps” that exist.

I never thought that I'd be expected to perform many of the same CM skills as a faculty member. CM isn't part of my teaching-research-service assignment as outlined in the collective bargaining agreement. Is the work I do, ensuring that students experiencing food insecurity access a pantry, part of my advising assignment? Is it student success? Is listening to the complex life experiences of a graduate student who works full-time and took in her incarcerated sister's children so that the kids did not enter the foster care system a requirement of teaching a research methods course? These are “capital gaps” that it would seem faculty are to bridge in this role of SCM. The university administration certainly considers these roles part of the retention plan.

The administration ignores several issues as part of its assumption that all faculty can adequately perform this role. Faculty approached by students in need may not be prepared or knowledgeable about resources and programs to help students. It is not uncommon for me to give social services advice to non-human services colleagues. These are faculty members who care about their students but do not know how to advise students on navigating the homeless system, for example. This put a secondary burden on faculty from the health and social service professions to help their colleagues. I have a prewritten email with the basics (pantries, housing, legal, domestic violence, and child abuse reporting) that I share when I am contacted.

Student problems often come to the attention of faculty because of an academic problem. Behind that academic difficulty is a life difficulty that results in needed SCM. By the time the student tells me the story (multiple emails, sometimes listening for 60 minutes in office hours), I have an idea of ways to problem solve with the student and am equipped to help them. This

saves the student the burden of going to another office to retell their story, which, depending on the situation, the student may not have time to do or may be traumatized by the retelling. I have been told by faculty who are not in social services and rely more heavily on Student Support Services that students have mixed reviews of the office's helpfulness. A student told a colleague, "It was hard enough for me to ask you for help. I don't want to talk to someone I don't know."

Expectations for faculty LCM exploded at the start of the pandemic when the university went online, and students faced a host of barriers in their lives. I felt like I was doing less teaching and more social working to help students survive. Faculty were asked to help students while also negotiating their own job changes or losses, having children at home doing remote learning, and attending to the health and caregiving of vulnerable older adults in their families. While this made sense during a global crisis, the university has grown accustomed to the undefined CM duties that faculty perform as part of "retention," which are uncompensated and not defined by work requirements.

Role Uncertainties and Compassion Fatigue

So much work has been added that I am confused about my role as a faculty member and who is going to question if I am "doing enough" for students. Other than the time I spend doing my research, I don't know what role I am fulfilling for the University. In acquiring this new role of SCM, what "capital gaps" am I supposed to be bridging? We know from the scholarly literature that uncertainty, or intolerance of uncertainty, is negatively correlated with work performance and job satisfaction.

Similarly, those engaged in faculty CM may experience compassion fatigue when helping students. Compassion fatigue is "convergence of secondary traumatic stress and cumulative burnout, a state of physical and mental exhaustion caused by a depleted ability to cope with one's everyday environment." (Cocker & Josh, 2016, p. 618). Social workers generally accept secondary stress is the act of listening to and helping process the problems. Faculty who have worked in the helping professions have probably experienced some form of compassion fatigue and carry that vulnerability. It is their expertise in the helping professions that also makes them likely CM, thus continuing their exposure to others' life problems. Administrators have added CM roles to faculty responsibilities with no thought to the increased risk of compassion fatigue and employee burnout, thus potentially limiting our ability to bridge any capital gaps.

Author 3 Reflexive Analysis

Before acquiring my doctorate degree and teaching at the university, I taught 8th-12th grade sciences from 1990s to early 2000s. I experienced changes in the public-school setting and in higher education, particularly in faculty and student expectations.

The types of capital gaps I have observed are navigational. Many students at our branch campus are first-generation and assume college is like high school without realizing that, because there is no compulsory mandate to attend, responsibilities shift from teachers and parents to students. I realized students assumed those in authority act like parents. Assumptions post K-12 might include that a professor will track you down to tell you what you missed or keep copies of missed assignments. As Author 2 indicated, SCM is complex, where ACM and LCM intertwine.

In my years of teaching, I have seen the aspiration toward students' autonomy slowly eroding. On the one hand, the faculty want to help students, so they help. Students get used to the help and begin to expect it as part of academic life. However, sometimes help is disempowering: if students think faculty can "fix it" they might be passive. I want to empower students to

become successful adults. Faculty have to scaffold their ACM and LCM so that students can both receive help and learn to help themselves. More help is needed in the 1000-2000 level course. By the time students are taking upper division courses, they should have had an opportunity to close some of the capital gaps and need less support.

Discussion

Based on these exploratory CAE narratives and themes, some suggestions for future research and recommendations can be made. First, we believe it is important to differentiate between *academic case management* (ACM) and *life case management* (LCM). Within this research, faculty appear to be more familiar and comfortable with ACM. We have policies in our syllabi, such as late work and academic dishonesty, that help us set expectations and boundaries with students. We have academic freedom to decide our policies on late work, which includes including them in our syllabi to provide both clear guidelines for students and “legal” protections when we need to enforce them, and the capacity to make exceptions. In addition, it appears that ACM and LCM address different capital gaps. For example, ACM works with capital that includes aspects such as Conventino and Mein (2020), social capital, and college readiness. ACM will coordinate institutional resources to examine navigational capital and study skills. However, as suggested by faculty narratives, at times these capital gaps will lead to life case management. Specifically, Wyatt et al.’s (2024) temporal capital would exist within the life case management role where faculty may have to work with students and their familial roles. It would seem, as suggested in this research, institutionally, this is more difficult to standardize through policy. These policies appear to create a more comfortable environment for faculty, and it generally may fall within the accepted faculty role. Furthermore, faculty and university administrators generally understand that ACM is part of the teaching assignment. It is also these “capital gaps”, such as navigational and informational capital, that faculty aim to bridge.

However, LCM is typically revealed in academic case management and, perhaps more abstractly, in institutional policy, where it is harder to identify. From the experiences of the researchers’ within this study, students come to faculty with an academic issue (e.g., asking to turn in late work) because of a life complication (e.g., needing to work two jobs). Here, temporal (Wyatt et al., 2024) capital and home support (Conventino & Mein, 2020) could make life case management more difficult. Faculty have to judge which “dog ate my homework” or “my grandma died” reason is legitimate and whether that reason is an ongoing barrier to success. We have to suss out what is a short-term problem (e.g., all three kids had covid last week and I missed worked) in which CM can help (e.g. a referral to a food pantry) versus a long-term problem (e.g., I have cancer and am having radiation for 8 weeks this term and don’t’ how I will pay for it) that is beyond assistance in a course. These “capital gaps” can be classified as aspects of social, cultural, familial, and temporal capital, which are more difficult to bridge as they intersect with academic “capital gaps.”

These “capital gaps” can also be seen through the lens of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, Lowry, & Maslow, 1979). As evident through the narratives of the faculty, many of the reasons students need academic allowances are because of complicated life situations. Maslow postulated that people cannot attend to higher callings of life, like higher education, until their physiological and safety needs are met. Not having enough food, caregiving burdens, medical and mental health concerns, and housing instability all fall into these first two levels of Maslow’s needs. Students cannot reasonably be expected to perform competently until these basic needs are addressed, yet there are high expectations for them to navigate their basic needs. Faculty,

Comment [GF13]: Reviewer 2 - connect to literature

Comment [ST14]:

Comment [ST15]: R1 – here we point out the scope of what fac can and cannot do to address structural issues

Comment [ST16]: Reviewer 1 – added more social work theory here to identify how and why faculty are having to address structural inequality.

universities, and public programs often struggle to assist students who lack the social capital to navigate basic-needs hardships.

For faculty at an open-enrollment institution, LCM problems should be expected. Our students may be academically unprepared and/or come from life backgrounds with risk factors for dropping out (e.g., parents did not go to college and cannot translate higher education norms or success strategies, PELL recipients, trying to be a full-time students while also being a full-time employee and/or full-time caregiver). The rising cost of tuition, the rules and regulations for receiving financial aid, and the scramble to get an education so you can earn a middle-class income force students to juggle too many other obligations with their academic work. These are “capital gaps” that are exacerbated in higher education.

Recommendations

Ways to make Academic Case Management Easier

We recommend several strategies to help faculty make ACM easier. These are the most common-sense ways to provide clarity for yourself, the students, and the administration when issues arise.

1. *Clearly articulate your policies in the syllabus.* This should include policies on late work, make-up assignments, or what to do in an “emergency” (e.g., my paper will not upload in the LMS, or “my grandma died”).
2. *Give a syllabus quiz* – To make sure that students know the course policies, give a quiz about the syllabus.
3. *Know University Academic Policies* – Periodically, faculty should review university policies that impact coursework. At a minimum, it is helpful for faculty to know the university’s drop and withdrawal dates each term. Also, being familiar with any policy that allows a student to withdraw for a medical reasons or other exceptional reasons may be helpful. Knowing withdrawal policies can help faculty advise students of withdrawing options if there is a life crisis. Sometimes, withdrawing may come with a tuition refund.
4. *“Getting Started” Module in LMS* – We recommend that faculty include a “getting started” module in their course. This module can have a link to all the university and community links a student might need. Our “getting started” modules include links to academic supports (e.g., the library, office of disability services), campus services (e.g., financial aid information, IT services) student support services (e.g., the campus food pantry) and community resources (links to basic needs like food, housing).
5. *Scaffolding* – Faculty should consider the time that they spend orienting students to the course and the university. Courses at the 1000 level should do more than 3000-4000 level courses. If faculty have a “getting started” module, they can use that as a jumping-off place for course orientation. We recommend for 3000+ level courses to implement a “Three Before Me” responsibility policy. The Three Before Me policy reminds students to do the following before they send an email to their faculty 1) check the syllabus or assignment for details 2) read the course bulletin board for announcements (helpful tip – if you send all the students an email, post the email on the course bulletin board for ease) and, 3) ask a peer.
6. *Skipped assignment pass* – Building in one free skipped assignment makes your life and students’ lives easier. With a skipped assignment, the faculty will build in

Comment [ST17]: Reviewer 1 – this is an example of how faculty can mitigate structural inequality. Added sentence to be explicit

Comment [ST18]: Reviewer 1 – this is an example of where we address institutional and community response

grace. This allows students to have a bad day or a rough week without having to explain things. If students do send an email about a late or missed assignment, faculty can say, "Use this as your free assignment." With a built-in skip assignment, faculty do not need to judge a student's "crisis" as you have allowed one skipped assignment. This is also an attempt to assist students who face economic (e.g., working full time to pay for school, do not have money to fix a broken-down car) or other structural (e.g., caregiving for children or older parents/grandparents) barriers without the perceived stigma of disclosing these life complications to **faculty**.

The skipped assignment works especially well when there are weekly discussion boards, quizzes, or reflection papers.

Comment [ST19]: Reviewer 1 – this is an example of when we address ways faculty can mitigate structural inequality. Example given for additional clarity.

Ways to Make LCM Easier

Students balance many life demands. Students might be enrolled full-time and work 30+ hours to meet their financial obligations. They may lack social and financial safety nets, so that a car repair creates a life stressor. Faculty control over structural issues of wealth **inequality** and other structural barriers to higher education is limited, but a good CM can help support a student.

Comment [ST20]:

Comment [ST21]: Reviewer 1 – we point out that faculty have limited control over addressing economic and other structural barriers. We do point out ways that faculty can soften the blow of these insults by using CM.

1. *Campus resources* - If you are committed to helping students, learn about the campus resources. Since the 2007-08 financial crisis and again bolstered by COVID relief, campuses have expanded student services to include food and clothing pantries, expanded the availability of items (e.g., laptops, graduation regalia) and books that can be borrowed from the library, and emergency student **funds**. For example, the Health and Education unit hosted a trivia fundraiser designed to raise \$250-500 short term emergency funds not covered by traditional scholarships. Emergency funding has been given to help a student cover an unexpected car repair so they could continue to go to their student teaching site, pay for scrubs for a nursing student enrolled in clinicals, and paying to fix a computer so the student could graduate in a few months.
2. *Alumni Societies* - The Alumni Societies are also an untapped source for student **support**. The Social Work Alumni Society has been active in supporting unique financial needs of students. During Covid, they gave away \$50 grocery gift cards to any social work student who lost their job or had a cut in hours at the start of the pandemic. During the holiday season of the pandemic, they offered \$50 gift cards to anyone who was struggling with food insecurity. More recently, they gave \$50 grocery gift cards to students impacted by the federal shutdown (e.g., students with a federal job not getting paid, students who received food stamps and were not issued). Each time, approximately 30 students were served, about 20% of enrolled social work students. Another time, the Social Work Society was able to buy eye glasses for a student who was in a car accident and their glasses broke and the deductible was not met. In all these cases, the Alumni Society empowered a faculty liaison to screen a student in need (as simple as a conversation in which the reason of the need was identified) and then authorized the payment via email.
3. *Community resources* - Tapping into the local community aid through the United **Way's** helpline, a food pantry network, or federally supported programs like rental assistance,

Comment [ST22]: Reviewer 1 – this is an example to university response. Additional example added.

Comment [ST23]: Reviewer 1 – added the alumni connection as another way there is institutional or community support for closing the inequity gap

Comment [ST24]: Reviewer 1 – this is an example of university response. Additional examples and strategies added.

Home Energy Assistance Programs, legal aide, or free or sliding scale health services at a Federally Qualified Health Center, may help students address a financial barrier. Faculty can learn about these services in several ways. Social work faculty or student support staff may be able to teach you about community resources. It has been our experience that student support staff tend to want the referral to come to their office rather than partner with faculty on doing the work. While this works for some students, others may not want to “tell their story again” to someone they don’t know. Educating yourself by visiting community resource fairs (sometimes they come to campus in search of students who would like to volunteer) and asking lots of questions and picking up brochures is another option. Finally, offices of service-learning, civic engagement, or community outreach often know folks in the non-profit space and can facilitate a connection. Faculty can post local resources in the “getting started module.”

4. *Honesty* - Be willing to say “Your life is more important than my course.” CM is brief and focused on one-time, time-limited situations. It is not able to address structural inequality, significant health and mental health issues, or situations in which the student is at risk to themselves or others. In these situations, immediately make a referral to the student’s support services. Other times, the student’s life is simply too complicated to manage school and life demands. It is often kindest to give students “permission” to drop a course, become a part-time student, or delay school until life is more settled.

Comment [ST25]: R1 = this is a place where we pointed out the role and scope of faculty CM

What Administration Can Do

As university administration places more responsibility on faculty to promote student success, the administration needs to do its part to support faculty who take on this role. First, administration can decide how case management support “counts” in the annual evaluation process. Is this role part of teaching, advising, or both? Are faculty required to do any of it? If faculty are not going to be given credit for doing it, what sort of email should they send to students in need so that student support services can do all the work? Is there research that supports who (faculty or staff) retain students best and if different situations or student characteristics help predict outcomes?

Comment [ST26]: Reviewer 1 – added this section

Administration, especially those at open enrollment campuses, needs to recognize that an open admissions policy may result in additional students who are underprepared academically, socially, and economically to be responsible for the demands of higher education. Being underprepared may be because of underperforming high schools that failed to help students be college-ready, complicated life situations that make fulfilling full academics an uphill battle, or lacking a combination of both that make college a challenge. Given this, administrators need to both support retention efforts and understand not everyone admitted is ready to be successful in college. Constantly pressuring faculty to pass students who lack academic competence through Drop-Fail-Withdrawal reports, requests for “extra credit” assignments from chairs, or grade grievances that are not based on policy, can be counterproductive to the struggling student. Administrators need to honor and respect that the majority of faculty are trying to help students

be successful academically and in life. Sometimes the kindest thing we can do for a student is tell them that their life circumstances may not be conducive to being successful in higher education at this moment in time. Allowing students to run up student loan debt without successfully moving towards degree completion seems unethical.

All in higher education also need to admit that higher education is not prepared to solve or be the lead agency to address all of society's problems. The Hope Center's 2023 -2024 basic needs report found that 41% of students experience food insecurity, 48% of students experience housing insecurity, and 14% of students experience homelessness while enrolled. Further, 73% of students experience basic needs insecurity in the areas of mental health, transportation, child care, and internet-technology access (Hope Center, 2025). Campus efforts to host food pantries, clothing closets, student support funds, and expanded IT check out programs, should be applauded and continued, while at the same time, we must acknowledge that these programs address the minor economic bumps in a road, not systemic poverty or structural inequality that some students face. While some might like to think these issues only impact community colleges or open enrollment campuses, the housing crisis at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) shows that is not the case as students live in their cars due to the lack of affordable housing (Grey, 2023). Some colleges and universities in California have created camping parking lots for students to live in (Mendez-Padilla, 2024).

Policy Changes to Support Students

The HOPE Center (2026) outlines a robust policy agenda that would improve the lives of higher education students. Their policy proposals range from simplifying and expanding federal financial aid to investing in student mental health to ending taxes on the PELL grant. The top two priorities are:

1. *Expand and permanently authorize the Basic Needs Grant* – If \$45 million was added to the Basic Needs Grant program in fiscal year 2027, coordinated supports for students could be started on college campuses through the creation of basic needs hubs. Further, the passing of the BASIC Act (S. 5091) would provide an additional \$1 billion to allow institutions to create infrastructure to support student needs. These efforts would help meet the needs of the 51% of students who experience basic needs insecurity, but do not receive any public benefits (Hope Center, 2025).
2. *Bolster access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP)*- All SNAP recipients had a reduction of benefits of about \$25 per month as part of the “Big Beautiful Bill” (Wheaton, Giannerelli, Milton, & Dehry, 2025). At a minimum, Congress could restore those benefits for all, including higher education students, most likely mothers with children (Hope Center, 2026). Next, Congress could pass the EATS Act (H.R. 3183) to allow attending school to count this engagement as the work requirement. Additionally, Congress could pass the Student Food Security Act (S. 5004) making it easier for those with PELL grants and those eligible for Federal Work Study to qualify for SNAP. These

Comment [ST27]: Reviewer 1 – added this paragraph about the wider structural inequalities in higher ed and out limitations

Comment [ST28]: Reviewer 1 – added federal policy changes that would help higher ed students

changes could help close the gap for the two in five food insecure students who could become eligible for SNAP benefits (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2024).

Limitations

Collaborative autoethnography was used as a point of exploration through the reflexive narratives and experiences of three female faculty. The reflexive analyses point to the “capital gaps” that students have when they enter higher education, which faculty are charged with addressing. The analyses identified ACM and LCM, which are conducted by faculty. The limitations of using collaborative autoethnography also indicate where further research should be directed. This research was limited to three faculty members at one university on two campuses. Future research should include mixed methods approaches such as surveys, campus descriptions, student interviews, and focus groups. In addition, a larger, more diverse faculty sample should be interviewed.

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the current political climate. The data used by the HOPE Center and cited in this paper was collected before this Administration’s cuts to the nation’s safety net. It is reasonable to expect the economic conditions to be further weakened with cuts to SNAP, Medicaid, Child Care, Pell Grants, and homeless grants. At the writing of this paper, inflation is rising (Department of Labor, 2026), and consumer confidence is down (Coacci, 2026). Further, the shifting agenda of the Department of Education (Turner, 2026a) and moving the administration of federal financial aid to the Department of Treasury (Turner, 2026b), complicate the political landscape and policy recommendations.

Comment [ST29]: Reviewer 1 -added contextual warning for the national data on structural barriers and policy change.

Conclusion

This CAE has identified that the faculty’s role has increasingly become one of CM. Specifically, faculty perform ACM and LCM. At times, these forms of CM may present as isolated events, but they are most likely interwoven. As “capital gaps” continue to be identified as definitive aspects of student success and retention, higher education needs to acknowledge the work faculty are doing. More importantly, though we have made recommendations, are higher education administrations and faculty doing what needs to be done to address “capital gaps”, are faculty being given the resources they need by both the university and support for students by way of federal programs that help address structural inequality, or do we continue to triage students and hope for the best?

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Comment [GF30]: Reviewer 1 - specific references have been checked, several references did not have doi

Comment [ST31]: Also, journal style guide doesn't ask for dois -
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