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Professional Development *Institute*

BACK TO OUR
ROOTS



55 Years of HESAA
Educating for Democracy

About the Program

2025

BACK TO OUR ROOTS

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Educating for Democracy

The Professional Development Institute (PDI) is an opportunity to reconnect, reflect upon our roots, and celebrate 55 years of Educating for Democracy. The Institute has been developed with the core values of the HESAA program as a framework for program proposals, demonstrating a continued commitment to preparing higher education professionals who are authentic, collaborative, reflective, and socially just.

Featured Conversation

Kaleigh Mrowka, Ph.D., '12

Director of Campus Culture Transformation at the Constructive Dialogue Institute.



Amid growing challenges to trust and civic engagement, higher education has a vital role to play in renewing democracy. This session invites participants to explore how colleges and universities can strengthen their civic purpose and rebuild public confidence through practices that foster curiosity, inclusion, and shared understanding. Using dialogue as a lens for reflection, participants will consider how higher education might evolve to prepare students—and institutions themselves—to navigate differences and contribute meaningfully to democratic life.

Kaleigh is a restorative practice scholar, trainer, consultant, and leader with over a decade of experience in restorative facilitation in college and university environments. Her work considers the ways that dialogue and restorative practice can be used to co-create healthier and more community-centered organizations, and she has worked with dozens of colleges and universities seeking to build more relational and restorative campus organizational cultures. Kaleigh began her career in student affairs and is passionate about the ways that students learn from both their curricular and co-curricular college experiences. She holds a B.A. In Speech Communication from Ithaca College, a M.S. in Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration from SUNY Buffalo State and a Ph.D. in Language, Literacy and Culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.



Institute Program

2025

08:30 AM – 09:00 AM

Continental Breakfast and Check-In
Social Hall, 3rd Floor

09:00 AM – 10:00 AM

Welcome and Featured Discussion
Social Hall, 3rd Floor

10:10 AM – 11:00 AM

Educational Session Block 1
Campbell Student Union, Various Locations

11:10 AM – 12:00 PM

Educational Session Block 2
Campbell Student Union, Various Locations

12:00 PM – 12:50 PM

Lunch
Social Hall, 3rd Floor

1:00 PM – 1:50 PM

Educational Session Block 3
Campbell Student Union, Various Locations

2:00 PM – 2:50 PM

Educational Session Block 4
Campbell Student Union, Various Locations

3:00 PM – 4:00 PM

Featured Panel and Closing
Social Hall, 3rd Floor

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ROOTS**

55 Years of HESAA
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Session Block 1

10:10 AM – 11:00 AM



User Experience Design Methods for Higher Education Practitioners

Chelsea Montrois, Product Designer, Anthology

307A, Assembly Hall South, 3rd Floor

Great student experiences don't happen by accident. They're designed! This session will introduce user experience (UX) design methods and mindsets and explore how you can apply them in a higher education context. We'll touch on simple, practical approaches to understand student needs, map their journeys, and do work that leaves a lasting impact, from orientation to graduation. Whether you work in student affairs, advising, communications, or alumni engagement, you'll walk away with strategies you can apply tomorrow to make every student touchpoint more meaningful. Whether you're composing an email, revising a policy, or building a new extracurricular program from scratch.

Wearing the Colors, Staying the Course: How Campus Pride Supports Student Persistence

Alexandra Green, Coordinator for Student Leadership and Engagement & Thomas Trzepkowski, Associate Director of Orientation, Transition and Engagement Initiatives, Buffalo State University

307B, Assembly Hall North, 3rd Floor

This session will explore the critical relationship between campus pride and student retention, emphasizing how a strong sense of belonging and institutional identity can foster persistence and success. Using Buffalo State as a case study, we will examine strategies to embed campus pride into programs, traditions, and daily student life. Participants will gain insights into how initiatives that promote school spirit, institutional traditions, and affinity-building experiences not only enhance the student experience but also serve as effective retention tools. Attendees will leave with practical strategies to integrate campus pride into their own areas of work to support student success.



Session Block 1

10:10 AM – 11:00 AM

**BACK TO OUR
ROOTS**

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Social Change, Vulnerability, Trust, and Healing Among Professionals in Higher Education

Danielle Johnson, Director, Daniel Acker Scholars Program and Social Justice Initiatives for CPMC, University at Buffalo
Jacqueline Hollins, Associate Vice Provost for Student Success and Academic Support, University at Buffalo

SORC (Student Organization Resource Center), Basement

Within higher education today, student affairs and higher education professionals, faculty, administrators, and scholar-activists have engaged with and made meaningful contributions in social justice. For many professionals, administrators, faculty, and staff, immersion in social change work was the result of personal or professional racial, gender, ableist, religious, socioeconomic, or sexual identity discrimination experienced by them or a loved one. While the catalyst for involvement is personally meaningful, it requires a depth of vulnerability that, while it may be empowering, also creates the necessity for healing and self-care in spaces where trust is valued and nurtured. This session will offer the chance for attendees to discuss the importance of trust and vulnerability in relating to one another as colleagues, as well as enhance our relationships with our students. This session will also provide the chance to discuss the importance of engaging in social justice movement work, the vital role that vulnerability and trust play in sustaining involvement in this work, and why healing practices are essential to the wellbeing of professionals, staff, faculty, administrators, and students working toward creating social change.



Session Block 2

11:10 AM – 12:00 PM



Authenticity through Adversity

*Lyndsay Christia, Student Affairs Professional in Transition, Doctoral Student,
Morgan State University
307A, Assembly Hall South, 3rd Floor*

In the dynamic and often unpredictable world of higher education, where no two days are the same, student affairs professionals serve in environments that can test patience, resilience, and personal strength. Through our graduate education, we learn about student development theory, problem-solving techniques, and best practices. Although we learn how to think through issues, no one prepares us for the emotional toll of being in these situations and the impact that it can have on our confidence, motivation, and ability to persist in our roles. Authenticity through Adversity explores how to remain anchored in your core values and professional “why” during challenging seasons, whether navigating institutional change, interpersonal conflict, or the court of public opinion. This session will equip participants with strategies for preserving professional integrity, maintaining composure when their reputation or work is challenged, and leading with grace even in difficult circumstances. Through reflective exercises and case studies, attendees will gain insight into how to stay grounded, communicate with intention, and model authentic leadership that inspires trust and fosters positive change.

Headwinds in Accessibility Services: Ensuring Access in the Face of Shifting Federal Priorities

*Andrew Lidowsky, Associate Court Attorney, New York State Unified Court System, Supreme Court, Queens County, Civil Term & Andrea Gustafson, Learning and Accommodations Specialist, Student Accessibility Services, Buffalo State University
307B, Assembly Hall North, 3rd Floor*

Under federal law, the Americans with Disabilities Act ensures that students with disabilities have the same opportunities as their peers by requiring accessibility and reasonable accommodations in every physical and digital aspect of the student experience. The Office of Civil Rights, through the Department of Education, traditionally has been tasked with investigating ADA-related complaints. Its findings are publicly available and serve as guidance for other campuses on accommodation-related issues. Yet delays are common, which leaves students at risk of interrupted education, an issue worsened by recent Department of Education funding cuts. However, an underutilized alternative exists under New York State’s Human Rights Law. These statutes are codified under the Executive Law and empower the Division of Human Rights, an independent state agency, to investigate allegations of campus discrimination. This program examines federal and state frameworks for disability accommodations, explores student transitions from secondary to higher education, and highlights recent initiatives by Governor Hochul to improve accessibility funding and services in the state. Attendees will gain insight into legal protections, systemic gaps, and strategies for enhancing campus access for students with disabilities.

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**BACK TO OUR
ROOTS**

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Mini-Politics, Major Impact: How Clubs and Organizations Foster Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement

Meg Flaherty, Ph.D., Assistant Dean of Students & Title IX Coordinator, St. John Fisher University

SORC (Student Organization Resource Center), Basement

College-going is consistently identified as one of the strongest predictors of civic participation in adulthood, yet what it is about college-going that results in democratic engagement remains unclear. Drawing on findings from qualitative case study dissertation research, this session explores how student clubs and organizations function as "mini-polities" and "mini-publics" that cultivate the democratic values and practices that endure over the course of the lifespan. This session proposes a taxonomy of civic learning that distinguishes formal learning, informal learning, and a third kind of learning that is formative in the K-16 pipeline of education toward civic outcomes. The framework offers student affairs professionals a new lens for understanding how everyday interactions – committee structures, decision-making processes, cultural norms, and organizational structures – can be understood as the grounds for students' civic learning. Participants will engage in reflection and discussion to identify how these dynamics are at play at their own institutions and consider how intentional advising and program design can strengthen democratic engagement. By viewing co-curricular involvement through the lens of civic learning, this session highlights how student affairs practitioners directly contribute to higher education's public mission of cultivating active, engaged citizens.



Session Block 3

1:00 PM – 1:50 PM



Work-Life Balance Attitudes in the Gendered Organization

Angela Clark-Taylor, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Chair, St. John Fisher University

307A, Assembly Hall South, 3rd Floor

This session is for all faculty and staff will explore research findings on the importance of having a deeper understanding of work-life balance attitudes of women leaders and their teams. Participants will engage with research on work-life balance attitudes, discuss barriers to achieving work-life balance, brainstorm solutions, and set short term achievable goals to support their (and others!) work-life balance.

You Will Be Found: Cultivating Roots of Connection

Christina Papaleo, Learning and Development Specialist, Syracuse University

307B, Assembly Hall North, 3rd Floor

Inspired by the song "You Will Be Found" from Dear Evan Hansen, this interactive session explores what it means to be seen, overlooked, or genuinely understood. Using music as an entry point, participants will reflect on experiences of invisibility and affirmation while considering the role of personal narrative in shaping belonging and identity. Grounded in Dr. John Townsend's Relational Nutrients framework, the workshop highlights how encouragement, affirmation, perspective, and presence foster resilience and connection. Participants will also engage with narrative identity theory and self-authorship theory, both of which emphasize the transformative power of reinterpreting one's story and claiming ownership of one's voice. Through guided reflection, story circles, and practical exercises, attendees will practice reshaping limiting messages into more life-giving truths. The session offers strategies to cultivate environments where empathy is rooted, authenticity is welcomed, and every person is recognized as someone who matters.

Not Just Enrolled—Engaged: Transforming the Adult Learner Experience

Steven Swiatek, Assistant to the Chief Diversity Officer, & Bythovens Almonor, HESAA Graduate Student, Buffalo State University SORC (Student Organization Resource Center), Basement

While colleges and universities have made progress in attracting and enrolling nontraditional students—particularly adult learners seeking to retool their skills—far less attention has been paid to their post-enrollment experience. Historically, institutions have applied the same retention and integration theories used for traditional students to their nontraditional counterparts, often overlooking the unique challenges these learners face in cultivating belonging and engagement. This session will examine how the post-COVID landscape requires rethinking and rebuilding belonging for nontraditional students through the lens of Self-Determination Theory and High-Impact Practices. We will explore how autonomy, competence, and relatedness can guide the creation of meaningful engagement opportunities that foster persistence, success, and well-being for adult learners. Join us to discuss strategies for reimagining belonging and engagement beyond traditional paradigms. We will highlight practical approaches and adaptable program models that institutions can use to help nontraditional students stay connected, supported, and engaged while navigating college life alongside work, family, and personal responsibilities.

Session Block 4

2:00 PM – 2:50 PM



Shades of Hope

Jasmine Bell, Director, Center for Student Success & Coaching, Long Island University

307A, Assembly Hall South, 3rd Floor

How can higher education leaders and practitioners intentionally cultivate student hope to improve persistence and equity? This session draws on research grounded in Snyder's Hope Theory, which defines hope as both the motivation to pursue goals (agency) and the ability to generate pathways to reach them. Findings from a study of undergraduate students in English Composition I and II reveal strong links between higher hope levels and greater academic engagement, motivation, and persistence, with notable differences across demographic groups. Participants will engage with practical strategies for applying these insights in their own contexts—such as designing advising practices, mentoring models, and curricular activities that build resilience, goal-setting skills, and self-efficacy. By reframing hope as an educational resource rather than just a psychological trait, this session equips attendees with tools to strengthen student success initiatives and advance equity in higher education.

Assessment in Practice: Student Led Focus Groups

Conference Room 414 & 404, 4th Floor

The higher education and student affairs profession is at a crossroads. In 2025–26, declining enrollment and shrinking institutional budgets are reducing program capacity, while the escalating student mental health crisis highlights systemic gaps in campus support. At the same time, workforce burnout and political disruptions are destabilizing organizational culture and reshaping public trust in higher education. These converging forces present not only operational challenges but also opportunities for professional growth and innovation. We invite you to join current HEA 650: Assessment in Higher Education students and Dr. Kline in a focus group designed to explore both the challenges you face and the promising practices you foresee in 2025.

Rooted in Growth: Cultivating Yourself Through Professional Organizations

*Katie LaVecchio, Area Coordinator, University at Buffalo
SORC (Student Organization Resource Center), Basement*

Just as strong roots allow a tree to grow and flourish, professional organizations can provide the foundation for our personal and professional development. This session explores the many ways engagement with professional associations can nurture growth—whether through networking, leadership opportunities, mentorship, or skill-building. Participants will reflect on the “roots” of their own professional journeys while discovering how deeper involvement in professional associations can help them branch out, expand their impact, and thrive. Attendees will leave with practical strategies for getting involved, maximizing their membership, and cultivating connections that support both personal growth and professional success.

Panel & Closing

3:00 PM – 4:00 PM

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Feature Panel – The Future of Higher Education

Social Hall, 3rd Floor

Our final session together will feature a panel of higher education and student affairs professionals to help us reflect on our shared past, confront present challenges, and imagine a future that advances democracy through education. Grounded in our profession's values, we will explore how to respond to ethical complexities while cultivating hope and courage. Together, we will envision practices that inspire equity, belonging, and civic engagement, reaffirming our role in shaping institutions that serve the public good. Participants will leave renewed in their commitment to the powerful, transformative work of educating for democracy and preparing students to thrive in a just and inclusive society.



Before you go...
Alumni Event

6:00 PM – 9:00 PM

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HESAA Alumni & Friends Reunion Event

Resurgence Brewery

55 Chicago St, Buffalo, NY 14204, United States

All HESAA/SPA alums and friends of the program are also invited to join us for a celebratory reunion event following the institute. Registration for the Reunion Event is within the registration link above. Reunion tickets are \$25 unless paired with the Professional Development Institute for a discounted package.

