

Redefining Student Success in the Academic Library: Building a Critically Engaged Undergraduate Engagement Program

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Many academic libraries recognize the importance of reaching out to undergraduate populations and providing them with various forms of support systems to help them throughout their undergraduate careers. Undergraduate engagement librarians, first-year experience programs, and other such initiatives are designed to increase undergraduate students' use of the library and its services in order to deepen undergraduates' relationships with the use of information.

In 2012 at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) a campus-wide directive was issued from university leadership to examine student support services and their interactivity with one another and with the students they serve, leading the UIC Library to institute a permanent Student Success task force.¹ Two librarians at that time shared a core responsibility for realizing the Task Force's recommendations by focusing on undergraduate student engagement. As time progressed, these roles morphed into our two undergraduate engagement librarian positions as they exist today, and we were tasked with the project of reimagining student-centric student success pathways in the library, while also acknowledging UIC's unique student population and building programming and supports specifically aimed at this particularly diverse cadre of students.

We undertook a large-scale reexamination of the UIC Library's undergraduate support systems in fall 2018, ultimately leading to the formation of a new, streamlined system of support, the Undergraduate

Engagement Program (UEP), formally initiated at the UIC Library in the 2019–2020 academic year. Given the nature of our roles, we had the ability to conceptualize a new and innovative way to approach undergraduate engagement through a critical lens. Our goal in this paper is to demonstrate our process in developing our program through centering our unique student population, employing a synthesis of our individual methodological approaches, reimagining definitions of student success in the context of university libraries, conceptualizing tailor-made programming, and recognizing how such an approach fits within the context of contemporary academic libraries.

Understanding Our Students' Needs

With approximately 21,921 enrolled undergraduate students,² UIC's campus is one in which there is no racial or ethnic majority. Its campus is uniquely designated as both an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander–Serving Institution (AANAPISI) and Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI).³ It is home to the first Arab American cultural center on a college campus in the United States.⁴ Our campus has frequently been voted one of the most LGBTQ-friendly campuses in the country.⁵ The UIC student body is composed of 38 percent first-generation students with 70 percent of our undergraduates receiving some form of financial aid.⁶ Many of our students are commuter students who travel across the Chicago area, and within the landscape of higher education in Chicago, we are a campus with continual growth in comparison to other universities in Chicago.⁷ Like many institutions, the snapshot of our campus community is not that of a monolithic student narrative, but rather a wide range of types of students who challenge the normative narratives of what typically constitutes a traditional college student.

Our approach to undergraduate engagement—and by extension student success—is one in which we purposefully and intentionally center our diverse students' needs. We know that our students are Black and Brown. We know our students are disabled. We know we have undocumented students, LGBTQI students, and students who

experience homelessness or food insecurity. We know many of our students struggle with the ability to pay their tuition and that many of our students have identities that have been historically minoritized. As the co-creators of the Undergraduate Engagement Program, we made a conscious choice to center, and not erase, the multitudes of identities of our students. Instead of trying to fit our community into pre-existing models where whiteness and dominant culture is the foundation, we have worked strategically to create a model that, at its core, centers our campus community by employing a holistic approach to the definition of student success rooted in social justice frameworks. This approach is predicated on critical forms of librarianship in which one of the core tenets is challenging the notion that libraries exist as neutral spaces.⁸

The discussion of neutrality of libraries is certainly not a new conversation, but with the continued emerging practices of critical librarianship, the neutrality of libraries continues to be debated, even warranting a president's program at ALA Midwinter 2018 devoted to the conversation.⁹ For our purposes, we are approaching the neutrality of libraries through critical librarianship in which we take into account the library as an institution that was created by a set of norms and standards by dominant society. We are also critically examining the ways in which the field outside of critical library scholarship has largely left pervasive whiteness unchallenged by historically defaulting to whiteness and leaving conversations of race out of library literature.¹⁰

Our Methodology

As we established the UEP, several fundamental theoretical lenses shaped our vision. Prior to becoming a librarian, Teresa Helena Moreno was trained in feminist studies and critical race and ethnic studies, work that has found a natural home in the field of critical librarianship. Women of color feminisms and critical race theory in particular are often invoked in critical librarianship as helpful tools for unpacking and applying a critical lens, especially with regard to the conceit that neutrality in libraries is a myth and that the root of the problem is

an articulation of libraries' foundations being built upon whiteness.¹¹ By studying feminist methodologies as well as social movements, the inherited knowledge of those who have historically worked toward justice as well as inclusion provide a pathway and a lens that can be applied within a library structure.

Neutrality is often invoked in discussions of how to obtain information, but the specter of neutrality is rarely considered in terms of ideologies around student success in the academic library setting; a good deal of literature exists to describe how to better undertake critical library instruction, how to engage in more critical reference interviews, or how to create more critical metadata, but the same attention has not fully yet been given to building a critically engaged student success program within the context of academic libraries. Without this critical lens, librarians run the risk of creating programming that is ultimately not holistic or, worse, causes more harm or violence to its communities. To move toward a community-centered approach, Moreno posits that we as librarians must shift our thinking from the one-size-fits-all approach to a more complex, multitiered method. Ultimately, Moreno is driven by inquiries of how we can form supportive community-centered spaces within institutions that were built and continue to operate in ways that minoritize individuals and to push against the structures that historically subjugate minoritized people.

For Jennifer M. Jackson, the concept of a sense of belonging coupled with adopting a culturally sustaining pedagogy provides a different though complementary lens. Specifically, the concept of sense of belonging “refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers).”¹²

Jackson’s primary question, in her research and in her work on the UEP, is this: to what extent are student users feeling valued at the library? Libraries tend to use quantitative data to attribute value,

such as numbers of times students enter the library, unique visitors to library programs, etc. Yet these numbers do not tell the larger story of students' experiences, particularly with regard to these experiences' emotional quality. Indeed, several decades of educational research has shown a correlation between sense of belonging and student retention at all levels of education. Notable works include Goodenow,¹³ Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods,¹⁴ and Osterman.¹⁵ By including sense of belonging within the development of undergraduate engagement, a critical analysis can be taken as to the types of relationships students foster with their peers and library workers, as well as the ways in which students feel a sense of connection to various library spaces and resources.

While addressing the topic of belonging, it is also necessary to do so with a lens that addresses undergraduate students' cultural identities. Centering the program design around a culturally sustaining pedagogy “explicitly calls for schooling to be a site for sustaining—rather than eradicating—the cultural ways of being of communities of color.”¹⁶ Though this pedagogy is discussed more often within the realm of primary and secondary education, it is important that librarians recognize their roles as educators, as well as the ways in which librarians' interactions and decisions on behalf of patrons impact the ways in which patrons see themselves.

Having these complementary theoretical foundations prior to starting the UEP was key to collaboratively thinking through undergraduate engagement and support. When wrestling with the challenge of tailoring a program to a student population that is ever-growing and ever-changing, our approaches coalesce around a primary focal point of centering community. To quote fellow librarian and Black feminist Audre Lorde, “Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.”¹⁷

Lorde's sentiment here continues to be a guiding force in understanding that we must go a step further than creating student-centered programming and recognize that the diversity of UIC's student population—with regard to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, ability, immigration status, religion, and many other facets—must be explicitly spelled out and focused upon; that is to say, in order to instill the values that Lorde discusses and to truly take on community-centered-ness, we cannot minimize the differences and wide-ranging diverse sets of needs of our undergraduate student community. We must not only apply an intersectional theoretical approach to creating community but center these narratives in the decision-making process in order to have a truly student-centric approach.

In feminist praxis, the theoretical is only as good as the ability to put theory into practice. As the UIC Library had already adopted a specific mechanism for illustrating its strategic planning, we opted to utilize the same mechanism—a logic model—in order to organize our thinking through enacting our methodologically guided approach. A logic model can be described as “a systematic and visual way to present and share your understanding of the relationships among the resources you have to operate your program, the activities you plan, and the changes or results you hope to achieve.”¹⁸

Implementing a logic model was not without its challenges. Though the model visually illustrated various resources and relationships, it was a difficult framework to grasp for undergraduate engagement for two reasons. Primarily, it was challenging to dissect engagement events and relationships that were already in motion, but the structure of the logic model itself brushed against traditional ways of thinking about library programming as well as our methodologies and theoretical approaches to undergraduate engagement.

Undergraduate Engagement Program Logic Model

Inputs		Outputs		Outcomes—Impacts		
		Participants	Activities	Short-term	Intermediate-term	Long-term
What internal stakeholders and resources are needed?	What external stakeholders and resources are needed?	Who does the Undergraduate Engagement Program reach or benefit?	What type of program is implemented?	Results in terms of learning	Results in terms of changing action	Results in terms of changing conditions
Teaching and Learning Committee	(Broadly— Student Affairs and Student Academic Support) Office of Global Engagement Academic Units Centers for Cultural Understanding and Social Change Office of Diversity Co-curricular Programs Undergraduate Student Government UIC Registered Student Organizations	Undergraduate Students	Finals Week Relaxation Station	<i>Students will be able to:</i>	<i>Students will be able to:</i>	<i>Students will be able to:</i>
Student Success Committee		External Stakeholders	Library Orientation Sessions	Explore the Library Website as a Resource	Articulate and Apply Information Literacy Skills	Demonstrate How the Library Empowers Them to Succeed
Research Services and Resources Department (RSR/ISR)		Library Internal Stakeholders	Library Information Literacy Sessions (Main Focus: ENG 160/ENG 161)	See Themselves Reflected in and Connected to Library Collections and Services	Initiate Research Consultations, Purchase Requests, and Other Requests to Support Their Research	Complete Their Undergraduate Education in 6 Years
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Council and Cultural Competency Training			Pop-up Library at Student Events and Student Organizations	Engage in Library Activities That Address Holistic Needs of Student Life to Actively Participate in Rigors of Academic Achievement	Articulate Resources in the Library and Their Value to Others (Library Spaces, Services, Tools, and Resources)	Maintain a 3.0 GPA
Director of Communications			Research Clinics (Collaboration with Specific Departments at Student Support Units)	Holistic Needs of Student Life to Actively Participate in Rigors of Academic Achievement	Establish New Opportunities for the Library to Better Integrate into Campus Life Experiences	
Assessment Coordinator			Research Consultations	Have Successful Retention from First Year to Second Year		
Library Resources: Meeting Rooms, Labs, Current Collections; Collections Budget, Marketing and Promotional Budget						

In the initial attempt of crafting a logic model for the UEP, though it captured the essence of a student-centered approach, it failed to articulate specific details of an undergraduate engagement program and did not set attainable and measurable goals. Through trial and

error, and an exploration of various types of logic models, the logic model was revised in 2018, incorporating both an outcome approach model and a problem implementation template to create a more holistic picture of the work being undertaken. Additionally, in the revision process, we also saw the need to create multiple logic models for the program as a whole. What we have essentially developed is one overarching model with a number of sub-models that allow us to focus on particular partnerships or programs. In the revision of the logic models, we were able to go more in-depth to directly name our resources, collaborators, and assessment methods.

Since its inception in spring 2019, the mission of the UIC Library UEP has been to empower undergraduate students to discover, use, and create knowledge while fostering an academic environment that reflects their experiences and identities. The UEP addresses this mission through strategic collaborations with campus partners to provide experiential and academic programmatic support that strives to meet the holistic needs of students for undergraduate success, with the additional goal of helping students to redefine their relationship with information as research patrons. With our combined methodologies, and a defined mission, we set out to strategically plan and build the program.

Redefining Student Success in the Neoliberal Landscape

For many people who do work that is centered around student experiences or how students interact with various services or mechanisms, measurement presents a unique challenge. This became even clearer when working through the assessment portion of developing logic models gave us insight into what our limitations would be, especially given the qualitative nature of this work, particularly in relation to the social and emotional benefits of student success work. A complicating challenge to measurement is that the benefits of student success interventions often have a long incubation period in students—that is to say, a student may participate in a particular program in their first year of their undergraduate experience, yet significant benefits

may not be apparent until their third year, if not later in life. As such, often when measuring student success or student interactions with the library, researchers tend to rely on quantitative metrics that, for example, focus on comparing changes in students' GPAs to how many times students entered the library or asked for help using a chat or reference service; these measurements may also be employed to articulate the library's role in maintaining high retention or graduation rates. The methodologies for measuring outcomes via data points into forms of benchmarking are also included in what the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) acknowledges as being a key component and form of measurement in the Standards Structure for Libraries in Higher Education.¹⁹ The heavy reliance on numerical data points to inform assessment within our field, in turn, means we are relying on a type of traditional assessment.

Traditional methods of assessment can tell us certain things. For example, at UIC's Richard J. Daley Library, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, use of the library was in high demand as many students struggled to find seating, often sitting on the floor or on stools in between stacks, and typical gate counts estimated that at various points during the day there were anywhere between 5,600 and 7,600 students in the library. These numbers clearly indicate that we do not struggle to get patrons into the library, so outreach in that way is not a dire need. Students are also in high attendance when participating in library-sponsored finals events with numbers ranging between 200 and 400 unique visits in a single day, which demonstrates that these events, while expensive to execute, are quite reasonable expenditures given the per-person cost. These numbers and data points can help to show some areas of need and success; however, there are still measurements of success or unmet needs that can't be fully encapsulated in this form of metric alone. We may see several thousand patrons in the library each day, but this number tells us nothing about the quality of the experience; we usually see high attendance at finals week programming, but we do not know by these numbers alone if we are meeting our goal of providing students an opportunity to de-stress.

In the neoliberal university, we understand why data points and quantitative metrics become the kinds of methods relied on most heavily, especially because in many ways they are more easily tangible and therefore easier to capture. Additionally, they allow us to easily assign a value to a data point. Neoliberal institutional structures within higher education as well as the commodification of education teach us the double-bind of relying solely on these assessment points—they can be helpful for articulating a narrative of needs and success, but they only use one lens. Upon examining and looking more closely at our community, we understood that these metrics are not necessarily the purest, most holistic form of measuring student success. We found the need to think a little more creatively about how we're defining student success. By extension, when we brought this back to our library community and student success committee, we encouraged our colleagues to resist the standard normative narrative of success. What does it look like to redefine success and our measurements of success?

Academic success—from kindergarten through college—is only as good as the holistic support mechanisms students are granted during their education experience, including within the library. For a student experiencing homelessness, their GPA will likely be heavily influenced by a lack of stable housing and social support in ways that will supersede the excellence of a particular library instruction session they attend or the helpfulness of a librarian during a reference interview; this is just one case in which singular data points are not an adequate representation of the role a library can play in the academic life of a student whose non-academic needs present a constant challenge that will interfere with their academic success in myriad ways. And in asking our colleagues to redefine their ideas of what student success looks like—beyond the quantitative measures that we must continue to use in contemporary higher education—we begin to better understand our role as a library in the landscape of student success. Our students are more than their graduation rates, GPAs, and degrees conferred.

As corollary, it is also necessary to reassess preconceptions of the purpose of students' use of library spaces on university campuses. A group of students watching videos on their laptops can appear to be nonacademic or out of step with the intention of library spaces for patrons' use, yet redefining our ideas of student success might lead us to recognize that, for example, for commuter students—a very large contingent of the undergraduate student population at UIC—finding a safe place on campus to go between classes and taking a break to watch their favorite television series can mean the difference between the student staying on campus and attending their late afternoon class or leaving campus early and skipping the class because they have nowhere they feel welcome to go.

Academic librarians first and foremost recognize that their role is to support the academic success of their students, but student success is contingent on straddling two worlds—the academic and the social. The library is an integral part of the academic landscape, offering essential services and access to materials that make learning and teaching possible, but the library is also a social destination for the entire community that is essential to academic life on campus. This second, overlooked facet of the library's role on campus is absolutely essential to the university as a whole, further evidenced by the fact that universities heavily invest in and support a wide range of campus life initiatives as well as student organizations. It is for this reason that we have actively chosen to engage in holistic approaches as well as understand the need for assessment measures that will accompany our redefined articulations of student success.

Conceptualizing Programming for the UEP

The success of the UEP rests on the development of relationships in and outside of our library as well as the creation of library-led programming and programmatic partnerships. In moving forward with a holistic approach to student success, we know that we have to actively partner with campus organizations to meet our goals. Partnerships with other offices on campus provide a multitude

of opportunities for high-impact undergraduate engagement programming.

To organize our thinking, we categorized our programming into three areas:

- **Library-led programming**—initiatives started and managed by the UIC Library—include examples such as finals week programming, our Wall of Encouragement (a space in which students are invited to leave sticky notes with encouraging remarks to make visible students' solidarity and community), and our new Pop-Up Library (for which students conceptualized designs and voted to select their favorite and which is now being manufactured in order to appear at future events on campus with curated titles available for borrowing).
- **Library collaborations**—long-term relationships built into existing curricular models—include fundamental support for all first-year writing courses in the form of one instruction session per class and our ongoing relationship with the Writing Center.
- **Campus collaborations**—initiatives led by other campus entities in which we play a support or outreach role—include examples such as assisting with university orientation sessions, participating in a task force focusing on the needs of first-generation students, or providing workshops on information literacy to specific groups on request.

In order to determine the UEP's programming, an evaluation of existing relevant services on campus was essential. The evaluation of existing services and areas for growth were identified in the process of creating the logic models. These primary drivers also helped to avoid replicating programming and initiatives already underway on campus and were also essential to avoid undermining the good work campus partners are already doing—campus partners who are experts in their own areas of focus.

But in order to create a sustainable program interwoven into the fabric of a university, building relationships with campus partners ensures that student experience and support are made more seamless through constant communication, providing campus partners and librarians the ability to know where a student can receive particular support and personally handing off the student to the campus partner when appropriate. Campus partners and librarians can also report on recent trends in our respective areas; for example, prior to the establishment of the UEP, the library worked with the UIC Writing Center to offer librarians for consultation following or as part of a student's peer-tutoring process. The UEP deepened this relationship by offering librarian consultations to Writing Center users much earlier in the research and writing process through knowledge gleaned from Writing Center usage and anecdotal evidence perceived in library instruction sessions, particularly with first-year writing classes.

One of the most unique things about UIC is its commitment to the Centers for Cultural Understanding and Social Change; unlike many student resources centers that can mostly focus on academic success for students who identify as disabled, African American, Latinx, Arab American, women, transgender, Native American, or other diverse identities, these centers focus on culture and community building, in contrast to the deficit model of support services, in which specific populations are labeled "at risk." For us, finding ways to be in collaboration with the cultural centers was key to themes of belonging and building UEP programming tailored to the diversity on campus.

As part of our launch of the UEP, we instituted a film series in conjunction with the campus cultural centers, in which we select a film to screen and host conversations afterward, often focusing on educational content. When possible, we work to collaboratively select titles in service to the centers' programming or that are relevant to related academic departments' curricular goals. In most cases, these conversations have led to our purchasing new titles based on our partners' recommendations, which inadvertently have helped us with

our larger efforts of diversifying the library's collections. By involving relevant liaison librarians in the process as well, we work to highlight titles in our collection relevant to the content of these films, which has in turn made bare any glaring omissions in our collections, thereby giving us insight into relevant purchases to expand the diversity of our collections. This has been particularly relevant as we strive to select titles that are written in #ownvoices (that is, for example, books on Indigeneity written by Indigenous authors rather than non-Indigenous authors).

In addition to such programming, another aspect of the program is to increase the visibility of diverse populations throughout the library in order to contribute to students' sense of belonging. In advance of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day, we used the display screens throughout the library to post photographs of Dr. King's work in Chicago (found in the UIC Library's archives) and paired them with quotations from Dr. King; through using more academically challenging quotations as part of the #ReclaimMLK movement,²⁰ we also incorporated a pedagogical component that expands students' understanding of this well-known figure's views outside of whitewashed media portrayals. While our first foray centered around Dr. King, we have since expanded our efforts to include figures such as transgender activist Sylvia Rivera alongside more popular icons, with the goal of teaching through representation.

On Critical Librarianship, Inclusive Practices, and DEI Initiatives

To those who are not actively involved in inclusive practices, undergraduate engagement—especially when undertaken with our chosen methodology and critical approach—can be contextualized as part of larger diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. This is especially true in the contemporary moment when libraries are devoting considerable time and resources to DEI conversations. Consultants are coming into our institutions to aid in creating DEI plans. Even our conferences are focusing more specifically on DEI concepts; indeed, the 2019 ACRL Conference focused on “recasting the narrative,”²¹ and Robin DiAngelo spoke on white fragility at ALA

Midwinter 2019.²² The messaging is clear that conversations about DEI are on trend for the field of libraries.

Yet, for diversity practitioners, this work is not trendy, and people's lives are not trends. For diversity practitioners—or professional feminists—this is not a supplemental or additional lens through which their work is viewed; rather, this encompasses the entire methodology and framework upon which their approach to their work relies.

Put another way, Sara Ahmed writes, “Feminists are diversity workers in the first sense: we are trying to transform institutions by challenging who they are for. We have feminist centers and feminist programs because we do not have feminist universities.”²³

So too is Ahmed's assertion true with university libraries. In UEP we strive to challenge who the university library is for, how student success is defined, and how students have a sense of belonging within the library as an institution. In developing the UEP, it is further underscored to us that the library is not a silo but the nucleus of a larger structure with arms stretching out throughout the entirety of the university. Our choice to call for a feminist approach of belonging to the UEP is vitally important given the larger truth that institutions such as libraries and universities are inherently embedded with institutional racism, white supremacy, ableism, ageism, classism, heteropatriarchy, and transphobia.²⁴ Just as we know that we must acknowledge and often work within neoliberal rhetoric, we also know that we must push beyond those very boundaries to make real the transformative promise of student success in the academic library. To do this is to reimagine the idea of student success and to understand that dominant narratives of student success are not the only form of student success. In centering our various communities within UIC, students teach us as librarians what success looks like to them and for them, but we have to be open to listening to their needs.

Yet Ahmed also offers this warning: “Feminist work in addressing institutional failure is appropriated as evidence of institutional

success.”²⁵ The double-bind of addressing the dominant cultural elephant in the room in this way is that, by critiquing and addressing the systemic failures within an institution, institutions can then in turn uphold such attempts as a kind of diversity “success”—even by simply naming the challenges and not working to adequately address them. While the approach outlined in this piece may feel new to undergraduate engagement within academic libraries, especially because our program was built centering populations of students who have been historically minoritized, we must resist the urge to put this work on a pedestal and name it a success of DEI work within the institution of libraries. It is our job to engage all undergraduate students to meet their needs in a holistic way that works toward individualized success for each student. Acknowledging and purposefully centering our diverse campus in conceptualizing an undergraduate engagement program is not a special marker of institutional success. It is simply doing our job.

In Light of COVID-19

UEP at UIC, like many programs and initiatives on college campuses, has had to make shifts to accommodate the reality of our new educational environments—namely the shift to virtual spaces. The pandemic has unintentionally highlighted the gaps in our initial formation of the program regarding our work with off-campus learners. Prior to COVID-19, the availability of online instruction at UIC was not ubiquitous; however, as we are learning more from our campus leadership and the trends of higher education, it has become clear to us that when the pandemic ceases our institution will likely move to a hybrid educational model incorporating off-campus and on-campus learners. As we began to understand the reality of this shift, it became important for us to understand how our prior strategic planning and program implementation needed to also change.

It is for this reason that we at UEP have decided to focus on the future of this new hybridity, particularly as it relates to undergraduate support, throughout this academic year. The methodology we have

developed has proven to be extraordinarily helpful in moving us forward in unprecedented times. The framing of the library as a physical resource space and as an intellectual one has been a guiding foundation in our communications with undergraduate students. It has helped us articulate the necessity of the library as a research tool, but it has also allowed us to examine the student needs that our library meets through students' access to physical space, which has grown increasingly relevant with the various restrictions in place due to COVID-19.

The methodology of centering students gave us the insight to find ways to make sure we were directly incorporating their voices. To this end, we have begun to develop a process of conducting focus groups and have been working with student leaders to best understand and address their needs as best as we can in a pandemic, all with an eye to the future of hybrid learners. COVID-19 has certainly impacted us all and has made inequalities in our society even more visible. In UEP we are striving to learn from what the pandemic has laid bare, and it has served as a reminder of the continual need to recalibrate when the situation calls for it.

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