

Positive Restlessness: Using the Appreciative Education Framework to Impact Campus Culture

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Abstract

Using the Appreciative Education framework fosters a culture of innovation and growth. This article shares the journey of one college toward becoming an Appreciative Campus and highlights its positive impact on the broader community. Rooted in a person-centered philosophy, this approach values and empowers students, faculty, and staff alike. A key component of this transformation is intentional onboarding of faculty and staff, which fosters a sense of belonging from day one. Additionally, campus events and programming are strategically planned throughout the academic year to align with point-in-time learning and encourage participation. This approach supports the institution's strategic plan by promoting sustainable enrollment growth and closing equity gaps. When individuals feel appreciated and empowered, they thrive, fostering a culture of success and resilience.

Keywords

Appreciative Education framework, Appreciative Campus, student success

Higher education is a vehicle for expanding and developing individual knowledge in ways that positively impact society through employment, workforce training, and civic engagement. Individuals pursuing higher education are expected to become more thoughtful and responsible members of society. In meeting these varied goals, a central theme remains consistent: higher education seeks to foster the holistic development of the individual.

Drawing on the principles of Appreciative Inquiry and positive psychology, the Appreciative Education framework (Bloom et al., 2013) provides a structured, six-phase approach that fosters growth. This approach is deeply informed by the Appreciative Advising model (Bloom et al., 2008), which emphasizes intentional engagement and strengths-based support for students, faculty, and staff. Originally conceived as an advising model, Appreciative Advising has since evolved into a comprehensive framework applicable across all facets of education. As outlined by Bloom et al. (2008), the six phases Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle—represent progressive stages of relationship-building and individual growth as learners work toward their goals:

- Disarm creates a safe and welcoming environment essential for meaningful growth.
- Discover helps individuals explore their strengths, passions, skills, and personal narratives, promoting deeper self-awareness.
- Dream encourages individuals to articulate their aspirations and envision their future.

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- Design involves developing a concrete, achievable plan that aligns with the individual's dreams.
- Deliver focuses on taking actionable steps and receiving support to achieve the goals outlined in the Design phase.
- Don't Settle challenges individuals to push beyond comfort zones, aiming for continuous improvement and the realization of their fullest potential.

Pine Technical and Community College (PTCC), located in Pine City, Minnesota, a growing community of just over 3,700 residents, is a small but high-impact institution serving East-Central Minnesota and Western Wisconsin. As part of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system, PTCC enrolls approximately 2,000 students and offers a wide array of programs in high-demand fields, such as health sciences, information technology, automotive technology, early childhood education, and gunsmithing, which is one of the few programs of its kind in the United States. The college is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) and holds specialized accreditations, including reaccreditation by the National League for Nursing Commission for Nursing Education Accreditation (NLN CNEA) for nursing programs and Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) certification for automotive technology programs. With emphasis on workforce development and career readiness, PTCC maintains a strong job placement rate and is recognized for its student-centered approach, quality instruction, and responsive service delivery.

In 2016, PTCC first explored Appreciative Advising (Bloom et al., 2008) through a pilot initiative tied to its HLC efforts. Although that early attempt focused on classroom-based advising for high-risk students and was led by a small group of staff, it did not gain long-term traction. However, it laid the foundation for future innovation. In recent years, PTCC reinvigorated and institutionalized Appreciative Education (Bloom et al., 2013; He et al., 2014) as a campus-wide framework to strengthen student services, foster inclusivity, and align with system-wide priorities such as the Minnesota State Equity 2030 Goals and Guided Learning Pathways. This renewed commitment reflects PTCC's broader mission: to serve as a dynamic and inclusive hub of learning that evolves alongside its community's needs. In 2023, the first year of full-scale re-implementation, PTCC experienced a 14% increase in student retention and a 9% increase in completion rates, which are key indicators of the framework's impact on student success.

Description of Practice

How does Appreciative Education actually work in practice (Bloom et al., 2013; He et al., 2014)? The framework encourages students, faculty, and staff to engage meaningfully in the higher education ecosystem. The result is the cultivation of well-educated individuals equipped with both the technical skills required by their chosen professions and the personal insight necessary to positively contribute to their communities. By focusing on aspirational goals and purposeful achievement, Appreciative Education provides a framework for translating dreams into action. Adopting an institutional culture grounded in Appreciative Education can transform student success efforts by aligning them with intentional, strengths-based practices. This approach mirrors the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, which emphasize the power of positive organizational change through recognition of individual and collective strengths (Stavros et al., 2016).

At PTCC, the Student Success department has fully embraced the principles of the Appreciative Education framework. One illustrative example comes from a faculty in-service day focused on improving student outcomes and enhancing faculty communication. The session began with a Disarm activity to create a relaxed, welcoming atmosphere for

collaboration. Faculty then engaged in a Discover phase, using open-ended questions to surface key insights and perspectives, which led into a Dream phase, during which faculty envisioned ideal outcomes and strategies for improvement. Working collaboratively, the Student Success Leadership Team and faculty entered the Design phase, co-creating actionable solutions based on the feedback received. As these ideas were implemented, the Deliver phase ensured that changes were monitored and supported. Finally, the Don't Settle phase continues to guide ongoing refinement of processes in pursuit of the shared vision.

The Appreciative Education framework has now become an integral part of PTCC's institutional culture. Its influence can be seen in both strategic initiatives and grassroots efforts across campus. The principles of the Appreciative Mindset (Bloom et al., 2008) are revisited regularly with staff to ensure alignment with the institution's values. The "Towards Becoming an Appreciative Campus" logo appears on many public-facing materials, symbolizing PTCC's commitment to becoming a fully Appreciative Campus (Propst Cuevas et al., 2025).

Faculty and staff have also taken the initiative to create welcoming and inclusive student environments. Offices have been reimaged to be more inviting, and interactions with students are approached with intentional appreciation. The onboarding process for new employees has been redesigned to reflect this philosophy. New hires are welcomed warmly, treated to lunch with their team, and provided with the tools and support needed to thrive in their new role. This thoughtful approach highlights the belief that every individual contributes uniquely to the campus community.

Guided by the Appreciative Mindset, each department, including the facilities department, which is responsible for maintaining the campus's physical environment, including custodial services, building maintenance, and campus grounds, at PTCC, has been encouraged to reflect on and recognize its unique impact on student success. The department has embraced this perspective, recognizing that its efforts to maintain a clean, safe, and vibrant campus play a vital role in helping the campus community feel welcomed and supported.

One intentional example of this mindset is the replacement of the standard entrance mat at PTCC's main entryway. Rather than a generic mat, the facilities team installed one that reads "Welcome to PTCC," offering a warm and inviting message to all who enter (see Figure 1). This small but meaningful gesture reflects a broader commitment to hospitality and inclusion.

Staff and faculty are similarly encouraged to thoughtfully consider the physical and emotional atmosphere of the spaces where they engage with students, ensuring these environments are both welcoming and supportive. Campus-wide branding reinforces this commitment, beginning as early as the moment a student steps onto campus. Coffee stations are strategically placed throughout the building, offering refreshments that contribute to a sense of comfort and care. Additionally, food baskets are available in various locations to ensure that no student goes without nourishment throughout their day. These seemingly small gestures collectively foster a culture of belonging. As students move through the halls, they are often greeted warmly, frequently by name, by faculty, staff, and administration who take the time to get to know them personally. This level of familiarity and intentional connection is central to PTCC's student-centered ethos, reinforcing that each student is seen, valued, and supported.

Figure 1*Welcome Mat at PTCC*

Note. Photograph of a grey welcome mat at the main entrance of Pine Technical and Community College with a customized “Welcome” intended for all individuals entering the building. Own work.

Implementation

In 2016, when the Appreciative Advising model (Bloom et al., 2008) was first introduced at PTCC, it was implemented on a limited scale as a pilot program. Participation was restricted to a select group of staff and confined to specific classrooms, where it functioned primarily as a group advising model. At the time, awareness of the initiative was minimal across the broader campus community, and many faculty and staff were unfamiliar with its goals and principles. This limited approach presented a significant challenge: by focusing solely on the Appreciative Education framework within the advising context, its transformative potential was unintentionally constrained. The work became associated with a small group of individuals recognized as advisors, rather than embraced as a shared institutional philosophy. For Appreciative Education to be truly effective, it must be a collective endeavor. When all members of the campus community understand and contribute to the appreciative approach, it becomes a unifying culture rather than a siloed initiative. Lasting organizational change emerges from inclusive, strengths-based engagement across all levels of an institution (Stavros et al., 2016).

Fast forward to 2022, when PTCC undertook a bold and strategic restructuring of its Student Success team, uniting a wide array of student services, including financial aid, advising, accessibility services, transfer and records, library services, and more, under the leadership of a newly appointed Director of Student Success. This reorganization occurred at

a critical juncture, as the college sought to reimagine the delivery of student support in a post-COVID-19 environment. With students gradually returning to in-person learning while still expecting the flexibility and accessibility afforded by remote services, PTCC recognized the need to build a more integrated, responsive, and student-centered model. In parallel, the college strengthened its use of technology, such as Zoom, scheduling tools, and an enhanced online presence, to complement face-to-face services and meet the evolving needs of students, faculty, and staff in the dynamic educational landscape.

Internal Assessment

This transformative effort began with a comprehensive assessment of the department's staffing structure and operational capacity. Recognizing that the student experience is profoundly shaped by the efficiency and effectiveness of institutional services, PTCC prioritized a thorough evaluation of how student services align with its strategic goals and mission. Central to this process was the use of strengths assessments, which served as the foundation of the "Discover" phase in Appreciative Education (Bloom et al., 2013), helping the institution identify and leverage the unique talents and capacities of its staff to drive meaningful change. This analysis revealed critical insights into redundancies, workload imbalances, and areas where support systems could be enhanced. Informed by key performance indicators and institutional assessments, the college identified opportunities to strengthen capacity, close service gaps, and streamline processes to improve student retention, satisfaction, and overall success.

An early pivotal action in this effort was hosting a series of listening sessions with internal staff and other key stakeholders across campus. These conversations revealed strengths to build upon and opportunities for growth in the current advising model. One of the most compelling findings was an opportunity to reclassify the traditional academic advisor role by integrating financial aid advising responsibilities.

Integrating Academic and Financial Aid Advising

Drawing inspiration from a successful model at another Minnesota State institution and grounded in the Appreciative Advising framework, PTCC adopted a dual role advising structure. This approach enabled the college to consolidate two critical functions into a single strategically elevated position, thereby fostering a more holistic and seamless student support experience.

The impact of merging academic and financial aid advising was both immediate and far-reaching. Students gained a consistent point of contact who could support them academically and financially throughout their time at PTCC. This integration was especially beneficial for students in technical programs with complex financial aid eligibility requirements tied to state and federal funding. Instead of navigating multiple departments, students could now access comprehensive support from a single advisor, often receiving real-time assistance with both academic planning and financial aid concerns. This streamlined approach improved access to emergency and basic needs support, reduced waiting times, and strengthened internal collaboration. Staff in these reclassified roles reported feeling more empowered and connected, which enhanced their ability to respond quickly and effectively to students' needs. Ultimately, this model advanced PTCC's student-first philosophy and significantly improved student retention and engagement.

Redesigning Onboarding

Recognizing that meaningful structural change depends on thoughtful onboarding, PTCC's Student Success department initiated a redesign of the college's onboarding

experience. The department director led this effort after they completed the Appreciative Administration Online Course through Florida Atlantic University's (FAU) Office of Appreciative Education (OAE). Drawing from the course's theory-to-practice framework, a new onboarding template was developed to foster trust, build early team cohesion, and reinforce a culture of continuous improvement. PTCC's Human Resources department later expanded this model to be universal and applicable across departments, with select elements adapted for new faculty onboarding as well.

New team members were welcomed with intentional practices designed to build trust, foster early team cohesion, and reinforce a culture of continuous improvement. From team-hosted welcome lunches to structured job shadowing opportunities and early introductions to department goals, onboarding was designed to help new staff feel grounded and aligned with institutional priorities. Training was strategically scheduled, supported by mentorship from experienced colleagues, and included direct engagement with senior leadership. A deliberate balance of tasks and reflective learning ensured that new employees had the space to acclimate, contribute, and begin thinking innovatively. From day one, new hires were introduced to PTCC's "Don't Settle" ethos, a call to focus on potential and continuous growth rather than limitations.

Transforming Campus

Building on this momentum, PTCC expanded its Appreciative Advising work into a broader institutional commitment: "Becoming an Appreciative Campus" (Propst Cuevas et al., 2025). This initiative called on all departments, not just student services, to consider how their processes, language, and systems could better support the student experience. Each office was encouraged to assess its practices through a student-centered lens, streamlining forms, reducing complexity, and improving clarity. To spark dialogue and foster buy-in, PTCC invited Dakota County Technical College (DCTC) to share its success with a similar advising model. Through in-person sessions with PTCC leadership and cross-campus teams, DCTC provided practical insights and outcomes that helped build support and enthusiasm for the new direction.

That engagement with DCTC helped pave the way for a formal partnership with the Office of Appreciative Education (OAE) at Florida Atlantic University (FAU), widely recognized as the global leader and central hub of Appreciative Education practice and research. Together, PTCC and the OAE launched a year-long professional development program designed to embed Appreciative Education principles (Bloom et al., 2013; Propst Cuevas et al., 2025) throughout the institution. Advisors completed the Appreciative Advising Institute and pursued certification, while key administrators, including the Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs, Deans, and the Chief Human Resources Officer, completed the Appreciative Administration course, reinforcing institutional commitment from leadership. As part of this partnership, an OAE representative conducted an informal campus audit to provide feedback on PTCC's physical and social environment. Rather than using a formal assessment tool or checklist, the college invited the representative to explore the campus organically with a "fresh set of eyes" to experience what a new student or visitor might encounter. During the visit, the representative was asked to pay close attention to whether individuals greeted them warmly, whether wayfinding signage was clear and accessible, and whether campus spaces appeared clean, safe, and inviting.

Throughout this journey, PTCC approached the Appreciative Campus initiative with a strong sense of fiscal responsibility and innovation. Understanding that transformative change does not always require significant funding, the college focused on strategic alignment, reframing stakeholder conversations, and optimizing existing resources. Campus

leaders emphasized that the initiative is an ongoing journey, not a fixed destination, and that progress, not perfection, should be the goal. Organizational change is most effective when it builds on existing strengths and shared aspirations rather than focusing solely on deficits (Stavros et al., 2016). This message empowered departments to experiment, take ownership, and contribute meaningfully to the collective vision of student success without fearing falling short.

One of the most impactful ways PTCC reinforced this cultural shift was through strategic alignment of its branding and marketing with the Appreciative Campus identity. Every detail from campus signage to digital messaging was designed to reflect a unified, student-centered approach. These enhancements did not require a costly redesign; instead, they focused on intentional choices and collaboration that reflected a shared vision. Institutional leaders modeled this mindset, promoting cross-departmental learning, celebrating innovation, and encouraging continuous open and progressive dialogue. Appreciative Education became more than just an advising framework; it became a common language and guiding philosophy that now permeates the PTCC community.

Through thoughtful planning, authentic engagement, and a commitment to inclusive excellence, PTCC has laid the foundation for a culture that is responsive to student needs and deeply reflective of its values. The college's transformation into an Appreciative Campus illustrates how purposeful leadership, collaborative innovation, and an unwavering focus on student success can drive meaningful and lasting change.

Implementing meaningful change takes time, and each institution must assess its own unique variables to determine how best to align Appreciative Education principles (Bloom et al., 2013) with its mission and day-to-day realities. At PTCC, the intentional cultivation of growth and a culture of appreciation led to measurable, meaningful outcomes. By recognizing and valuing the unique strengths, experiences, and potential each student brings, every department, regardless of size or scope, can significantly influence student success. Human beings thrive when treated with respect, seen for their potential, and appreciated for their contributions (Stavros et al., 2016). This principle holds true in any educational setting, large or small, and lies at the heart of Appreciative Education's impact, which can significantly influence student success.

The true strength of implementing the Appreciative Education framework (Bloom et al., 2013; Propst Cuevas et al., 2025) across the entire campus lies in its ability to distribute ownership and cultivate a shared sense of purpose. When every member of the community, faculty, staff, and students alike, embraces the Appreciative Mindset (Bloom et al., 2008), it sets a powerful tone for campus culture. This collective approach fosters a shift toward a more positive, inclusive, and welcoming environment where appreciation is not just a concept, but a daily practice. In such a culture, every individual feels seen, valued, and empowered. Faculty and staff recognize their roles not just as educators or support personnel, but as key active contributors to a nurturing educational ecosystem. Students, in turn, experience a heightened sense of belonging and are more likely to engage, persist, and thrive academically, socially, and personally. This shared commitment to appreciation and growth becomes the foundation for a truly student-centered institution.

Culture change is a gradual process that cannot occur in a vacuum. It requires intentionality, consistent effort, and strong leadership to drive and sustain the transformation. The journey often begins with identifying a change agent, someone who is deeply passionate about student success and committed to the core tenets of Appreciative Education (Bloom et al., 2013). From there, the shift begins to take root and spread organically, particularly when the framework is strategically embedded into everyday interactions across campus. At PTCC,

this cultural transformation was launched through deliberate and sustained efforts. A full academic year was devoted to integrating Appreciative Education into all in-service activities. During this period, a representative from the OAE participated in every session, laying the groundwork for a shared understanding among faculty and staff. The Student Success department championed the approach, embedding the principles of Appreciative Education into their daily practices. Even the smallest details, such as student-facing forms and campus messaging, are now reviewed and refined to reflect the values of appreciation and inclusion. Through these ongoing and intentional efforts, PTCC has experienced a genuine cultural shift that continues to evolve as Appreciative Education becomes embedded not just in programs or policies, but in the daily fabric of campus life.

Results and Outcomes

Taking a step back to evaluate the results of these intentional efforts, it is evident that implementing the Appreciative Education framework (Bloom et al., 2013) has led to a positive and meaningful cultural shift at PTCC. One of the most notable outcomes is an improvement in faculty and staff morale, reflected in a renewed collective commitment to student success. Across campus, there is a visible drive among colleagues to collaborate, support one another, and prioritize a shared mission. Rather than centering conversations around system weaknesses or barriers, faculty and staff now approach challenges with a strengths-based mindset—focusing on what is working and how to build upon it to foster meaningful progress for students.

Improvements have also emerged in the onboarding process for new employees, largely due to the influence of Appreciative Administration practices (Bloom & McClellan, 2016). The concept of PTCC as an Appreciative Education campus is now embedded into the very beginning of each employee's journey. Every new staff and faculty member receives a primer on the principles of Appreciative Education and how they contribute to a culture centered on student success. More than just a philosophical introduction, this approach extends into action: new hires are welcomed and celebrated for the unique talents and experiences they bring. They are actively encouraged to use those strengths to contribute to the college's mission.

As a result, engagement across campus has grown organically. Faculty, staff, and students are increasingly connected—not just through formal roles or responsibilities, but through a shared sense of purpose and appreciation. This heightened sense of belonging has deepened relationships, fostered collaboration, and created an environment where individuals feel empowered to bring their whole selves to the college community. In short, the Appreciative Mindset has not only transformed individual interactions but has strengthened the collective fabric of the institution. Because faculty and staff feel genuinely valued and appreciated, their engagement with students is naturally empowering and affirming. These positive dynamics foster an environment where students are encouraged to flourish academically, personally, and professionally. Faculty and staff play a pivotal role in building students' confidence by recognizing and celebrating their talents while supporting their growth and development. These affirming interactions create a foundation of trust and motivation, helping students see themselves as capable, competent, and full of potential.

Through student life events and co-curricular activities, this appreciative approach is further reinforced. Students are consistently acknowledged for their unique strengths, achievements, and contributions. These moments of recognition not only build confidence but also cultivate a deep sense of belonging. When students feel seen and celebrated for who they are and what they bring to the community, they begin to take pride in their identity and in their role as members of the PTCC community. This sense of pride becomes a powerful

motivator, fueling engagement, persistence, and a deeper connection to the college experience.

Discussion

Deliberate and intentional efforts to implement the Appreciative Education framework have had a transformative impact on the culture and outcomes at PTCC. By fostering a shared sense of purpose and belonging, the appreciative approach advances equity and inclusion across the institution. Every member of the college community, students, staff, and faculty alike, are encouraged to recognize their inherent value and unique contributions to the collective good. These efforts have not only strengthened campus culture but have also yielded measurable results with increased student retention and program completion. The Appreciative Education framework (Bloom et al., 2013) functions as a form of universal design, rooted in a deep understanding of how human beings learn, grow, and thrive. It acknowledges the holistic nature of development and creates structures that support individuals in reaching their full potential.

The sustainability of these efforts depends on an ongoing commitment to reflection and alignment. Institutional practices are continuously evaluated through the lens of the Appreciative Mindset (Bloom et al., 2008) to ensure alignment with the college's mission of inclusivity and student success. Policies, procedures, and operational processes are reviewed and refined to reflect appreciative values. Student-facing forms and communications are regularly revised to enhance clarity and accessibility, particularly for individuals unfamiliar with the complex systems of higher education. This student-centered lens ensures that all students can confidently navigate the college environment, regardless of background or experience.

PTCC's journey underscored the value of prioritizing progress over perfection, showing that incremental change begins with determination and a clear shared vision. What may have once seemed like an impossible feat has now evolved into a leading initiative that is positively shaping campus culture. By encouraging all departments to view their contributions through the lens of the student experience, PTCC witnessed the tangible impact of this shift, leading to measurable improvements in student success rates. When every facet of the college is aligned to support students, the results are evident, reinforcing that a student-centered approach is not only effective but also essential. The journey to becoming an Appreciative Campus requires intentional effort and time; however, these efforts pay significant dividends in terms of student outcomes and institutional growth.

Higher education is facing a new era filled with challenges, including the need to continually justify the value of education and demonstrate its importance. In this climate, when students feel valued, seen, and appreciated by their institution, they begin to recognize the intrinsic worth of the education they are receiving, not only as a pathway to economic opportunity but as a means to contribute meaningfully to their communities. Faculty, staff, and administration at PTCC collectively promote this broader vision, reinforcing that education is not solely about credentials, but about cultivating informed, engaged citizens who uplift those around them. As part of this commitment, PTCC staff are trained during onboarding to execute the "D" phases of Appreciative Education (Bloom et al., 2013), helping ease current and prospective students as they seek out services. Supervisors reinforce this approach through department meetings and regular check-ins, modeling a culture of care and attentiveness. This sense of validation not only enhances their educational experience but also increases their confidence in the value of their program of study. When students feel they truly belong and are equipped with the skills necessary to thrive in their chosen industries, they leave with a sense of accomplishment and pride in their education. These

students, in turn, become ambassadors for the value of higher education, sharing their positive experiences with others. By integrating all phases of the Appreciative Education framework, PTCC reinforces a strengths-based, student-centered approach that reflects the broader principles of Appreciative Inquiry and organizational development (Stavros et al., 2016).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the journey to becoming an Appreciative Campus at PTCC has been one of intentional growth, collaboration, and unwavering commitment to student success. By embedding the principles of Appreciative Education into every aspect of campus culture, PTCC strives to create an environment where all individuals, faculty, staff, and students feel valued, empowered, and inspired to fulfill its mission and educational endeavors. This shift has transformed the way PTCC has approached education and led to key leading indicators of improved student retention, program completion metrics, amongst other Minnesota State institutions.

As higher education faces increasingly complex challenges, the need for institutions to foster environments where students feel appreciated and supported has never been more critical. PTCC witnessed firsthand how a culture of appreciation, when integrated across all departments and levels of engagement, can profoundly impact student outcomes and institutional success. Driven by commitment to positive restlessness, PTCC continually seeks new ways to elevate the student experience and challenge the status quo. This mindset encourages innovation, reflection, and a commitment to growth at every level of the institution. PTCC demonstrates that higher education is not just a pathway to career success but a meaningful experience that shapes individuals and communities for the better.

The work of becoming an Appreciative Campus is ongoing, and its sustainability relies on a continued commitment to evaluating, evolving, and prioritizing the needs of students and the community. By maintaining a student-centered approach and fostering a culture of belonging, PTCC prepares students for professional success and active, informed, and engaged participation in society. As the institution looks to the future, it remains committed to the belief that education, when approached with intentionality, appreciation, and care, has the power to transform lives and build stronger, more vibrant communities. PTCC is proud to lead the way in demonstrating the transformative power of the Appreciative Education framework and is excited for what the future holds as the institution continues to grow, evolve, and thrive.

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