

# Learning as a Living Relationship

LEVERAGE POINTS FOR TRANSFORMING EDUCATION

*"Life cannot be made to conform to a system, it cannot be forced into a framework, however nobly conceived... The highest function of education is to bring about an integrated individual who is capable of dealing with life as a whole." — J. Krishnamurti*

**Pavel Cenkl** | Dean of Academic Affairs

**Prescott College** | *Arizona*

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**Regenerative Learning Network** | *US & UK*



# A Systemic Crisis

## The Polycrisis Meets the Metacrisis

The crisis in higher education is systemic.

### Polycrisis

*"A complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet." — Morin & Kern, 1999*

### Metacrisis

*"An aggregation of educational crises of sense-making, capability, legitimacy, and meaning." — Stein, 2022*

**35%**

Public Trust

Down from 57%

**\$1.84T**

Student Debt

Total outstanding student  
loan burden

**36% / 60%+**

Increase in tuition since 2000  
Private / Public

❏ These are symptoms of a deeper failure: the **siloining of learning itself**.

- Knowledge privatised.
- The more-than-human world expelled from the curriculum.
- Students optimised for performance, and debt creation rather than for inquiry.
- The system reproduces itself, not free minds.

# This is no time for incremental change

The modern university is built on unstable and unsustainable premises

## Transactional

Knowledge moves from expert to novice. A one-directional transaction.

## Individual

The unit of learning is the isolated mind. Community is merely instrumental.

## Siloed

Disciplines transcend place, season, soil. Knowledge belongs nowhere.

## Institutional

What works for a few cannot be standardised for millions without loss.

# Lessons from Tagore

## Santiniketan: Learning Under Open Skies

*"The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence."*—

Rabindranath Tagore



### Relational Ontology

**Learning arises through relationship with place, community and the more-than-human.**



### The Living Self

The living self is realised only through immersion in the world. **Silos diminish capacity building.**



### The Experiment

Santiniketan dissolved the wall between classroom and living landscape by learning through art, movement, and seasonal rhythms. **An institution that tried to undo itself.**



# Relationality

Relationship as foundational learning theory

All phenomena arise in relationship. The self is not prior to learning: it **co-emerges** with it.

## Learner

Not a container to be filled. A node in a living network.



## World

Not a backdrop to learning. An epistemic actor in its own right.

## Relationship

Not a means to learning. The medium through which it arises.

# Leverage Points in System

1. Numbers – Constants, subsidies, standards
2. Buffers – Stability reserves (time, money, resources)
3. Stock & Flow Structures – Physical systems, pipelines
4. Delays – Speed of response
5. Balancing Loops – Self-correcting feedbacks
6. Reinforcing Loops – Growth/decline feedbacks
7. **Information Flows – Who has access to what information**
8. **Rules – Incentives, punishments, constraints**
9. **Self-Organization – Ability to evolve structure**
10. **Goals – The purpose of the system**
11. **Paradigms – Mindsets out of which the system arises**
12. **Transcending Paradigms – Capacity to step outside and evolve worldviews**

*Donella Meadows, "Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System," 1999*



# Leverage Points

## Where to Intervene in the System

**Donella Meadows** identified twelve leverage points in any system, ranked by power to produce change. Higher education spends 90–95% of its reform energy at the **bottom** of this list. The high-leverage interventions for a regenerative educational future are:

1

### Transcending Paradigms (1)

Adaptive, resilient, cross-sector, whole-person, whole-community learning. Capacity to evolve new worldviews.

2

### Paradigms (2)

Regrounding in community, civic, bioregional and ecological engagement. The mindset from which the system arises.

3

### Goals (3)

Reframing purpose: from credential production to ecological and community flourishing.

4

### Self-Organization (4)

Transdisciplinary design, cooperative structures, relational networks. Capacity to evolve from within.

5

### Rules (5) & Information Flows (6)

Credentialing, accreditation, governance. Who controls what can be known and said.

**Reform works at 12. Regeneration works at 1–6.**

# Toward Regenerative Practice

## Reframing Skills, Metrics, and Institutions



### From Skills to Capacities

- Systems thinking and ecological analysis
- Collaborative facilitation and participatory leadership
- Conflict transformation and intercultural communication
- Adaptive problem-solving and ethical reasoning
- Strategic storytelling and narrative design



### Value That Flows Back

- Systems impact: graduates contributing to ecological and social resilience
- Relational capacity: collaborating across difference and discipline
- Adaptive agency: navigating uncertainty
- Civic imagination and lifelong flourishing beyond graduation



### Distributed, Co-Creative, Alive

- Distributed learning across complementary cross-sector organisations
- Shared risk and responsibility; co-creative networks
- Living, adaptive curricula
- Moving from scarcity and competition to collaboration and reciprocity
- Inhabiting alive spaces where community, bioregion and institution interweave

# An Invitation to Action

How can we move from **sustaining** the higher education to **regenerating** it?

What would it mean for DCF to become a **regenerative learning network** that answers to no single institution?

How is our work in education **accountable to place**: ecologically, historically, culturally, ethically?

What does the dharmic tradition hold that neither Tagore nor Krishnamurti could fully carry — and what might it offer **now**?

**Who authorizes knowledge in a distributed relational network** — and can a regenerative learning network avoid replicating the authority structures of the institutions it critiques?

**Can learning ever be "owned" by an institution** if knowledge itself is understood as emergent, impermanent and co-arising?

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