

Revitalizing Institutional Identity Post-COVID: A Pan-African SoTL Study Grounded in Kotter's Change Model and African Ontologies

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ABSTRACT: This study examines how the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) can address complex institutional challenges beyond classroom practice by revitalizing a disrupted university culture in a Pan-African context. Guided by Hutchings' (2000) future-oriented question of "What could be?", we applied Kotter's eight-step change model within a narrative participatory inquiry design that positioned students as partners in co-creating knowledge. The intervention integrated African philosophies of Sankofa (reflection for action) and Sunsum (interconnectedness), alongside storytelling as a traditional pedagogical tool, to foster cultural renewal. Felten's (2013) pillars of good SoTL and Hamilton and McCollum's (2024) emphasis on epistemological and ontological depth informed the approach, ensuring cultural responsiveness and collaborative engagement. A five-week catalytic intervention provided students with a lived experience of the original institutional culture, resulting in increased academic motivation, enhanced campus engagement, and a strengthened sense of identity. The process achieved short-term wins and accelerated change compared to the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM), reaching integration a year earlier than expected. Findings underscore the importance of care-driven practices, student partnerships, and indigenous knowledge systems in sustaining transformation. The study offers a model for addressing grand challenges in higher education and calls for future research on culturally grounded change frameworks, longitudinal sustainability, and the role of storytelling in SoTL.

KEYWORDS: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Kotter's Change Model, African Epistemologies, Institutional Culture, Student Partnership

Introduction

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) invites educators to systematically investigate teaching and learning with the goal of improving practice and contributing to scholarly discourse. Hutchings (2000) frames SoTL through four guiding questions, including the future-oriented "What could be?", which challenges scholars to envision possibilities beyond current realities. Felten (2013) emphasizes that good SoTL is grounded in clear goals, appropriate methods, evidence of student learning, and is deeply contextual, collaborative, and public. More recently, Hamilton and McCollum (2024) argue that great SoTL extends beyond methodology to interrogate epistemological and ontological positions, shaping how knowledge and being are understood within educational contexts.

This study responds to Hutchings' (2000) call for future-focused inquiry by exploring whether a disrupted Pan-African university culture, fractured by COVID-19, could be revitalized. We viewed this challenge as a SoTL grand problem, complex, context-specific, and requiring innovative, collaborative solutions with potential transferability. Post-pandemic observations revealed a campus

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marked by isolation, diminished student engagement, and weakened institutional identity, particularly among cohorts who had never experienced pre-COVID campus life. Against this backdrop, the study aimed to reimagine and rebuild a vibrant culture grounded in scholarship, leadership, and citizenship, while exploring how students perceive university culture as a foundation for future learning and campus life.

Institutional Values and Cultural Foundations

The university's institutional culture is built on three core values: **Scholarship**, **Leadership**, and **Citizenship**. These values were co-created by the university community during its formative years over two decades ago and continue to define its identity and collective purpose.

- **Scholarship** reflects a commitment to deep expertise, curiosity, and innovation. It involves asking questions that broaden understanding, embracing new ideas, connecting with peers in relevant fields, and sharing knowledge proactively.
- **Leadership** emphasizes enabling others to succeed, communicating effectively, taking initiative, and setting ambitious yet achievable goals. It calls for leveraging the talents and experiences of others and going beyond expectations to create a meaningful impact.
- **Citizenship** represents social and environmental responsibility, ethical behavior, and awareness of the long-term implications of decisions. It includes fostering community, leaving a positive legacy, and promoting well-being, all while enjoying the process of learning and growth.

This shared framework of values forms the foundation of the university's identity. The present study seeks to revitalize this identity in the aftermath of COVID-19 disruptions.

The Research Problem And SoTL Context

The challenge addressed in this study is complex and multifaceted, aligning with what Rittel and Webber (1973) and Bass (2020) describe as a “wicked problem.” Such problems lack straightforward solutions and require innovative, collaborative approaches. Within SoTL, these challenges are recognized as critical to advancing learning in the 21st century.

Two of the five SoTL grand challenges underpin this work:

1. **Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking**

Grand Challenge 1 highlights the need for learners and educators to think critically and creatively when addressing complex phenomena. Revitalizing a campus culture that most students have never experienced demands imaginative approaches and the synthesis of diverse ideas to envision new possibilities.

2. **Engaging Learners in Their Learning Process**

Grand Challenge 2 emphasizes the importance of learner engagement. Students are motivated by different factors, and these motivations evolve over time. The intervention, therefore, incorporated multiple pathways for engagement, representation of information, and opportunities for action and expression (Hüvös, 2023).

Creating a supportive learning environment was essential. Students were expected not only to design a renewed culture but also to adopt and sustain it. This required institutional systems—encompassing faculty, staff, alumni, and resources—that value and reinforce the learning process. Such environments encourage risk-taking, build self-efficacy, and promote ownership of learning. They also

require educators to navigate complex social and psychological dynamics, including identity-related interactions.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of revitalization at the Pan-African higher education institution was grounded in its institutional identity, the integration of selected Ghanaian and African values, and established theories of change and revitalization. Two Ghanaian philosophical principles, Sankofa and Sunsum, informed the cultural dimension of the framework, while Wallace's revitalization theory, the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM), and Kotter's theory of change provided the theoretical structure.

In Ghanaian tradition, revitalization is understood as a reflection translated into action. Sankofa, a central philosophy, emphasizes learning from the past to shape a better future. It advocates returning to retrieve lost knowledge and wisdom to inform present and future development (n.d.; Amano Boateng & Maier, 2025). This principle aligns with the study's aim to revisit and reapply the institution's original values and identity as a foundation for cultural renewal.

Wallace (1956) extends this idea by conceptualizing revitalization as "a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture." This notion of conscious effort resonates with the Ghanaian concept of Sunsum, which refers to spiritual essence, purity, and integrity. In this study, Sunsum symbolizes the invisible energy that drives reflective action, reinforcing the intention to restore the culture to its authentic state.

Wallace also identifies triggers for revitalization, noting that high societal stress, such as an epidemic, can catalyze cultural reconstruction. The COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, served as a significant stimulus for recovery. Wallace argues that individuals hold mental images of society and its culture, which influence their actions to reduce stress or transform society. This suggests that students and staff would be willing participants in the proposed change.

Change is the underlying process that enables revitalization. It involves both systematic procedures and shifts in individual mindsets, which are critical for sustaining transformation. The Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) offers a developmental approach to implementing change in educational settings (Hall et al., 2015). CBAM emphasizes understanding and supporting individuals throughout the adoption of innovations. It recognizes that successful implementation requires more than resources and training; it also depends on addressing the human element, including individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The model's three diagnostic dimensions provide tools for assessing concerns and usage, enabling the development of tailored interventions to support success (Hord, 2006).

Kotter's theory of change complements this approach by outlining eight steps for effective transformation. These steps begin with establishing urgency and forming a guiding coalition, followed by creating and communicating a vision that delivers both short-term results and long-term sustainability. Kotter's framework informed the structure of the intervention and guided the process of cultural revitalization.

This study examines how engaging students who have returned to their Pan-African University after the COVID-19 pandemic in a structured initiative can serve as a catalyst for restoring and reimagining the institution's original culture. It examines whether active participation in this process can ignite a sense of ownership, strengthen institutional identity, and create a renewed cultural foundation that reflects both historical values and future aspirations.

The post-COVID disruption of institutional culture at a Pan-African University significantly affected students' sense of identity, and attendance in class was notably low. None of the students who resumed studies on campus after the pandemic had fully experienced the pre-COVID culture, making restoration challenging. Most students were unable to articulate or embody the university's identity.

Research Design

This study employed a narrative participatory inquiry case study design (Sunday et al., 2020), focusing on a single Pan-African university. The approach engaged a wide range of stakeholders in sharing narratives about institutional identity, including its past, present, and envisioned future. These narratives were elicited through student-led questions exploring the hearsay of pre-COVID culture, current experiences, and aspirations for cultural revitalization.

Narrative participatory inquiry was selected because it positions participants, particularly students, as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive subjects. This aligns with Felten's (2013) principle that good SoTL is collaborative and grounded in partnership with students. By inviting students to lead dialogue and reflection, the design foregrounded their agency and acknowledged their lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge. This participatory stance reflects an epistemological commitment to valuing diverse ways of knowing and an ontological recognition of students as active contributors to institutional transformation. Hamilton and McCollum (2024) argue that great SoTL interrogates systems of knowledge and being. In this study, the design incorporates African philosophical constructs and relational ontologies, situating revitalization within a Pan-African context that values communal identity and collective responsibility.

The design was further structured around Kotter's eight-step theory of change, which provided a systematic framework for guiding the revitalization process. Each step was embedded within the participatory approach and connected to the principles of student partnership and African knowledge systems:

1. Establishing a Sense of Urgency
The disruption caused by COVID created a natural sense of urgency. This was amplified through student-led discussions that highlighted the loss of institutional culture and its impact on identity and engagement.
2. Forming a Powerful Guiding Coalition
Students, faculty, staff, and alumni were brought together as a collaborative coalition. This group represented diverse voices and perspectives, reinforcing the principle of partnership and shared ownership.
3. Creating a Vision for Change
Through narrative inquiry, participants co-constructed a vision for revitalizing the institutional culture. This vision drew on historical values of scholarship, leadership, and citizenship while integrating African philosophies such as Sankofa and Sunsum.
4. Communicating the Vision
The vision was communicated through participatory forums, reflective prompts, and campus-wide dialogues. These activities ensured transparency and inclusivity, fostering trust and commitment.
5. Empowering Broad-Based Action
Students were empowered to take initiative by designing and implementing cultural activities that reflected the shared vision. This step operationalized Felten's emphasis on student partnership as a driver of meaningful change.
6. Generating Short-Term Wins
Early successes, such as increased student engagement in cultural events and improved attendance, were celebrated to build momentum and demonstrate progress.
7. Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change
Feedback loops were established to refine strategies and sustain engagement. This iterative process enabled the coalition to adapt and expand its initiatives in response to emerging needs.

8. Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture

The final step focused on embedding revitalized practices into institutional systems and traditions, ensuring long-term sustainability and alignment with the university's identity.

By integrating Kotter's structured change process with participatory inquiry, the design created a dynamic framework that honored African epistemologies and ontologies while applying globally recognized principles of organizational change. This approach not only addressed the immediate challenge of cultural disruption but also provided a model for collaborative transformation in higher education contexts.

Procedure (The Catalytic Revitalization Activities)

In five weeks, the university engaged over 60% of its 1100 students in intensive and targeted activities that operationalized the conceptual framework and the institutional identity (scholarship, citizenship, and leadership traits), a culture they had only heard about but not experienced in fidelity. The activities took the form of conversations, structured focus groups, storytelling, reflections, problem-solving exercises, and practical actions. Each catalytic activity gave students opportunities to show, do, or reflect on the "possibilities" of reversing the disrupted campus culture. The students were also encouraged to construct and plan short- and long-term actions and habits to sustain and revitalize a culture of their desires.

Catalytic Activities

In storytelling, some alumni volunteered to tell their university stories in panel format, fireside chat style, and structured group conversations. They used the opportunity to answer student questions about the university culture prior to COVID. The participating volunteer alumni were very passionate about their alma mater and provided many vivid examples of their institutional lived experiences to the current students. Approximately 300 students engaged with the alumni.

Additionally, a panel comprising a cross-section of students, alumni, and staff discussed the evolution of the university's culture through their unique lenses and experiences, providing the necessary context and history for understanding the present and planning for the future. In attendance were 30 students, alumni, and staff whose interactions contributed to the storytelling.

The storytelling activities included watching movies as a group and reflecting on them independently through writing. For example, the movie "Lean on Me" is a true story about the outcome of a highly prestigious high school's deterioration due to student apathy and its subsequent revitalization through intentionality and hard work. Over 600 students watched the movie with some administrators in an open courtyard and wrote reflections afterwards. The students immediately saw the parallels between us in our current state and the movie's theme.

In addition to storytelling, there were co-creating problem-solving activities, where faculty, teaching assistants (faculty interns), resident assistants, and staff each met at least once in small groups of 10–15 to discuss the problem and to respond to the following major prompts and other follow-up reciprocal questions_

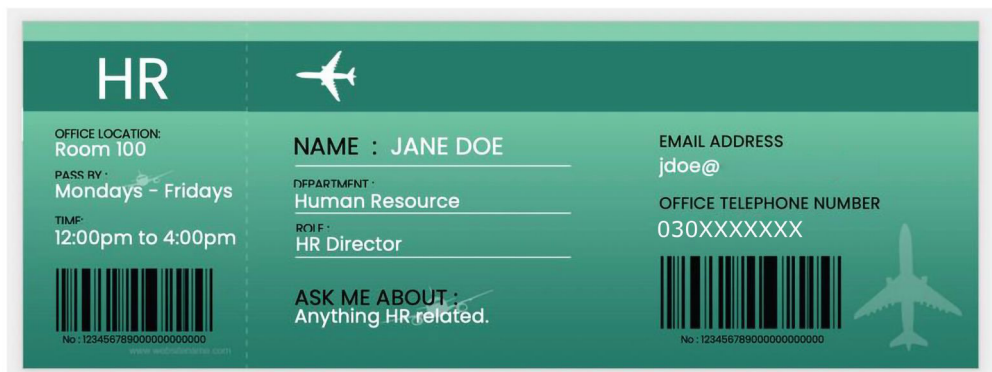
- "What have you heard about our university's culture pre-COVID?"
- "What do you imagine as our most ideal campus culture?"
- "What can you do or we do to get us to our culture pre-COVID or better?"

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The students narrated what they had heard and used stories to share their ideal university experiences, both past and future, that they envisioned for the university to return to its pre-COVID culture. They were also encouraged to suggest what they could do to get us to revert. As many as 900 of the 1300 students engaged in authentic, confidential dialogue. Approximately 600 students participated in in-class discussions with faculty, alumni, and faculty interns on the academic and personal factors that contribute to the collective culture. A total of 321 and 250 students participated respectively in the on-campus and off-campus “Hack-your-hall” (a hackathon concerning culture on student life, campus safety, relationships, etc.). Each group had a notetaker, and the data collected was collated and coded for thematic patterns and understandings.

Another focus was interconnectedness through many activity forms. Sometimes it involved holding an ice-cream social where students earned an ice cream cone only when they introduced themselves to each other in person and then successfully introduced their new acquaintance to another at the social. Many students only knew each other virtually, and these activities provided them with a reason to speak to one another and get to know each other in person. About 400 students participated.

Another interconnectedness activity involved having students learn about the services each university office offered. The activity required students to “travel across the University,” where students were given an “airplane ticket” with a specific staff member at a departmental office as a destination, e.g., the HR Director’s Office. On arrival at the office, the student asked questions to understand the HR Director’s role and how her responsibilities impact the student. Approximately 100 students took part in this activity. The top three travellers were awarded prizes.



Interconnectedness with the university's goals and values was fostered through a scavenger hunt across the university. The activity served three purposes: students had to ask for directions from university staff and fellow students on how to get to various buildings and rooms, they gained knowledge of the campus layout, and they reinforced their awareness of the university's values. About 70 students participated in this activity.

Several other stakeholders also organized university identity-building activities. The university's Students' Council led activities such as outdoor picnics and games to support the institutional identity theme. About 200 students participated. The Office of Student & Community Affairs (OSCA), in addition to organizing and serving on panels, also provided opportunities for students to express themselves through art, music, and poetry, depicting cultural change. Approximately 30 students participated in this creative activity. OSCA recruited faculty and staff as hostel volunteer patrons to ensure the sustainability of the changes.

Instruments

Multiple instruments were employed to collect data and assess the impact of the revitalization initiative during the five-week catalyst period, as well as its projected long-term influence on institutional identity. Data collection included interviews, focus groups, and both structured and unstructured conversations, supported by note-taking and audio recording.

In alignment with Ghanaian traditions of knowledge transfer, surveys were not used. Instead, storytelling served as the primary method, incorporating alumni narratives, student accounts of the original culture, films, and group discussions. Storytelling is a cornerstone of African culture, used to transmit history, values, and social norms while fostering community. In this study, it was central to shaping and reinforcing institutional identity.

Observation was another key component. Custom-designed observation forms, which combined checklists and rating scales, provided a structured way to record behavioral patterns and changes, such as engagement outside the classroom and physical attendance, as indicators of motivation. Photos and video recordings supplemented these observations, while detailed field notes offered narrative accounts for later analysis.

Attendance records were analyzed to measure participation directly and academic engagement indirectly. Additionally, students' written reflections captured emerging thoughts and responses to the revitalization activities.

Ensuring Analytical Rigor

To ensure trustworthiness, multiple strategies were applied. Coding and analysis were conducted collaboratively by a team of researchers who met regularly to discuss interpretations, resolve discrepancies, and maintain consistency. This approach incorporated diverse theoretical perspectives.

Findings were validated through iterative comparison across interviews (Chui et al., 2014) and other data sources. Preliminary results, including key themes, representative quotes, and theoretical interpretations, were shared for feedback to confirm plausibility and identify missing perspectives or alternative explanations.

Results

The catalytic short-term activities resulted in two major outcomes: changes in students' behavior choices in the short term and the initiation of long—term mindset changes. The behavioral changes were observable during and after the catalytic activity period, and the emerging mindset shifts were evident in student reflections.

Short-term Behavior Changes

The most pronounced behavior change was in students' attendance at classes. There was a weekly check on class attendance, and absences dropped from 12% to 2%. With the increase in attendance, the campus social life improved, as seen in the photos below.

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Long—term mindset changes initiated



Week 1 and 2



Week 5 and 6



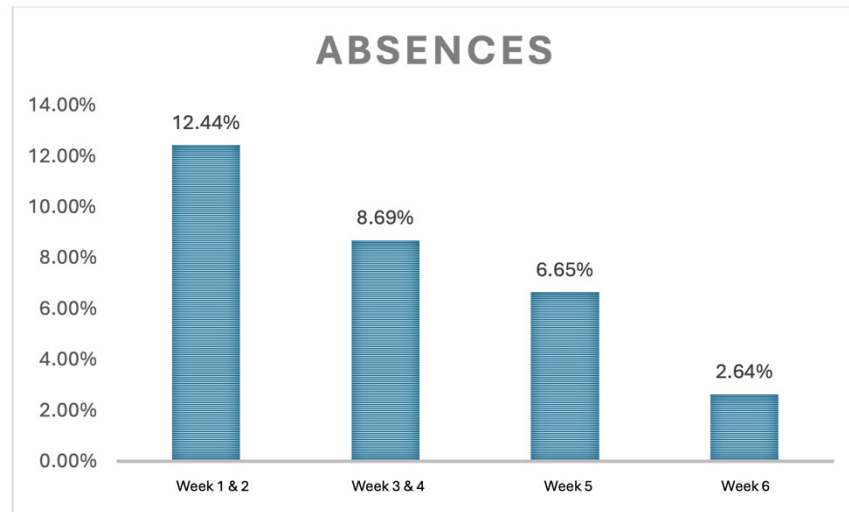


Figure 1. Trend of Absences over the Catalytic Period

The study had two primary research themes. The first were predetermined research themes based on the tenets of the original culture. Those themes were leveraged due to the integral role the desired institutional change played in the design of the interventions, and they were:

- Embracing fresh thinking (Scholarship)
- Asking questions that broaden the conversation (Scholarship)
- Reflecting for action (Sankofa)
- Being socially and environmentally conscious (Citizenship)
- Having fun (Citizenship)
- Connecting with others (Citizenship)
- Developing interconnectedness (Sunsum)
- Engaging talents, experiences, and capabilities of others (Leadership)
- Communicating effectively (Leadership)
- Setting ambitious yet attainable goals (Leadership)

The second type of themes in the research study were not predetermined, but rather emerged from coding the students' focus groups and interview transcripts. Out of the approximately 200 student-written reflections and conversation transcripts, the following additional major themes emerged as areas of focus in revitalizing the campus culture.

- Desirable and worth sustaining
- Needed to strengthen the university Ecosystem
- Introspecting and responsibilities
- The power of caring

Note: Introspecting and responsibilities could be conflated with “reflection and action” (Sankofa) of the conceptual framework. “Connecting with others” (an institutional citizenship trait) and developing interconnectedness (Sunsum) of the conceptual framework could also be conflated.

To illustrate each theme, student quotes and excerpts from students' writings have been provided.

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Embracing Fresh Thinking (Scholarship)s

During the short-term catalytic period, the students demonstrated their openness to engaging in fresh thinking in their reflections, short conversations, and structured focus groups.

One student said, “[I don’t see] Discipline as punishment [anymore. I understand now, and I know it’s for my good.”

Some students now believed that through sacrifice, determination, and hard work, one could turn a bad situation around. Others, after being introduced to the values, were convinced that they would need to cultivate the three values—citizenship, leadership, and scholarship—to help them succeed in their university life and post-university, because ethics and leadership didn’t matter only at university.

Asking questions that broaden the conversation (Scholarship)

Some of the questions the students asked that made us realize they were thinking beyond the five weeks of activity, and extended the conversation, included:

“What are the measures we can use to guide and rate the change I have made, to see if it is working or not [and I wonder] if the impact will be for the long run?”

“Would you recommend Joe Clark’s leadership style, and which community would this type of leadership style work best?”

“Would you say Joe Clark was a role model? Why or why not?”

Reflecting for Action connected with Introspecting and Responsibilities

When students were asked after a series of conversations, events, debates, and visualizations what they felt they could do to help the institution revive itself, they had the following to say (See Table 1). The bolded items have been made into posters and displayed in the classroom as daily reminders of their promises.

Table 1.
Sample of Students Quotes as a Resource for Classroom Posters

Poster Quotes Made	Poster Quotes to be Made
It begins with me.	Personal discipline.
I stay true to who I am, because The University is me.	Cultivate in me more ethical and social behavior.
Be a friend.	Do for others what you want others to do for you.
Be friendly.	Make the first move.
Expand your friend circle.	Be kind to someone you do not know.
Simply say “Hi”	Respect boundaries.
Respect time.	Respect our values, religions, tribes, nationalities, and each other
Consider other’s views.	Build open mindedness.
Serve when the opportunity arises.	Agree to disagree
	Immerse ourselves in all we do.

“Lean on Me” is a great movie. First, it made me think about the discipline our university had before the COVID pandemic. The number of AJC [judiciary] cases before was [less] than the cases we have now. In comparing this to *Lean on Me*, the discipline wasn’t in the school for quite some time. I believe that everything is a process, and it takes time to achieve one’s goals. I believe there will be a change as time goes on, and the discipline that was once there will return. The movie has helped me

reflect. I believe I can be disciplined; I will be able to accept correction. As a final-year student, I am going to participate in my NSS [National Service]. If my boss is hard on me, I won't take it personally because I believe it will help me be more disciplined."

"The part that [resonated with me the most about the movie *Lean on Me* was when] Mr. Clark accepted his weaknesses as a leader when he was told by his vice principal that he should learn how to appreciate others too, and not only attribute all successes achieved with Eastside High to himself. This resonated with me because, as leaders, it can sometimes be challenging to acknowledge our shortcomings, especially when they are pointed out by the people we lead. Hence, I plan on harnessing this lesson learned from Mr. Clark in my leadership journey in the university and beyond to help me be an effective leader who always strives to create a diverse and inclusive environment where everyone feels like their opinions matter."

Having fun (Citizenship)

Fun was intentionally integrated into many aspects of the intervention. The most popular fun activity was watching a movie with 600 peers, outdoors in the evening, while enjoying free popcorn, pizza, and ice cream. The following are some of the things students said about the different activities or programs of the catalytic period:

"It was a great movie that did not only help release stress but also taught me lessons for future occurrences."

"We should have more of these kinds of hangouts. It is indeed a refreshing time for all of us. Thank you!"

"I look forward to more insightful movie nights with power-packed benefits for the whole community. Thank you."

"Just wanted to say that we really enjoyed it [all] and are grateful."

"The program was fun, and I would like it to be organized more often."

Connecting with others (Citizenship) & Developing Interconnectedness (Sunsum)

During this period, students were often grouped together, and out of these clusters, unstructured conversations emerged among community members, fostering new friendships and acquaintances across disciplines, year groups, and the broader community.

The chosen student quote talks about the value they now place on connecting well with others:

"This was a powerful reminder that no matter how great our ideas and motives are, we need to work well with others to make it happen. I am very passionate about changing things, but sometimes we can get so focused on that mission and think we are the only ones that [. . .] can make this change. But this is not true; if change is to be long-term and effective, I need to work with other people and believe in how they can also make this mission or goal a reality."

All the processes in the initiative would promote student interconnectedness, a trait of "Sunsum" that is considered important in revitalizing culture, fostering a holistic community, and society (n.d.; Amano Boateng & Maier, 2025).

Engaging talents, experiences, and capabilities of others (Leadership)

Some students represented the revitalization of the institution through their diverse talents in poetry and art. See below the poem "COVID-19 Wrapper" written by a student of the class of 2025:

"All we hear are stories of the energy and vibrance of this hill and how it resulted in a positive transformation of the students and faculty. And the truth is, we, as first-year students, long for this



Figure 1. Student Depiction of Culture Revitalization

experience, and we see some of this energy seeping out from the post-COVID wrapping that restricts us as fiercely. But I am sure it is just a matter of time. I am sure no wrapper can ever contain the [university] energy.”

Another student, through his artistic talent, expressed the reimagination and recreation of a desirable university culture. He depicted it as a head and face, gradually engulfing and covering the undesirable skeletal version of the current university culture. See figure 1.

Some student quotes on the value of various talents include:

“There is a lot of potential in everyone. I will have to work very hard to be my best in my life at [this university].”

“In our school environment, we are surrounded by so many people: students, teachers, cleaners, and security guards, among others. All of these individuals are part of our school and play a crucial role in fostering our culture, and must be considered and treated as such. This is what has impacted me most, and what I will carry in my life in [the university].”

Communicating effectively (Leadership)

Throughout the intervention, students, staff, alumni, and faculty had to communicate their messages clearly and honestly to be understood and appreciated by each other. Through a combination of active listening, empathy, and clarity, as well as verbal and nonverbal cues, in various opportunities, the students communicated their lived and preferred experiences.

Appreciating the Desirableness of the University (Desirable and worth sustaining)

According to a student, “This university culture should never fade, it’s such a unique experience to be part of this community ❤️”

The students noted several aspects of the university that they admired, appreciated, and hoped could be sustained, as part of the revitalization. First was the environment; they felt that the university environment provided students with opportunities for self-discovery, self-growth, and healthy competition. All these were desirable traits because they motivated students to strive for greater achievement. They heightened students’ standards and expectations of themselves, things like the university Honor code, which put you on the trajectory for a better self.

Students also valued the quality of the rigorous education they received, specifically, the student- and learner-centered teaching. Maintaining the relevance of the curriculum to work ethic and the workforce, they felt, was necessary for revitalization. The network experiences both local and global, as well as academic and professional, support systems, with caring faculty/staff, all of which are characteristics of the university that should be sustained.

Overall, the friendly and hospitable “my brother’s keeper” attitude of students on campus was also a trait that students wanted to maintain. Finally, the intentionality with which the university approached almost all its tasks, including its culture, was to remain, if we were to achieve cultural revitalization.

Strengthening the Academic Ecosystem

The students offered advice to the faculty on scholarship expectations for a revitalized culture. Students were prepared to respond in certain ways to faculty actions aimed at revitalizing the institutional culture. Some of the imperfections and insufficiencies of the institution's citizenship that needed to be corrected during revitalization were identified by the students. The students proposed ways to strengthen the university's ecosystem:

"I would also like to suggest that students' opinions and issues at departmental levels be sorted out. I have observed that, due to COVID-19, students have withdrawn from social engagements and are primarily focused on achieving good grades, as many are struggling academically. Hence, students need to be listened to, supported, and encouraged. Each department could seek the opinions of students and find out 'what isn't' working, and I believe by this, the romanticized stress which has become normal among students will cease to exist."

Students requested more faculty involvement. They requested more Faculty-Student interactions at the departmental or university-wide level, possibly through increased opportunities for listening and communication. They also requested that faculty provide more intentional teaching of the expected culture and expectations, and asked that faculty model university expectations by adhering to university policies and exemplifying an ethical and entrepreneurial lifestyle. Faculty should consider "process" as equally important as the product and inspire students, checking for learning, not just grades or GPA.

The Power of Caring

One recurring comment from the students was the impact of the university's demonstration of care and concern on their willingness to reflect and speak up about the kind of culture the university should have and cultivate. Some student quotes include:

"Thanks a lot for the effort you are putting into bringing back the university culture. The seamless organization and subtle impact were very evident to me. I loved the university I came to meet, and it's quite unfortunate that a lot has changed over the past few years. As I leave the university soon, I pray that things improve, and I hope the university spirit is reawakened. God bless you."

One student vowed:

"While at the university, or anywhere I am given the opportunity to lead, I'll be more loving to everyone around me."

And another simply stated:

#WeNeedToRebuildOurCommunity'sCultureAfterTheCOVID

Being Socially and Environmentally Conscious

Some students' awareness of the Pan-African foundation of the university was heightened during the conversations. They discussed intercultural understanding and relationships, as well as building cultural responsiveness among themselves. Some spoke of being more intentional, moving forward, to make international friends. Introverted students and international students wanted to feel less isolated and more integrated.

Setting Ambitious yet Attainable Goals (Leadership)

Many students, in their reflections, committed to life-changing goals, such as being firm in making decisions, never giving up in their efforts to achieve their goals, and paying attention to people, whether superiors or subordinates.

The Change Process

All these changes lead up to Kotter's steps 7 and 8, which are the final stages of attaining organizational change.

One student said, "As [activities, fun, pizza, etc.] can not be given all the time, and students may go back to withdrawing. I think we need to come up with ways to create a lasting change, a change that is from the heart and mind. That way, when all this is over, the change will live on. Thank you once again."

After the 5-week short-term catalytic intervention, some long-term changes emerged in the subsequent three years:

The policy on class attendance has been modified and is actively implemented. Students "**Will fail the course**" has replaced "May fail the course," if they are absent the equivalent of three weeks of a course in a semester, with no plausible reason, or "will be deemed no longer enrolled at the university" if the student makes no contact with any administrative staff.

The practice of a **weekly check-in** on all student attendance has become a permanent feature of the university. The Academic Affairs Projects Officer phones every student who missed class to offer "care". The student is asked how the office can assist in getting the student back in class.

Additionally, each semester, the week after mid-semester, students who are on the trajectory of failing a class due to absences receive an email with detailed information on the number of absences they have accumulated to date. This often curbs the behavior. Currently, weekly absences range from 3% to 6%.

The practice of creating posters featuring students' quotes to display in the classrooms has become a tradition. Currently, the posters are rotated regularly every quarter of the year around the classrooms, bulletin boards, and other areas on campus. The posters are also used to teach other characteristics beyond the student quotes. See Appendix 2.

Another tradition is the university's monthly "Academic Breaks" where the entire community—students, faculty, staff, administrators—come together for 20 minutes over light snacks, speaking to each other, meeting new community members, seeing people you had not seen in a while, rekindling each other's existence as members of the community.

On a regular basis, aspects of the "Pre-COVID values and culture" are displayed on bulletin boards, at orientations, in class, and elsewhere, with the content rotated and replaced to keep the concept dynamic, present, and sustained. See Appendix 3.

Discussion

We sought to understand what happens when students returning to a Pan-African university after the COVID-19 pandemic are engaged in a multi-year initiative designed to revitalize the original pre-COVID campus culture. This question was critical because when the campus reopened in January 2022, students continued to display behaviors of isolation. Most had little or no experience of the vibrant culture that previously defined the institution. The emerging culture was inconsistent with the university's mission, and academic motivation, engagement, and performance were steadily declining.

To address this challenge, we implemented an intervention grounded in African philosophies of reflection and action (Sankofa) and interconnectedness (Sunsum), storytelling as a traditional

Ghanaian pedagogical tool, Kotter’s eight-step change model, and Wallace’s revitalization theory. This structured approach ensured that cultural renewal was intentional rather than left to chance. The intervention successfully triggered revitalization and accelerated the restoration of what we describe as the “pure” institutional culture.

Our design reflects Felten’s (2013) pillars of good SoTL, particularly the emphasis on student partnership, context, and public sharing of results. Students were positioned as co-creators of knowledge, leading dialogue and shaping the vision for change. This participatory stance aligns with Hamilton and McCollum’s (2024) argument that great SoTL interrogates epistemological and ontological foundations. By valuing African knowledge systems and relational ontologies, we recognized students not only as learners but as agents of cultural transformation. This approach challenged dominant Western paradigms of change and affirmed the legitimacy of indigenous philosophies in the realm of higher education reform.

A key outcome was the achievement of short-term wins, which Kotter identifies as essential for sustaining momentum. Following the five-week intensive intervention, students showed increased engagement on campus, higher class attendance, and renewed participation in cultural activities. These changes reflected core institutional values: embracing fresh thinking and asking questions that broaden conversations (Scholarship), being socially and environmentally conscious, and connecting with others (Citizenship), as well as engaging talents, communicating effectively, and setting ambitious goals (Leadership). This collective mindset signaled the re-emergence of the original institutional identity.

Beyond restoring the pre-COVID culture, new student aspirations emerged. These included appreciation for the university’s aesthetics and opportunities, a more balanced academic and social ecosystem between faculty and students, and recognition of the community’s care and commitment. As one student noted, “It is not the activities alone that have made us change but the fact that you cared enough to do all that for us.” This finding underscores the relational dimension of change and the importance of trust and belonging in cultural revitalization-elements central to SoTL’s concern with learning environments and student engagement.

Another significant outcome was the accelerated timeline of cultural restoration compared to expectations based on the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM). While CBAM suggests that full implementation and fidelity often occur after four cycles or approximately four years, the desired level of cultural integration was achieved in the third year (Table 2 below). This acceleration may be attributed to the participatory design, student partnerships, and the structured application of Kotter’s change process, which created urgency, built coalitions, and anchored new practices in institutional systems.

Table 2.
Levels of use

Level Characteristic Behavior	Approximate Timeline
Stage VI: Renewal. Seeks more effective alternatives to the established use of the innovation.	Year 5 onwards
Stage V: Integration. Makes deliberate efforts to coordinate with others in using the innovation.	Year 4
Stage IVB: Refinement. Assesses impact and makes changes to increase it.	Year 3
Stage IVA: Routine. Has established a pattern of use and is making few, if any, changes.	Year 3
Stage III: Mechanical. Is poorly coordinated, making changes to better organize use of the innovation.	Year 2
Stage II: Preparation. Prepares to use the innovation.	Year 1
Stage I: Orientation. Seeks information about the innovation.	Year 1
Stage 0: Nonuse. Takes no action with respect to the innovation.	Year 1

These findings demonstrate that intentional, culturally responsive strategies can successfully restore and enhance institutional identity in post-crisis contexts. They also emphasize the importance of integrating African philosophies with global change theories and SoTL principles to foster sustainable transformation in higher education. By combining Kotter's systematic approach with Felten's pillars and Hamilton and McCollum's call for epistemological and ontological depth, this study presents a model for addressing complex challenges in ways that respect local knowledge while contributing to the global discourse in SoTL.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the SoTL can extend beyond classroom-focused inquiries to address complex institutional challenges. Hutchings (2000) reminds us that SoTL is guided by questions that not only examine what works but also envision possibilities—"What could be?" This study embraced that future-oriented question by exploring whether a disrupted university culture could be revitalized and what new forms of identity and engagement might emerge in the process.

By applying Kotter's eight-step change model within a participatory design framework grounded in African philosophies of Sankofa and Sunsum, we successfully catalyzed cultural renewal in a Pan-African context. The five-week intervention provided students with a lived experience of the original culture, enabling them to move beyond imagination to active engagement. This approach aligns with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, and Dewey's principles of experiential learning, all of which emphasize learning through experience, reflection, and social interaction.

The outcomes affirm Felten's (2013) pillars of good SoTL—clear goals, appropriate methods, evidence of learning, and partnership with students—and resonate with Hamilton and McCollum's (2024) call for epistemological and ontological depth. By valuing African knowledge systems and relational ontologies, this study highlights the importance of cultural responsiveness in higher education transformation. The accelerated timeline of change compared to the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) suggests that intentional design, student partnership, and care-driven practices can expedite institutional renewal.

Care emerged as a central theme. Students emphasized that the most powerful catalyst was not the activities themselves but the sense of being valued and supported. This finding reinforces African communal values such as Ujamaa and collectivism, which prioritize group well-being and interconnectedness. It also underscores the human element in change processes—successful implementation depends on relationships, trust, and sustained engagement.

Looking forward, this study opens possibilities for future research that extend Hutchings' vision of "What could be?" Comparative studies could examine how culturally grounded change frameworks operate across diverse African higher education contexts. Longitudinal research is necessary to evaluate the sustainability of revitalized cultures and the impact of student partnerships on maintaining momentum. Further inquiry into storytelling as a pedagogical and cultural tool within SoTL could deepen understanding of its impact on engagement and identity formation. Finally, research should explore how integrating global change theories with indigenous philosophies can inform models of institutional transformation that are both contextually relevant and globally significant.

By combining Kotter's systematic approach with Felten's (2013) pillars, Hamilton and McCollum's (2024) emphasis on epistemology and ontology, and Hutchings' (2000) call to imagine what is possible, this study offers a framework for addressing grand challenges in higher education. It demonstrates that revitalizing institutional culture is not only achievable but can be accelerated through intentional, participatory, and culturally responsive strategies that honor local knowledge while contributing to global SoTL discourse.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: The changes in the attendance policy

The policy on class attendance has been modified and is actively implemented. The bolded sections of the policy below reflect the changes. “Will fail the course” has replaced “May fail the course”, and “will be deemed no longer enrolled at the university” has been added.

If a student misses the equivalent of more than three weeks of classes over the course of a semester, the student **will fail the course**. If the absence was due to a documented illness or other emergency, the instructor may assign an Incomplete (I) grade and allow the course to be completed upon the student’s return to the school.

If the student misses more than three successive weeks of classes over the course of a semester, and does not make any contact with the instructor, finance, registry or OSCA, or any other administrative member of [the university] during that period, the student **will be deemed no longer enrolled at [the university]**. The returning student would have to provide documentation of illness or another emergency and may have to reapply to continue studies for the subsequent semester. **Readmission will be determined on a case-by-case basis.**

Appendix 2: Students Quotes and Others Displayed in Classrooms

The practice of creating posters featuring students’ quotes to display in the classrooms has become a tradition.



Appendix 3: Bulletin Boards with “Pre-COVID values and culture”

