

Forces Shaping Education

How to design learning environments for what's next.

At Steelcase Learning,
we inspire a life of learning by
creating places that engage and
ultimately empower people within
and beyond the classroom.

We support
lifelong
learning
by creating
experiences
that can:



Empower

Strong engagement allows for greater empowerment as people have more **agency and independence**.



Engage

Active and inclusive learning environments improve both student and faculty engagement.



Expand

Anyone can carry a learning mindset forward — positively impacting their **personal and professional growth** for years to come.

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Working with Steelcase

Learning is evolving at an accelerating pace.

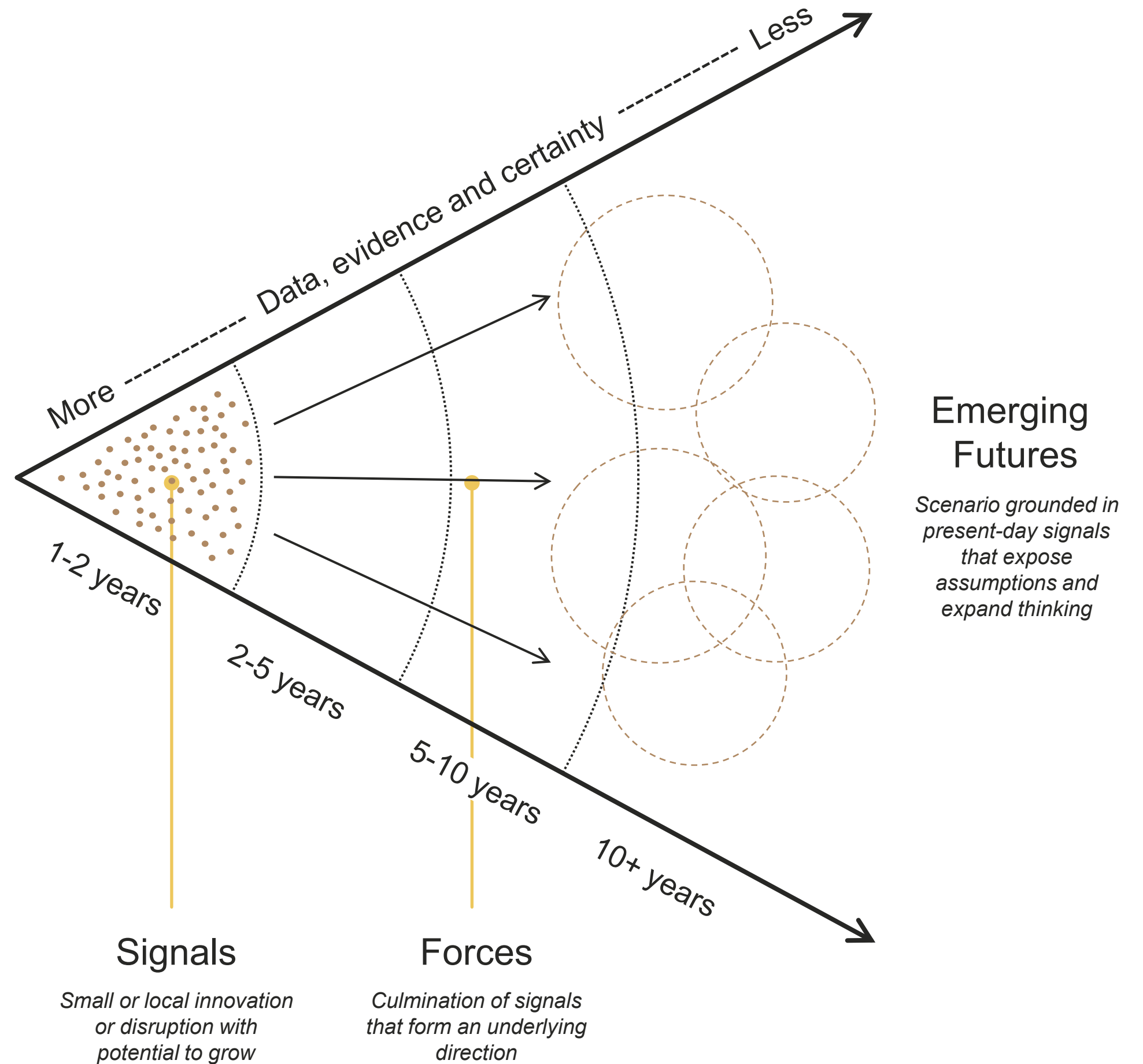
Most decisions focus on the near term, but emerging futures are already shaping how learning will evolve. Exploring these futures helps connect today's actions to what's ahead.

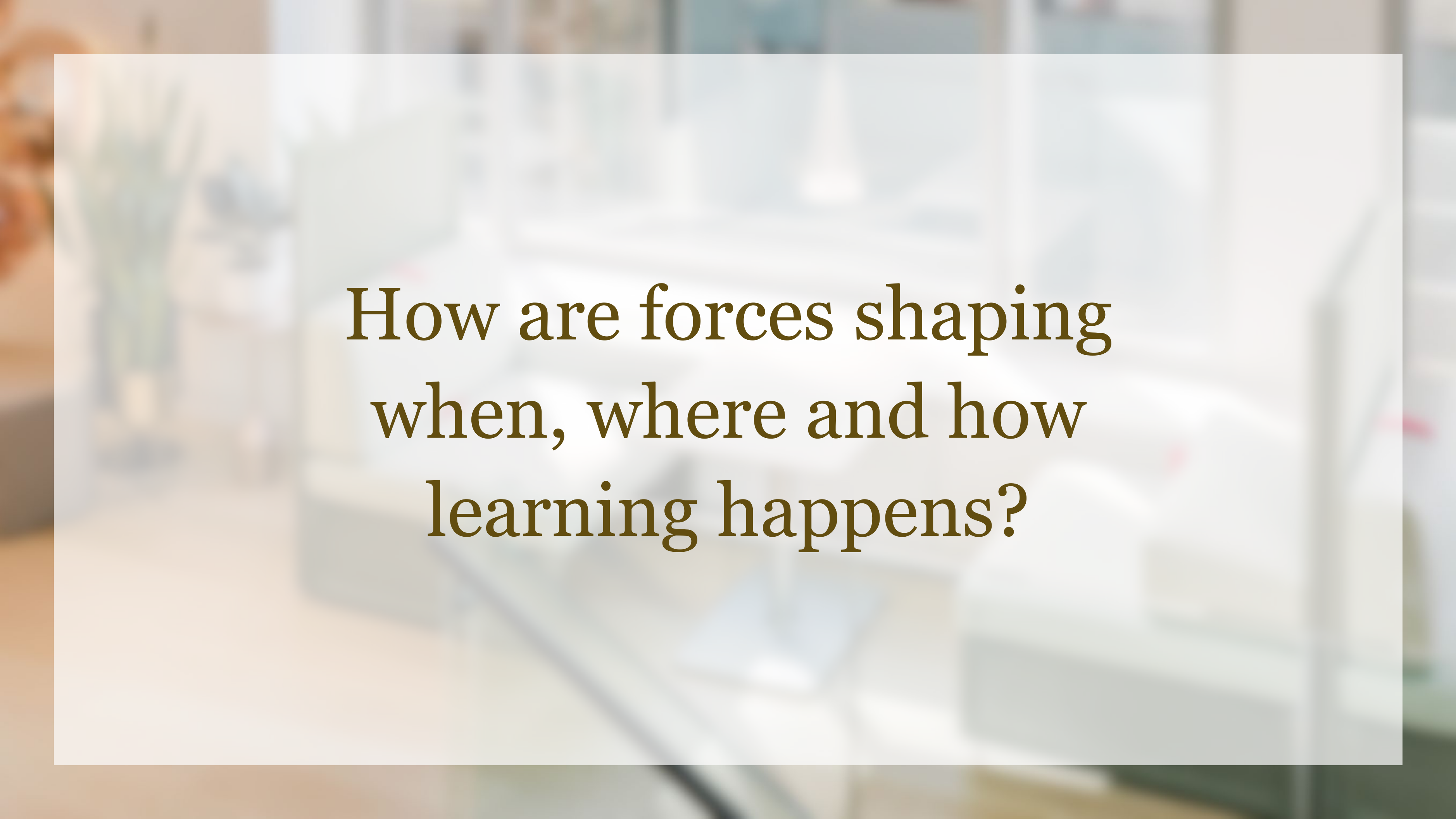
- Anticipate change earlier
- Strengthen adaptability
- Align around future priorities
- Make more confident decisions



In a world of constant change, education continues to provide a foundation for how people evolve, adapt and grow.

We use strategic foresight methods to understand the forces shaping the future of education, helping clarify emerging needs and inform decisions being made today.



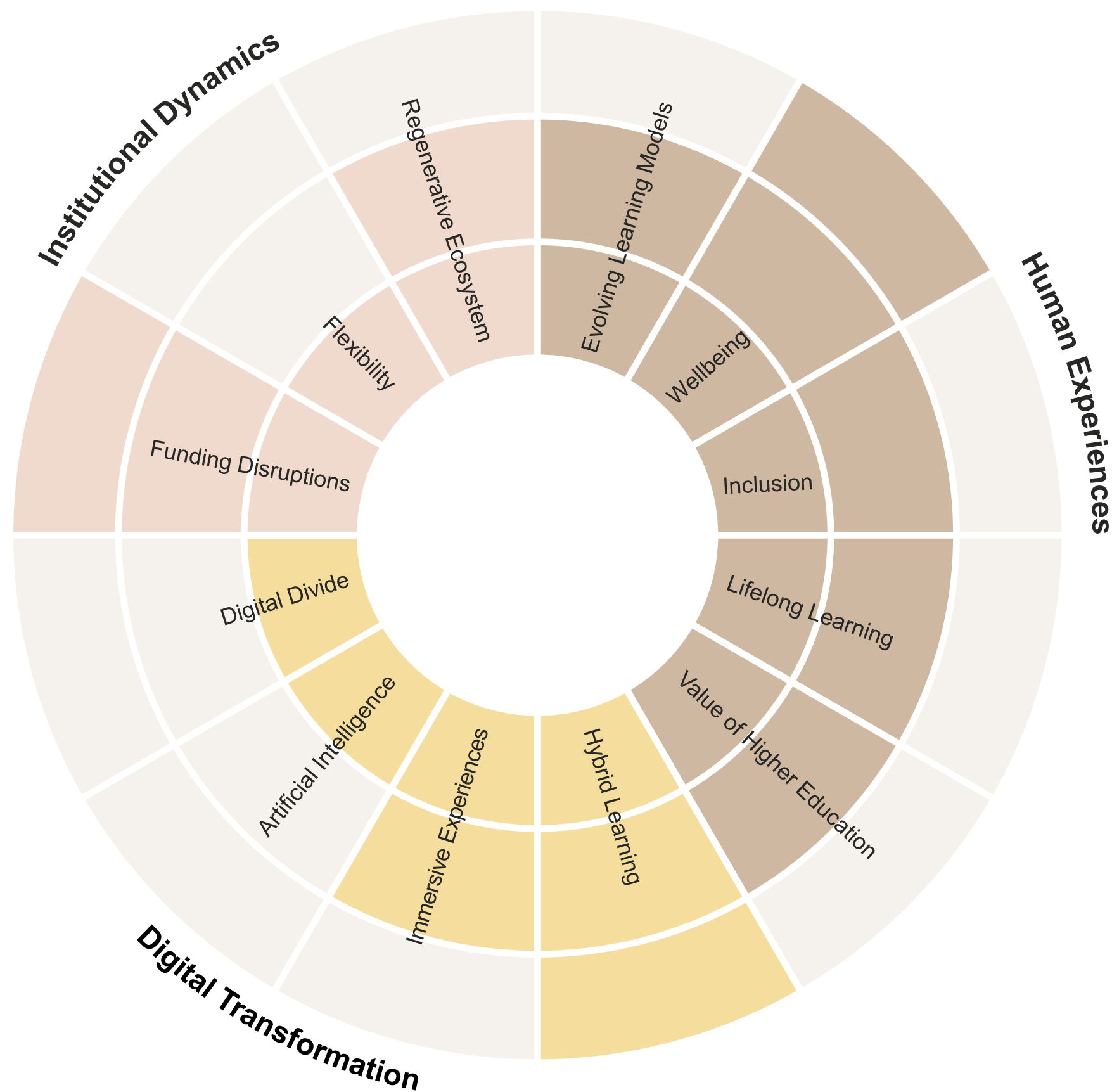


How are forces shaping
when, where and how
learning happens?

Learning is shifting in response to changing human needs.

Societal forces — economic pressure, inequity, climate change, mental health and demographic shifts — are reshaping how and where learning happens, extending beyond classrooms and requiring flexible, supportive environments.





Understanding a Shifting Ecosystem

The forces shaping learning are not equally mature. Clarifying the stage of development for each force helps organizations anticipate impact and act with confidence.

Foresight Forces Maturity Ranking:

Emerging			
Developing			
Established			

Understanding Forces of Change

“Foresight methods help us understand how signals of change across education will shift the trajectory of learning. From there, we can explore how space can support learners and educators as models, expectations and environments continue to evolve.”

Jordan Smith

Steelcase WorkSpace Futures Researcher

The Forces Shaping the Future of Learning

Human Experiences

Learners and educators expect education to be more supportive, inclusive and responsive to individual needs.

Evolving Learning Models

Wellbeing

Inclusion

Lifelong Learning

Value of Higher Education

Digital Transformation

Technology is reshaping how learning is delivered, accessed and experienced across settings.

Hybrid Learning

Digital Divide

Artificial Intelligence

Immersive Experiences

Institutional Dynamics

Education systems are adapting how learning is structured, funded and delivered in a changing world

Funding Disruptions

Flexibility

Regenerative Ecosystem

Forces Shaping Education

SBI + Steelcase Roundtable

Most Significant Forces Impacting Education:

- 1. Artificial Intelligence
- 2. Value of Higher Education
- 3. Funding Disruptions
- 4. Inclusion
- 5. Wellbeing
- 6. Immersive Experiences

3

Total Responses

Roles:

A&D Designer

Higher Ed Admin, Staff, or Faculty

University Interior Designer

6 / 10

Average Preparedness Score

Advances in technology
are expanding access
and reshaping how
learning is experienced.

Artificial Intelligence

AI is becoming embedded in education, expanding capabilities while raising questions about integrity and human connection.

95%

of faculty say AI will increase student overreliance on these tools.

90%

of faculty say AI will weaken students' critical thinking.

83%

of faculty say AI will shorten students' attention spans.

78%

of faculty say cheating has increased with the rise of AI.

74%

of faculty say AI will erode the value of college degrees.

87%

of faculty have created policies for acceptable AI use.

Shifts in funding, value
and adaptability are
placing new demands
on institutions.

Funding Disruptions

As public funding declines and costs rise, the financial burden of education is shifting to students and families.

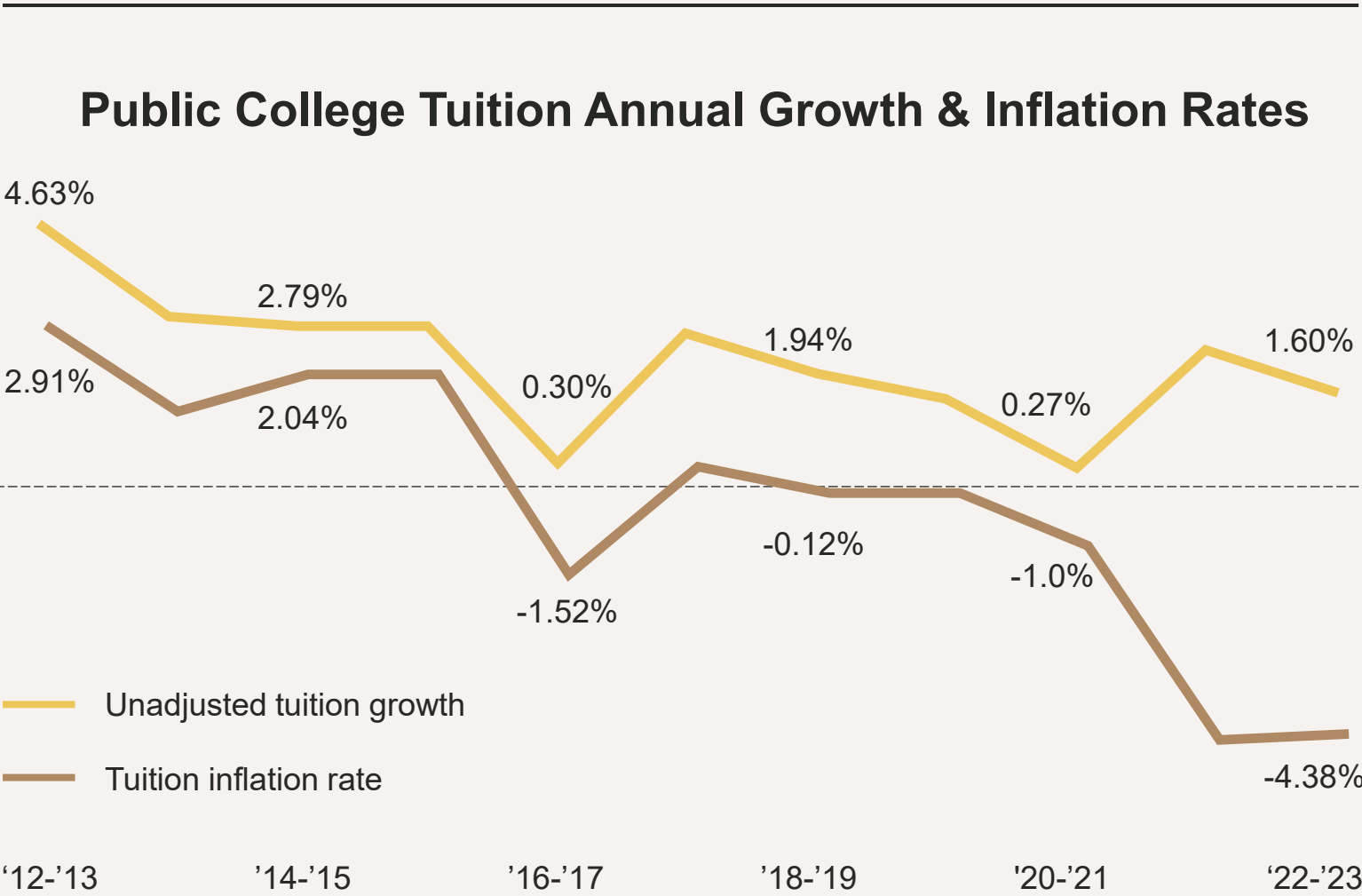
-13%

decrease of public funding per student since 2008.

+37%

rise in tuition per student since 2010.

(Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2025)



(National Center for Education Statistics, 2023)

Learning must support the whole person.

Value of Higher Education

Students are rethinking the value of traditional degrees as costs continue to rise.

Growth of Microcredentials

+300%

increase in microcredential offerings on major learning platforms between 2018-2022.

(OECD, 2022)

Impact of Skills-Based Hiring

+10pts

higher retention among workers hired through skills-based practices when employers fully commit.

(Harvard Business School, 2022)



Wellbeing

Growing mental health challenges are making wellbeing a systemic priority for learners and educators.

Teachers report higher burnout than other working adults.



(North America Global, 2023)

“Prioritizing embedded counselors and other mental health-related services underscores our continued commitment to the well-being of our students, ensuring they have the resources and support they need to thrive both academically and personally.”

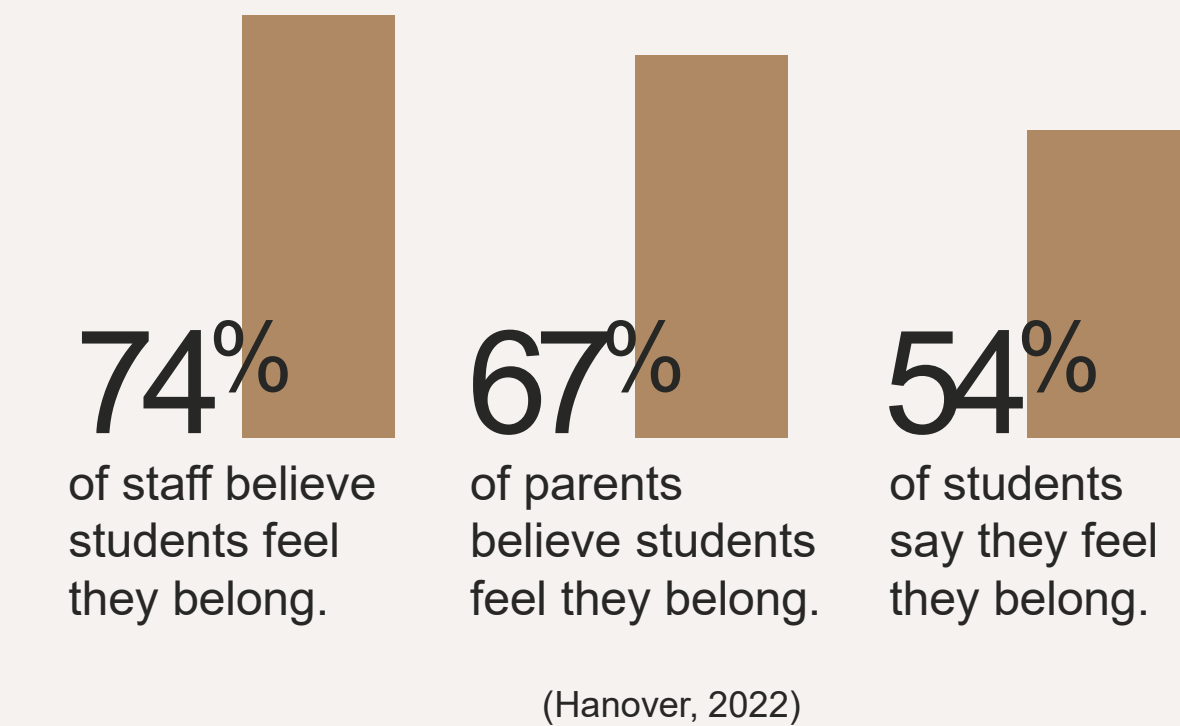
Vice President for Student Life
Public Research University

Inclusion

Traditional models of learning have excluded too many people — inclusion requires environments that elevate voice, belonging and participation.

Perceptions of Belonging Differ by Group

Belonging is overestimated by adults compared to students.



“Access and inclusion should be considered a design opportunity rather than just a design constraint.”

Design Education Researcher
Public Research University

(Harvard University, 2022)

Impact of Factors

How are the shifts in education affecting you?

1

How are learner expectations reshaping your institution?

2

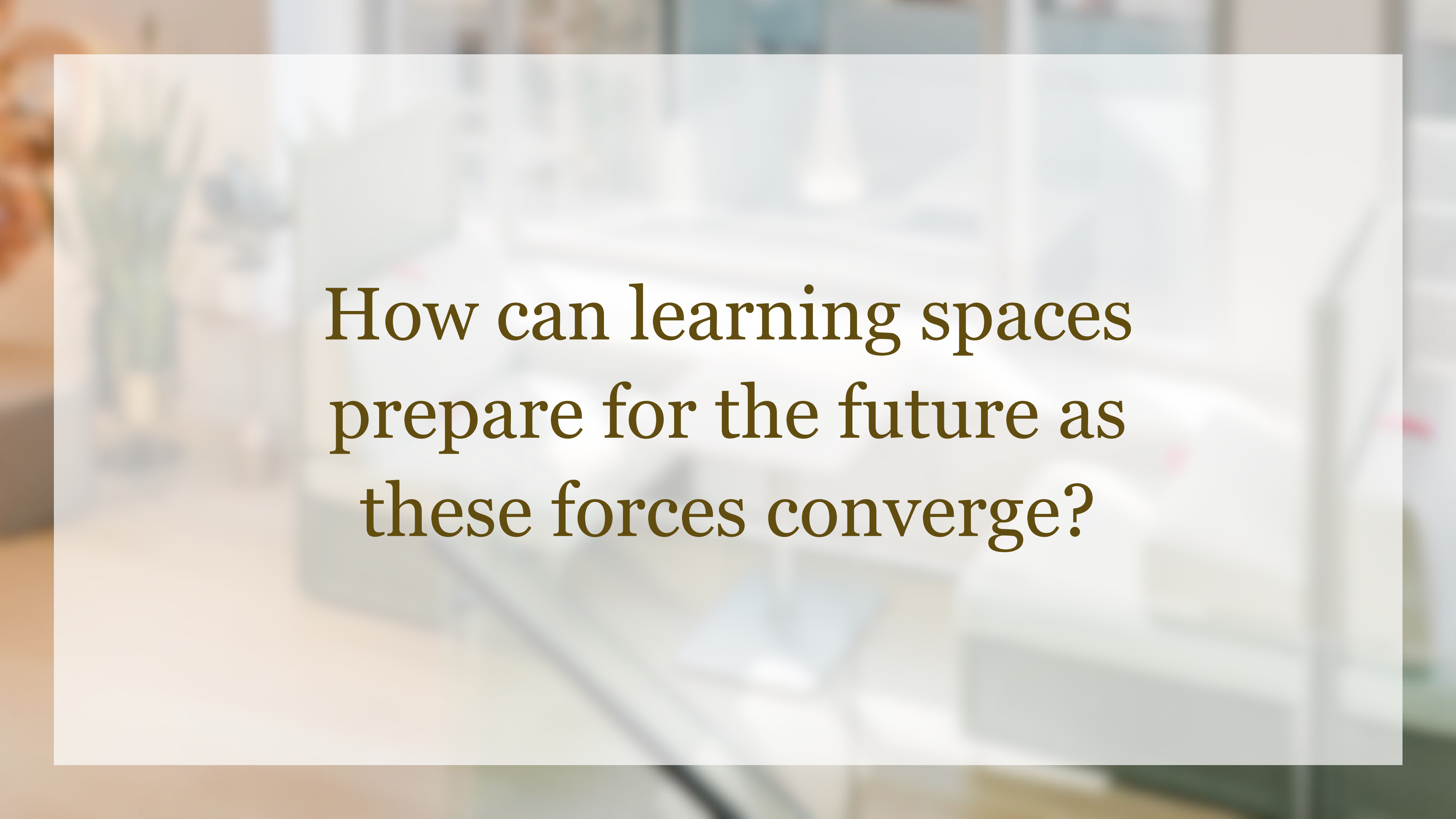
How is your institution adapting to new learning models?

3

How are educator roles and needs evolving?

4

Which force(s) offer the greatest opportunity?



How can learning spaces
prepare for the future as
these forces converge?

Emerging Futures

AI + Active Learning

A future where AI supports instruction and active, authentic learning experiences deepen engagement and participation.

Adaptive Infrastructure

A future where modular, sustainably sourced systems enable flexible spaces that evolve over time and support long-term resilience.

Tailored Wellbeing

A future where higher education prioritizes whole-student wellbeing as essential to learning, belonging, and long-term success.

A future where AI-facilitated instruction supports foundational learning, enabling deeper, applied learning experiences. Adaptive and authentic learning work together to drive stronger engagement.

Impact of Future State

- Learning spaces support both computer-based instruction and applied, deeper learning experiences, including project-based learning.
- AI-enabled experiences expand to include more natural human-computer interactions, such as voice, immersive, and avatar-based interfaces.
- Schools test new space-planning models, with collaboration spaces and labs increasing while traditional formal classrooms become less central.



AI + Active Learning

- ① Create shared focal points that support collective thinking. Use vertical surfaces and shared digital displays to support group sense-making and problem-solving.
- ② Keep human connection central by designing environments that prioritize eye contact, conversation and shared focus while ensuring technology remains intuitive and supportive rather than dominant.
- ③ Provide flexible furniture to support social learning and exploration. Ensure students can easily shift between independent work, collaboration and hands-on experimentation.
- ④ Design for AI-guided instruction, balancing zones for computer-based learning with studio-like areas for applied learning, group problem-solving and project-based work.

Individualized Wellbeing

A future where higher education places holistic student wellbeing at the center of the learning experience. Technology-enabled environments support personalized pathways that address academic, emotional, and social needs across the student journey.

Impact on Future State

- Classrooms and shared spaces are redesigned to include quiet zones, mindfulness rooms and sensory-supportive environments.
- Dedicated AR/VR-based wellbeing programs require specialized lighting, acoustics and connectivity.
- Embedded sensors and IoT connected systems monitor environmental conditions like air quality, noise and temperature to support comfort and focus.



Individualized Wellbeing

- ① Support the whole person by designing spaces that help students regulate stress and energy through lighting, acoustics, tactile materials and opportunities for movement or stillness.
- ② Make psychological safety visible and spatial by using materials, acoustics and layouts that signal wellbeing, comfort and belonging, helping people feel welcome and supported.
- ③ Offer choice and agency by providing a range of settings—quiet, active, social and restorative—so students can select what they need in the moment.
- ④ Honor both individual and social wellbeing by balancing spaces for respite with places that foster connection and community.

Adaptive Infrastructure

A future where modular, reconfigurable platforms enable flexible environments that scale easily with changing needs while integrating sustainable materials and systems for long-term resilience.

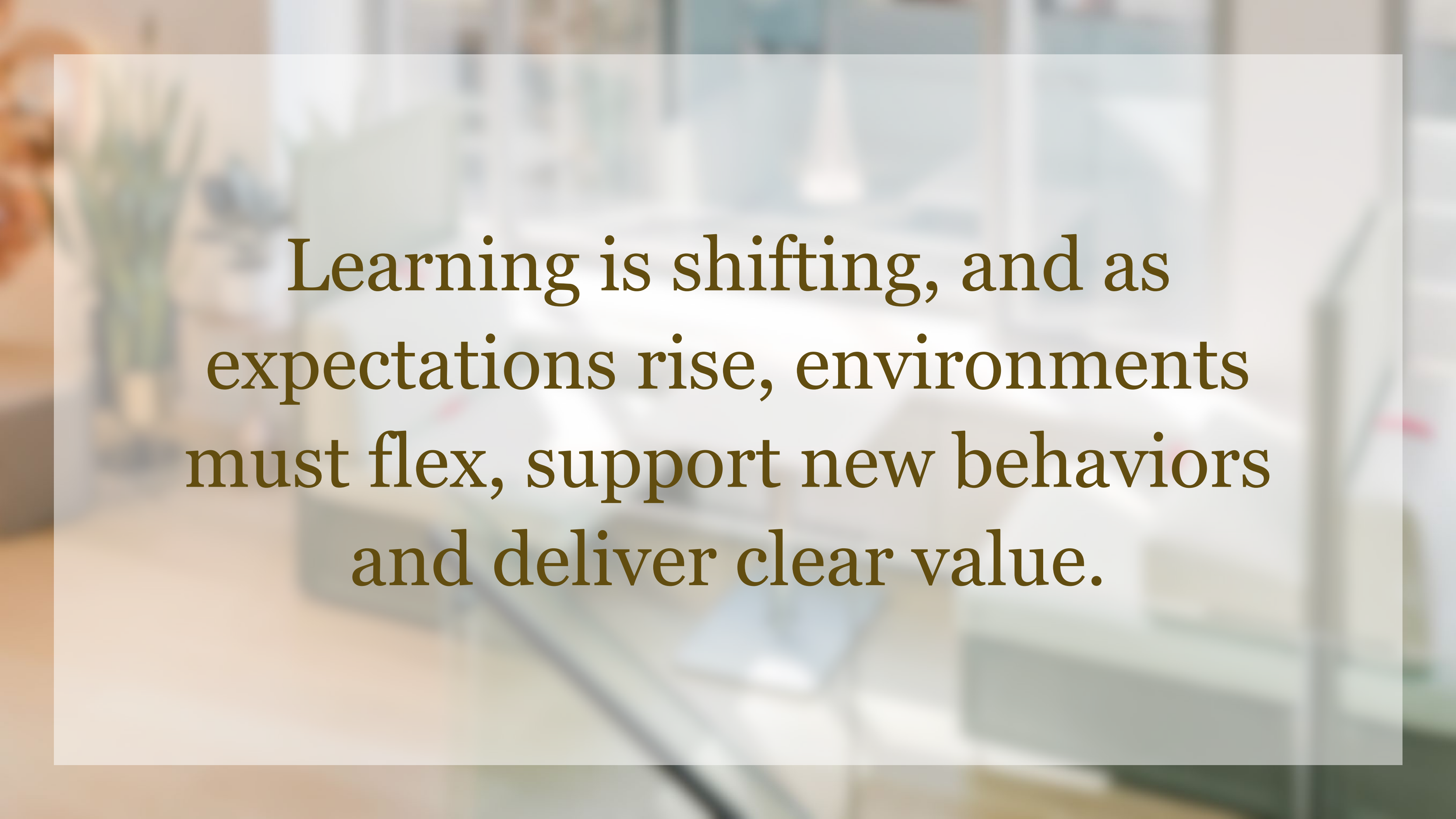
Impact on Future State

- Buildings support ongoing reconfiguration without the need for major renovations.
- Enrollment volatility drives demand for classrooms that can scale capacity up or down within minutes or hours.
- Institutions prioritize components designed for long life cycles, repairability and modular replacement.
- Smart environments adapt to a range of cognitive and physical needs to better support students.



Adaptive Infrastructure

- ① Design for change as the default by planning for frequent reconfiguration, not occasional renovation.
- ② Prioritize longevity over specificity by choosing components and systems that can evolve with new pedagogy and technology rather than requiring replacement.
- ③ Enable flexibility without friction by ensuring changes can be made quickly without the need for facilities staff or complex resets.
- ④ Support multiple capacities within a single footprint by designing spaces that can shift fluidly between modes without compromising ergonomics, power access or sight lines.

A blurred background of an office interior, showing desks, chairs, and plants. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent white rectangular area.

Learning is shifting, and as expectations rise, environments must flex, support new behaviors and deliver clear value.

Get in Touch

To find out more about
solutions and spaces that
inspire a life of learning,
visit steelcaselearning.com

Meet Us

Experience our curated spaces,
including our newest solutions for
learning and work, while engaging
with experts through in-person or
virtual tours of our showrooms.

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