UKAT

The Hidden Curriculum of Time and Space: Why Belonging Is Designed Before It Is Felt

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ABSTRACT

Academic advising and personal tutoring are deeply relational practices, yet they are often expected to flourish within institutional structures that unintentionally erode connection. This opinion piece argues that belonging is not simply something students feel. It is shaped by the hidden curriculum of institutional design, particularly through the organisation of time and space. Drawing on practice at a small specialist college in Ireland, it explores how timetabling, orientation sequencing, and protected periods within the weekly schedule send powerful signals to students about whether they matter. When time and space are approached as intentional design features rather than neutral administrative decisions, the conditions in which advising relationships can take root are strengthened. For advisors and tutors supporting students with limited discretionary time on campus, developing structural awareness, the ability to notice and influence how design shapes belonging, is increasingly essential.

When Structure Speaks First

One of the clearest insights I have ever had into how belonging is shaped came not from a formal evaluation or student panel, but from a short, matter-of-fact sentence offered by a first-year student. Speaking about why she had stayed on campus to take part in activities, she said, "It is on my timetable, so I can stay."

She was not describing a friendship, a module, or a support service. She was describing structure. For her, the timetable acted as a form of institutional permission. It legitimised being present, lingering, and taking part. The design of the week itself created the conditions in which belonging could begin.

This moment, simple as it was, crystallised something I had been observing for years across orientation programmes, academic transitions, and peer support initiatives. Belonging is shaped long before any advising conversation takes place. It is influenced by the structures that quietly govern student life: the timetable, the gaps between classes, the sequencing of early experiences, and the physical layout of the campus. These elements are often treated as

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administrative or logistical decisions, but students read them carefully. Together, they form what I call the hidden curriculum of time and space: the unspoken lessons students learn about their value and place within the institution.

For much of my career in student engagement and support, my focus was firmly on relational practice. I analysed and refined approaches to active listening, empathy, co-creation, and peer-led support. I drew on work around mattering (Schlossberg, 1989), early integration (Tinto, 1993), and engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994). At conferences such as UKAT and EFYE, I explored how advisors and tutors can nurture confidence, voice, and agency. Yet throughout this work, one insight kept appearing. Relational practice cannot compensate for structural barriers. If students do not share time, if they are rushing between commitments, or if they are simply not present on campus, then even the most skilled advising interventions will prove fruitless.

This is not a deficit in students. It is a design issue.

Understanding the current structural reality

At Marino Institute of Education, a small specialist teacher education college in Dublin with approximately 1,400 students, the profile of the 'typical' student reflects broader shifts across Ireland, the UK, and Europe. While up to 300 students live on campus, the majority commute, often travelling between thirty minutes and two hours each way. Attendance is mandatory. Most undergraduates are preparing for professions with guaranteed employment. That shapes both their motivation and their timetable pressures.

So much of this is not unique to Marino. Across Ireland, nearly half of all students live at home and commute, with an average one–way journey of 52 minutes. This means many spend over two hours travelling every single day (Cullinan & Flannery, 2026). Ireland is also experiencing a significant accommodation shortfall, with a gap of 42,000 student beds. Recent policy proposals to condense timetables into fewer days risk further compressing the time students can actually spend on campus (Burne, 2026).

Additionally, many students work part–time, and some work close to full-time hours. Others have caring responsibilities. Their presence on campus is not elastic. It is carefully planned and often rationed against travel costs or lost income. This pattern is consistent with wider work on the impact of commuting on the student experience (Keogh et al., 2020; Thomas, 2012).

When every hour of the day is already claimed by travel, class, or work, engagement becomes an act of sacrifice rather than a natural part of student life. Advisors and tutors increasingly encounter students who are tired, time-poor, or absent from the spaces where relationship-building traditionally occurs. It is easy to misinterpret this as disengagement or

low motivation, when it is more accurately the predictable outcome of structural constraint. Students can only engage within the boundaries of the time and space an institution makes available to them.

This recognition shifted how I approached my work. Instead of asking why students were not engaging, I began asking what our structures were signalling. What did our timetable teach students about where they should be? What did our orientation sequence suggest about what we valued? What did our use of space imply about who belonged where? The answers were uncomfortable, illuminating, and instructive.

Designing time as a signal of value

One of our most intentional choices was the introduction of a second 'Student Life Hour'. At Marino, this meant blocking out 12–1 pm on Mondays and Tuesdays across all undergraduate programmes. Because lunchtime follows each of these designated hours, students effectively gain a predictable two-hour window of time on both days. This was not an additional programme or an optional event to be managed. It was blank space, built into the timetable and understood as a legitimate time to be on campus. We did not add new required activities into these slots. Instead, we simply stopped scheduling over them so students could choose how to use the time.

Of course, adding structured time carries risks. For students juggling paid work or caring responsibilities, any fixed timetable block can feel like a constraint rather than an opportunity. We addressed this by designing the Student Life Hour as protected time, not a prescribed activity. Students remain free to use it for clubs, advising appointments, library work, or simply catching up. The aim was not to add another obligation. It was to create a predictable shared pause, a structural signal that being present and connecting with others is legitimate and valued.

One telling indicator was that societies that had previously struggled with attendance suddenly had the space to run regular sessions. The Neurodiversity Group launched during this slot, offering weekly drop-ins that would have been inaccessible to commuters in an evening slot. The Students' Union began hosting information sessions that had previously been squeezed out due to time constraints. Students weren't asked to do more. They were given structured permission to stick around.

The effect was visible. Students stayed, and they talked. They remained on campus because the timetable had already carved out the time for them to do so. Tutors have reported that during these hours they now encounter students informally in communal spaces, leading to conversations that would previously have required formal appointments. Students who once left immediately after class are now more likely to linger, ask follow-up questions, or introduce

friends. These interactions are small, but they add up. They helped normalise advising as part of everyday campus life rather than something reserved for a crisis. The structure created the conditions, and the relationships followed. The rhythm of the week shifted. The message shifted from "you are here only for class" to "you belong here as a whole person".

We applied similar thinking to orientation. Traditional models often front-load information at a moment when students are anxious and socially unanchored. We reversed the sequence. Day one focused on community and connection through a menu of choice-based activities called 'Campus Connections'. Students could opt into drama workshops, campus history tours, sports, or discussion groups on AI. Day two addressed transition and support services. Day three finally introduced academic content. This was a simple structural change, primarily a matter of swapping the order of sessions, but it shifted the tone of the entire first week. Connection came first, information second, and academics third.

When advisors and tutors met students on that third day, they encountered cohorts that had already formed early peer connections. Students were more relaxed, more confident, and more receptive. The structure had already done part of the relational work. This does not suggest that structure replaces human connection. Rather, it facilitates it. Good design cannot guarantee belonging, but poor design can certainly make it much harder to find (Gilani & Thomas, 2025; Jankowski et al., 2025).

Designing space and the geography of inclusion

Space, like time, clearly communicates expectations. Students read meaning into room allocations, building layouts, and the location of support services. They notice where conversations happen, and where they do not.

At our pre-arrival Tasters and Tours event, we created student-only spaces for taster classes while parents attended parallel sessions elsewhere. This spatial separation supported student autonomy and allowed peer relationships to form without observation or pressure. It also signalled a shift in the parent-institution relationship, offering clarity to families and confidence to students.

The principle extends beyond this event. Advisors and tutors rely on early peer networks to support students over time. These networks do not form by accident. They are shaped by where students are invited to gather, talk, and spend unstructured time. When space supports connection, advising becomes relational rather than remedial.

Taken together, these patterns raised a broader question for me.

From relational practice to structural awareness

These experiences led me to a broader conclusion. If belonging is shaped by design, then advisors and tutors need to develop what I call structural awareness. This is the ability to notice how time, space, sequencing, and signals quietly shape whether students feel they belong, and to influence those conditions through everyday practice and advocacy. I use the term lightly. It simply means learning to read institutional design as a form of pedagogy rather than just a logistical necessity.

This does not mean that advisors must control timetables or room bookings. It means recognising which structural conditions support advising and which undermine it. It also means advocating for changes that make relational work contributory rather than compensatory. Three starting points are particularly useful when thinking about practice:

1. Map the early touchpoints. Identify the first six or seven interactions a new student has with the institution and ask what each one teaches them about belonging. At Marino, when we mapped those touchpoints, we realised we were asking students to absorb logistics before they had any sense of connection.

By reversing the orientation sequence and building in a 'digital-to-physical' handshake, we changed the signal. On Day two, for instance, students are guided through the VLE to locate their tutor's details. We then built in five minutes of protected time for them to send a brief hello email. It is a small act, but it turns a digital listing into a relational beginning.

2. Advocate for shared time. Shared time is foundational. Even one protected hour per week can transform the possibilities for connection. Advisors can frame this not as a loss of teaching time, but as an investment in student persistence. Our experience with the 'Student Life Hour' suggests that when you stop scheduling over a specific window, you aren't just 'clearing the diary'. You are providing structured permission for the informal interactions that sustain a student through a difficult term.

3. Use space intentionally. If formal offices feel intimidating, we should meet students in communal spaces. Normalising advising as part of everyday academic life, rather than something reserved for crisis, helps lower the barrier to entry.

Sometimes the shift is as simple as where a conversation happens. Advising need not always take place across a desk. Conversations held while walking across campus or sitting side by side in a communal space subtly alter the tone and power dynamics. Space participates in the interaction.

What this means for advising practice

The hidden curriculum of time and space shapes student behaviour every day. Advisors and tutors are often asked to create belonging through care, conversation, and presence. These skills are essential. But they flourish only within structures that allow students to be present, to pause, and to connect.

When engagement is structurally impossible, exhortations to "get involved" risk becoming quietly moralising. Students are subtly rewarded or blamed for behaviours that are largely the byproduct of poor or unintentional design. When institutions rely on students to find their own time and carve out their own space, belonging becomes an individual challenge rather than a collective responsibility.

If advising is to support the whole student, institutional design must do some of the work alongside it.

Conclusion

The goal of structural awareness is not to manufacture belonging through a clever timetable. It is to protect the conditions in which belonging can emerge. Design cannot force connection, but it can certainly make space for it.

The student who said, "It is on my timetable, so I can stay," captured a quiet truth. Belonging is not secured by initiatives or good intentions alone. It is shaped by structure. Advising and tutoring are powerful practices, but they are always influenced by the architecture around them.

If we want students to believe they belong, we have to design the foundations for it.

About the Author

Colum Cronin is Student Engagement Officer at Marino Institute of Education in Dublin. A native of Cork with over twenty years in higher education, his work focuses on student belonging, transition, and engagement. He is particularly interested in how institutional design and the hidden curriculum of campus life shape students' opportunities for connection and participation.

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