

*Listening to Students*  
*Who Ever Thought about Leaving College*  
*or*  
*Did Leave College and Came Back*

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**Listening to Students  
Who Ever Thought about Leaving College  
Or Did Leave College and Came Back...**

*“I left college due to family obligations. I am the oldest of 8 and my family needed financial support. Not having the financial resources to help me navigate school and work at the same time I chose to work instead. I returned to college 10 years later, still not having much financial backing but able to have set aside some money to make due until I could acquire financial aid or a loan. Some things that currently make me want to leave is not feeling like I have a support system, guidance, or a sense of belonging while this experience has been a huge transition and overwhelming.*

*What is keeping me in school now is knowing that I am closer to my goals now than when I first started. I don't want the progress that I have made to be in vain.*

*I am finding more people who share my same sentiment or have a similar background to help me build a sense of community and belonging.*

*I think better promotion of diverse groups and clubs could help those who may want to find other's who share the same emotions, culture, background and are in need of community support can help. I also think any advertisement of grants and scholarships throughout the year could help those who are in need of financial support. Pointing students in the direction of job and paid opportunities that align with their majors could help with a student's finances aslong with them gaining experience.”*

— Black, Female, 31, Sophomore, first generation college student.

*“I went through family hardships and it was too much at the moment, my mother passed away and shortly after that I lost my first pregnancy in the second trimester. I was going through too much, and I had medical reasons to leave.*

*I eventually returned to college ... after the birth of my daughter. I wanted to get my Bachelor's to show her she can too.*

*I think it is a great university with so many resources. I was a bit disappointed I was never able to get childcare for low income students there.”*

— I am a first generation student, my parents were born in Mexico and I am the first born to the U.S in my family. I am a mother to one child.

*“I am currently in this situation, I am going into active duty for the air force in order to start my career and to be able to continue with my schooling.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Provide resources where we can socialize with each other, I noticed by going to campus for the past two years, the students are not really interacting with each other and the campus is not very social. The students do not really know how to be social aside from doing assignments. Even towards their own classmates that they see everyday they do not interact with.”*

—21 year old, Filipino, 2 years of college, multilingual

*“When I transferred from ARC to Sac State, Covid had just hit and the support from staff on campus sucked.... I also didn't have much help figuring out Sac State as a transfer. It was very difficult figuring everything out, and even now, it gets confusing. Latino transfers are not as likely to graduate, but I will be the difference.*

*It was a Latino interest Fraternity that ended up helping me out with almost everything. I believe they made me feel like I was part of the school and helped me navigate the whole campus while giving me leadership roles and a sense of pride for being at school. I was also able to see brothers achieve their Doctorate which has inspired me to continue my education.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Damn hand me a scholarship, all jokes aside, there should be more focus on transfers and emphasis on minorities. I believe Sac State has a large amount of Latin(x) and AAPI students so make it feel like it, and maybe bring more culture and resources.”*

—24, Hispanic, born in Durango MX, raised in Lake Tahoe, "junior" in college, first generation

*“The top reason I had to leave college was the price of tuition and cost of living in this city.*

*The pursuit for a future that releases me from the shackles of struggling day to day life is what drives me to return to college. I hope to be able to create results with my life that aid others and create available health care to people in rural areas.*

*Sacramento State University could make it more affordable to attend their institution for people who come from low-income backgrounds and are not covered by financial aid.”*

—I am a 24-year-old Mexican American first-generation college student who comes from a small farm worker town in the central valley.

*“I left because I already had a good job and didn't really need to finish for it to make a difference.*

*What made me come back is someone emailing me that I was so close to finishing and letting me know exactly what I needed ... turns out it was just three classes.”*

— I am 33 years old. Mexican American single mother first generation and I will be graduating this semester.

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) I need money to go to college to get a better paying job that will pay me more money.*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back if you left?) Coffee and credit cards. I get help from the government which includes food stamps and FAFSA but everything else needs to be paid somehow.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Lower tuition cost. I know that is saying a lot compared to other school tuition but it's a very steep price for people trying to better their lives in unruly circumstances.”*

— Age 25, Latina, Junior year, transfer student

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) I am the oldest sister. My father was a alcoholic and abused drugs. Any money he would have, he would gamble it in the casino. I am my mother's right hand. I needed to leave college to help support my mother financially.*

*I came back because I was tired of putting myself last. I lost myself. Receiving my degree has always been an ultimate goal of mine.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Help connect us with our professors more. Advertise more clubs”*

—I am a 25-year-old Mexican- American. I am a first-generation college student. I began college in 2016 and transferred in 2019 to Sac State. I did not attend until Spring 2022

*“I left college in the fall of 2014 because of how unmotivated I was with college at the time. I also was tired of how I kept failing a particular class over and over again.*

*I came back in the Spring of 2019 because I wanted to further my life with education and a better life.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Have more resources available for non-traditional students.”*

— Hispanic/ Latino Male, Age 29, Senior, First Generation Student

*“Originally, I am from Sacramento and attended San Francisco State University from Fall 2017 till Winter 2020. I left because my parents still lived in Sacramento and they needed help financially since covid-19 wasn't letting them work. I decided it'd be best to take a break from my education and help my parents out while they were able to support themselves financially, so I dropped out but with the intentions or returning.*

*During my time off I was working two jobs and one of them was full time. I was relieved that I no longer had school to worry about but my mother had a near death experience in 2021, her only wish in life is to see her children graduate from a university so while she was sick I made the promise to return when I was ready. In spring 2022 I applied to for fall 2022 as a transfer student and was accepted.*

*So far I've really enjoyed my time at Sacramento State. My only complains thus far are parking and the library. Parking is too complex and majority of the fault is the students who are not self-aware when it comes to parking their vehicles. As for the library, there's not enough room for students to sit down and do their work. I myself have walked countless times in circles all throughout the library looking for somewhere to sit and have an outlet which most spots don't have. It's very frustrating that a school with this many students has almost no seating and no outlets to charge our laptops.”*

— Cis-make, 24, Mexican-American, transfer first yr at Sac St, first generation student.

*“I left college many times because of baby sitter issue, finance, personal problems, and loss of motivation in learning.*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back if you left?) I realize that nowadays, the minimum qualification for a job is a college degree. Without a college degree, I was stuck working in sales, restaurant, or retail. I did not want to do those jobs anymore. I wanted something more stable with retirement and benefits.*

*I would like more night classes or online classes. I also like Sac State to offer more tutoring in the evening for students, like me, who are working during the day.”*

— Hmong, 32 years old, a mother to two children, who graduated from high school in 2009, and a first generation college student.

*“Something that made me want to leave college is the lack of support I had. It was difficult for me to find a group or make friends who understood what I was going through. I just constantly compared myself to others who were able to have support of their family or a big group of friends.*

*It wasn't until my last and fifth year I discovered a native club on campus. I just kept thinking I would find something or some group. An outside organization California Native Youth Collective is funding a project where I will be able to connect with other native students through a food demonstration. Its given me something to look forward to.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) I feel sac state offers resources such as peer support which is helpful. Many services can be helpful. I just felt like no one really spoke on generational trauma. So the support that was offered, I didnt find beneficial. I just needed a space where I could feel heard. The pain from pursuing an education alone, and watching others talk about needed extra graduation tickets when I don't know anyone who would show up to mine.”*

—22. Filipino and Native American but my tribe is from Oregon. This is my 5th year studying nutrition and food. I have made it through college because of student loans and my tribal support. I do not have my parents or family in my life. My family lives in Oregon and in the Philippines so I only met them once or twice. My parents also cut me off in my second year of school, at 19 years old. I was living with an abusive partner and then became homeless. Thankfully ... I finally qualified and moved into an apartment. Balancing school and work became easier when I eliminated my physical and mental health. I often went to the emergency room for panic attacks throughout the years. Ive been placed on mental hold twice and I attribute this to the overwhelming pressure to earn a degree. But I persisted and I never gave up, and I know I will have much more opportunities because of it.

*“The time I decided to leave college was because I needed a job because I needed to support my son who at the time was 2 years old. It was very difficult to live out of financial aid with all the bill I had.*

*What made me come back was wanting to give a example to my son. To show him that school is hard, yet you can still make it. I also want him to know that I will always support him no matter how difficult school will get*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Provide more help for freshman's and support more the first generation. Just because is already very difficult for me in particular to ask for help when I need it. The reason why is because I feel people wont help me”*

— I'm Hispanic and I'm 31 year old mother of 2 children. I'm currently a freshman at the Sacramento State University. I'm also first generation college student to pursue a higher education and that moves out of what I have know as my hometown. I immigrated from Mexico when I was 9 years old ....

*“I remember having to leave college because my parents didn't want to support me. They kept telling me about housing and that nothing is free. If you want to go to college you need to pay rent. Sometimes it's hard to balance both work and school.*

*I realized that I needed to push myself and go to work to pay rent and attend college so I can invest myself for a higher paying job in the future.*

*I think Sacramento State can introduce apprenticeships opportunities for students that want to learn technical skills.”*

—Anonymous

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) The cost-benefit of being a student for 4 years, rather than working for those 4 years. And the potential stress that college will put upon me. My values regarding education are important, however, I don't see enough worth in how it may apply to a career in my future.*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back if you left?) Peer pressure, parental pressure, being told I'm doing the wrong thing if I'm not going to go to college. Feeling guilt for considering leaving college.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) More events or facilities on campus that makes me, an ordinary student, feel included. I want to feel as if I'm a part of a school and not just a student amongst students. I don't feel the 'community' within Sac State. I feel as if I'm not included in a community. A face in a faceless crowd of non-interaction.”*

— First Generation, Asian American, Freshman/First Year, Age 18, low-income family household

***“Out of high school I had the opportunity to attend college however I was not focused and I did not know what I was doing. I was trying to figure things out on my own and I allowed barriers like housing and transportation detour me from completing college and I soon found myself pregnant at the age of 20. This was the first time I left college. After having my son, I earned a skill and became a CNA. I always told myself I would return to finish my degree. In 2011 I enrolled at ARC and transferred to Sac State in 2014. I was working full time as a Med Tech/CNA, attending school full time and raising my son. Things became overwhelming and I became pregnant again. I left school because I had to provide for my family and I had an obligation to raise my children. In 2021 during the pandemic I decided to return to school to complete my degree. I wanted to finish my degree to have the opportunity to apply for better paying positions and I also wanted to be an example to my son to always push through and finish what you start. I wanted to also show them that it was important to have an education. Family obligations and lack of support have always been the things that have made me decide to leave college.*”**

***I came back to finish my degree. What keeps me here is telling myself it’s all for a reason and just believing that things will work out. I also have a failure is not an option motto.***

***As an older person returning to college I think there should be more support or maybe activities for returning students or students that are parents or working. I feel like the target audience for all activities on campus is young college students. I feel like the struggle or challenges for a young student is very different from a mid aged, single parent, household student.”***

— Female, 38 years old, Black, single parent. I am a senior, first time generation college student. I have two sons ages 17 and 6. My 17 year old is a senior in high school and my 6 year old is 1st grade. Both boys are coming into new phases of their lives and it is challenging. This is my second attempt at Sac State and my third attempts at finishing a degree.

***“After high school, I moved away and was living on my own. I had bills to pay and had to find a job. After awhile, I had to pick between making ends meet or continuing my education, which I had no idea what I wanted to major in. With no motivation, I quit community college and continued to work. I have returned several times, but ultimately, I gave up after a semester.***

***After several years, I felt I needed more growth in my career. I wanted to return to school, but did not know where to start. When my son was born, I knew I had to prove myself, not only to myself but my son. I felt that if he had a role model to encourage him, he could do it for himself.***

***I think that there is still a barrier, where students aren’t motivated to continue their education. Maybe there’s a misunderstanding of deciding their major or the where to find help with their personal needs/mental health. As an older student, I like to see a lot more peer support, at any age and background.”***

— Female, 36, Hmong American, First generation college student, Parent

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Financial problems. Questioning the use of bachelors in future*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back if you left?) Opportunity. Kssu Radio/ extracurriculars*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Opportunities to develop skills needed in the real world”*

— Im a first generation immigrant. There's a pressure to be able to be the first in my family to finish college. Im 26. Kind of old but i know that thats just a mental barrier. There are plenty of older people still in school.

*“I loved attending American River College and did well there. However, when I transferred, I had a very tough time navigating the CSUS campus. I left college multiple times and finally came back this year (2023) after leaving in 2017. Back when I first transferred to CSUS, there were times I wasn't able to afford gas to get to school which affected my grades. My grades suffered and I was then put on academic probation. I had never heard of this before and felt afraid to see a counselor. I avoided the emails and eventually felt like I could no longer attend CSUS.*

*I came back because I finally sought therapy and realized the difficulty I have with asking for help. I didn't take to time to ask questions. I also have a steady job at the state and have the mental capacity to continue school.*

*Financial aid is still a nightmare for me. At 33 years old with a professional job, I thought I would have an easier time navigating the financial aid websites, but it is still the bane of my existence. I think I still need to submit a document that requires a lease from when I was 18 years old. Waiting to hear back on whether you can afford school is so anxiety inducing. I question whether going to school is worth it every time I have to go through the financial aid process.”*

— Female, 33 years old, Asian-American, first generation college student

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Nothing now because I came thus far, may as well continue!*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back if you left?) Thirsty for knowledge I guess!*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Good question ... more protection on campus to ensure and secure us precious students!”*

—I have dropped out of college so many times I cannot count, for whatever reason I continue to come back.

***“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Right now my family obligations and the fact that I may need to start working full time to pay my bills.***

***I am trying to find a work from home job, and also looking into taking classes fully online next semester.***

***(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Offer more class times that fit a full time work schedule especially online”***

—33, Black, Junior, First generation college student, Parent

***“I've had a few instances in which I have truly considered leaving college. The first time was Fall of 2021, I was in an unhealthy headspace & just extremely lost in my path in life with no idea of what I was making of my life. For mental health reasons, I took that semester off and returned the following Fall 2022 and have been here since then. As of right now I am actually considering it once again & am unsure if it's the best decision for me.***

***Honestly what has kept me here is if I graduate my parents will know their sacrifices weren't in vain and were worth something. My family ultimately pushes me to continue my education, and it was for them that I returned. Finally just wanted to accomplish something so big for me and have something that I can say I worked hard for.***

***I often times feel really confused on whether the path I am taking is the correct one. I believe a better job can be done in making sure Sac State is reaching out to those students who seem to be not doing so well academically. Knowing what it is that they are going through and making sure if there are any resources they are in need of, how they need help, and giving them that space to talk about it. And actually giving these resources to ALL students.”***

—21 yr old, First Gen College Student, Mexican, Part Time Student & Job  
@ Sac State

***“COVID-19 pandemic forced me into a position where I had to temporarily leave college. Due to the hate crimes against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders that skyrocketed, I and my family felt unsafe.***

***During the pandemic, classes were offered virtually so I was able to continue staying in school and finish my degree. Once classes transitioned back into traditional classroom settings....***

***(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Please make Sac State safer. I have heard that there are many attacks ... especially at night either here on campus or at dorms.”***

—22 year old first generation, multilingual, female Hmong student.  
Currently in my third year at Sac State.

*“I considered leaving college when I was working at Mcdonald's last semester. Since they had me working 36 hours though they knew I was going to school. I was having trouble with my work place because I kept telling them I needed them to lower my hours. I could not balance school with two classes and working so many hours. It took me a little more than half the semester to get them to change my hours to 15 hours. It was a massive pain trying to keep up with my studies. Especially since I am diagnosed with social anxiety. My job was very stressful as a cashier and the demands of the job. I also considered leaving college in the past since I was having trouble at home my mom arguing always with my dad to the point of not feeling safe in my own home. Other times I considered leaving college because I felt insecure in the class I was taking and I needed help but was to anxious to get tutoring or help.*

*What kept here was trying to actively change my mindset and therapy for my social anxiety. Also my family expectations for me. Including the fact that I need a bachelors degree at least to get a good paying job, though I have 4 associates already. I made it this far so I should stick to it plus I get to socialize and do something during my spare time. I don't have a social life ... school helps me be around people.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Notify tutoring hours for writing or other subjects around campus. Make professors push us students to attend office hours. Make sure the curriculum is doable for students who are working full time. If it is not then make the class being taken for two semesters so the workload is doable.”*

— Second year Sac State, I am a transfer student from Solano Community College. I am junior/senior credit wise. I am 24 years old and Latina. I am also multilingual student my parents are from Mexico. Though I was born here in the U.S and I am a lesbian.

*“I think what makes me wanna leave college is not having enough support. Like as first generation it lot of pressure since my family expect me to finish quick start working. But it hard since I'm not good with lot of stuff and it make difficult for me to understand the material.*

*I think that kept me here is try focus in class but also getting support from a frien .*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Maybe get more support, resource or help”*

—24, Hispanic, senior, First generation

*“I don't want to leave college.*

*I want to study, and learn. I meet a lot of smart, creative, innovative people everyday.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Help me find scholarships. Also provide more class sections.... I am taking (a class) and there are just 2 or 3 sections. This helps in having more flexible schedule, otherwise we have to go with the whatever limited option.”*

—Anonymous

***“I’m not making a connection with anyone; I find it very difficult to make friends. Every time I come on campus I just feel really small and lonely and no matter how much I try to talk to someone the connection never sticks. I also have no career passions that I want to pursue so personally I feel as if there is no point or reason for me to be in college.***

***The thought of being a failure in my future and the unknown of what would happen if I did leave and disappointing others is the main reason for me staying.***

***Its not so much the college that is bad, I think the campus is beautiful and I always see clubs or other activities being advertised. I just did not have the experience that I hoped for”***

—18, black, first year, first/second gen college student

***“The only thing that has ever deterred me away from college is the struggles of financial hardships, hospitalization, lack of support and inadequate childcare.***

***I have always strived to accomplish my goal of being the barrier breaker in receiving my college degree. Now that I have children it is my desire to show my children that no matter how long it may take and what we may face in life to never give up in working toward your goal(s). Hard work pays off with time and dedication. To be motivated and driven for knowledge because its the one thing no one can take from you. Knowledge is power and the key to opportunities. So, by any means necessary I will lead by example for myself and my family.”***

— A first generation college student (Senior), A Wife and Mother of three, An African American Female

***“Left for a year in order to get a job and help back home with financial issues***

***My parents want me to finish school and my significant other is pushing me to finish as well***

***(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Better professors or better understanding professors things happen and they expect us to have school as a number one priority most aren’t privileged enough to just focus on school provide better aid or more”***

—21 years of age first generation Mexican college student dependent of a veteran

***“What made me leave college in 2013 was that I didn’t have enough money to support myself, and my immigration status was not good. First, I went to get a second job to pay my bills, rent, food, and transportation. I was too tired to get up and go to school, so I started to drop classes one by one, and finally, I just gave up school. I always wanted to go back I just couldn’t do it. I need it the right information***

***What made me comeback to school was I finally realized that in order to succeed, we must give up something. I am now a parent and want to be a good example for my son. I also like finding all kinds of information and motivation here at school. I didn’t know how much help you could find on a college campus.***

***Sacramento states is excellent. I feel like I belong”***

— Thirty-seven years old Mexican immigrant, first-generation college student, and parent.

## **Introduction**

Millions of students enroll in higher education in the nation each year. Some will complete their educational journeys, yet many may struggle to stay and still others will go.

### ***Those Who Leave College***

The number of Americans with some college but no completion of a credential or degree (SCNC) rose to 40.4 million, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center report, [“Some College, No Credential,”](#) for the most recent academic period studied. This growth of 1.4 million students “is due to a lack of re-enrollment among the 39 million previously identified SCNC students and the 2.3 million new SCNC students (recent stop-outs).” By state, California has the highest number by far, at 6.6 million SCNC students, and the 6% rate of recent stop-outs of the national total SCDC population is also in the higher range.

### ***Those Considering Leaving College***

And many of the students who are enrolled in higher education are struggling. According to the Gallup/Lumina Foundation report, [“The State of Higher Education,”](#) based on a survey of students currently enrolled in college, 41% surveyed said that it was “very difficult” or “difficult” to remain enrolled in their program, up a bit from last year. When asked whether or not the student had considered withdrawing from their school for at least one term in the past six months, 41% of students responded yes, a number that has risen steadily in the past few years the survey has been done.

### ***The Risks of Stopping Out***

Once a student stops-out, they are statistically less likely to come back—and those who do are less likely to complete to degree. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center report, “Some College, No Credential,” notes that fewer SCNC students re-enrolled than in the previous year (down 8.4%, totaling 864,800 students) and fewer SCNC students persevered into their second year of re-enrollment (down 4.3%, totaling 508,700 students) from the previous year.

A student may discontinue college for any number of significant reasons, especially in the wake of a global pandemic, continuing economic uncertainty, and mental health epidemic, and all of this in addition to the problems long associated with college enrollment, including cost, time, and competing work and/or family responsibilities. Yet research tells us that for the student, achievement of a college degree means more career paths and promotions available, greater likelihood of financial prosperity and security, and better health and quality of life. The nation needs its most educated workforce to maintain its standing in the world economy and for its judicial, political, healthcare, and education systems, and other important sectors of society. And we, as an institution, need our fullest, most diverse student body for the betterment of all our campus experiences, learning, and scholarship.

### ***This Project—and Our Work***

*Listening to Students Who Ever Thought About Leaving College or Did Leave College and Came Back* is the unfolding of survey responses from students on this campus this year, centering on the different factors in their difficulty in enrollment and consideration of leaving or actually leaving—and what gets them to stay or come back. Each section of the project will focus on one key aspect of keeping students on-track and successful in college life through to completion.

This second section, Part 2, focuses on what research tells us is the essential need to belong.

## **Part 2: The Essential Need For Belonging**

We don't always realize the full importance of feeling a sense of belongingness at the institution. It isn't just a nice thing for students to have—it is essential. For decades now, research has shown the importance of belongingness to students staying and succeeding in college.

The towering leader in the field of student retention in higher education, sociologist professor Vincent Tinto, began work almost fifty years ago on the pivotal questions of why students drop out of their studies and what will help them to stay. In his books, *Leaving College* and *Completing College*, as well as numerous other writings, he developed this key proposition: One of the central factors in the decision to stay or go is how well the student is integrated into college life, both socially and academically.

*Students with low or no sense of belongingness are more likely to feel isolated in college and leave, but students with a greater sense of belongingness are more likely to stay through to completion.*

While integration can occur in myriad ways, the core means for students to develop a sense of belongingness in their journey through higher education are:

1. Interactions with faculty, staff, and other students,
2. Participation in campus life, and
3. Involvement in classroom community and learning.

He stresses that students' experience of college in ways that create belongingness are most impactful in the first year, but occurs as a process from the first to last day a student chooses to continue to attend and pursue their college degree.

His work has been well-supported and a mainstay in scholarship and institutional efforts to increase student retention.

### ***The Many Benefits of Belongingness***

In addition to making it more likely students stay and succeed in college, there are further benefits of belongingness:

#### ***The Benefits of Connecting with Others***

Creating and maintaining connections with students, faculty, and staff on campus can help students in college, the working world, and their personal life. Those connections can be a helpful source of information and tips on campus life: The best classes to take, resources to utilize, study tips and collaboration, and scholarship and internship opportunities. Those connections can also be of great value professionally: The people a student meets can share their experience and knowledge in career and industry, as well as employment opportunities and business ventures, and may refer the student to others who are hiring or write that letter of recommendation needed to get the job desired. And these same connections may be the people now or in the future who decide to hire or promote the student on their chosen career path. Those connections can also help in personal life: To combat what the Surgeon General has called the current [“epidemic of loneliness”](#) and provide a buffer to stress and a network of support in times of personal adversity and the huge increase in struggles with mental health for students. It should also be said that making connections with our fellow human beings is, in itself, a pleasure, as well as a way to hone the communication and interaction skills with others

so especially needed now, at this time in our society. And the friendships made can last a lifetime.

### ***The Benefits of Connecting to Campus Life***

Campus life and university events, programs, and services are wonderful and can provide a whole new experience, rich with opportunities. Whether meeting in-person or virtually, there are so many different campus events and groups, there is something for everyone—and the benefits are significant: Involvement in campus organizations and clubs give students exposure to information and experiences different than classroom learning and occasions for interacting with their peers, faculty, and staff, where they can make those personal connections so essential to feeling a sense of inclusion on campus and also increase access to valuable information regarding courses, services, and opportunities. Research also shows that student engagement, such as extracurricular activities, positively impacts academic performance! Campus involvement also affords great opportunities to expand skill sets and develop the team, leadership, and communication skills sought by employers. Students don't always realize that their involvement in clubs, organizations, and volunteer work may be included in resumes to show that they are well-rounded and can manage a variety of responsibilities, such as course load and campus activities, and that experience in extracurricular activities may also be cited in responses to interview questions to good effect. The campus also offers so many neat events, including athletics, theater, art, career fairs, presentations, and more! *There is so much to learn and do outside of the classroom.*

### ***A Few Important Things to Add***

All students can benefit from a sense of belongingness, but some more than others, including: First-year and transfer students, new to campus; older reentry students, who may feel that generation gap with younger classmates; students with disabilities, who may feel greater separation from their classmates without disabilities; students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, who may feel a steep divide in way of life from students without financial struggles; students coming here from around the world, who may be experiencing culture shock and homesickness; students feeling alone in their classes due to underrepresentation in their fields of study, such as female students in STEM classes (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics); first generation college students, who are typically going it alone in college life without benefit of parents or family members who have gone and can knowledgably support them; and students of color, who may feel greater isolation in academia or may have been treated as if or told that they weren't cut out for college in their prior schooling.

it should also be noted that in addition to greater student persistence and retention, belongingness is a significant determinant of the student's satisfaction with their college experience—and this satisfaction increases the likelihood that a student who has stopped out of their studies will someday return to higher education and to that institution, studies show.

### ***In this Document***

It is one of our most fundamental human needs, psychologist Abraham Maslow tells us. And belongingness is imperative to student success in college life. To follow, you will find suggestions for students, faculty, and staff to forge and foster greater belongingness here on campus.

## **For Students in Developing Belongingness in their College Journey**

First of all, if you didn't realize this before, please know now: *You belong here at this university.* We need and value you for all you are—your background and life experiences, strengths and struggles, personal qualities and potentialities—all you bring to this campus and to our learning!

There are so many valuable benefits to gaining a sense of belonging on campus, including greater comfort and success in college life and maximizing your learning, opportunities, and experience here on campus. Here are some guidelines for students to develop greater belongingness in their journey here:

### ***Make It Easy for Others to Talk to You***

We may not always be aware of how we come across, which, in turn, affects how others choose to communicate with us or even the choice to interact with us at all. So put your phone down and look up and out at the world and people all around you. Body language is impactful, so keep your demeanor open and natural. Some nice eye contact and a smile can sure go a long way, too, in connecting without words, as well as inviting someone to converse! And when someone takes the time and care to greet or spark conversation with you, remembering to be polite and positive goes a long way to facilitating interaction. Be okay with pushing through any awkwardness that can come with meeting new people, and reciprocate the kindness given in someone taking the time and care to want to connect. You will both be contributing to a campus climate of connection.

### ***Start Talking to Others***

And, of course, you can help create greater connections yourself by saying hi to someone who sits down by you in class or out on campus, striking up conversation with someone waiting by you in line for office hours, food, or campus services, and embracing opportunities in classroom and online discussion, campus groups, and events to get to know others and let them get to know you. For students who may find interaction with others you don't know difficult due to shyness or lack of experience: Start small and simple—connections can be short, but still have positive impact! And this can be a good opportunity to become more accustomed to and strengthen your communication skills with others while also making connections on campus.

### ***Keep An Open Mind***

College is a great time to meet others different than you, to help get you out of your comfort zone, expose you to different viewpoints, values, and ways of life, and challenge and expand who you are and way of being in this world. So, keep an open mind to others from all walks of life, others different from you in demographics—as well as in differences of opinion. And, if you find yourself disagreeing with someone else's views, listen extra hard to expand your understanding of another side of the issue, and use your best verbal and nonverbal communication in listening and expressing your own view to promote good discussion and show appreciation for difference.

### ***Learn More***

Here is an excellent short book, written for students, on the importance of building connections that is free to all: [Connections Are Everything: A College Student's Guide to a Relationship-Rich Education](#). There you'll find much information and inspiration to build relationships with

peers, faculty, and staff in your college journey—and the specific steps to take and thought-provoking questions to ask yourself to maximize your college experience through connections.

### ***Do More***

Students may have the demands of work or family to discourage or limit doing more on campus, but the investment of time may be well worth it, in terms of the many benefits of student connections in college life! And some group meetings or events may be held via Zoom, which can make participation easier for some.

To follow are some of the great opportunities to build connections with others on campus:

#### ***Campus Clubs and Organizations—***

- [Student Organizations and Leadership \(SO&L\)](#): Helps students get involved in campus life through close to 300 student-led clubs and organizations, including those that are academic, cultural, fraternal, honorary, political, professional, recreational, religious, service, social, sports, and special interest in nature. Club Days happen the first two weeks of the semester, and after that, students can still come by to check out a group or join at any time in the semester (with a few possible exceptions of groups whose membership is created at semester's start).
- [Associated Students, Inc. \(ASI\)](#): Serves as the official governing body of Sacramento State and provides the framework for students to become engaged in campus life through participating in student government, joining campus committees, advocating for higher education, planning and promoting ASI events, joining clubs and organizations, and attending university events and activities.
- [KSSU Radio](#): Is the student-run radio providing regular programming for the campus, including a range of different radio personalities and music genres, interviews, podcasts, and broadcastings for Hornet athletic events. Students interested in volunteering may help out with events or deejay an on-air show for the station or host a podcast (and KSSU folks with help show you how to do this and get your voice and creativity out there!).
- [UNIQUE](#): Offers students the valuable volunteer opportunity to plan, promote, and produce quality campus events such as concerts, lectures, performing arts, and multi-cultural programs.
- [Community Engagement Center](#): Offers students opportunities to develop the skills necessary to become engaged citizens in their communities by volunteering in the community.

#### ***Campus Events—***

- [Sacramento State Campus Calendar of Events](#): Provides listings of upcoming events, including movies, concerts, recreational activities, club and program events, comedy showcases, lectures, performing arts, gallery showings, and more.
- [Sacramento State Athletics](#): Hosts athletic competitions for the many Sac State sports teams.

#### ***And More—***

- Other significant ways to connect more to others and campus life include [having a campus mentor](#) and [finding a student employment position here](#).
- And there are so many more events and groups than those listed here, so be sure to check out the campus website and notices on campus all around for further opportunities!

## **For Staff and Faculty Interacting and Working with Students**

Getting students to connect with each other, with you, and with the campus is key to student success, studies have shown time and time again. To follow are some ways we can achieve this:

### ***Create Student-to-Student Connections***

Student connections are vital. As human beings, we all want to feel a sense of belonging. Creating opportunities for students to interact and connect with one another can go a long way toward building a greater sense of belonging, and has other important benefits, as well: Student-to-student interactions can enhance their college experiences and learning, lead to advice given about classes and college life, help with studying and assignment completion, and build support systems that are sometimes the one thing that keeps a student coming to school.

*Student talk is powerful.* Yet while students often want to talk with their peers, they don't always know how to start up a conversation, especially in the first half of a semester. Often, for example, you will see that they turn to checking their text messages before class or sitting out on campus or waiting for office hours, rather than chatting with their peers, and many will admit this is because they feel awkward or unsure of what to say. This difficulty for many to talk with others was true before the pandemic and worse now.

Faculty and staff, in their various spheres of the campus working with students, are well-positioned to facilitate student relationships out on campus and in the classroom.

### ***Get Them Talking***

We typically feel more at ease when we get to know people, but sitting silently side by side at a campus workshop, event, or classroom lecture next to strangers will not help in this regard. Icebreakers and introductions will go a long way to helping students to feel more comfortable and open up conversation with others. Introducing students to one another in casual conversations in departments, offices, or out on campus can also be helpful in forging student-to-student connections. Highlighting the unique qualities, interests, and achievements of students, academic or otherwise, may also offer a way for students to learn more about their peers, creating conversational openers and connection.

### ***Keep Them Talking***

Provide opportunities for students to continue to talk to one another and work together in campus workshops and events and in the classroom, through discussion, pair or group learning activities, team projects, and more. Encouraging student dialogue further increases the possibility of student connections being made, and also promotes more active learning, development of cognitive thinking and communication skills, and exposure to diverse views, values, work habits, and life-worlds. In class, straight lecture, in contrast, is seldom ideal to maximum student learning, and has the added disadvantage of limiting student interaction. Working together is also typically the preferred method of learning for many groups, including female learners and African American, Latinx, Native American, and Pacific Islander students, research shows, rather than solitary study or sole lecture-listening.

### ***Create Connections with the Student***

Staff and faculty interaction with a student is pivotal. Whether academic or social, formal or informal, shorter- or longer-term, the interactions we have with our students matter in so many ways. Every connection a student makes with someone at the institution helps to build a stronger foundation for that student's academic success. Every connection made can help the student to feel more included and content in college life, more comfortable in the classroom in seeking support when needed, and set down the "roots" so essential to academic persistence and retention. Every connection made can help the student to better learn course material and study skills, contribute to the student's personal growth and intellectual development, shape decisions made in major and future career, and impact educational aspirations and attainment. *Those connections are key, and every single one counts.* This is true for all students, decades of research show, and especially for minority underrepresented students and first generation college students.

As staff and faculty, myriad opportunities to connect with our students arise in the office, department, classroom, or out on campus.

#### ***Remember the Personal Side in All You Do***

Connecting is relational—and something we can all do, no matter what our roles on campus are. Connecting can be achieved in a variety of ways: From something as simple as a smile, greeting, or a few words of support or encouragement to a student out on campus; to getting to know students and letting them get to know you more personally in one-on-one conversation or in classroom lessons, campus workshops and presentations; to giving the gift of your time and undivided attention, showing you care and are committed to their well-being and success at this institution; to following through and following up on the questions or concerns expressed to you in person or email correspondence.

#### ***Encourage Students to Come See You***

Your genuine invitation to students to stop by and see you in your office, department, program, or service can go a long way to increasing the number who do. This can also help those who feel intimidated at the prospect of doing so or who are hesitant to "bother" you to feel more comfortable. This is true of staff services, as well as faculty office hours, which are that key time where you can answer questions that a student might feel reluctant to ask in class or need answered more fully, allay concerns or help a student overcome obstacles to course progression, give guidance to help a student get on track or stay on track in college life, help students to get to know and connect with you, lend an ear to a student in need, and inspire students to aim high in their professional and educational aspirations.

#### ***Be Inclusive***

A fundamental aspect of feeling a sense of belongingness is identity. Using the preferred terms for identity groups and the preferred names and pronouns for individual students shows respect for who they are and correct pronunciation is important, as well. We also

want to avoid saying or doing anything carrying inaccurate and alienating assumptions, such as all people are male or female, heterosexual, have citizenship, grew up in or have now a traditional family household, have sufficient economic means for good, stable food and housing, and are neurotypical or of equal ability of sight, sound, mobility, speech, health and energy level. Avoiding assumptions that all students are of younger age, without children, and don't work much or at all, is also important. Such assumptions are, for many of us—especially those older—easier than we might realize to lapse into, but can create a real sense of divide, diminishment, or erasure for our students.

### ***Work with Students***

Offer students the valuable opportunity to work with you on projects, research, or writing, or in campus organizations, events, services, or in other capacities outside of the classroom. This will increase the quantity and quality of interaction with you, and likely give the student a different and richer context for learning, professional experience to help get a job and use in the working world, and a role model of good communication, work ethic, and leadership. You, personally, and the work you are doing will also likely be greatly enriched through collaboration with students! It should also be noted that just the invitation itself, even if the student does not or cannot accept, can sure send a message of inclusion and vote of confidence in the student's capabilities.

### ***Mentor Students***

Become a mentor, someone who looks out for, champions, and encourages a student on in their college education. Both mentees and mentors stand to gain so much. You will likely find that just the word itself, "mentor," gives a sense of academic place and pride to the student who has one. Such a valuable, cherished relationship may be absolutely instrumental in the life and success of a student, and transformative for both of you. You can informally mentor or formally become one through campus mentoring opportunities such as the [Sac State U-Mentor Program](#) or other mentoring programs on campus and in the Colleges.

### ***Give Them a Place to Be Themselves***

A central part of belonging is feeling that your full authentic self is acknowledged and honored: In academia, a place where students can share freely their selves and any struggles they have in or out of the classroom. Philosopher Martin Buber posited that most of the time we interact with people in terms of our practical roles and needs when going about life—so essential to day-to-day functioning, but not fully seeing or appreciating others beyond this. Yet we may also enter another way of being where we encounter and relate with others in their utmost individuality and totality, where we view and value them as truly unique, where we are fully present and engage in open, genuine dialogue together. This is the beautiful space he called "I-Thou," where people feel free to be their most authentic selves, and know they are seen as special, as irreplaceable, for all they are.

### ***Create Connections to Campus Life and the University***

Students also need to feel a wider sense of belonging with their institution.

#### ***Tell Students All the Campus Has to Offer***

Sac State offers so many programs and services, all great ways to get students engaged and increase their likelihood of staying and succeeding in college. There are places on campus for women, men, LBGTQ+ students, students of various cultural backgrounds and religions, students with disabilities, international students, student athletes, student veterans, and undocumented students; programs for minority underrepresented students, lower-income students, English language learners, first year students, and honors students; services for first generation college students, former foster youth, student parents, students experiencing hunger or homelessness, students of migrant or seasonal farmer backgrounds, and formerly incarcerated students. There's also tremendous help for writing, reading, researching, and other general academic tasks, as well as tutoring for specific courses, and a variety of academic and interest clubs, events and workshops, opportunities for internships and study abroad, and so much more! *The resources and opportunities abound for all, but so many students don't know they are there.* Studies show that students who utilize campus services not only see the benefits of that support for them, but also feel higher levels of belonging! We can encourage student engagement by announcing campus events and activities (or building these into course assignments) and explaining the importance of these to students.

#### ***Participate in Campus Life Yourself***

Faculty and staff showing up at athletic competitions, presentations, gallery showings, walks and marches, and other events shows students that campus participation is important, and can also help students create greater connection with you, outside of interactions in your office, program, department, or service. You showing up to events or joining groups can also show appreciation for, and encourage greater participation in, these events and groups. You might also consider how you might collaborate with others to create greater campus events and groups or create one yourself!

#### ***Let Students Have a Greater Voice in Campus Affairs***

A campus that reflects the views of its students will have the strongest sense of belonging. When students are asked for their thoughts on campus issues and happenings, they feel a greater part of their campus. Many students will respond with their thoughts and input in surveys or at campus meetings and events and feel a greater sense of belongingness for having done so, especially if there is follow-up or follow-through on what they have said. But even for students who never once give voice, just the act of asking can send the message, "you matter." Planning opportunities at the institutional level for greater student feedback and forums on the issues and challenges before the university—and actively issuing invitations and reminders for the greatest response and participation—will increase the student voices heard and sense of mattering on this campus.

### ***For Teaching***

Students need to feel integration with the campus both socially and academically. In their classes, this means that in addition to connecting with their peers and instructors, they need to feel a sense of belonging in their learning.

Here are some fundamental ways to accomplish this:

#### ***Let Students See Themselves in the Learning***

Keep in mind that many of our students, including students of color, women, LGBTQ+ students, and those with disabilities, are much less likely to see themselves represented in the course material they are studying—and consider the impact this may have on their sense of belonging in academia and learning. Try to use demographically diverse subject matter, references, and examples in what you teach, clips or images you show, exercises you create, and reading and other materials you assign. This can provide badly needed connection to what students are trying to learn in the classroom and the place they see for themselves in the realm of college—and is also better representative of the world and a more well-rounded and accurate account of subject areas. This also means acknowledging other ways of knowing, being, expressing, and scholarship in academia than the traditional Eurocentrism and western canon of most disciplines.

#### ***Let Students Be Themselves in the Learning***

Whenever possible, give that space and freedom for students to share their own knowledge, understanding, perspective, or experience in relation to the topic at hand. Integrating opportunities for students to apply and draw upon their personal backgrounds, lived experience, and identities in course assignments and class discussion gives a space of belonging in the learning, while also expanding and enriching learning for all—including the instructor. This may include use of assignments or class discussion prompts specifically asking students to share how a course concept, theory, or reading connects (or doesn't) with their lived experience or background and why, or for a student to state their opinion on a reading or prompt and why they hold this view, based on their experience, background, and class content. This all can send the message, *who you are belongs in and is valued by academia*.

#### ***Give Students a Say in the Learning***

Much or all of course design and content is decided solely by the instructor, but giving students a choice in aspects of the class invites them to feel more a sense of co-creatorship in their own learning. Faculty can, for example, ask for student input on topics to teach or give students (individually or as a class) their choice in ways to learn course content, assignments to complete, and due dates for these. Faculty can also invite students to share readings or resources corresponding to course content or offer feedback on their teaching, course policies, content, and assignments. Further opportunity for students to actively shape the class experience can include asking students to create their own community rules for in-class or online discussion interaction, encouraging or acknowledging student roles taken in class (including, for example, time-keeper, group project or class discussion leader, volunteer for demonstrations), or inviting students to add songs to a class playlist during the break.

### ***Remember Connection in Remote Learning***

Distance learning can feel decidedly distant unless we take greater care to foster connection. In asynchronous online courses, learners can feel like they're pressing on alone through modules with no or low engagement with others, unless the instructor strives to include a student introduction (activity or assignment) in the beginning and introduce themselves, as well (in a welcome video or an instructor biography in a Canvas page or syllabus section). Cooperative learning opportunities throughout the semester are also needed, such as discussion boards, peer review, and pair work or teamwork. In class modalities where there is a mixture of online and in-person instruction, being mindful to look straight into the camera (rather than only the students in front of you) and to treat online learners equally with in-class students (in terms of attention, questions, and more) is important to the student feeling connection with you, their peers, and the learning, rather than a distant, passive observer in the course.

### ***Let Students Shine in the Learning***

Academia can seem like the professors' world, ruled by instruction and the instructor, without a real place for the student other than a desk in class. The divide with academia can be steep, especially for students historically underrepresented in higher education. But when students are able to showcase their talents and bloom in their abilities for all to see, they forge for themselves a place in academia that has real meaning and significance to them. *When students are given the opportunity and encouragement to shine in their classes or out on campus in all of the ways unique to them, they may feel a greater sense of belonging at the school, a stronger belief in their capabilities, and a deeper connection to what they are learning.* And for some, this may be the exact point when they realize they are here to stay, when they begin to envision more themselves graduating from college one day.

## Conclusion

Everyone deserves the right to their higher education, and every student comes with their unique thoughts, backgrounds, ideas, and insights to contribute to all of our learning and campus environment. *Every student is needed here, wanted here, belongs here.* But not all students know that or feel that sense of belonging.

This section of “Listening to Students Who Thought About Leaving College or Left and Came Back” highlights the most essential of needs students have, the need to feel a sense of belonging, and the steps we can take to forge and foster connections in and out of the classroom to increase student fulfillment and achievement at our institution.

*Our Hive, Our Home... Stingers Up!*

For more perspectives from students and information regarding this work, “Listening to Students Who Thought About Leaving College or Left and Came Back,” please see the sections:

- [“Part 1: The Pivotal First Year in College”](#)
- [“Part 2: The Need for Belonging”](#)
- [“Part 3: The Need to Do Well and Feel Confident in Coursework”](#)
- [“Part 4: The Need to Manage Stress and Cope with Struggles”](#)
- [“Part 5: The Need to Manage Costs and Financial Pressures”](#)
- [“Part 6: The Need to Finish Each Semester as Strongly as Possible”](#)
- [“Part 7: The Need to Return”](#)
- [“Part 8: The Need to Be Engaged in Learning”](#)
- [“Part 9: The Need for Greater Mental Health”](#)
- [“Part 10: The Need for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice”](#)
- [“Part 11: The Need to Find One’s Path”](#)
- [“Part 12: The Need to Graduate”](#)

This work is part of the larger [\*Listening to Students\*](#) project done at this institution.

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