

*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 want to leave college because I have lost all motivation to learn. For the past few years I found it difficult to grasp concepts of any subject and I space out a lot wherever I am. This may be all because of the pandemic and when online classes started or maybe I am burnt out from taking IB classes in high school.*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you did leave college?) This is arguably the best option for gaining financial stability in life. I am here to get a degree, get a job with the degree, and use the money I earn to pay off debt, buy necessities, then buy luxury items. Later on maybe I will get a higher paying job. As of now I cannot think of any other way to be set for life.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Lower cost of everything. If I do fail a class or cannot get into one, my graduation is delayed by another semester or two and I end up having to pay more money. More specifically if tuition and housing cost are cheaper I do not have to be so worried about trying to graduate ‘on time’.*

—19, male, Chinese, 2nd year 2nd semester

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Tuition, lectures with little to no student involvement*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left college?) My family support, they work extra hours to the extreme to help me pay for college and be able to live my twenties.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Lower tuition, more parking (having to leave hours early just to secure a parking spot)”*

—20, white/Russian, 3rd year, first generation student

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Lack of support from faculty/staff, and high demands, expectations, and workload for a first-year student*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left college?) The motivation to achieve my goals for a better future*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Listen more to student’s experiences and needs....”*

—Age: 21 Ethnicity: Asian American Year in school: 4

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Being sick all the time not being able to have fun or go to class, personally a frequent driver as a hobby and my car is at home.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Idk, maybe add a water fountain on 3rd floor Desmond that works and more lenient parking rules on weekends bc nobody here on the weekends and it just makes it hassle for everyone”*

—Firstyear

*“It is nearly impossible to pursue a full-time education and finish in the typical amount of time (four years, in my case) while maintaining a living wage. I've stopped and started college twice now for the express reason of needing to work full-time on top of trying to finish my Bachelor's degree and credential. The lack of options when it comes to in-person class times for someone working a 9-5 while attending Sacramento State is also very discouraging.*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if left college?) I don't have a choice, I want to finish my education and this is the only way to do it. The only thing that saved me this semester was having three asynchronous courses online.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) More availability and options for necessary core classes during evening and night time.”*

—A white, 24 year old woman in her third year of higher education

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Just at the same time COVID was emerging, my dad was diagnosed with stage 4 kidney cancer. I developed anxiety and depression for a few months, and had to go on medication for anxiety. I learned that my anxiety had stuck with me after that experience, but I somewhat knew how to control it after some time.*

*I was already more than half way done with school, so I saw no point in leaving behind what I had already accomplished. I decided to stay for the sake of myself and my family as I know they sacrificed so much for me. I stuck it out, even if I did feel unmotivated most of the times. I wanted to make them proud and prove myself to be tougher and more resilient than anyone would expect me to.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) It's a hard topic to discuss or even bring up casually, so I wouldn't be able to say for certain what would have helped. I think as long as there are mental health resources available and maybe more cancer awareness resources, that might be the best thing there is.”*

— I am a first generation Latina. I am 23 years old and this is my 5th and last semester here at sac state. My first language was Spanish, so my learning ability could be affected at times.

*“I left community college for a semester because of financial costs outside of school required my immediate attention. Since FASFA assumes that your family will help contribute to your education expenses it narrows the amount of aid I am qualified for. For this upcoming semester I am thinking about how difficult it will be to afford school.*

*When I had left community college for a semester it was the most eye opening experience and it made me want to achieve my bachelors degree. I went back because I was able to save enough money to afford school once again. And currently what is going to stop me from taking as many classes next semester and set me back in achieving my bachelors degree is the cost of tuition.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Lower the cost of tuition and do not raise the cost, it is already expensive. The education provided at the school is amazing but is raising the cost each year actually improving all areas of the college? Is it improving the quality of education for all majors? What does raising the cost of tuition actually change for students who already commute 30-60 minutes to school? If you want an educated society the cost of education should not be expensive for those who have to pay the tuition by themselves without family contribution.”*

—My demographics: female, 22 years old, Caucasian, junior-transfer student, my job is a department manager for a fast food chain.

*“I left college because I wanted to work full time. I needed the income to support myself. I came from a big family, and I grew up in a family that depended on government assistance. Other reasons I left was the difficulty of navigating the college system and the burn out of schooling. The expectations (hard push) from the school to maintain a full-time student status was exhausting. I felt alienated from campus because I did not know what I was doing or what classes I needed. There was no peer support much less staff support. If there were, then it was hard to find. It felt like there were many red tapes, but in reality, it's just knowing how to navigate the system. One thing that would have made a huge difference would have been the support from peers (at least for the first year and nearing graduation) who were knowledgeable in how to navigate the system and would make me feel an important part of the community. I eventually return to school after 10 years to obtain my degree because I wanted the opportunity to gain better employment and increase my income as well as my knowledge, skills, and abilities. As I slowly work my way through my classes and learned, on my own, how to navigate the system, I was able obtain my associate degree in 4 years. I took another 4-year break to raise my children and returned to obtain my bachelor's degree.*

*I came back to college to obtain my degree to have the opportunity to gain better employment, improve my knowledge, skills, and abilities, and for personal growth. Let's be honest, depending on your career, a degree may not be necessary to gain employment that pays well.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) I had a difficult time with the staff in the program that I was in. Better training for staff so they can help assist students who need help with graduation, credits transfers, etc. More transparent on information (no ‘fine print’ information; everything should be clear and easily visible to read). Timely response to email inquiries (48-hour window).”*

—first generation college student

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?)*

*1st time: I needed to work full time to be able to pay my bills and going to college seemed a luxury I couldn't afford. That led to a 3 year gap.*

*2nd time: I had gotten married and became a parent. I was the primary caregiver and could only take classes when my husband wasn't at work, usually only one class a semester. His job often required overtime, and that made it difficult to know if he would be home in time for me to get to my class on time, or at all.*

*3rd time: I was turning 30 and wanted at least something to show for the last 12 years spent off and on going to American River College, so I got an AS degree. I just looked at whatever degree I could get with the classes I had taken. I added the missing class and got my degree. Around that time things got really busy as a parent, most evenings were spent taking my kids to activities making taking classes difficult. That led to an 8 year gap.*

*Since coming back this final time 5 years ago: Every semester I want to quit. I feel that I am being selfish. That I'm not there for my youngest like I was for his brothers. That I'm wasting my family's time and resources. I hate the commute and traffic. I feel too old. I feel so out of place as a person with 2 kids in college being in college myself.*

*I keep coming back because my father always wanted me to get a college degree. It was very important to him. He saw it as my ticket to a better life. He passed away when I was 10. Now that my kids are older I thought it would be a good time to reenter the work force. Ironically, because I was worried about how we were going to help pay for their college so they didn't have school debt when they graduate. Unfortunately, I'm not qualified for anything other than a minimum wage job. I'm hoping that with a college degree I can get a better job. So far all I've done is cost us \$25,000, and now we're paying for 3 people at once to go to college, yikes. Three things have kept me going this last time around, 1. the support and encouragement from my husband and kids, 2. if I quit now I will have nothing to show for all of my effort, 3. guilt that if I don't get my degree I will have wasted all that money and time.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) More flexible class options. I thought that I would be able to take classes while my kids were in school. That didn't turn out to be the case. The classes I needed were often from 1-6pm. In my major the classes are offered one time once a year, or once every 2 years and so you take them at that time or you don't get to advance. I've hated this. I really didn't want my schooling to interfere with my obligation as a parent, but it has. This has often led me to want to quit every semester, and I feel so guilty.”*

—42 years old White College Senior 1st generation college student Parent

*“Burnout made me leave.*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left college?) Need to retake two failed classes to get higher grade point average.”*

—first generation, veteran

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Lack of support, accessibility, and financial concerns*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left college?) My motivation to graduate and help the community.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Provide more accessible options for those who work full-time. It is very discouraging and makes it easy to give up when you have mandatory courses that are happening at 9 am. Offer more courses that fit the needs of all students and not just some. It is sad that people have to sacrifice taking care of their basic needs to attend college that they have to pay to attend.”*

—29 year old, Black female. First generation college student and graduate student.

*“i left college in 2019 after struggling with the stability of my personal life i did take a gap and left to enlist in the military to find that stability i was missing*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left college?) Finding my footing in the military, establishing my routine, learning where i could take a class here and there and enrolling after my first year in the service. Solely online classes and then shifted to in person at Sacramento state when my work allotted school time.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Offer online classes i was surprised and disappointed about the flexibility for students that cannot attend in person classes. I committed to Sac with the impression of having that opportunity but at orientation I was told otherwise, forcing me to try and find the time to be able to attend classes in between my work.”*

—22 years old hispanic/latino woman 3rd year in college, first generation college student, active duty/veteran, single no children, only speak english

*“Once when I was 20 I left because I didn't know what I wanted and I was having more fun working, getting paid, hanging out with friends, not being a minor anymore, and doing illegal substances. A couple years later I then took a couple classes with a friend, which was fun but I didn't 'go back' to school.*

*At 30 I thought to myself 'you're too old to go back to school' so I didn't. Then at 35 I was like 'I'll kill myself if I work customer service for my whole life and I'm not too old!'. What keeps me going now is that 'I want my life to have value and helping people will give my professional life value and I want to make the world a little better place'.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Help on the phone and not just refer to the website. Clear department responsibilities. I call for help and people say acronyms they can define and just point the finger other places and then you call them and they say nope not us.”*

—biologically and mentally she/her/hers, 41, irish-american, sophomore (CRC(FLC) 2000-2002 2008, FLC 2018-2023 transfer degree, SacSt 2023-), 2nd graduate of college in family (grandpa did business school in Mass. 90 years ago, not a veteran, not a parent, not multilingual learner

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Disillusionment with course content was the biggest factor, ask any undergrad (in my) major and they will pretty much all have the same outlook on their time learning in college (and to be fair this isn't an indictment of CSUS specifically, most college courses I've seen are like this). My experience is limited ... but what I've seen is this major is too nuanced to teach correctly in just 4 years. No one is graduating that can say ‘I know this topic 100%’ and we are learning hundreds of topics by the time we graduate. It's all mile wide inch deep levels of understanding on various aspects.... Without supplemental self-learning on a student's own time in the form of projects they won't be able to actually apply the concepts their learning or be able to give a holistic explanation during job interviews out of college. So in short - I believe I was not prepared for a job based on what I had been taught up until my Junior year, so I took time off to teach myself a specialization of (my major).*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left college?) I promised my Mom I'd finish, also I also don't like quitting things.*

*In my own experience I had to take a semester and a summer off from schooling to focus on my career. What I took away from this experience was the need to teach yourself specialized topics so that you can stand a chance in the job market and the critical lack of free-time full time students have. I needed to divorce myself from college entirely in order to create a solid foundation, I tried to reduce my unit load but I ended up feeling like I was wasting my time even more as I still stretched myself between coursework and self-learning. I know I am just one voice amongst thousands of students and working for the state has shown me just how slow some organizations can be at making changes... but in my opinion students would benefit tremendously from coursework that focuses on long-term projects instead of tests and homework. Give students room and time for creative problem solving, let them get their hands dirty with different topics.”*

—4th year, started working as a student assistant in 2021 for the California Dept. of Pub. Health and then took a year off of school to work full time for CDPH. Came back to finish my degree.

*“I never dropped out but I thought about it many times. I didn't have motivation, had bad grades, loads of school work was too hard for me and I just thought about being out and having fun with my friends.*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left college?) My Dad was very persistent with me finishing school and I didn't want to disappoint him. I also had major FOMO when I started seeing students I went to School with graduating from Universities and already going back for their Masters. I didn't want to feel left out.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Provide more Evening/Night Classes or Online Classes for those students who work full time.”*

—26 year old Mexican American female and first generation student.

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) It was Spring of 2021. We had gone through a full year of COVID-19, a year of political unrest and personal struggle. I had broken up with my first serious boyfriend at the end of Fall 2020, which triggered a spiral into a depressive episode (I’ve had chronic MDD since childhood). I was tired, stressed, feeling lost and like school and life in general were pointless. I stared at my laptop screen but didn’t absorb anything. I was a person who avoided advising appointments, and I was already very overwhelmed by the idea of graduating even without all the other factors. I realized I would have to start planning for graduation very soon. The thought of graduation filled me with nothing but fear and anxiety, and I had no idea how to begin the process, let alone what to do with myself as a new grad in the middle of a pandemic. We hit the one-year anniversary of the lockdown over spring break, and when classes started back up again, I just... didn’t log back in. It was too much.*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left college?) I want my degree. I want a job that pays actual money, I want to do something worthwhile with my life, I want health insurance and my own apartment and a career that I can talk about at parties. I’m just tired of living the narrative of ‘trans neurodivergent dropout working in fast food and living with their parents’, lol. I love CSUS, but I’m here to graduate, preferably soon.*

*I really wish the transfer process was easier for former dropouts. I’m currently having to find syllabi for 84 units worth of classes so that I can get credit for them, and it’s tedious. And this is after waiting for-ev-er for my transcripts to process (like a month). It’s been 2 years since I was a college student, & the whole thing is just overly confusing. I wish I could just focus on school and not this.”*

—24, a junior, transgender, queer, AuDHD/neurodivergent

*“I left college at 19 in Spring 2014 & married then I returned in 2016... then I left again after Spring 2019 because of divorce & I became discouraged about how difficult it was to get into a nursing program. I didn’t meet the required science g.p.a of 3.0 because I received straight B’s and one C. I obtained a CNA license and worked in a furniture warehouse during the pandemic but left in 2022 because I felt purposeless. I’ve always regretted my unfinished education choices, but lack of finances and the need to work makes me want to leave college. I returned so that I can hopefully earn a bachelor’s then use it to try to enter into an accelerated nursing program instead.*

*I returned because I did not want to settle with a low paying job or unfinished college education. What’s keeping me here is some financial aid and the encouragement of my mom and siblings.*

*I have all A’s except for (one class). It would be great to have professors that lecture well, care about the students’ success, and not have such a strict and cutthroat testing environment where you have to answer 50 questions in 60 minutes and can’t go back to previous questions. I found it strange and stressful and ended up bombing it. Doing bad in school makes me want to give up because I am no longer young & sharp - having adequate time to take exams or correct my mistakes would be nice. Emailing the professor did nothing to solve my issue.”*

—Age: 28 Race: Asian (Vietnamese) Third year (I think) First generation college student Divorced, no children



*“I left Sac State in 2009 for mostly financial reasons, but I was also very immature and didn't know what I wanted to do. I have taken various JC classes between 2009 and now, and now I am back full time to finish my BA.*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left college?) Job potential and career goals. When working for the State of CA, there is only so far you can go without a degree and the time/experience needed in place of a degree is extensive. Plus, it is a personal goal to finish at Sac State and go on to higher education.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) More programs, counseling, and events for returning and older students. Most of the events and lectures I would love to attend are during working hours. I work full time for the state. Anything that can be given after work hours or on weekends is always appreciated!”*

—I am a 35 year old, black, cis-het woman, 3rd generation college student

*“I had to leave school when I was in community college because of the workload combined with the cost of living. My credit card debt piled up and I couldn't afford to pay off my debt and bills so I had to quit school in order to get more hours.*

*While I was out of school, I pursued blue collar work. I was in pest control for three years and was a plumber for 2 years and although I was making the same amount of money as my contemporaries, I was working physically harder and putting in significantly more hours. I saw my friends that graduated college living with a better quality of life so I decided to return to school and pursue a degree in computer science.*

*Sacramento State desperately needs a better website for the student center. MySacState UI is decent, but the student center is messy and not organized. I think organizing the student center would make the experience easier for many students.”*

—From the perspective of a student who comes from a low income household.

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) No motivation. I didn't know what I wanted to major in. I rather work and make money than go to school so I dropped out of school in 2012-2013. I had other priorities in life besides school.*

*What made me come back to school was because I wanted to excel in life. Working at my previous company, it was hard to work my way up and make a comfortable living. Although education doesn't define success, you can never go wrong with having an education.*

*(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Offer more online classes or night classes.”*

— I am a 30 years old Asian American female. I graduated high school in 2011 and went to community college for 2-3 semesters and then dropped out. In 2019, I went back to school during the summer semester at Los Rios and now I will be graduating in Spring....

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) The curriculum for the major is too rigorous, previous education never really prepared me for what university/college had to offer. (Grade school, highschool) Also lost the motivation to be consistent with my studies, even I am uncertain that (my major) is something I want to pursue.*

*(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left college?) Four years in, tens of thousands of dollars in. Neither of which I can get back, I am forced to see it all the way through, even if it takes me another year, or two years.*

*For me, the issue isn't CSUS but my prior experience with education. I didn't build the right habits that helped me stay consistent. There are plenty of assist workshops here I never took the time out to try out any of those.”*

— First generation asian college student.

*“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) I was really homesick and struggling to take care of myself. Being away from my family and friends into a new school where I knew no one was intimidating and lonely.*

*I created a sense of belonging, I got more involved on campus and started talking more to my classmates, going to sac state events. I was feeling more and more like a part of the community, and therefore less alone.*

*I would have enjoyed if we had parent days or sibling days. Have my family come visit campus, I do not know if we have/had these but those would have been nice to attend.”*

—First-generation, 21 years old as of right now, Mexican-American. In my fourth-year.

*“The primary reasons I have wanted to leave college have been burnout, lack of finances, and the time needed to be successful in college. I have worked the entire time I have been in college, and starting in 2021 I have been working full-time and living with my partner. It has been difficult to find classes that fit into my schedule but I need to work full-time to afford my basic necessities.*

*I haven't left college because of how passionate I am about public health and the support I have from my friends and partner. Everyday I think about the jobs I want in public health and how my bachelors will help.*

*Sacramento State should offer more hybrid, online, and night classes. This would help students who are parents, students who work full-time, and students with disabilities. Also, I wish more programs like the food pantry were open outside the typical Monday-Friday 9am-5pm. There are many resources and events I can't utilize because they happen on weekdays during the day.”*

— My demographics include Age 24, Multiracial (Black, Arab, White), Sixth year in college, second year at sac state, Queer

***“When I left my studies, I felt lost and without any guidance. My parents did not know much about the educational system and though they supported me, my siblings and I had to figure out college on our own. I eventually felt like I was taking classes just to take them without a goal or plan on what to do next.***

***What is keeping me here is the awareness and knowledge I have gained in the resources that are available for me. I also have the time to commit to my studies, and a new family support system at home with my little ones. I am now motivated, more than ever, to graduate.***

***I know there are groups and even scholarships for parents, but this was not known to me until my second semester at CSUS. I wish I had learned about the resources sooner so that I could access them sooner. I am still happy I received support and that there is an awareness to there being students that are parents as well.”***

—35, Hispanic/Latina, senior, first generation college student, parent, multilingual learner, continuing student, community college transfer student

***“It was always difficult for my family financially; I grew up with parents always stressing for wanting a better life for us, children, but financials were the most difficult to keep up with in living a more prosperous life. Further, growing up seeing the difficulty, caused me to want to find a job instead of attending college. It wasn't until my father pushed to go into higher education is what caused me to attend college, until I got my first job on campus. With this, once I started seeing that I could be making money instead of going to school and spending money, I sort of lost my drive in education. I lost a lot of motivation for school when I lost financial aid; this caused me to just want to quit school and make money rather than be in debt.***

***I feel like the biggest motivation for me now, is that I want something better for my future. In the difficult times we live in now, I see that it takes more than just experience to make it even further. Also, from many lectures and conversations with family and friends, it pushed me to finish what I have already started and possibly go even further with education. After seeing so many of my colleagues finish college has also inspired me a bit to finish college.***

***Sacramento State has done a lot for me, I was fortunate enough to have great colleagues who were able to show me the campus and help me find the resources that could help me for my future. Throughout my years at Sac State, I feel as if I have developed so much in my professionalism and leadership skills. I feel like the one thing that Sac State should proceed to progress in, is to really put those resources out there for students more and get them the help that they need and deserve.”***

— I am currently a Sac State student and I identify as a Hmong male. I am currently a senior, currently finishing up with my last semester, majoring in Biochemistry. I don't necessarily consider myself a first-generation student because my parents have associate degrees. However, I am the third child out of six and coming from a family of eight. I am also a natural-born U.S. citizen, coming from Massachusetts, and I speak both English and Hmong.

## **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 2023 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 SCNC population is also in the higher range.

### ***Those Who Consider 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 2023](#), 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 section, Part 8, focuses on the need for greater engagement in learning.

## Part 8: The Need to Be Engaged in Learning

While the term has been conceptualized in different ways in the field of education, simply put, student engagement in learning is the amount of time and quality of effort put into subject learning and coursework: *How invested and involved students are in their studies.*

Scholars find there are specific dimensions of engagement in learning that can occur:

- **Cognitive engagement:** The student’s mental effort put forth to learning, including various types of thinking and intellectual endeavors, such as reflecting, making connections, applying, analyzing, evaluating, problem solving, and creative thinking.
- **Emotional engagement:** The student’s positive feelings and attitudes regarding the learning, including interest, enthusiasm, motivation, and excitement regarding their learning.
- **Behavioral engagement:** The student’s actions taken to further learning. In the class setting, this can include active listening, asking questions, contributing to class discussions, and participating in lesson activities. In coursework, this can include reading course material and completing homework, studying for tests, researching and writing papers, and working on projects. Outside of class, this can include other activities to further the learning, such as going to campus events or joining clubs in line with the program of study.

There is much research to show the importance of learner engagement to college success. Students engaged in their studies tend to have better academic performance, persistence, retention, and graduation rates, as well as greater fulfillment and sense of belonging in academia.

We consequently strive for student engagement in higher education and have increasingly done so over the past decades—but now more than ever. Educators have noted with concern the lower level of engagement seen in students. The causes are myriad, including exhaustion and burnout over the past few years, increasing stress and mental health decline in society, lower attention spans and more passive mindset of learning created in pandemic distance learning conditions, and less academic preparation for college and students’ lower confidence in their academic abilities.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) provides a way to look at different types of student engagement at individual institutions of higher education choosing to participate in the survey, such as our own. The survey goes out to first-year students and seniors on campus and asks questions to measure four different types of student engagement. Of these, the one most reflective of our focus here is “academic challenge,” encompassing how much students report that they engage in various types of higher-order learning, reflective and integrative learning, learning strategies, and quantitative reasoning in their studies. We can see from the [NSSE multi-year data for our campus](#) that numbers are lower in most of these areas for this past year compared with the most recent pre-pandemic year survey numbers for our institution.

### ***In This Document***

To follow, you will find suggestions for students, faculty, and staff to help students engage more fully in their coursework.

## **For Students For Greater Engagement in Learning**

Student engagement—how involved you are in your learning—is pivotal to how well you do in coursework, how much you learn, apply, and remember of it, and how fulfilling and exciting you find your studies to be. You're also more likely to persist and progress through to graduation!

Engagement can vary from time to time, class to class, and assignment to assignment, depending on any number of factors. Engagement can also range in degree, from high to low. A student can knock out a paper and call it done, but how deeply did they go in their thinking, abilities, and potential? A student can show up to class, but how attentive are they and striving to engage in the lesson at hand?

Sometimes we forget that every class or academic event provides a rich opportunity for learning. You learn about the subject being taught, which can be of such value in and of itself—but you also learn so much more, when engaging more fully. What we gain may be added understanding of some of the most fundamental questions of how the world works and how to navigate life in it; what's going on around us, why things are the way they are, and how we might create positive change; and how others live, think, believe, and behave differently than we and why, and what we may learn from this. We also can learn vital skill sets for thinking (analysis, creativity, reasoning, problem solving), communicating (speaking, listening, writing, presenting), working with others (teamwork, leadership, conflict management, adaptability to people with diverse backgrounds and perspectives), and growth (goal setting, self-reflection, ethical consideration). These are skills needed for flourishing, fulfilled human beings and what employers around the nation ask higher education to help students to develop for their careers.

Sometimes we think a topic or course is irrelevant to our major or career path, not realizing how very interrelated fields of study are and that informed members of society need a wider base of knowledge beyond the curriculum of their selected program (of societal issues, cultural movements, government, politics, world events, historical forces, global dynamics, technological and scientific advancements, for example). This breadth of knowledge provides our fullest understanding of any one topic, by helping us to see larger contexts and connections at play, and coming up with effective ideas or solutions for the more substantive needs and problems of business and society typically requires we come at the issue from wider, multiple angles.

Sometimes we think if we find something boring, that's reason enough to stop listening, when the fact of the matter is that we live in a richly complex and dynamic universe, unlimited in all we can discover and learn. Some would argue that being bored is simply a mind limited by the inability to see the opportunity for all types of great learning, experiences, and outcomes if we put ourselves to it.

Sometimes we may disagree with what's being presented and shut down, failing to take the opportunity to expand our knowledge by stepping outside of what we think on the issue and learning more fully the other side(s) of it.

Sometimes we might think we have already learned something being taught, when maybe a refresher is what we needed or we could have learned in a better and/or different way, had we stayed engaged. Sometimes we may think we already know something, forgetting that knowledge creation is ever-changing and increasing. And as the wise often note, *“the more you know, the more you know you don't know.”*

Sometimes just showing up is all we have to give and we're in a headspace where we just want to make it through the class, due to stress, tiredness, work and family responsibilities, and more. There are significant factors that impact how much we listen, learn, and engage, it must be acknowledged.

Yet we also should consider what we miss out on when not fully engaged. *What would we gain if we could pour more of ourselves into what we're learning?*

### ***For Greater Engagement in Class Lectures and Campus Presentations***

How much we learn comes down to how much we engage in class lessons, campus workshops, or academic events. Here are some guidelines for maximizing your attention and listening in such situations.

#### ***Prepare Yourself Mentally and Physically***

Being tired or hungry can limit our full engagement. Try to get a good night's sleep and a good meal so that you have optimum energy for the learning to come.

In your courses, do any assigned reading before class and review the prior class day's notes. Listen to how your instructor introduces the material and for any preview of points or agenda for the lesson. If attending a campus workshop or other academic event, look over any information given with the invitation or announcement and highlight the reasons in your mind why you want to attend. *Prime* your mind for the information to come.

#### ***Strengthen Your Ability to Pay Attention***

Attention spans are much lower these days, due to a variety of factors, including higher stress levels that mentally tire and erode our concentration and increasing technological use that accustoms our minds to content that is fast-moving, visually stimulating, geared to our interests, and that presents information in short, simple bites. This makes longer, more information-intensive, and complex content, such as a lecture, difficult to sustain our attention. The pandemic also made it so students may have become accustomed to viewing a Zoom lecture or recorded lesson in a more distracted, passive manner, where they could move around, multi-task, eat, be on their phones, or do other things freely. This may still be their norm in online classes and even in on-ground classes, to some extent, making breaking the habit and learning to devote full attention difficult to do.

To pay attention more fully: Try to pick the spot best for you in the learning situation to focus. Be sure you can see and hear the instructor or presenter well and you're away from anything in the environment that could distract you. Put your own potential distractions away, such as homework for other classes and your phone. *Make the conscious choice to devote your full attention to the learning*, as much as possible. Try to put all cares and concerns on hold, free your mind of all but the information presented, and strive to be fully present in absorbing and actively engaging in the learning. If you find you've drifted off into a daydream, tangent, or zoned out—hey, it happens!—simply bring yourself back and re-focus. The ability to pay attention is like a muscle: You have to work on it, and with time and practice, it will grow stronger.

### ***Strengthen Your Ability to Listen Actively***

Research has long shown we typically don't listen very well. Immediately after a short presentation or talk, most of us cannot accurately report half of what was said, and after 24 hours we can only remember less than a quarter of the original message (and much of this recollection may be distorted or inaccurate). The findings are much the same for college students listening to lectures in which they knew they would be tested on the information presented. *The research also shows that we tend to think we are better listeners than we actually are!* And now the ability to listen has worsened, due to lower attention spans, as well as much less practice in active listening in class or to others the past few years of pandemic shut down and social distancing. This is to our detriment. Studies show the many benefits of active listening: Better learning and grades in the class, as well as greater likelihood of being hired in an interview, being promoted on the job, successful leadership and productive team membership, and greater connections with others and more fulfilling relationships in personal life.

To listen actively, fully engage your ears, eyes, mind, and heart: Your ears, to hear what the instructor's saying and key vocal cues. Your eyes, to see any visual aids used and the instructor's nonverbal cues of demeanor and movement that enrich understanding of what's being said. Your mind, to stay focused, understand, and assess the material. Your heart, to feel any emotional aspects of the instructor's message and any of your own feelings in response. And, if you're actively listening with every part of you, your heart rate will typically rise to a number equivalent to mild exertion or at times higher. *True active listening really takes considerable effort and energy!*

### ***Use Your Brain Time Wisely***

Most people talk at a rate of about 120-180 words per minute, but your brain can process about 400-500 words per minute—much faster than your instructor or a presenter can speak. This has been called “spare brain time,” and many people are tempted to fill in the extra time with all manner of thoughts or activities unrelated to the lecture at hand.

But you can capitalize upon this opportunity by contemplating even more fully the lecture material: Try to determine the key points, paraphrase the meaning of a term given or point being made, identify any questions you might have, connect the material to what you already know, or evaluate the supporting material.

### ***See the Potential Value and Use of the Learning***

It's much harder to pay attention and listen to lessons and presentations, or do course reading and assignments, when at times we may not see the use or value of doing so.

This makes essential your ability to put your mind to work and ask yourself: *What am I seeing or learning now that might prove useful, directly or indirectly, in the short-term or long-term future? How will learning this subject matter, listening to this lesson or campus presentation, completing this assignment, or reading this material help me to progress toward my goals, grow in my thinking, knowledge, or skills, or contribute to my present and future well-being and success?* The instructor or campus presenter will often



state the importance of the information they're presenting, too, so be sure to note this, as well, for further inspiration for fuller attention and active listening.

### ***Take Notes Well***

Taking good notes for most students typically results in more active listening during the class (you have to focus more closely to catch the key points and supporting information), better retention later (you remember the material longer), and, of course, a written record of information when it comes time to review for exams. Research has shown that effective notetaking during lectures can increase test scores by more than 20% (a difference between receiving a C and an A). Yet studies also show that most students don't take very good notes, with typical lecture notes capturing only about 20% - 40% of the material presented.

To take good notes: Always write down any main points, terms, or key concepts that appear on slides or the board—but don't stop there. Fill in what the instructor has identified as key points with: (1) definitions or explanations provided, (2) examples given (research shows these help with learning and remembering!), and (3) related information emphasized. Note any helpful cues regarding lecture content, such as "for example," "is defined as," "one conclusion is," and so forth. You also want to look for lecture cues regarding the importance of information presented. Most students know to heed the instructor mantra, "this will be on the test," but you should also listen for other indicators of importance, like "a key point to take is this," or if the instructor spends a lot of time on, repeats, and/or seems especially enthusiastic about something. After the lecture, try to review your notes while the information is fresh in your mind and compare notes with classmates or any class video recording or transcript, when possible, in order to fill in the blanks, clarify, and round out more fully your own notes.

### ***For Greater Engagement in Coursework***

Sometimes we just aren't fully engaged in coursework, due to any number of factors, including not seeing the use or value of the coursework, not having the best study conditions or time management skills, not being physically or mentally up to full focus on our studies, and not having confidence in our academic abilities. Here are some strategies to help to overcome these barriers:

#### ***Remind Yourself of the Value of Doing Coursework***

Different academic tasks offer different opportunities for learning and skill-building:

- Reading can strengthen our speed and effectiveness in reading, in general, while also building vocabulary, and expands our awareness of all the various aspects of the subject matter that an instructor doesn't have time to provide out loud in class, so that we learn more.
- Writing assignments help us strengthen our writing abilities, in general, while allowing us to explore further and sharpen our thinking regarding a topic through written expression.
- Research assignments give us the opportunity to learn how to find good information, leading us to a range of perspective and/or depth of knowledge on a topic, along with studies and experiments, to add to our information base and strengthen our papers and presentations with support for our points or arguments.

- Studying for exams solidifies your knowledge of class content, while also giving you practice in test-taking in preparation for the exams you may someday need to take to get a job or be accepted into the next level of higher education you seek.
- Presentations allow you to share your perspective and knowledge with peers, adding your voice to the creation of class knowledge, while also providing the opportunity to develop the presentational skills needed in college and life beyond.
- Group projects help you to gain experience in working with others different than you in background, perspective, work habits, and communication, while also enriching your thinking, when exposed to others' views on a topic. Groups are also typically assigned bigger, more challenging tasks, because of the greater number of people to do the work, and this allows you to achieve more in academic endeavors than is typically doable for one student alone.

### ***Create the Best Conditions for Study***

When planning your semester's classes, try to arrange a class schedule conducive to your best focus, learning, and homework completion, when possible (for example, taking harder classes at the time of day you're at your best in terms of energy or building breaks in between classes to stay on top of reading and homework or to take a little down time in preparation for full mental focus in the next class). During the semester, find a quiet spot on campus or off, with low or no distractions, to do coursework. To avoid being pulled away from your studies, try to stay off the Internet entirely or open the Internet only to access the online classwork or reading you need to do, and consider turning off notifications on your cell phone.

### ***Don't Procrastinate***

It had to be said! At least half of students procrastinate, and that is a very conservative estimate. While a few students might say they do their best work at the last minute, it's hard for most students to optimally engage in terms of both time and quality of intellectual effort spent on an assignment, when doing things at the last minute. Planning and time management skills are necessary to develop in college life for this reason. Please also be aware of the "planning fallacy," a common error where we underestimate the time a task will take—this, together with procrastination, can sure hinder full academic engagement and performance.

### ***Believe in Yourself and All You Can Learn to Do and Achieve***

The role of "academic self-efficacy"—believing in yourself—in college success is clear: It can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Lower self-efficacy can lead to paralyzing doubts or fears and students not doing the work at all or to the best of their ability. Higher self-efficacy means the student will likely engage more fully in the work, seek out any assistance and resources needed for it, persevere through any obstacles encountered, and, ultimately, be more successful on that assignment. If you are doubting yourself, then talk with others about how you feel, use proven strategies like positive self-talk and visualizing success, and keep in mind that a good number of your professors doubted their abilities in some of their coursework when they were students! If you can use some academic support, Sac State offers the [Peer and Academic Resource Center \(PARC\)](#).

[Reading and Writing Center](#), [Math Lab](#), [Smarthinking](#) (the 24-7 online tutoring for a number of subjects and writing), and tutoring centers and campus workshops in the many departments and programs of study across the campus.

### ***Be Good to Yourself***

Your physical and mental health and well-being are significant factors in student engagement in learning—how could they not be? Throughout the semester, try to maintain good sleep, nutrition, exercise, and wellness, physically and mentally, as much as possible. [Student Health, Counseling, and Wellness Services](#) in The WELL offers so many medical, counseling, and wellness services to help you get and stay healthy during your time at Sac State, and most services are covered already (by the Health Services fee a part of your tuition) and available at no additional cost. And if you are experiencing challenges with food, housing, financial or other unique circumstances that are impacting your education, help is just a phone call or email away in the [Crisis Assistance & Resource Education Support \(CARES\) Office](#).

### ***For Greater Engagement in Your Studies***

Learning engagement doesn't have to end with class lessons and coursework! You can explore subjects and fields of study outside of class by joining any of the numerous clubs for students related to majors, careers, and interests, and campus events on topics and issues you want to learn more about. You can also gain greater knowledge and experience with a field or program of study through internships, field experience, collaboration and research with other students or faculty outside of class, studying abroad, and more!

To follow are some of the many great opportunities for greater academic engagement outside of the classroom:

- [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, professional, and special interest in nature.
- [Sacramento State Campus Calendar of Events](#): Provides listings of upcoming events, including program workshops and events and informative forums, lectures, and exhibits.
- [Student Research Center](#): Provides opportunities for students to share their research and creativity in poster sessions, campus fairs, and more, and to collaborate with faculty on research, scholarship, and creative activities.
- [Career Center Internship Services](#): Offers tools and resources to help students obtain an internship. The website provides further information, including links to Handshake: Find Internships, the CA Internship Network, and CSU Entertainment Alliance Internships. Students may also schedule an online appointment for [Career Counseling](#) to get help with internship search strategies, or look at the [Job and Internship Handbook](#) and [Job and Internship Search Strategies video](#) for helpful information. You can also inquire directly with your department or field of study or check for internship opportunities with the campus programs and organizations of interest to you.
- [Study Abroad](#): Provides opportunities for study in locations around the world, for typically a semester, summer, or year, with one program a week or two long.

Please note that interning and studying abroad require more long-term arranging, so be sure to plan ahead.

## **For Staff and Faculty For Greater Student Engagement in Learning**

*Enjoyment and excitement in their classes, fulfillment in their programs of study, intellectual engagement and endeavor. Love of learning, the marvel of gaining depth and breadth of thought on a topic, the thrill of discovery and imagination, the good hard work of critical thinking and computation, the accomplishment of thorough and thoughtful assignment completion and meaningful mastering of subject matter....* These are some of the aspirations we have for our students—but not easily achieved when learners aren't fully engaged.

Here are suggestions for staff and faculty to foster greater student engagement in their studies:

### ***Help Students to See the Importance of Their Studies***

Students engage more in learning when they can see the importance of it. In conversation with students, we can highlight the benefit and fulfillment their studies can bring. We can ask about their classes and assignments—what they have liked, found interesting or useful, how they might apply their learning now or in the future. We can also share what other students have found beneficial in their classes or what we have enjoyed or found valuable, ourselves, in our own undergraduate studies—or even mention times where we used to good effect something learned from subject matter we never thought would matter once the course was over. We can remind students that different courses will exercise different types of thinking and abilities, that their lower division courses help to build a broad foundation of knowledge, experience, and skills for progressing in their upper division and major courses, and that all coursework prepares them in different ways for the working world, engagement in their communities and the civic realm, and growth and fulfillment as a human being.

### ***Help Students to See the Importance of Engagement***

Students may think that simply coming to class or turning in a big assignment they started the night before it comes due counts as engagement. We can make clear that showing up and getting work done is a fundamental first step, but engagement refers more to the amount of time and quality of effort put into their learning. Students may also not realize the benefits of fully engaging in their courses. We can inspire them by sharing the many positive outcomes of greater academic engagement: *Better learning, better grades, better experiences in class and college more generally, and greater likelihood of staying and succeeding in higher education.*

### ***Help Students to Think About Their Thinking***

Metacognition increases learner engagement. Just the concept itself can intrigue students! There are different ways to engage in metacognition we can encourage students to try, including:

- Reflecting on learning motivations and processes, and how one learns best and why.
- Assessing strengths and areas for improvement one has in different types of academic tasks (reading, writing, researching, mathematics, studying, test-taking, and so forth) and steps needed for improvement.
- Understanding the use of different cognitive tasks (analysis, critical thinking, evaluation, creative thinking, application, and synthesis, for example) and where one is in the development of these and steps they may take to progress and grow.
- Identifying obstacles in thinking or learning about a subject and how one can work to overcome these.

- Noting points of confusion and gaps in knowledge in a concept or subject and how one can gain clearer or fuller understanding.
- Realizing how one's thinking may have changed about a certain topic, concept, or field of knowledge, considering the reasons for this change and the effects thereof.
- Realizing one's growth in thinking, learning, and performing academic tasks and the outcomes thereof.

When we discuss with students how they think and learn, they come to see that their cognitive processes and self-awareness are important—for them and to us, that we care about their learning and intellectual development.

### ***Help Students to Engage More in Learning Outside the Classroom***

Learning experiences outside of class can increase academic engagement, sense of belonging, depth of learning, and student retention and college completion rates. We can encourage students to attend the events and join the organizations and groups in line with their academic and career interests. We can challenge them further by encouraging “high impact practices” that have such significant impact on student engagement and success, such as participating in [service learning](#), [doing an internship](#), [studying abroad](#), and engaging in [research or scholarship with faculty or peers outside of the classroom](#). We can also create or support others' creation of more campus events, groups, and learning experiences to provide even greater academic engagement opportunities beyond the classroom. And we can engage students in conversation about the subject matter they want to delve into and fuel their enthusiasm and intellectual curiosity.

### ***Provide the Support Students Need to Fully Engage***

*Not having good mental or physical well-being, not having the academic or study skills or academic self-efficacy to feel confident in coursework, not having accessibility needed for full learning and assignment completion, not having basic needs met, not having the social support or connections to feel included in academic life....* So many factors can lower our students' academic engagement. Here are some ways we can provide support:

- We can offer words of compassion and announce and remind students of campus well-being and basic needs support, such as [Student Health, Counseling, and Wellness Services](#) and the [CARES Office](#).
- We can bolster our students' academic confidence by expressing our belief in them, encouraging a growth mindset, and offering academic support, either our own assistance or through the [Peer and Academic Resource Center \(PARC\)](#), [Reading and Writing Center](#), [Math Lab](#), [Smarthinking](#), and the tutoring centers and campus workshops in the many departments and programs of study across campus.
- We can use universal design to make our classes and campus programs, services, and events more accessible to all students, with or without accommodations, and refer students who may need disability services to the [Disability Access Center](#).
- And we can help students to forge the connections they need to feel engaged, by making them feel seen and welcome, introducing them to other students and colleagues, and promoting the [U-Mentor Program](#), [Women's Resource Center](#), [PRIDE Center](#), [Dreamer Resource Center](#), [Disability Cultural Center](#), [Martin Luther King, Jr. Center](#), [Asian Pacific Islander Desi American Student \(APIDA\) Center](#), [Serna Center](#), and other campus organizations where students can find a place of belonging.

## **In Teaching**

The importance of faculty in student engagement has long been shown. The learning experiences and environment instructors create, as well as the relationships we have with students, have significant impact on how much students engage in their courses.

To follow are suggestions for creating greater student engagement in learning:

### ***Let Students See the Wonder and Worth of What They're Learning***

Sometimes students may question the importance of what they are studying, the relevance of the material to the reality of their day-to-day lives and future success, and how the content and/or method of teaching and assessment meet their goals and interests, and this may hinder full engagement. Sometimes, too, students may see theory as arcane, research studies as intimidatingly technical, historical aspects of a field as far removed in time and place, academic terminology dry, and whole bodies of knowledge without interest or appeal, unless we take the time and care to bring these aspects to life in our teaching.

#### ***Show the Value to Students' Interests and Goals***

We can show at every turn the value of the subject matter we teach to students: How learning the material will be useful to them personally (in their daily lives and growth and fulfillment as a human being), professionally (in their present and future occupations), academically (in progressing through their next level courses, developing their cognitive and academic skills for college success, etc.), and societally (in becoming more informed members of society and contributing to the communities and country in which we live). This is needed now more than ever, given the waning confidence in the value of a degree that students may be hearing or feeling, and the fact that so many students come to college at significant cost to themselves, in terms of finances, competing family and work responsibilities, and more.

#### ***Show the Relevance to Students' Lives and World***

We can show the relevance of what they're learning by giving students the opportunity to discover and share connections made of course material with their personal experience and daily lives. We can use real world examples and case studies, as well as references to current events, media, and pop culture; show the timeliness and/or proximity of what students are learning; and use concrete problems in life or real-life scenarios to work through in teaching our subject matter. Showing the relevance and value of content increases student perception of the learning as more interesting, useful, and enjoyable, and students do better on coursework and regard the instructor more favorably, research shows.

#### ***Show the Fascination and Fulfillment of the Subject***

We can also let students see the wonder of what we teach, which, in and of itself, can be so tremendously engaging! We're in our disciplines, in our related projects and lines of research, for different reasons, but at the center is our driving interest and belief in our fields of study. So let your passion for your subject and love for teaching it show more fully in your verbal and nonverbal communication. You can say what you love about

your field; highlight the aspects of the subject matter that you or past students found particularly fascinating, thought-provoking, or fun; let your passion be seen in your demeanor and heard in your voice; and harness the joy and creativity in lesson creation to do our fields of study justice and engage our students as fully as possible. Student engagement and learning increases when students can see how deeply their instructor regards the act of teaching and the worth of course content.

Perceptions of relevance, value, and interest can vary from person to person, as we know. We can ensure learning connects with students' different backgrounds and meets their individual interests and goals as much as possible by getting to know our students. At the start of the semester, we can ask them to share their backgrounds in icebreakers or getting-to-know-you discussion boards or videos, or ask in class discussion or student surveys/questionnaires what they hope to learn and take from the course, their interests, and personal and professional goals. We can ask students to look at the learning objectives for the course to see which one(s) they find most important and why, and what they might add or change. We can ask students what questions they have about the subject matter coming into the course, and then as the semester ensues, what questions they have coming into a specific lesson, or what areas of the subject matter they are most interested in learning. For the day's topic, we can ask learners to consider and discuss connections made between course content and their lives, the potential value of the learning to themselves or others, and what they found most interesting. And at the end of a course, we can ask students to share what they found most important of the course learning and why. Asking students to consider these types of questions can highlight the worth of the course in their minds and sharing their thoughts with others maximizes understanding for all.

### ***Engage Students in the Learning***

Lessons are so much better when students are fully engaged—for the students disengaged, for the students who are engaged, and for us! Here are some strategies for increasing student engagement in class.

#### ***Hold Their Attention***

To gain attention, you can open with a good “hook” (such as a compelling quote or visual) or engage in concept exploration (having students think about or do something in relation to the topic to prime the mind for the lesson to come). To maintain attention, you can work within the natural human attention span by breaking up straight lecture segments. There are many ways to do this, including those suggested prior, but here is a quick list: Good stories, interesting examples, “fun facts” about the subject matter, humor, controversy in the material you are teaching, common misconceptions of the lecture topic cleared up, great questions posed to the class, frequent invitations for students to comment and ask questions of their own, impactful clips, music and sound, polling the class (“With a show of hands, how many of you...?” or using a Zoom poll), and fun quiz games or the use of online interaction tools or “clickers” (classroom response systems that encourage student response to lecture material).

More generally, it's also helpful to teach in a way that invites the learners' critical reflection of, active participation in, and personal connection to the subject matter at hand. And never underestimate the power of your own great energy and enthusiasm for what you teach in maintaining the focus and enjoyment of your students!

### ***Make It More Active***

Resources abound on the many different techniques to use in teaching to engage students, for both on-ground and online instruction. Discussion is a key tool used to engage students, and can take place in different ways to achieve more maximum contribution from even the more quiet students: In pairs, small groups, or full class discussion, and in variations of these, including “think-pair-share,” group “fish bowl” discussions and “jigsaws,” and anonymous contributions (for example, written on notecards, mixed, and then read or put on a Canvas page set up to allow anonymous student contribution). Here is a short list of other techniques: Concept mapping, hands-on work, scavenger hunts and other learning games and contests, social media use, simulations, creative exercises, self-assessment questionnaires that ask students to apply course material to themselves or their lives, and classroom assessment techniques that ask students to respond in short, informal writing to questions about the day’s lesson (e.g., “What was most clear and/or unclear to you about today’s lesson?” or “How did discussing the topic or concept with others impact your thinking and why?” or “What is something you wanted to know about the topic that wasn’t covered/what questions about the topic do you still have?”).

More generally, it’s also helpful to craft lessons in keeping with the notion that students learn best when they can engage in course material with their eyes, ears, voice, minds, and even hearts. In this last regard, while some may think of academic instruction in more cerebral terms, the power of emotion to engage students in the learning is something we can see in the classroom, and, certainly, research shows.

It should also be noted that there are some times that will require greater effort to engage students: Early morning classes, the last half of a night class, around class registration time, midterms, and finals, all can get overwhelming and exhausting for students. Then the techniques described prior are needed all the more, and student movement around the classroom (request for volunteers, students brainstorm ideas on the board) and stretch breaks can further help to energize. Indeed, some have argued that physicality in instruction not only shakes things up and can wake them up, but also stimulates the brain, increasing student focus and learning.

### ***Challenge Students***

There are also ways we can push students to think and do even more in course learning that can achieve higher learner engagement, if implemented well.

#### ***In Thinking***

Intellectual stimulation is incredibly engaging, students will tell you, and we can sure feel it when it’s happening in the class setting! Having students tackle those harder theories or concepts in the field or encouraging students to go deep and wide in their thinking, pour themselves into critical thinking or creative thinking, can push them further in their minds. And when we do so, being mindful of academic self-efficacy and learner obstacles or anxieties regarding what you are teaching or asking them to do is needed. Some students may have low confidence in their academic capabilities, generally, or with regard to specific abilities. Some may find critical thinking foreign to them, or say “I’m “I’ve never been a creative person,” for example. These students may feel lost and disengaged unless we take care to be especially clear in our instruction, express belief in their capabilities, and offer support for their learning.



### ***In Assignments***

Setting high expectations for assignments can also challenge students ever more in their thinking and abilities. The guideline for optimal goal creation is setting high, yet attainable goals: Too low of expectations can bore and disengage and too high of expectations can confuse and overwhelm. We also need to be mindful that setting high expectations for an assignment without providing a clear path forward or process to begin and complete the work, and accompanying academic resources, sufficient classroom preparation, and instructor guidance, may create anxiety and lower engagement. Scaffolding of assignments (giving a big assignment in smaller chunks, with separate point values and due dates, when possible) can be a great way to help students achieve a lot in terms of course objectives and end tasks, while also decreasing anxiety (by taking it one step at a time) and room for error (by allowing the instructor to see if the students are on track with the bigger assignment).

### ***In Topics of Discussion***

Choosing to hold the more difficult discussions related to course topics (such as race and ethnicity, sexuality, politics, and warfare) can really engage learners and transform a class, when done well. Creating guidelines for constructive dialogue (and leaning into “learning moments” should something other occur) and being mindful of triggering is important to thoughtful participation and not having students disengage.

### ***In Performance***

Putting students front and center in their learning can really increase engagement, as well. We can have students do demonstrations or role-play, lead a discussion or teach a part of the class, or participate in a class debate, with students taking sides on an issue and arguing their positions. To voice is powerful, and performance situations typically energize engagement. But we still need to be mindful of the social anxiety (rising now, post-pandemic), as well as public speaking anxiety (that most people feel at the prospect of speaking before an audience), that can cause some students to disengage, and offer the encouragement, support, and sometimes flexibility needed, to find alternative ways for a student to engage in the activities with less anxiety.

### ***Let Students Shine***

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, making it especially important that we lay the foundation for students to shine in their own unique ways in education—perhaps the highest level of engagement.

### ***Get Them Comfortable in the Class***

A supportive classroom climate is necessary for students to feel comfortable being all they are and can become in academia and, research shows, impacts student engagement, motivation, learning, and persistence in the coursework. A good classroom climate is set principally by faculty—with your own good nature, warmth, sincerity, energy, and humor, and interest and caring in your interactions with students. This will set a good tone all around and facilitate students’ greater connection with you and their peers. Showing your passion for your field and love for teaching also helps students to feel more at ease and connect with you. A good class climate is also set by the students and

instructor working together toward thoughtfulness and collaboration in academic exploration, respect, and collegiality in relationships, and everyone feeling a sense of belonging, valued for what they bring to the class, and supported by their learning community.

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

Class discussions also help pave the way to greater student confidence in contributing their unique insights and talents, so be sure to give space and freedom for students to share their own knowledge, understanding, perspective, or experience in relation to the topic at hand. Not only do all learn more richly in class discussion, but the students come to see themselves as co-creators of knowledge, active in their own education, and they gain confidence in their academic potential and sense of place. Student interaction and collaboration in small groups is another good way for students to get to know each other and begin to share freely and fully themselves and their gifts.

### ***Give Them Opportunity***

Creating different types of learning experiences, such as the ones described earlier in this section and more (e.g., inquiry-based learning, service learning, social justice and activist learning), provide further opportunities for students to shine. So, too, can offering a variety of assignments. Faculty often rely on research papers and testing, but depending on your subject matter, there may be other options to consider assigning to students that encourage different ways of understanding and expression, such as:

- Students creating products, pitches, proposals, posters, performances, video recordings, plays, music, art, poetry, creative writing, newspaper articles, letters, dance, events, and acts of service, activism, civic engagement, or social justice.
- Students devising their own course assessment(s), with guidance and input (and possibly final decision making) from you.
- Students showing their learning through journaling, portfolios, and reflective essays asking students to identify the points or principles most valuable to them in their course learning and explain why, and then discuss how they will put that learning to good use in their futures.

Offering choice in assignments (students choose the tasks they would like to complete for the course) and topic choice on assignments given, when possible, can spark greater enthusiasm and sense of meaningfulness in the work, paving the way for higher levels of student achievement.

### ***Help Them to See and Share Their Gifts***

Faculty and staff, in and out of class, can help students to see their strengths. Noting their affinities and assets fosters within students greater awareness of their gifts and spurs them to share these more. Spreading the word about campus clubs and events in line with the student's interests and talents is helpful, too, for the student to have further opportunity to develop and share their gifts.

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—a deeper connection to and engagement with 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

This section of “Listening to Students Who Thought About Leaving College or Left and Came Back” highlights the need for student engagement in learning, for their greater academic fulfillment and success, and increased likelihood of college persistence, retention, and graduation.

We know that engagement in learning is important to students’ decisions to stay in college. According to the Gallup/Lumina report, [“The State of Higher Education 2023,”](#) when asked what factors were important to students being able to remain enrolled in their college studies, one of the top factors reported was enjoyment of their program, including course content and social interactions.

We also know that student engagement, down significantly during the pandemic, still isn’t up to where we would like to see it.

This section has offered suggestions to create greater engagement in academics, for the sake of the student and the transformative act of learning that educators hold dear.

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 prior sections:

- [“Part 1: The Pivotal First Year in College”](#)
- [“Part 2: The Essential 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”](#)

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

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