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

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Who Ever Thought about Leaving College
Or Did Leave College and Came Back…

"School can be hard with trying to also make money to survive and living. I have failed a couple classes and have had to retake classes. Failing has made me think of leaving. Also how hard it is to transition from living under your parents roof to your own.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left?) My parents. Being the oldest of the family. I don't want to let them down and they keep me going even though they don't know it. Also I don't like to give up, I try my best to finish what I started.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) More pop ins where we meet different programs and resources on campus. I remember one time there was a sign outside a building stating free donut + coffee to check out a resource on campus. This will get students to learn more about other programs Sacramento state has to offer."
— I am 20 years old and a first generation Latina student.

"(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Tough major and debated is it really worth my time; I stayed

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left?) Lack of decision for other majors, sunken cost fallacy

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Improving (my) department would be nice"
—22, Asian, 4th year

"I've left school a few times, the first time at 18 right after high school at a junior college, I didn't plan on pursuing a degree, came back at 20, left again at 22 for financial reasons, came back at 23 and resumed, stopped again that year, finally transferred at 25, if I leave again next this year will definitely be for financial reasons, sac is too expensive even with financial aid and scholarships

My own ambitions drove me back every time I've left

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Nothing really, college structures are aimed for a certain percentage of people. It's not really about intelligence, most people with enough time and determination can learn anything. People with an abundance in those areas will thrive through college and those with a restriction in either one will struggle. It's about recognizing where you landed on the pyramid and understanding who built it. Just gotta work with what you got 👍"
— Mexican, first generation student, 25, male, handsome lol, transferred as a junior

"I first left college in 2003 when I had my first child, was working full-time, and my ex husband was not supportive of my education. We earned too much so I could not get financial aid and my ex husband would not agree for me to get a loan. I am Hispanic and there is a lot of cultural background of husbands having a say in their families.

I returned to college after my divorce, I was able to pursue my goals and did not need permission or approval from anyone. Also, now as a single parent on one income I qualify for financial aid.

My goal to get a career and provide a better life for my kids motivates me to get my degree. Being a role model for my children helps me for day to day coursework and studying. Wanting to feel pride and accomplishment for myself to finish my education.

Knowing that there are many forms of support programs at Sac State is keeping me motivated to pursue grad school.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Having more meetings and activities in the evenings would help students like myself that work full-time during the day."
— I am a first generation college student and parent. I am 41 years old with 3 children and work full time. I am a junior transfer student from community college. Mexican-American, 3rd generation born in the U.S. Bilingual English & Spanish.

"On my very first day of freshman year in high school, my mom told me that I wouldn't go to a community college, she wanted me to go to a 4 year and she'd be disappointed if I didn't.

I don't want to disappoint my mom, I'm so miserable here and it's affecting my happiness but I know that going home will be so much worse for me"
—Anonymous

"Coursework is manageable, but can be overwhelming and frustrating especially as a student who works part time in order to pay my dues at school. Everything is a choice, however I feel as if I'm forced to like college, but at the same time it almost feels like college is trying to drive me away. I came here for my major, but I'm forced to engage in other classes that are uninteresting or irrelevant to my major. Also, while I understand that there are prerequisites to meet, waiting until year 2 or even possibly year 3 is such long time to even touch on the classes I'm really interested in.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left?) Having some friends from back in high school to talk with and the Well. I'm also optimistic about the future, but also unsure if it's even worth waiting for that future.

My opinion is mainly subjective, but I definitely feel that Sac State could appeal more and be more friendly to its commuting and working class students. That's obviously a hard task especially since time is limited, but it's like if you aren't living in dorms or a part of a club, you're not going to like college. They're like requirements to fun in college."
— First year, Asian male, I work part time at a restaurant outside of school, Psychology major

"I thought about dropping out from college during covid-19 pandemic. It was the first year that every class was online and I was not fully engaged with my classes. The classes I was taking were difficult and with the lack of motivation I failed all my classes that semester. I have always struggled with classes in general and found that I do better when I take in-person classes. Also, during this time I was living at home and was struggling with my parents relationship issues. That year I witnessed my parents through domestic violence several times and hatred between the family. I could not stay in the house without experiencing one of those issues which also affected me during that semester. My parents were then filing for a divorce and a restraining order. It was an unhealthy time for me to even do anything. Also, after failing my classes Fall 2020 I felt like failure and felt that I have disappointed my family. I even had suicidal thoughts for my failure. My first thought after failing all my classes was that I was going to be kicked out of the school. With my issues during that time I decided to take a semester off and did not go to school for Spring 2021. During that time I worked a full time job and was looking for other options with what I can do with my life. During this time I was debating if I should even return to school. School has always been difficult for me because I struggle studying. Sometimes I feel like school is not for me. It was until I got an anonymous call from sac state that this lady asked me if I am coming back to school for fall 2021. I then had a few weeks to think about it and decided to return. Since the semester affected my GPA due to my failed classes I knew I was not going to receive financial aid. This was also another reason for me to not go back. I looked for help and was able to find out of the SAP appeal and program. This program was the reason why I came back and I did not know anything about this before. The SAP helped me get approved for financial aid as long as I meet the requirements for Fall 2021. So, I decided to come back and take as many in-person classes I can take. From there I have gotten better and had to change my major to graduate faster and currently I will be graduating summer 2023….

The SAP appeal helped me decide to come back to school and do better. Also, my counselor helped … guide me through the courses that I needed. Also, my significant other and some of my family encouraged me to go back to college and at least come out with something ….

I think it would help for others to promote the SAP appeal because I have seen many friends I had drop out due to grades but they had no clue on the SAP appeal and how much that appeal is useful for peoples circumstances and education. Also, the university can help with more food drives because I struggle financially and due to the SAP appeal I do not get federal work study so that means I do not qualify for EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer cards for the CalFresh Program) even though I am a full time student. More opportunities for food would help." — I am a first generation student, Hispanic, fifth year at sac state, and I am currently 22 years old.

"Started in 2000 left in 2007 with difficulty in getting into (my desired program). It was too impacted and I was on the lottery. Left college in 2007. Returned in 2021 to start a new degree.

Sac State needs more support for its adult learners who have been away from school for many years. Support in: Financial, peer to peer group support for older learners, having an advocate for adult learners." — Asian Female, 40. Senior standing, first generation college student, multilingual learner, learning disability.

"I am stuck here because (my) department is awful and employs terrible professors across the board. Nearly every student I have spoken to in every … class has said they have failed at least one (of my department's) courses, causing them to delay their graduation by a year or more. It feels like the department is intentionally keeping these god awful professors so students are forced to fail and retake courses because it's a cash cow in terms of tuition. We keep giving them money just to fail us over and over in this endless loop of needless stress and banging our heads against a wall just for a piece of paper that allows us to finally leave. This department has been dangling a carrot in front our faces for far too long and someone needs to do something about it."

—Anonymous

"There are other things that I want to try/do as a career that involves me not being in college in the US.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left?) As a safety and also for my parents.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) They have been a great institution for me so far. The only thing I can think of is I would like more info on studying abroad and whether I am eligible for it."

—19, Japanese, and first generation college student.

"Right before my first semester at Sacramento State my eldest child passed at 20 years old. The stressors of family life and community organizing have made me reconsider if continuing my education is worth it. Online learning hit my GPA and the lack of work home separation on top of helping my children adapt to distance learning was a lot especially with two boys moving on from primary school back to back via distance learning. Studying sociology through a screen is difficult … while I found new ways to study individuals in society it is not the same as observing them in person.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left?) The support I get from the DEGREES program through things as simple as a newsletter. The community building I have been able to do both online and in person. Having professors I felt were safe to talk to and who might understand where I was coming from. Being able to return to campus for one in person class was a HUGE deal for me. Statistics is hard and I completed 101 in person and had to do 102 online.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Stop hiring people who work overtime to under serve students and make students feel excluded."

— A mother, Indigenous, multilingual, adult learner, transfer student, sociology major

"I left college in my 20s because I had no framework for understanding the experience of going to college, or the concept of setting and achieving long-term goals. I decided it was better to just work full time and left without completing a degree program.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left?) I realized that more opportunities would be available to me and my family if I earned a degree. I have slowly but surely been working toward my degree and have begun working in my field. I have learned to balance all of my obligations and find it fulfilling to engage in learning.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Provide more flexibility in class delivery options and schedules to allow those who work and those with families to be able to continue to attend college. I have been incredibly disappointed and frustrated with what I perceive as a lack of consideration for anyone other than young students who don't work."
— First generation college student, parent, working, age 36.

"I want to leave college at times because the work load can feel all consuming while also trying to navigate my life outside of school. It feels impossible to work full time while being a commuter. Last semester felt like I lived at school/work and was only visiting my home.

The only thing that's kept me going to school is that if I stop going I'll have to start paying back my student loans and I don't have the money for something like that right now.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Bring back more options for online classes. That not only helped because I'm a commuter but also struggling with anxiety, it felt more comfortable participating and genuinely engaging in my course content more."
— I'm a working class 23 year old African American woman. I'm in my junior year of college and am a first generation student.

"(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) I had several things going on. After I returned home from the Army I tried to have a small beekeeping business and going to school. After getting to sac state the course load became a little more than I could handle so I left college to pursue beekeeping full time for a little over a year. After that time I built up my business enough to make a small profit if I sold it. I loved what I did beekeeping but I know that it wasn't a long term career. I then decided to sell the bees and return to school.

What made me come back was the Universities commitment in returning to in person classes. Also selling my beekeeping business. I realized that I only had 30 ish units to complete after talking to an advisor. This was completely doable.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Having advisors that care a little more. When I made my decision to leave school I wrote to my advisor. She responded with 'I understand (Name), we will still be here when you want to come back.' It was a cold breakup with my advisor. No help, no resources, nothing at all. I continued in the major and I requested a new advisor."
— I am 29 years old. I am Latino. I am a veteran. First generation college student. I am a ESL student.

"I thought about leaving college for trade school as I know that I can obtain a job right now after completing trade school classes that I want to pursue. I would be spend less time and when trying to earn a college degree, where that is its own journey, and completing required courses, I have to compete with people in the same position as I am on salary, determining whether I can stay in California for a job due to rent prices, and whether I am even getting a job with my degree where as trade school teaches a person through consecutive weeks and that person can be proficient of that craft. There is too much emphasis of skill and luck during college and what happens afterwards as persistence is based on the characteristics of the person but in the path of a trade school, skill and luck controls value and quality respectively.

Having grit is likely why I am still here at Sac State.

Honestly, I have no words that I can say that Sac State can do better for me as my time here can be cut short depending on the grades I receive. I have a suggestion and that is to not allow exam scores determining a fail and a pass as I know from experience that exam scores can be worth up to 40% of your overall grade, meaning that B you have can easily become an F simply by failing that exam. This all depends on the type of courses as some require exams for the performance of what they have learned but there are other courses that will implement exams so they can skew grades for students on that course. My next suggestion is give an open presentation on the Library Quad or between Lassen Hall and Starbucks to students on week one and week two of how to drop courses on their first semester as there is a good chance that they will not retain the knowledge of drop courses during their first time here at Sac State."

> — I am a male student here at Sac State that is currently on academic probation, where I receive little from my own family and am a first generation of Chinese immigrant parents in the United States.

"(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Exhausted, not motivated to learn. Every day is doing similar things. Learning things from the textbook, memorized the stuff, and exam.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left?) I need to get the degree.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Provide more opportunity for active learning."

> —Anonymous

"What me made think about leaving college was just having to deal with being a husband, father and a full-time worker while balancing school. It was hard. I persevered and kept going and I'm about to graduate.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left?) Perseverance and wanting to show my children you could face adversity and prevail. I also wanted to be the first of my family to graduate college.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Sac State has been great. Maybe offer more groups for non-traditional students that may be dealing with school and outside life."

> —41-year old, first generation black male, parent. Senior.

"(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) The amount of workload and readings each professor gives us. Students are taking 12-15 units and it can be overwhelming with assignments. All my classes right now, has 10 page essays due within the same week as midterms. On top of that, they assign so much reading and other homework assignments. Do I study for midterms, do my 10 page paper for each class, or my other assignments? It is so overwhelming trying to keep up with assignments for each class and having to balance work and family life. At times, my family complains that I am not even spending time with them and I feel bad that I am not spending time with them as much as I used to when school is on break. I want to be able to spend time with my family because family is important to me. Plus, whenever school starts, I never have time for myself. I am constantly stressed out, constantly doing assignments. I even skip meals and stay up extremely late at night each day just to manage to complete my workload. I want to have time for myself because I am important as well. What is the point of having going through schooling if school is my main cause of stress and stress is known to be a harmful thing to the body? College life is the most draining lifestyle ever. I was never this drained out or even thought about dropping out when I was in high school. These thoughts started to arise each semester college starts and the main reason why I think about dropping out, is the heavy workload.

I stayed because I have to get a degree in order to get a good job. Plus, each time I thought about dropping out, I was halfway done with my degree. I am not known to be a person who quits. But each time the semester starts, I always have thoughts in my mind to drop out based on the amount of workload professors in each class gives us.

Professors should not assign a lot of workload, especially online classes. Classes at Sacramento State should assigned less amount of workload and understand that students have a life outside of school as well along with other responsibilities. We also want to live our lives happily and by having professors assign multiple page readings along with 10+ page essays, is not helping. It makes it harder for us to manage a work, family, school, and social life. If professor assigned 1 discussion board and 1 quiz per week, and 5 page paper no more (that is not due on the same week as midterms and finals) that would be appreciated. Also having a study guide that goes over exactly what will be on the exam and no surprise questions, would also be greatly appreciated since it will help the student in their learning experience and not set them up for failure. Professors need to help their student succeed by designing their course to help the student pass the class and enhance their learning experience not setting us up for failure."

—4.0 gpa student, early 20s, employed, spending time with family is important to me

"When I left college back in 2000 I just didn't feel that it was right for me at that time. I felt that for me it was better to go into the workforce full time.

20 years later, it was something that I always wanted to complete and now was a good time for me to come back to school.

So far my Sacramento State experience has been great."

—47 years old, male, Latino. First generation college student. Parent, Husband

"(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Financial and lack of support in terms of understanding the materials. I kept failing some courses. Also, I didn't have a clear direction of what courses I had to take to finish in a timely manner. The counselors didn't help much because most of them are unable to pinpoint some of the courses I need. For example, now I am close to graduation, but the courses I am taking are unlike anything I have ever seen because their necessary and sufficient prerequisites are missing from my studies! Now I have to go back again to recapture those courses to succeed the current ones. It is always a back-and-forth struggle.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left?) Determination and stubbornness. If I start things, I like to finish. When I left college, I didn't leave for good. I just wanted to come back with more resources and tools.

Now, I understand why all the instructors and PhD holders are so old and disconnected from ordinary people because of what I see is what they had been through.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Better teachers who know how to communicate effectively so students can retain the materials and have supports. Also, financial incentives are really great to fill the void. I hope that will continue in the future.

The love needed to support students is somehow missing! It is a lonely environment where the courses' materials are just foes!"

— I am immigrant. I am employee. I am poor. I came from a poor family who needed, have needed, and still need my support financially. That is why I had to go back and forth in school. It had to quit when the situations get tough, and I come back when there is some relief. I was first accepted to university back in 2009, but I am still here at undergraduate program after 12 years! The time and years that passed speak for themselves. I was about 32 at that time, but today I am 46! It is okay. I think. The problem with higher education is that it is never ending, and it is expensive both time and money not to mention the energy it demands.

Sometimes, I think I don't belong here as a black man.

I got some loans and grants to offset the cost that was one of the reasons I had to come back plus I have been in college so long that it feels unworthy to leave it incomplete somewhere in the middle when I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

I remember a quote from Danzel Washington, "When you fall down seven times, you have to get up the 8th time." What a noble quote!

"(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) The first time was after high school. My parents did not want me to go to college. I ended up moving out to live with my grandma, aunts and uncles. I took 1 year off because I couldn't afford out of state tuition but it gave me time to cope emotionally and save up for school.

Second time was this semester. I am at a cross road, wanting to pursue a different career path. Depending on this semester, I may or may not continue school. I feel like I need to find a better career so I can support myself but I am also providing mainly for my own schooling, which is already pretty hard on top of other life expenses. All my younger siblings are looking up to me because I was the first to go to college. I feel the pressure of having to finish soon and wanting to switch majors seems like something that will stop me from trying to live independently sooner. But this break is a time to pursue an interest and to have more time to think about how I want to maneuver my way into the real world more.

I want to continue school because I'm close to finishing. Also I love the student support, the professors, the environment. Sac State is the place to be. I really love it.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Some how help find more resources or spread more resources to students who either just graduated or taking a semester off."

> — A young self providing female who don't have all the support to go to school full time.

"(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) It was a combination of multiple things…when I first started college I was under the impression I needed to take 15 units a semester to maintain financial aid but it was 15 units to graduate on time and 12 units to receive financial aid. I was taking way too many courses and my grades suffered. When I was put on academic probation my advisor had me take fewer classes. It was too little too late and I flunked out.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left?) Healing trauma through a socially acceptable route of completing my bachelor's.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Communication. I took 15 units of (a department's) courses and they did not transfer them correctly. I met with the … department head and she still didn't work on my transfer units after multiple conversations and emails. So I just retook courses and took some new ones. I tried to get into a (deaprtment's) course that was also a GE that I needed and after failing to get into the class 2x I emailed the professor letting them know because they said they would make space for me. They never did and I ended up having to take a history course that is GE but not part of the (department) requirements which meant I had to take an extra course."

> —33 years old, white, Latina, survivor of sexual assault and rape, working class

"After my first year of college, I wanted to drop out, i feel like it just adds more to my stress and it's a workload. I work a job and i am a full time student and it's hard to handle, recently had to pay out of pocket which left financially unstable this semester, but recently was able to receive my aid. It's hard to be paying out of pocket and pay for my own living especially when i live here on my own. Being college has added so much stress to me especially this semester, no professor or faculty will understand how hard it is at times. So much work is given and so much is expected out of students in college and i don't feel that is right, many professors don't take the time to understand a students situation especially with other classes, sometimes professors give so much work acting like their aren't other classes that we have to catch up on.

It has had a toll on my mental health and it's hard for me and i feel like giving up at times but want to keep going to make many proud of my success. Maybe this might be acknowledged or not but being an full time student, working a minimum wage paying job, having to pay multiple things, and having to worry about other life problems is very draining.

I am staying here because I want to make so many people proud, especially my family. Also i have made many friends who are so supportive and kind and very caring which helps me a little. I don't enjoy school very much and it's hard for me to reach out for help sometimes when there is so much going that I have to keep up on.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) I feel that they should provide more resources especially for those who are suffering mentally, and have a lot going on in their lives. I wish they would make professors understand that it's not easy for us, of course you need to work hard so it'll pay off at the end but when so much is expected, do you really want to keep going when it's so draining? I feel that the school should also try to understand every students financial situation, it's not easy for everyone to be paying what can't possibly be paid especially when living on your own and trying to be dependent of yourself."

> — I am hispanic, 19 years old, and i'm a second year in college. I speak both English and Spanish, my parents are from central America and both attended college but i don't think they were able to complete their years to get their degree. I would probably be the first to graduate from college in my family if i continue.

"(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) I am struggling to find the financial and logistical support I need to work full time, attend class full time, and be an active parent/take care of my family.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you left?) Fear of not making a better life for my family.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Understand my situation/situations like mine and help me get caught up in one of my classes."

> — A 32 year-old Hispanic first generation college college student who is also a parent of 3 and the primary income earner of my household. I also struggle with adhd.

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 third section, Part 3, focuses on students doing well and feeling confident in their studies.

Part 3:
The Need to Do Well and Feel Confident in Coursework

How well students do in academics very much impacts their decision to continue in their studies or not—and how well they believe they can do may be just as or even more important. Yet research shows that students are feeling more uncertainty about their academic preparedness for college and experiencing difficulty in their college classes.

Students Coming into College and Here Now

An ACT (American College Testing) research brief, "Disruptions and Gains: Students' Reflections on the Effects of the Pandemic," surveyed high school students a few years ago to assess how the pandemic impacted their learning. Due to the many school closures and hasty jump to online learning that most—students and teachers alike—were ill-prepared for, the pandemic significantly disrupted all levels of education, including high school, and this report notes, resulted in the documented decline in academic performance. Students, too, feel this: Based on the responses of close to 2,000 students who would now be of age to be coming into their first-year of college or already enrolled in the early years of their higher education, 85% agreed that their academic learning in high school had been disrupted by the pandemic and 37% reported they struggled with grades during this time. Further, half or more students said that the pandemic adversely affected their motivation to learn (60%) and had a negative effect on their time management and organizational skills (50%), study habits and learning strategies (55%), and focus and discipline (55%).

And, of course, students taking classes during the pandemic in higher education also experienced much disruption and added stress to their college learning, with the effects felt even now. According to the Gallup/Lumina report, "The State of Higher Education," based on a survey of just over 6,000 students currently enrolled in college, difficult coursework fell into the top five reasons for students considered stopping out, along with emotional stress and mental health and cost and financial considerations.

The Need to Do Well and to Feel Confident in Coursework

Students who are struggling with coursework may feel deeply discouraged or deficient, may wonder if the cost to themselves and personal finances is worth it, and leaving, in their minds, may seem their only option. And some students, those already considering leaving and even those struggling in coursework but still wanting very much to stay, may have to leave if failing to meet satisfactory academic progress (SAP) results in losing the financial aid to keep coming to college or their GPA begins the probationary process through to academic dismissal or disqualification, requiring they leave, for a time.

One of the seminal scholars in the area of student retention, Vincent Tinto, spent half a century studying why students think about or make the decision to leave college and what gets them to stay or come back, and his work is a mainstay in institutional efforts to keep students on track to graduation. In addition to noting the need for a sense of belonging on campus, he also finds students' academic performance in coursework and their perception of having a positive experience in academia significant to their persistence through to college completion. And in more recent writing, he brings a focus to academic self-efficacy—students feeling that they are, in fact, capable of succeeding in their studies.

In "From Retention to Persistence," he identifies self-efficacy as a key force in a student's decision to stay in college, yet noting this can be lower for some: "Although many students begin college confident in their ability to succeed, more than a few do not, in particular those whose past experiences lead them to question their ability to succeed in college as well as those who experience stereotype threats that label them as less likely to succeed. But even those who enter college confident in their ability to succeed can encounter challenges that serve to weaken their sense of self-efficacy."

The Importance of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, a term psychologist Albert Bandura developed about half a century ago, is the belief in our capability to perform a task or achieve an outcome in a specific situation.

Self-efficacy is learned, not something we are born with, and can change over time, going higher or lower, to good and for not-so-good effect. Self-efficacy is also typically situation-specific, varying from task to task, activity to activity, depending on the nature and magnitude of what needs to be done. We can feel confident we have what it takes to succeed in one area (like writing) but less confident in another area (like math). It should also be noted that your level of self-efficacy can be completely unrelated to your actual level of skill or knowledge in a task or activity, meaning you could be quite skilled or talented in a subject area but still lack confidence.

There is much research to show the role of self-efficacy in the fundamental choice to act or not to act to complete a task or activity—as well as how much and how well you put in effort when you do choose to act, your degree of persistence in the face of challenges or setbacks and level of motivation and engagement in the task or activity, and ultimately, your quality of performance.

And, of course, how well you end up doing can, in turn, impact your degree of self-efficacy in what Bandura called "reciprocal causation," a self-perpetuating cycle. If you have good self-efficacy in a certain area, then you are likely to do well and this can, in turn, create greater self-efficacy in that area. The opposite can also be true: Not believing you can do well means you are less likely to do well and this, in turn, can lower your confidence in future situations with this task or activity.

Self-efficacy is a profound determinant of human behavior and performance, as you can see, and as such, has been studied and utilized in a number of different fields, including health, athletics, psychology, business and industry, and, for our purposes here, education.

Studies have shown self-efficacy to impact student motivation and academic achievement. Moreover, *there is much research to show that having the knowledge and skills to perform a task is less important than the self-efficacy needed to actually put these to use in coursework and to overcome any challenges or obstacles encountered in working on assignments.*

In this Document

To follow, you will find suggestions for students, faculty, and staff to increase both academic success and self-efficacy.

**For Students
Wanting to Do Well and Feel Confident in Their Coursework**

Hornet Scholars, we are rooting for you and believing in you as you put in the hard work in your classes and pursue your field of study!

To follow are suggestions and tips for doing well and feeling confident in coursework:

Get Organized

Using a daily planner or calendar (paper version or any of the many homework planning apps available) to keep track of all of your coursework can be helpful. Be sure to build time in to work on the bigger assignments, as these can sneak up on you. Many students rely on their notifications of soon-to-come-due assignments or their Canvas "To Do" list on the course homepage to see what needs to be completed for the day or week, but that list only holds seven items in order of upcoming date, and includes class announcements, any zoom meetings, and any other course assignments. What can happen, then, is that the bigger assignments may not become visible until right up next to the due date, especially if these weren't published in Canvas by the instructor until closer to the due date for the student to see. This can result in lack of longer-term planning and the student feeling taken by surprise with big exam or assignment due dates that have been scheduled since day one of the course in the class syllabus. A planner or calendar may also help you to reserve study time for yourself, amidst your other responsibilities and activities outside of college.

Come to Class

For most in-person classes where attendance is taken, regular absences often become cause for concern, in the experience of the instructor, that the student is at risk of not passing. And even students with top GPAs will admit that if they don't come to class consistently, their grade can sure suffer from falling behind. Coming to class regularly means you stay on track, and you don't miss out on any important announcements, lecture material, assignment instructions, or participation points, when the instructor has participation built into course grading. Plus, there is so much to be learned about the various aspects, events, endeavors, and phenomena in this world! And you want the opportunity to get to know and be known by your instructors (whom you may someday need to ask to be a reference or write a letter of recommendation) and your classmates (who are valuable sources of campus and class information, potential partners in group projects in your classes, and possibly your employer someday or someone who recommends you for hire in their organization).

Take Notes Well

Taking good notes for most students typically results in more active listening during the class, remembering 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. 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.

Utilize Your Professors and Classmates

When questions arise in relation to coursework, get those questions asked, rather than trying to press on alone in confusion. Asking questions in class can help the instructor to clarify or elaborate on needed information and also benefit other students who had the same question but didn't ask. If you don't feel comfortable asking in class, then try going to your instructor's scheduled office hours, which is the time faculty reserve specifically for students to come by (or you can request making an appointment at an alternate time that fits your schedule, if need be, including meeting via Zoom or talking by phone). Classmates can also be great sources of information: Check with a student sitting next to you in class or see if there is a class Discord, GroupMe, or other communication app to get your questions answered.

Strengthen Your Academic Skills

Academia is a world unto its own, with things like source citation, APA and MLA, essay formats, and other skills to develop in coursework over the time you'll be here. Sac State has tremendously helpful academic resources, ranging from the Peer and Academic Resource Center (PARC), the Reading and Writing Center, the Math Lab, and Smarthinking (the 24-7 online tutoring for a number of subjects and writing) to tutoring centers in the many departments and programs of study. Many students wait until later in their college journey to utilize these resources, but why wait so long? *The sooner in your academic career you master these skills, the sooner an easier time and better grades you will have in coursework!* You can also strengthen skills by reflecting on your process of studying and assignment completion, to see where you might improve for the future. Feedback from professors can also show where your strengths and potential lie and help to prevent future mistakes in that class or others you have now or in the future.

Create the Best Conditions for Study

When planning your semester's classes, try to arrange a class schedule conducive to your best learning and getting homework done, 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. On campus, the main places for studying include the Library, Academic Information Resource Building (AIRC), and the University Union, and many of the different affinity centers provide designated study space for students, as well, such as the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center, Asian Pacific Islander Desi American Student (APIDA) Center, and Serna Center. 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 turn 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, the dangers, of course, are greater stress, adverse impact on physical health, and the likelihood of less-than-optimal performance on tests or assignments. Planning and time management skills are necessary to develop in college life. 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 learning and performance.

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

The role of self-efficacy in 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 progress on the task, seek out any assistance and resources needed for it, persevere through the work as well as any obstacles encountered, and be more motivated, more engaged, and ultimately, more successful on that assignment or in that class. If you are doubting yourself, then talk with others about how you feel, seek out any academic support you need to achieve your goal, 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, too, when they were students!

Don't Forget the Personal Wellness-Academic Success Connection

Your physical and mental health and well-being are significant factors in college student success—how could they not be? Throughout the semester, try to maintain good sleep, nutrition, exercise, and wellness, physically and mentally, as much as possible. This should be as important in your steps to take for academic success as all of the other guidelines here. For students in need, please know how much this campus wants to support you. The [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 [CARES Office.](#)

Be Sure You Have What You Need in Technology

Be sure to get squared away on all technology required for a course as soon as possible in the semester. Campus [Student Tech Support](#) offers help for this and more to students by phone, chat, service ticket, or walk-in assistance. The [Student Technology Resources Canvas site,](#) on the student's Canvas navigation bar, that has many resources for learning technology skills needed for academic success. You also want to be careful about using your cell phone to do coursework: Try not to do the bigger course assignments on your phone, such as taking exams or writing papers (smaller quizzes or discussion board posts may be okay). Be aware, too, that some Canvas tools don't function on a cell phone (such as Collaborations) and some things on Canvas may appear differently or not at all when viewed on a phone, unless the student has the proper corresponding apps on their phone (for example, a Word document in a Canvas course will need Word to properly view, which a student may or may not have on their phone). When using the Canvas Mobile App, some things may not appear correctly or as clearly, either. If you encounter such technological issues while doing coursework, then access Canvas on a laptop or

desktop computer. With regard to the Internet, please note that the Chrome Internet browser is the one recommended for Canvas use, and that strong, stable wi-fi service is especially needed when taking any online exams, uploading any recorded presentations, and attending any Zoom classes. Student Tech Support can help with Internet and laptop loan or computer labs.

Utilize Success Strategies for Assignments

A few quick tips:

Papers

Be sure to review several times the assignment description requirements. Students can turn in papers that are beautifully done and full of thought, but not meet, for example, the minimum number of research sources or go a little bit off the paper topic and prompts. Remember, too, that immediate red flags to an instructor typically include writing less than the minimum page limit or word count and not proofreading for easily caught errors.

Exams

Study smart, using any study guide or practice exam the instructor provides. Research tells us, as well, that student study groups are very helpful, so be sure to connect with classmates to set up study sessions or to collaborate on exam preparation with students via Discord, GroupMe, or other communication apps. For online exams, be sure to have a strong and stable internet connection, read the instructor's directions carefully, and don't press the "Take the Quiz" start button until you're sure you are ready. If it's a timed test and you get kicked out, don't panic. The likelihood is that you can go right back in, but if not, take a screenshot and let your instructor know immediately what's going on.

Presentations

The general guideline is that it takes an hour or two to effectively prepare for every one minute of speech, and best practice is eight to ten full rehearsal sessions for good delivery, greater confidence, and better ability to stay within time limits. Research tells us that practicing in front of friends, family members, and roommates leads to a higher grade on the assignment and more favorable audience response once you give the presentation in class. We also know from research that most people will be the most nervous in the first minute—the start of the presentation—and after that their level of anxiety will go down.

Group Projects

Here are some best practices for successful group work:
- Group Formation: Keeping an open mind and good mindset will go a long way to a positive experience and outcomes. Push through any of the social unease that typically comes with grouping up with people you don't know well or at all. Discuss group goals, rules, and expectations as a group. And studies show that getting to know each other at the start of a group project and continuing to make time for more personal talk while working with the group will help build a strong foundation for people to work their best, when you don't remain strangers, but instead, develop connection.
- Meetings: Meeting face-to-face (in person or online, through Zoom, for example) for at least some of the group discussions is better than solely online written

collaboration (such as Google Docs, for example), research shows. Having an agenda of items to be discussed ahead of a meeting allows group members to best prepare. Having one or more group members take notes during the meeting is helpful to keep everyone on the same page moving forward in terms of what was discussed and decided, including the group members who could not attend.

- Communication: Creating a supportive climate through good verbal and nonverbal communication and listening helps everyone to contribute their best— and create a more rewarding group experience and outcomes. Communicating clearly and frequently in person and in writing, and double-checking as needed, through to the end of the project can help to prevent miscommunication or things falling through the cracks or going sideways with the work.
- Work: Setting timelines for rough draft or first installments of the project due can help to keep group members on track with the task and ensure that each group member knows exactly what they need to do and is doing that in the way the group would like the work to be done. And if you feel like your group is taking forever to make progress on the work, then that is common. Most groups take longer to get to know each other and settle into effective ways of working together on the task.

Think About Your Thinking

Metacognition is the term for thinking about how you think. This includes: Considering what motivates you to learn, and how you learn best and why. Assessing your strengths and areas for improvement in different types of academic tasks, such as course reading, writing, researching, mathematics, note-taking, studying, and test-taking. Understanding the use of different cognitive tasks (such as analysis, critical thinking, evaluation, creative thinking, application, and synthesis) and where you are in the development of these and steps to take to progress and grow. Identifying obstacles in 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 better 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.

Reach Out for Help If You're Struggling

Some students may struggle from time to time in class, for any number of reasons.

If you find yourself struggling, reach out to your professors, in person or by email or Canvas message. Professors who understand what's going on and why you are struggling may decide to grant time extensions or allow late assignments with penalty, sit down and assist you directly, and/or offer other forms of support, depending on your needs and circumstances.

In addition to all of the great campus academic support mentioned earlier and here again— the Peer and Academic Resource Center (PARC), the Reading and Writing Center, the Math Lab, and Smarthinking (the 24-7 online tutoring for a number of subjects and writing) and tutoring centers in the many departments and programs of study —you may also reach out at any time to the DEGREES Project here on campus, a safety net for any student in need, academically or personally.

For Staff and Faculty
in Fostering Academic Competence and Confidence

In the past few years, our students were striving to learn and complete coursework during a worldwide pandemic and sudden pivot to online learning that very few were prepared for.

All students have consequently incurred loss to their education, but some more than others, due to any number of factors present then and before the pandemic, including: Lower socioeconomic backgrounds putting students in schools with less funding and less experienced teachers and counselors; being taught and assisted by school staff with cultural norms or languages that may be different than their own; less assistance with their homework from parents who may be working long hours to pay bills and put food on the table; and less time for school work as the student may have to work more around the house or in caregiving with siblings or working outside the home to help with household income. Many students, too, are parents with their own children and working long hours on the job, coupled with caregiving responsibilities. Close to a third of our students are first generation college students, moving into the world of college often all on their own. Some students are multilingual, with varying degrees of English-speaking proficiency, who may at times struggle with academic reading or writing.

The result is many of our students may experience greater difficulty in their academic pursuits, and *some students may really struggle in their classes here.* This can impact not only a student's sense of self-efficacy in academia, as well as the choice to continue with their coursework or not, but also, potentially, the possibility of even attending college in the first place. Students may also lose good academic standing, beginning the process of probation which may lead to academic dismissal or disqualification. Many of our students also rely upon financial aid to get their college education, but if a student fails to show consistent satisfactory academic progress, then the student may become ineligible for financial aid. Students may then be forced to leave college, sometimes never to return. We lose them, and they lose the opportunity to obtain that college degree that will help to secure greater future financial livelihood.

In Interacting and Working with Students

We can contribute to our students' academic success in a number of ways, including those to follow.

Encourage Them

This is something we can all do. "We think about educators as those who are in the classroom and those who are in Student Affairs, but from my training, I also see many of our custodial and janitorial staff and facilities staff as being absolutely a part of the educational process," President Wood noted in his Fall Address. He recounted one of his first studies at another college, where he was interviewing students about their success and asking who they engage with inside and outside of class. The students' answer, he found, was, "The person who tells me, *'I'm proud of you. Keep going. Keep your head in the books. I'm here if you need anything'* was the janitors, the custodians, the food service workers, and the groundkeepers." He adds, "So all of us here have the privilege of being educators." An encouraging "you got this" or compassionate "I see you working hard," can lighten hearts and fortify tired minds, and inspire students to keep on going.

Let Them Know You Believe in Them

All students benefit from a faculty or staff member's clear and strong belief in them—and some more than others. For example, first generation college students tend to doubt their academic abilities, even when they have the same level of high school preparation and achievement as other students, studies show. African American students, Latinx students, and Native American students from kindergarten on face the stereotype of lower academic ability and, thus, lower expectations from teachers, staff, and peers in their earlier education, which has documented detrimental and long-lasting effects. Students with disabilities also may experience much the same. And so, some students may have now come to doubt their abilities, and may even feel, as others have suggested to them, that they are "not cut out for school," "not a good student," or "not college material." This makes showing faith in our students' capabilities and potential so very necessary and incredibly impactful—assuring them that they are well-placed and have what it takes to succeed in college—when others in their educational pasts or even themselves may have said otherwise. Students will often say that such moments were a defining moment or turning point, how you stating belief in the student got them on or kept them on the path to academic success.

Support Them in Their Struggles

In conversations with students, when you ask how their classes are going, they may directly say or indirectly reveal through their voice or demeanor that they are struggling on an assignment or in a class. Helping students to locate and feel comfortable using the campus resources they say they need or you think they may benefit from can help the student to feel less alone in their struggles. So, too, can invitations encouraging students to come see you in your office, whether staff or faculty. Sometimes, too, when noting a student is taking a course many consider difficult, then simply asking how they are doing and acknowledging it is a harder course to take, but there is support for students to make it through, can be the reassurance needed. And taking a moment to teach the basics to a student in need can mean so much, such as giving advice on how best to take notes in lecture, study for tests, research a topic or cite sources, outline a speech, or structure a paper. That one area that you helped the student in might have been the one thing hindering an assignment's completion. That small amount of guidance on a fundamental college skill can be a turning point in the student's sense of capability in academia and lead to a huge step forward in the student's progress in college.

Pick Them Up if They Fall

When a student stumbles academically, a few quick words or, better yet, sitting down and having that talk to try to mitigate the effects of a low or failing grade can mean a lot. You can remind them that tests and other assessments are simply one measure of a student's learning, and not always an entirely accurate one at that, given the myriad factors in and outside of the class that can impact how well a student performs. You can also help the student to realize that sometimes the most valuable learning comes from mistakes made or that academic ability is much like a muscle that needs to be exercised and, over time, will grow and strengthen. This may set their mind at ease and give them badly needed encouragement to continue on in that class or educational path. Sharing your own stumbles in school or problems in learning can also show the student that even someone who works at a college can struggle academically and still get back on track, still be an intelligent person, still belong in academia.

Teaching

Faculty play a central role in student academic success. This is the true privilege and utmost responsibility of the profession.

There is a saying in this regard: *"Teach as if your students' lives depend on it—because they do."* College completion is, indeed, very much linked to greater financial prosperity, job security, health, and quality of life in the future of college graduates.

We know we have incredibly talented and committed faculty here. Sacramento State was ranked fifth in best undergraduate teaching in the Western U.S. by U.S. News and World Report in the past few years! Yet we also know that there is always room for improvement, and reminders are helpful in the continual fight for greater student success in our courses.

As faculty, we typically focus on teaching the knowledge and skills needed in the course subject matter, without giving as much thought to helping students to develop the needed belief they can do well in the course. Yet the seminal scholar in self-efficacy work, Albert Bandura, argued that a central goal of education is to equip students with both. He found that the most important thing we can do for student self-efficacy and consequent achievement in our classes is to create learning and performance situations where students can see and experience themselves as capable, and this will increase confidence.

This doesn't mean lowering expectations or intellectual rigor at all. That would be counter-productive to students being truly challenged and then feeling the corresponding level of achievement having met that challenge and resultant confidence in their capabilities. What it does mean is creating a framework for student success in your courses—which, in turn, can carry forward to greater success in all of their other courses, now and in the future.

Creating a Framework for Success

Faculty can create a framework for student success in our own classes and beyond in many ways, including those to follow.

Course Reading

Scheduling course reading in increments, rather than a lot of material at any one time, prevents overwhelm. Remember that students with some vision and learning disabilities may take much longer to work their way through the material, and that some may get headaches, nausea, or exhaustion with too much reading. Multilingual learners, too, may need greater time and expend greater effort. It's also good to be mindful of the added reading there can be in online courses. Numerous items to read and/or lengthy walls of text in Canvas can feel overwhelming to any student, but may be especially so for a student less academically prepared for college. To help out, faculty can: Add images, compelling headings, and color to visually break things up in the readings and spark greater engagement and enjoyment. Replace written material with video or audio course information, when possible, such as recorded lessons and podcasts to see and hear. Break up the reading with good discussion questions and interactive exercises.

Helping students to understand how the information is organized in the course textbook or materials and highlighting key study features (e.g., chapter summaries, glossaries, indexes, supplementary materials helpful to learning) can facilitate greater ease and reading comprehension.

Reminding students to complete the reading before coming into a class primes their minds to help them to better understand and remember the information presented in the lesson that corresponds with their textbook.

Assignments

Structuring the course calendar in a way that is well-paced gives students sufficient time to complete each assignment and prevents overload, especially in the last half of the semester, when things get decidedly busier for students in each of their courses.

Creating one or more low-stakes assignment early on can help students to feel more confident in the course, if they do well, and if not, helps you to see where they're at and what they need, academically, to help prepare them with the knowledge or study skills they need to move forward more successfully in the class.

Crafting clear assignment descriptions and rubrics gives all students a foundation for success, but especially students who may already be feeling a little shaky in academic life.

Giving assignment directions both in writing and out loud in class or short recorded instructor video helps students who have different learning modalities to better understand, and may be a real source of clarity, inspiration, and reassurance that the student knows what to do and how to do it. It's also helpful to include frequently asked questions about the assignment along with the answers, samples of student work to see, and past student common mistakes or difficulties in order to prevent such problems for current students.

Setting high expectations accompanied by high support for assignments and exams can challenge students to do their best, drive them to excel, and spur them to realize just how strong and capable they are as learners. These are all substantial dividends that carry forward to their other classes, present and future. Yet setting high expectations without providing a clear path forward or process to begin and complete the work, and accompanying academic resources, sufficient classroom preparation or instructor guidance, and so forth may set students up for failure. 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).

Allowing students to choose their own topics, when possible, for assignments can help with comfort level (they will likely have some knowledge of a topic they have chosen), motivation (they will probably pick something of interest to them), and learning (they can focus on learning the new skills or information that the assignment was designed to accomplish).

Inviting students to submit a rough draft of their work for you to review, arranging for peer review opportunities, and/or considering building rough drafts into an assignment process/grade, when possible, are good ways to help students stay on track with due dates and assignment requirements and gain confidence in the work they have done. This may also prevent failure to do the assignment correctly or at all.

Tests

Providing students with clear review guidelines well in advance of an exam, as well as sample questions or an instructor review, gives them a sense of what and how to study, which can increase student confidence and competence in test performance. We often forget just how daunting or difficult exams can be, sometimes even for our top students. Add in the fact that instructors can test very differently, and some students experience very real test anxiety, and the potential for poor exam performance rises. Prepping them for what to expect on your tests can alleviate this uncertainty and allow students to do their best.

Providing very clear guidance about what to expect in an online testing situation is also needed, including any extra technology set-up needed to access the exam, so that students are prepared. Sometimes our best students get anxious in the online test format, or are hindered by technical difficulties that hurt their performance and grade. Giving very clear instructions about the online test format you specifically use (whether the test or quiz is open just once or for multiple tries, can the student go back to past questions or not), and what to do when something goes wrong (student tech support information and any information you would need from them when they notify you).

Encouraging study groups can help students support and teach each other, and make the stress and hard work of exam preparation a little easier. Study groups are also a helpful way for students to obtain information missed or not fully understood. Helping students to coordinate study groups and even allowing a little class time to form the groups and get them started reviewing for the test helps put that in motion.

Keeping in mind the needs of students with greater challenges to test-taking can help you to create testing conditions more conducive to their best performance. For example: Permitting the use of dictionaries can help multilingual students, the use of scratch paper can help students with some disabilities, and letting students with disabilities know ahead of time that their accommodations are in place for the upcoming exam can give them peace of mind.

Considering allowing students to demonstrate mastery of course material using alternative testing methods better suited to their strengths may help to increase student success. For example, rather than the usual multiple choice format that could hinder students with print disabilities or written essay format that isn't ideal for students with learning disabilities that impact writing, an oral exam or audio/video recorded exam might be appreciated. Conversely, if the exam is an oral one, but the student's learning disability impacts their listening or speaking ability, then a written format might be the best way for the student to show all that was learned. Faculty may still further consider using alternative learning assessments other than exams altogether.

Helping students to recover and learn from a poor test performance can help so much with academic self-efficacy and persistence in the course. Try to go over exams with students who performed poorly, ideally, as soon as possible. This can show them exactly what you are looking for in test responses, as well as to demystify the test-experience for a student, when you take the time to break things down for them in this way. You may also help the student to identify types of frequent mistakes made and then together brainstorm strategies for preventing these in the future. An announcement to the class

after an exam letting students know the first exam can be harder as they get accustomed to your way of testing and that other high point value assignments coming in the semester can bump up their percentage in the course can boost morale and motivation. You can also remind students of academic resources to improve test-taking and that they are welcome to come see you to better prepare for the next exam. Many instructors also use options such as having one extra quiz/exam and then eliminating the course quiz/exam with the lowest score or offering extra credit learning opportunities.

Learning Assessments

Allowing other types of learning assessments can help students to demonstrate their best learning. Faculty often rely primarily on writing assignments and tests, which may not be the types of assessment most conductive to all students showing you their learning. Papers require proficiency in academic preparation in such things as basic essay format, research, source citation, and ease of English vocabulary. Tests require experience and confidence in study skills and test taking ability, and comfort level with English vocabulary.

Offering a variety of assignments allows students greater opportunity to maximize their strengths and improve in other, less developed areas—and the former builds confidence to achieve the latter. This also may prevent students from being graded solely on the one or few methods of evaluation least suited to their less developed skills or any disabilities. Other forms of assessments to consider include:

- Students creating products, pitches, proposals, posters, presentations, 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 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.
- Students devising their own course assessment(s), with guidance and input (and possibly final decision making) from you.

Presentations

Remembering that speech anxiety is very real for many people can help you to make the situation more tenable for students needing to present in your course. Some students may choose to drop a class when they see a presentation scheduled in the syllabus or choose not to do that assignment—even at risk of failing the class or not graduating because it is a required class for them—so great can their public speaking anxiety be. Giving a presentation can also be especially terrifying for students with disabilities related to speech production or anxiety or students learning English. In such cases, the opportunity to give a video-taped presentation or a one-on-one speech to you in your office or complete an alternative assignment, when possible, might be very much appreciated.

Course Accessibility and Equity

Ensuring accessibility is also essential. Strive for accessibility of all course instruction in Canvas and in the classroom for any student who may struggle to see, hear, communicate, navigate through the course and classwork, and/or learn fully, with or

without accommodations. The campus IRT [Accessible Technology resource page](#) is helpful for further learning.

Equity is also needed—striving to ensure that all students have fair opportunity to learn and perform in the class. This means we consider the different needs of the different student groups in our classes and we critically assess our courses, asking ourselves: What challenges might different types of students have in completing these assignments, learning this material, participating in this type of class and modality, navigating the class and accessing the readings, and adhering to course policies and expectations?

Course Support

Sharing campus academic support throughout the course—and normalizing the act of getting this support—can be incredibly helpful for students in terms of feeling they aren't going it alone in their studies and their improved ease and achievement in performance. You can link academic support like the [Peer and Academic Resource Center (PARC),](#) the [Reading and Writing Center,](#) the [Math Lab,](#) and [Smarthinking](#) (the 24-7 online tutoring for a number of subjects and writing), as well as any program- or department-specific support, to assignments and/or remind students of these in class, and have these listed in your syllabus or Canvas course. It is also helpful to allow quick presentations to the class from campus academic support services and even offer points or extra credit as incentive for students to use these academic resources.

Class Lessons

Taking the time to craft clear lessons is rewarded with greater student learning, thinking, motivation, and comfort level with class material. Yet as clear as we want to be or maybe think we are, there is always room for improvement. A few quick reminders:

- Start each lesson with a preview of the key material to be covered, transition clearly between points so that students can more easily follow along, and then summarize key points at the end to drive them home.
- Define key terms and concepts clearly and more than once, and provide further explanation and concrete examples to round out learning.
- Use good visual aids, which, we know from research, can increase attention, comprehension, and retention of material, so long as these are prepared and presented effectively (handouts or slides that are organized and engaging in design, for example, and not going through slides with written content too quickly or simply reading slides without further elaboration).
- Be explicit when there are items you really want students to focus on or take away with signposts such as "this is important," "this will show up on the exam," "you will need to know this to do the assignment correctly" or "you will learn this to understand the material to follow.").

Using good delivery enhances learner attention, enjoyment, comprehension, and retention of the material, research shows. Present the lesson with appropriate vocal rate, volume, and expressiveness, pausing to allow time for processing and/or note-taking, and use good eye contact, facial expression, and movement.

Gauging how well students are learning can be accomplished in different ways: Offer frequent opportunities for questions, especially in the online Zoom format. Look for nonverbal signs of confusion indicating that a student has become lost. Try class assessment techniques, short and informal (typically ungraded) in-class writings done by students to help you assess how well they are understanding the material and what they are confused about [e.g., the "One Minute Paper" ("What did you find most important in today's learning and why?") and "The Muddiest Point" ("What questions do you have regarding the material we discussed?")].

Making it easier for students to follow along and not miss anything can be facilitated with a few other strategies: You can provide lecture outlines, notes, slides, or handouts ahead of time, when possible, and encourage students to get in the practice of comparing their class notes with one another to help students fill in any "holes" in their notes due to inattention.

Offering multi-modal ways of learning effectively appeals to auditory learners (through lecture and class discussion), visual learners (through slides, handouts, demonstrations, and clips), and kinesthetic learners (through "hands on" learning activities, group exercises, role-play, simulations, and so on). Students typically learn and retain most when as many senses are used as possible. Ideally, in a given lesson you would want students to be able to *see, hear, say*, *and do* something in relation to the lesson at hand.

Grading

Giving specific, constructive feedback on assignments can be highly beneficial for students, because oftentimes they don't understand what mistakes they made on an assignment or how to improve and are hesitant to ask. The result may be that they continue to make the same mistakes in that class and their other classes, too.

Complimenting strengths in assignment feedback can help students to capitalize upon these skills in future coursework, as well as gain greater confidence in their academic abilities—and for some students, your praise can be that sometimes badly needed reassurance that they are capable, that they do belong here in academia.

Allowing an assignment "re-do" for even partial points, when a student under-performs or goes off track, is a good way to help a student salvage a grade and increase learning.

Allowing for late work means students don't lose as much learning or points—and when we take the time to craft good, meaningful assignments for students, we don't want students to miss out on this learning opportunity due to late work policies. Some faculty allow one assignment late submission for any reason. Others allow late work with documented extenuating circumstances or, in the absence of that, late policies that take a percentage of points off per day late, up to typically about half the points total potentially to be earned for the assignment. It should also be noted that it's important to make your policies clearly known to students, as only some will reach out to ask about an extension or share with you any obstacles to assignment completion they're experiencing in their lives. It should also be said that while procrastination can definitely be a cause, sometimes late work is the result of extremely busy lives, an unprecedented level of stress and mental health struggles, or even just the student not wanting to turn in less-than-perfect work—wanting to do their best, even if it does mean the work is late.

Keeping Students On Track

Reminding students of upcoming assignment due dates in class or Canvas announcements can be very helpful. Many students rely on their notifications of soon-to-come-due assignments or their Canvas "To Do" list on the course homepage to see what needs to be completed for the day or week, but that list only holds seven items in order of upcoming date, and includes class announcements, any zoom meetings, and any other course assignments. What can happen, then, is that the bigger assignments may not become visible until right up next to the due date, especially if these weren't published in Canvas until closer to the due date for the student to see. This can result in lack of longer-term planning and the student feeling taken by surprise with big exam or assignment due dates that have been scheduled since day one of the course in the class syllabus. Some faculty like to include at the end of each Canvas learning module or page a "Looking Ahead" section that reminds students of reading, assignments, exams, and other important things coming and that they should be working on, or put this in a description of weekly tasks for the course.

Keeping Students Persevering In Harder Classes

Students can struggle in any class, but some classes are just more difficult. For the harder classes we may teach, taking even greater care to foster student success is essential. Embedding academic support services into the course may prove essential. Reassuring students that "we're all in this together" and you, the instructor, will be there every step of the way, can help alleviate any anxiety. It's also helpful to note that sometimes struggle is a part of the learning journey, coming at something multiple times may be needed, and that growth mindset needed. Some faculty like to have their students at the end of the course write a letter to future students, discussing what to expect in the course, and offer advice, tips, and encouragement for succeeding in the class.

Keeping An Eye Out

Being proactive and checking in with students, especially when they might appear to be struggling but don't come for help, can make a world of difference in terms of a student passing a class or failing it, in continuing on in their college education or stopping out. You reaching out and your support for the student can mean so much! You may also refer a student struggling in your class to any number of campus supports, including the DEGREES Project, which serves as a safety net for all students from their first year through to graduation, with student success support including early intervention, academic advising, graduation support, mentoring, and connecting students to other valuable campus resources.

Conclusion

They are Hornet Scholars, our students, thinking through and discussing their course subject matter, researching topics or doing their own research, writing papers and studying for exams, brainstorming ideas and collaborating on projects. Our own teaching, classroom learning, and scholarship is made better by each one of our students. And some will go on in their higher education to become the next generation of theorists, researchers, and educators!

This section highlights the need for students to not only do well in their coursework—but to also feel they can do well in academia—and the steps we can all take for greater academic success here.

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.