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

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

"In 2018, I dropped out of California State University of Long Beach. Back then, I did not know what I wanted to pursue in college. I also did not feel like college was what I needed to do at the time.

After years of being out of school, I gained more interests and wanted to learn again. After the pandemic I felt very motivated to come back and get a degree. I was only going to pursue an Associates Degree, but felt that I wanted more. I think that having a degree would be a great fall back in case somethings do not work out in my life.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) I think that I need to see more of what Sacramento State University can offer before I can realize what it can do better for me. So far, I have found resources on campus reliable and convenient."

> —I am a 25 year old Filipino immigrant. I lived in the Philippines for 13 years, then moved here back in 2011, therefore I am bilingual. I'm currently a full time student and I do have work but it does not have a set schedule.

"I decided to 'take some time off' from community college in Dec 2019 after a serious case of burnout and caffeine overconsumption. When COVID-19 devastated the world, the planned one semester off became a couple of years off. I took online classes here and there during the pandemic but they were unmotivating and made me feel even further burned out.

After staying home during the pandemic, I realized I loved working to help my community and meeting new people through those experiences. I signed up for a certified medical assistant course on a whim to help pay the bills and completed the class by passing the NHA national exam. When I began my first job working at a primary care office in April of 2022, I instantly knew I had almost made the biggest mistake of my life by giving up my dream of becoming a physician. From interacting with incredible patients who taught me strength and resistance, to the unwavering support and encouragement of the doctors I worked with, I was motivated to go achieve my goals again. I retook courses at my community college and applied to Sac State, and here I am!

My struggles with school right now are difficult to discern and easy to blame on age. As a 26-year-old transfer student, many of the barriers I face are dispositional. It is admittedly difficult to find the energy and excitement to make friends among people who are at significantly different stages in their lives, and imposter syndrome is a key player in how I feel about my accomplishments thus far. Additionally, it is hard to find your place as a transfer student because most of my peers already have well-established study groups and routines. Study groups and friendships are the reason I did well at the community college, and losing that here is making classes difficult. I'm not sure what solutions are available, but maybe a focus group for transfer/mature students to get to know one another and discuss things that may benefit future students under this demographic! Thank you for reading!"

> —A first gen 26 year old STEM/Premed Student returning to university after a few years off.

"The first time I left college was due to financial reasons. I realize now I did not understand how financial aid worked and would have been able to stay in school. Once I started working to pay for school, it did become more difficult to prioritize school. I eventually left college and went to work fulltime. I also was experience depression and in the 80s, I don't recall there being any mental health assistance available.

I came back to school in my 50s because the desire to get my degree never left. Once my children were in high school and college, they encouraged me to return to community college to re-start my college journey.

Being at Sac State now is a completely different experience when I first started here in 1981. It is much more student centered with many support services for students.

One thing that I think the college could do better is provide some type of orientation for students like myself who previously attended decades ago and when we returned did not get an orientation because we we were considered returning students. It was a bit daunting starting the semester because I felt unsure of the process. I did arrange to take a tour before the semester started and met with a transfer coach to review my coursework, but it would have been helpful to have had some type of orientation considering that many changes have taken place since the 1990s when I last attended Sac State."

— I am a 59 year old African American woman. I transferred from a community college but previously attended Sac State.

"I left college when my brother died. Getting a degree and coping at the same time wasn't happening.

I came back because I had a desire for more. I don't feel like I've recovered from what happened, but I'm as good as I'm going to be.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) I need somewhere to smoke that's closer to my classes."

—Veteran, addict, weirdly smart though

"(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) It is a big commitment to be in school and to have other roles at home.
I had classes that had a lot of homework and it was hard to meet deadlines.

I stayed because I was determined to complete my education.
I always went to my professors' office hours.
I was not shy to ask for help from my teachers.
I used the resources at school, such as PARC and prospects.
I feel connected to SacState because I feel welcome and represented.
Mentors … encouraged me to continue my education journey.

I found the resources I needed to complete my education, but I know everyone is different. In my case, I always ask questions, even when I go to the wrong place. The staff at SacState has been a connection that I am very grateful for."

— Female, 46 years old, Married, Parent (2), Bilingual, Hispanic, First-generation college student, Last semester

"I left college at the age of 20, because my parents at the time were old and was on a fixed income. I had to work full time to help pay the bills. I put my education on hold for 8 years. I returned back to college and completed my two years and transferred here to Sac State. I'm still contemplating if I should still stay as I mentioned above the time and cost of going to college is just to expensive.

I want to leave college again because I work full time, I'm a full-time mom to two toddlers who are under five, and going to school right now is just too expensive. Even though middle-class scholarships and other scholarships are available to me it's just not enough. Time and money is an issue with this ongoing inflation.

Sac State should offer more evening classes and online classes for returning/working mom. I really hope they take this into consideration."
—Anonymous

"I left college because I could not afford the time or money to attend in-person and work full-time. In addition, my living situation was hostile, and made my commute to and from school farther as I moved away from my family home. Once I became financially stable, had a safe place to live, and overcame a period of depression, I returned to finish my education. Another big thing that helped in my journey was encouragement from my peers/colleagues to finish my higher education to learn more about my interests, apply myself, and open up more career opportunities for my future.

What is now keeping me here is my desire for a better life, where I am happy to learn and that my education supports my skillset in prep for careers ventures. The fact that I can take all my university courses online had changed everything in the best way for me.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Provide affordable housing or viable resources for affordable housing for students like my former self who had nowhere to turn when escaping from a broken home but are still interested to continue their education. Students need to live in a safe place with adequate privacy to stabilize their mental health before balancing anything else like jobs and education."
—25 yo, female, African American student. I work full time and attend CSUS and community college full time

"I left during covid due to not being able to navigate online efficiently and having the self discipline to stay online. When I was ready to return I had a Brain bleed which made me defer a lot longer than anticipated.

What made me come back was wanting to finish my degree. I was really nervous so I reached out to a professor first who did me the service of reassuring me that I could come back and I would have staff support.

Sacramento State can do a better job at having more club events and more community events. Maybe marketing it better."
—23 years old, female, Hispanic and first generation here in America.

"(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) The incompetence of the system and the whole college experience at Sacramento State from 2014-2018 were extremely frustrating and stressful.The diffculty in getting the classes I wanted due to the high levels of impaction for every major and class. I remember having to 'crash' or sit in alot of classes for a chance to be enrolled in them but I never got in because along side me there were also 10 other students trying to enroll as well. The lack of resources and help at the time, along with the issues of parking and congestion. Parking at the the time would sometimes take more than an hour to find. All of these things added additional unwarranted stress at that time and made it hard for me to stay motivated in continuing my college education. I felt as if the university failed me, so I left after the Spring of 2018 with no intentions of every coming back.

After leaving college, I realized that continuing my education was necessary so that I could achieve and pursue my personal fiancial and life goals. During my time away from college, I gained a better understanding of … myself, my interests and career aspirations, and the struggles of the real world. I recognized that obtaining a degree would be essential for achieving my goals.

I also took the opportunity to reflect on what had led me to leave in the first place, and to address any issues that had contributed to that decision. I sought out resources and support to help me overcome those challenges, and I came back to college with a renewed sense of purpose and motivation.

Overall, my desire to achieve my goals, combined with my reflection and planning during my time away, were the key factors that motivated me to come back to college in the Fall of 2022. My time here has currently been a much better experience compared to my previous experiences.

There are many areas in which Sacramento State University can do better for me and future students. But I think the most imporant one is support services. Offering more resources and support for students, including academic advising, tutoring, career counseling and mental health services. Students need learn how to make decisions for themselves must be able to envision what life after college will entail.

Students need assitance but they're afriad to ask for it and don't know where to start. I believe emotional maturity and setting goals for life after college are the most important and if guidance for this is avaliable at Sacramento State University it will be greatly beneficial for me and all future students."

> — I am a first generation Hmong-American. I am a 26 years old male. I would consider this my 5th year in school attending Sacramento State and I am currently a Senior. I started my journey in Fall of 2014, and I left in Spring of 2018. Then I returned to Sacramento State during the Fall of 2022.

"Back in the late 90s, my college career started off strong as I was on the path to become an Engineer…. However, as my mother's health deteriated, my academic focus faltered. When my mother passed in early 2002, my mind could not commit to college at all, outside of subjects that were already easy for me. It was the hope of myself and my father that I would recover from the loss and renew my focus on my education. However, the end of the same year, my father's upper back pain turned out to be lung cancer which we battled and ultimately lost in 2004. After settling debts I was not able to sustain surviving and be a college student in the Bay Area. I ended up working multiple jobs as a musician, that took up all of my time, going from one gig to another, only finding stability on the weekends as a church musician.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back, if you did leave college?) As I was working as a gigging musician, I got to work with high schools and middle schools for both their musical theatre programs as well as their choral programs. I was given the opportunity to teach voice several times using my experience working in the church. Several of the teachers I worked with/for informed me that if I completed a degree and teaching credential, they would recommend me for any job. Moreover, I found that I really enjoyed the work of helping budding musicians find their voice and develop their skills as musicians. For this reason, I was inspired to move to Sacramento, where the cost of living is more managable than the Bay Area and to return to school, but for a Music Education Degree and a Teaching Credential.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) One of the most discouraging aspect of being a returning college student is the credit cap. When you transfer units, so you do not have to take classes you have already passed, you cannot cherry pick only the classes you want to transfer. All of my electrical engineering courses count against me as a music major, removing many opportunities for me to take electives, even if electives are within the music realm. There seems to be no program for us returning students to gain all the opportunities of our younger first time college student classmates because of this credit cap which threatens our financial aid. For example, as a Voice major, I would have loved to explore vocal Jazz as that is a common class to teach in the high school level; however, because of the credit cap, this was never an option lest I figure out a way to pay out of my own pocket. As it stands, we are in the 'corrective action' catagory through Satisfactory Academic Progress."

— Samoan/Filipino child of a Vietnam conflict veteran, musician.

"I left sac State in 1994 when my then boyfriend, now husband, found out I was pregnant. At that time, I could not imagine having a baby and going to school - I also didn't have anyone to help me think through my decision to quit school.

I came back to school in 2022 because I want to pursue a career as a LMFT.

At this point, two semesters in, there is nothing I feel needs improvement. I'm not sure if that's because I am older, a bit more wise and resourceful than my 22 year old self, or some other reasons. I've had a great experience in all aspects of coming back to school."

— I'm a 50 year old Spanish/Pacific Islander American. I am a senior in the CCE program. I am a mother of two adult children and one 4 year old grandchild.

"When I 1st left college I was disqualified for grades. I didn't know what major to choose. I took classes at Los Rios colleges until I earned an AA in design technology and didn't know how to continue from there so I stopped and worked in the industry for 10 years. I decided I didn't want to continue that career and went back to school to become a counselor or therapist.

College has been stressful but I am staying here because the path to a B.S in (my program of study) is clear to me and I know exactly how many classes to take and when I will graduate. The path was always fuzzy in the past so now that it is clear, it seems very doable.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Maybe help build trust between the students and professors. Sometimes it seems like the professors are coming from a place of not trusting students and I am constantly needing to prove that I really want to be here and that I am putting in the work and want to excel. If something happens to go wrong, it's not due to lack of caring."

—Female, Latinx, 39 years old, Senior Year, 1st gen college student.

"I have left college many times due to the system being long. I took multiple wrong classes due to wrong advice from counselors. I am mentally burnt out and although in my final year I don't know if I can make it. I have Sacrificed so much just to sit in a classroom and at my age I don't think I can do it anymore. The constant financial burden and societal burden due to putting so much time in school has left me mentally exhausted.

I was always one step closer to achieving my goal although with every step I got closer, the college made me feel like I was ten steps back. I had simply sacrificed way too much time and effort just to quit.

This is my last semester. Just let me pass my classes and leave. There's no need for all my professors to make the classes more difficult than they already are. I just want to be done and move on to the next stage in life. The Sacramento tertiary education system has left many like me stagnant for years and I just want to be done."

— Hello, on my fathers side I am not a first gen college student but on my biological mother's side I am a first gen student. I immigrated to the USA in 2003 at age 8. I am multilingual and this is my last year in Sac State.

"I left college because I was working since I was 16 years old. In community college I had to pick up a second job losing focus on my academics.

I came back after having my son. He gave me the motivation and determination of how important school truly is. I want him to graduate from college and even get his masters. I want to lead by example. As an older sister as well. I graduate high school back in 2014 and will be graduating State in Spring 24. My academic journey took 10 years and I never thought I'd be this close to the finish line but I'm doing it and that's all that matters.

It's honestly amazing. The help is great, I appreciate EOP so much and the transfer center. I just wish they had more online courses available as a single mother working full time. Online classes allow me to do it all."

—I am 27 year old. I Hispanic and a first generation student. I'm the oldest. This is my senior year at state. I have a 2 year old son and am I single mother. Spanish was my first language.

"I left college 16 years ago when I was 20 years old and returned to college life when I was 32 years ago (4 years ago). The reason for leaving was primarily due to peer pressure/influence. I hung out with the wrong crowd and later got married at a young age. I became a housewife for years before moving to Sacramento to take care of my ill father. Soon after this transition, I was going through the process of a divorce. This was when I decided to go back to school while taking care of my ill father. When he passed away, I continued my education and luckily, I was able to complete my degree in 4 years, graduating this Spring.

I mainly continued my education even after my father passed away or when he was still here because of the flexibility I had at my community college. Most classes were online and it was only minutes away from home even when I had to go in-person. Since attending Sac State, classes were online due to the pandemic so this works well with my family responsibilities I have at home. If classes were not taught online, I don't think I would have completed my degree within 4 years, or maybe I would have left again for the second time.

I feel that our school takes political issues more seriously than students' well-being. For example, masks mandates were lifted but most students were not comfortable with other students not wearing masks and eating in the classroom shortly after masks weren't required. Of course you can't impress every student, but at least set rules, i.e. no eating in class (especially small classrooms). This isn't just a pandemic issue. Eating is very distracting and I find it disrespectful to the professors. The chairs in classrooms are indeed the most uncomfortable ones I've ever sat on and has significantly affected my health. Bad parking has been a Sac State culture where people park over the lines (given the spots are already narrow). I use the paybyphone feature but having just one ticket machine on one of the floors is unacceptable and inconvenient for others. Safety concerns have been ongoing for several semesters now, yet this has not been taken care of and we still don't see much campus securities around. Too many unnecessary fees such as the Well (I had never even walked near it so I definitely haven't used it) and also sports fee! Given the current inflation, these fees should be removed or least you can do is reduce it. Once the school decided to go back to in-person classes, there were barely any online classes available. In my opinion, I think the school should have slowly transitioned into this phase so students can make plans with their schedule. I know universities need to make money but true educators will think for students, not make every penny off of them. What can Sac State do better for me? Please focus on students' well-being and think from their perspectives instead of spending time on unimportant matters - learn to prioritize."

> —36, Chinese, graduating Senior, First generation college student, First child to graduate from college in my family, Divorced 4 years ago, No children

"Originally, I only went to college because my peers were doing it. I had no idea what I was doing and it took several times going back to learn, over time.

My educational goals are what is keeping me motivated to not leave school again. I am focused on my educational goals now, so that later I will have a career to focus on.

Sacramento State is a wonderful university. I can't think of anymore this school can do for me than it has already done. CSUS is filled with opportunity on every corner."

> —I am a White American female. I am Irish, but not in any near generations.

"The lack of virtual required classes makes me want to drop Sac State. It's easier to work virtual classes into my work schedule because there isn't any travel time, and I can log off of class and lead a presentation within minutes. It's not a huge inconvenience for my current employer, so we're both able to get what we want. More and more, I am finding less required classes being offered virtually or they have an in-person component. I cannot afford not working full time to go to school. I had a feeling when I applied to Sac State that it was not built for non-traditional students and I think I was right. Frankly, I would never forfeit my goal of finishing college solely because Sac State favors a traditional approach to education. If anything, lack of accessibility forces me to look elsewhere and find another college that has more online offerings. Excuse my language, but I will be damned if I let one college stop me from achieving what I want. I hope other non-traditional students begin empowering themselves to believe the same thing.

I stopped going to college for some time because it was difficult to find evening classes I needed. They also weren't offered on weekends. I supported myself and did not have a flexible employer at the time who would allow me to attend school during the day. If the required classes weren't available after work, that meant I didn't take classes. Eventually, it became so frustrating that I gave up. I wondered if I really needed college because I found well paying jobs without it. But I realized that I wasn't attending college as a means to find a job, but more because finishing would fulfill a personal goal. I also learned to persevere. There's not just one way to eat a cookie! If I couldn't find one path to my dreams, I learned to find another or create my own. Also, there are way more virtual classes offered now than there were pre-pandemic, so that provides more options.

I met with an advisor today and they told me that less classes will be offered in person moving forward. That was a huge bummer to hear, but I get it. Colleges make a lot of money from parking and onsite facility management. And many people believe that in person engagement offers something one cannot get virtually. As a non-traditional student, I would love more online classes. I could probably finish sooner than I'm slated to if I had required classes offered virtually. Or I would love if Sac State was clear that this college isn't for non-traditional students. It's actually completely fine! Like so many others, I just want to find the right path that is for me.

I came to Sac State because the college arena is super hard to figure out. Looking at colleges without a counselor or someone to offer guidance on the system as a whole, is difficult and very intimidating. This is a local college and it was recommended to me by people who went here, many years ago. It seemed like the best option. I'm currently deciding if I should find another college that is a better fit for me and my work schedule. I'd rather do that than try to persuade Sac State administration to listen to me. Sac State has a vision for the kind of college it wants to be and that's okay. Not every person is a fit for a college, and not every college is fit for a particular type of person or lifestyle. I've loved many professors while attending this college … but I'm not in school for the 'college experience' or to make friends. The education system requires that I fulfill certain academic requirements to get that piece of paper I really want and that's all I have interest in doing. I just want to be able to do it in a way that is accessible." — Is a Black woman, Working full time, Recently back to college, In mid-late 30s, Has parents who attended some college but didn't graduate, Dealing with issues related to high-pressure work environment, school, racism and discrimination (mental health really impacts success in any environment including school!)

"As a first Gen student, I came to college at age of 17 with very little knowledge on how to succeed. I did not even know that I had to request living in a dorm, so for the first month of the semester I commuted from Stockton 4 days a week. Commuting took its toll on me and when I learned attendance to class was not mandatory, there was little motivation to attend. I did not know how to ask for help due to my cultural upbringing; I didn't know how to communicate with teachers and ask for clarification or help on assignments. I don't recall faculty ever checking up on me or any of the Sacramento Counselors either. My transcript is forever stamped with the failures of my first year at Sac State. I felt like a failure and my confidence was at its lowest during this time.

I came back to Sac State in 2022 to pursue my dream of becoming a Registered Nurse and applied to the BSN program. I had completed all of my prerequisites for the program at community college and thought I would attempt returning to my starting place to finish what I couldn't accomplish 23 years ago. By some miracle of god, I was accepted on my first attempt and on schedule to graduate this Fall.

*I feel that Sacramento State counselors need to be more proactive in ensuring the success of all students, but especially minorities that may not have the parental guidance or support that come with **the complexities of college life. The success of a student relies heavily on having support and guidance from others that have experience and can provide advice, even if it's to say that a college degree is possible! For many years I felt like I wasn't deserving because I was a minority and I needed to settle for entry level jobs, but friends I made in the medical field helped change my mindset. I was encouraged to pursue higher education and had doctors even log on to the Sac state website to help clarify the BSN requirements and lay out a roadmap on what courses I needed to achieve my goals. This is what I wish would have happened when I started Sac State in the fall of 2000."***

—First generation Mexican-American who came to CSUS in 2000 at age 17. Was academically disqualified due to lack of support from faculty or staff. Returned at age 40 to complete Bachelors in Nursing with more wisdom and focus to achieve my dreams.

"I have left and gone back to college a few times. Specifically when I had my son seven years ago, when I was working two jobs, and then once when I didn't really know where I was going with my education.

I am motivated to advance in my career and I like learning.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Offer more online classes!!!"

—Age: 28 Gender: Female Race or ethnicity: Hispanic Caucasian Education level: AS Marital status: Single Household income: 94,000 Employment status: Full Time Location: Auburn, CA Sexual orientation: Bisexual Family size and composition: 3 person HH, 2 adults, 1 child Language spoken at home: English

"College is not geared towards people whom have active lives outside of school, ESPECIALLY and yes I am emphasizing that word, if they are parents. A lot of professors do not have empathy towards parents in general and do not understand the struggles we face while working full time and going to school as well as parenting which is like 40 full time jobs in one. Those jobs are: financial planner, nurse, caregiver, teacher, maid, chef, psychologist, etc. You get the point. The other reason I had thought to leave college was the financial obligations. If one does not qualify for financial aid and loans are not a good idea, there are not enough resources to help mitigate the financial burden. The school will say go to this tab on our website and the tab is years old with links that do not work or they tell you to go to the FAFSA website which is not always helpful.

What kept me in school is my children. I need a better path to a better future for them. Yes I am strong, but I should not have to be THIS strong and pick between my mental health and school.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Have resources for parents from beginning to end, not just a go here and look, do it yourself model. (Some) office(s) are not helpful a lot of the time because they are understaffed and out resourced. Yes it is the students responsibility to figure things out but at the same time, being an Anchor university and creating a place of inclusion and understanding means you shore up and stand with the struggling students. Not a placating environment but an environment that creates slid foundations and keeps the community strong."

—Parent, full time career woman, 35-45 age range, mixed race, first gen

"I left college because I had a sexual experience with a college (employee). I internalized this experience as my fault and something I had asked for because I had been promiscuous with boys my age. I returned home, but carried this shame and fear with me wherever I tried attending a new college.

I got therapy and worked through the personal issues that resulted…. But most importantly, I was connected with Project Rebound. This is another part of my story that resulted from the impact of being victimized and devalued. There is a value in having facets of Sac State that speak to the variety of support services needed by students. Along with advising counselors that work with the reinstated students - has helped.

I love Sac State. I was reinstated from 1995 - with my original student id number! The campus has grown immensely and is actually sought out - college destiny these days. I am proud to be a Sac State student. I enjoy my classes and have no fear around male teachers. I'm glad I never gave up. And I love when my professors recognize me as a returning student and validate the courage this takes - and commitment. As an adult, I work full time to support myself financially which is draining. Some says I wish I could have weekend due dates??? Thank you!"

— Female, mixed ethnicity Pacific Islander and European. 48 years old. Junior at Sac State. Father is White European with Masters Degree, Mother is Pacific Islander with GED and Health Care training. All on father's side - college educated - No college on mother's side. Younger sibling with her Masters Degree. Older sibling with same mother no college

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 section, Part 7, focuses on the need for students to return and finish their education.

Part 7:
The Need to Return

As the preceding section notes, too many students leave their higher education, some never to return, and so many students currently enrolled in college consider leaving, at risk of not returning once they do so. This document focuses on the students who left the education realm and came back, often called returning students.

The term "returning student" has various definitional parameters, but the most common are:
- Delayed entry into college after graduating high school or earning a GED or certificate of high school completion: The student is returning to school life.
- Break from past college enrollment: The student is returning to post-secondary education.

Because in either case the student is reentering the educational arena, the term "reentry student" is sometimes used.

Students may have put off going to college or decided to leave college due to any number of factors, including financial pressures, job priorities, military service, family duties, and/or other personal circumstances or hardships. But now they are back in the educational realm.

Who Returning Students Are

They are included under the broader term "nontraditional students" due to the characteristics listed above, as well as those below, which typically define returning students, wholly or partially:
- Older in age: Typically, 25 years of age and up. For this reason, they are sometimes called "adult learners." In contrast, "traditional students" are aged 18-24 and are the majority at most institutions. At Sacramento State, about three-fourths of students fall within this traditional age range, according to the most recent Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning enrollment data.
- Part-time enrollment: Taking 11 units or less. In contrast, about three-fourths of students here take a full course load of 12 units or more, according to campus enrollment data.
- Family responsibilities: Often have dependent children, in contrast to most of the undergraduate student population, the majority of whom are not parents. They may have partner or family support in caring for children or may be a single parent going it alone. Sometimes the student may be caring for their own elderly parents or other family members in need, and, if so, this may be in addition to that of their own children.
- Financial responsibilities: While many college students work, often returning students are the primary wage-earners for their family or sole source of income for themselves, and work close to, at, or more than full-time.

The above are characteristics that many returning students share, in whole or in part—but not all. There is great variation in the returning student population in terms of: Life stage (young adult to older in age), family circumstances (have children or not), employment status (have a job or not, need a job, retired from a job) and work schedule (full-time or part-time), finances (able to pay for school and living expenses sufficiently to suffering food and housing insecurity, including homelessness), academic level (prepared and ready for academic work or in need of refreshers or remedial instruction), stage of education (pursuing a degree for the first time, returning to complete that degree, or coming back for a second degree), and more.

It should also be noted that nontraditional students are becoming the "new traditional" in higher education—meaning that most students share one or more of the characteristics listed prior. The National Center for Education Statistics has noted that almost three-fourths of college students match at least one of the criteria for nontraditional students.

And the number of nontraditional students has been rising in enrollment. This is of great benefit to the returning student, given the myriad benefits of earning a college degree to the student and their families currently or to come! This also benefits our society, in terms of a more skilled workforce needed to meet projected demands to keep the country and our state competitive in the global economy. And because freshmen college enrollment has also been decreasing nationally, with a projected "demographic cliff" of even lower numbers of traditional students in the near future (due to a drop in birth rates of those who will come straight to college out of high school), the rise in enrollment of nontraditional students is also beneficial for a thriving campus.

Students Considering Returning to the School Setting

With regard to students who have never enrolled in college or who stopped out of college and have not yet returned, the Gallup/Lumina Foundation report, The State of Higher Education, may provide some insight into those who eventually do come to college for the first time or who come back to college. Based on a survey of adults unenrolled in college at this time, 61% who had stopped out of college considered returning and 36% who had never been in college reported considering enrolling.

Their reasons for considering college enrollment included: To obtain knowledge or skills (64%) or personal fulfillment or achievement (57%), get a higher-paying job (56%) or more fulfilling career (49%), be a more competitive job candidate (34%) or get a promotion or salary increase (26%), make a difference in their community (17%), learn from others with different experiences than themselves (17%), become a more informed citizen (15%), fulfill family or societal expectations (14%), one's employer would help pay for college (12%), and recent job loss (7%).

When asked for their reasons why they hadn't enrolled yet, very important reasons included: The cost of the degree (55%) and inflation making it less affordable (45%), work conflicts or the need to work (38%), emotional stress (30%) and personal mental health reasons (28%), childcare responsibilities (26%), personal physical health reasons (24%), the time-to-completion length (22%), and care for an adult family member or friend (22%).

Students Who Have Returned to College

With regard to students who leave college and then come back, the Lumina/Higher Ed Insight report, Persevering to Completion: Understanding the Experiences of Adults Who Successfully Returned to College, shares the survey responses of this type of returning student.

When asked what their reason(s) for re-enrolling in college were, returning students answered: To achieve a personal goal (70%), finish what they started (56%), get a better job (45%), be a role model for others (34%), change careers (28%), advance at their work (22%), re-enter the workforce (9%), and satisfy their employer (4%).

When asked about their experiences re-enrolled in college, here are the themes that emerged:

- Financial pressures were significant. While most returning students (74%) found receiving financial support to be very helpful to staying enrolled, financial challenges still included taking on debt (48%), lack of financial support (31%), and textbook costs (27%).

- Logistical factors also impacted the student. Balancing school and life responsibilities was the largest challenge, and many returning students viewed as somewhat or very challenging the time commitment needed (74%), family issues (72%), and changes to their employment situation (63%) upon re-enrollment. Logistical factors that returning students largely reported as helpful or very helpful to them remaining enrolled included more convenient class schedule times (95%) and online/hybrid modalities (96%), greater availability of staff (90%) and open campus offices (83%), and online campus services (93%).
- Academic factors returning students found somewhat to very helpful to remaining enrolled included timely feedback on work (93%), a clear map forward to complete their degree (92%), understanding the connection of their studies to their career goals (91%), access to advisors (88%), interaction with faculty (88%), class projects related to career goals (86%), campus academic support (85%), and assistance with job search (62%). Academic challenges reported by more than half of students as somewhat or very challenging included the difficulty of coursework and the length of time-to-degree, with the biggest being poor advising and campus communication.
- Personal factors that almost three-fourths of students found very helpful to them remaining enrolled included support from family and friends, and more than half said employer support or a sense of belonging at their institution. Personal challenges to remaining enrolled seen as somewhat to very challenging for some students included lack of employer support (41%), being older than other students (31%), lack of support from family and friends (26%), and feeling out of place (24%).

College is a big step for most, but note the tremendous significance of a person's decision to return to college after time has elapsed or to enroll in college for the very first time after a sustained period since high school, especially in the face of family and career demands in daily life and other important considerations. It may have taken great soul-searching, courage, resolve, self-sacrifice, encouragement from others and/or that inner voice telling them to seek more for themselves. It may have necessitated much negotiation of logistical and other concerns to mitigate disruption to family or work life. It may have come at great cost, financially and in other ways.

And they are here now in their higher education, in a college environment not designed for nontraditional learners, with multiple competing demands on their time and energy, and at risk of greater sense of isolation and estrangement due to typically greater age and life situations vastly different than most of their classmates.

Research over the years tells us that nontraditional students perform academically as well or better than traditional students—but that they are at risk in terms of persistence and completion. Those factors common to returning students—delayed college enrollment or break in enrollment, having dependents, being a parent, working full-time, and going to college part-time—put them at risk in terms of staying and finishing their higher education. So many, too, are first generation college students and students of color, and some are students in past or present military service, and these groups of students, too, face significant additional challenges in higher education.

In this Document

To follow, you will find suggestions for students, faculty, and staff to help returning students stay and flourish in their studies here.

For Students Returning to Their Education

It is a significant step to reenter the educational realm—and an exciting one!

Here begins the journey to achieving the goals you have set that brought you here—and perhaps pursuing new, as yet unformulated dreams, as well!

And Sac State is grateful to have you here! All students bring wonderful things to our university, but returning students tend to show even greater hunger for learning, passion for their studies, desire to succeed, and valuable life and work experience!

Whether you realize it or not, returning students are often the ones who most frequently:

- Remind faculty and staff of just why we do what we do, so clear is your appreciation of your college education.
- Drive instructors to continually move beyond theoretical concepts into actual application and use of knowledge in order to better position students in their present and future jobs.
- Stretch us in our individual spheres of campus work to find new ways to assist or encourage, determine more relevant ways to reach, or teach a little differently to this different type of student learner, you.
- Contribute so much valuable perspective and life experience to campus learning, including your "real world" questions, comments, and connections—benefitting your classmates, faculty, and staff!

It may have been a few years or a few decades or longer since you were last in an educational setting, and it can be a real transition to return to the classroom.

To follow are helpful suggestions for returning students to better transition and flourish here at Sac State:

Maximize the Strengths You Bring

Remember that you bring tremendous assets to college success that many students have not yet cultivated, such as greater work ethic, focus, drive, and perseverance. You likely have more clearly defined goals for yourself and your studies, as well as better developed skills in time management, organization, juggling competing responsibilities, problem solving, effective listening and communication, and teamwork. You bring valuable life experience and the wisdom of age, too! Many of you also bring career knowledge—and if you're pursuing a field of study you already work in, then you may have more industry knowledge and practical experience on the subject matter than at times even your professors!

Know That You Aren't Alone

About 37% of college students in the nation are over 25 years of age, according to the Lumina Foundation, and here at Sac State, almost a quarter of students are over 25 years, with almost 4,000 students aged 25-29 years, almost 2,000 students aged 30 to 49 years, and almost 300 students over age 50 (if you don't see this yet, then you will in upper division coursework and night classes, which tend to have more students older in age). More than one in five college students in the country are parents, with almost 4 million raising their children while in higher education, according to the Women's Institute of Policy Research, and for this semester at Sac

State, close to 2,000 students identify as parents, according to campus research. In terms of employment, 64% of college students in the nation work, with 40% working full-time, and 49% of college students are financially independent from their parents, again according to the Lumina Foundation. Nationally, almost 5% of college students are active duty service members, members of the Reserves or National Guard, or are veterans, according to an American Council on Education report on undergraduate military learners, and Sac State has the second largest veterans' program in the CSU system, serving over a thousand veterans and their dependents. And in terms of returning student status, about two to three percent of students who left college re-enroll in higher education, according to the Education Data Initiative, and here at Sac State, just short of 450 returning students and returning transfer students came back just last semester.

Manage Your Time and Schedule

You have more to do than most students, and that work-life balance can be difficult to achieve without good planning and time management! Try as much as possible to find the class schedule that works best with your work and/or family life. A daily planner or calendar to keep track of all of your academic, work, and family responsibilities can also be helpful. Make sure to save blocks of time in the week for completing homework, on campus or off. Here, 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.

Get Up to Speed with Campus Technology and Systems

For some students, technological proficiency in college life is not a problem, but for others, this may be a real source of confusion or doubt. And even digital natives may be new to online university systems and course learning management systems. If unsure or in need of a refresher, click on the following links to learn more about how to navigate your Student Center (the campus system for students to see where they stand and what they need to do each semester to progress smoothly toward their degree) and Canvas (the campus learning system where you'll find your courses and more). Be sure to get squared away on all technology required for a course as soon as possible in the semester. Campus IRT offers help for this to students by phone, chat, service ticket, or walk-in assistance, and the Student Technology Resources Canvas site, on the student's Canvas navigation bar, has many resources for the learning technology skills needed for academic success.

Get Those Academic Skills Down

If you are newer to college or back after a long break, you may feel rusty or uncertain regarding academic work. You aren't alone in this! Many returning students feel this way. 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, including 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). There are also tutoring centers in the many departments and programs of study and workshops, as well, held by the many campus organizations and services. *Take advantage of all of the academic help!* Please note, too, that many these resources provide online support.

Build a Support System on Campus and in Your Life

Here at Sac State, get to know your professors, classmates, advisors, and others on campus. Consider signing up for a faculty or staff member to mentor you on your college journey through the U-Mentor Program, or other mentoring opportunities on campus. Use resources, such as Student Parents Resources, the Veterans Success Center, or HornetAttain! for returning students, and keep an eye out for groups and events for students like you, such as the Student Parent Scholars United Club, the Sigma Omega Delta Co-Ed Veteran Fraternity, and so many more groups (please see Student Organizations and Leadership to see all of the different groups). Off-campus in your life, let your circle of friends know you are taking classes and pursuing your degree, if you have not yet told them. Be sure to share what you're learning and doing in coursework with your family and friends, so they better understand and feel a part of the experience. You can also bring them to campus—there are events for students and their friends or families to enjoy, including children! It may also be helpful to let your employer and co-workers know that you are taking college classes. *Having a support system in place can make you feel less alone in your studies on and off campus, knowing there are people who care about you and your dreams, who are rooting for your success.*

Explore Interests, Forge Passions, and Expand Your Skill Base on Campus

Students may have the demands of work or family to discourage or limit greater engagement on campus than class attendance, but the investment in time may be well worth it! Campus groups, programs, services, and events offer a whole new experience, rich with opportunities. Whether meeting in-person or virtually, there are so many different campus events and groups that there is something for everyone—and the benefits are significant: Campus involvement provides great opportunities to discover interests, pursue passions, and expand skill sets and gives you exposure to learning and experiences different than that found in the classroom. These are also great occasions for interacting with your peers, faculty, and staff, where you can make those personal connections so essential to feeling a sense of inclusion on campus and also increase access to helpful information regarding courses, services, and opportunities. Research shows that student engagement positively impacts academic performance, as well! The campus also offers so many neat events: Athletics, theater, art, career fairs, presentations, and more! *There is so much to learn and do outside of class!*

To follow are some of the many great opportunities on campus to engage more in campus life:
- Student Organizations and Leadership (SO&L): Helps students get involved in campus life through close to 300 student-led clubs and organizations, including those that are academic, cultural, fraternal, honorary, political, professional, recreational, religious, service, social, sports, and special interest in nature.
- Sacramento State Campus Calendar of Events: Provides listings of upcoming events, including movies, concerts, recreational activities, club and program events, comedy showcases, lectures, performing arts, gallery showings, and more.
- Sacramento State Athletics: Hosts athletic competitions for the many Sac State sports teams.
- Associated Students, Inc. (ASI): Serves as the official governing body of Sacramento State and provides opportunities for participating in student government, joining campus committees, advocating for higher education, and more.
- KSSU Radio: Is the student-run radio providing regular programming for the campus, including a range of different radio personalities and music genres, interviews, podcasts,

and broadcastings for Hornet athletic events. Students interested in volunteering may help out with events or deejay an on-air show for the station or host a podcast (and KSSU folks will help show you how to do this and get your voice and creativity out there!).

- UNIQUE: Offers students the valuable volunteer opportunity to plan, promote, and produce quality campus events such as concerts, lectures, performing arts, and multi-cultural programs.

There are excellent resources for students to expand their technological skills through IRT's Software and Tools Catalog. You can learn about spreadsheet applications, video recording, digital editing, information and data management tools, statistical modeling and math computation programs, 3D computer graphics applications, survey creation, tools for geography, math, and science, and so much more!

There are also so many resources for job search, career exploration, and interviewing and networking available at the Career Center. You can:

- Make an appointment for Career Counseling for such topics as job and internship search strategies, Linked In and networking tips, resume and cover letter writing strategies and review, job application questions, job fair preparation, interviewing tips and practice, career readiness resources, and more.
- Take advantage of all the many great resources and information on the Career Center Jobs website, including the Job and Internship Handbook, and the various job boards, especially Handshake, an online job board for Sac State students to post their resume and search for full-time or part-time jobs, on-campus employment, and internships that may be paid. Students will also receive e-mails describing positions that match their search criteria for employment.
- Utilize the Sac State Career Network, which offers insight, advice, and networking opportunities with Sac State alumni. Students can have conversations with alumni who are in the industry or company of the student's interest, get their resume critiqued, engage in mock interviews for practice, and more.
- Take advantage of Big Interview, which helps students to improve their resumes or interview skills for a job in different industries. Students can get coached by an expert and learn what questions to expect and what responses will impress interviewers.
- Attend the great workshops and events scheduled on the Career Center Calendar!

Know the Financial and Basic Needs Support Available

College can be expensive, particularly for returning students, as so many support themselves and their families and don't have the same financial aid opportunities given to recent high school graduates and to students taking a full-time course load. Devoting time to coursework can also pull you away from working as many hours as you may need, financially.

The campus offers support, including those services to follow, where you can:

- Maximize financial aid through the Financial Aid & Scholarships Office, which helps students apply for and receive various types of financial assistance. There's also an online scholarship system for students to fill out one application for scholarships and then the student will be matched with any of the over 700 scholarships that the student is eligible for. The process takes just a few minutes, and all students are encouraged to apply, with some scholarships especially geared to adult learners, student parents, and more.

- Utilize the Career Center services for employment as described above, if a job is what you want and fits with your life circumstances at this time.
- Get basic needs support through the CARES Office, which steers students to campus and community resources and provides follow-up support to address a variety of issues, including but not limited to transportation barriers, and financial, housing, and food struggles. There's also the Associated Students, Inc. Food Pantry and the Hummingbird Closet for food and clothing in times of need.

Remember the Reasons You Decided to Come to College

College can get busy, at times feel overwhelming, and the competing demands of work and/or family with your studies can make you feel frazzled and spread too thin. Sometimes there are feelings of guilt at the time taken from family or earning pay, and/or the cost of going to college. Some coursework can be difficult and you may have doubt about your academic capabilities. Reminding yourself of your motivation to pursue your college degree can pull you through these harder times. Reasons can include changing careers, starting a business, getting a promotion, or updating job skills; making a better life for you and your family through the increased earnings of a college degree; being a source of inspiration and role model for others; beginning a new chapter or second act in your life; and achieving life-long dreams and reaching your full potential. *What motivates you?* Hold onto that, especially when times get tough.

Be Sure to Ask for Help When You Need It

Sometimes students, particularly older students, are reluctant to ask for help—but why struggle on alone, if you have questions or concerns in college?

Every student gets lost or confused regarding campus policies, procedures, and places. There is help all around you, including the Student Services Center and the DEGREES Project, assisting students here at Sac State from start through to completion-to-degree, where you can call, email, or walk in for assistance.

If you are unsure about class material or assignments, then reaching out to the professor during their office hours reserved for students can be a great way to get your questions answered and feel more confident in coursework. If the scheduled office hours don't work for you, the professor may arrange an alternative time to meet or talk by phone or try to address your questions via email. Reaching out to classmates, as well, can be very helpful—and you likely won't be the only one with that question or point of confusion!

If you find yourself struggling in a class for any reason, including coursework difficulty, self-doubt, or work and/or family situations, then reach out to your professors, in person, by email, or both. Professors who understand what's going on and why you are struggling may offer helpful encouragement and advice. They 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. And again, there is 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 all of the tutoring centers in the many departments and programs of study.

For Staff and Faculty
To Support Returning Students in College Life

Returning students have every incentive to achieve their educational goals, and we have so much to gain from their presence and success at this university! Yet returning, nontraditional students tend to find that college life is geared primarily to the traditional college student, the younger first-time, full-time students who are the majority of the undergraduate student population.

This makes it especially incumbent upon us to help returning students to feel welcomed and valued on our campus and to achieve their full potential in academic life.

Help Them to Feel at Home

Research shows that while traditional students usually see themselves here as students first, nontraditional students tend to reverse the order: They see their primary role as worker, partner or spouse, parent, and/or community member, before that of student. While this is certainly understandable, it may also be very telling. We don't always realize just how difficult it may be for some to forge a place of fit and belonging here—and they may not realize how important it is that they do so.

Connect with the Student

Because faculty and staff are typically older in age and working professionals, many with children, returning students may relate much better to us than their classmates. You may be the one person on campus with whom the student connects, the only person that the student feels "gets them," includes them, with whom the student feels comfortable conversing. Having academic or personal conversations with a student helps create a climate of inclusion that they can find difficult to achieve with their classmates. Such conversations also pave the way for the student to come to you with questions or concerns about coursework or college life, especially older students who may be reluctant to ask for help when they need it. Introducing the student to or including the student in conversations with other faculty and staff, can, similarly, help to build connections.

Connect the Student with the Campus

Returning students often have a very limited understanding of campus life. They may not realize that events offered include highly informative lectures, the powerful performing arts, beneficial career fairs and workshops, and activities for them to attend for personal growth or to enjoy with their families. They may not know there is a huge variety of student organizations on campus, including many that are related to their major and/or chosen career path, which offer greater knowledge about the job field, guest speakers, networking opportunities, and more. Returning students may also not understand that campus engagement positively impacts their academic performance and provides opportunities for interacting with their peers, faculty, and staff, where they can make those personal connections so essential to feeling a sense of inclusion on campus and gain valuable information regarding courses, services, and opportunities. Faculty and staff can encourage student engagement by announcing campus events and activities and explaining the importance of these to students.

Bring Down the Age Gap

Age is often the single greatest source of divide for returning students. They may well feel the difference in age when they look around at the other students or listen to the youthful comments or conversations that surround them in the classroom or campus life. While staff and faculty work with this age group, some of our returning students may not be familiar at all with the young adults of today and feel very out of place or sharply different from their classmates. We can help to mitigate age differences in a few key ways:

Be Mindful of Age

When we are with the general undergraduate student population out on campus or in the classroom, we may not recognize just how much of what we communicate directly or indirectly assumes a younger audience. We often don't realize this until we look around and see the discomfort in an older student and feel the distance created by our words. Assumptions made regarding age often include that all students: Are single or dating (rather than married or in committed, long-term relationships); don't have children (rather than have started families); live in the dorms or at home with, or in housing financed by, their parents (rather than have and pay for their own homes); work part-time or not at all (rather than have full-time jobs and possibly established careers); and spend free time engaging in campus life or going out (rather than not having free time, or spending time outside of school or work caring for their families).

Maximize the Value of Age Differences

Students older in age often come to realize just how helpful their classmates may be in increasing their awareness of the younger population, which can come in handy in their role as parent to their own children now or someday, or as an employee who works with a younger population or person interested in keeping up with trends in our culture. Older students will often tell you just how much they appreciate the outlook of youth: The way of thought can be freeing, the optimism inspiring, and the freshness invigorating. And you can see younger students listening with great attention when their older classmates share their wealth of experience, the wisdom age brings and valuable "big picture" perspective. Younger students will often say they really want to know about the "real world" of work from those actually in it, and how they appreciate the insights of longer life experience shared by their older classmates. As faculty and staff, we can create that climate where students of all ages feel comfortable in contributing and can facilitate realization of, or make explicit ourselves, the value of age differences.

Work to Change College Culture

Postsecondary education has been designed for the traditional learner, in its culture and practices, resulting in nontraditional students often feeling out of place and going without or with less support in their studies. Changing institutional culture begins with how we may view our different learners and their unique journeys through higher education and how we support them.

Perspective

Historically, taking a full courseload and finishing in four or so years has been seen as the hallmark of student success in higher education, but for some nontraditional students the only path to graduation may be taking a class or two a semester over a decade or longer. Taking a break from college may also sometimes subconsciously be seen as lack of drive or commitment in the student—but so many significant life events may necessitate class or college withdrawal, including the need to survive economically, maintain or regain

mental wellbeing, recover from illness or injury, and care for children and other family. The phrase "dropping out of college" may imply failure, but that student has, in fact, achieved some college credits—and their return to college is an accomplishment in and of itself, as well, given that, statistically, so very few students who leave will come back. Some have argued that returning nontraditional students are sometimes viewed through a deficit lens in higher education, but we know from research that these students perform academically as well or better than traditional students—and do so with typically far greater role responsibilities and time-demands.

Practices

College life often revolves around the traditional learner in its various aspects, and this, too, can shape institutional culture, posing barriers to nontraditional students' ease and progress through college life and tearing at any sense of belongingness in academia. In our various spheres of work, we can strive to make our campus more conducive to the needs, goals, and identities of students who are older, care for children and other family members, and work fulltime. We can ask ourselves what can best support nontraditional students, in terms of institutional procedures and policies, campus programs' and services' hours of operation, class schedule offerings and delivery, and campus materials and correspondence, and then work for improvements. We can strive in our communication to be more inclusive and better reflect the identities of our nontraditional students in ways described previously, with regard to age, and hold wider discussion in our work of the presence and importance of nontraditional students on campus.

Make Classes Conducive to Their Needs and Goals

We can also strive to make our courses better suited to the nontraditional learner. One of the best known approaches to adult learning is andragogy, a theoretical concept popularized in the nation by Malcolm Knowles in the 1980s. According to this framework, adult learners are most highly motivated based on a need to know or do something, bring a task- or problem-orientation to the subject matter, need to incorporate their experience in the topic at hand, desire immediate application of the material, enjoy critical thinking, and prefer self-directed, active learning. Accordingly, below you will find some strategies for the classroom, as well as attendance considerations, specifically suited to returning, nontraditional students, but with decided application to other students, as well.

Lessons

Due to their typically longer life and work history than their classmates, returning students are a wealth of information, so draw upon this experience in class discussion to benefit all. Put them to work with critical thinking, problem solving, and application questions and exercises to explore the topic at hand. Provide more active learning in the form of group collaboration, self-reflection exercises, demonstrations, and simulations. Incorporate as much as possible "real world" examples or applications of course concepts into the day's lesson, as well as clips and guest speakers in the form of professionals and alumni. Emphasize the relevance or value of course material to life success by stating this explicitly and/or asking the students to consider how what they're learning can be put to good effect outside of the classroom, to link class content to real-world outcomes.

Reading and Assignments

When possible, choose reading relevant to their situations or life goals, as well as nonacademic materials (e.g., newspapers, magazines, websites). Craft assignments

designed to draw upon the experiences of the student and/or apply to real life and the working world situations as much as possible, in order to maximize student motivation, satisfaction, and benefit. Allow students, when possible, to choose the topic and/or assignment format in order to spark greater interest and learning drive.

Attendance

Returning students may well be juggling work schedules, childcare arrangements, community obligations, and other demands on their time that make coming to campus difficult. They may be the primary wage-earner with small mouths to feed, who cannot as easily or at all say "no" to a boss asking them to come in on their scheduled day off or to stay longer hours than were scheduled, breaking into the time they had freed for going to class. They may have no recourse but to stay at home when a child becomes ill or other family members require caregiving. This makes helpful more flexible class attendance and late work policies (especially for assignments that need to be completed in class, such as presentations, lab work, and in-class tests), in acknowledging important role responsibilities, time-demands, and struggles outside of academia. Perhaps this also means we allow the student's child into class when daycare is not available (if no disruption to class lessons), or that we accept medical notes for an ill child to excuse the parent student's absence or correspondence from the student's employer describing an unexpected workload increase. If assignments or extra credit opportunities are tied to attendance at campus events, then offering other options to make it easier for the student who can't stay longer or return to campus outside of class time may also be appreciated.

Help Them to Feel Capable in Their Abilities

Students returning to their education for the first semester or so may feel uncertain of their ability to learn, understand, and retain information, especially if they weren't successful in their prior education. Research shows they often require remedial instruction, and even those well-prepared for college may need refreshers in some areas:

Help with Academic Conventions

Academic protocols can be a real source of frustration or roadblock for the returning student. They may spend half of the limited time that they have available for completing an assignment trying to figure out how to use an online research engine effectively, format a paper or structure an essay properly, or use proper source citation. This may feel like a huge learning curve in and of itself, on top of an already tremendous amount of subject matter learning, on top of learning how to learn again, for many returning students. Taking a few minutes to give the student a quick tutorial or some pointers on these types of basic academic skills can allow the student to focus more on the greater task at hand (the assignment) and give that student confidence moving forward in the other assignments in the class and all of their other classes, present and future.

Help with Coursework

Returning students who encounter coursework they find difficult may assume that it is their age and/or break from school, rather than the subject matter itself, that is to blame. They might not realize that it is a course concept or entire subject that many of their peers also find hard to learn. They may not realize that so many returning students can feel slower to acclimate to learning and academic tasks. Reassurance that they are not alone in their struggles can help to ease doubts about their personal ability to succeed in college. You sharing any of your own struggles in college learning can also help them to

understand that anyone—even a university employee—can encounter difficulty in coursework and still forge on and be successful. Referring students to campus resources for academic support can also be tremendously helpful.

Help with Technology

When we tell students to "look online" or "e-mail me if you have a question," we may not realize that for some returning students, familiarity with technology may be limited. They may have low to no understanding of how to type papers, spellcheck drafts, or cut-and-paste sections, create a presentational slide show, save their work, e-mail, attach documents, and more. Now factor in university online processes: Getting information about campus programs and services from webpages, submitting forms via OnBase, scheduling appointments through EAB, using Canvas, participating in online class discussions or google docs, taking online exams, etc. Taking a few minutes to show a student how to perform some of these tasks can be a huge form of practical assistance and psychological support. Showing them their way around Canvas or the Student Center, as well as sharing how-to resources and campus IRT support with students and linking these to email, webpages, and Canvas courses or assignments, all can be very helpful.

Reassure Them They Made the Right Decision

In returning to their education, they may feel excitement and happiness, a sense that they are doing what they need to do and fulfilling their life's purpose and goals. Some returning students, however, may also feel intimidation or uncertainty. They may doubt that they have what it takes to succeed in academia or doubt that they have the time to devote to college. They might weigh their considerable responsibilities in terms of family and/or work with the added demands of coursework. They may struggle with the financial investment of money spent for college (and/or money that could have been earned had school not taken away from available work hours) with the cost to them or their families. And some will wonder at some point if they made the right decision to return to school.

Show Them the Value of College Life and Services and Class Learning

We can highlight at every turn all this institution offers to show the value to them of being in college. There are so many beneficial opportunities for learning and skill development through engagement in campus life, as described previously. Sac State also provides further resources for students to expand or strengthen their skills sets, including through the many services offered by Campus IRT for technological learning and training and the job search, career exploration, and interviewing and networking resources available at the Career Center. And with regard to our classes, teaching in ways geared to adult learners and planning for and being explicit about what students will gain in learning subject matter and completing the various assignments, also discussed previously, can remind students of just why they decided to come back to college.

Remind Them They Made a Wise Investment in Their Future

Students usually know that college is important to their future, but they don't always realize just how much. Discussing the rewards of college graduation can be a huge source of motivation, especially when the many responsibilities of the returning student in the here-and-now can obscure the longer-term picture. The benefits of a college degree have been well-documented, in terms of greater employment opportunities and advancement, higher salary and more health benefits, greater job security and satisfaction, and a better life for the student, their family, and their generations to come!

Conclusion

When students choose to enroll in college for the first time as an older student or choose to come back to college after taking a break, their decision to do so is a truly life-changing one, significant in so many ways for them—and also to us. We are a better and stronger institution with their enrollment here, and our community, California, and the country are, as well, with greater college attainment.

Sacramento State University has been at the forefront of state efforts to increase the number of students returning to college—so let's work ever harder to make our institution a place of higher learning more inclusive of returning students and all nontraditional students, in the name of equity and greater college success and fulfillment 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.

With so very much appreciation to Elijah Martin, Outreach Coordinator, Black Honors College, for his great skills and insight so invaluable to this project, and to Ruth Williams, Director, Black Honors College, and Dr. Marcellene Watson-Derbigny, Associate Vice President, Student Retention and Academic Success, for their extraordinary support, assistance, and wisdom shared over the years in this work.