

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

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

“What makes me want to leave college is the thought that I am not smart enough. Like I didn’t get the same education as most, and I feel like that really puts me behind in my higher education. I feel as I am playing catch up and no matter what I do I will not be able to get into certain doors as others.

What’s keeping me here is that I made it a goal to further my education. I made it a goal to understand myself and find a career that helps me do that and helps others do that. I made it a goal to set the bar higher in my family for future generations.

There’s this program at sac State and it’s called first year experience and it goes over everything that a psychology student can possibly know for their first year. For example, where certain things are on campus like resources, and any other questions like buildings and how long they stay open. It’s just an amazing program that allows students to learn more about the campus and different fields in psychology. If a program like this geared towards the whole campus not just psychology can be a mandatory part of the students experience I think it would be beneficial. I feel it could be beneficial because students learn more about the campus, if they learn more it would encourage them to get more involved with the campus and have more successful journey at school.”

—Hispanic, First generation college, 23 years old, Senior graduating this spring

“I left at the end of fall semester in 2021, and did not come back at spring. I was going through a mental health crisis. I had untreated depression and it led to an attempted suicided. I had to go through treatment, so I left school. Stresses from school, my depression, falling behind on assignments, and having no friends were all big reasons. I still have moments where I consider to leave school.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back to college if you left?) -My parents and family encouraged me to return to school. -I got treatment for my mental health, so I felt a lot more confident in myself that I can finish school. -I wanted to try again.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) I wished that they advertised more or make more announcements. I knew the well had a health center, but not mental health services.”

— I am a hmong woman that is 20 years old, and this is my second year. I am the oldest in my family, and my parents have their bachelors.

“I left school because of the cost and the drive to finish.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back to college if you left?) Wanting to achieve getting my degree.”

—24, female, mixed, Junior, first generation college student, and parent.

“I left college for 5 years because my dad passed away, and I needed time to heal.

What made me come back were my kids. I want to provide them a better life. I want to be a role model for them.”

— I am a Hmong student and mother of two wonderful children. I am 30 years old and is in my Senior year, hoping to graduate next semester. I am currently work at Amazon Fulfilment center near the airport, and recently just got my California Life Insurance license, and will soon start working as a Life license agent as well.

“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Chronic Health Conditions, Homelessness, Lack of support or Being in a dangerous environment.... Adversity that prevented me from obtaining jobs, employment and being able to complete in the labor market due to lack of higher education.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Provide long term realistic options for homelessness. 30 days emergency housing is insufficient”

— I am an African American Female Disabled student

“I didn’t feel like college was for me, that there wasn’t any purpose of pursuing a higher education if I hated attending classes or doing any assignments.

What is keeping me stay to finish my degree is my family & significant other. I’ve told my family about how I wanted to quit going to school & didn’t like going & stuff, so I took a semester off. It helped me a little bit in figuring out if I actually wanted to leave or just finish it. My significant other is also pursuing higher education, so them continuing made me just want to stick it out as well.”

—22, Asian American in my 4th year of college.

“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave?) The cost of college.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back to college if you left?) I’m staying in school as I now qualify for the California grants and that covers a majority of my tuition.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Help with textbook costs or let us know of more programs out there to help us cover costs. There are many factors that come into play such as rent, utilities, gas, food, and then supplies that are needed.”

—Female, Mexican, Full time worker, First generation

“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Anxiety, stress, loneliness, money.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back to college if you left?) My parent’s pressure, fear, peer pressure.”

— Junior undergraduate, 21 years old, Mexican, multilingual, transgender (lgbtq+) student

“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) COVID and we were remote learning. I can’t do remote learning. So, I did withdraw from the Spring semester of 2021 determined to never come back.

What’s keeping me here is in person classes. When I received a message that Sac State was coming back to in person I enrolled for the Fall 2021 classes.

Sac State is doing good. Just please, never go back to remote learning. At least try to track down sick people and make them learn remotely or something. Otherwise, Sac State is going to lose a student.”

— Puerto Rican

“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Financial hardship and having no support system. Being a first generation college student I didn’t have members of my family to look for advice. I left a few years ago and came back to finish my Bachelors.

I’m staying this time because I feel I’m getting better financial assistance and have an amazing support system at CSUS. The clubs I’ve become a part of and the degree project give me alot of good advice. I feel like there are people who understand me and what I’m going through.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) They’re doing g great for the most part. I would say... better food 😊. Also, I’m looking for a summer internship that is part time so I can take classes as well. There might be a resource that provides more info about this, but I’m unsure where to look.”

— I’m 31 years old and am Mexican. I’m a fifth year senior, first generation college student, Spanish was my first language, and am a returning student.

“Originally I flunked out of college due to mental health issues, and the second time I ran out of funds; this is my third attempt at college, and I am currently a junior.

I came back to college this time around because I was unhappy in my job, and wanted to set an example for my children.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Online classes are still the best for me as a mom and full time student.”

—40 year old Asian woman

“Fell Through the Cracks, didn’t join any clubs and didn’t make any friends, it caused me to fall into a deep depression which lead to me withdrawing after the first semester and moving back home for a brief period to re-evaluate whether college is really worth it.

I came back because I knew it was important to finish this degree if I wanted to have a better chance of succeeding later on in life

What got me to stay were the friends I made once I came back to campus and started participating in clubs and campus events, they gave me a reason to continue my degree”

—21, African American, Son of Veteran, 4th year

“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Money, motivation, and stress related to family, personal and work issues.

Being almost finished with my degree I’m just pushing as hard as I can.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Help pay for my tuition even after failing a couple classes, I’m still in good standing but I don’t get access to tuition help anymore, which has created many financial burdens with me and my family.”

—I am 22, Mexican American woman, 4th year student, I am a first generation college student, and a multilingual learner, I learned English at 6 years old.

“It’s really hard having to go to school work and care for family but having to pay rent on top of that buy groceries and commute makes it almost impossible. Lack of familial support and having so much pressure put on me as the oldest daughter and granddaughter my culote says I should be able to do it all.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back to college if you left?) My two friends I made.... School is hard but it’s also my entire social life ... it’s a small getaway form my home responsibilities. I also want to be able to help people like me in the future and getting my degree is the only way to do it.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) I think maybe just advocating a little more for students like me. There are so many groups on campus and things like the food pantry which helps!!!! But I feel like I don’t really fit in anywhere. Most people can’t relate to my situation. It would be nice to be involved more on campus but my schedule makes that impossible. Maybe something as simple as somewhere to talk to people like me because I am sure I’m not the only one.”

—24 year old Hispanic female 1st generation student oldest of 3 siblings full time caretaker of grandparents and working part time about 20-30 hrs a week

“The times that I thought about leaving college were times that I felt like I wasn’t good at anything, wasn’t getting the grades I thought I deserved, didn’t feel like the path I was going on was what I actually wanted, or that I wouldn’t be able to get the job I wanted after getting my education and feeling like it was a waste of time and money.

The main thing that keeps me in college is seeing a lot of the people around me being supportive. Also seeing people I went to high school with drop out of college somewhat encouraged me to stay in college because I didn’t want to end up like them. Knowing that education will take me farther in life and provide a more comfortable one is also a main reason why I stayed.”

— A 22-year old Hispanic Female. Middle class, junior at SacState, divorced parents, highest academic level within my family.

“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) In the past ... 1. Too young wanted to party 2. Didn’t know what I wanted career wise 3. High paying job didn’t want to stop working full time 4. Relationship problems 5. Lost/spent my tuition money 6. Hard to focus I have to work 2x as hard as normal students

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back to college if you left?) Accumulation of credits over the years led me to obtain a AA transfer, Pressure of being almost being 30, Pressure coming from immigrant family, Motivation from previous counselors/proffesor, Stopped doing online but on campus forced me to be in touch with students and professors

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) I think their professors need to take their job more serious. I think a lot of them have alot on their plate and it makes students suffer when they cut corners forgetting curriculums. Teachers often go off topics on lectures and it’s already hard enough to focus ... no need to share personal irrelevant stories.”

— Transfer -First gen Latina Woman, 28

“First of all financial situation, it is a struggle to find resources for someone who is the main supporter at home. There is help in campuses but sometimes it feels some how intimidating to talk about the actual struggles. Of not having enough money, or support

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back to college if you left?) Wanting to excel academically and to actually make a change in my generational history.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) To have resources for parents such as housing for those who already have children or some type of guidance”

— Hispanic, single mother, 2022 and first generation student - 9 years in school, multilingual learner

“I left college the first time because I got pregnant and was not able to keep up with school, work and being a young soon to be mother. I left the second time because I landed my first real job and needed to work full-time to support my 5 kids at that time since I was newly single and raising my 5 kids by myself.

I am staying now because most of my kids are now adults and I am able to dedicate more time to finally obtaining my degree. I started something and now it's time to finish it. I want to show my kids that no matter how hard life gets, getting the proper education is never out of reach.

I would say free tuition but I know that's a long shot. So I will say keeping the BSCTS programs going to help students like myself be able to earn a Bachelors Degree.”

— I am going to be 46 in 20 days. This is my 3rd attempt at this college thing. I am from Micronesia so I am considered Pacific Islander. My parents both did some trade schools for college many many years ago. I'm a mother of 6, domestic violence survivor, I speak Chuukese and English and understand Spanish.

“I left College after only one semester due to the differences between High School and College. When I came to America I was a senior in high school and it was a challenge learning English and a new type of Education System. I feel like my High School teachers were much more understanding and helped me a lot. In College, I felt alone and so lost and did not really understand the classes or the Canvas system. I went to the counselors several times with questions about classes and they would turn me away with a handout or just a paper with all the classes listed. I eventually dropped out.

I came back because I was not successful in finding a good job and realized I need an education to be successful. I came back to college and took my time and slowly, with the help of some alumni, learned the college system.

I think counsellors can do a lot better job in helping students. Whenever I have a question and go to a counsellor, I get a generic answer and get turned away. Especially when I started Sac state.... I feel like if I had a better support system I would not have dropped out and graduated a couple years before.”

— I am 26 years old and a First Generation Pakistani Immigrant. I am a multilingual learner and I plan to graduate in the Summer section.

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

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back to college if you left?) To get a degree so I can do financially well in the future.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Offer more support”

— Female, Asian, 22, First Gen, 4th year in college

“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Lack of support, racial injustice, discrimination from staff / faculty at Sacramento state.... I finished a majority of my required courses and then stumbled upon a misunderstanding that has not allowed me to continue finish and further my education. I completed about 75% of my education to receive a Bachelor’s degree so it is difficult to start somewhere else brand new from scratch because my courses from SAC aren’t transferable and I am currently no longer able to financially start from the beginning. The school in general has left me feeling robbed, hopeless and disappointed I experienced this in a higher level of education.

N/a nothing is keeping me here and if I had the opportunity to finish I would however I don’t know where I stand in my education with this institution. Also it burdens me to have to continue paying out of my pocket hard working money to receive such treatment.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Care. Faculty and administration should care, should have empathy should hear my voice and my thoughts/ feelings.... I would like to just finish and never return. All I want is my degree.”

— First generation college student, female age 28 Hispanic transfer student junior level

“Back in Spring 2022, I stopped going to classes and got a W on all courses, and even dropped out of my sorority. It was such a tough choice, but mentally, I wasn’t doing well, and I was not motivated to give it my 100% for college at the time. I just felt mentally exhausted and drained, I felt like I just needed time away from school.

I bounced back after that semester long break. Fall 2022, I signed myself up again and passed all my classes, feeling refreshed and mind was cleansed. What kept me going the most was that I was actually almost there to graduate, so I just pushed myself further so I can reach my end goal.

Sac State is already a great campus with great resources and lots of info emails that I keep just in case I need it. So, I don’t believe Sac State needs to work on anything else.”

— I am a 22 year old Chinese-Vietnamese first gen American. This is my final year in college, after 5 long years. I’m a Health Science major with a minor in Asian Studies.

“During the first week, I wanted to drop out of college because it was a new environment and I felt like I couldn’t fit into campus life as easily. I struggled to adjust socially within my classes, because everyone was semi-focused on getting through the class. Or it was a lecture class that made it difficult to get to know people on a personal level. Around the time of midterms week is when I thought about dropping out multiple times due to the stress and pressure I felt from my workload. I was constantly working on assignments and papers almost everyday, and felt mentally unwell or unfit for college, despite doing somewhat good in my classes. I wasn’t sure if the pay off was worth my deteriorating mental health and continual routine of putting all my energy into my assignments. So I was on the fence when it came to dropping out because I didn’t have the courage to actually do it.

Initially, I found a group of friends to make my days on campus a bit easier and genuinely enjoyable, I didn’t feel as lonely which really helped my mental health a bit. However, that feeling didn’t last long as eventually I felt a lot of pressure and turmoil. There was unspoken pressure from my family to do well in college and graduate with at least a Bachelor’s. Despite my parents telling me it was okay to not go to college if it wasn’t something I wanted to do. Once Fall Semester started, it felt like it was too late to turn back and I’d have to give the next four years of my life to study for a decent career that can not only make my family proud, but make me successful and financially independent. I also knew that even if financial aid covered my tuition, there was money still being spent on me that I didn’t want to go to waste. Along with that, I didn’t want to make a rash decision and ruin my entire academic life just because I wasn’t emotionally stable in the moment.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Provide mental health support resources in connection with medical centers....”

—female, Asian American – Chinese, 18 - 24 range, undergraduate – freshman, first generation student, bilingual, experienced loss in the past year

“I wasn’t doing well in school and after transitioning from in person and online school it was hard for me to do school. I don’t like computers and isn’t the best with them. I didn’t do well in the fall 2021 and couldn’t afford to go to school anymore after being laid off with no EDD as well. I was also in between majors struggling to figure out what I wanted to pursue in life. I took a semester off to work and realized I missed school because I had so much free time and didn’t want a dead beat job that will get me nowhere. I didn’t tell anyone I dropped out but I didn’t like hearing things behind my back about ‘what am I doing with my life’

I didn’t like the whispers and around my back but I met someone who motivated me to go back. All it took was a question as simple as do I want to be working in a restaurant forever making minimum wage. I was only a few semesters from graduating so I went back in the spring of 2022 and currently on track to graduate in the fall. I know that a college degree will prove to people in the future if I wished to apply somewhere and I can proudly say that I am a college graduate instead a college drop out. There was also an academic counselor who still works there who told me that college isn’t for everyone when my grades started to slip as I was only a freshman. He discouraged myself and ever since then I never went to a counselors because most people say there are there to help but majority of the time they are rude and discouraging which is why people don’t utilize counselors. One bad apple can spoil the rest of the bunch.

Sacramento state should hold workshops with the different majors that are offered and show the different kinds of field and routes you can take. They should also re evaluate some of their counselors and professors because you never know what happens behinds closed doors and the trauma a faculty can cause a student”

— I am a 22 year old Chinese student. I am currently a 5th year. My parents didn’t go to college but I have an older sister who graduated from sac state a few years ago

“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) Burnout from being stuck in an educational environment for most of my life. Started in junior year of high school and continued throughout most of college. I want to start my life already.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back to college if you left?) The possibility of being poor and the investment I’ve already made in my education (time and money, close to graduating).

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Not much. I don't want to drop out because of Sac State, I want to drop out because I've been in school for too long.”

—Anonymous

“I only take a term off after the fourth week of the term due to a major change.

I came back to continue my education and get my four year degree as required for my desired career. Physical Education PE Teacher.

Sacramento state has been great and provided a number of resources.”

—22, African American, Italian, Irish, 5th year Senior

“(What made you or is making you want or need to leave college?) No support, immigrating here young and not having proper resources, mental health. The pressure of graduating on time because I’m staying another semester.

(What kept you here or is keeping you here taking classes—or what got you to come back to college if you left?) My mom. Wanted to be the first to graduate college.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) More support.”

— Latina, bise cual, immigrant

“I first had to leave college because I was diagnosed with epilepsy and had to learn how medication affected me physically and mentally. Then when I was planning on returning to school I found out that I was pregnant with my son.

I have liked the people I met there and all the help that they try to offer students like me.

I think the the thing I felt or feel most confused about was/is how the process for applying to graduate and how I could go about that since I had to stop going with only one semester left to go.”

— Hello. I am a Mexican-American 29 yrs old, female. I'm first generation college student. Grew up speaking Spanish and learned English in school. I should only need 1 more semester of full time to graduate with my bachelor's.

“One of the main reasons I truly wanted to drop out of college was due to financial aid issues with the college. Every year I submitted my FAFSA it felt like I was picked on by the college for many different reasons. Whether they thought it was weird that my parents lived in the same house even though they were never married, deterring whether or not I deserved scholarships because of unit loads even though I've been a full time student every semester, or being told by (staff in an) office that ‘It could be worse, you could've been dropped from your classes’ after I explained that my father passed away and I was unable to pay my tuition without the scholarships they were keeping away from me. This college is so unprofessional that I was angry attending classes every day and cried every night because I was so tired of having to deal with rude or unhelpful faculty.

Literally the only reason that is keeping me at this college is because I'm so poor I could barely afford to attend this college in the first place. Since my father passed at the beginning of February my mother and I have been trying to scrounge together what little money we have just to pay rent while I'm looking for a job with my degree. If I didn't need a degree and I knew all of the garbage that I would've dealt with every single day with this college I would've NEVER attended it.

Financial aid needs to be a huge priority.... People seem to forget that not everybody is born with a silver spoon in their mouths and some people can't just drop several thousand dollars at any time just to pay for tuition. I can't afford groceries let alone afford to be kept from scholarship and FAFSA funds for several weeks/months past the disbursement date.”

—21 years old, Native American/Caucasian, Second-Semester Senior, first generation college student.

“My first semester of college was quite rough. It was difficult adapting to the new change; missing friends and family, and having to live in a new city. Things are going well now so there is no need to leave college.

The things that are keeping me is getting the chance to better myself, make new friends, and experience life being a young adult.

Things at Sac State is going great, there isn't nothing I would change at the moment.”

— I am a young African American woman. I'm a 18 year old college freshman.

“I stopped attending community college in 2014. I started right out of high school and wasn't ready for it. I struggled academically. Particularly in English and Math. I had to take so many remedial math and English classes. I failed Intermediate Algebra and Intermediate English multiple times. Without these classes I couldn't move forward with my degree. I was very discouraged and burnt out. In my last attempt at Intermediate Algebra I got a 69% and decided to take a break which turned into a 7 year hiatus. I did attend cosmetology school in between this.

After working for the past six years in cosmetology I burned out in that career. During the pandemic when person care businesses were shut down I realized how much the physical aspect of the job had taken a toll on me. This is when I decided I wanted to finish my degree and build a career that has the potential for longevity.

I transferred to Sacramento State University in Fall 2022. My experience has been nothing but great. I feel very supported and my professors have been great. I still do struggle academically. I'm able to pass my classes but...not an A student. I think that Sacramento State can offer guidance to first time college students by offering more tutoring services. Additionally, I think a class on how to study would also be beneficial. Lastly, a class on preparing for and applying to graduate school before students pick a major would be nice. For my major a Master's degree is needed to work in the field which I didn't know when I chose my major. Trying to get into graduate school is a process that can use more support especially for first generation college students like myself who have never navigated through a process like this before.”

—31 years old, African American/mixed, Junior, first generation college student

“I didn't technically leave college but I struggled with drug addiction during COVID and skipped all my online classes for 3 semesters in a row due to addiction.

I transferred to Sacramento State to get sober and to continue my education. My family provided immediate support in Sacramento. I wanted to continue my education because I find pride in my studies.

(What can Sacramento State University do better for you?) Nothing. Sacramento State was the new start I needed.”

— Age: 29, Gender: F, Filipino, first generation student, senior in mechanical engineering

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 first section, Part I, focuses on what research tells us is the pivotal first year of college.

Part 1: The Pivotal First Year in College

Research has long shown how critical the first year of college is for students in their decision to stay. About a quarter of students leave the first year, according to the [National Student Clearinghouse Snapshot Report, “Persistence and Retention.”](#) Although this number has lowered to about where it was pre-pandemic, it is still terribly high: *One in four of our first-year students will not complete or come back from their first year.*

Some new students can be those who choose to delay their entry to college after high school completion. These reentry students, we know, can be at-risk in terms of becoming accustomed to schooling once again, juggling the responsibilities of work and/or family with courseload, and struggling to feel a sense of belonging with typically younger-age peers and confidence in academic skills that may feel rusty.

Most first-year students are coming straight from high school: About six in ten high school students come to college right after graduation, and they, too, are at-risk, more than ever.

The Incoming Class of First-Year Students

In an ACT (American College Testing) research issue brief, [“Influence of the Coronavirus Pandemic on High School Seniors’ Views: College and Career Choices, Challenges, and Opportunities,”](#) the graduating class of high school seniors were surveyed regarding how the pandemic had affected their thoughts and decisions regarding college. The study authors note: “The high school class of 2023 is a unique cohort of students, as the COVID-19 pandemic began not long after this class started their first year in high school. The pandemic, along with the unprecedented changes it brought to education, made these high school students’ experiences different from those of previous cohorts,” of students coming to college. The study provides a snapshot of these students coming now to our campus and other campuses across the nation.

The top challenges during this time affecting students’ college and career thoughts, ranked in order, were:

1. Greater financial difficulties impacting schools of choice and the decision to even enter college.
2. Changing academic circumstances during the pandemic leading to “a lack of learning and greater difficulty focusing on their studies and keeping up with the work.”
3. Doubt about college, including self-doubt regarding their readiness for college and ability to succeed, or even the need for college, time commitment required, or value of a degree.
4. Mental health issues, such as anxiety, fear, depression, and loneliness.
5. Education or career undecidedness, including feeling less certain about their options or that they used to know what they wanted to do in terms of college, major, and career, but the pandemic changed this.

In short, while it has long been a key factor in the decision to stay in college, how well the first year goes may be more pivotal than ever to students coming into higher education now.

In this Document

To follow, you will find suggestions for students, faculty, and staff for an easier transition to college for first-year students and a successful year for all students.

For Students Transitioning Into College and All of Our Students for a Successful First Semester and Year

First of all, *welcome new students and welcome back continuing students!* It is an honor to have each and every student on their journey here. You make our institution better and stronger with all the unique perspectives, qualities, talents, and skills you bring—and we are so excited for all your bright future holds for you and our world! The learning and experiences you'll have here will help to shape who you are and what you are made of and can do, and open up doors to careers, other opportunities, and relationships that can last a lifetime.

Here are some fundamental guidelines for getting off to a great start to the semester and year:

Be Okay with Uncertainty at First

If it's your first time in college, it can feel like an entirely different world. Everything is new, with campus policies and procedures to learn, routines and norms to become accustomed to, and new places to familiarize yourself with. The learning curve for college life can feel huge and intimidating. And even for continuing students, each new class can come with its own uncertainties with a new instructor, area of study, and set of assignments. So take it one day at a time and remember that just about every student feels this way in their first year of college and throughout, as very likely did your professors, campus staff, and administrators when they were students!

Be Positive in Your Mindset

A good outlook leads to good experiences, a smile leads to positive relations and connections, and an open mind leads to your fullest learning about others and life. What you expect to happen is more likely to, in fact, happen, and this makes your attitude powerful—a self-fulfilling prophecy. So be the creator of your own best experiences and future, beginning with a good frame of mind! It is exciting to consider: *What will this college experience, this class bring? What will I learn, who will I meet, what will this lead to, what path will this take me on?*

Connect with Others

If you are new here, forming connections with others in and outside of the classroom can help so much in the adjustment and in setting you more at ease—and it can be so rewarding, meaningful, and fun to meet and get to know others! If you're a student who has been here for a while now, then taking the time and care to extend yourself to others who are new can mean so much and create that welcoming climate appreciated by all.

Be Sure You're Plugged into Campus Technology and Communication

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) and [Canvas](#) (the campus learning system where you'll find your courses and more). Be sure to also check campus communications daily and, even, ensure that message notifications are enabled (you don't want to miss announcements from your instructor regarding class cancellations, for example, or campus invitations for advising appointments prior to class registration for the next semester, and other important campus news and opportunities). You'll also want to see if students in your classes have created a class Discord, GroupMe, or other communication app to keep each other informed and collaborate on coursework.

Take Advantage of Resources and Ask for Help

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 through their journey here at Sac State from day one to completion-to-degree, where you can call, email, or walk in for assistance.

Enjoy This Time

College is a time of excitement, uncertainty, adventure, and new beginnings. The time you spend here will likely be key in development of self, career path, social sphere, and learning about the society and world in which you exist. Here is where you form impactful, sometimes even lifelong, relationships with peers, faculty, and staff; where new experiences are had, memories are made, mistakes may occur to learn from, and achievements earned; where interests are found, skills developed, passions sparked, gifts realized, and dreams are born and pursued.

And...

If You're a First-Year College Student, Be Aware of Key Differences Between the University and High School:

Attendance: While legally mandated in high school, attendance is the choice of the student in college. This new freedom can bring temptation to skip class, with students not always realizing the repercussions: High school classes meet daily, but college classes are typically held only once or a few times a week, making one absence equivalent to missing half or an entire week of instruction, which can set a student back greatly in terms of material missed. Many classes also tie attendance to class participation points and/or have strict attendance policies impacting course grading, potentially resulting in the student losing significant course points or even failing a class at too many absences. Please also note the [campus policy](#) stating that failure to attend the first day of class or in the first two weeks of the semester, any two classes (in a course that meets twice a week) or any one class (in a course that meets once a week) may result in the student being dropped by the instructor.

Learning and Homework: In contrast to high school, college classes move much faster in covering content, the material is typically harder, the reading more extensive, and the assignments and exams more difficult. The increase in the amount and complexity of course material here than in high school and corresponding need to devote greater time to studies makes time management critical.

Assignments and Exams: Students might not realize it is their responsibility to stay on top of things because college instructors won't remind or nudge them nearly as much about assignment due dates as they may expect. Other aspects of academia that students may not expect include: Instructors have higher expectations for performance commensurate with college work, so if students do last minute, sub-par work on an assignment, then they may get it back ungraded, due to not meeting minimum college standards, rather than getting some points for trying, as they may have in high school. Some college instructors do not allow make-ups or late-submission for assignments or exams, either. If students don't complete an assignment or test in a class, then they may not be able to do well in or even pass the class, depending on the course requirements and

point values given to these. Extra credit opportunities are far rarer in college, also, making good performance on assignments and exams all the more essential.

Grades and Getting Academic Help: College instructors don't usually give out regular grade progress reports that students in high school often receive, nor are they as likely to immediately and actively intervene when a student slips in grades. Instructors want their students to succeed, but it is the student's responsibility to keep track of their grades and take the steps needed to improve in coursework, including taking the initiative to speak with the professor and seek academic assistance.

Finals Week: In high school, students may be used to taking final exams during the regularly scheduled class time, but here on campus final exams come in the specifically scheduled two-hour time slots for each class the last week of the semester (with a few exceptions, such as some online exams). Be sure to note when the final exam is scheduled for your courses so that you are here ready to take the exam during that time, and are free from work or other responsibilities (or inquire well in advance to see from the instructor about the possibility of taking the final exam at an alternative time).

If You're a Transfer Student, Be Aware of These Key Differences:

Major Advising: Transfer students will be familiar with general education advising, but may not know about Major Advising. Once a student has declared their major, an advisor or list of potential advisors is then provided in the student's Student Center (on the right). Major advisors may also be found by contacting your department or looking over the department website, which often has information on where to obtain Major Advising. Major advisors provide more specific advising to the student in their journey through that program of study, and students are encouraged to meet with one once a year to stay on track with classes. Major advisors can also help a student determine specific future career paths with that major, and discuss department events, considerations of graduate school, internships, and more.

Dropping Classes: Transfer students may be accustomed to being able to drop classes themselves well into the semester at their prior institution, and not know that dropping a class for any reason here at Sac State must occur by the end of week two through OnBase (the campus system that students can use to submit forms, such as add/drop requests)—and thereafter becomes much harder with requirements that include justification in writing and the appropriate signatures from instructors, department chairs, and deans (in the case of later withdrawal). This means students may stop coming to class, thinking they will drop it at some point, and then be met later with the inability to do so, thus likely failing the course unnecessarily.

Finals Week: Students transferring in from some colleges may have gotten used to taking final exams during the regularly scheduled class time in the last week of the semester, but here at Sac State, final exams come in the specifically scheduled two-hour time slots for each class that last week (with a few exceptions, such as some online exams). Be sure to note when the final exam is scheduled for your courses so that you are here ready to take the exam during that time, and are free from work or other responsibilities (or inquire well in advance to see from the instructor about the possibility of taking the final exam at an alternative time).

For Faculty and Staff to Help Students Have a Successful First Year

It is all brand new for them. College life can be overwhelming for new students at first, but there are things we can do to help them more easily navigate the world of college and succeed in their first year and beyond.

Validation Theory was introduced almost thirty years ago by nationally recognized education scholar and activist specializing in student retention, Laura Rendón, and the work continues to be a force in higher education. She was part of a research project studying first-generation college students, low-income students, and reentry students. These nontraditional students frequently find college life more difficult due to traditional campuses and classrooms not designed with them in mind and their own self-doubts that they belong and can do well in academia. When asked when they knew they'd be successful in college, the students often noted it was someone who offered them reassurance, encouragement, or support. “What had transformed these students were incidents where some individual, either in- or out-of-class, took an active interest in them—when someone took the initiative to lend a helping hand, to do something that affirmed them as being capable of doing academic work and that supported them in their academic endeavors and social adjustment,” she found.

By individuals, she specifies a variety of institutional agents such as advisors, coaches, tutors, resident advisors, administrators, and faculty, teaching assistants, lab instructors, and other campus employees in their work in and out of the classroom, as well as classmates and people in the students' personal lives, too, who can validate the student in their college journey.

By validation, she tells us both interpersonal and academic validation—for who they are and how they're doing and how they can be supported, and for all they contribute and can accomplish as a student.

In terms of the importance, she notes that validation is prerequisite to student development—of their role and capabilities as a student and sense of belonging on campus.

And in terms of when validation is needed, she is clear: “Validation is most effective when offered early on in the student's college experience, during the first year of college and during the first weeks of class,” and something that should also be a continual process “throughout their college years.”

Many educators over the years have argued that validation is beneficial to many more students than those nontraditional. And now, post-pandemic, with so many students coming in with greater stress and mental health struggles, doubts regarding their academic capabilities or outright expectations of failure, and other factors undermining their academic and personal well-being, *validation is needed more than ever for all students*. They are coming in at much more risk than prior generations of students.

[Please see:

[“Validating Culturally Diverse Students: Toward a New Model of Learning and Student Development”](#) by Laura I. Rendón,
for further information and numerous suggestions regarding student validation,
and also [“Revisiting Validation Theory: Theoretical Foundations, Applications, and Extensions”](#)
by Laura I. Rendón Linares and Susana M. Muñoz]

In Interacting and Working with Students

In carrying out this work, an important first step is helping students to make that social adjustment to university life.

Help Them to Feel Comfortable

There are simple, yet significant things we can do to help students feel more comfortable with us and their peers, set down “roots” here, and forge a place of belonging and support as they begin their college education.

With You

Faculty and staff can sometimes seem intimidating, and especially to younger students now, because many are far less used to and comfortable communicating, post-pandemic. Being approachable in head-to-toe demeanor and tone of voice, along with encouragement to students to feel free to come by our office or contact us if questions arise or the student just wants to say hello or talk, can help students to feel more at ease. Sharing a little bit about who you are outside of the office or classroom, hobbies and interests you have, mistakes and blunders you have made, your own experiences as a student, all can humanize yourself and help the student feel more comfortable and better relate to you.

With Their Peers

Icebreakers in class that first day of the semester and student discussion and collaboration as the semester ensues, as well as introductions of one student to another out on campus or at events, help students to get to know each other and feel more at home. This is especially important as college can be lonely for students new to campus. They are no longer in a high school, where they knew everyone, or at their former institution, if a transfer student, where they may have formed social connections. Some may see a few of their old classmates here, but others may be far from home and know no one. For those who have moved here to reside on campus or in the surrounding community, they will likely be excited about the prospect of being away from home, but some may also experience real homesickness.

Help Get Them Connected with the Campus

It’s also helpful to assist students in becoming accustomed to and integrated in campus life.

Make Sure They’re Plugged into Campus Communication and Technology

Students might not realize to check campus email and for any class announcements regularly, unless we state the importance of doing so. We should also not assume that just because most are digital natives, they will know how to utilize campus technology and systems or have the internet service to support learning or perform other student responsibilities, such as making appointments or completing forms. Showing them the way around [Canvas](#) or the [Student Center](#), or getting the [Sac State Mobile App](#), 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 for students.

Make Sure They Know All of the Campus Resources and Opportunities

There are so many campus programs and services to support a student in their journey here and increase their success. Involvement in college life can also help new students to feel more comfortable and offers other wonderful benefits, including giving students 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. Student engagement can also strengthen academic performance, studies show. Faculty and staff can encourage students' use of university programs and services or engagement in college life by sharing campus resources and announcing groups or organizations to join or events to attend (or building some of these into course assignments), and explaining their importance to students.

Help Them to Better Understand College Life

It is a big university, with numerous policies, procedures, and practices, presenting quite a formidable learning curve for just about any student, and especially those who are new.

Help Them Get Their Questions Asked and Answered

Asking campus staff or faculty members for help can be intimidating or make a student feel deficient or out of place, especially first-generation college students, students of color, lower-income students, and male students. And sometimes they aren't even sure of what they're trying to ask or need to ask. That makes going the extra mile for students so very needed and appreciated: Offering assistance when a student appears lost, confused, or hesitant to come up to a service counter or into a faculty or staff member's office; being mindful of university jargon and acronyms and taking the time to clarify and simplify complex campus policies and procedures; normalizing and validating the act of asking questions or asking for help; relaying any of your own experience as a student getting used to a new campus—all can mean so much.

Share Your “College Survival Tips”

Who knows better the ropes of making it through Sacramento State than the faculty and staff who work here? “College knowledge” is valuable, but something not all students have. Some of our students may be first generation college students without the benefit of having family members who have gone to college and can provide guidance, others may not yet have friends on the campus who can “dial them in” to college life. Discussing the process of class registration or the importance of assignment completion, prioritizing time, due dates and late work, attendance and absences, classroom norms and expectations, and so forth, can be tremendously helpful.

Don't Forget that Personal Touch

Recall that validation, so key to students' successful experience and completion, also means the student feels they are seen and cared for—as both a student and as a person. As staff and faculty, myriad opportunities arise in the classroom, office, department, or out on campus to create that sense from our students' first to last day of college.

Say “Hi”

Never underestimate the power of a smile, nod of acknowledgement, simple greeting, or a wave hello on campus. Small things to do, but such a big difference these can make to a student, especially when they come from a professor or university staff member! You are validating their presence on campus and acknowledging them personally.

Be On A First Name Basis

Try to learn and use those first names, with correct pronunciation—it is well worth the effort. Students’ sense of acceptance and inclusion may deepen when you, a staff or faculty member, remembers exactly who they are. You are sending the message that they are more than a number, more than one student of many, *that they matter*.

Talk with the Student

Get to know students through more personal conversation. Ask how their semester is going, what classes they’re taking, and what their interests or hobbies might be. If holding a class or meeting, getting there a little earlier and getting to know students through more personal conversation, or in office hours allowing for more conversation than solely the inquiry at hand, all can pave the way to those more personal connections. Taking the time to talk in this way shows interest and provides that validation they are valued as a student and more, while also paving the way for greater discussion regarding college or coursework.

Show You Care

Offer encouragement to the student who feels overwhelmed, convey concern for the student who is going through something, affirm the self-efficacy of a student who has expressed doubt regarding their academic ability, reach out to the student who appears lost or disengaged, find services for the student who is clearly struggling. All can mean more than we ever realize. You may be the only source of support that the student has, the one person who turns that situation around for the student. Faculty and staff members’ heartfelt, caring attitude is one of the most important factors in student retention and success. You are sending the message that you want to support students through their struggles and see them succeed or, in the words of the Validation theorist herself, you’re telling a student, *“you can do this, and I am going to help you.”*

Keep in Touch

Check in with the student, even after they have left your office with the services received or questions answered, or the course that the student took with you is over. Understand just how strong of an impact and show of support it can be when you attempt to maintain contact or follow up with a student, even when the student might not return your message, or show outwardly just how much that gesture means. You are validating that they matter at this institution, even past the conclusion of your time with the student in a class, program, or campus service or interaction in your office.

In Teaching

The classroom is where students spend the most time in their higher education, so making this a place of validation in terms of their role in academia and potential to succeed is pivotal.

Get Them Off to a Good Start

This begins with laying the foundations for student success with course design.

A Student-Centered Syllabus

Many students, especially those new, may take a first look at a course syllabus and feel intimidation, uncertainty, or dread, such are the long-held university norms for syllabus creation. Unless we're careful, our syllabi can feel dry, impersonal, or overly formal in tone, be convoluted in wording, seem distrustful and diminishing of student character and competence, or come across as uncaring or punitive in language or policy. There has been a movement in higher education, consequently, toward more student-centered syllabi, in the name of greater student success. This starts with more easily understandable wording to clarify and demystify course or university requirements or procedures. This may also include creation of class attendance and late work policies that treat students as we would treat ourselves and want treated by others in our academic work spheres, with some degree of flexibility in acknowledging important role responsibilities and time-demands outside of academia and extenuating personal situations or struggles (or, if a course does warrant less flexibility in attendance or assignments, explaining why these policies have good reason for being in place). A student-centered syllabus can also mean: We don't simply state office hours, but also offer a warm invitation for the student to come and see us. We don't simply list assignments, but try to use less intimidating or uninteresting names than just "research paper" or "annotated bibliography" and/or explain the value of our assignments to the student's learning. We don't simply list our expectations for students and what they must do to be successful, but we also lay out the resources, tips, and our own role and what they can expect from us in their success in the course. Not only do students feel a greater sense of welcome and rapport with the instructor, but with these types of changes to syllabi also may increase student motivation and achievement, research shows.

Good Course Planning and Set-Up

Getting students off to a good start also begins with the most basic considerations in course planning, such as having class materials ready as soon as possible for students with disabilities who may need more time for accessibility and study; having textbook desk copies in your office or on Library reserve for students who may not yet have received financial aid for textbook purchase (or not scheduling quizzes or exams on the reading the first few weeks); and ascertaining students have the technology tools and know-how they need to succeed in your course. In Canvas course set-up, this means having a clear and consistent layout to class content and assignment submission—always important, but especially in the online class modalities, where asking questions when confused may not be as easy for students. Faculty also often create a "Welcome" page or

video to introduce themselves and the course, and a “Getting Started Module” to help get students situated in the class, understand how to progress through the Canvas tabs and modules, and provide helpful campus resources, including campus IRT and Canvas support. A message or announcement out to the class of welcome before semester start and information on getting started in the course and other logistics also is helpful and sets a nice tone.

Create a Good First Impression Of...

And in addition to the class syllabus and set-up, you also want to put your best foot forward, in terms of the course and yourself, for students’ increased comfort level and success in class.

Who You Are

Students typically feel more confident of success in courses where they feel favorable regard for their instructor, especially students who come from negative past school experiences with teachers who may have doubted their students’ intellect or academic capabilities, distrusted or demeaned their character. Human beings form impressions very quickly, typically beginning the moment we see and/or hear someone new to us or other type of first contact. This means your welcome email or announcement to students before course start, you coming into the classroom that first week, your demeanor and lesson delivery as you teach in-person or online, all can shape their impression. Your own good nature, sincerity, and warmth can help students to feel comfortable in class and connection with their instructor. A sense of fun, humor, and personality can go a long way, too! This can set a good tone all around and facilitate greater, more positive interaction with you and their peers and good class climate. Similarly, your love for teaching, passion for your field, and commitment to student success also help students to connect with you, and learning increases when students can see how deeply their instructor regards the act of teaching and the value of course content.

What They’ll Be Learning

Getting students curious or enthusiastic on day one about what they’ll be learning can sure lay a strong foundation to their motivation and success! There are a variety of ways to accomplish this: You could, for example, provide a pre-course self-assessment of the knowledge and skills they will be acquiring throughout the duration of the course to see where they’re at and give them a preview of the great learning to come, or build intrigue by taking common misassumptions and/or little known fun facts about your field and turning these into a “Fact or Fiction” activity or class discussion. You might have students look over the syllabus and assignments, and then ask them to consider or discuss with their peers what learning strategies and resources might be useful for students to succeed in the course. You can ask students to look at the learning outcomes listed in your syllabus and see which ones they see as more interesting, useful, or necessary to their major, college success, present or future work, and/or personal growth. You might have students complete a questionnaire asking them to state what they hope to gain from the class in terms of knowledge or skills. You could also pose a few real-world applications or hypothetical “what would you do?” scenarios in relation to course content, to show the relevancy or utility of what they’ll be learning.

Conclusion

One in four of first-year students will not complete or come back from their first year of college, unless we do more and do better.

This section highlights the pivotal first year of college and the steps we can take to make this as successful as possible for students to springboard into a fulfilling journey through to graduation.

Best wishes for a wonderful academic year!

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

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

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

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