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Engaging the Disengaged Student

How colleges connect with students
in the classroom and beyond

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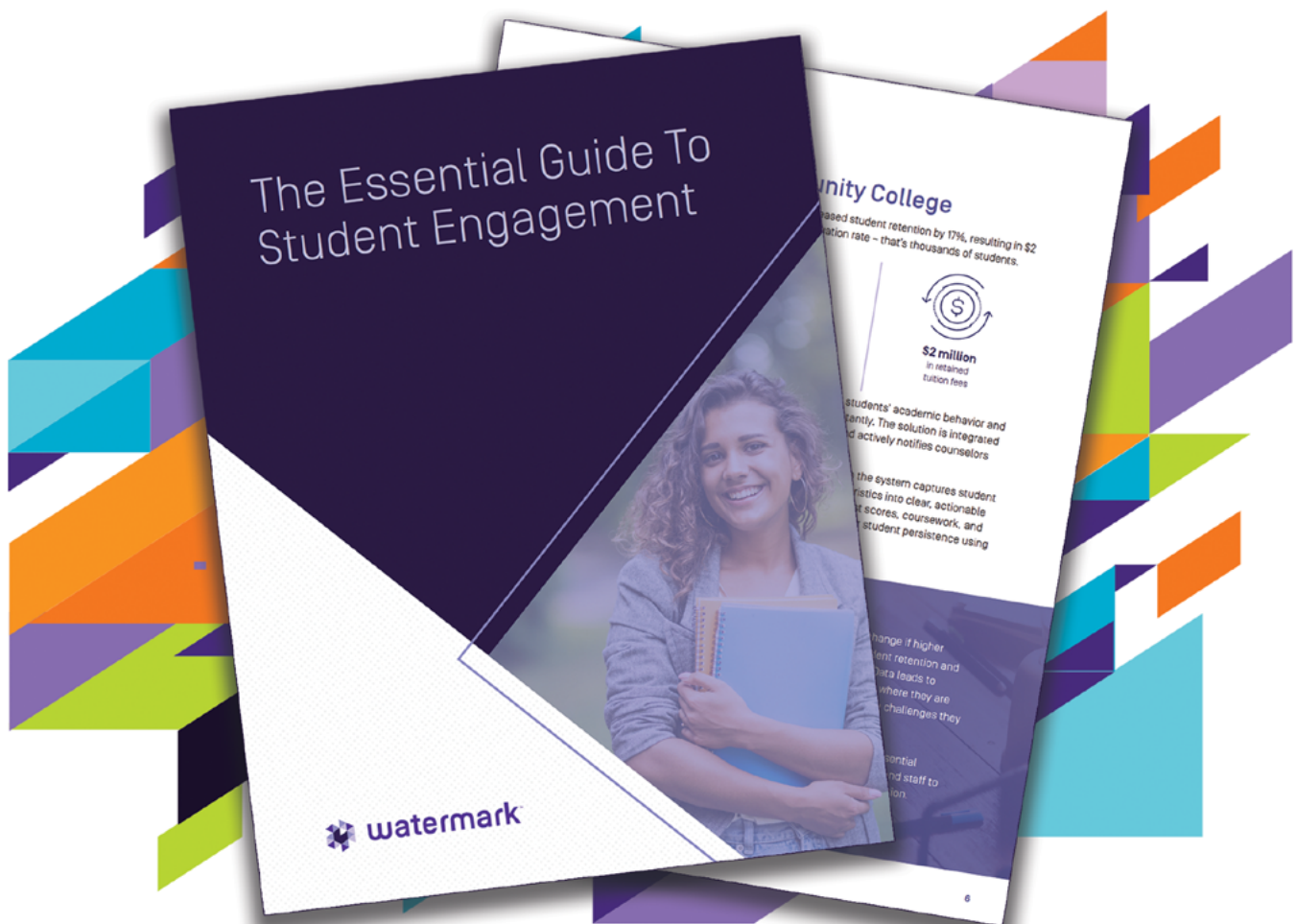
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Engaging the Disengaged Student

How colleges connect with students in the classroom and beyond

In spring 2022, *The Chronicle* asked faculty members to share their experiences with student disengagement. More than 100 people wrote in to describe a disconcerting level of disconnection among students, using words like “defeated,” “exhausted,” and “overwhelmed.”

While faculty members were reporting the problem had lessened by the fall of 2022, colleges continued to struggle with several challenges: Fewer

students showing up to class; some avoiding speaking when possible; many skipping the readings or the homework; and signs that others have trouble remembering what they learned.

This collection of *Chronicle* articles is meant to help academic administrators, including provosts, deans, and department chairs, support faculty members to overcome these classroom issues. It describes the issue and offers advice from a variety of professors and experts on how it can be solved.

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HOKYOUNG KIM FOR THE CHRONICLE

A ‘Stunning’ Level of Student Disconnection

Professors are reporting record numbers of students checked out, stressed out, and unsure of their future.

By **BETH MCMURTRIE**

In 20 years of teaching at Doane University, Kate Marley has never seen anything like it. Twenty to 30 percent of her students do not show up for class or complete any of the assignments. The moment she begins to speak, she says, their brains seem to shut off. If she asks questions on what she’s been talking about, they don’t have any idea. On tests they struggle to recall basic information.

“Stunning” is the word she uses to describe the level of disengagement she and her colleagues have witnessed across the Nebraska campus. “I don’t seem to be ca-

pable of motivating them to read textbooks or complete assignments,” she says of that portion of her students. “They are kind kids. They are really nice to know and talk with. I enjoy them as people.” But, she says, “I can’t figure out how to help them learn.”

Marley, a biology professor, hesitates to talk to her students about the issue, for fear of making them self-conscious, but she has a pretty good idea of what is happening. In addition to two years of shifting among online, hybrid, and in-person classes, many students have suffered deaths in their families, financial insecurity, or other

pandemic-related trauma. That adds up to a lot of stress and exhaustion. In a first-year seminar last fall, Marley says, she provided mental-health counseling referrals to seven out of her 17 students.

Marley knew the pandemic was wreaking havoc on people's lives. But she didn't expect that its impact on learning would be so profound, even when students returned, with excitement, to campus.

She is far from alone. *The Chronicle* recently asked faculty members to share their experiences with student disengagement this academic year. More than 100 people wrote in to describe a disconcerting level of disconnection among students, using words like "defeated," "exhausted," and "overwhelmed."

While a self-selected group, the respondents, several of whom agreed to be interviewed, represent a range of institutions: community colleges, large public universities, small private colleges, and some highly selective institutions. They described common challenges: Far fewer students show up to class. Those who do avoid speaking when possible. Many skip the readings or the homework. They have trouble remembering what they learned and struggle on tests.

The professors also described how they have tried to reach and teach students, what they think is at the root of the problem, and what's needed to fix it. Some believe it may be necessary to change the structure of college itself.

Not that anyone has easy answers, starting with the question of what's at the root of the problem. Do students actually want to be in college? Had they gotten so used to online teaching that simply leaving their dorm rooms seems too hard right now? Did the accommodations that grew out of the pandemic — including flexible attendance policies and fluid deadlines — foster a belief that they could catch up later, but they don't? Or is it that the world itself feels so out of control that students find it hard to care about their classes?

"My students are struggling to focus within and outside of class," wrote one history professor at a public university

in Georgia, who, like many respondents, asked to remain anonymous in order to speak frankly. "They feel overwhelmed and pressed for time. They cannot separate the existential dread of Covid and now Ukraine from their daily ability to live."

Though professors reported seeing burn-out at all levels, from recent high-school graduates to adult learners, newer students seem to have struggled the most.

Freshmen and sophomores, wrote Ashley Shannon, chair of the English department at Grand Valley State University, in Michigan, are "by and large tragically underprepared to meet the challenges of university life — both academically and in terms of 'adulting,'" such as understanding the consequences of missing a lot of class. "It's not all their fault, by a long shot! I feel for them. But it's a problem, and it's going to have a significant ripple effect."

"Students seem to have lost their sense of connection with the university and university community, and their sense of purpose in attending," said Stephanie Masson, who teaches English at Northwestern State University, in Louisiana. After two or more years of masking, they feel as if it's not OK

On students

"They need to be seen and heard, and they need to talk about their experiences. ... They have been afraid, and many are terrified for more than two years now. They say it's just getting worse."

—Psychology professor at a public university in Utah

"We assumed that last year's students would have had the hardest impact from the pandemic, but this year's cohort is, as best I can put it, resigned."

—Community-college faculty member in North Carolina

to get close and talk to someone. “It’s almost like they just prefer to sit in their little cone of silence.”

Many faculty members thought this academic year, with more people vaccinated, classes meeting in person, and campus clubs and events back in full swing, would be better than last. Yes, Covid remained a significant risk, but those changes were all for the better.

“I want so badly to be active in my classroom, but everything just still feels, like, fake almost.”

But recent survey data from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, a network of nearly 700 college and university counseling centers, jibes with what faculty members told *The Chronicle*. The data show that, among students who sought help, self-reported feelings of social anxiety rose significantly in the fall of 2021, with the return to campus, even as feelings of academic distress dropped. Even then, academic worries remained higher than they were before the pandemic, as did feelings of generalized anxiety, family distress, and trauma.

An increase in social anxiety could explain some of the behaviors that professors are seeing among their students, such as skipping class, said Brett E. Scofield, executive director of the center. For some students, avoidance mechanisms are their ways of coping with stress. “All those behaviors,” he said, “are very consistent with what students are reporting when they come into counseling services” — the low motivation, lack of focus, and enduring feelings of isolation.

Psychologists describe the wear and tear on the body from cumulative stress as its “allostatic load.” That may be what’s happening now, Scofield said, and it’s something that many people are going through.

Maci Lyman, a junior at Doane, is one of Marley’s students. She’d had one semester of a normal college experience before Covid changed everything. A first-generation stu-

dent from Omaha, Lyman described the nearly five semesters since then as isolating, depressing, and unreal. When the pandemic hit, she moved in with a cousin and tried to do schoolwork from there. In the fall of 2021 she was back on campus, but all of her classes were on Zoom. Her lasting memory of that time is flipping open her laptop in the dark for morning classes, so as not to wake her roommate, then drifting in and out of sleep with it on her chest. Interactions with other people were so limited, she said, that she essentially changed from an extrovert to an introvert.

“I didn’t even realize how depressed I was,” she said of that period. “It felt normal because everyone was feeling the same way. If you walked up to someone and they were happy, it felt strange.”

This past fall, she said, she was determined to reclaim some sense of normalcy, and began getting involved in clubs and activities again. That has proved helpful. But college itself, she said, “almost felt harder.”

“There was this expectation to finally be back to normal. And you were like, Well, I don’t really know what that is,” she continued. “What is the normal college experience?”

As she returned to the classroom, Lyman found that many professors had come to rely more heavily on technology, such as asking everyone to get online to do an activity. Nor do many of her courses have group activities or discussions, which has the effect of making them still seem virtual. “I want so badly to be active in my classroom, but everything just still feels, like, fake almost.”

Lyman said Marley is one of the few professors she has who takes time to check in with students in class, and ask how they’re doing, as well as encourage them to talk even if they feel as if they don’t have much to say.

The junior often wonders how much she has changed simply because she is growing into adulthood, and how much change stems from the pandemic. “Honestly, I feel stuck,” she said. After hoping for so long that things would get back to normal, “it was so anticlimactic when you got there.”

“Really, this is it? This is what I’ve been waiting for?”

At the State University of New York at Oswego, Kristin Croyle has been studying the intertwined problem of student exhaustion, disengagement, and anxiety through surveys and conversations with faculty members, the staff, and students.

“There’s just a lot going on. We don’t know what to do. We’re in a state of shock.”

Croyle, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, believes that the continual pivots in instruction have led students to develop habits that may no longer work now that they are back in classrooms. That feeling of ineffectualness has led to a more existential anxiety — specifically, a loss of confidence in themselves and their futures. A psychologist by training, Croyle is quick to say that those are her working theories, not hard facts. But she thinks that being a young adult today is challenging in ways that people of other ages may not understand.

“Going to college and making that investment in your future, it’s an act of hope that you can do something that is exciting and interesting to you, that you can find a career you want to engage with that will make a difference, that you can change the direction of your life with this act,” she said. But students’ hope in the future right now is low, and that kernel of enthusiasm is hard to sustain. “Our faculty are right there to hold their hand, to see what potential they have to make a difference in the world. It’s a long game; it’s not a short one. In the short run, it’s a really devastating and difficult time.”

Camryn Lloyd is a first-year student at Northwestern State and one of Masson’s students. She said she had been spared some of the worst of Covid’s college disruptions because she took a year off after high school to join the National Guard, which kept her connected with others. But she, too, finds herself thinking of the pandemic’s impact on her life — she lost an uncle — and the lives of her classmates, many of whom seem quiet and withdrawn in class.

“I feel like with this generation you can’t get too happy,” she said. “There’s just a lot going on. We don’t know what to do. We’re in a state of shock.”

Many professors note that students’ feelings of exhaustion and anxiety mirror their own, and that perhaps they feed off one another. “We’re as tired and burnt out as our students are,” wrote Shannon, of Grand Valley State, “but are expected (and do genuinely try) to be accommodating and empathetic with their struggles. It’s hard to find the line between being supportive of struggling students and just giving up entirely on academic rigor.”

Those who teach at colleges with a high percentage of students who are lower-income, come from communities hit hard by Covid, or have work and family responsibilities say the cumulative toll of the pandemic has led to emotional overload and physical exhaustion.

“There is rarely a single issue,” wrote one faculty member. “In most cases, it is something closer to a catastrophic cascade failure. The most common components that play into this are: lack of basic needs, an econom-

On mental states

“I fear it will take some time to bring us all back mentally and emotionally to the campus life we experienced before the pandemic. Administrations can speed this up by devoting time and resources to support ALL of us. They can also be creative about incorporating what we’ve learned about learning and mental health in the pandemic.”

—Anonymous

“I’m also seeing a great deal of stress-related brain fog, even in the engaged ones.”

—Psychology professor

ic or job-related problem, lack of child care, mental-health issues, cost of health care, and caring for a sick family member.”

Keri Brandt Off is chair of the sociology department at Fort Lewis College, in Colorado, which enrolls many Native American and Alaska Native students. This past year she has noticed an increased sense of “weightedness” among her students. They show up looking exhausted and often escape into their cellphones. “They’re here, but they’re not here,” she said. That’s not surprising, given how hard the pandemic hit Native communities. “I have students who lost many, many family members.”

Some faculty members who responded to *The Chronicle* believe that students’ study skills atrophied in the shift to remote learning, especially in high school. Workloads were often lighter. Deadlines became fluid. Discussion happened asynchronously or not at all. Students entered college, they believe, expecting more of the same.

“There has been a lot of concern that the use of Zoom, particularly recording and posting things later, has led students to develop the mistaken idea that they don’t need to pay attention or be engaged at the time of class because they can just go back and review the recording later,” wrote one faculty member who teaches a large introductory-biology course. “The problem is, they don’t do that.” In a class of 120, only one or two watch the recorded videos, the instructor said, and only 20 to 30 attend class.

Yet faculty members also pointed out that some of the trends they are seeing this year, including shorter attention spans and growing mental-health problems, predate the pandemic. The strains of the past two years simply accelerated those longer-term trends.

Mary Beth Leibham teaches child development and educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire. She began noticing decreased engagement in her classes five or six years ago. Students say they feel overwhelmed, tired, and lost, she wrote. Leibham worries about the pressure students put on themselves “to have it all figured out.”

For many students, she said, success means getting straight A’s, always going above and beyond, and “good enough” is not really good enough. “This breaks my heart,” she wrote. “My students are so much more

than their GPAs and sports accomplishments. I tell them this every chance I get, but I fear they don’t believe me.”

Faculty members said they were responding to these challenges in a variety of ways. In addition to reaching out more frequently to struggling students, many are changing what or how they teach. They are spending more time in class on community-building exercises and group discussions. They are replacing high-stakes tests and papers with smaller, more frequent assignments to reduce anxiety. Many are maintaining flexible deadlines and asking students for input on creating assignments of interest to them.

“Quite frankly, I’m annoyed when I see or hear faculty whining about students not showing up or not putting what the instructor thinks is 100-percent effort in,” wrote Sharon Lauricella, a professor of communication and digital-media studies at Ontario Tech University, in Canada. Her approach, she said, is to make sure that her classes are engaging, enjoyable, and essential.

Like many professors, Marley, at Doane University, decided to make building relationships in her classes a priority, as an antidote to the sense of isolation she could feel among her students. She found herself having to work harder, too, to stay positive and assume students are doing the best they can. “In the fall, when I lost that, it became a self-repeating cycle,” she said. “I was frustrated with them, and they pulled back.”

This semester, she created an anatomy-based scavenger hunt in one course, pairing students with others they had not worked with before. She also rewards students for contributing to class discussions, passing around a bowl of candy. “I talk all the time about how it’s important to try,” she said. Allison Skala, another of her students, said that approach makes a difference: “Her setting that as the tone in her class has been so motivating. I look forward to going to class because I know my words are going to be taken into consideration.”

Incorporating field trips, podcasts, “real world” assignments — and shorter lectures — are increasingly popular. The more that an assignment, or a course, connects to

students' lives, professors said, the more likely they are to be engaged.

Marley found that to be true in a class about opioids and addiction that she team-teaches with an English professor. Even though a significant percentage of students still don't complete the assignments, they are much more engaged over all. "For a large number of students, they have a family member with an addiction," she said. And compared with, say, an introductory-biology class, this one "speaks much more directly with what's happening in their lives."

Even before Covid hit, Brandt Off, the Fort Lewis sociology professor, had been wrestling with how to address the increase in anxiety and depression she noticed among her students, which sometimes manifested itself in addiction or suicide attempts. She is reminded regularly that even if students aren't showing up, they still have something to say.

"The work they are doing is amazing," she said. "They might not come to class, but they are submitting assignments that are so thoughtful and well done." In a social-theory class that discusses dualism — the way people present one version of themselves to the world and another in private — she asked students to apply that concept to their own lives. They came through with powerful essays, she said.

But such strategies are far from a sure bet. And many faculty members said that nothing they do makes much of a difference with their truly disengaged students.

"I can't seem to reach this group," wrote a music-history professor, after describing how she uses low-stakes assignments that include detailed instructions and group work in class, intended to prepare students for an open-book take-home exam. That worked in earlier years, but not now. "I'm trying to be accommodating with extending deadlines, giving personal invitations to office hours and appointments, and more," she said, "but, honestly, it's feeling like they are just not interested in doing the work. I get it. I'm also exhausted."

Professors are talking with colleagues in their departments and across campus — including psychological counselors and academic advisers — about those challeng-

es, with mixed results. "We just get lots of contradictory top-down messaging about supporting our students," wrote one, "but little actual guidance about how we can do so while maintaining policies."

Others say it is helpful to discuss challenges and share insights, even if solutions aren't immediately apparent. "Once we see the patterns, we can begin to understand better what is happening," said Brandt Off, "but I mostly feel like I am swimming through the dark as a teacher these days."

For many professors, the struggles they are witnessing in their classrooms raise larger questions. For one, is this simply a transitional period, and students will bounce back in the next semester or two?

"The short answer is, we don't know," said Scofield, of the Center for Collegiate Mental Health. "We're still in a pandemic." What is clear, he said, is that "meeting students can't just be dealt with by one part of college. It's a collective effort."

Some are asking whether college itself needs to change. This is not a new conver-

On shifting responsibilities

"Our administration has shifted responsibility onto faculty more and more. I am now expected to be an instructor, career counselor, mental-health adviser, and personal coach."

—Biology instructor at a California community college

"Who is caring for the faculty who are supposed to be doing all this extra stuff for students without extra (or even adequate) compensation?"

—Literature professor at a public university in North Carolina

sation, of course, as it feeds into broader concerns about the value and relevance of a degree. But for some the growing feelings of anxiety and distraction among students have escalated the urgency of the question.

“People come to college because they want to be challenged,” said Andy Driska, an associate professor in the department of kinesiology at Michigan State University, who teaches an online graduate course in exercise and sports science. Yet colleges seem hesitant to challenge students right now out of a fear that they might break. “It’s almost like we need to come together, as faculty and students. How do we hit the reset button? What does education need to look like?”

Two ideas come up most frequently in the discussions professors say they are having with one another, and in their observations of their own teaching: increasing experiential learning and redesigning courses to connect more closely to students’ lived experiences and prospective careers.

Experiential learning, in which students learn by doing, addresses many of the shortcomings of traditional higher education, its proponents say. It connects learning to the world off campus, and it provides a sense of immediacy that lectures, problem sets, and textbooks often cannot. Would it be better, Driska asked, if 18- to 20-year-olds were encouraged to do two years of national service? “I feel like we’re at that point,” he said. “All reform effects are still just kind of pecking around the edges. We’re not talking about big, systematic things to change and rethink education.”

Laura Niesen de Abruna is provost of York College of Pennsylvania. She has been closely tracking how remote learning has shaped students. Students wanted to return, she said, but they wanted to come back to residence halls, sports, clubs, and conversations with professors. “What they don’t want is to sit passively. It reminds them of what they went through with the great pandemic.”

A former president of the Association of Chief Academic Officers, Niesen de Abruna said the time had come to reinvent the academic experience. Can professors build more hands-on learning into their courses? Are their classes and course sequences de-

signed to help students build careers or just turn out future Ph.D.s like themselves?

“How can we change the model that we have in higher education,” she said, “from coverage of disciplines to experiential learning, which is really connected to the careers that most of our students are going to have?” The answer, she believes, can help York and other colleges engage students more effectively.

Mallory Bower, SUNY-Oswego’s coordinator of first-year experiential courses and engaged learning, has also been thinking about the future of learning. While today’s students are prone to anxiety, she noted, they are also adept at exploring and learning through the internet. “Students can feel like, If I can find this on YouTube, then why am I here?” she said. “They are looking for a return on investment, and I don’t blame them at all.”

Bower incorporates experiential learning in all of her courses, which cover a range of topics, including strategic communications and career preparation. She also leads a first-year seminar that requires students to explore the campus.

Last year she created a course called “Who Do You Think You Are?” It was a success, she said, because students were encouraged to have serious conversations on complicated topics, like abortion laws, race, or sexuality. It also gave them a sense of agency by, for example, devoting class time to discussing how to write to their legislator or register to vote.

Bower acknowledged that professors like her have more leeway than, say, those who teach content-heavy science courses. But she hopes that her classes will provide students with a sense of purpose that will carry over into other parts of their lives. “We can’t do everything,” she said. “We can’t fix everything. But we can do little things.”

Creating that sense of connection, to help students see the larger purpose and value of higher education, may be what helps them regain their footing.

Beth McMurtrie is a senior writer at The Chronicle.

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ADVICE

How to Solve the Student-Disengagement Crisis

Six experts diagnose the problem — and suggest ways to fix it.

Dejected,” “exhausted,” “overwhelmed” — these were typical responses when *The Chronicle* asked faculty members how their students were faring. Professors reported widespread anxiety, depression, and a lack of motivation in their classrooms. Recent survey data from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health show a rise in students’ reports of their social anxiety and academic worries. Professors, meanwhile, are frustrated by their inability to reach those students. And they’re worn out from trying. “It feels like I’m pouring energy into a void,” as one put it.

The problem of student disengagement is easy enough to identify. Diagnosing what, exactly, is fueling it, and what colleges should do about it, is more of a challenge. So we asked several experts — both faculty members and administrators — about the steps colleges can take to combat such pervasive student disconnection. Here’s what they told us.

Make Authentic Human Connections

By REBECCA A. GLAZIER

Student disconnection didn't happen overnight, and it can't be solved by any single professor's innovative pedagogy. But there are things we can do at both the individual and the institutional levels to support and engage students. At the individual level, it starts by making authentic human connections.

Decades of research has shown that the best way to ensure that students are successful in college is to help them build [relationships](#) — with professors, with mentors, and with peers. Professors are especially critical here. The more positive interactions [students have with faculty](#) members, the more likely they are to graduate. When students feel like their professors care about their success and are there to help, they will be more [committed](#) and [engaged](#).

That is why flexible deadlines aren't enough. [Building rapport](#) with students doesn't just happen in the last few weeks of the semester; it begins before the class even starts. A welcome email, a pre-semester survey, or a [warm and engaging syllabus](#) are all ways to signal to students that their success matters.

Once class starts, continue to build rapport by bringing students into the course material: Let them vote on case studies, give them a turn at leading the discussion, hold active-learning simulations, or move class outside for an impromptu discussion of current events.

The pandemic has taught students that they can get most of the course content by reading the textbook or watching a recorded lecture. So what is the value of coming to class? It has always been human connection — the give and take of discussion, the knowledge gained through solving a problem together, the fun of exploring an outlandish counterfactual, the sincere inquiry of a spur-of-the-moment question. We need to rediscover the unique advantages of learning together in a shared space. That means connecting with students on a human level. We can't leave it to those who this

kind of work often falls on: [women](#), [faculty of color](#), [queer faculty](#), and [first-gen faculty](#). We need all hands on deck if we are going to overcome this disconnection crisis.

Respect Priorities

By TOBIAS WILSON-BATES

Like so many professors this spring, I found myself staring out at a surprisingly large number of empty seats. Absenteeism has increased at every level of schooling since the start of the pandemic. Many professors attribute it to apathy or poor decision making. But in my experience, students, faced with the impossibility of meeting the demands of all their coursework and extracurricular commitments, tend to make the right choices.

As a professor at a college made up of 40-percent first-generation students and a large number of dual-enrollment and non-traditional students, I have not seen academic malaise. Instead I've seen students working harder than ever. However, now their work increasingly involves an array of concerns above and beyond what I assign them in class.

First-generation and nontraditional students have always needed to balance a multitude of responsibilities, but never like this. My students are increasingly caring for relatives, taking on extra shifts at work to pay escalating rent and transportation costs, and dealing with personal health issues — both mental and physical. I would tell a student to prioritize all of these matters above meeting a deadline for my class.

Unfortunately too many professors think the answer to student disconnection is to double down on rigor, so they increase mandatory student checkpoints like quizzes and online-learning modules with strict deadlines. This creates a situation where any work that isn't graded, like reading, becomes deprioritized.

The lenient policies I implemented during the pandemic have changed how my students view attendance and deadlines. Flexibility in the classroom is now the *only* flexible commitment in their lives.

Students have not lost the capability to do meaningful, complex work. They are not generally too burned out, depressed, and dispirited to do the kind of foundational critical inquiry that undergirds a college education. Across the board, though, they are overcommitted to the point that any work assigned to them demands they make a sacrifice or deprioritize a separate, vital part of their lives.

We need to think carefully about how the tasks we assign to students compete with the demands of their schedules. The urgency of re-establishing classroom norms and fully committing to the slower, less-quantifiable aspects of our classes need to be communicated to students in a way that will allow them to calculate how deep learning fits into their crowded lives.

Provide Hope

By KRISTIN CROYLE

Seeking a college education is an act of hope. Students invest their time and money in the belief that it will help them change their lives, and maybe even change the world. Students now are struggling to find that hope. They have turned inward, becoming disconnected and disengaged.

There is no magic solution, but there are steps colleges can take that we already know can make a difference.

- Use best practices in teaching across all the faculty. Too often, we treat excellence in teaching as an optional pursuit for faculty members. Great teaching engages students better than anything else we can do.
- Make sure students are aware of vital campus services — mental-health care, financial counseling, food banks — and encourage them to take advantage of those services. It is no longer acceptable for us to say, “We try to get the word out, but students just don’t notice.”
- Look at your student-equity data and redirect resources as needed. We know the pandemic hit low-income students and students of color much harder.

How is that affecting your students in terms of recruitment, pass rates, retention, progress to degree, and graduation rates?

- Provide support to staff and faculty members. They are also disengaged and overwhelmed — and their stress hurts students. Do your faculty and staff members know they have access to mental-health benefits, employee-wellness programs, and employee-assistance programs?

As social interactions start to normalize and our students see more hope for their own futures, we will likely see a shift back to more engagement. But we can’t wait for that to happen. Students, faculty, and staff need us to recognize that there is an emergency now and to act with resolution.

Require Student Engagement

By EMILY ISAACS

Faculty members need to be released from the “super prof” role we have found ourselves attempting to fulfill — mental-health counselor, adviser, academic coach, technical expert. It isn’t working, and we’re burning out.

But faculty members *are* essential to students becoming connected. We do that best through igniting their passion for inquiry and research — and their capacity to persist through challenges. In the past we’ve accomplished that by being a fount of knowledge armed with great materials and well-crafted courses and assignments. Increasingly, however, the spark isn’t lighting. We have to become igniters. We need to lean forward, walk around the room, peer over shoulders, and be intrusive, in both digital and physical spaces. We need to encourage and *require* student engagement.

Next year’s classrooms will include many struggling learners who have not yet realized that learning is inquiry. They often are smart and knowledgeable but hit the wall quickly, lacking stamina and self-belief. They have become accustomed to thinking that learning happens by showing

up. I picture many of my students as having lived in a learning cast, their learning muscles somewhat atrophied, underused, and in need of physical therapy. Here are some therapeutic suggestions:

- Finalize your course schedule before the semester begins, to avoid constant tinkering and to provide greater stability for your students.
- Communicate high expectations *and* the possibility of great success.
- Provide early and frequent assessments that underscore expectations and the path to success.
- Ensure that students “do” in every session — write, speak, solve problems, create graphs, etc.
- Design lessons and activities that have students interact and collaborate frequently.
- When students “choose not to,” nudge, prompt, and hold the line that doing — engaging, collaborating — is required.
- Take action when students show disengagement. Draw their attention to their silence, inactivity, and unresponsiveness, and tell them they must do better.
- Share stories of learning how to learn; ask students to describe experiences with deep learning so they can tap into that experiential knowledge.
- Demonstrate empathy, and be on the lookout for students who will benefit from an after-class nod, smile, or simple, “Are you OK?” as they leave the class.
- Accept the limitations of what a teacher can do. Work reasonable hours and set parameters around your teaching time.

Faculty members need to do what we already knew how to do: create and nurture engaging, active, and social learning spaces.

Acknowledge That Students Are Struggling

By ELAINE M. HERNANDEZ

We are about to complete the fifth semester of teaching during a deadly pandemic that has killed a million people in the United States.

Each semester we have faced new hurdles. Why has this one felt the most challenging?

In preparation for the Omicron wave, I embedded flexibility in my courses. I recorded each lecture and posted them online, an approach that proved crucial when many of my 130 students were too sick to attend. But even as the Omicron wave receded, attendance plummeted. For one 50-student course, I was lucky if 12 showed up in person. I know why: Students are [struggling](#).

The root cause, of course, is the pandemic. Physical distancing has been effective at preventing the spread of the virus, but it has had unintended consequences.

One is that our social norms have shifted. While seniors first faced the pandemic during the second semester of their sophomore year in college, freshmen first faced it when they were juniors in *high school*. Their college experiences are built on a foundation of rules that sometimes change midway through the semester at a time in their lives when peer pressure and acceptance prevail. And controversies about how to behave — whether or not to wear a mask when mandates end — do not spare them.

Facing a dizzying array of pandemic tragedies, social movements, and inequities, and, in many cases, in college for the first time, students have created new norms. Low in-person attendance and disengagement are two of them.

What is the solution? Here are three recommendations.

Create spaces for interactions. In-person classroom interactions are the best way to teach students social norms. Colleges need to continue to be creative about how to foster these interactions while attending to student and faculty needs during Covid waves.

Teach all students about the hidden curriculum. In one of my lectures, I talk frankly about the [unspoken and unwritten rules](#) that help students succeed. For example, we discuss how to interact with faculty members or how to develop productive study habits. I end by explaining that it is normal for them to face challenges and that their careers path will not always go as planned. These efforts should be systematic and not burden faculty members.

Focus on equity. Equity is not the same as equality. Striving for [equity](#) requires designing systems in response to students' varying needs. Scrutinize rules to avoid putting minoritized students, low-income students, or those who have been systematically marginalized at a disadvantage. One way to do that is by adopting [care-referral systems](#), which allow faculty members to refer any student to needed services.

Fight Against Burnout

By NICOLE GREEN

Students are not doing well. They have spent the “best years of their lives” missing milestones in high school and college, like sporting events, parties, proms, and graduations. They have had to adjust to online coursework, isolation, and continuous changes in Covid-19 guidelines, mandates, and regulations. They have gotten the short end of the stick in a critical time of development. They are anxious, grieving, and, in short, burned out.

Burnout consists of three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of ineffectiveness.

Students are emotionally exhausted, which makes motivation or concentration nearly impossible, especially when tasks are hard and require a great deal of mental engagement. Students have also disconnected, and they use depersonalization as a strategy to distance themselves from their work to prevent further emotional fatigue. So during online instruction, they might keep their cameras off. During in-person instruction, they might procrastinate and avoid participating. Unfortunately, these strategies can negatively build on themselves, leaving students feeling even less effective, which then furthers burnout and exhaustion.

Here are some ways we can support our students.

Put their basic needs first. Students should be encouraged to focus on things like getting enough sleep, eating healthy, exercising, and engaging in safer social engagements. Students' schedules have been negatively affected by the pandemic and need to be readjusted to decrease anxiety and disengagement.

Validate their feelings and needs. Many students are not sure if what they are feeling is normal because they were not able to bond with other students when classes were remote. Encouraging students to express their feelings will inspire connection and engagement in and outside of the classroom.

Invest in their mental health. Our families and our country have suffered a great deal of loss, turmoil, and confusion. Some students may need additional support to cope. Urge them to take advantage of counseling and crisis services.

Keep them engaged. Students should be reminded that belonging and community are essential for their well-being. Encourage them to find ways to be active and feel purposeful to avoid feelings of helplessness.

Rebecca A. Glazier is an associate professor of political science in the School of Public Affairs at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Tobias Wilson-Bates is an assistant professor of English at Georgia Gwinnett College. Kristin Croyle is dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the State University of New York at Oswego. Emily Isaacs is executive director of the office of faculty advancement at Montclair State University. Elaine M. Hernandez is an assistant professor of sociology at Indiana University at Bloomington. Nicole Green is executive director of counseling and psychological services at the University of California at Los Angeles.

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HOKYOUNG KIM FOR THE CHRONICLE

‘It Feels Like I’m Pouring Energy Into a Void’

Faculty members share their thoughts on trying to reach disconnected students.

By **BETH MCMURTRIE**

Recently we asked faculty members to tell us about their experiences with student disengagement in their classes. Many of you responded — so many, in fact, that we were able to include only a small fraction of your replies in an article on the topic we published. We wanted to share more of your thoughtful views, so we’ve collected some of them below. Answers have been edited for length and clarity. All responses have been anonymized.



Have you seen decreased engagement among your students?

Yes, especially in my large introductory course. I am using a Hy-Flex arrangement to simultaneously teach an in-person section and an online section of the same course. I find that student attendance at the live sessions, either in the classroom or over Zoom, declines rapidly a few weeks into the semester, and the students who do attend the live sessions are extremely passive. My class sessions are organized around participatory activities and Q&A sessions, but often students will just sit and wait for me to say something rather than asking questions themselves.

I'm an undergraduate adviser. I have never had so many students that have gone into academic suspension or dropped courses a couple of weeks into the semester. Some students just disappear and end up failing their classes. I try and reach out

to them to see how they are doing personally as well as academically, and many have said they are struggling emotionally and mentally. It is heartbreaking. Before I might see one or two out of 30 having issues; now it is probably half of the students.

Student disengagement is unprecedented. They are increasingly not coming to class, answering instructor emails, completing work for class discussion, and completing formal assignments. Their social skills are nonexistent: They can't manage to sustain a basic, nonacademic conversation, they don't make eye contact, and their body language alternates between apathy and disdain. Moreover, when I encourage them to be a contributor to the class learning environment, their behavior is often disrespectful and confrontational. It is a crisis.

Other than the typical dip in energy during the spring semester, I have not seen this. In fact, once students got back in the fall, I noticed that they started participating in class more. This semester, students are very engaged in the classroom. They seem to be doing their assignments and other work. This has been echoed by others in my department. However, I am concerned about the quality of their work. There is less creativity and willingness to strive for the best outcome.

Students seem much less focused and more distracted than before Covid. They cannot see themselves working in the lab for eight hours anymore, so we have shortened the labs to four hours. They seem more angry, more irritated with the teaching assistants, and less sure of themselves. Many are scared to ask questions, and I think they are feeling intimidated by the whole ordeal. They often come across as arrogant or know-it-all but I believe this just hides a deep-seated insecurity.

Have you had to try harder this year to motivate and engage students? If so, which approaches are working?

I've had to reach out directly to students much more frequently. I offer to review assignments before they're due. I've added a more progressive final project

that asks students to provide updates on progress throughout the semester. I post the most common comments I've made on homework in prior semesters, so students can avoid similar pitfalls. I'm dropping the lowest quiz and assignment grade to try to boost overall grades. I even graded final projects on a curve last semester.

I ask them when we meet in person, "How is everyone doing?" I never provide only negative feedback; I now also spend a lot more time coming up with positive reinforcements. For example, five years ago, I could say, "Proofread for errors" on a paper, and leave it at that. Now, I use their name, and tell them things like "Overall you're on the right path here, but proofread a little more to catch small errors and get full points." I don't know if it is working. It feels sometimes like I'm begging them to care.

I'm sending out emails constantly to people who haven't submitted yet, coming up on deadline, or to people afterward encouraging late submissions. I was more upfront during drop/add about how much work the course would require, and provided tutorials on study skills and time management. I've liberalized late and redo policies. I give a lot of pep talks. This semester I have extended availability for virtual office hours. Students respond warmly to all of this, but I'm not sure it's going to be enough to improve retention or success rates.

It feels like I'm pouring energy into a void. With my introductory students, I feel like everything has to be bigger and bolder to get any response from them at all. With my upper-division students who are falling behind, I have sent so many emails checking in with them and reminding them of deadlines, and mostly I don't get a response. Nothing seems to be working.

I haven't needed to change my classroom style, but I have needed to show extra compassion, give students more time to complete assignments, and make many more extensions than normal. In some cases I advocate with administrators to get students access to mental-health resources. Students are definitely appreciative of greater flexibility and expressions of support.

If you have spoken to students about these issues, what reasons have they given for not being engaged?

I have spoken to some of them. They are generally feeling overwhelmed by all the stay-at-home and isolation, mask wearing, Covid in the family, etc. They were also really unhappy that we went back online for a month in January and then came back to the lab in February. Some complain that their classmates are not engaged when they are doing team work.

They say everything feels hopeless. They say they are overwhelmed, stressed, and anxious. They say it feels as if the world is falling apart and everything is out of control. They are having to work too many hours and are taking too many units. They say they have no time to sleep and take care of themselves. Many also admit to compulsive use of the internet.

I've spoken to a few students, one on one, about issues affecting motivation, attendance, and turning in work. Some reasons are related to health issues, either flu or Covid they have experienced, or health issues with family members. Some are facing financial issues related to the rising cost of attendance and housing struggles. These are not new problems, but they seem to be magnified recently.

Have you discussed these challenges with your colleagues or anyone else on campus? If so, has anything come of it? What else should we know to understand what's happening with students?

One thing my colleagues and I agree on is that we are beyond depleted. We're anxiously awaiting the return to "normal," but if the place we've been in for the last year is actually the "new normal," we don't know how much longer we can sustain this. Many of us don't even want to talk about it with the administrative folks because we don't know if we'd be able to make it through that conversation without breaking down. It would be nice to see the university support everyone, rather than expecting employees to sacrifice themselves at all costs for students.

The engagement of the faculty in my department to support the staff on this is minimal. I am generally disappointed by the faculty management's hands-off approach. It seems they engage only when there is an obvious problem, and that the quality of teaching and mental health of students and staff is just not on their radar. It is all very silo-style. Everyone is doing their thing, and unless people talk one on one, nothing gets communicated.

I need fewer workshops about how to think more about students. I need, instead, more conversations about faculty's disengagement and exhaustion. Like many others, I am considering leaving my career because of the constant stresses and expectations placed on faculty and staff as well as historically low morale at my institution. However, I want to stay because I love what I do and enjoy working with students. This constant tension is taking a toll on my well-being, and I'm sure part of this is showing up in the classroom.

I fear it will take some time to bring us all back mentally and emotionally to the campus life we experienced before the pandemic. Administrations can speed this up by devoting time and resources to support all of us. They can also be creative about incorporating what we've learned about learning and mental health in the pandemic into a "new normal" campus-community life.

Are there campuswide actions that could be taken to support the grown-ups on campus in their efforts to reach and support students? It feels like so many things are siloed when it's becoming apparent we're dealing with a systemic concern that very likely would benefit from some systemic interventions that support everyone.

Beth McMurtrie is a senior writer at The Chronicle.

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Students' Ideas on Overcoming Disengagement

By BETH MCMURTRIE

For many students, the second year of pandemic education has been the hardest of all. As I reported recently, many professors have seen record-high levels of disconnection in their classes: students not showing up, doing the assignments, or participating in discussion. Their two big questions, throughout, have been: Why is this happening? And what can be done about it?

Two faculty members who read my story decided to turn those questions over to their students. Specifically, they designed class assignments around the article and asked students to respond. I wanted to share their ideas here because asking students what they want and need is one step toward figuring a way out of this problem.

First up is Eva Zygmunt, a longtime professor of early childhood, youth, and family studies at Ball State University. This semester she is teaching an undergraduate class on grant writing and research methods, and had been searching for a question for students to explore through a research method called "[Lego Serious Play](#)," in which they use personal storytelling and metaphor construction to work toward solutions.

Zygmunt asked students to read the article and respond to this research prompt: "What are the keys to re-engagement?" The students put their ideas into five different categories: content, teaching methods, relationships, and policies that would contribute to re-engage-

ment. And they came up with five broad themes, which Zygmunt outlined for me:

Student Voice: This was the most important theme, Zygmunt said. Students don't just want to be recipients of information. They want to be active participants in their learning, through things like class discussion and the shaping of the course itself.

Flexibility: Education can't be one size fits all, students said. The notion that every policy holds true for everyone in every situation is wrong. That might mean continuing some of the pandemic-driven policies of flexibility with attendance and deadlines.

Care: Students want instructors who care about the content of what they're teaching because that helps students care about learning, Zygmunt said. They also want instructors who are accessible and approachable, who have high expectations of their students and are willing to put in the effort to make sure they succeed.

Variety/Interactivity: Students want a variety of approaches to teaching and learning, with an emphasis on interactive activities and engaging experiences. Information should not be presented in only one way. And they appreciate opportunities to learn from outside experts, including guest lectures and videos.

Relevance: Students want to know: How is this content relevant to me? How can I make meaning of it? How can I connect it to my personal experience?

"This particular moment in time really requires a different kind of teaching if we want students to be fully engaged," Zygmunt said. The ideas her students outlined match her experience: Get students moving, get them involved, and have some fun doing it. That makes people want to learn.

Zygmunt said that her teaching strategies might not make sense to someone who isn't steeped in what she terms pedagogies of engagement. But she knows they work.

"I'm not going to lie. Some people might look at my teaching and say, What are you doing building Legos? But students understand," she said. Her approach is: "What can we do that gets them out of their seats, that they have an experience instead of just being an audience? Then we can bring it back to, OK, what are the principles here?"

Zygmunt noted that faculty are also struggling with burnout. How can you be flexible, accessible, and interactive in your teaching when you're barely holding it together yourself?

Faculty members "may be in a position where they may not feel particularly cared for right now," she said. "Teaching into a void is not a good feeling."

I spoke with a couple of Zyg-

ment's students as well, Catherine Grasso and Corbin Harrison. They talked about how motivating it is to come to class when you know that the professor makes clear that they care about your success and value your opinion, to include asking what topics might be most interesting to study. They also discussed how courses that are designed to be interactive, whether through discussion or group activities, are naturally more engaging. "It gets your brain working more rather than just sitting in one spot," said Grasso.

I asked Zygmunt, too, about one of the common challenges faculty members faced when teaching in person this year: a sea of mostly silent students. What happens if you work hard to foster discussion, but nobody seems to want to engage? She chalked that up in part to habits students learned during the first phase of the pandemic online, when it was easy to disconnect on Zoom. "I think it's sort of a retraining," she said of what might come next. "They're saying, I want interaction. I crave getting out of my seat. But at the same time they're not used to that. And they're uncomfortable with that."

Zygmunt plans to share her students' ideas with colleagues and hopes to write about some of them while on sabbatical in the fall. "I don't think it's rocket science. It really isn't," she said. "But at the same time, there are always moments in time when people are primed to listen and learn."

Writing About Disengagement

Next up is David S. Weiss, a part-time instructor of English at Georgia Gwinnett College. He is using the article in a composition class with the theme of "Wrote My Way Out." The final assignment is to produce a research-based essay,

podcast, video, or other project that addresses a question or theme around written communication.

After reading my story, Weiss thought his students might find inspiration in it for this final project. In short, he was hoping to connect with his disconnected students by getting them to write about their experiences.

Weiss sent the story to the 25 percent of his students who have so far not begun work on their project, including attending a required one-on-one advisory meeting. He wrote to each of them to say that he noticed they had become disengaged in class and that they were at risk of failing if they did not do well on the project.

"I do understand that it has been difficult to remain engaged in your college classes during Covid, especially while working," he wrote. Then he pitched the idea of asking if they would like to "write a reaction or response to the article, reflecting on your own experience of how it has been challenging to keep up with schoolwork and stay engaged with classes during the pandemic."

So far, says Weiss, one student responded to the idea. He also approached other students with the same idea, if he sensed that they did not seem interested in the topic they had come up with. "I've had a fair number of takers for that," he wrote, and he included a video clip of a conversation with one student, Mauricio Reyes, who said the story reflected what he saw and was experiencing.

Reyes, who works in construction while attending college, said to Weiss he thinks that students have slowly lost interest in class because they are intent on catching up on all of the things that got shut down over the past couple years. "They're just trying to literally enjoy the year and a half they missed," he said. "I kind of feel like that."

*Beth McMurtrie
is a senior writer at
The Chronicle.*

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Yes, Students Are Disengaged. What Else Is New?

A recently identified phenomenon seems awfully familiar.

By **ROBERT ZARETSKY**

As the high tide of the pandemic recedes, what are we to make of — and what must we do about — the debris and damage left in its wake? Most every public and private enterprise in our country, of course, confronts these urgent questions. Yet they beat with a particular urgency on college campuses. Our business is not filling empty shelves or filing back orders, but instead informing young minds.

For more than a year, however, we could reach those minds only across flat screens.

How great has the damage been? Now that we can disconnect from Zoom and reconnect with students, turn off flat screens and turn on classroom lights, do teachers face a different kind of disconnect and flattening? One that is not electrical and spatial, but instead is intellectual and psychological?

A spate of articles and essays suggest that this may well be the case. In the spring



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of 2022, *The Chronicle* published “A ‘Stunning’ Level of Student Disconnection,” in which the reporter Beth McMurtrie reviewed the responses from faculty members asked to share their “experiences with student disengagement.” This was followed by an [essay in *The New York Times*](#) by Jonathan Malesic. The piece attracted an impressive number of comments — nearly 1,500 — and continues to light up Twitter.

How could it not? The essay’s headline — “My College Students Are Not OK” — is a sly teaser, boding a bleak tale of the freshly dug graves of academe. Malesic tries to live up to the title’s grim promise with a dire dispatch from the front lines. In last fall’s classes, he reports, a third of his students were invariably absent, while those who did show up either hid furtively behind their laptops or slept openly at their desks.

Yet he fails to give us a percentage — either precise or approximate — of those hiding or sleeping. Moreover, he notes his classes were “small,” but doesn’t say how small. Does this mean 10 students? Twelve? Twenty? The numbers matter. Are they statistically generous enough to support Malesic’s sweeping assertions? If the numbers are too few or too skewed, it is not clear we can give more weight to his conclusions that the “students weren’t doing what it takes to learn,” indeed that “they didn’t even seem to be trying.”

Perhaps aware of the fragile evidentiary basis to his claims, Malesic also cites three professors in the University of Texas system, in which he taught last year. Not surprisingly, they reaffirm his experiences and reiterate his insights. One colleague remarked that, upon her return to the classroom, her students seem unresponsive. “It’s like being online!” she exclaimed. “This was my experience too,” Malesic adds. “In my classes, it often seemed as if my students thought they were still on Zoom with their cameras off.”

Here’s the funny thing, though. I often

Students back then were not waiting for smart phones to play dumb. They were already quite good at it.

thought this about many of my own students not just last year, but last century. A time before Zoom, or the internet, was invented. Back then I would tell colleagues and friends that I have students who “sit there like bumps on a log.” Or in contemporary parlance, students who tapped the mute button. I had such bumps way back then; I have such bumps now. How many bumps? From one third to one half. And the percentage does not vary a great deal, no matter how great an emphasis I place on class participation.

As a result, I am not sure what to make of Malesic’s experience. Like he did, I also teach at a public university in Texas (the University of Houston); like him, I have been teaching a long time (since the fall of the Berlin Wall); and like him, I teach a writing workshop from time to time.

Of course, the persistent presence of bumps in my classes might say something about my teaching. But it might also say something about the dynamics of class participation. The caption below a wonderful

Gary Larson [cartoon](#) — a family is sitting in a semi-circle and staring at an empty space — reads “In the days before television.” This captures, I think, the category mistake we are stumbling over. Students back then were not waiting for smart phones to play dumb. They were already quite good at playing dumb — namely, preferring to keep mum — when there were still fat screens topped by rabbit ears.

Holding back, rather than holding forth, is what many, if not most students — and the occasional teacher — seem to have done ever since the days of the Academy. Isn’t that Socrates, after all, [staring off into space](#) amidst the philosophical hustle and bustle of Raphael’s “School of Athens”? Yet, there are still those students, thankfully, who hold forth in class. In my three courses this spring semester — about 25 students in two, and 10 in my workshop — there were always five or six students who talked. And talked some more, not only engaged by the

books but also engaging the more reserved students. (And they continued to talk with one another in chatrooms both before and after class.)

My experience was not unique. When I prodded colleagues at UH and other public universities, they mostly offered similar accounts. There were students who were engaged, others who were not; there were some well-written papers, many more that were not; there were the many who attended and the few who disappeared. But such things always “happen,” as one UH colleague observed. A colleague at the University of California at Davis reported that his experience has not been nearly as “dire” as Malesic’s, while another UH colleague concluded that for “every student I can think of with serious depression and social anxiety, I can think of several others who have done fine work and been even cheerful.”

How can we account for this disparity between Malesic’s circle and my own? Perhaps we have become captive not only to certain metaphors, but also to certain biases. McMurtrie notes that the 100 respondents for her article were “self selected.” So, too, for Malesic: A dozen friends contacted him with similar accounts after he posted his experience in the classroom on Facebook. But those with experiences like Malesic’s are more apt to reply in kind than those with different (and less dire) experiences. We are, according to Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman, machines that jump to conclusions — especially when they confirm our own biases. (Including my own, of course. After all, I selected my respondents.)

Obviously, there are several studies, cited by McMurtrie and Malesic, that track worrisome upticks in the levels of disengagement and anxiety among young adults since 2020. No less obviously, these findings must not be dismissed or ignored. As someone who not only taught through the pandemic but also is the father to two children in school during the same period — one finishing college, the other starting high school — I think I understand some, if not all, of the hardships and challenges that have confronted my students.

But I also think it is dangerous to generalize when there is only limited data — data, moreover, about an experience that we will need many years to fully measure. As a historian, I wonder if we have the necessary perspective to make sense — or, at least, make a sensible narrative — about how our students experienced a plague that is not only not past but stretches into our future.

Yet both past and future are mostly absent from Malesic’s account. For example, he does not say if the sense of disconnection he diagnosed in his students last fall persisted through spring semester this year. For both pedagogical and ethical reasons, it is important to know if a wide-

I wonder if we have the necessary perspective to make sense about how our students experienced a plague that is not only not past but stretches into our future.

spread condition of anomie and apathy still plagues his students.

Second, he ignores what the French historian Fernand Braudel called *la longue durée*, or the “long haul” of history. Malesic’s approach is simple and stark — an Edenic before and hellish after. Before was a time when all students showed up to class, talked up their books, and wrote up their papers. Come March 2020, we were heaved into the After, where students failed to show up even when their bodies were slumped behind desks.

How like the perspective of those who lived through the French Revolution, historians might observe. To contemporary witnesses, the taking of the Bastille marked a great tear in historical time, an event so seismic that it cracked open the vast divide between the *ancien régime* and the new world the revolutionaries thought they were creating.

Yet as historians ever since Alexis de Tocqueville have understood, the events of 1789 represented a continuation, not obliteration, of trends that had been underway for decades, if not centuries, in France. The problems Malesic describes did not first appear in 2020, but instead are embedded in the warp and woof of the past. As McMurtie rightly notes, it may well be that the “strains of the past two years simply accelerated longer-term trends.”

Neither the strains nor trends are going away. But to deal with these issues that loom so large over the future of the academy, we must not only keep in sight their evolution across the past but also our inevitably flawed and limited perceptions of the present.

Robert Zaretsky teaches in the Honors College at the University of Houston.

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