

Student Disconnection and How to Solve It

“Going to college and making investments in the 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...but students’ hope right now is low, and that kernel of enthusiasm is hard to sustain.”

Kristin Croyle, SUNY Oswego

The past several months has brought a raft of popular media and scholarly analysis on the status of young people, both reports of a mental health crisis among adolescents as well as a decline in student performance and engagement.

When describing what student disconnection is and what it looks like in practice, educators interviewed for an April 2022 Chronicle of Higher Education (CHC) article, various themes emerged:

- No-shows for class or completing assignments on time (or at all)
- Difficulty retaining basic information covered in lecture
- Failure to read assignments
- Reluctant to speak up in class
- A lack of motivation, focus
- Brain fog
- Reported exhaustion
- Avoidance in response to feeling overwhelmed
- A lack of preparation for the demands of college, for “adulting”
- Loss of confidence in themselves, loss of a sense of purpose for being in college



Researchers and mental health professionals point to several multi-layered causes, including COVID and other social factors predating the pandemic.

- Grief and trauma related to the death of loved ones
- Financial insecurity
- Disrupted routines
- Social anxiety
- Social isolation
- Suspended reality of typical expectations (in-person commitments, firm deadlines, etc.)
- Prolonged sense of existential dread and anxiety over external events, e.g., the pandemic, global conflict in Ukraine, climate change, social unrest (George Floyd murder, mass shootings, January 6th, etc.)

Educators have weathered the impacts of student disengagement and their own physical and mental too. The question is, how do we respond to this moment. Faculty interviewed for the CHC article have responded to these challenges in a variety of ways. Some examples include:

- Making relationship-building a priority in classes, both by building teacher-student rapport and student-to-student bonds
- Acknowledge the struggle your students (and you) are facing
- Replacing high-stakes tests and papers with smaller, more frequent assignments to reduce anxiety
- Maintaining flexible deadlines
- Seeking student input for creating assignments of interest to students
- “real world” assignments that directly connect to student lives/ experiential learning
- Building in curriculum that helps students apply what they are learning to future careers
- Faculty are talking with colleagues in their departments and across campus for peer support (with mixed results, though)
- Mind your own burnout as educators/model self-care

Questions:

1. Have you noticed a change in your students’ level of engagement? If so, what does it look like for you?
2. What is your sense of the particular causes of this disengagement for Austin College students in particular?
3. How have you responded in your classes? Any strategies you think are especially useful? Are there things we can do as a college community? How are you taking care of yourself as an educator?

References:

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