

Enhancing Student Engagement in the First Year

10 Strategies for success

Context and key issues

Student engagement in learning and in learning communities is a key to success in the first year of university. Students who engage with their peers, academic staff and the broader university community are more likely to:

- feel that they belong in the university community
- be motivated to study
- form friendships and peer networks
- persist with university study beyond the first year.

Student engagement in the first year depends on many pre-entry factors, as well as contextual factors such as student expectations and aspirations, disciplinary context and class size. The following strategies provide a guide for engaging students in the first year. They will be most effective if tailored to your particular context and student cohort.

Strategies for success

- 1. Create and maintain a stimulating intellectual environment**
 - Give students good reasons to be part of the learning community.
 - Provide coherent and responsive curricula and course structures.
 - Include elements of public scholarship to ensure relevance of the curriculum in a real-world context.
 - Stimulate discussion and debate, exploration and discovery that extends well beyond the traditional classroom setting onto the campus and into the community and workplace.
 - Tell students about how you, as an academic, spend your week combining teaching and research.
- 2. Value academic work and high standards**
 - Actively encourage commitment to study, and allocate time to developing academic literacy skills in disciplinary contexts.
 - Provide mentors – both at staff and peer level – to motivate, connect and engage students.
 - Model ways of thinking and problem-solving so that students learn how to think and learn in the university and disciplinary context.
 - Set standards, but remember to give first year students a ‘roadmap’ for learning at university.
- 3. Monitor and respond to demographic subgroup differences and their impact on engagement**
 - Get to know students if possible and make it a priority to become familiar with their needs, aspirations and motivations.
 - Monitor subgroup differences and develop targeted strategies for engaging students according to their needs and background experiences.
- 4. Ensure expectations are explicit and responsive**
 - Communicate expectations clearly and consistently across the institution and within Groups and Faculties.
 - Include students in the expectation-building exercise. Listen and respond to their expectations.
 - Reiterate expectations at key times through the semester and in different settings.
 - Ensure that students know you have listened to their views: provide feedback on their feedback!
 - Be sure to shape student expectations and to clearly establish realistic expectations and maintain high standards of learning and teaching.

5. **Acknowledge the challenges in students' lives**
 - Let students know that you/your teaching team/Department/Group/institution understand and are aware of various pressures they face as students and respond explicitly and practically to their concerns.
 - Equip students with coping strategies: incorporate these in regular lectures/tutorials.
 - Include talks about coping strategies from later year students in orientation activities or early lectures.
 - Acknowledge that a large proportion of students will be juggling work and study commitments.
 - Be explicit and proactive in dealing with issues and challenges that might jeopardise student engagement.
6. **Foster social connections**
 - In small groups, maximise the value of in-class time with active and collaborative learning activities. Encourage problem-solving activities, small group discussion of readings and class materials, and provide collective intellectual stimulation and challenge.
 - In large lectures, foster student interaction through question-answer sessions and a range of interactive activities.
 - In online learning and teaching, provide for online discussion, collaboration and interaction.
 - Create opportunities for civic engagement with communities beyond the campus.
7. **Provide targeted self-management strategies**
 - Seek to develop self-regulated learners who drive their own engagement behaviours.
 - Discuss strategies for time management and motivation, particularly during stressful times.
 - Identify the various sources of help early and at key moments through the semester so that students are prepared ahead of time and know where to go for help.
8. **Use curriculum structures, assessment and feedback to shape the student experience and encourage engagement**
 - Provide feedback and continuous assessment tasks early and often – set an assessment task within the first five weeks.
 - Attach importance to 'assessing *for* learning' rather than simply 'assessing *of* learning'.
 - Use assessment in creative ways to bring peers together both in and out of the classroom.
 - Engage students in self-assessment and peer assessment to cultivate responsibility for engagement in the learning process.
9. **Manage online learning experiences with care**
 - Online resources: Placing lecture notes or audio streaming on the web is not a substitute for effective lecturing. Students indicate that even when all lecture notes are on the web, they will attend lectures if the lecture is interesting and presented well. Contact with academics and peers is crucial.
 - Encourage student involvement in lectures when lecture material is presented online. For example, integrate group discussion activities into the lecture timeslot to foster face-to-face interaction.
 - In online learning environments, capitalise on the community-building capacities of online discussion forums.
10. **Support and engage teaching colleagues**

This strategy applies particularly to leaders of learning and teaching such as course and program convenors.

 - Ensure that teaching staff are engaged and supported.
 - Articulate the challenges of teaching first year students and establish working principles for a distinctive first year pedagogy in your program/course.
 - Support sessional staff. Sharing of teaching tips and assessment strategies among your teaching team is a great way to provide on-the-run, just-in-time professional development.
 - Value first year teaching and ensure that your best teachers and star researchers have a role to play in teaching first year students.
 - Create a culture that values the front-end of the university experience as an essential investment in the quality of later year experiences and in 'growing' future researchers.

Acknowledgements: adapted from Krause, K. (2005). *Engaged, inert or otherwise occupied? Deconstructing the 21st century undergraduate student*. Keynote paper presented at James Cook University Symposium: Sharing Scholarship in Learning and Teaching - Engaging Students. James Cook University, QLD, Australia, 21-22 September 2005. Available online: www.griffith.edu.au/gihe