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A Case for Student Engagement

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All faculty members have heard students say, "Just tell me what is on the test!" Translated, this response generally means, "There is too much content for me to comprehend — I have a life/family/work — and I can't manage it all!" Faculty also report that students say, "I hate participating in active learning in class. I want teachers to teach me — I am not paying money to teach myself."

The goal of all nursing and health professions education is to prepare students to be safe and effective clinicians. Despite students' desire for faculty to simply "tell them what is on the test," the research related to effective learning is clear: *Student engagement improves student learning outcomes.* These outcomes typically include academic success (GPA and credit completion ratios) completion and grades in developmental and gateway courses, persistence (enrollment across time), and degree completion (McClenney, et. al., 2001).

Student engagement is most likely to occur when nursing and health professions students are completely involved in their course work and clinical experiences — when they recognize that the commitment they make as students may save a life when they are practicing. Student engagement requires effort on the student's part; yet, it is the role of faculty to provide an environment that encourages and rewards behaviors that enhance student commitment to learning.

Kuh (2003) suggests that in some teaching–learning situations, there is an unspoken "disengagement compact" generated by faculty that says "I'll leave you alone if you will leave me alone. That is, I won't make you work too hard (read a lot, write a lot), so that I won't have to grade as many papers or explain why you are not performing well." This White Paper discusses faculty strategies to disrupt the "disengagement compact" and provide an environment that encourages student engagement.
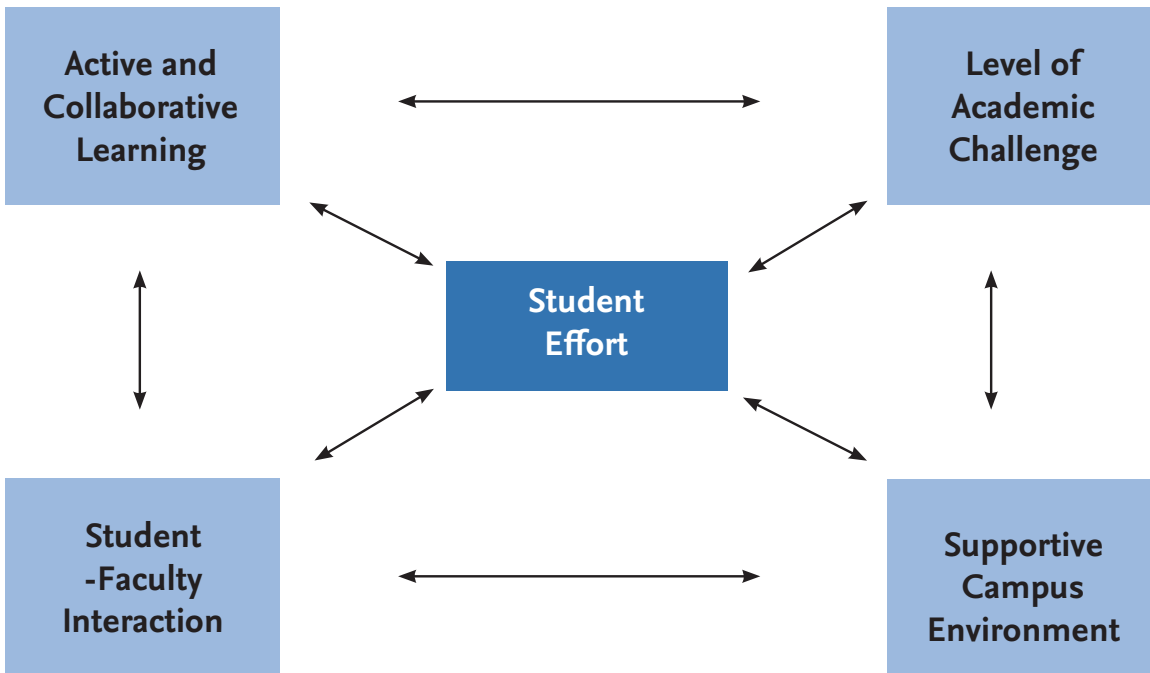
WHAT IS STUDENT ENGAGEMENT?

Student engagement occurs when students make a psychological investment in learning. They try hard to learn what the program has to offer. Students are engaged when they are involved in their studies, persist despite challenges and obstacles, and take pleasure in accomplishing their academic goals. In contrast, the most seriously disengaged student is disruptive, skips class, or fails to complete assignments. However, don't be fooled; even students who behave well in class, attend regularly, and complete their work may be disengaged. They are present in class and clinicals, but do not exhibit excitement, commitment, or pride in their work (Newmann, 1992). These are the students that faculty may have the greatest opportunity to motivate through changes in teaching-learning activities and other supports.

Factors Influencing Student Engagement

There are a number of factors that has been demonstrated to positively influence student engagement, including active and collaborative learning, level of academic challenge, student effort, student-faculty interaction, and a supportive campus environment (McClenney, et. al., 2001).

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Each of these factors influences the others, as depicted in the figure below.

Figure I: Model of Student Engagement

Adapted from: Suggested Strategies for Student Engagement by the Health and Exercise Science Division to align with the research-based conference of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement http://www2.pvc.maricopa.edu/hs/docs/ strategies_for_student_engagement.df

Active and Collaborative Learning

Active and collaborative learning seems to be the most consistent predictor of student engagement, and ultimately, positive student learning outcomes. Students are involved in active and collaborative learning when they participate in class, interact with others, and are involved with the material outside of the classroom. Students learn more when they have the opportunity to think about and apply what they are learning in a variety of settings (McClenney, et. al., 2001). For this reason, case studies, such as those published by HESI, and simulation activities are so valuable for nursing and health professions students. Box A below includes some additional ideas to encourage active and collaborative learning in both the classroom and clinical settings.

Box A: Active and Collaborative Learning Strategies

- Think-pair-share: Give students a few minutes to think and write several points about a particular topic, then turn to a partner and discuss. Share points from the discussion with the class.

- Minute papers: At the end of class, ask students to anonymously answer the following questions: "What was the most important thing you learned today?" and "What questions remain unanswered?" Answer the most frequently asked question(s) at the next class.

- Short writing activities in class: Can be used in an online or on-ground course.

- Brainstorming: Ask students a question in class and get their input. Record this on the board (can be used in an online course).

- Games

- Debates, either in person or online

- Cooperative group work

- Subject summaries: Ask students to summarize similarities and differences between methodologies, theories, opinions, or other issues.

- Assign research or independent study to encourage deep learning.

- Technology: Use web activities, clickers for answering questions, simulations, EHRs designed for students, and other technology to give students an opportunity to "act like a clinician."

- Turn to your partner: During class, ask students to turn to a partner to complete a mini- assignment together or compare notes to be sure both have all the content.

- Challenging questions: Ask challenging questions in class and give students an opportunity to debate.

- At the end of the class, ask "What are your questions?" rather than "Does anyone have questions?" to indicate that you expect questions.

- Case studies can be used as a classroom group activity, as homework, or in preparation for clinical or simulation experiences.

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Level of Academic Challenge

Level of academic challenge refers to the extent to which students engage in challenging mental activities, such as evaluation, synthesis, and creativity. Again, the use of case studies and simulations in nursing and health professions provides an opportunity for students to evaluate actual clinical situations and apply principles of care in a safe environment. In both learning activities, after putting forth their best suggestions for responding to hypothetical situations, students have an opportunity to debrief with faculty. Box B provides some suggestions for enhancing the level of academic challenge in your class.

Box B: Teaching-Learning Strategies to Enhance the Level of Academic Challenge

- Ask students to analyze ideas, experiences, or theory in small groups during class or clinical periods.
- Critique articles, protocols, and situations individually or in small groups.
- Choose textbooks and additional reading assignments that challenge students to think deeply.
- Require written papers and oral presentations individually or in small groups.
- Use teaching EHRs to prepare students to document care in a process expected by clinical agencies.

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Student Effort

Regardless of the commitment of the instructor, the student must make an effort to gain mastery of the competencies necessary in a clinical role. *Student effort* is generally seen as time on task and preparation for class, simulation, laboratory, or clinical experiences. The use of all available resources, such as tutorials, student advisement, and counseling, is also part of the effort of the student. Table C provides some suggestions for encouraging student effort.

Table C: Teaching-Learning Activities to Encourage Student Effort

- Have students complete a self-assessment that gives them information about their learning habits.
- Communicate expectations for the class and the reason for high standards (e.g., patients and employers will expect high standards).
- Require multiple drafts of a paper before it is graded to encourage more thorough work; these drafts can be reviewed by faculty and/or peers.
- Ticket to Class: Award points to students who complete some type of assignment in preparation for class.
- Require multiple references for papers.
- Expect timely submission of assignments. Identify verbally and in the syllabus the consequences of late submissions. Make no exceptions for consequences.

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Student-Faculty Interaction

The more contact students have with faculty, the more likely they are to persist toward their academic goals. Faculty members serve as role models, mentors, and guides for continuous lifelong learning. Given the multiple demands placed on faculty, the question of how much student-faculty interaction is required is important. Kuh (2003) suggests that the intent and substance of the contact is more important than the number of times the student and faculty interact. Students most appreciate having a way to get help when they "get stuck" and email access makes this easier in today's teaching environment than in the past. Most students require only 1-2 interactions a semester to feel connected to their instructors (Kuh, 2003).

The close interaction that nursing and health professions instructors have with their students in laboratory/simulation assignments and clinical experiences makes the number of times that students interact with the faculty almost moot. However, these faculty members must be sure that their interactions with students are substantive and that the interaction encourages students to devote greater effort toward their educational endeavors.

Box D provides some suggestions to make best use of the student-faculty interaction.

Box D: Suggestions to Promote Effective Student-Faculty Interactions

- Plan ice-breakers for the first day of class.
- Have students share information about themselves on the first day (past education, work experience, educational goals, etc.).
- Treat students respectfully.
- Use emails to encourage communication and provide information.
- Know your students by name (use name tents, if necessary).
- Advise students about career opportunities.
- Return exams and papers in a timely manner. Provide feedback!
- Structure classroom exercises which give students immediate feedback.
- Student discipline should be done in private. Avoid public confrontation.
- Foster open lines of communication in both directions. Be clear about expectations, but invite student feedback.
- NOTE: Provide individual student support as required, but remain within the faculty role. Refer students to other experts, for example a counselor, as necessary.

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Supportive Campus Environment

Students perform better and are more satisfied when they believe that all aspects of the institution are focused on providing student support. This is enhanced when academic and co-curricular activities are designed to encourage positive working and social relationships among different groups on campus. Although individual faculty may not have control over other components of the institution, Box E provides some suggestions for demonstrating a *supportive campus environment.*

Box E: Activities to Provide Environmental Support

- Orient students to all services upon entry to your program, and occasionally thereafter.
- Refer and encourage students to use departmental and institutional support programs, such as financial aid, counseling, and tutoring.
- Assign students to group activities that require them to work in diverse groups.
- Provide orientation to clinical, laboratory, and simulation settings before expecting students to perform.
- As students are assigned to complete particular activities, alert them to resources that can help. For example, having a librarian provide general information about library resources will encourage students to seek him or her out when they need something specific from the library.

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Ways to Measure Student Engagement

The importance of student engagement can be seen by the use of student surveys by colleges and universities as part of their organizational assessment. Box F outlines two of the most common instruments used.

Box F: Surveys to Measure Student Engagement

Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) — a survey validated for use with community college students of diverse backgrounds. Students are asked the extent to which they are involved in various markers. High scores are correlated with success in the educational program. http://nsse.iub.edu/html/about.cfm

National Student Survey on Engagement (NSSE) — a survey given to thousands of students in four-year institutions to determine student perception regarding the effort students put into their studies, the extent to which they participate in educationally purposeful activities, and impressions of how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to encourage students to participate in activities linked to student learning. http://nsse.iub.edu/html/about.cfm

Conclusion

As expectations for nursing and health professions graduates increase in concert with the continuing complexity of the health care environment, more attention must be paid to ensuring that students are prepared to use higher order thinking skills (application, evaluation, synthesis) in the clinical environment. Implementing strategies to encourage student engagement plays a pivotal role in preparing students for this type of scholarship, and ultimately, for practice now and in the future.

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