

Analysis of Engagement Methods in the College Classroom Post Pandemic

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Abstract : College enrollment is declining and generation Z, today's college students, are struggling. Before the pandemic, researchers characterized this generational cohort as unique. Gen Z has been called the most achievement-oriented generation, as they enjoy greater economic status, are more racially and ethnically diverse, and better educated than any other generation. However, they are also the most likely generation to suffer from depression and anxiety. Gen Z has grown up largely with usually well-intentioned but overprotective parents who inadvertently kept them from learning life skills, likely impacting their ability to cope with and to effectively manage challenges. The unprecedented challenges resulting from the pandemic up ended their world and left them emotionally reeling. One of the ramifications of this for higher education is how to reengage current Gen Z students in the classroom. This research presents qualitative findings from 24 single-spaced pages of verbatim comments from college students. Research questions concerned what helps them learn and what they abhor, as well as how to engage them with the university outside of the classroom to aid in retention. Students leave little doubt about what they want to experience in the classroom. In order of mention, students want discussion, to engage with questions, to hear how a topic relates to real life and the real world, to feel connections with the professor and fellow students, and to have an opportunity to give their opinions. They prefer a classroom that involves conversation, with interesting topics and active learning. "professor talks instead of lecturing" "professor builds a connection with the classroom" "I am engaged because it feels like a respectful conversation" Similarly, students are direct about what they dislike in a classroom. In order of frequency, students dislike teachers unenthusiastically reading word or word from notes or presentations, repeating the text without adding examples, or addressing how to apply the information. "All lecture. I can read the book myself" "Not taught how to apply the skill or lesson" "Lectures the entire time. Lesson goes in one ear and out the other." Pertaining to engagement outside the classroom, Gen Z challenges higher education to step outside the box. They don't want to just hear from professionals in their field, they want to meet and interact with them. Perhaps because of their dependence on technology and pandemic isolation, they seem to reach out for assistance in forming social bonds. "I believe fun and social events are the best way to connect with students and get them involved. Cookouts, raffles, socials, or networking events would all most likely appeal to many students". "Events... even if they aren't directly related to learning. Maybe like movie nights... doing meet ups at restaurants". Qualitative research suggests strategy. This research is rife with strategic implications to improve learning, increase engagement and reduce drop-out rates among Generation Z higher education students. It also compliments existing research on student engagement. With college enrollment declining by some 1.3 million students over the last two years, this research is both timely and important.

Keywords : college enrollment, generation Z, higher education, pandemic, student engagement

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