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## Engaging Student Disengagement

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## Engaging Student Disengagement

I began this paper annoyed. Student disengagement is a byproduct of insolence. At least, that is what I assumed. When I go to class, students rarely speak up; they use their electronic devices and/or talk amongst themselves. My classmates seem to not care about their education and have little interest in learning. In my Western Civilization class, I am constantly distracted by a boy who watches films on his laptop in front of me. Why does he even bother coming? It is degrading to the value of my education. It is disrespectful, not only to their peers, but the faculty as well. That was my thought process when I began my paper. However, I quickly became ashamed of my ignorance. After researching the causes of disengagement, I became empathetic towards the apathetic. My research revealed that students become disengaged as a result of low self-esteem, lack of encouragement, and a sense of purposelessness. While a classroom cannot supplement support from home, students at Germanna should provide encouragement to their peers and form relationships with one another.

### Clarification

A *disengaged* student is characterized by apathy that presents in many different forms. An authoritative definition of a disengaged student is found in Ernest Boyer's definition of an engaged scholarship, as relayed in Kajner and Shultz's (2013) work published in *Comparative and International Education*. He stated that engaged scholarship is, "collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in the context of partnership and reciprocity" (p. 2). Kajner and Shultz went on to claim that an engaged student actively participates in the exchange of ideas in the classroom and has a personal interest in learning (pp. 1-2). It follows, that

disengaged students are not unconcerned with their personal development in a classroom setting. These are stereotypical under-achievers. Much of the disengaged student populous is mistakenly branded as disruptive, rebellious, and occasionally shy.

### **Pervasiveness**

Every school has a disengaged population of students; however, some schools are prone to a larger percentage of disengaged students. Washer and Mojkowski's article (2014), "Student Disengagement: It's deeper than you think," outlined that schools in low-income and rural communities are often bogged down with students failing to meet expectations. The same article detailed President Obama's 2009 and 2013 speeches that addressed the issue of drop-out rates which are often a direct consequence of disengagement, as revealed Blondal and Adalbjarnardottir's study in *The Scandanavian Journal of Education Research* (2012, pp. 85-100). In his speech, the president also cited the fact that over 1.3 million high school students drop out each year. Washer and Mojkowski went on to outline the pervasiveness and scale of disengagement as a worry throughout the nation (pp. 8-10). Disengagement is clearly engaging the masses.

### **Within the Virginia Community College System**

By nature, Germanna caters to diverse demographics. Sometimes it is more challenging to connect to students at a 2-year community college than a traditional 4-year institution. Consequently, disengagement has permeated Germanna. Donna Alexander, a Student Success Coach whose job focuses solely on engaging students, bluntly stated that disengagement is rampant. She explained that the student population at community colleges, Germanna included,

is transient and many of the students have to balance work, families, and personal difficulties; school is not a priority for them (D. Alexander, personal communication, February 18, 2016). When I first entered the Virginia Community College System, or VCCS, as a dual-enrolled 15-year-old junior in high school, I did not have much empathy because I could not understand my fellow classmates' struggles. In fact, most college students who have been gifted with the opportunity to attend a 4-year university straight out of high-school would not understand this burden. Recently though, I began to work and even under the stress of a part-time job alone, I found myself detached from the student population and I was no longer able to attend the clubs and extracurricular I once had enjoyed. Many community college students have much more than simply a part-time job. The students that Germanna and VCCS serve are often distracted and earnestly to finishing their degree. Disengagement is a unique challenge that community colleges engage.

### **Causes**

Aside from prioritizing, many factors affect the investment a student has in their education, but there are two prominent genera of indicators: home and school interactions. A famous maxim states: home is where the heart is. Students are profoundly influenced by the people, places, and events of their childhood. If a student approaches an obstacle at home, that obstacle translates to an impediment for succeeding in academics. Four specific circumstances that originate at home and are shown to directly correlate to a student's level of involvement in academics: encouragement, purpose, peer interactions, and self-esteem.

## Motivation

Most successful students owe credit to people in their lives who have encouraged and supported them, but many households either neglect children or undervalue their students' education. This treatment may seem archaic, but it is prevalent. A highly localized study done by Katie Hendrickson (2012) for *The High School Journal* in Rural Appalachia revealed that when parental and academic values are disparate, students tend to follow a parent's instruction. In the study, many parents emphasized vocational education to their children without regarding that a full education is often a precursor to success, despite trade (pp. 27-39). If parents have not emphasized the value education to their student, the student might not finish their education unless presented with an alternative role model. Receiving positive reinforcement and support is an important element of encouragement. At Germanna Community College, there are strong individuals who often find themselves providing support to others. Reciprocally, students need encouragement and on challenge is providing enough encouragement to accomplish a task as great as graduating college.

Another root of the weed of disengagement is purposelessness. Many people are goal-oriented. When a child does not have any dreams or inspiration, he or she becomes indifferent. If he or she has no goals or the goals do not correlate to school, he or she might not have motivation to be engaged in the student population. Donna Alexander (personal communication, February 18, 2016) expressed her sentiments on this by stating, "Where there's no purpose, there's no passion." Many times she had seen students come to her office without a goal and performing poorly in academics, but when she sat down with them and gave guidance or found their inspiration they set out to raise their grades or reprioritize.

### **Academic Interactions**

The eternally persistent consequences of negative peer influences apply to the issue of student disengagement as well. A student faced with a lack of social and academic encouragement often will struggle to focus on school. In an investigation done by Shields and McGinn (2011) for *Teaching in Higher Education*, after following 15 students through their journey in a 4-year institution they found many students who experienced marginalization and began to be less concentrated on school and achievement (pp. 471-482). At community colleges, most students are, hopefully, mature enough to not ostracize each other. Nonetheless, marginalization is a common occurrence. Alexander (personal communication, February 18, 2016) expressed the fact that students' responsibilities make them less inclined to interact and become a part of a "student body." Since students are rarely there for more than two years they have a decreased likelihood of "fitting in or "belonging," especially students that are more shy.

### **Self-Esteem**

Lastly, a student may have encouragement and purpose, but still feel inadequate. Low self-esteem leads a student to feel worthless. Self-esteem issues may be a result of puberty, a lack of home encouragement or abuse at home, bullying, or an underlying mental illness. DeCastella, Byrne, and Covington (2016) published an authoritative study in *The Journal of Educational Psychology* that assessed psychological reasons for disengagement. From a sample of 1,423 Japanese students and 643 Australian students, they found that fear of failure and low self-worth makes students use disengagement as a maladaptive self-protective strategy in the classroom (2016, pp. 861-880). Once again this relates to Germanna and community colleges. Their reputation was built upon accessibility. The bridges of accommodation and counseling services

they extend to the mentally ill are unrivaled by private 4-year institutions. Subsequently, the percentage of students struggling with mental illness and learning disabilities attending community college are marginally higher than comparable institutions.

### **How Do the Students Feel?**

With this background, I progressed through the process of writing an essay. In class one day, we split up to discuss our paper topics. Understandably, I was nervous. My topic was about fellow classmates and their struggles. This was not a problem I had personally dealt with, so I was unsure of how my presentation of it would be received. Nevertheless, my classmates were enthusiastic to acknowledge this issue. There seemed to be a consensus that this attitude is pervasive in the classroom, but there was a missing link. Students acknowledged this problem, but no one would claim to be disengaged. It took me awhile to realize the disconnect was in definition. As I spoke to more close friends about my topic, they pointed out to me that they consider disengagement to be blatantly disruptful behavior in the classroom, such as using electronics in class or chatting in the back. My friends were unconcerned with other students not participating and simply attempting to get good grades. Conversely, scholastic sources and I see education as more than a passing grade. Only if students actively participate, can education enrich their life. Learning is done through discussion after the teacher has left the classroom. Socrates explained this when he stated, “Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.”

If Socrates addressed it, clearly student disengagement is not a new concern. Though, that does not require passivity. Disengagement is detrimental to society. When students are apathetic and accomplish little, it often results in discontentment. Giving students tools and inspiration for

life is essential for a society that flourishes, an economy that grows, technology that advances, and research that heals.

### **The Impact on Society**

Furthermore, disengagement does not only affect the disengaged. Aurich's (2012) dissertation, *Academic integrity, academic sabotage, and moral disengagement*, showed how a disengaged population harms hardworking students by correlating disengagement to sabotage and cheating in college. Secondly, Washor and Mojkowski's (2014) correlation between drop-out rates and disengagement showed how disengagement leads to a less highly-skilled workforce (2014, pp. 8-10). Lastly, DeCastella, Byrne, and Covington's (2016) research has shown through their explanation of disengagement as a self-protective strategy, that unaddressed disengagement is unaddressed mental illness (pp. 861-880). Sabotage and cheating, underachieving, and mental illness are harmful reciprocal impacts of disengagement. By addressing engagement, one more factor contributing to these pervasive pandemics can be alleviated.

### **Progress**

There are many simple solutions to implement to alleviate the pressures that cause disengagement. Despite the initial cause of disengagement being familial, schools have ultimately been entrusted to tackle this problem. A school system that runs effectively can easily implement reforms to solve this conundrum. Ms. Alexander listed efforts that the Virginia Community College System has in place to combat disengagement. The Student Success Institute is particularly devoted to this concern. The Institute focuses on and even collects research about the most efficient way to aid Virginia Community College students. VCCS also

has a range of counseling and accommodation services that are aimed at addressing the mental health aspect of engagement. Student activity services aim to build a sense of community in a transient student population in order to help students make school a priority. Lastly, there are tutoring services for students that might otherwise not finish their degree. (D. Alexander, personal communication, February 18, 2016) All of these organizations and elements engage students and enrich their college experience.

### **Efforts Succeed**

Attempts like the VCCS's make a difference. An anonymous student on *BacktoCollege.com*, shared her story to show how successful a student can be when they are engaged and surrounded by encouraging classmates. "P" decided to go back to college and began with one, week-long course. In the course, her instructor had told the class to keep a journal and sketch every organism they saw. P described her engagement by stating, "Even though I can only draw stick figures, I pretended I was an artist during class and I drew everything in sight. I told myself not to be afraid!" ("Going Back," n.d.). Later on in her story, she told how the other students encouraged and supported her by helping her down a cliff. She explained that their supportive actions and enthusiasm encouraged her through the rest of her college experience. Then P stated that her life is enriched because of college and that she graduated with a 3.9 GPA. There are many students like P that, when given the right attitude and supportive class, accomplish while still attending to other responsibilities and obstacles.

The general population will never teach a classroom. The school institutions endeavor to engage students, but they cannot force students to care. Support and emotional encouragement are potent weapons against disengagement. Simply talk to a student. Ask her how school is

going. Most importantly, make sure she never gives up. If students remain apathetic, advancement slows. As sappy as it may sound, invest in the future by investing in a student. Remember that empathy spreads faster than apathy.

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