

Motivating Today's College Students

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With an early December wind chill topping out at eleven degrees and the setting sun quickly fading behind the carillon of our campus chapel, it may seem like a strange time to contemplate student motivation on our small Midwestern campus of Elmhurst College. Yet, as we observe the initiative, dedication, and persistence of the eight undergraduate students who have spent the past three hours lining our campus walkways with one thousand luminaries, we wonder why these students are so dedicated and others are not. At a time in the academic year when most students' motivation for learning and involvement has shifted from inquisitive exploration to exhausted survival, the members of the Walk for Hope steering committee are inspired by and dedicated to their task of placing the paper bag luminaries, each sponsored by a community member to raise money for the American Cancer Society. Are these students motivated to raise money for a good cause or to surpass the amount last year's steering committee raised? Perhaps it's the opportunity to do something with their immediate group of friends or do something to invoke the pride of their family? Little separates these students from today's average undergraduate. Yet, at this moment they exhibit what seems an increasingly scarce resource desperately sought by faculty and student affairs administrators nationwide, a trait that fuels academic success, engagement, and learning: student motivation.

Conversations with faculty and staff colleagues at small private and large public institutions over the last several years have echoed themes of frustration concerning the need to compete for students' time and attention. Students appear to spend hours surfing Web

sites, hanging out in groups, and updating their Facebook sites. They compete for multiple leadership positions from which they often fail to gain all they could because few focus fully on their responsibilities. They forfeit deeper engagement in academic research to earn minimum wage at a retail store in a nearby mall.

Identifying Student Needs

Whether you believe the characteristics commonly attributed to the Millennial Generation or not, it is clear that the manner in which students are motivated to engage in higher education has been changing and will continue to change rapidly. The priority students affix to their education is too often usurped by increasingly demanding and time-intensive life priorities such as work, family, or emotional/psychological needs. Many members of this generation of students continue to live in an age of convenience and consumption. A college education has become commodified, understood as yet another acquisition to be made rather than a process in which you engage. Yet, as the Association of American Colleges and Universities describes in *Greater Expectations* (AAC&U 2002), students need to become intentional architects of their own learning, actively setting goals, exploring, reflecting, and integrating acquired knowledge and experiences into existing worldviews. In today's environment of convenience and consumption, how can students be persuaded to move beyond "commodity" thinking and fully engage both in and out of the classroom in activities that enhance their learning? How can they be inspired to become immersed in learning?

Elmhurst College is a small liberal arts college, but its student body defies easy classification. Each fall, the college attracts a first-year class of approximately five hundred, approximately three hundred transfer students, and a number of adult students. Over 50 percent of students live off campus and many work at least one job. Because very different reasons underlie students' decision to enroll at Elmhurst, inspiring student success and learning requires understanding motivation from a variety of perspectives. In fact, when we discuss student motivation, what we are really talking about is whether or not students have made educational activities a true priority: whether they have chosen to fully invest their time and energy in their college experience. Likewise, once students do demonstrate motivation, we are interested in understanding this commitment itself. How do they take initiative, apply effort, persist to overcome obstacles, and, ideally, reflect on their accomplishment once they have succeeded?

When we consider the motivation of undergraduates, it is important to consider characteristics commonly attributed to this generation of traditional-age students. Respecting the power of relationships is critical to student motivation. Today's students appear to be the recipients of a great deal of family involvement and attention, and it is not unusual for the expectation of this involvement to continue after they enroll in college. Many students continue to have regular, sometimes daily contact with their par-

ents, calling to provide updates or seek consultation on even minor decisions. While partnering with students' families, particularly the notoriously labeled "helicopter parents," may invite a loss of student autonomy, we have found that strategic, carefully crafted invitations that enlist limited parental support serve us well. We have begun to provide a consistent message to families during the admissions, advising, and orientation process, linking student success to the appropriate use of time, and urging the family members to support student initiative and responsibility in the process of learning. Families are also frequently invited to help students overcome obstacles. We honor the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act restriction on

both of these instances, we employ the student's relationship with his or her family to help make learning a priority.

Finally, we have, on more than one occasion, wondered if students transfer the expectation of involvement with their parents to the college. Are they expecting the same kind of support or parenting from faculty and staff? Frequent communication and an engaged academic adviser or student organization adviser are among the keys to maintaining student initiative and effort.

Motivating Millennial Generation Students

We have also become aware that students increasingly seek someone to provide structure, direction, and praise in a way

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sharing specific student information, but we enlist family members' help by educating them about campus resources, such as our Learning Center and Counseling Center, and we encourage them to talk to their children about taking advantage of the services available. In

previous generations of students did not. Today's students often ask what to do before thinking through their own plans. It seems they want things to be fixed or done so they can move on to the next project. We have found that the most successful advising style has been to ask questions

that lead students to formulate their own ideas. Whether in the classroom or in a leadership experience outside of class, this use of inquiry forces students to make the educational experience their own by requiring that they reflect on the challenge at hand and develop a solution of their own. The energy generated by these students' realization motivates them to take action where providing the answer would not.

At Elmhurst and across the country, today's undergraduates are very accustomed to group activity. We have seen a trend over the last few years toward copresidents or leadership teams. Students still compete to be the president of an organization or the editor of a publication, but it seems they do not want to be alone with their responsibility. Our students are generally very peer-network oriented, preferring to work and socialize in groups. Capitalizing on this preference for group activity to promote motivation is challenging, but not impossible.

One simple way to encourage greater motivation is to use a student's relationship with the group to focus his or her attention. For example, the student leaders in our Student Government Association (SGA) appear significantly affected by the evaluations of their peers. Each semester, staff advisers of SGA administer a standardized peer evaluation, asking group members to rate their leaders' commitment, knowledge, and performance. The results serve to pro-

voke the leaders to apply effort to improve and stimulate reflection about what they are learning from their leadership experience. Ultimately, relational techniques that were successful in increasing initiative for students from previous generations must be even more personalized today.



Increasingly critical to student motivation is an informed perspective on the diversity of students. For example, many campuses traditionally have held overnight or weekend retreats as a way to get students away from the day-to-day activities to begin to develop as a team and focus on their group and responsibilities. However, for students who are not

comfortable staying away from home overnight for reasons involving disabilities or cultural values, this may not be a viable option. Because of increasing student diversity, it is critical for staff and faculty to know their student population well enough to know what unique obstacles and incentives may inspire or discourage motivation.

Many students come to Elmhurst accustomed to a frantic schedule of academic, work, and cocurricular activities. Students often continue to maintain these busy schedules in college, sometimes from dawn until well after midnight, moving from class to student organization meetings to on- or off-campus work. While these students' frenzied schedules may create the impression that they are highly engaged in their college experience, in fact some students have created a rigid compartmentalization of many seemingly disconnected experiences. Rather than expend the time necessary to encounter new ideas, reflect, and make connections with their existing worldview, many of our students carefully budget the minimum amount of time necessary to allow them to achieve the grades they desire while fitting in as many other activities as they possibly can. As a result, students sometimes end up overwhelmed when something in their schedules shifts unexpectedly. But we can help students be more sensitive to how they use their time, and in turn, help them use their

time to immerse themselves more fully in the experience of learning. For example, by scheduling regular, brief one-on-one meetings with the student leaders, we are able to compel them to stop and reflect, refocus, and connect. In this sense, we hope that the disconnected parade of class, work, and cocurricular activities can begin to dissolve into a more seamless educational experience.

One generational characteristic we have observed in many students is a significant achievement orientation. However, while students may want good grades for graduate school admission, too often they may not want to focus on learning what they need to be successful in graduate school. They may have long lists of honors, awards, and leadership positions in clubs without understanding that what they have learned in their positions (i.e., public speaking, critical thinking, or intercultural awareness) is what will make them successful. If they cannot articulate what they learned in the organizations listed on their resumes, they will not get the jobs or have the skills the employer is expecting. One technique we've found to be successful in provoking greater effort and reflection involves a tool often used in the classroom—persistent inquiry. By asking questions, we check students' assumptions and often provide them with helpful information about getting a job.

Engagement through Experiential Opportunities

In our work with students such as those from the Walk for Hope steering com-

mittee, we advance an educational, or developmental, agenda through the use of experiential opportunities and education. Much like service learning, experiential education allows for increased educational outcomes. Experiential learning is particularly useful for this generation, which exhibits a much higher sensitivity to issues related to social justice and a marked desire to do good. It is not unusual for us to be able to appeal to an individual student's philanthropic orientation to inspire initiative. When we are able to help students see that a project in which they are involved—such as planning a lecture on the impact of fair-trade coffee—is achieving a greater good, they are much more inclined to persist until the project is complete. We believe this is due in part to this generation's response to 9/11 and tragedy they have seen during their lifetime.

This generation of college students has been raised on interactive technology and entertainment-style communication. We have been told by our students that straight lectures or PowerPoint presentations rarely hold their attention. Experiences that involve students and require them to interact as a part of their own learning are more likely to maintain their interest.

Finally, one timeless aspect of out-of-class education that can provoke a great deal of initiative and encourage persistence is reality, and the realistic dangers of failure. It is critical to help students understand the realistic, albeit sometimes indirect, steps between the

generally comfortable routine of college life and the upsetting reality of failure, whether it manifests itself in diminished prospects for employment, disappointed family members, or a failure to raise as much money for a philanthropy as the group the year before. By helping students see—perhaps for the first time in their lives—that the work in which they are engaged is meaningful work that is important for them to accomplish, we can help students take the initiative, avoid failure, and learn.

In 1954, when Abraham Maslow attempted to organize human motivation in the hierarchy of needs, Facebook was not an obstacle to self-actualization. But just as the society challenges educators to think of innovative ways to inspire students to take initiative and persist to success despite their daily distractions, so too does it provide new avenues to promote learning. While placing one thousand luminaries on a bone chilling night may, at first, appear daunting, the persistence of these students illustrates that student engagement is often the first step on the path to student motivation. ■

Reference

Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2002. *Greater expectations: A new vision for learning as a nation goes to college*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.