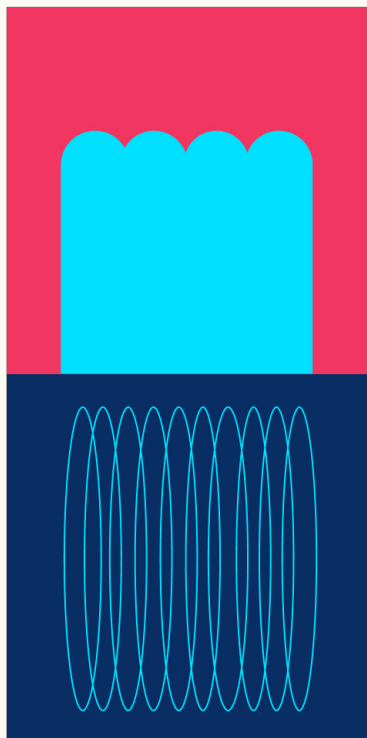


# Defining student engagement:

The search for higher education's most elusive success metric



# Table of contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>03</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>04</b>
<b>A brief history of student engagement</b>	<b>06</b>
<b>Where we are now</b>	<b>09</b>
<b>Building a shared definition</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>17</b>

# Foreword

**Michael Meotti**

Executive Director, Washington Student Achievement Council

---

We all remember what it feels like to be a student who's engaged in an educational experience. It's hard to put into words, and everyone feels it differently. Maybe you're sitting bolt upright in your chair, attending carefully to every word your instructor says. Maybe you're scribbling furiously in a notebook to make sure you capture every nuance of an inspiring discussion. Maybe you're sitting at your desk at home, stewing for hours over the exact right word choice for the end of your essay — and loving every minute of it.

The beauty of student engagement is in the myriad and diverse ways it can happen. No two students engage in exactly the same way, but you know it when you see it. However, as is so often the case, the same things that make student engagement so beautiful also present significant challenges.

Engagement is hard to define. That's particularly true for institutional leaders who have to understand what engagement looks like for large cohorts of students — sometimes tens of thousands of individuals at the same time. Each one has unique aspirations and challenges that define their higher education experience. They each have their own styles of engaging in their education, from late-night study groups to thousand-word discussion posts to twice-weekly visits to a professor's office hours.

And, as an increasing amount of research suggests, a student's level of engagement has a direct relationship with their likelihood to persist in their education, complete their degree, and go on to live a fulfilling and prosperous life. My experiences in higher education showed me that engagement is a necessary part of every college's efforts to build stronger relationships with students — the sort of relationships that, when maintained and cultivated, are the foundation of both student and institutional success.

Of course, that means understanding engagement is of paramount importance for all of us who work in higher education. If we can map the factors that help students engage, and intervene to get them back on track when they disengage, we may be able to make the difference between completing college and stopping short. But is it even possible to understand the incalculable number of factors that inspire tens of thousands of students to work hard, build relationships, and progress to the next step in their educational journey?

We may never know the answer to that question.

We are starting to ask it in new and different ways, though, and that's an important step in the right direction. Emerging technologies are helping schools **listen to their students** at scale, and providing a window into their day-to-day challenges — and successes. That hasn't historically been possible. As a result, colleges and universities are realigning themselves around engagement and student success to more deeply incorporate those principles across all levels of the institution. There's an increasing recognition that student engagement should take into account factors both in and outside of the classroom — and that recognizing it as a priority can have tremendous implications for student success.

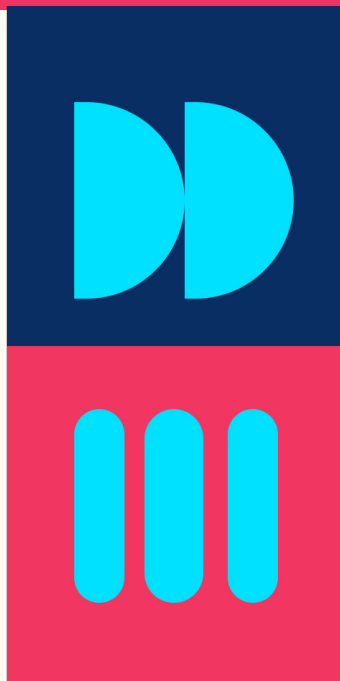
The goal of this paper is to help institutional leaders, policymakers, and other stakeholders keep asking hard questions about student engagement. It's not designed to be a comprehensive overview of that topic, but rather a contribution to an ongoing discussion that is among the most important in the higher education community today. We hope it serves as a useful resource for your critical conversation about how higher education can best meet the needs of students in a rapidly changing world.

# Introduction:

---

What we talk about when we talk about student engagement

---



# “Student engagement is no longer a buzzword. It’s part of the lexicon in higher education,” says Dr. George Kuh, Chancellor’s Professor Emeritus of Higher Education at Indiana University.

---

Over the past two decades, student engagement has **emerged** as a top priority for higher education leaders and decision-makers. A combination of research, anecdotal evidence, and lived experience has reinforced the idea that fostering engagement in the college experience is a necessary part of institutions’ efforts to boost persistence, retention, and completion. Recently, researchers and institutions have focused more squarely on how the concept of **belonging impacts engagement**, and ultimately retention, for traditionally underrepresented students — those from low-income backgrounds, first-generation college-goers, and those who are Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other students of color.

“The absence of engagement is what we really notice,” says Kevin Kruger, president of NASPA. “The student who doesn’t have a connection to somebody, or isn’t involved in an activity. Unless they have real, innate academic abilities, they’re going to struggle and fall through the cracks.”

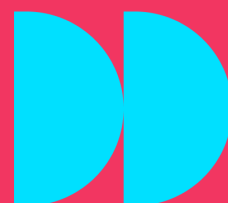
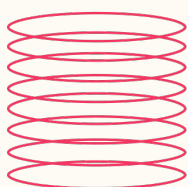
Engagement is clearly critical to student success. Unfortunately, as with so many ideas that begin as neologisms and quickly become overused, the term is not as well-defined or as well-understood as proponents might imagine. Does “student engagement” mean participating in class? Does it mean visiting tutoring or counseling centers? Attending study groups? Does it have to be strictly academic, or can it also mean showing up at football games and

tailgating with classmates? What does good student engagement look like, and — perhaps most importantly — how can we measure if we’re doing it well?

It’s hard to disagree that “engagement,” however it may be defined, should be a priority for colleges and universities. Still, a lack of clarity around how to define engagement can, and often does, lead institutions to invest in approaches that are not ideally suited for their **student success objectives**.

The goal of this paper is not to prescribe a definition of student engagement or to supersede existing research. Rather, we hope to clarify the conversation and spark an ongoing discussion about what we talk about when we talk about student engagement. The goal is to help institutions better understand what types of engagement matter most for their students, and have the greatest potential to keep them connected and on track to graduate, and set them up for success after college. After all, engagement is ultimately a means to a greater end: Sending students of all backgrounds out into the world prepared for meaningful work and lives.

# A brief history of student engagement



# The term “student engagement” is ubiquitous these days, but even just 20 years ago, it wasn’t much discussed.

---

In the words of Indiana University’s Dr. George Kuh, “I suspect if you went back to popular media and looked at articles pre-2000 for the term ‘student engagement,’ you wouldn’t find much, if anything.” A quick [Google Ngram search](#) proves the point.

The ideas and principles underpinning student engagement have been around for much longer, though. Alexander Astin, a clinical psychologist and professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, first introduced the influential “**theory of involvement**” in the mid-1980s. In Astin’s formulation:

“Quite simply, student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. Thus, a highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students. Conversely, a typical uninvolved student neglects studies, spends little time on campus, abstains from extracurricular activities, and has infrequent contact with faculty members or other students.”

Even in this early conception, Astin identified some of the tensions that are inherent in a theory of engagement, or what he refers to as “involvement.” Those include:

- **It’s not black and white.** As Astin put it, student engagement “occurs along a continuum.”

Each student can manifest different levels of involvement in a given activity at a given time.

- **It’s both quantitative and qualitative.** Astin provides the compelling example of study time: It’s possible to measure how many hours a student spends studying, but equally — if not more — important to understand how many of those hours were spent in active concentration, and how many were spent daydreaming. This give-and-take remains an inextricable part of student engagement research.

Crucially, Astin also hypothesized that there was a direct relationship between student involvement and academic performance. That is, his idea of student involvement relied on the idea that increasing involvement, in both qualitative and quantitative ways, would result in a corresponding increase in academic performance.

Since then, a body of research has sought to refine Astin’s theory and put it into practice. Indiana University’s **National Survey of Student Engagement**, or NSSE, began in 2000 as a way to capture real-time information on student engagement, directly from students. A fixture on many campuses today, it began with a cohort of about 275 institutions.

The goal, says Dr. George Kuh, founding director of the survey and a professor at Indiana University, was to mitigate the rise in popularity of college rankings. “People glommed onto those rankings as if

---

they actually meant something in terms of the quality of undergraduate education,” says Dr. Kuh. “But the rankings were clearly about what institutions have — its resources which are easy to measure (number of faculty with terminal degrees, student SAT scores) — as contrasted with what really matters to collegiate quality, which is what students do with those resources.”

The hope of a student engagement survey was to help both higher education institutions and their students measure the experience of campus life itself. NSSE and similar surveys, like the **Community College Survey of Student Engagement** (started in 2001), use what might be considered a more focused definition of student engagement than Alexander Astin’s original concept.

As Dr. Kuh explains, the NSSE defines engagement as “Quality of effort directed to educationally purposeful activities.” Under this formulation, other types of interaction — such as getting help completing the FAFSA or connecting with counseling and health services — do not qualify as student engagement, strictly speaking. While they are universally acknowledged as essential to facilitating student learning, not to mention persistence and completion, they fall outside the NSSE definition of engagement.

Approximately 6 million students have taken the NSSE over the past two decades. Participating institutions receive a **snapshot of student responses**. These are designed to help administrators understand the amount of time and effort that students put into “educationally purposeful” activities, as well as the ways in which the institution’s courses and resources facilitate students’ participation in activities that support learning.

The survey — and the broader focus on student engagement over the past 20 years — has given rise to new approaches to academic advising and helped fuel the growth of first-year experiences. It has been influential in both the civic engagement movement and in institutions’ increased focus on project-based and experiential learning. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the NSSE has also helped institutions understand **how students have responded**

---

to the shifting landscape of **remote learning**.

In the two decades since the NSSE first launched, student engagement has quickly become thought of as a linchpin in any efforts to advance student success. It’s the subject of conferences and **panels, books, and research studies**. It’s frequently raised as a top priority by institutional leaders looking to help more students persist and succeed.

At some of the country’s more forward-thinking institutions, the NSSE has been integral in shaping institutional infrastructure. When Allison Calhoun-Brown joined what was then called the “student life” division at Georgia State University, she and her colleagues quickly changed the name to “student engagement.” Calhoun-Brown and her team recognized that the department, which housed a variety of services from housing to career advising to extracurricular and peer-led activities, was responsible for many of the non-academic factors that make students more likely to **feel supported by their institution** — and, in turn, more likely to stay enrolled.

“Student engagement is broader than [student life],” Calhoun-Brown told us, “but we wanted the name of the department to be something aspirational that reflected what we were trying to accomplish as an institution both inside and outside the classroom.”

As interest in student engagement has grown, so too have questions about how to foster it on campus — and, in turn, concerns about just how expansively to define engagement.

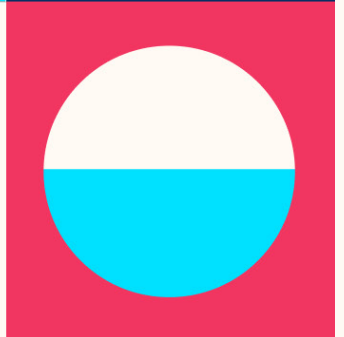
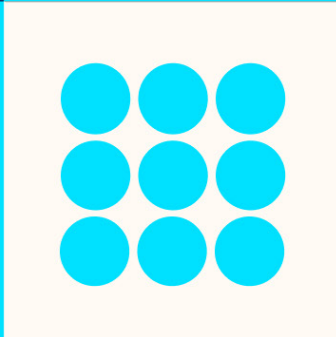
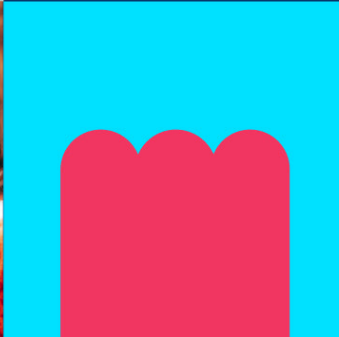
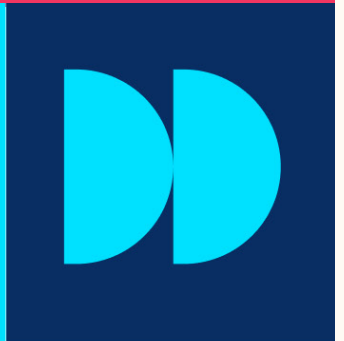
“**Student engagement is broader than [student life]**”

**Allison Calhoun-Brown**

Sr. Vice President for Student Success and Chief Enrollment Officer, Georgia State University



# Where we are now



## “The pandemic has redefined student engagement,” says Ulisa Bowles, Executive Director of Admissions at Fayetteville State University in North Carolina.

---

“There’s a clear line of demarcation between what it was and what it is — and institutions have needed to expand and be creative.”

Bowles’ sentiment is one felt at campuses across the country. The sudden shift to remote learning last spring forced many colleges and universities to reconsider what it means to engage with students, and the conversation is far from over. “In many ways, the pandemic accelerated what was already happening,” according to Elizabeth Adams, Associate Vice President of Undergraduate Studies at California State University, Northridge. “There’s an increased awareness, especially at institutions like ours, that the ‘we’ve built it, you come to us’ thing was failing a lot of students, and specifically those who are first-generation or come from low-income households.”

As a result, the pandemic has brought a heightened sense of responsibility for institutions to invest in the sort of engagement that occurs outside the classroom. “If a student is food insecure, or if they don’t have transportation, or if they have to work extra because someone else in the family lost their job, their academic experience will be affected,” says Adams. “That means we need to take a step back and really look at a much more holistic approach to the student.”

At the same time, the turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has also come up against the shifting demographics of students themselves. Today, what was once called **“nontraditional” learners are becoming**

**a majority** of college students (ie., those who are older than 18-22, or balance work and family commitments along with part-time studies). At the same time, students who arrive in college directly from high school **expect a level of digital engagement** that many colleges are still adapting to.

As Carol Rava, Deputy Director of the college access nonprofit GetSchooled, put it, “We switched our view of engagement in part because we saw what young people were doing. What equals engagement with information has changed over the past 10 years. Is a student watching TikTok videos about FAFSA or tips to find a summer job? In many cases, that’s a win.”

In short, the current state of student engagement is typified by change. Shifting priorities, the rise of remote learning, and the needs of a new generation of learners will likely continue to shape the landscape of student engagement for years to come. What that looks like in practice, of course, will be the subject of ongoing discussion.

### The rise of the “Student Engagement Platform”

It won’t surprise anyone in the education technology community to learn that even before the pandemic, interest in student engagement has corresponded with the advent of the so-called student engagement platform. A raft of apps, tools, and technologies purport to boost student engagement in ways that can

---

help institutions achieve their **desired outcomes at every point throughout the student lifecycle.**

Many of these platforms stray outside the bounds of existing definitions of engagement, however. As a result, they may actually contribute to increased confusion about what “student engagement” actually means — in ways that may hinder institutions’ efforts, instead of helping them.

A cursory search of “student engagement platforms” turns up tools that help students check into and review campus events, provide data and analytics for student affairs professionals, push real-time questions and activities to students’ devices during lectures, and more. That’s an awfully wide range of tools that all lay claim to a single category of education technology. Do all of them **foster actual student engagement.** Certainly some of them do, so how can you evaluate which platform will align best with **your institution’s student engagement needs and objectives?**

Without a clear, shared definition of student engagement, we may not be able to answer that question. So, what might such a definition look like?

---

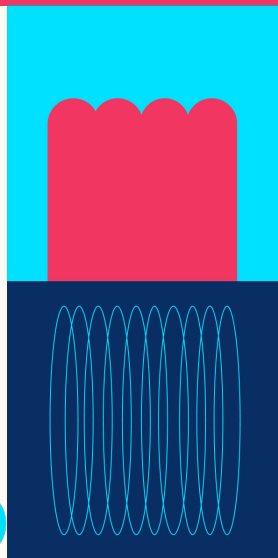
“If a student is food insecure, or if they don’t have transportation, or if they have to work extra because someone else in the family lost their job, their academic experience will be affected.”

**Elizabeth Adams**

Associate Vice President of Undergraduate Studies  
California State University, Northridge



# Building a shared definition



# Before exploring a potential definition, it's worth reiterating that the goal of this paper is not to prescribe a universal meaning for the term “student engagement.”

---

Academic researchers have been working to do that for nearly 40 years.

Rather, the objective is to help administrators and decision-makers understand how to apply the building blocks of student engagement to the context of their own institution. Doing so will enable them to make better decisions about the approaches and strategies they can execute to successfully engage their unique student body. Let's explore those building blocks of a shared definition for student engagement, as well as the outstanding questions that institutional leaders should ask themselves as they consider their own definitions.

## The building blocks

### Involvement

Alexander Astin's original term, “involvement,” is perhaps still the most fundamental part of any definition of student engagement. At its core, engagement has to do with how students are spending their time — and, more specifically, how much of that time is devoted to activities that help them succeed both in and out of the classroom.

### Quality of effort

Of course, not all time is spent the same. The quality of effort, or the depth of engagement, matters. A student may be physically present in class, but their mind may be elsewhere. Similarly, they might spend hours in the library studying, but be constantly off-task or focusing on rote memorization rather

than deeper forms of engagement with the material. Quality, especially when paired with quantity, is a critical measure.

### Interaction

Another key aspect of student engagement, according to Dr. George Kuh and others, is that it should include interaction with peers, instructors, counselors, coaches, and the like. Students are more likely to succeed when they have a support network. Interestingly, emerging research shows that, in many cases, this network can also include non-human conversation partners. Consider the case of West Texas A&M University (WTAMU), which uses **behaviorally intelligent chatbots** to engage students — and, in turn, to boost year-over-year retention. “I really think that's where [WTAMU's chatbot] can really benefit student engagement and retention,” said Michelle Bonds of WTAMU, “Students may not always feel comfortable going to somebody and asking those questions, but we still need to have the resources available so they can find the information they need.”

### Intentionality

Should all student engagement be carefully facilitated? If a study group springs up after midnight in the library, does that count as engagement? The most popular answer will likely not come as a surprise. Student engagement tends to come from a mix of activities intentionally designed by the institution and organic interaction between students. The question for institutional leaders is not just which activities to prioritize, but also how to foster the sort

---

of environment that facilitates more organic interaction. Kevin Kruger noted that institutions are focusing more on intelligent design — including more communal spaces in residence halls — that reflect an intentional effort to cultivate engagement among students outside of classroom experiences.

In designing tools for engagement, **Mainstay takes all four of these qualities into account.** We focus first and foremost on involvement, interaction, and intentionality, as they can be most directly influenced by digital engagement tools and campaigns. It's our belief that when an institution intentionally creates opportunities for involvement and interaction, quality of effort is much more likely to follow. Thus, for our purposes, we **adapt existing frameworks** and define student engagement as follows:

#### A definition for student engagement

**Student engagement is a measure of a student's level of interaction with others, plus the quantity of involvement in and quality of effort directed toward activities that lead to persistence and completion.**

Those activities can include, but should not be limited to, actions that are essential for continued enrollment — like completing the FAFSA on-time or resolving a registration hold. To meet the higher threshold for engagement typically indicative of successful outcomes, a student must not only be performing basic tasks, but also connecting in deeper ways with their coursework and their faculty, advisors, and peers.

**Similarly, an engaged institution is one that removes barriers to performing basic activities, and intentionally creates opportunities for involvement and interaction.** More ideally, it also fosters a culture of deeper learning and connection.

---

Critically, we've come to see engagement as not something a school does, but as something a school earns. Passive, one-sided activities are not enough: If the point of engagement is to build a relationship, it is incumbent upon colleges and universities to help students understand the myriad ways they can engage with an institution, and make use of whichever approaches work best for them.

#### The questions

As noted in the introduction, our definition of engagement is meant to be instructive but not prescriptive. Below are some of the outstanding questions that warrant further discussion.

##### Academic or not?

The NSSE definition of student engagement, which prioritizes activities that lead to positive academic outcomes, is far from the only conception of student engagement that has become popular in recent years. A growing number of student affairs leaders consider non-academic factors, particularly **mental health**, to be an equally important consideration for student engagement. According to Kruger, "Socio-emotional needs are not frivolous, nor are connections to other students. Those interactions that actually support student mental health — that's a dimension that we now know is critically important."

Dr. Sue Maxam, Assistant Provost for Retention Initiatives at Pace University, agrees: "We've evolved in the 10-20 years since student engagement focused on academics. It's also about what goes on outside the classroom."

##### Engagement or belonging (or both)?

At a time when higher education institutions — and the country as a whole — are in the midst of a renewed reckoning on systemic racism, it's become increasingly important to examine the ways in which our traditional definitions of engagement do and don't take a student's background, socioeconomic status, and identity into account. When a college or university evaluates students' levels of engagement, to what extent do they also examine how that

---

engagement may differ along lines of race, finances, and other demographic factors?

A growing body of research is helping college and university leaders better understand students' sense of belonging on campus; that is, the degree to which they feel "**accepted, respected, included, valued, and happy at school.**" Given that a sense of belonging is a predictor of "better persistence, engagement, and mental health," according to one **recent study**, examining whether students feel like they belong at their institution is clearly a related challenge to that of studying engagement. This challenge is one that has taken on increased weight with the paramount importance of equity and racial justice in the national narrative.

While engagement and belonging are certainly relevant to each other in many ways, they are not the same: The former refers more to students' behaviors, and the latter to their feelings. However, is it possible to understand where and how engagement and belonging overlap? How does one affect the other, and where are we currently measuring one where we should be measuring the other? These will be particularly critical questions as institutions seek new strategies to support students from all backgrounds — and ensure they feel both engaged and that they belong.

### **How do you measure engagement?**

Student engagement experts broadly agree that any engagement activity is only as useful as the outcomes (e.g., enrollment, persistence, degree completion, employment) that it produces for students. As Georgia State's Allison Calhoun-Brown put it, "We can design all kinds of wonderful things, but unless a student actually utilizes those things, we're not generating the kinds of results [and] objectives that we need."

Regardless of the definition, student engagement will never be fully quantifiable. That's one reason why event participation has so often been used as a proxy: It's easy to tell when a student has checked in at an event — and if they rate it highly, you can call them "engaged." The most helpful proxies for measuring student engagement, though, might exist beyond the

activities themselves. "Engagement is qualitative, but you also have to set quantitative goals," says Sheenah Hartigan, who leads enrollment services at Ocean County College in New Jersey. "Student success is the bottom line. That's what matters. But the engagement rate affects the success rate."

In that formulation, measuring engagement would start with outcomes — e.g., increased FAFSA completion or **increased year-over-year persistence**. When Joel Lee's team at Winston-Salem State University discovered that immunization forms posed a barrier to enrollment for a significant number of students, they launched a **communications campaign** specifically targeted at completion of those forms. "For us, engagement means action," says Joel Lee, who recently joined UNC Greensboro as Associate Vice Chancellor after serving as Assistant Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management at WSSU. "We need students to take an active role." During Joel's time at WSSU, campaign impact was measured by student engagement. The first year results included a 74% increase in bill payment and a 37% increase in immunization completion by initial deadlines, exactly the sort of specific metrics that indicate an engagement campaign is successful. The real benefit of engagement comes when a student's sense of belonging and ability to succeed are improved. **Mainstay's behaviorally intelligent chatbots** can be used to engage students on all kinds of topics, from promoting an upcoming basketball game, to checking in on their state of mind during

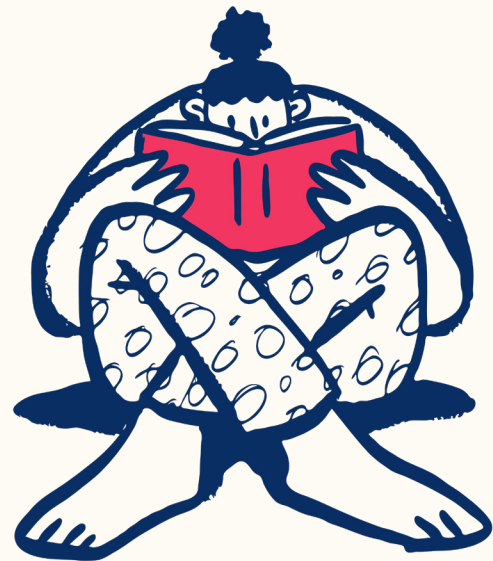
“**Student success is the bottom line. That's what matters. But the engagement rate affects the success rate.**”

**Sheenah Hartigan**  
Enrollment services  
Ocean County College

---

a stressful time, or keeping them informed about evolving COVID-19 policies. All of these contribute to true engagement by helping students take actions that lead to persistence and success. Research from **Georgia State University**, for example, has found that using chatbots to help students meet key deadlines and complete critical tasks boosted rates of both FAFSA filing and registration for the fall semester by 3 percentage points. As a result, more than 1,300 students were able to take the next step in college journeys that otherwise might have ended too soon.

Often, though, when we think about student outcomes, we are thinking about specific and measurable steps on the path to enrollment or graduation. This is why we work closely with **our institutional partners** to measure engagement based on students' ability to address specific tasks, overcome blockers, or build support systems that could help them take the next step forward.



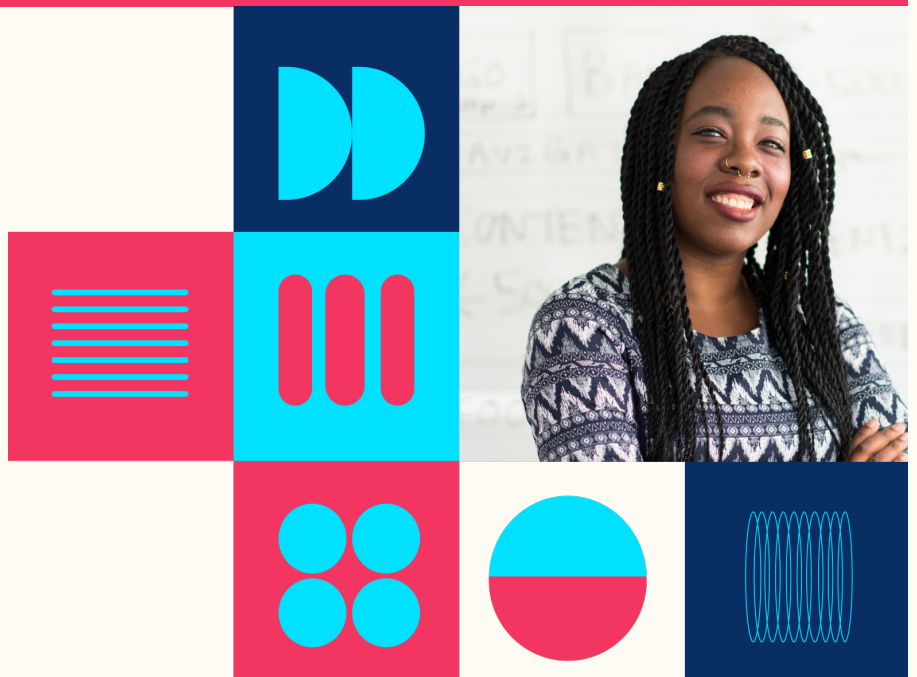


# Conclusion:

---

The purpose of student engagement

---



# Should student engagement be a goal in and of itself — or is it only valuable insofar as it helps higher education institutions achieve their persistence, retention, and completion goals?

---

The answer to this question may differ from institution to institution, and will likely change over time. At the same time, it's a critical question to consider because it can help administrators and staff put a complex term and an ongoing debate into perspective. Ultimately, as noted in the introduction, the goal for most institutions isn't simply to get students more engaged — it's to help more students complete their degree and enter the "real world" with the preparation and skills they need to succeed. In a sense, then, engagement is just a means to an end.

Treating student engagement as only a retention tool, however, runs the risk of ignoring one of the most important things about it. For students, learning how to be engaged in school is a skill in and of itself. It often involves empathy and collaboration with peers, or the ability to take criticism and feedback from mentors. It usually reflects students' ability to be proactive with, and supportive of, their communities. In short, an engaged student is generally one who exhibits many of the so-called "soft skills" that businesses value the most. In that sense, then, engagement may be at least as important as academic outcomes — if not, in some cases, more so.

It's likely that in the years to come, engagement will remain a topic of intense discussion and scrutiny among higher education pundits, practitioners, and researchers. In such sweeping conversations, it's easy

for the debate to veer toward polemic and away from the sort of substantive, informed discussion that actually helps colleges and universities serve students better. This paper is meant to spark a more substantive discussion. That's the type of engagement we expect from students, and we should expect no less of ourselves.



# Improve student engagement with Mainstay

Let's work together to build more meaningful student engagement at your institution.

Request your personalized demo today at:

[mainstay.com/demo](https://mainstay.com/demo)



learn more at [mainstay.com](https://mainstay.com)

