

# Iowa State University's Student Engagement Task Force (2022) Recommendations

Submitted on June 13, 2022

Over the past few semesters, we have all had these conversations in the hallways or teaching meetings, or leaning on a colleague's door frame, talking about the change we have observed in students since returning to campus after Spring of 2020. Faculty, staff, and student leaders have expressed frustration and concern about decreased class attendance, an increase in the number of mid-term grades assigned, and lower overall performance in the classroom mirrored in a lack of involvement in student organizations and other extracurricular activities. We acknowledge, anecdotally, that this campus phenomenon is not unique because of similar reported experiences throughout the country (Mangan, 2022; McMurtie, 2022; Willett, 2021).

Per a request from Ann Marie VanDerZanden, Associate Provost, and Faculty Senate's Student Affairs Committee, a task force was formed in response to recent conversations about the lack of student engagement on campus. This task force's charge is to *partially* address these issues by *developing recommendations* that can be enacted over the Summer of 2022. Specifically focusing on *how to bring awareness* to this issue (along with the available resources on campus).

While student engagement is complicated, our work can provide insight into developing an awareness campaign for fall rollout/delivery. To aid in the development of our recommendations, we chose to focus on the following areas:

1. Classroom engagement/performance
2. Student organizations
3. Mental health and well-being
4. Retention

The task force met over four weeks to discuss, develop, and rank (within each focus area) the following twenty-three recommendations for consideration, along with a few unanswered questions.

Finally, for additional insight, we encourage our campus community to review Glazier et al. (2022) *The Chronicle* article "How to Solve the Student-Disengagement Crisis." This article summarizes the essentialness of developing human connections, re-establishing class norms, providing support for mental health and well-being for all of us, adapting interactions to support students varying needs, and building a sense of belonging. This article reaffirms the importance of how our recommendations can help Iowa State University surpass the statements of aspiration outlined in our 2022-2031 Strategic Plan.

## Table of Contents

Classroom Engagement Recommendations.....	2
Student Organization Recommendations.....	4
Mental Health and Well-Being .....	6
Retention Recommendations .....	8
Task Force Membership .....	10
References.....	10

## Task Force Highlights

Committee members highlighted (\*asterisk) the following recommendations or action items as essential to our charge:

- 1. Promote the connection between faculty-students
- 2. Build community in labs during the first week of classes
- 9.f. Encourage students to get involved by following the "Join three" – one for your major, professional/leadership development, and one for fun.

## Classroom Engagement/Performance Recommendations

1. **Promote the connection between faculty-students.** \* Students' experiences in the classroom and with faculty are among the most meaningful factors in student outcomes ranging from persistence, graduation, sense of belonging, and academic self-efficacy to other essential psychosocial outcomes associated with learning and graduation (Kezar, 2017).
  - a. Human connection, in any modality, is the antidote for the emotional disruption that prevents many students from performing to their full potential, and in online courses, creating that connection is even more important (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). Prioritize the instructor-student relationship to serve "as the connective tissue between students, engagement, and rigor" (Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020, p. 2). See Humanizing Online STEM (<https://humanizeol.org/>).
  - b. Re-envision departmental faculty/staff bio pages with a student-centric lens.
  - c. Encourage faculty to use a "Get to know your instructor" PowerPoint (PPT) template. To foster positive engagement in the classroom, faculty can use a presentation template to help students get to know them better as a person and not just as an instructor.
  - d. Encourage faculty to shift the focus from lecturing to facilitating students to actively engage with the course content:
    - i. Use active learning strategies (<https://bit.ly/celt-active>), including the Teaching Tools: Active learning in multimodalities (PDF) (<https://bit.ly/celt-tool-act>).
    - ii. Invest in a campus-wide license for Top Hat to promote active learning and classroom assessment techniques (<http://bit.ly/celt-tophat>).

- e. Use the Who's in class form (<https://bit.ly/whos-in-class>). Instructors can design a more inclusive learning environment when they are interested in their students by reading more about their backgrounds, interests, and motivations for learning (Addy et al., 2021).
  - f. Participate in faculty development opportunities coordinated by CELT (<https://www.celt.iastate.edu/>) to learn more engagement strategies.
2. **Build community in labs during the first week of class.\*** Often lab courses do not meet the first week - encourage instructors to use that lab time to build a sense of community (and provide resources/ideas for instructors to incorporate).
  3. **Emphasize the value of the ISU Annual Inclusive Classroom Training.** The AY22-23 Training will focus on "Our Students: Building meaningful connections" (<http://bit.ly/isuict>).
  4. **Host forums, conversations, mini symposiums on student engagement and mental health/well-being.**
    - a. Host campus-wide conversations about the following topics:
      - i. An Engagement Exchange: Building effective practices in your teaching (interdisciplinary forum with all colleges)
      - ii. Mental health and well-being. See the ISU Health and Wellness Symposium (<https://www.cyclonehealth.iastate.edu/symposium/>).
    - b. Host departmental discussions on teaching in the classroom (e.g., 15 minutes during a faculty meeting, lunch and learn) and not just during the ISU Annual Inclusive Classroom Training.
    - c. Work with unique campus partners/colleagues (e.g., philosophy + music, sociology, and kinesiology) to develop interdisciplinary connections that promote engagement and well-being.
    - d. Work with career/industry to connect "career moments" and industry into courses (core/disciplinary) and how-to coordinate successful internship experiences, connecting content, and self-reflection.
  5. **Lengthen the time allocation for experiential learning.** The change of modality allowed students to complete course work on their timetable. Once we returned to in-person, students expressed feeling stressed and pressured to complete lab/studio work within the time limit of an in-person class. Should ISU lengthen lab/studio time by x minutes? Lengthening the time is to provide an additional buffer for students to finish their work and not increase the content or problem-solving.

## Student Organization Recommendations

6. **(Re)connect student leaders (and campus advisors) to existing resources.**
  - a. Emphasize the existing tools available from Student Engagement (<https://studentengagement.iastate.edu/>) which includes student organizations (officer resources), leadership and service, arts and the Workspace, The Maintenance Shop, and more.
  - b. Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Campus Life (<https://www.housing.iastate.edu/campus-life-diversity/>)
  - c. Revise the current student officer training to meet the needs of our student leaders (relevance, expectations, and accessibility). What are the ten essential things student leaders need to know? (Student Engagement)
  - d. Promote the campus-wide Student Organization Awards (<https://studentengagement.iastate.edu/sac-annual-events/student-organization-awards/>) to all of campus, and share awardee information with the awardees' home College/Department(s)
  
7. **Create a community-building kit** (student leaders, faculty, staff, residence hall community advisors, etc.). The use of the Toolkit helps with community building for their groups, organizations, and classroom community. Identify ways to recognize those areas of campus using the Toolkit and help evaluate its use.
  - a. Explore what existing guides may exist in the residence halls, sorority and fraternity engagement, athletics, peer mentor, and learning communities.
  - b. Departments that may have existing guides (e.g., Student Engagement, Department of Residence, VPSA Campus Life, Learning Communities, Sorority and Fraternity Engagement, and CELT) collaborate to develop an ISU Toolkit for building community and connections.
  - c. A scholarship opportunity for this project would be to create an evaluation for those who use the Toolkit for building community.
  
8. **Role model the “small talk” skill on campus.** The lack of in-person communication on campus decreased the strong interpersonal skills that our community is known for across Iowa.
  - a. Develop a 1-page easy guide to help promote the “art of small talk” and “benefits of networking.” Potential partners: College career services, departmental faculty (e.g., Music and Theatre, Speech and Communication Studies, Psychology), Strategic Relations and Communications, College communications staff, and Alumni Association.
  - b. Instructors interact with students before/after a class – the interaction role models the small talk.
  - c. Student leaders interact with their peers before/after a meeting/event/program.
  - d. Administrators/staff/faculty (whomever is hosting/facilitating) interact with people before/after a meeting/event/program.
  
9. **Determine and promote the benefits of involvement.** Help student leaders determine/promote their organizations' benefits to build on their membership. Use current campus resources:

- a. Student Engagement, VPSA Campus Life, and College Student Services: develop a resource to help students build a benefits list and promote it to the campus community.
- b. Consider hosting a foundational workshop to help student organizations with this project.
- c. Student panel: Host an in-person upper-division student panel(s) for lower-division students to participate (e.g., Host the panel ClubFest eve introducing what ClubFest is and best practices for getting involved? See the peer promotion information below).
- d. Determine asset-based recognition for students actively engaging in student organizations (social media platforms, live events, able to apply for awards).
- e. Student leadership: Share the benefits of being involved outside the classroom the proper school/work/life balance.
- f. **\*\*Peers and Student Leaders:** Peer promotion is vital (e.g., encourage students to get involved by following the "Join three" – one for your major, professional/leadership development, and one for fun).

**10. Staff and faculty build relationships with students** through student engagement outside of the classroom (Student affairs, discipline-based/field of study, student organizations, etc.)

- a. Get involved with student organizations and campus events.
- b. Determine and promote the benefits of serving as an advisor to a student organization.
- c. Promote events such as WelcomeFest and ClubFest *through Inside Iowa State*. Having faculty and staff attend these campus-wide events demonstrates to students that our campus is involved with one another outside of the classroom.

**11. Renew ways to promote involvement opportunities.** Renew the ways to advertise through tactile ways (not virtual) - sign up in-person, or posters, flyers (get rid of online Qualtrics) (e.g., half-sheet handout at advising meeting to share departmental networking/involvement activities).

- a. When departments create digital signage, could they also create a PPT slide that could be downloaded and used as announcements for the week of those events? ClubFest, WelcomeFest, ISU AfterDark, Student Union Board, etc.
- b. Ask students (or student groups) to volunteer (or make it an assignment) and create the slide based on upcoming events and include it in slide decks for class.
- c. Current campus resources:
  - i. Student Engagement and Campus Life could explore developing a best practices resource for promoting organizations and events collaborating with Trademark, and Printing Services.
  - ii. Printing Services and University Marketing provide cost-effective ways for students to create tactile promotions.
- d. Unanswered questions: Does Student Government still fund printing? Does Student Engagement still offer flyer distribution?

**12. Amplify the significance of volunteering and community service** for all members of the University (faculty, staff, students, affiliates) (e.g., promoting service opportunities).

**13. Innovate ways for students to get involved.**

- a. Host "pop-up" events and involvement opportunities for the students living in the residence halls and other strategic housing spaces.
- b. Create more opportunities for students to have inclusive classroom conversations (e.g., ISCORE).
- c. Host an involvement activity where upper-division students reach out and mentor lower-division students (Learning Communities+) - Learning Communities - BEYOND the first-year experience - creating the connection with (and among) students.
- d. Develop and host a spring campus-wide event, similar to the 2005 This is Your April events, to celebrate and put Iowa State on display.

**Mental Health and Well-Being Recommendations****14. Create a campus-wide culture of well-being.**

- a. Promote a mental health normalized campaign. Create a campus-wide version of the "End the Stigma. Make it OK" campaign (<http://bit.ly/ia-makeitok>) from the Iowa Healthiest State site (<http://www.iowahealthieststate.com/>)? Make It OK is a nationwide campaign (<https://makeitok.org/>).
  - i. Unanswered question: ISU WorkLife shared it– could it go to students?
- b. Publicize the Lifeline and 988: Beginning July 16, 2022, dialing 988 will route your call to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (<https://bit.ly/3MTx6xD>). (Side note: Continue to dial 1-800-273-8255 (TALK) to reach the Lifeline until July 16, 2022).
  - i. Develop a campus-wide message/campaign led by Student Wellness, Strategic Relations and Communications, ISU Police, ISU WorkLife, Environment Health and Safety, and the Office of Equal Opportunity.
- c. Develop tips about mental health, well-being, and mindfulness (or explore existing ones) in a format that faculty/staff can add to their class lecture/discussions via PowerPoint and announcements in their Canvas course(s). Similarly, use the same for digital signages across campus.
  - i. Create an ISU-centric campaign with help from SVPP, VPSA, Memorial Union, and college communications specialists in collaboration with Student Wellness, ISU Recreation Services, and other campus partners.

**15. Equip our community with mental health/well-being resources.** Provide students, staff, faculty, and families with effective ways to ask about mental health, recognize indicators and share ISU resources. Consider the following:

- a. Develop a 1-page resource (emailed) with strategic info about how COVID has impacted college students (what research has shown) and some low-stakes/high-output tips/tricks (i.e., 5-minute break, mindfulness) for instructors to use the next time they teach. For example, see the infographic COVID-19 Impact on College Student Mental Health (PDF) (<https://bit.ly/3t2bxDd>) based on COVID-19 Impacted College Students' Mental Health Hardest, According to Nationwide Survey of Students (<https://bit.ly/3LVd4Sm>).

- i. Explore and share effective practices for when global events impact people negatively (and sometimes positively). What can we do to help ALL people feel belong and connected when these are occurring?
- b. Invest in the Active Minds V-A-R: Validate, Appreciate, Refer® everyday tool for everyday challenges guide (<https://www.activeminds.org/about-mental-health/var/>) (or similar easy-to-use resource) to listen and helpfully respond. See the Active Minds website (<https://www.activeminds.org/>).
- c. Use (or customize) the National Institute of Mental Health Digital Shareables (<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/get-involved/digital-shareables>) to help promote self-care and wellness across campus.
- d. Encourage faculty/staff to attend or departments/colleges to host the Student Wellness' QPR (Question, Persuade, and Refer) (60 minutes) Gatekeeper Training for Suicide Prevention or other development opportunities (<https://bit.ly/3wTou4I>).
- e. Share grief and loss support resources and practices on Student Wellness and ISU WorkLife (O'Sullivan, 2022; Malmon, 2022).

**16. Help students build their self-management.** Students struggle with managing the different course modalities (a mixture of in-person, online, etc.). Helping students manage the academic work and life balance and remembering all the minutia that contribute to their mental health/anxiety.

- a. Implement a real-time student success dashboard for students (and faculty/staff). Identify an app/LTI (Learning Tools Interoperability) connected to Canvas that may be used by faculty and students to forecast success (e.g., EAB Navigate or their mental health suite, University of Iowa's Elements of Success software, <https://teach.uiowa.edu/elements-success>).
- b. Capitalize on the learner success audit final report recommendations from the American Council on Education's Learner Success Laboratory (<https://bit.ly/3GxUw9A>).

**17. Promote well-being while teaching and working with students (and each other).** We do not always know what our students (and ourselves) are going through, which may be particularly true when there is a disruption in our routine learning environment (e.g., weather event, emergency, pandemic, etc.) or students experiencing difficulties or complex situations.

- a. Build soft skills (e.g., interpersonal communication skills, problem-solving, critical thinking, etc.). Use the scaffolding technique, beginning with low stakes activities that build – a rough draft can turn into a second draft – to become the final paper. See an explanation on the Effective practices for papers and projects page (<https://bit.ly/eff-pap-proj>).
- b. Be flexible (within reason). Faculty should consider being *somewhat* flexible if they genuinely want to support all our students. Instead, give flexibility (within reason) on assignments, deadlines, etc. Consider replacing or modifying stressful, high-stakes exams with alternative assessments, which can ease stress but still allow students to demonstrate their mastery of learning outcomes (Ellis, 2020; Stanton et al., 2016). See CELT's Be Flexible page (<https://bit.ly/celt-flexible>).

- i. Unanswered questions about *too much* flexibility: What will our students' future expectations as employees be? What new resources do they need? Where do they get those tools? How do we create "society-ready graduates" now compared to pre-pandemic?
- c. Incorporate a break and mindfulness into courses. Mindfulness can play a vital role in helping students and teachers create a classroom environment conducive to learning and personal growth. See CELT's Mindful and Contemplative Pedagogy page (<https://bit.ly/celt-mindful>).

**18. Include soft skill building in coursework.** Soft skill examples include team building, accountability, decision making, building confidence, interpersonal skills, networking, etc.

Current campus resources:

- a. College Career Services develop/publish/advertise/use a list of soft skills and related careers for their college to use in recruitment, workshops, discussions and classrooms.
- b. Departmental Curriculum Coordinators and Curriculum Committees connect course work to the published list of soft skills and develop what incorporating soft skill building looks like for each course (e.g., Sharpen essential "soft skills" to become more authentic, agile, and dynamic leader in XXXX).
- c. Faculty and staff role model soft skills and intentionally include them in their work.
- d. A multi-collaborative event with VPSA areas, College Career Services, and Alumni Association to host soft skill-building workshops/activities/guides.
- e. Unanswered questions:
  - i. Does a list of essential soft skills exist for each College/Major?
  - ii. Do curriculum committees incorporate soft skills into course objectives?
  - iii. How can we have our alumni connect with our students to show promise and course relevancy?

## Retention Recommendations

**19. Connect to campus culture and involvement opportunities in the classroom.**

- a. High Impact Practices: Learning Communities, research, study abroad, capstones, work, or connection into an internship (participate in 3 or more).
  - i. Group students into intentional learning cohorts (following Learning Communities) for networking, social engagement, and community-building.
  - ii. Cohorts for groups past 1st year. There may be intentional groupings 1st and 2nd year; however, in the 3rd year, there is nothing – how can we create a senior peer group or cohort? Leverage peers and alumni.
- b. Exposure to the benefits of being involved with student organizations.
- c. Engage the college student councils in hosting an event to recruit students.
- d. Peer referrals of upper-division students attending lower-division courses and promoting their orgs/events (develop stu org influencers). These influencers can recommend that new students join three organizations: a leadership one, recreational one, and a discipline-specific one.

**20. Support for Transfer students.** What resources exist for transfer students? How can we better support transfer students? (e.g., many years ago, there was an Off Campus and Adult Student Services). How can we create transfer coordinators in each department – or interdisciplinary hub?

- a. Explore the development of a Transfer Student Center. A staff coordinator (and assistant) work together on the following:
  - i. Learning Community (e.g., small cohort, full cohort)
  - ii. Transfer articulation agreements from Community Colleges
  - iii. Seamless entry and retention
  - iv. Scholarships for transfer students
  - v. Donations/endowment to fund transfer students (and the office)
  - vi. Unanswered questions: How can transfer students “afford” (or any student) the one-year intern (unpaid)? (How can any student afford it)
- b. Academic support available for transfer students

**21. Promote prerequisites as a tool for success.** Help students understand prerequisites and the foundational needs for courses that require them. (Students who transfer in with 100s, 200s, and go into 300s are they ready?). One way that campus is making strides is the Gateway Course Redesign Initiative.

- a. Unanswered question: How can ISU encourage collaboration between the instructors of course sequences (US\_T 101-102-201-202) to connect content, strategies, and more?

**22. Retain students authentically, campus wide.**

- a. Outreach to students if they are not enrolled. Concerted effort for campus to communicate/call students with talking points.
- b. Create talking points that will help our faculty and staff see the essentialness of us supporting retention practices.
- c. Add Canvas announcements/tools for intentional communication and engagement for students (announcements, ISU Academic Calendar is available in the system, Colleges can provide strategic programs to their students, etc.)
- d. Career Services - upbeat messages about placements, recruiting, and communicating CERTAINTY for post-graduation opportunities.
- e. Increase financial assistance. Opportunities for financial aid and completion grants could be a significant strategy. Students may leave due to financial reasons. For example, scholarships become more expensive after the first year and we see a lot of attrition during sophomore year because of it.
- f. Communicate a realistic expectation of what being a student is like at ISU. Many students may have been pushed to a college education with unrealistic expectations based on media or anecdotally. Not everyone enjoys what higher education provides as a culture. What can we do to demonstrate authentic Iowa State experience for our students?

**23. Remove barriers when students want to change majors (easily).** What is the experience like? How can it be easier for our students?

## Task Force Membership

Name	Role	Department
Sterle, Jodi A (Chair)	Faculty	Animal Science
Bestler, Laura L	Staff	Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching
Bigelow, Timothy	Faculty	Electrical and Computer Engineering
Campbell, Julia E	Undergraduate Student	Student Government
Evans, Sharron M	Associate Vice President & Dean of Students	Dean of Students Office
Gillette, Meghan T	Faculty	Human Development and Family Sciences
Hanson, Virginia M	Faculty	Agricultural Education & Studies
Kerby, Kent B	Assistant Dean	Liberal Arts and Sciences
Leptien, Jen (she/her)	Staff	Learning Communities
Parsa, Rahul A	Faculty	Finance
Pokharkar, Aditi R	Undergraduate Student	Economics
Sullivan, Kala	Faculty	Human Development and Family Sciences
Viall, Austin	Faculty	Veterinary Pathology
Younger, Toyia	Senior Vice President	Division of Student Affairs

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