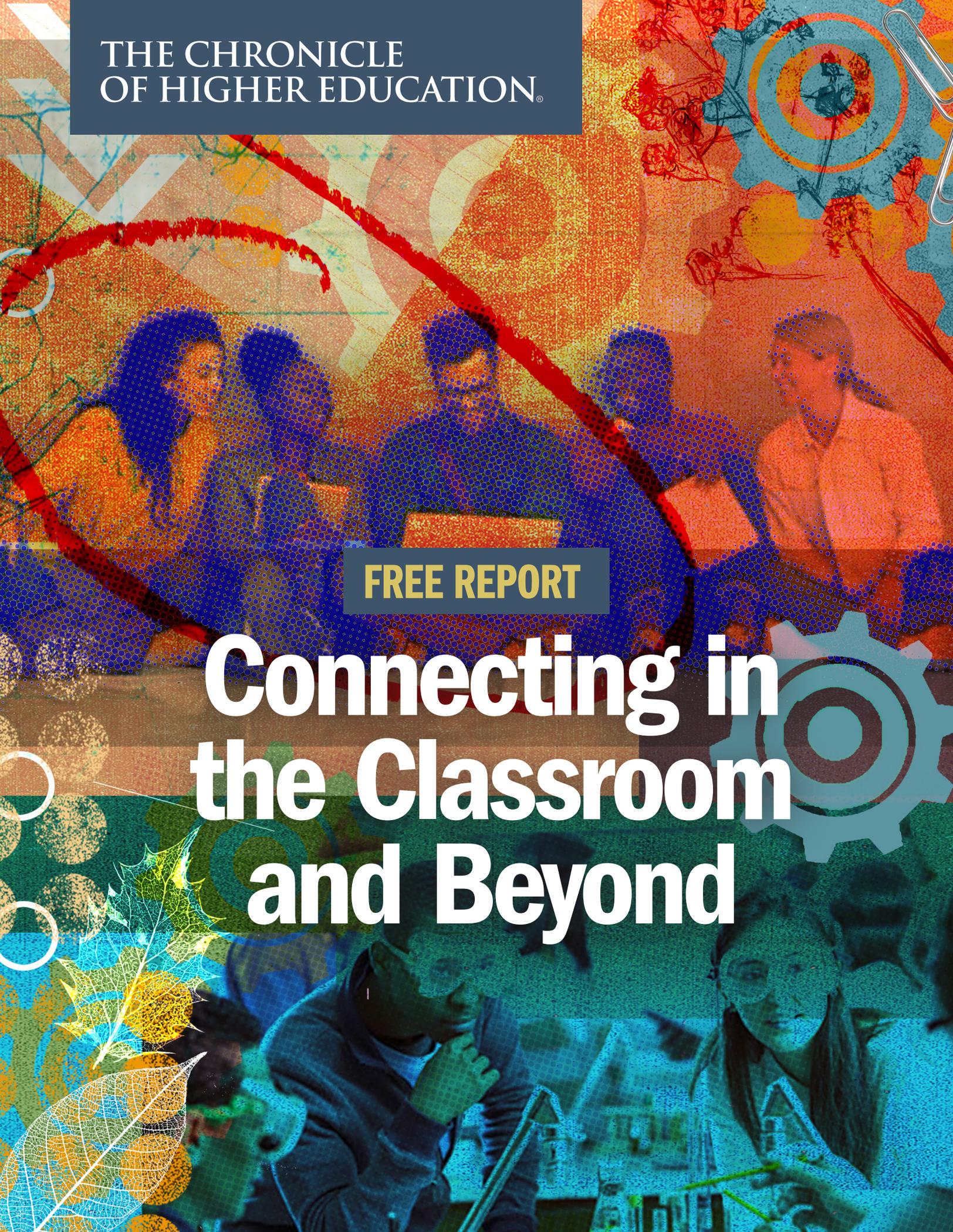


THE CHRONICLE  
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FREE REPORT

# Connecting in the Classroom and Beyond



By BECKIE SUPIANO

**T**EACHING has been difficult throughout the pandemic. Instructors learned how to teach in Zoom on the fly and to project their voice across a lecture hall while wearing a mask. But as students returned to the classroom, the challenge was less technical but more demoralizing: Many students weren't coming to class, and even the ones in the room seemed disengaged.

"It's hard, because we feel like we're getting back to normal, and I think we all thought: OK, well, things should be getting better then," says Rebecca Glazier, a professor in the School of Public Affairs at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and the author of a book about building rapport in online teaching. "But it doesn't feel like that."

When they taught in Zoom, many professors struggled to connect with students who didn't turn on their cameras and so appeared as black squares. But bringing students back to the classroom didn't solve the connection problem, Glazier says. "They're still black squares, they're just in person."

It's a sweeping problem, with no single cause or solution. Students had gotten out of the habit of coming to class in person. They were accustomed to the increased flexibility professors had offered in previous pandemic semesters. They were sick, stressed, and overwhelmed by a barrage of troubling national and global events. They weren't sure college was really worth it.

Some of those challenges, to be sure, predate the pandemic. It's not as if there were ever a time when every student always came to class — much less paid attention. Still, many professors have noticed a real change. And the stakes are high, both for

students in need of degrees and for colleges in need of enrollments.

Many colleges are trying hard to improve the student experience and, in particular, to help students feel more connected. The classroom is a critical place for such connections to occur. Academics are the heart of college life, and the only piece of it all students participate in. And social connections are a precursor to learning.

If students feel unsteady in an unstable world, that's both understandable and beyond the power of professors or colleges to fix. But that doesn't mean they can't do anything to help. Professors can do a great deal to make class feel worth coming to. And colleges can step up to support their efforts.

Many students and instructors perceive online courses as impersonal. But the worst classes are in-person ones in which *professors* are disengaged — reading

**Bringing students back to the classroom didn't solve the connection problem. "They're still black squares, they're just in person."**

their PowerPoint slides, not responding to students' questions. That's according to a survey Glazier and a colleague conducted asking students about their best and worst classes. Learning runs on human connections, but research suggests that students rely on those connections even more in person, Glazier says. In an online course, students can do well as long as the instructor communicates clearly. "But when

Cover illustration by Sarah Jones for The Chronicle

you're in a room with someone," she says, "the student really needs you to be there, and be a real human that is present and engaging with them."

How does a professor convey that kind of presence? Ideally, Glazier says, it begins before the first day of class. Professors can reach out to students to introduce themselves, provide the syllabus, and convey their excitement, she says. They can ask students about their interests, their concerns, their preferred names, and their pronouns. "Check in with them before the class even starts," she says, "because then you're saying: I care about you as a person."

If professors want students to care about their course, in other words, the first step is to show that *they* care — about the material and the people trying to learn it.

Like Glazier, Sarah Rose Cavanagh has surveyed students about their best and worst classroom experiences. One theme: Worst experiences often involve professors duplicating information students have already learned from the book, says Cavanagh, senior associate director for teaching and learning in the Center for Faculty Excellence at Simmons University.

Turn that around and you get Cavanagh's quick recipe for making class time count: Do something valuable that's different from — and builds on — what students can accomplish on their own. That can take a bunch of different forms: activities, labs, discussions. "Students are also really looking for social connection," Cavanagh says. Students, she says, often describe their best class experiences in metaphysical terms, describing the interactive "vibe" or "energy" in the room — or the online space. Students — and indeed, people generally — are motivated by the feeling of being



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## TAKEAWAYS

**Faculty members, and especially those who teach in person, are struggling more than ever to connect with students.**

**Students rely on human connections in the classroom — especially when classes are taught in person.**

**Professors can begin engaging students before class ever starts, by introducing themselves, providing the syllabus, and asking students about their interests and concerns.**

**Colleges can help by providing time to be creative, rewarding good teaching, and encouraging their strongest teachers to share ideas.**

# Helping Students Connect Over Coffee

**D**URING the fall semester of 2021, Deborah M. Sims noticed that her students were reluctant to work in groups. Maybe they were adjusting to being back in the physical classroom or were having a harder time communicating with their masks on, thought Sims, an associate professor of writing at the University of Southern California. But whatever the reason, students needed to be able to interact successfully. “Feeling safe and welcome is not optional,” she says. “It’s a precursor to the students’ cognitive work.”

So Sims decided to do something about it. In the spring of 2022, she taught three classes of a required advanced writing course, with about 20 students in each. Several times throughout the semester, she provided asynchronous content in lieu of a traditional class session and had students use that class time to meet in rotating, assigned small groups at different campus coffee shops. After each discussion, students wrote a short reflection.

Sims gave her students guidelines for these conversations, covering everything from using open-ended questions to keep a conversation flowing to giving nonverbal cues and making eye contact.

This kind of setup might be harder to pull off in a different sort of course — one with a large number of students or with tons of content to be covered. Still, carving out some class time to help students connect effectively may be worthwhile for professors, even as the memory of Zoom school begins to fade.

“My goal was to produce an opportunity for socializing that would be connected to the classroom but not happening in the classroom,” Sims says.

It worked. In a survey Sims sent out,

students reported liking the exercise and finding it productive. Some indicated personal benefits she hadn’t anticipated, like getting practice for a career in which speaking with strangers would be an important skill. The coffee talks also seemed to help foster a sense of community in each class. Students seemed on the ball on what was happening in class, Sims says — an indication that they were taking their questions and confusion to one another, and not bringing it all to her.



GETTY IMAGES

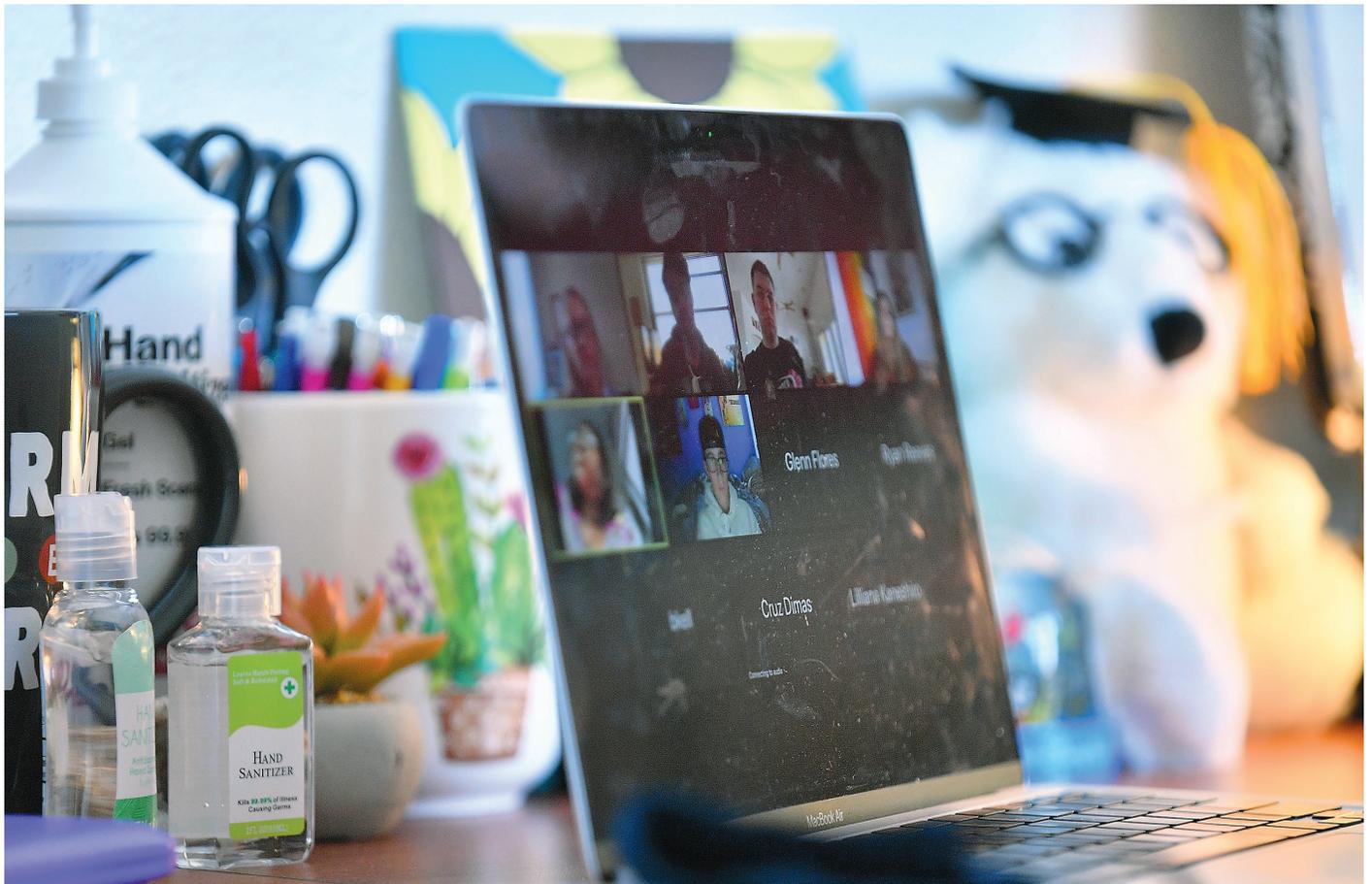
Sean Chen, a biological-sciences major who took the course as a junior, considers himself to be a bit awkward. He went to a small high school, surrounded by kids he’d grown up with. Even though his dad works at USC’s dental school, making the transition to a large university was a big

adjustment — one that was interrupted by the pandemic.

Chen liked the idea of the coffee talks — though at first he wondered if they’d mean having to do more work outside of class. It’s hard to tease out how much of the writing class’s success was due to the coffee talks — there was no control group, he notes — but the class did seem particularly comfortable. “There was a pretty good vibe and environment,” he says — and that made him feel at ease participating in class discussions.

Talia Ginsberg, on the other hand, has always considered herself outgoing, someone who likes to make friends in her classes. It’s been harder to socialize during the pandemic, says Ginsberg, a neuroscience major who took the writing course as a sophomore. The low-stakes format of the coffee talks seemed to make her classmates more comfortable connecting. That made her class experience better, too. “It helped build back those things that you lost.”

— BECKIE SUPIANO



SAM WASSON, GETTY IMAGES

A laptop features a Zoom session in August 2020. Faculty members at many colleges continue to face challenges engaging their students, whether virtually or in the classroom.

part of a team tackling a shared problem, says Cavanagh, who is also an associate professor of practice in psychology.

### **CITIZENS OF THE WORLD**

Students want to connect with their classmates, not just their instructor. But they might not always know how. Professors can help, Cavanagh says, with simple moves like incorporating icebreakers into class, giving prompts to encourage successful class discussions, and even encouraging students to get a handful of classmates' email addresses in case they need to get the notes after an absence.

"It's this line that we play," Cavanagh says, "especially in residential colleges,

where we're not their parents, and we're not their social facilitators, but part of the college experience is supposed to be this kind of formative, not just learning the content, but also learning to be a citizen of the world." First-year students, especially, benefit from some extra guidance in how to interact with one another.

Flower Darby emphasizes making class time meaningful — whether it's in person or online, synchronous or asynchronous. She says professors can do this by breaking down class into individual interactions, and then thinking about how to make each of those interactions more "interesting, relevant, fun."

So "think about the value that students get from spending time with you, the

instructor,” says Darby, associate director of the Teaching for Learning Center at the University of Missouri at Columbia. Students can learn lots of things from watching a video on YouTube, Darby says. The benefit of taking your class is interacting with you.

That benefit might come from opportunities for students to see the professor modeling how to solve problems or think something through by using a disciplinary lens, or by letting students ask and answer questions — something that can be done using clickers or Zoom polls in a larger-enrollment course and through the discussion forums in an asynchronous one.

It can also help, Darby says, to make the most of the margins of class time. If possible, come early or stay late to speak with students informally. Try to hold office hours right after class. In a smaller online class, let students into Zoom one by one and greet them individually. Even small actions like these can help students feel less like a number, and more like they matter.

### MIXING IT UP IN THE CLASSROOM

Picture a college classroom and you may well envision what Susan Hrach calls “the industrial-age model of imagining that everybody can just be sitting down, facing forward, quietly listening — and that’s what we think is learning.”

It’s possible to learn that way, says Hrach, director of the Faculty Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning at Columbus State University. But it’s inefficient and unnatural. “Humans are designed to learn through experience,” says Hrach, who has written a book on the subject, *Minding Bodies: How Physical Space, Sensation, and Movement Affect Learning*.

One of the best things instructors can offer, says Hrach, who is also a professor of English, is variety.

Sidney Ducleroir, a student of Hrach’s who graduated with an English-literature degree in 2022, agrees. “I think a lot of people are really over the ‘sit down, I lecture,



COURTESY OF SUSAN HRACH

Susan Hrach, director of a teaching center at Columbus State U., thinks instructors need to offer variety in the classroom: “Humans are designed to learn through experience.”

you take notes’ format,” she says. Students are under stress, and they lost accountability and momentum when classes moved online, Ducleroir says. To combat this, professors need to make classes relevant and engaging.

Jonathan Stringfellow, another of Hrach’s students, adds that one of the best ways professors can accomplish this is by being engaged themselves. “What helps me the most for feeling engaged in class is when the professors are excited about what they teach,” says Stringfellow, an English-literature major and senior in fall of 2022.

Learning, after all, is social. Hrach is a fan of social-annotation tools like Perusall and Hypothesis. “A certain amount of learning

involves absorbing ideas through texts,” she says. But students don’t have to do this work alone, fueling the isolation many have been struggling with. Hrach provides some of her own annotations in advance, highlighting passages she wants them to respond to or consider, and peeks in every so often to answer students’ questions. The tool can help students decode the early literature Hrach teaches, which many find challenging. And “it builds a certain amount of community,”

“I frequently assign texts that I’m not super familiar with. I like the freshness of discovering it with them.”

she says, “in between our seeing each other in person.”

One of the highlights of being a professor is getting to learn with one’s students, Hrach says. “I frequently assign texts that I’m not super familiar with or I haven’t read in a long time,” she says. “I like the freshness of discovering it with them.” Among other things, that strategy models the learning process, and shows what makes it worthwhile.

#### **HOW COLLEGES CAN HELP**

For professors, making class time meaningful can pay off in several ways, including boosting student performance and making teaching more enjoyable. Still, fine-tuning one’s teaching is work, and professors are nothing if not overburdened after the past two years. So what steps can colleges take to help ensure that more

of the classes their students take will be worth rolling out of bed for?

College leaders can begin, Hrach says, by finding the professors on their own campuses who are not struggling with student disengagement, figuring out what they’re doing, and having them collaborate with their teaching center to share what they’re doing with colleagues. Then, she says, give all of your instructors time to participate in a faculty learning community or visit colleagues’ classrooms to see what they’re doing.

Cavanagh, of the Simmons teaching center, agrees that giving professors more time is the No. 1 way for colleges to help. Classes are the one aspect of college that all students encounter, she says. Professors can improve them, but this is the kind of creative work that just takes time.

Among the ways to provide that time, adds Glazier, of Arkansas: Pay professors to attend professional development for their teaching. Invest in people over technology and tools. And have the right nonfaculty support systems in place for students (for counseling or learning needs, for example) so professors can refer them to a professional who can offer the help they need.

Ideally, says Darby, of Missouri, colleges would give professors a buffer by reducing teaching loads, class sizes, and service expectations. And they’d reconsider how they measure and weigh good teaching in tenure-and-promotion decisions, too.

Few colleges, of course, find themselves in an ideal position. That’s all the more reason, Darby says, to create structures in which faculty members can at least support one another, including opportunities to learn from colleagues by observing their teaching.

Helping students reconnect in the classroom is too important to leave to the individual efforts of already-exhausted instructors.

# The Power of ‘High Impact’ Learning

By **KARIN FISCHER**

**W**hen Martin J. Hershock came to the University of Michigan at Dearborn as an undergraduate four decades ago, he was a first-generation student, with a limited sense of how to navigate college.

But his time at the commuter college was a positive one, offering opportunities like internships and undergraduate research that got him excited about learning and showed how his studies tied to real-world issues. Hershock went on to earn a doctorate in American history and eventually returned

to Dearborn as a faculty member. Nine years ago, he became dean of the university’s College of Arts, Sciences, and Letters.

Now Hershock and his colleagues have made the kind of experiences that were pivotal for him central to the undergraduate experience for all students in Dearborn’s arts and sciences college.

Educators have come to understand what Hershock saw firsthand: that having hands-on, experiential activities can deepen classroom learning and improve academic

outcomes such as retention and graduation rates. Those activities have gotten a name: high-impact practices.

In addition to internships, research, and study abroad, among the 11 recognized practices are capstone courses and projects, common intellectual experiences, and learning communities.

Research has demonstrated the efficacy of such practices. Students who engage in service-based learning are more likely to continue with their studies: Among Washington State University students who

completed a service-learning project, first-year retention rates were nearly 10 percent higher than those of their peers. A recent study by the University System of Georgia found that students who studied abroad had better four-year graduation rates and higher grade-point averages than those who stayed on campus.

Having hands-on, experiential activities can deepen classroom learning and improve academic outcomes, like retention and graduation rates.

And experiences like internships can help students even after they earn their diplomas, improving the likelihood that graduates — especially those from low-income and underrepresented backgrounds — will land jobs. An analysis by the Burning Glass Institute, an independent nonprofit research center, on the future of work and learning, found that Black and Hispanic computer-science graduates were significantly more likely to get a good job after graduation if they had completed an internship.

## EMBEDDING EQUITY

High-impact practices emphasize important skills like critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration. But they also may help students succeed because they give them a sense of belonging and of connection to their professors, fellow students, and the broader community.

Many of these experiences, such as study



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Students from the U. of Michigan at Dearborn take part in a study-abroad activity in Cyprus. Study abroad is among the “high impact” academic practices thought to improve student success.

U. OF MICHIGAN AT DEARBORN



abroad and undergraduate research, were previously thought of as optional or add-ons, boutique programs for a select group. But given their powerful effects, there has been a greater push in recent years to ensure that all college students participate in at least one high-impact practice. The State of Utah even requires that public-college students complete high-impact practices to earn their bachelor's degree.

"What's different and what's new is the focus on equity and inclusion in design," says Tia Brown McNair, vice president for diversity, equity, and student success at the American Association of Colleges and Universities.

There has also been greater emphasis on shaping and implementing these experiences. Experts agree that it's not enough to simply offer such programming. Activities must be intentionally designed, including faculty feedback and opportunities for student reflection.

The AAC&U runs an annual institute on high-impact practices that helps campus teams develop and assess their own strategies. McNair says there isn't a one-size-fits-all model. Instead, colleges must focus on the needs of each group of students and what works best for them. "They have to be culturally responsive," she says.

Even within institutions, the approach can differ. At Nebraska Wesleyan University, a private college, all students do a capstone project, assemble an e-portfolio, and complete an internship or study abroad. But exactly what those activities look like can differ from major to major, says Patrick Hayden-Roy, who was concluding his term as associate provost for integrative and experiential learning in 2022. "It's not a static model."

At Dearborn, such efforts have included an overhaul of the first-year seminar. The introductory courses have been restructured around major themes like people and technology, environmental and social justice, and storytelling. They are team-taught by faculty members in different disciplines and emphasize engaged scholarship, often

with community-based projects, says Marie Waung, an associate dean of arts and sciences.

The seminars provide an introduction to the college classroom, give students an early chance to learn closely from a professor, and help them begin to make sense of their education by casting it in ways that have real-world resonance. "There are so many opportunities for students," Waung says, "that especially for those who are first generation, it can overwhelm them."

Nebraska Wesleyan also works to get to students at the beginning of their studies, through first-year "exploratory" courses. It's a matter of equity, says Hayden-Roy. "Often in the past, we've implemented a 'build it and they will come' approach," he says. "And those who come forward are those who know to come."

Salt Lake City Community College has all of its general-education courses incorporate e-portfolios — a digital collection of student work, such as papers, presentations, and artwork. The portfolios help students better understand and reflect on their work, says Kathy Tran-Peters, coordinator of the honors program and interdisciplinary studies. "It empowers them to take control of their education."

But barriers exist that can prevent students from taking part in high-impact practices. They take faculty members' time and commitment to design and execute. Activities like study abroad and internships can be out of reach for low-income students.

Many of Dearborn's students are working their way through college and can't afford to give up a regular salary for a short-term internship, Hershock says. So the university has raised money to pay for internship stipends. At Salt Lake City Community College, \$100,000 has been set aside to cover students' costs in high-impact practices, such as to attend conferences and present research.

The hurdles are not always financial. A longstanding critique of education abroad is that it can be difficult for students to find the time to go overseas, particularly if they

are in a highly structured major. Dearborn is starting a program that will allow students to go abroad and earn general-education credits.

At Piedmont University, a private institution in Georgia, faculty members voted in the fall of 2016 to make high-impact practices a centerpiece of the student experience.

Although students are not required to engage in a high-impact practice, most do, says Julia Schmitz, an associate professor of biology who helped shape the plan as part of Piedmont's reaccreditation. Freshmen and transfer students in the fall of 2020 who participated in at least one high-impact practice had a first-year retention rate of 79 percent. Retention rates for those who didn't take part were 68 percent.

One emphasis at Piedmont has been on undergraduate research. A number of professors have built research opportunities into lower-level courses, giving students a chance to work in teams or one on one with a faculty mentor. Each spring, the university holds a student-research symposium in which students apply and are selected to present their findings on projects as varied as a study of invertebrates in campus wetlands and the designing of computer games. At the most recent symposium, 10 percent of the more than 400 presenters were first-year students, Schmitz says.

## GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

With global learning part of Piedmont's mission statement, another priority is study abroad. Yet most of the college's students are from within a 150-mile radius of campus, says Steve Nimmo, interim vice president for academic affairs, and many do not have a passport. "If we're going to be in a global society," he says, "we need to do this."

Piedmont embeds international experiences into short-term, faculty-led courses, typically held just after the spring semester. Travel costs are included in course

## Academic Practices That Pack a Punch

Educators have identified a group of educational activities that truly make a difference, improving students' chances of academic success. Known as **high-impact practices**, they include:

- Capstone courses and projects
- Collaborative assignments and projects
- Common intellectual experiences
- E-portfolios
- First-year seminars and experiences
- Global learning and diversity
- Internships
- Learning communities
- Service- and community-based learning
- Undergraduate research
- Writing-intensive courses

Sources: American Association of Colleges and Universities, Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success

fees to help make international study more accessible to students, nearly all of whom are on financial aid. Students do preparatory work to give the trip context and write papers after their return.

Professors have stepped up to lead the courses, Nimmo says. Schmitz has taken students to France to visit the Curie and Pasteur Institutes, but she says day-to-day exposure to different cultures, such as to fast-food restaurants abroad, has been as meaningful for her students as the academics. So far, she has taught three study-abroad courses and was scheduled to lead

two more trips — until they were canceled by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic was especially disruptive for high-impact practices that emphasize in-person experiences. Study-abroad rates plummeted as countries around the world shut their borders. Internships and service-learning projects were put on hold. Even at institutions like California State University at Fullerton, which had made a major effort to increase access to experiential learning, such activities “dwindled greatly,” says Dawn Macy, director of Fullerton’s Center for Internships and Community Engagement.

**“High-impact practices naturally form connections. It’s students with faculty. And it’s students with one another.”**

Colleges scrambled to shift some of these opportunities online. Nebraska Wesleyan, for example, offered “virtual global engagement” programs, connecting individual classes with partner institutions overseas, often around group projects. One course, on African cinema, beamed in Rwandan actors and directors who had created the films the students were studying.

Nationally, about 80 percent of internships were performed remotely or in a hybrid form in the summer of 2021, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers. But far fewer students did an internship than before the pandemic.

Despite the challenges of Covid, the positive effects of high-impact practices continue to be felt, and may have reinforced a sense of community for those who have engaged in them.

#### **‘I DIDN’T FEEL SO ISOLATED’**

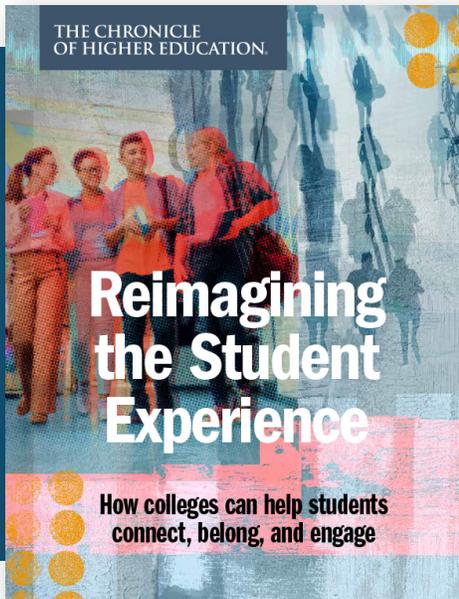
Before graduating from Dearborn in the spring of 2022, Zenon Sommers took part in several high-impact practices, including undergraduate research, community-based learning, and learning communities, where he was both a participant and a peer mentor and instructor.

When courses went online because of Covid, “I was able to stay a lot more connected because I had already been working with so many different people,” he says. “I didn’t feel so isolated.”

“High-impact practices naturally form connections,” says Waung, the associate dean at Dearborn. “It’s students with faculty. And it’s students with one another.”

Sommers, a double major in psychology and behavioral and biological sciences, says he can see the effect of high-impact practices across his college experience. Early interactions with professors made him more comfortable seeking out help during office hours. Undergraduate research has opened him up to a possible academic career, starting with a year teaching high-school English through the Fulbright Austria program. Community engagement helped his commuter-college experience feel much more personal and intimate.

When Sommers had the chance to transfer to Michigan’s Ann Arbor campus, he decided against it, figuring he wouldn’t have as many opportunities to work closely with his professors. “That’s something,” he says, “I didn’t want to lose.”



**Colleges have, in recent years, come to better understand the connections between academics and students' well-being, financial pressures, family obligations, and life goals, among other factors.**

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