From: Jonathan Eldridge
To: Jonathan Eldridge
Subject: Spring 2023 Faculty Information & Updates, Volume XII
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Attachments: Why Are Students So Disengaged.pdf
Teaching in an Age of Militant Apathy.pdf
Scholarship-App-Social-Media.jpg

Dear College of Marin Faculty:

If you look at the titles of the two articles attached to this week's email you might think they are yet more depressing news about the state of higher education. But each focuses on concrete ways faculty can better connect what they are teaching with how students best engage that content—and how they can then apply that to future learning and career aspirations.

Also this week, please share the attached image about scholarship applications with your students—the deadline is approaching!

Finally, this week's update on the LRC construction project, **April 03 – April 09**.

1. *Grading*
2. *Mass excavation and removal of dirt*

Noise you will expect to hear onsite:

1. *Large equipment*
2. *Idling trucks*
3. *Back up alerts*

The contractor will begin the mass excavation and removal of dirt off of the site. This work requires approximately 96 loads of dirt to be removed via truck each day. 3 Trucks will move loads beginning at 7am until 4pm in the afternoon. The team will monitor traffic conditions and make modifications so as to minimize traffic impacts. A specific route has been identified for the trucks to utilize while do this specific work and all safety precautions will be in place.

Thank you for all you do.

Jonathan

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Why Are Students So Disengaged?

A new survey by Wiley finds that one-fourth of students said they would be more invested in their courses if they learned in a way that emulated their future careers.
Johanna Alonso February 13, 2023

Over half of undergraduates reported struggling to stay engaged in their college courses and to retain the material they learn.

Undergraduate students are struggling to stay engaged in class—and they believe that material more directly connected to real-life issues could help solve the problem.

That's a key finding of the recent State of the Student 2022 survey by the academic publishing company Wiley, which noted that 55 percent of undergraduate and 38 percent of graduate students said they struggle to remain interested in their classes. The same proportion of undergraduates and 34 percent of graduate students also said they have trouble retaining the material they learn.

The survey of 5,258 students and 2,452 instructors in North America was conducted in August 2022 and sought to understand the factors that most impact student success, as well as what factors instructors perceive as the most impactful.

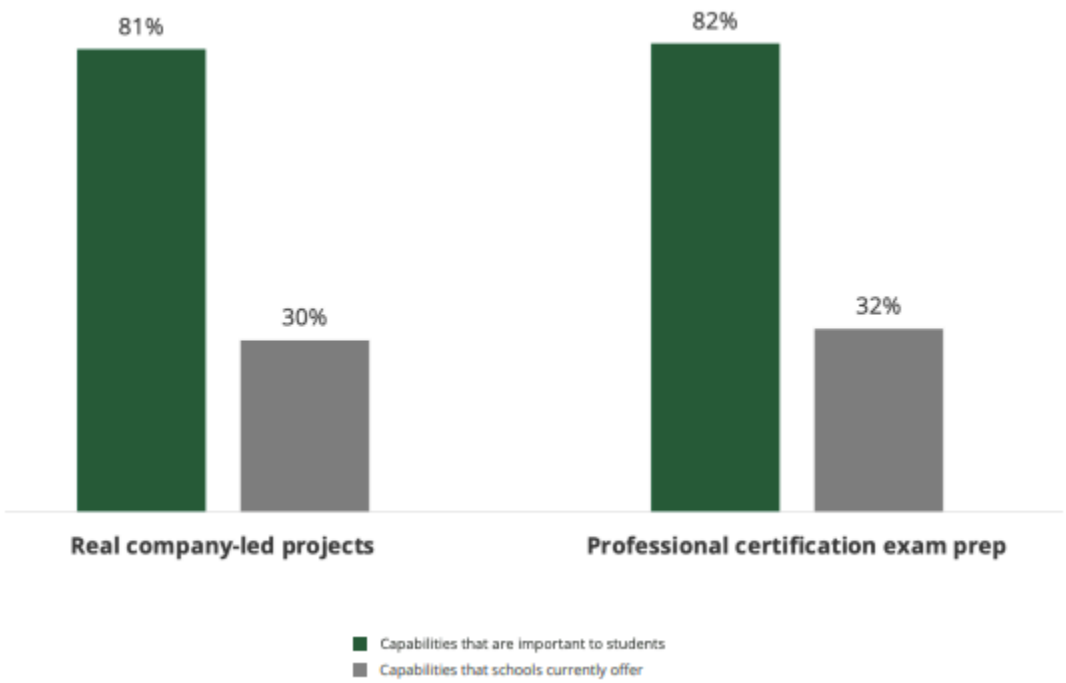
Students cited one clear way professors could make them more interested in the material: by relating it more closely to their future careers. One-fourth of the students surveyed suggested that lessons with real-world applications, including those grounded in experiential learning, would improve their engagement.

Smita Bakshi, Wiley's senior vice president of academic learning, said the findings apply to all fields. A professor in a STEM classroom, for instance, might introduce the actual tools or programs that a professional would use, she said, while a philosophy professor could link a lesson in ethics to current events, such as the debate over using ChatGPT as an educational tool.

A whopping 81 percent of students also said that it's important or very important for institutions to incorporate company-led projects to mimic real-world work. Yet only 30 percent of institutions currently offer such projects, according to the report.

A graph of how many students want company-led projects and professional certification exam prep incorporated into their college courses, versus how many institutions offer those things. (Source: Wiley)
Jillian Kinzie, associate director for Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research and the National Survey of Student Engagement, said that students have long been interested in incorporating more real-world experience into their learning, but it can pose a challenge to professors for several reasons.

"You have to know who those contacts are, and if you don't have them because you're not working in the industry regularly, it takes a lot of time to secure the involvement of those people," said Kinzie, who noted that the survey's results largely mirror the results of the National Survey of Student Engagement. And even if faculty have the contacts, industry professionals rarely have enough time to work with faculty and students, she said.



"There's a dance you have to do to figure out how you're going to make this work," she said. "Both sides don't have a lot of time to do that."

Bakshi said she believes part of the reason experiential learning and real-world problem-solving can help students better engage with the material is because they show students how the course will actually aid them in their future careers. More and more, she said, parents and students alike are asking faculty and administrators what skills are most essential and what fields students should study to have the best chance of making it in today's competitive job market.

"It is difficult to engage in a classroom setting when you're not quite sure what that classroom experience is going to do to help you get that job," she said.

At the same time, it's not always easy for students to gain experience outside the classroom; 34 percent of those surveyed said they found it difficult to get an internship.

External Challenges

The lack of experiential learning isn't the only thing keeping students from paying attention in class. They also reported high levels of financial and emotional stress; nearly half of undergraduates said mental health is a "challenge they're facing in their educational journey."

Because they have so much on their minds, Bakshi said, "they're not bringing their whole self to the classroom."

Another source of stress for some students is uncertainty about their careers. More students reported being unsure about what field to pursue in this survey (21 percent) than when Wiley last asked the question in 2021 (9 percent). The percentage of students looking to change their major also increased.

According to the survey, the main factors driving students toward a particular major were their interest in the field (57 percent), career opportunities (46 percent) and their ability to make a positive impact in that field (41 percent).

That contradicts what instructors tend to believe about the majors students choose; the report notes that professors think that students care more than they actually do about finding a high-paying job and less than they actually do about making a positive impact with their work.

Instructors are also more likely than students to see their institutions as doing a good job preparing graduates for the professional world; 64 percent of instructors and only 46 percent of students said their institution is preparing students well.

They also have disparate perceptions of what skills students will find most challenging postgraduation; students were most concerned that they would lack job skills (29 percent) while instructors expressed the most worry about their time management skills (47 percent).

Bakshi said it was important for professors to be aware of the areas in which students feel deficient so they can help address those concerns in the classroom.

“It’s really important then for educators … to be aware of how [students’] futures are being threatened,” she said. “Hopefully studies like this can close some of that awareness gap.”

Teaching in an Age of ‘Militant Apathy’

Immersive education offers a way to reach students. But can it ever become the norm?

By Beth McMurtrie

FEBRUARY 15, 2023

It is a strange time to be an undergraduate. Life may feel apocalyptic, buffeted by climate crisis, social tumult, and war, but you wouldn’t know it on most college campuses. If the societal upheavals of late 1960s and early 1970s were marked by campus protests and fiery speeches, today’s students move from class to class with heads bowed and hands clutched around phones. Instead of anger and outrage, there’s alienation and anxiety.

Professors and administrators have been talking openly about this challenge for the past year or so, since they saw students struggle mightily as they returned to campus following the worst of the pandemic. Some dove enthusiastically back into campus life, but many others had trouble engaging with their classmates or their academics. This has accelerated discussions about the rise of student mental-health challenges, the strains of economic uncertainty as college costs continue to grow, and the heightened academic needs of students. Colleges have increased the use of early interventions and strategies like mentoring and success coaching to assure students that they belong on campus, and are embedding more career skills into coursework to ensure they can succeed after they leave.

The efforts are critical for colleges’ survival, both politically and financially. Skepticism about the return on investment in a four-year degree continues to grow, while colleges have also been criticized for graduating lower-income students at lower rates. And enrollments on many campuses, which dropped during the peak of Covid, have yet to recover.

But as many students continue to exhibit debilitating levels of anxiety, hopelessness, and disconnection — what one professor termed “militant apathy” — colleges are struggling to come up with a response beyond short-term solutions. The standard curricula in higher ed — and the way it’s discussed as primarily a path to economic success — can exacerbate those feelings. Students are told the main point of college is

to move up the economic ladder, so no wonder it feels transactional. And the threat of failure must seem paralyzing given the high cost of a degree.

But what if students believed that college was more than that? That it was a place to discuss the big questions bouncing around in their heads, learn a vocabulary to describe what's happening around them, engage with the messiness of the world, and navigate their place in it. That it was meaningful.

This is hardly a new idea, of course. Service learning, common-reading programs, internships, study-abroad opportunities, and experiential education — known collectively as immersive education or high-impact practices — are all meant to serve this purpose, and have shown to have a positive and often profound impact on students' lives. They can be more absorbing, creative, and self-directed than traditional courses. But some students earn a degree without having even one of these experiences, and only about 60 percent of seniors have had two or more. More fundamentally, the challenge has always been how to make these approaches central to learning when higher-education structures — including cost — get in the way.

Now, though, immersive education is getting a closer look. At a national level, some educators are calling for a reinvestment in engaged teaching and a movement away from the credentialism that for decades has dominated the narrative about the purpose of college.

"There's been a discourse in society that higher-education leaders have embraced, which goes something like this: Higher education is essential for future career attainment, positive economic outcomes and social mobility," says Richard Arum, a professor of sociology and education at the University of California at Irvine, whose 2011 book with Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses,* set off a national conversation about what students get out of undergraduate education.

Colleges have championed that narrative, of course, in response to pressure from policy makers, politicians, and families to prove that the cost of a degree pays off in the long run. But in doing so, Arum says, they have shifted the conversation away from the very attributes that make education feel meaningful.

"Students come to college and say, OK, this is largely about economic mobility. It's largely about credentials, about occupations," say Arum. "So I'm just going to focus on courses that are about specialization for my major. And if the college makes me do

a general-education course, I'm not going to work very hard on that because what the heck does that have to do with my career?"

Colleges try to counter that by telling students that critical-thinking and communication skills are important as well. "But that's a pretty vague argument that isn't obvious for students to internalize and motivate their behavior. So what you see then is widespread disengagement from the curriculum," says Arum. "For educators like me, what's missing is what education is about. It's about psychological well-being and flourishing and growth and human development and encouraging a set of dispositions, attitudes and behaviors that lead to fulfilling lives."

These are experiences that talk about engaging with the world in ways that make the learning real.

While the transition to a more instrumentalist view of education was decades in the making, Arum is surprised that in recent years the public narrative hasn't changed, given everything the country has been through: Black Lives Matter, January 6 and the elections, mass shootings, wildfires, and floods. "Looking back, historians will be puzzled at how the rhetoric didn't shift from this more economic discourse," he says. No wonder students don't seem to want to be in college. "What we're offering them isn't aligned with their lived experiences and the moment we're in."

Colleges that want to deepen students' connection to their learning have options. Some are investing in interdisciplinary programs that take students off campus for weeks or months at a time. Others are revamping general-education coursework so that entering students can immediately dive into age-old questions that help them find their place in the world. Or they are creating immersive-learning courses and building them into majors, so that time-pressed students — or those hesitant to take on a less-structured or more time-consuming class — know that it will count toward graduation.

At Lehigh University, a number of first-year students have the chance to embed themselves in different environments and cultures during a semester away from campus. This year's projects focused on Ecuador and on the American West.

In Ecuador, the group lived in local homes, explored the ravages of pollution on the Amazon, and considered solutions to climate degradation. “Students are desperately seeking experiences that are ways to connect and find ways to make meaning of themselves in the world. What’s their place, what’s their sense of agency? What’s their way to affect these massive issues around them that they see defining their world?” says Cheryl Matherly, the university’s vice president and vice provost for international affairs, who helps lead the program, Lehigh Launch. “These are experiences that talk about engaging with the world in ways that make the learning real.”

For Yandel Santos, who participated in the Ecuador program last fall, the experience was the perfect entry point to college. “I wanted to immediately be put in an environment that would force me to adapt,” he says of why he applied.

Like a lot of students of his generation, Santos considers himself curious and an independent learner. He uses social media to explore the world virtually, watching a YouTube lecture by a Yale professor on power and politics, or scrolling TikTok to get people’s takes on events half a world away. Such access, he says, allows him to expand his social networks beyond friends and family, and the lessons and attitudes they offer. “What distinguishes my generation is that for the most part we don’t accept the status quo,” he says, echoing a common feeling. “We’re going to challenge it and question it and pick it apart.”

A native of Philadelphia, Santos had not traveled outside of the East Coast. In Ecuador, he lived with a host family, and took Spanish, biology, anthropology, and an integrative seminar with the other Lehigh students. The concepts he learned in one course would often connect to, and build on, those he learned in others, and the emphasis was on learning collaboratively. He also took on a research project on sustainability, interviewing residents.

The experience taught him how Indigenous cultures adapt to the climate crisis. The group, for example, visited both pristine parts of the Amazon rainforest, and communities with high rates of cancer and oil bubbling up from the soil, a legacy of corporate drilling.

Santos, who plans to study astrophysics, sees a connection between his exploration in Ecuador and his major, in that astrophysics seeks to understand the universe and humans’ place in it. And Lehigh Launch taught him a couple of things that he will

take with him: Always leave class with more questions than you went in with, and you can't live in one place your whole life and say that you understand humanity.

His professor and the program's director, David Casagrande, a professor of anthropology, called the experience "the most successful thing I have ever done."

"I just saw a complete transformation of students who now completely understand the relevance of anything they'll study, and have skills to deal with the disappointments and challenges they're going to encounter for the next three-and-a-half years or the rest of their lives."

To understand why programs like this work well, it helps to understand what's happening with students.

We all know that remote learning was damaging for many teenagers, but Mary Helen Immordino-Yang can tell you how. A professor of education, psychology, and neuroscience at the University of Southern California, Immordino-Yang studies how adolescents learn and develop, in part by using brain scans. In examining neural images, she found that learning is not just an intellectual process but a social and emotional one. Parts of the brain associated with those processes fire up as students engage with new and complex ideas, particularly those that encourage self-reflection and meaning making. Those actions also develop students' brains in crucial ways. In fact, she found that how students engage in this activity holds better predictive power of their longer-term development than metrics like IQ or socioeconomic status.

"It goes beyond being connected," she says of these different regions of the brain. "They are all part of the same process."

Strip one or more parts of that process away, as happened when students were isolated during the pandemic, and learning becomes "narrowed and impoverished," she says. "If you had a hard time managing the complexity of the real-world social space, [solitude] could be an advantage," she acknowledges. "But for most teenagers and young adults, you've now taken away much of the rich complexity." Students were lacking, among other things, stable, caring relationships with teachers and other adults they would encounter at school. "What we really have done during the pandemic is left kids on their own to build that kind of feeling."

Since we rely on these different facets of our brain to process and make meaning of what we learn, students had to fill in the gaps, whether or not they were well-equipped to do so. In many cases, their brains would over-activate or under-activate. They would ruminate, become anxious, get depressed, or withdraw.

There seems to be this overwhelming fear of failure that is so paralyzing, that instead of turning in subpar work, or work they don't feel good about, they just don't turn anything in.

Of course, the adolescent mental-health crisis is not new. According to the Healthy Minds Study, which surveys thousands of students each semester about their mental well-being, the percentage of students reporting depression, anxiety, and academic stress has been increasing steadily for years.

Immordino-Yang is one of many experts who attribute some of these longer-term trends to the pervasive use of social media, which deprives teens of genuine social interaction, and turns us into passive observers of others' experiences. One trend that she finds particularly disturbing is the use of dating apps in college, noting that she often hears students say they don't know how to date or have romantic relationships. "They don't have that disposition, that drive, to be in a close conversation with someone else."

Add to that the structures of modern education, which have increasingly emphasized structured learning and test preparation, and it's no wonder that students are struggling, she says.

"In every context, the student needs to feel like they are driving, they are the ones managing their own learning," says Immordino-Yang. Instead, students have come to expect "'you tell me what to do and I'll do it,'" she says. "We need to take that away. That is a crutch. That is not real learning. That is compliance."

Many educators have noted that even as students struggle, they find it challenging to advocate for themselves. That may be because in certain college settings, it's easier to retreat than engage.

William B. Davis, interim vice provost for academic engagement and student achievement at Washington State University, recalls getting phone calls from concerned parents well into the fall semester of 2022. Oftentimes, he says, "what's being reported is a sense of disconnection, even though [students] have been on campus 13-14 weeks." And traditional structures aren't working. "We've had mentoring programs, living-learning communities, but for whatever reason those aren't sufficient." At the same time, he adds, students are having trouble articulating their needs "in ways that would help us help them."

The cost of college, too, weighs heavily on most students. And whether or not they're worried about paying their tuition bill, students are keenly aware that the stakes are high.

"There is a certain kind of economic anxiety in this group and that translates into a broader uncertainty about their situation in society and at the college," says Frank Anechiarico, a professor of government and law at Hamilton College, who has been teaching since 1978. "It's impressed upon them that they are going into a tough world. 'You better be ready, you have to be very, very good in order to make it.' All of those things make it difficult for them to develop their own skills in a creative way that's not so worried about failure, or [being] less than perfect."

One of his students, Elian Sorensen, sees it in some classmates. At a place like Hamilton, a small, selective liberal-arts college, students are primed to achieve a lot. "There seems to be this overwhelming fear of failure that is so paralyzing," says Sorensen, "that instead of turning in subpar work, or work they don't feel good about, they just don't turn anything in."

Detachment, stress, hopelessness, and passivity are all things that advocates of immersive education hope to counteract. Typically, these courses and programs are collegial, requiring students to work together on a problem and counteracting the isolating effects of remote learning. They are often interdisciplinary, tapping the skills and talents of a range of students and professors to spark creativity — not groupthink. They may be experiential, pulling students out of the classroom and away from screens. They take an open-ended approach to complicated problems, instead of a

box-checking one. And they attempt to connect the subject to students' values, beliefs, and goals, investing them in the outcome and developing their sense of agency.

Anechiarico has been working on an antidote, of sorts, to this anxious malaise through a program called the Justice Lab.

In it, students collaborate over the course of a semester, taking four courses together that explore a significant challenge facing Utica, N.Y., their local city. In the fall, Sorensen and 13 other students examined homelessness. Several days a week they would head into the city and meet at the library for a course on the city's history taught by a history professor, or a class on urban homelessness and addiction taught by a sociology professor at a local church. They also learned about health care systems from a biology professor and social policy from a government professor, heard from guest lecturers, got to know members of the community, and interned at various nonprofits. Sorensen, for example, spent time at an opioid-treatment program inside a health clinic.

The pastor of the church, which had come under fire from locals for offering shelter and food without requiring that clients be sober or off drugs, often sat in on their classes, offering his perspective and earning the admiration of students for his dedication. Some students even spent their free time volunteering there. It was remarkable to meet someone who had worked so hard trying to improve the lives of people experiencing homelessness in Utica "and he's facing such backlash and vitriol," Sorensen says. "It was really eye-opening."

Sorensen, who is majoring in public policy, plans to work in disability rights after graduation. The semester spent studying homelessness was profoundly different from taking traditional college classes. For one, it pulled students off campus, highlighting how separate Hamilton is from the community around it. That made Sorensen wonder why Hamilton hadn't gotten involved in Utica's struggles with homelessness.

Second, there was an immediacy to the learning. "Most of my courses have felt distant from the subject matter they were focused on and this didn't," Sorensen says. "It felt like a first-person perspective."

It's not as if other coursework hasn't touched on real problems. A public-policy course examined the decision-making process around setting speed limits. A statistics class in economics focused on red-lining and inequality. Those were worthy topics of discussion, but still felt abstract, Sorensen says.

The experience also had an emotional component. “There was definitely a feeling of being almost weighed down by the terribleness of what we were exposed to,” says Sorensen, specifically “learning that so much of our inability to solve it is because of a lack of political will.”

It never felt despairing, however. While homelessness is not a narrow problem, says Sorensen, it’s also not overwhelming. “We learned about the specific political environment of Utica and its history and how the opioid epidemic contributed to the problem.” The students also learned how housing costs are a key driver of homelessness. “It made us feel like this was a solvable problem,” says Sorensen. “We were learning the skills to articulate compelling solutions.” The students’ research on housing, homelessness and addiction, in fact, was presented to some community leaders and helped move homelessness to the top of the mayor’s agenda, Anechiarico says.

Finally, Sorensen noted, the collaborative nature of the project helped mitigate the tendency toward perfectionism, where people are hesitant to say anything in class for fear of being wrong. “This program creates the opportunity to raise your hand and be like, I have a thought and it’s not a full thought, but I’m going to see if I can put it out there and maybe somebody can build off of it. And that’s not that scary.”

Anechiarico noticed the same thing. Being together five days a week created a level of social cohesion that is hard to replicate in a single course. “They really ended up liking each other. They trusted each other and worked on things together,” he says. “I didn’t ask them to do it. They just did it.”

Does immersive learning demand a full course load, dedicated professors, and time away from campus? After all, such programs are by definition small, as well as costly and time-consuming to organize. Or can the same benefits be found in a single course, or a series of courses spaced out over time? Advocates say they can.

One of the more successful examples is Purdue University’s 15-credit-hour certificate program, Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts, designed to get students on the STEM-oriented campus interested in studying the humanities and liberal arts. Its two-semester first-year sequence, called Transformative Texts, Critical Thinking and Communication I, fulfills general-education requirements and now draws 37 percent of incoming students.

Undergraduates in small groups might discuss and debate Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* Dante's *Inferno* or Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein.* They are encouraged to find their own way to express what they have learned, too: by creating a video game, perhaps, or a podcast series on Great Books.

In a way, Transformative Texts represents a return to the roots of liberal-arts education, when all students were expected to engage with great works of writing and timeless ideas. That was perhaps the original form of immersive learning. But as the number of students who major in the humanities has cratered and those who pursue STEM degrees — which are loaded with disciplinary requirements — has grown, many students have little time to engage in this kind of coursework.

Cornerstone, which began in 2018, was a response to that trend. In 2016 only 10 percent of graduating Purdue students had taken a class in literature, and just 7 percent had taken American history.

The program's advocates say that it also illustrates how just one or two immersive courses can have a profound effect. There's something about reading classic works that ask the big questions in life, taught by seasoned professors in small groups, that helps students orient themselves in college.

"I can tell you some really emotional stories about kids who were lost when they came here," says Melinda Zook, a history professor and Cornerstone's founding director. "It's a huge school and they had all these other courses as STEM students, huge classes where they felt completely anonymous, didn't know anyone, were often taught by an adjunct or a graduate student. And then they get into Transformative Texts and it's sort of like homeroom. And it's a professor, and they are known and they are seen and they can take ownership over their education."

Maddie Milharcic is a second-year student majoring in environmental and natural-resource engineering. She enrolled in Transformative Texts her freshman year and found the class discussions to be invigorating and introspective in a way that her other courses could not be.

She recalls one debate that stemmed from reading the *Epic of Gilgamesh,* an ancient poem, about whether man can exert godlike control over the world. That was a fascinating topic, she says, in the context of engineering, which essentially aims to take dominion over the natural world. She found herself reflecting on questions such as, how much of the world can we actually control, and how much of that should we

control? She had a similarly lively debate about the American Dream when discussing *The Great Gatsby* with classmates from Brazil and China.

"A lot of times with STEM-based courses there's a right answer — a correct path and a correct arrival point. But not so much with these two courses," says Milharcic, who hopes to do nonprofit or humanitarian work in developing nations. "It was nice to take a breather and use different parts of my brain and have those exercised."

Milharcic notes that many people her age feel as if "the world is on fire" and want to do something about it. "I think that's the reason a lot of students are in engineering: Maybe we can help someone somewhere. But you come in and you don't really know anything about engineering — or anything at all at this point — and sit in a lecture hall with 300 students. And it can be hard, especially coming off the application process where you describe your career goals and you talk about what you want to do with these big dreams."

Zook points to another benefit of these immersive classes, besides the in-depth discussions and tight friendships that often form. They allow students to take a step back from the urgency of the world's problems, to concentrate instead on "joy and beauty" through a poem or a piece of art.

She has noticed a shift in generational attitudes toward work for which this kind of reflective learning is beneficial. "I don't think credentialism is exactly dead. And certainly that desire for a job at the end of these four years, that's not dead either. But it may not be the same as millennials," she says. "They were going to do whatever it takes, jump through whatever hoop we put in front of them to get there.

"This is a more contemplative, maybe a little more sullen group. But you can bring them out of their shell. And they're delightful if you're able to do that."

Martha Fay Burtis, associate director of the Open Learning and Teaching Collaborative at Plymouth State University, has been thinking along similar lines. A few years ago the university received a grant from the Davis Educational Foundation to develop what it calls "cluster pedagogy," and bring an interdisciplinary approach to complex challenges like climate change. As part of the curricular revamp, all first-year Plymouth students are required to take a "wicked problems" course.

Access to clean water, for example, is a geographical problem, but also a sociological and political one. That teaches students that the most difficult and intransigent problems are not owned by a particular discipline, says Burtis, but such an approach also provides them habits of mind, or ways of thinking about these challenges that gives them a level of agency.

“You don’t want to be teaching a class as students are coming in that’s basically like, ‘Yeah, everything’s screwed up. And this is hopeless,’” she says. “So it takes a particular kind of pedagogical approach.”

Burtis feels like hope is what’s missing in today’s students, which is understandable given the strains they are under.

“People used to seek out college degrees because they felt like it was a way to launch their lives in meaningful ways. And partly that was about being able to get jobs and support families, but it was also about being able to find purpose and find meaning in life,” she says. “I think if you really talk to students, what you would hear many of them say is that they don’t feel like they have that.”

Some of it is due to their age, for sure, but she adds, “I worry that for a lot of young people today, their anxiety isn’t so much about, ‘I need to make the right decisions so that I find meaning in my life and I end up on the right path.’ It’s more, ‘What is even a right decision when it feels like I don’t know what the future holds, and I don’t know that I have any power or control over where I will end up?’”

Immersive learning is designed to give students more control, in that regard, because it allows them some determination of what they want to explore and how.

James Madison University has been taking this approach through a program called X-Labs, which offers open-ended, interdisciplinary courses on a wide range of topics, such as foreign-policy challenges, medical innovations, or e-sports. Seán McCarthy, an associate professor in the school of writing, rhetoric and technical communication, who has taught several courses through the lab, is a huge proponent of this form of learning. Last semester was a reminder of why: Professors across campus, like many across the nation, had difficulty engaging their students. A colleague of his termed this phenomenon “militant apathy,” in that students seemed almost defiant in their

indifference to school work. McCarthy's X-Labs students, by contrast, were "completely fired up."

Immersive learning has plenty of champions, but it still remains on the periphery of the college experience, for reasons large and small. A big one is cost, of course, and institutions have yet to find ways to make immersive learning widely accessible, particularly for lower-income students.

The most intensive experiences, those involving multiple courses and time away from campus, are almost impossible to expand. Not only are they time consuming to organize, they often require small classes to work well. The Hamilton Justice Lab program, for example, was capped at 16 students. The transportation and logistics of getting students back and forth to Utica, says Anechiarico, would have made a large group impossible. Staff at Hamilton's Levitt Center for Public Affairs, of which he is director, provide significant support, including budgeting, administration, and community outreach. Anechiarico himself supervised the internships and met with students as they worked on their research papers. "There's a lot of bureaucracy involved in this," he says.

If you think there's a crisis in student engagement, that's nothing compared to the crisis in faculty time management.

Similarly, Casagrande, the Lehigh anthropology professor, says that the Ecuador program required an enormous amount of logistics involving home stays and travel, much of which was handled by a third-party provider.

Then there's the issue of faculty time. Casagrande considers himself an innovative professor, using historical reenactments in class to discuss climate-change negotiations, for example, or taking students on field trips to buy trees for an urban-permaculture class. But designing and running these activities takes time away from things like research. Because he is tenured, he is less worried about that. But that puts him in the minority.

"If you think there's a crisis in student engagement," he says, "that's nothing compared to the crisis in faculty time management."

At Lehigh, the big challenge now is to figure out how to scale up Lehigh Launch — which was designed not to cost students any more than a semester on campus — and perhaps bring some of the lessons learned back to other classrooms, says Matherly, the vice provost. “We can have a wonderfully curated experience,” she says, “but if the only people who benefit are the 11 who do this, it really isn’t adding much value.”

McCarthy, the James Madison professor, notes that bureaucratic impediments in higher education — from funding structures to disciplinary silos to the ways in which faculty are evaluated and promoted — have long blocked innovative teaching from growing beyond an isolated program or a boutique enterprise. “A lot of this culture already exists,” he says of the creativity he sees around him. “It just needs to be properly supported and celebrated and enhanced in our curricular design.”

Designing and running these courses may involve finding a community partner to study or work with, creating a class structure that is adaptable as projects evolve, handling logistics and project-related costs, and open-ended assignments that require regular faculty guidance — particularly if students are struggling.

Phillip Motley, an associate professor of communication design at Elon University, has taught a variety of immersive courses, including January-term classes and a semester-long 12-credit program on social innovation that involved working with a consortium of local nonprofit groups.

These sorts of courses require not only more time, but often a different sort of structure, he says. You can’t drive into town to meet a community partner, for example, when your class meets twice a week for 70 minutes.

In admissions work McCarthy does for JMU, he’s seen that families are interested in things like experiential education and want colleges to teach their children skills that will help them become active citizens. But universities too often take those interests and turn them into buzzwords, and “Frankenstein” programs together, he says. Instead, McCarthy argues, administrators must consider more fluid structures that allow funds and resources to more easily cross departmental boundaries. “It’s a grand challenge — a wicked problem in itself,” he says.

The grand challenge of creating more immersive-learning opportunities may be one reason why many universities have preferred instead to tackle what happens *beyond* the classroom. Early-warning systems that track students’ grades and send alerts to advisers, chatbots that answer simple questions quickly and at any hour,

and an emphasis on creating a sense of belonging through peer mentoring and success coaching have shown promising results.

It's not as if traditional classroom structures have been left untouched. The movement toward more inclusive and active learning strategies has grown exponentially during the pandemic, as professors have learned the benefits, particularly for first-generation students and those from underrepresented groups. But as long as these efforts remain a patchwork, colleges will continue to struggle with student disconnection.

Several national projects have emerged to try to reset the narrative around the purpose of undergraduate education, advocating a more expansive, equitable, and immersive ideal.

The Postsecondary Value Commission, led by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Institute for Higher Education Policy, has attempted to define and measure the value of education after high school, in part to address deep concerns about the cost of college and the implications for lower-income students, students of color, and others who face disproportionate hurdles. The commission included well-being and civic engagement in their definition of value, and incorporated research on student learning and growth by Arum, the UC-Irvine scholar.

The Teagle Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities are underwriting the expansion of Purdue's Cornerstone project to more than 25 colleges. Teagle has long supported work in deepening liberal-arts education in a way that makes strong programs available to all students, whether they study at a community college or a highly selective one.

That's because too many institutions are failing to challenge students to dig into the big human questions they want to explore, says Andrew Delbanco, the foundation's president and a professor of American studies at Columbia University.

Our students are feeling anxious and disengaged not because they're not interested in school, but because of these larger financial barriers. They're

spending a lot of time trying to fill financial gaps.

Delbanco agrees that the ways in which political and academic leaders have spoken about higher education for the past generation or so has had harmful side effects. From colleges, he says, the message has been: Gain a competitive advantage, earn prestigious credentials. “That’s all tied up with the whole rankings mania.”

As for politicians, it’s about return on investment. “If you look at the speeches that President Obama gave about higher education and the speeches that President George W. Bush gave about higher education, it would be challenging to distinguish between the two. They’re both talking about the economic advantage of the individual and the economic competitiveness of the nation and in the global marketplace.”

But if you talk to students about “skills-based education,” they tune out, Delbanco says. They want to get help from thoughtful teachers and peers and imaginative works, so they can develop a voice in shaping the future. “They don’t want to be shaped by these impersonal forces.”

The most ambitious project is also the newest. The Paradigm Project, a seven-year, national effort led by David Scobey, director of Bringing Theory to Practice, wants to transform undergraduate education into a meaning-making enterprise where experiential learning is integrated throughout the system. Rather than a study-abroad program here, a civic-engagement class there, the curriculum would be organized around problems, project-based, and interdisciplinary. Equally important, this reorienting should not be any more expensive than what has been traditionally offered, which means that colleges would also have to think about what they have to stop doing, says Scobey.

The project wants to accomplish this by creating a grass-roots movement of evangelists to shift the public narrative away from “instrumental vocationalism” toward a more holistic view of education that includes personal development and community well-being. Doing nothing, Scobey argues, will simply cede ground to those pushing an evermore transactional interpretation.

“The nightmare version of that,” he says, is “the unbundling of higher ed, where you’re just getting a six-week certificate on top of a six-week certificate.”

What can make immersive learning more common? Students on the fast-track through college — those loaded up with required courses or burdened by debt — are unlikely to take a course that's optional. It's been shown, for example, that first-generation students are less likely to participate in any sort of high-impact practice, like study abroad or service learning.

Some say that immersive education will never really take off until the cost of college becomes more manageable. It's hard to engage when you have to race to work after class just to pay your bills.

"We are seeing students transferring from four-year to two-year schools with professional programs simply because speed is important," says Eve Shapiro, chief knowledge officer of Beyond 12, a nonprofit that provides coaching for almost 3,000 college students who are lower-income, first-generation, or from a historically underrepresented group.

That means a lot of the community connections are getting stripped away. And other, more engaging options, like internships — especially if they are unpaid — are simply off the table. "Our students are feeling anxious and disengaged not because they're not interested in school but because of these larger financial barriers," Shapiro says. "They're spending a lot of time trying to fill financial gaps."

The only solution, advocates say, is to make the experience integral, as Scobey's project aims to do, to undergraduate education — without additional cost. Some institutions have moved further along that path.

Plymouth State, for example, has shed academic departments to create cluster pedagogy on topics such as health and human enrichment, or arts and technologies, which will allow the university to design more project-based, interdisciplinary, and exploratory courses. But it remains a work in progress, says Burtis, the associate director of the Open Learning and Teaching Collaborative. It's easier to break down disciplinary silos in first-year and general-education programming than in a curriculum that takes students through to graduation.

Ball State has taken a different approach, offering a wide array of immersive-education courses since 2000, and they have become part of the university's identity. An office of immersive learning provides grants, professional development, and other support for faculty interested in creating and teaching one of these classes.

While immersive learning took a hit from Covid, the numbers are climbing back up, said Jackie Grutsch McKinney, an English professor and Ball State's director of immersive learning and high-impact practices. This semester about 1,200 students are enrolled in 85 sections — almost as many as would enroll each semester before the pandemic hit. (Ball State enrolls roughly 14,000 undergraduates.)

Several departments have figured out how to work immersive learning into their majors, which makes these courses particularly attractive to students, McKinney says. Architecture students, for example, are competing in a solar decathlon to build a house. A course taught by both art and biology professors produces a book for children that focuses on endangered or invasive species. A math class for non-math majors, which counts toward their core requirements, works with Habitat for Humanity to help develop financial tools.

Students are finding it more difficult to take risks on things they don't fully understand. They want very specific clarity in terms of when things are due, what they can expect. They are not as willing to live in ambiguity.

Integrating more of these immersive-learning courses and other high-impact practices into majors, says McKinney, is key if Ball State wants to ensure they're widely accessible on its increasingly diverse campus. Students are extremely pragmatic about their plans, she notes, particularly if they are pursuing majors with many curricular demands. In that scenario, selling someone on an immersive-learning course isn't likely to happen if it doesn't count toward graduation.

Another challenge is also emerging, one that suggests a real struggle to engage the very students who could benefit the most from this style of teaching.

Blame it on exhaustion, the fear of failure, or the impact of remote learning, but many academics have found students increasingly risk-avoidant. It's a paradox: Students say they want more control over their learning, but they are also uncertain what that entails, especially when, as with immersive learning, plans and goals may change midstream.

"What happens in an immersive-learning situation is that expectations can be very fluid as you make discoveries with community partners and as a group," says Jennifer Blackmer, director of the Virginia B. Ball Center for Creative Inquiry at Ball State. "They are trying to figure it out and trying to do so within a much more stressful environment."

A few years ago, the center began developing team-taught, transdisciplinary seminars that emphasize collaborative learning and problem solving. The first of these seminars was offered in 2020, before the pandemic hit, and it had no problem recruiting 80 students. But since then, says Blackmer, it's been a struggle to attract students, a problem she has discussed extensively with colleagues.

"Students are finding it more difficult to take risks on things they don't fully understand," she says. "They want very specific clarity in terms of when things are due, what they can expect. They are not as willing to live in ambiguity."

Like McKinney, Blackmer is attempting to tackle this problem by promoting the value of interdisciplinary courses to faculty and advisers, and integrating them into majors. Students need to be persistent, too, she says, in pushing for what they want. The more opportunities they have for immersive learning, the less intimidating it will seem.

Higher education is at a decisive moment. Will it continue down the path of credentialism and skill building, or will it embrace a more expansive view, one that engages an increasingly diverse, skeptical, scared — but also hopeful — generation?

Beth McMurtrie is a senior writer for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, where she writes about the future of learning and technology's influence on teaching.