

# 4 Simple Ways to Help Your Most-Disconnected Students

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Mischa Willett

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At my university, I teach in a program designed to help new students who are least likely to persist in their first year and who tend to have trouble graduating on time or at all. We do all sorts of activities — teach them email etiquette, explain what a provost is, help them identify academic challenges they’ve faced and may confront again in college.

It’s called the Ascent program, and it’s been wildly successful. We retain Ascent students at a much higher rate than their counterparts in the same academic and demographic categories. The program is growing but small, so retention remains a challenge for us — as it

is across higher education, especially after an undergraduate's first semester. For many students who choose to leave, their stated reason is my least favorite one to hear: They feel disconnected.

That's frustrating because it's a problem we can do something about, and I don't mean just the student-success specialists. All of us — as faculty members, administrators, and staff members — shape campus culture, intentionally and inadvertently. And we can mold it in ways that will help students of all stripes feel more connected to us, to one another, and to our campuses. Here are some practices I use to that end:

**Tell your story.** I once gave a poetry reading at an arts event with Eileen Jimenez, and we were asked to introduce ourselves. She began by giving her grandmother's name and her mother's name. I thought it was beautiful that she had situated herself in a generational story, as the necessary background of her identity — even before giving her own name.

Sometimes in class, I tell my students about my grandparents, too. Two of them had been incarcerated, as had a few of my uncles, my best friend from childhood, and my own brother. I don't share that information to seek sympathy, or make a big deal about it. But I want the students to know this piece of my story, and a few other bits too: that we were on food stamps when I was young, that I dropped out of college myself, that I went back and was the first in my family to graduate.

Those few personal details let my students know that, if any of them come from neighborhoods frequented by the police, I know what that's like. If they have family members in the penal system and suffer the attendant shame and struggle, or if their families can't always afford food, I know what that's like too.

Perhaps some readers are thinking, "Well, I don't have stories like that. What can I tell students that will make them feel more comfortable and welcome on our campus?"

The answer is: something. Anything. It doesn't have to be sad, or a story of difficulty at all. Some professors don't seem to realize the huge distance that first-generation students perceive between their professors and themselves. They tend to have few adult role models, and certainly not ones with Ph.D.s. I know I had never seen a college campus before I moved into a dorm room as a freshman. It was bewildering in hundreds of ways.

We can help smooth the transition via small acts that collapse those distances and humanize us to the starry-eyed and overwhelmed. So tell your students the names of your kids. Show them a picture of your pet. Be wise about protecting your privacy, of course, but talking about your neighborhood can make you and the region around the campus come alive to students. Mention your favorite music, give them a chance to giggle and judge. Such shared details can make things that are intimidating feel a little less so.

**Seek out the lost.** When I dropped out of college and went back home to work at the mall, my first-year composition professor noticed. He had seen something in me and called me at work — a few states away (on the telephone!) — to persuade me to come back. I did, and the course of my life changed.

I often think about all the steps he must have taken, just to get hold of me. That was before the internet, so he must've walked down to the registrar's office and asked for my home number. He had to make the call and, when I wasn't there, to explain to my mother who he was and what he wanted. Then he had to get my work number and call it, explaining to my shift manager who he was, and then give me the stirring speech.

But before any of that happened, he first had to notice that I was gone — and that's the part that seems most remarkable to me. He noticed I was missing and took action. Actually, the same prof had noticed I was absent once before, when I'd overslept and missed class. Naturally, I ran into him the next day on the campus. "We missed you in class yesterday," he said, professorially. "Yeah, yeah, I ...," I replied, searching for some good excuse. Before I found one, he said: "It's too bad. You would've liked it. Part of the class goes missing when you're not there."

Three things occurred to me in that moment that never had before:

- First: You could enjoy a class? It wasn't just a duty? He had talked about class as if it were something fun I was missing.
- Second: I added something to the class. Attending or not attending was my business, I had assumed. But this fellow thought that I contributed in a meaningful way, that I made other people's experience of the course better. I wasn't, in other words, letting only myself down by not going.
- Third: I was seen. I was not just a tuition bill, or an enrollment number, or even a student. I was myself, a person, a member of a community.

One thing we can do then, as faculty members, to help both retention and the student experience more broadly, is to keep our eyes open. Notice your students. And when you can, do something, however small, to show that you see them.

**Settle for "medium-impact" practices.** Perhaps you've read the literature showing that "high-impact practices" — seminars, internships, independent studies, group projects, study abroad — are key markers that help students (and, later, alumni) connect with an institution.

But it is hard to know how to confer those benefits on a student who can't take advantage of them or chooses not to for whatever mix of reasons. For instance, take independent study. Usually it's instigated by a student who is intrigued by a topic and approaches a professor with an idea for further study. Most first-generation college students won't know what independent study is, or that it is an option to take a class that is not on the official schedule

of courses. They have to be taught that this option is available to them. Perhaps the best you can do: Instead of waiting to be approached, invite a few promising students to hang around after class and pitch the concept of independent study to them. Make the first move.

You can also set the bar a bit lower and still make a difference in their lives with “medium-impact” practices — in terms of both their time and yours.

When I was an undergraduate, going to the theater at my college opened up my world enormously. I’m not sure I’d have become a writer were it not for seeing Dylan Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood*. And I wouldn’t have attended the play had someone not invited me. Here, too, is a rich source of potential connection and even transformation that many students will pass up unless someone reaches out to initiate them. Most campuses have such things: poetry readings, guest speakers, dance programs, plays.

Say there’s a free event coming up. There is a huge difference between you, as a faculty member, standing at the front of the room and saying: (a) nothing about it; (b) “there’s a play on campus this weekend”; (c) “you should go to the campus play this weekend”; (d) “you’ll get extra credit if you go to the play this weekend”; and (e) “I’ll be going with my family; you should come, too, on Friday at 7 p.m.”

**Create community where and when you can.** That’s needed as isolation continues to rip at the social fabric that has been fraying for a generation. I can’t overemphasize — and very likely, I don’t have to, because anyone who works with 18-year-olds knows — how socially inept students seem in recent years. Blame cellphones, blame social media, blame the pandemic — but it’s difficult for students to make real connections with other people, in a way it never was for most of us.

So I think we have to do it for them. That extends to invitations to events, as described above, but even to things like group work. Left to their own devices, I have found that students would rather suffer alone, misunderstand the assignment, or even fail out of class than ask a classmate (or me) for help.

Helping them forge those necessary connections is, in my view, a part of faculty work. If a student misses class, I don’t say, “Ask someone for the notes.” Instead, I say, “This is James; he seems to take good notes. James, will you share your notes?” This approach puts all the awkwardness on me rather than on the students and absolves them of a task that many are anxious about performing.

But also, our job — or our role as faculty members, anyway — doesn’t stop when class is over.

The other day I saw a former student at a bus stop looking blue. But I was in a hurry, so I did that checklist thing: Should I look down at my phone and avoid contact? Smile and keep walking? Plus I was embarrassed because I had forgotten her name. I mustered an earnest “How’s it going?” and she burst into tears: “I just don’t know what I’m doing with my life.”

That wasn't a problem we could solve at the bus stop. But we could start. We talked. I shared some suggestions. She felt better. But I almost missed the opportunity to connect and make a difference.

Perhaps now more than ever, faculty members need to see and be seen around the campus. It doesn't cost much, in terms of time or money, to take small steps that counter the disconnection many students feel, and it may help all of us feel more connected, too.