



Student Engagement in the Communication Classroom: An Intervention to Encourage Student Success

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ABSTRACT

Universities implement a variety of interventions to address student engagement and retention. This is especially true post-pandemic as faculty attempt to return to a pre-pandemic structure. *Emerging adulthood* aligns with the personal responsibility demanded of college students as well as changes in personal growth. In the current climate, stress has been shown to negatively impact executive functioning, the cognitive processes necessary for academic success. This essay describes an intervention encouraging student self-reflexivity around processes for engagement, academic success, and retention. *Communication Fundamentals for College Success*—a 5-week, two-credit workshop—was developed and delivered by the authors. Curriculum focused on time management, study skills, communication in the classroom, and accessing campus resources. This essay concludes with student testimonials culled from their “Assembling Your Toolkit” assignment.

KEYWORDS: executive function, retention, pedagogy, resilience, mental health, COVID-19

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Introduction

At our university convocation in August 2022, the provost referenced our *duty of care* as we welcomed students to a new academic year. To the authors, the phrase *duty of care* implied a responsibility to provide more structure as well as more support for our students. Whether due to their synchronous Zoom-delivered or asynchronous online courses or being back in the classroom (but masked), it was our collective understanding that students were still reeling from COVID-19. Whether they had been in high school or college, they were emerging from 2+ years of less-than-optimal learning environments due to the pandemic. Faculty noted that our in-person students in the spring quarter of 2022 seemed to think we were still *on screen*, often staring blankly back at us as we carried out our discussion-based curriculum. We also intuited a diminished sense of personal responsibility among our students, a sort of learned helplessness no doubt encouraged by what we observed to be the pandemic's *whatever-it-takes* practice of open-ended due dates for assignments and loose attendance policies (Carmack, 2023).

Across academia, professors and administrators have been trying to curtail weakening levels of student engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent move to online teaching prompted us to investigate what we could do in our college to strengthen engagement, increase students' sense of belonging and, with it, student retention. Whether courses occur synchronously or asynchronously, these critical components of engagement and a student's sense of belonging are absent from the vast majority of online modalities (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021). As Gillen-O'Neel highlights, both the emotional and behavioral development that comes with a sense of belonging is particularly important for our students as emerging adults. Our sense of urgency to increase a sense of belonging among our students, and a sensitivity to the context of emerging adulthood, prompted us to design and implement the communication-focused educational intervention that is the focus of this article.

Transitioning from the learning environments of high school to college has been—for some time—a discussion of great interest not only to university staff and faculty but within families as well (Marrun, 2018; Mwangi et al., 2020; Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). The concept of “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000, p. 469) aligns with the greater personal responsibility demanded of college students than of high school students, as well as the closely related changes in personal growth, which often result from social and psychological changes. As Arnett (2000) describes it, the transitional years from the relative dependency of high school to becoming independent (ideally by the mid- to late-twenties) “are the most *volitional* years of life” (p. 469, emphasis original). Part and parcel to growth in this model is effective psychosocial functioning, which was severely undermined by the COVID-19 limitations.

Initiatives at Other Institutions

University faculty have recognized proclivities, practices, and patterns among undergraduates for some time and, collectively, these behaviors predate the pandemic. Arguably, the pandemic further impaired an already noticeable shift in student learning, cognitive functioning, and communication competence requiring a range of interventional strategies (Son et al., 2020). For example, Archbell and Coplan (2022) note that even though social anxiety is prevalent among college students, little research has been conducted to explore the relationship between social anxiety and academic performance. In their study of over 1,000 undergraduates with multiple majors at a Canadian university, they found that students with social anxiety communicated less frequently with instructors and exhibited lower overall engagement. One recommendation from this study was to move from an instructional paradigm (with a focus on content) to a learner paradigm involving more active participation among peers, leading to more positive relationships and a sense of belonging.

A study focusing on student engagement among an education major cohort, conducted in the United Kingdom by Millican et al. (2024), found that attendance and contributing to the classroom conversation were positively correlated with engagement; however, a wide range of obstacles (transportation, needing to work, and mental health) often prevented students from attending as much as they would have liked. Outcomes such as chronic absenteeism, in turn, create a hesitation to contribute to class discussion and small group activities when they *could* attend, because students felt less competent. Similar to Archbell and Coplan, the authors recommend emphasizing classroom collaboration and creativity, and encouraging students to take a more active role in their learning.

More closely aligned with our project is the work of Myatt and Kennette (2023). In a synthesis of empirical support for the role of positive psychology in higher education, Myatt and Kennette focus on how students motivate themselves to take responsibility for their learning and practice the social and emotional tools that will serve them beyond their university years. Citing research by Zhang (2022) on post-pandemic college students, these authors frame positive psychology as integral to student well-being because of the shared perception (among faculty and students) of a higher incidence of negative emotions on campus. In short, they argue that meta-learning increases satisfaction of faculty and students alike.

Recognizing the need of the current historical moment as well as the opportunity to respond in an evidence-based manner to the needs of our students as emerging adults, the co-authors collaborated in the design, delivery, and evaluation of a for-credit workshop called *Communication Fundamentals for College Success*. This essay describes the conceptual frameworks that informed the design, the innovative use of self-assessment and reflection to support student growth, and preliminary feedback from students.

Conceptual Foundations

This section first reviews the constructs that explain and provide an evidence base for the design and content of the workshop.

Student Engagement

Researchers have identified at least four different approaches to explain student engagement: the behavioral perspective, the psychological perspective, the sociocultural perspective, and the holistic perspective (Kahu, 2013). The behavioral perspective has to do with teaching practices and considers how time and effort in purposeful, active learning activities—including attendance—contribute to engagement (Coates, 2007). The psychological perspective owes its name to the internal processes of motivation that are the focus of this approach; this varies considerably student to student and can evolve over time through interventions such as mandatory advising and mentoring (Fredricks et al., 2004). The sociocultural perspective carries with it a constructionist approach, emphasizing the institutional context. For Thomas (2002), the culture of an institution creates in-groups and out-groups, and the resulting bias—whether intentionally or not—leads to poor results across the board for the “fish out of water” (p. 431). Finally, the holistic perspective recognizes the implications of all these perspectives and defines engagement as “the perceptions, expectations and experience of being a student and the construction of being a student” (Bryson et al., 2009, p. 1). Engagement, then, is a multifaceted phenomenon that extends beyond the classroom and includes how work is accomplished in multiple sites including those beyond the classroom—the financial aid office, the library, the computer lab, the cafeteria, the dorm, off-campus or on-campus employment—all places where students can find a sense of belonging, or not. This confluence of influences on the success and emotional life of the student is referred to as “life-load” (Hews et al., 2022, p. 9). We embraced this holistic perspective in our course design.

Executive Functioning

Although we shifted our focus significantly by the time we offered the workshop, we began with the concept of executive functioning as essential to supporting student success and well-being. Executive functioning refers to self-regulation and cognitive controls such as planning, problem-solving, self-awareness and self-monitoring (Miyake & Friedman, 2012). Executive functioning skills are critical to success in the college classroom. However, as is the case with motivation, students present with these skills to varying degrees based on educational and personal background. In particular, first-generation college students and/or students from underrepresented groups may not have benefited from prior executive functioning preparation—formalized or not—in high school or through other contextual exposure, such as the workplace.

Executive functioning also includes behaviors related to goal-directed decision-making, adapting to new or different directives, and monitoring progress (Miyake & Friedman, 2012). For all adults, it has been demonstrated that stress impedes cognitive function; this includes executive function (Shields et al., 2016) as well as stress caused by social (rather than genetic) phenomena.

University students have been identified as a population at risk for diminished executive function, along with experiencing increased mental health challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Li et al., 2021).

Social Support and Mental Well-Being

Although increased access to mental health counseling almost certainly helps to alleviate some mental health symptoms, such services are only scratching the surface of needed student support. During the pandemic, students in both high school and college suffered from decreased interpersonal relationships, limited physical activity, less-than-ideal environments for studying (including poor internet capability), and uneven online teaching skills and expertise (Tortella et al., 2021). These experiences can be attributable to confinement-related factors that resulted from lockdowns, social distancing, and remote learning because of the closure of schools and face-to-face human interaction and have led to diminished capacities in the classroom (Tabullo et al., 2022). Because depression and anxiety (including social anxiety) had existed on college campuses prior to COVID-19, many educators and counselors have already implemented a variety of strategies in the interest of keeping students engaged.

Resilience

Educational counselors and others use the concept of *resilience* (more casually referred to as *grit*) to describe how students get back on track following a setback. Resilience—an aspect of positive psychology—is based in part on the belief that people want to succeed. Resilience in the educational context has been defined as a *bounce back* from events or situations considered stressful, whether originating from adversity, trauma, tragedy, or threat (Smith et al., 2008). With regard to historically underrepresented groups, resilience is especially important for academic success (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010). In an environment of universities competing for students, cultivating resilience strategies among students is imperative for retention (Eisenberg et al., 2016).

We acknowledge that executive function, resilience, grit, and even positive psychology are contested terms (e.g., Credé, 2018). We know also that activating students in the classroom and having them develop a sense of belonging and self-efficacy are two of the three major factors (along with perceived worth of the curriculum) in terms of engagement which, Tinto (2010) argues, results in retention. Transitioning out of pandemic-related teaching and classroom management practices will take time. Our contention is that the transformative potential of higher education requires the skills associated with executive functioning, however labeled. Consequently, we planned, scheduled, administered, and evaluated a pilot workshop series to improve students' broad learning capacity via improved skills often related to executive functioning and also related to well-being. The remainder of this essay describes an original "for credit" workshop course in our College of Communication with a focus on defining and teaching those skills associated with executive function but which we packaged (and embraced) as student engagement. What follows is our plan for the workshop, the delivery—the course has now run three times with ever-increasing enrollment—and preliminary outcomes identified in student responses.

Preconditions and Design of the Intervention

Drawing on our considerable collective experience and success as university professors (each of the three faculty authors has earned university teaching awards in the prior 5 years), we considered how various skills and behaviors could be taught in the context of communication for *success*—asking for help, learning about university resources (i.e., Writing Center, Counseling Services), communicatively engaging in class with both peers and professors, and navigating academic learning software (i.e., D2L). Seeing an opportunity to apply for university funds to support this intervention as a study, we were awarded a small grant that enabled us to support course administration and data management for the purposes of evaluating project outcomes. We also applied for and received IRB approval to collect student data on a number of measures, both qualitative and quantitative, with students enrolled in the class signing consent forms acknowledging participation.

We also recognized the opportunity presented by *dangling* two credits (half of a typical four-credit course) made available to most of our university's undergraduates by the undergraduate pricing structure. Students' tuition package covers the cost of 18 credits per quarter but a full load for most students is four 4-credit classes. In the sciences, those two credits are employed in the *lab* offerings of chemistry and biology; however, they often go unused in programs (like communication and other social sciences) that do not have mandatory lab hours. Given that the workshop would be completely optional and potentially an added time and effort investment for students who were enrolled full-time, the ability to offer this workshop *for credit* and ostensibly *free of charge* was critical to its feasibility.

The decision to design the workshop to run for 5 weeks in the middle of the quarter was also strategic. The course begins in Week 3 and ends prior to Week 8. We learned from the academic advisors in our college that beginning the course after the drop-add period would provide some students with an opportunity to pick up credits they would otherwise lose. In some cases, students also may seek workshop credit because they miss the standard registration window and need to ensure continued progress on their degree. Still other students were drawn to the curriculum itself, recognizing their success in college was contingent on improving their strategy in balancing four classes and, often, employment. We saw the opportunity, then, to offer a communication-focused workshop in the form of a two-credit, 5-week class, specifically within our discipline, and open to students from across the university.

In addition to the learning outcomes for the workshop itself, the team held in mind the following objectives for the project: First, to observe and record improvements in students' self-reported measures of organization and time management skills, help-seeking, growth mindset, and ability to balance different roles and responsibilities in their lives. Second, to cultivate practices of self-reflection and future planning related to their academic lives. Third, to identify the features of the curriculum that students predicted as having the greatest impact on their future success.

The authors met regularly in the fall quarter of 2022 to share resources, short-list topics, and assign modules and, although we received encouragement from the dean and program director, we did not receive any course releases or overload pay to plan and deliver the course. The second author agreed to serve as the instructor of record with others volunteering to guest lecture topics of personal interest and expertise. She was able to do this because of a course release associated with a different project (reducing her 2-quarter load to three classes rather than four), which allowed her to split one teaching assignment in half, teaching two units of the workshop in 2 quarters, each with a 1.5 course load.

Intervention Design

This intervention is a novel two-credit hour course co-taught by instructional faculty in the College of Communication and two guest speakers (a visit from the head of advising in the college and representatives from our Office of Health Promotion and Wellness). Participants are undergraduate students recruited to the course through flyers posted in student common areas, referrals by advisors, and the campus Continuity and Engagement Office. The course meets for two, 90-minute classes per week for 5 weeks, with the following composite Learning Outcomes. After completing this workshop, students will be able to:

1. Define their own learning styles/preferences and related needs for successful course completion;
2. Apply time management techniques to course workload planning;
3. Interpret course syllabi and assignment instructions in terms of professor expectations for performance and resources needed;
4. Integrate realistic self-care into their college-work-life routines;
5. Practice effective communication, both face-to-face and online, with professors, classmates, advisors, and student support staff; and
6. Define several types of learner engagement strategies.

The course design integrates modules on personal awareness, communication, and relational skills (including mindfulness and self-reflection), coping practices, and growth mindset alongside modules related to executive functioning such as scheduling and project management, goal-setting, and oral and written communication related to active learning. For the purposes of relationship-building and continuity, the instructor of record (second author) is responsible for overseeing the personal awareness and development curriculum. Additional instructors and a staff representative from the Office of Health and Wellness deliver modules related to executive function and other classroom skills designed to build both confidence and awareness of campus resources; including, for example, counseling services (see the Appendix for the schedule of topics). The workshop, then, has ten 90-minute class meetings, with the instructor of record introducing the module on the first class meeting of each week and a visiting instructor coming to the class for the second meeting of each week to reinforce specific aspects of the module. Short readings are assigned for most of the class meetings, utilizing both academic and popular press (i.e., *Harvard Business Review*) publications.

Assessment

As part of their assessment for this workshop, students regularly contribute written reflections, and the course culminates in an “Assembling Your Toolkit” writing assignment. For each module, three or five concepts or tools are introduced. In the concluding section of this essay, we provide a thematic analysis of the results from the “Assembling Your Toolkit” assignment, with representative quotations pulled from student essays. In the prompt for this culminating writing assignment, students are asked to identify “three tools that you will take from this class with you in your remaining college career and beyond.”

Outcomes From the Toolkit Assignment

Time management, developing a growth mindset (including resilience), self-care, and classroom engagement (participating and active listening) are the four tools named most frequently by students with well over half naming time management and growth mindset, and just under half identifying the importance of self-care. Over a third (40%) spoke to the importance of classroom engagement. Other less frequently identified concepts or skills recorded in these essays include the importance of self-reflection, understanding learning preferences, and cultivating study skills. Here, we provide some representative quotations from this “Assembling Your Toolkit” assignment which operationalizes the dominant themes in the students’ own words. These examples help demonstrate how students advance their educational confidence and overcome barriers with both short-term and long-term gains. In order to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms have been employed for these examples of student testimony.

Time Management. “Quinn,” a student enrolled in the Spring 2023 section of this class, writes,

I have come to realize that successful course completion requires careful planning and allocation of my limited time and resources. I have learned to create realistic schedules, set clear goals, and prioritize tasks to ensure I meet deadlines without compromising the quality of my work.

“Caryn,” a student enrolled in the Winter 2024 class, offers this perspective,

A crucial part of time management is having an overview of what is ahead of you. Mapping out the entire quarter provides a rough idea of which weeks will be the most busy and which weeks may be relatively light.

Also, from the Winter 2024 class is “Nolan” who has this to say about a specific tool he employs to help manage his schedule,

The first thing that has become part of my toolkit is my Google calendar. I now use this daily to add things to my schedule and to make sure I am not forgetting anything. I also get reminders from my calendar about things I had completely forgotten about which saved me.

Growth Mindset. A second frequently identified concept was developing a growth mindset. “Angie,” from the Spring 2023 class, demonstrates her understanding of a growth mindset this way:

In life, and especially as a student, there are beliefs we have about ourselves when it comes to mistakes or shortcomings. In my experience this usually would show up as saying ‘I can’t’ do something or ‘it’s too hard.’ How I am learning to counter that every day is by saying ‘I can’t do that yet’ or ‘it’s hard for me right now, but I will get it.’

“Gerry,” from the Winter 2024 class, describes growth mindset when she states:

One of the most impactful ideas I’ve gained from this class is the idea of a growth mindset. Rather than viewing intelligence and abilities as fixed traits, I’ve come to think of them as ever-changing and evolving endeavors. Every experience is a chance to grow and learn something new.

Another student from the Winter 2024 class, “Macey,” frames growth mindset in terms of potential when she writes, “I do believe human potential is unknown now, so I’ll do my best not to sell myself short and put learning (not achievement) first in all that I set out to do.”

Self-Care. The third most frequently named concept was self-care. Students named lots of different ways they fulfilled this notion of self-care. “Ajla,” enrolled in the Winter 2024 class, expresses her commitment to self-care by identifying a practice she learned in a different class but sees the connection to what she was being encouraged to do in the workshop. She writes, “I took a meditation class last quarter and I realized that the way I felt after each session was relief. I could feel myself being grounded and just felt some of that weight being lifted off my shoulders.”

Spring 2024 student “Jacqueline” was not familiar with the term self-care and translates it in a way that allows her some grace. She writes,

This course introduced me to the concept of practical self-care, which differentiated it from mere indulgence. I learned that self-care doesn’t have to be grand gestures; it can be as simple as making time for oneself amidst a busy schedule. The discussions about finding moments to relax, such as enjoying a cup of tea or taking a rejuvenating shower, resonated deeply with me.

Classroom Engagement. The students’ fourth most frequently identified concept was being engaged in the classroom. Spring 2023 student “Luka” lists engagement as the first item in her toolkit. She explains the importance of engagement,

We talked about student engagement and being more present in the classes one is in. One can simply sit in a class and listen halfway or do something else while the professor is talking, but why would they want to? Why attend a class just to sit in a room? [. . .] I had to remind myself to sit in front and ask questions. I found that the results were shockingly good. My grades were improving based on this very valuable tool.

In her narration of engagement, “Charlotte,” from the Winter 2024 class, focuses less on active listening and more on asking questions. She explains it this way,

Before I ask a question, I think about being perceived as silly or stupid. When I was younger, especially in junior high and early high school when I was one of three girls in the advanced math class, I worried about seeming too smart; this I equated with being the goody-two-shoes [. . .] I’d never thought of these performances as inherently political

and reflective of the system. [. . .] In going over ‘right’ (honestly curious, helpful, relevant) versus ‘wrong’ (aggressive, redundant) questions, I gained an understanding of the value of questions, particularly in a university setting.

In addition to assessing student responses from the workshop, we have also had two opportunities to share preliminary findings with academic audiences. These include a pre-conference at a regional communication conference and to our colleagues on our campus from across programs, schools, and colleges at the annual Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Conference. Feedback from those preliminary experiences acknowledged this effort as a labor of love but also as a legitimate and replicable model for student engagement. Notably, a member of the nursing faculty corresponded with us about applying some of the curriculum to their programs.

Next Steps

Having successfully delivered four workshops (with more scheduled for the subsequent academic year), the research dimension of the project continues. As we mentioned in the introduction, we applied for IRB approval to collect data from students. In addition to student testimony and other qualitative data derived from student reflections, we have also administered a variety of pre- and post-test surveys which measure aspects of qualities associated with executive function. We have now collected enough responses to achieve saturation in our analysis of the qualitative data, and to identify patterns of significance in the quantitative measures. In short, we are planning a longer, more complex analysis of multiple data points. Our original research protocol included a longitudinal follow-up to the workshop. Students were incentivized to participate in an interview during the quarter following their participation in the workshop; this was unsuccessful. Although establishing the longitudinal impact of the intervention remains an important goal, we have had to consider other approaches; for example, partnering with our Institutional Research team to compare students’ pre- and post-participation GPAs, or crafting a short survey to assess the endurance of skills and strategies over time.

Delivering the workshop was not without its challenges. Because the course only starts in the third week of a 10-week quarter, we regularly had to address concerns from the program director and the associate dean about whether there would be sufficient students. We strongly rejected, for example, the suggestion to deliver this course online (to increase enrollment). Instead, we asked for patience as the advising staff helped ensure the interest and, ultimately, helped drive the necessary enrollment figures.

The primary purpose of this essay has been to share our process and some of our results so communication-minded leaders on university campuses will encourage interventions of this nature. Relatedly, as faculty, we appreciated the willingness of academic advisors to be involved. While this unique response to a perceived challenge in the classroom was initiated by our *duty of care* we have also benefited from an *all-hands-on-deck* mindset with our advising staff and staff from the Office of Health and Wellness actively involved. This *holistic* approach to student engagement, then, has multiple benefits because it both responds to the complexity of being a student in today’s environment and encourages working together toward a common goal.

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Appendix

Topic Schedule	Module Content Class 1 (with Instructor of Record)	Module Content Class 2 (with Visiting/Guest Instructor)
<i>Week 1</i> Foundations for Success	Knowing your learning style; locus of control, & baseline skills. Building a classroom learning community.	Time Management: How to decode your course schedule, interpret a syllabus, plan your quarter.
<i>Week 2</i> Student Engagement	Understanding introversion and extroversion; cultural norms of communication and classroom behavior.	Communication Practices: How to approach your professor; email norms; using Zoom; presenting in class.
<i>Week 3</i> Growth Mindset	Understanding locus of control; past experiences of success and challenge; resilience and rebounding.	Study Skills: How to read and take notes—for exams and for assignments; organizing materials.
<i>Week 4</i> Building Resilience	Mapping social support; identifying signs of distress; identifying and asking for what you need.	Identifying Resources: How to identify sources of support at the university and beyond.
<i>Week 5</i> Assembling Your Toolkit	Reflection on self-assessments, insights, and personal goal-setting.	Selecting Personal Strategies for Success: A review of strategies from the workshop and anticipating upcoming quarter.



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