



## Motivated to Engage — and Succeed

By Jody Robbins

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Dr. George Kuh literally wrote the book on student engagement — “Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter.” In discussing the subject with him, he’s quick to point out that being engaged is useful both inside and outside of the classroom.

“Engagement is important in every facet of life, whether it’s with a community, a partner, or a family member. It’s about being accessible and present in the moment with regard to the experience you’re having,” Kuh says. “Engagement is key in terms of the motivation tied to the learning experience, so students learn something they may not have otherwise, and find meaning and relevance in it.”

Kuh has been studying and innovating in the field of student engagement since well before the phrase was coined in academic circles. In the 1930s, experts were all about “time on task,” and in the 1980s “involvement” was the buzzword.

“Today, student engagement isn’t just about how students spend their time and what they’re getting out of it, it’s about what institutions are doing from their side,” Kuh says. “The more engaged a learner is, the more they benefit in a variety of ways. These are things we don’t always measure well, but are critical to success: conscientiousness, self-reflection, mediating one’s emotions, and being able to interact effectively with people from different backgrounds.

“These are things universities don’t offer as majors, but every field of practice is going to require those kind of behaviors to be effective.”

### Using Technology To Inspire

For example, DeVry University leverages technology in the form of the Inspire tool to engage students in a positive way.

“Prompts are useful, and I think the use of technology in intentional, educationally purposeful ways tends to be positive, but students will ignore prompts if they don’t feel a connection to the person or entity doing the prompting,” Kuh says. “We can’t escape the fact that we’re all social creatures, we rely on sensing authentic support or concern for our well-being.”

While those prompts may be helpful to students, DeVry also enlists faculty and a student care team of advisors to back up the automated system. This is important as true engagement requires a host of conditions and must be backed up by action and sincerity.

“There are many ways institutions can provide that: in classrooms where individual faculty members take some responsibility for creating a culture of community by simple things like knowing everybody’s name, meeting with students individually or in small groups to create a sense of trust,” Kuh says. “We’re all more likely to listen to someone we trust, who is authentically accessible to me, and interested in my success. These sound like ephemeral notions, but when we reflect on our own experience, these are critical factors in our life.”

### **Peer Pressure, The Good Kind**

Often used with negative connotation, peer pressure can be highly beneficial. “There is a longstanding thread in higher education research that shows peers are the most important influence group on a college campus,” Kuh says. “They influence how students spend their time, what classes to take, etc.”

Kuh says that many institutions are trying to artificially, yet authentically, induce healthy peer relationships. It’s not about making students do things they refuse to do, but giving them more context.

“I was myself not a strong undergraduate student academically. I studied as hard as I could but wasn’t intellectually mature enough to benefit in some ways, but I did connect with my college in all sorts of ways,” Kuh says. “Many students do make those connections through peers, the social connections students form. So, when faculty can organize an out-of-class experience to take advantage of the peer effect, it’s a long-term benefit.”

The real enemy of effective educational practice is anonymity, Kuh says. “We have to try and shape peer or affinity group culture in a way that will help students thrive.”

An example: learning communities. This refers to a university organizing class schedules so that certain groups of students are taking multiple classes together, helping them form an affinity group that’s collectively focused on a shared academic program and on learning.

Another effective way to build student engagement goes back to positive peer influence and building a space for that through a range of opportunities and activities.

“When a faculty member structures a class so that students interact with each other and the world outside the classroom, it puts students in situations where they’re expected to apply their education,” Kuh says.

“These kind of high impact practices create circumstances where students are getting to know their peers. It also shrinks the psychological size of the campus.”