2022 CSULB Academic Senate Retreat
Shifting Tides: Preparing for Tomorrow's Students

Present to you by
Academic Senate Executive Committee
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Background

What will tomorrow's CSULB students be like, after 2+ years of social upheaval, COVID, and at-home instruction? The annual CSULB Academic Senate Retreat took place at the Japanese Gardens on the afternoon of October 20th, 2022 and focused on understanding tomorrow's students. More than 70 members of the CSULB community gathered with local K-12 educators to discuss this very question. Note takers at each of 10 tables recorded key points, and the Academic Senate's Executive Committee synthesized the notes. The results were eye opening.

What We Learned from This Meeting?

> **Socialization –** *Students need to feel that they are an integral part of a larger community (and not just an online community).*

The K-12 teachers told us, more than anything, that tomorrow's students feel isolated. They are desperate for a sense of community, beyond their online communities. They've lacked opportunities for **socialization**—so some struggle with basic interpersonal skills and the emotional intelligence that are part of everyday face-to-face communication, much less skills to engage productively in teamwork. After two years of online instruction, students are unaccustomed to even speaking in classes.

Despite being isolated at home, the K-12 educators told us, tomorrow's students are also concerned about global issues—pandemics, global warming, social issues, and wars are all on their minds. Lacking the historical understanding that comes with age, young people are focusing on the present—as they always have. What's different now, though, are all the families that were uprooted, moved, or forced into cramped living conditions during the pandemic, family members who died, siblings and relatives needing care, household members working longer hours or multiple jobs. Tomorrow's (potential) students are questioning the value of college education, and the idea that achievement requires dedication and struggle. They need to earn money to support their families. All these stresses add up to more depression, exhaustion, anxiety, and other serious mental health issues and struggles as students try to find their place and value in a complex world.

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> **Academics** – *K-12 teachers have noticed more students with gaps in their academic knowledge since the pandemic.*

And then there's **academics**. To no one's surprise, teachers have noticed gaps in students' academic abilities and knowledge since the pandemic started. Teachers felt pressure to "just pass" students, and that lack of effort had no consequences. Illnesses and restrictions led to lengthy absences from school—weeks, sometimes months. The K-12 educators we spoke with noted how the pandemic had a disproportionate impact on students without access to technology (and knowledge about how to use it), those Zooming from shelters, autos, or other less-than-ideal environments, and students with learning disabilities. Beside subject matter content, students need to learn study skills—including things as basic as how to take notes—and develop their critical thinking skills. Everyone agreed students who were straddling the boundary between failure and success were the biggest concern right now.

> **Technology –** *We have more access to useful technological tools in education than ever before, but too much reliance on those tools at the expense of other successful pedagogical approaches can accidentally reduce student learning.*

And, finally, there's **technology**. The last couple years have revolutionized how we're all using it. The picture phones and paperless society forecast during our youths have arrived. Augmented and virtual reality are exciting new learning tools. And students like it. They crave more online learning opportunities.

Some teachers, however, feel students' academic performance declines when learning takes place online, that using *less* technology is beneficial, and reducing face-to-face instruction is a mistake. (Face-to-face instruction, by the way, is a particular struggle right now for new teachers whose teacher preparation and student teaching took place online.)

What is agreed upon, however, is the recognition that "technology" isn't a single tool—it's many tools. Some students know how to navigate social media yet lack the technological skills needed for academic use. And the same point holds for those doing the teaching—online video, learning management systems, virtual reality, and other technological tools require different knowledge and skills.

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How Can We Help?

So, with all these issues, how can we help? Participants at the Academic Senate retreat talked about that, too, with discussions continuing after the retreat ended. Here are some of the key suggestions that emerged:

- Classroom time with students is limited, and we want to cover as much as possible during that precious time. But now, with students craving socialization, we need learning environments that help build a sense of community. Awkward conversations about daily life can grow, over the course of a semester, into relationships and better understandings of each other.

- In addition, we may need to present course materials at a different speed than we are used to doing, in smaller segments with more chances for students to self-assess their learning and experience success, and with greater emphasis on helping students see what study skills and independent learning looks like.

- Similarly, we all need to focus more on just "being available," including outside regular class hours. Making office hours a time when students feel comfortable asking questions—even when feeling lost or struggling, whatever the reasons—and being understood by their professors could have wonderful consequences.

- We all need to stay up to date with knowledge and skills for using and teaching with new technologies. New platforms, educational apps, social media, and virtual reality can play effective roles in education, but only if both students and teachers can use them effectively. We all need to remember, also, that just because students spend a lot of time looking at screens doesn't mean they're skilled at using the devices academically. Students often don't know how to use search engines, online databases, and other technological tools effectively in academic environments.

- We need to work hard to build face-to-face connections between colleges and high schools to help students understand their abilities to access college educations, the value of the experience, and the importance of a college degree.

- We need to learn more about how to help assess and assist students (and colleagues) with mental health challenges and other personal struggles. Schools at all levels need more counselors and more faculty training.

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