

**"A Teacher Affects Eternity;  
He [She] Can Never Tell Where His [Her] Influence Stops."**

**-Henry Adams**



**Classroom strategies  
for fostering  
student retention**

# Classroom strategies for fostering student retention

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# Introduction

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In recent years there has been a significant increase in research addressing student retention. Consequently, many campuses have developed programs and/or materials to improve student learning, satisfaction and retention. According to Noel (1978) "Everyone must be a retention agent - the president, instructors, librarians, staff in the cafeteria, the business office and the custodial personnel." Of these roles, faculty are key to student persistence.

The research reveals three major factors that foster student persistence: 1) The quality of education, 2) Personal contact with faculty, and 3) The home-like atmosphere of residence halls. Even though we might dismiss the idea of residence halls as applicable at a community college, faculty can create an environment in the classroom that will aid in the psychosocial development of students. This can be accomplished through methods such as active learning and classroom break time.

A student persistence initiative was facilitated at New Mexico State University titled Gaining Retention & Achievement for Students Program (GRASP). This program designed strategies for classroom use by faculty to increase persistence of their students. In this booklet, you will find the 12 key strategies for promoting student persistence as developed by New Mexico State University to fit the campus of Lansing Community College.

For further information on student persistence, please visit or contact the Center for Teaching Excellence.



## Learn and Use Students' Names

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The importance of using a person's name was best described in *How to Win Friends & Influence People* authored by Dale Carnegie (1936, 1982). Dale Carnegie's third principle is "Remember that a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language" (83). Carnegie continues, informing us of something we already know: There is magic in our name. Our name sets us apart, and makes us "unique among all others." Below are some ideas for bringing the "magic of the name" into the classroom within the first three weeks of the semester:

- Have students sit in the same seats for the first few weeks until you are able to match names with faces.
- Have a short ungraded quiz over students' names at the beginning of class for students, as well as for yourself.
- Have students prepare a "Passport" for your class. Students glue a snapshot of themselves on a note card for the instructor. Instructors may want to encourage students to use photos that showcase a personal item of the student (i.e. a picture of the student with his/her pet) to help make the person memorable. Beside their snapshot, students are asked to write a variety of information to help the instructor get to know the individual. Information about the students' likes and dislikes, background, and goals are especially helpful memory hints.
- Ask students to interview each other using questions about unique traits, unusual hobbies, proudest moment, most prized possession, most unusual accomplishment, etc. Students then introduce their partner to the class. After everyone has been introduced, it's time for a memory test. The instructor begins by stating his/her name as he/she holds onto the end of a strand from a ball of yarn. The instructor tosses the ball to someone and says something like, "I'm tossing the ball to Greg because I remember that Greg wrestles alligators in his spare time." The pattern continues until everyone in the class is connected. The class members then do the same thing in reverse as they untangle themselves and talk about the person immediately before them. (Option: While all class members are connected, the instructor may want to use the connected students as a model to explain how the class will grow from a collection of individuals to a network of educated students over the course of the semester.)
- Have students make nametags on the first day of class. 5" x 8" cards work well for this. Students use heavy black or blue markers to write their names on the bottom half of the card, students fold the card in half, creating a tent nametag. Students keep the nametags with them and place the tag in front of their desk during subsequent class periods. (Variation: The instructor collects nametags at the end of the class. As nametags are returned to the students in subsequent classes, the instructor tries to match the name with the student.)

# Create a Positive Classroom Environment

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"A joyful classroom atmosphere makes students more apt to learn how to successfully solve problems in a potentially stressful situation" (Sylvester, 1994). Yelon (1996) states that he personally learned from "people I liked, who treated me with respect, who encouraged me, and who made the learning a pleasure." To create a positive classroom environment consider the following:

- Arrive early and greet students by name.
- Learn something about your students and use the information when conversing with them.
- Say and do things to show respect and support such as:
  - "This is tough, but I know you can do it."
  - "Any question is a good question."
  - "If you want extra help, just call."
- Avoid statements that will cause students to feel unworthy such as:
  - "Why do you bother coming here?"
  - "This problem is only for the intelligent."
- Be explicit and timely with feedback.
- Use naturally occurring humor about yourself or the subject.
- Avoid statements which will cause undue anxiety such as:
  - "This test is extremely difficult."
  - "Only one-third of you are going to pass."
- Strive for a pleasant physical environment to create a positive association with what is learned.
- Attend to cues of physical discomfort.
- Maintain a comfortable temperature.
- Begin and end on time.



## Provide Access to Course Materials

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When students have access to course material they are often better prepared to concentrate and reflect on course content. Lecture outlines and posting materials on a Blackboard course site are methods for making course materials more accessible.

- **Lecture Outlines.** Providing students with lecture outlines is of great educational value. With this tool, students are more able to listen and concentrate on the content of material presented. Faculty have also observed that when they hand out lecture notes they themselves tend to stick to the material and report that their presentations follow a more logical order. Silberman (1996) suggests providing a prepared form or skeletal outline that prompts students to take notes during class. Even a minimal gesture like this engages students more than if already completed instructional handouts are provided. There are a variety of methods to do guided note taking. The simplest one involves filling in the blanks.
- **Blackboard Course Site.** Instructors can also utilize their Blackboard class site to post course materials and facilitate class discussions. Online discussions provide an opportunity for students to reflect and formulate responses, and students who may be reluctant to share in class may be more apt to engage in an online discussion. The CTE offers several face-to-face Blackboard workshops. See the CTE website at [www.lcc.edu/cte](http://www.lcc.edu/cte) or call 483-1680 for more information.

Silberman, Mel. (1996). *Learning: 101 Strategies to Teach Any Subject*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.



# Communicate Clear Expectations

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Davis (1993) addresses the importance of communicating with students in her chapters on the Course Syllabus. Clearly communicating the requirements to students is key to their success. In addition to communicating course requirements, it is helpful to determine students' preparedness for the course. This may be accomplished by explaining the skills needed, or when appropriate, by an ungraded pre-test or questionnaire.

- Be prepared to alleviate some of their concerns and answer their initial questions, some of which may be:

- Will I be able to do the work?
- Will I like the professor?
- Will I get along with my classmates?
- What are the number of assignments and tests?
- What is the grading system?
- What is the textbook?
- Why should I take this course?

- When reviewing your syllabus consider including the following:

- Describe the prerequisites of the course.
- Give an overview of the course's purpose.
- State the general learning goals or objectives.
- Clarify the conceptual structure used to organize the course.
- Specify the textbook and readings by author and editions.
- Identify additional materials or equipment needed for the course.
- List assignments, term papers, and exams.
- State how students will be evaluated and how grades will be assigned.
- List other course requirements.
- Discuss course policies.
- Provide a course calendar or schedule.
- List important drop dates.

- Invite students with special needs to contact you during office hours.
- Schedule time for fast feedback from your students. For example, at the end of a class session, have students anonymously address questions such as the following:
  - What went well?
  - What unanswered questions remain uppermost in your mind?
- Include supplementary material such as additional readings to help students succeed in the course.

# Use a Variety of Teaching Techniques and Strategies

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Yelon (1996) contends "It is difficult for someone to pay attention to a particular topic for a considerable length of time" (149). One way to overcome this is through variety in your teaching strategies. Novelty is not about entertainment but rather about "being a master presenter" through arousing, directing and maintaining a student's attention. Following are a few of his suggestions:

- Vary your actions by modulating your voice as appropriate, using gestures, moving about the classroom, and/or changing expressions as appropriate.
- Vary instructional techniques by sometimes using examples, demonstrations, practice and feedback, providing explanations as appropriate, having students discover the concepts through presented examples, and by having the students discuss the meaning of a study.
- Teach creatively
- Think about unusual ways in which you can teach the content and give the students something to talk about after class.
- Use humor, suspense, and surprise
  - Find natural ways to surprise students.
  - Do something unexpected.
- Use techniques to help student learn to control their attention.
  - Take periodic breaks (i.e., every 50 minutes).
  - Suggest to the students that they use varying activities as they study.
  - Suggest to the students that they set study objectives for certain portions of their work.
- Monitor your own attention.
- Provoke curiosity with questions and with puzzling events and demonstrations.
- Have students think of bizarre ways to present an idea and try them.

## Have Students Re-state Material Through Reflection and Self-Assessment

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Focusing through reflection will deepen a student's learning. Student self-assessment is a "complex, multidimensional activity in which students observe and judge their own performances" (Palomba and Banta, 1999: 80). Therefore, in asking a student to re-state material, the process is influencing and informing students of their future learning and performance. Questions for reflection may be responded to in either a written or a verbal format. An additional benefit is that it allows you to see if students are "getting it." Below are examples of questions to ask to assess students' learning:

1. What is the most significant thing you learned today?
2. What question is uppermost in your mind?
3. Jot down 3 or 4 key concepts or main ideas from today's class.
4. What did you learn today that you think is totally unimportant?
5. What did you learn today that you will use/apply?
6. What is an example of what we learned today?
7. Why is what was learned today important?
8. What value does what we learned today have for you?



Shaffer, Kathy. (2000). Are They Getting It? Workshop Handouts.

Palomba, Catherine A., Banta, Trudy W. (1999). Assessment essentials:

Planning, implementing, and improving assessment in higher education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

## Provide Opportunities for Students to Interact

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On the campus of a community college the classroom becomes the arena for a student's academic and psychosocial development. Researchers have established that a greater number of students will persist when residence halls are more like home. Most of the students on the campus of a community college do not reside on the campus but commute. Therefore, teaching techniques that encourage student interaction are of primary importance to the continuing of students' academic and psychosocial development. Classroom break time is also considered important in encouraging students to form relationships. Following are several ways to encourage interactions between students:

**Develop a TV Commercial.** Divide the class into teams of no more than 6 members. The teams are to create a 30 second television commercial that advertises some aspect of subject material of the class emphasizing its value to the students or to the world. The commercial is to contain a slogan. Before teams begin planning, discuss the characteristics of some well-known current commercials to stimulate creativity. Ask each team to present its commercial. Praise everyone's creativity.

**Group-to-Group Exchange.** In this strategy, different assignments are given to different groups of students. Each group then "teaches" what it has learned to the rest of the class. Select a topic that includes different ideas, events, positions, concepts, or approaches to assign. The topic should be one that promotes an exchange of views or information. Divide the class into groups corresponding to the number of assignments (2 to 4 groups). Give groups time to prepare and to select a spokesperson. Spokespersons are to make a brief presentation and allow for response from others. Compare and contrast views and information that are exchanged.

**Student-Centered Case Studies.** A case study is widely heralded as one of the best learning methods. Divide the class into pairs or trios and invite them to create a case study that the remainder of the class could analyze and discuss. Provide adequate time for the pairs or trios to develop a short case situation that poses an example or issue to be discussed, or a problem to be solved that is relevant to the subject matter of the class. When the case studies are completed, have the groups present them to the class. Allow a member of the group to lead the class discussion. For variation create an even number of groups. Pair up groups and have them exchange case studies.

**Student Active Breaks.** For controlled periods of time (i.e. five to ten minutes), have students pair and compare lecture notes. Or, pair students for discussion of essay questions as a review before a test. Students may also be paired to discuss, apply, analyze or evaluate material in your lecture, or to synthesize it with other course material.

## Give Encouragement to All Students

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Positive expectations (“You can do it.”) may not guarantee success but they certainly increase the chances of success. In the classroom, keep in mind the concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy. You and your students can work toward the “win-win” situation. To be most effective, encouragement needs to be specific, intentional, and focused on specific actions and reactions. You can develop empowered students by increasing responsibilities and opportunities for them to solve their own problems by allowing them to make their own decisions, formulate their own plans, establish their own goals, and negotiate their own rewards. Invite students to identify how the material presented in your course will be helpful to them as they attain their educational goals.

Ask the question of students, “What is the best way for me to help you achieve your goals in this course?” Given the students’ and the instructor’s goals, provide support in a way that inspires confidence, fosters hope and courage, and urges in a helpful way

Many students must overcome insecurity and doubts and often need extra encouragement and a boost to their confidence. Students bring to the classroom “baggage” from their personal life. As faculty, it is not our responsibility to take care of students, but we are responsible to care about those who enter our classroom to learn. Therefore, it is important to remember that most students benefit by good counsel, and that it is as important to stimulate the intellectually gifted and well-adjusted student as much as the poorly adjusted student who struggles with learning.



## Direct Students to Appropriate Resources

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There are a number of resources available at Lansing Community College for students seeking support and advice. These resources include:

### **Tutoring Services**

A & S Room 103 Phone: 483-1206

Tutoring services are offered through Library Information Services (TLC 201A, Phone 483-1657) and provide free tutoring to students enrolled in LCC courses. Professional and peer tutor technicians, as well as peer tutors, help students develop course competencies and study skills. Individual appointments, study groups, supplemental instruction, and drop-in tutoring sessions are available on a first-come-first-served basis.

### **Academic Advising and Counseling**

GVT Room 2300 Phone: 483-1904

Academic advisors and counselors are available to provide information on skills and prerequisites, to help students plan class schedules, to discuss curriculum choices, and to provide academic and personal support.

Home page: <http://www.lcc.edu/academics/supportservices.shtml>

### **Library Information Services**

TLC Room 201A Phone: 483-1657

Library Information Services provides information and research assistance, library resources, a computerized catalog, interlibrary loan service, book renewals by phone, library instruction, and Internet access to the library catalog and electronic databases from on and off-campus.

Home page: <http://www.lcc.edu/academics/library.shtml>

### **LS ARC Liberal Studies Academic Resource**

Center Location: AS 455 Phone: 483-1555

Liberal Studies Academic Resource Center serves the academic needs of students by providing an environment that is conducive to studying and applies learning. The Center provides access to computers with course specific software, physical models, lab equipment, tutorial services and space for group and individual work.

Home page: <http://www.lcc.edu/lst/lsrc/index.htm>

### **Multicultural Center**

Location: GVT Room 2370 Phone: 483-1059

The Multicultural Center promotes a campus environment responsive to the needs of LCC's diverse students, faculty and staff. Staff facilitate minority students' access to appropriate services to ensure their career and academic success.

Home page: [http://www.lcc.edu/eo\\_mcc/](http://www.lcc.edu/eo_mcc/)

### **Women's Resource Center**

Location: GVT Room 2300 Phone: 483-1199

The Women's Resource Center provides services and programs in support of women and men at Lansing Community College, including financial assistance with tuition, textbooks, transportation, child care costs, academic advising, reentry support, and referral services.

Home page: <http://www.lcc.edu/counseling/wresrc.htm>

### **Financial Aid Information**

Enrollment Services/Student Financial Aid Office Location:

GVT Room 2200 Phone: 483-1296

The Enrollment Services/Student Financial Aid Office at Lansing Community College is committed to providing students with financial resources for higher education.

Home page: <http://www.lcc.edu/finaid/>

### **LCC Writing Center**

Location: A&S 251 Phone: 483-1907

The Writing Center will give individual assistance on writing concerns and will support writers at all levels of experience and at any stage in the writing process. When going to the Center, students are encouraged to bring a specific writing task to work on along with ideas, notes, or drafts.



# Provide Numerous Options for Evaluation

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Instructors may find it beneficial to evaluate students in a number of ways. When possible, you might even allow the student to choose between several different evaluation options. Learning occurs in a variety of ways, and to use only one method of evaluation can increase stress for a student and decrease the student's positive classroom outcome. Listed below are several widely used methods for evaluation along with several tips for effectively using each:

## Testing

Below are some suggestions for effectively writing common test-question types:

### Short Answer & Essay Questions

- Indicate the number of points each question is worth.
- Allot the appropriate space for students to write their answers.
- Too much space may result in a longer response than necessary.

### Multiple Choice

- Use positively stated stems as much as possible. When using negatives such as "not", italicize, underline or bold the print.
- Attempt to keep response options homogeneous and nearly equal in length.
- Place blank spaces at the end of the stem versus the beginning. This decreases students reading time.

### Matching Items

- Keep items homogeneous.
- Put dates in chronological order.
- Include clear directions such as whether or not an item may be used more than once.

### True/False

- Keep the length of true and false items nearly the same.
- Consider asking students to write their reasoning for each true or false response.

For additional assistance in creating various types of test/exam questions, see the Center for Teaching Excellence's website at <http://www.lcc.edu/cte> and see the self-paced online workshop entitled "Testing Techniques".

## **Writing**

"The power of writing is that it forces students to actively think about the material" (Nilson, 1998: 123). Writing exercises also provide the opportunity for students to explore their values, feelings, cognitive processes, and their learning strengths and weaknesses. Writing will also improve their communication skills. Below are some suggestions for incorporating writing into your courses.

### Research Papers

- Remind students that writing is a process that helps clarify ideas.
- Help students develop a focus and thesis.
- Have students compose a draft.
- Have students engage in Peer Editing. (For more information about Peer Editing contact LCC's Writing Center.)
- Consider having students present their finished work to each other.

### Abstract for a Professional Journal

- Remove the abstract from a journal in your field.
- Ask students to write the abstract.
- Have students compare abstracts.
- Have the students compare theirs with the published abstract.
- Ask students to compare and contrast the two abstracts in writing.

### Journals

- Students write intellectual and/or emotional reactions to various course aspects.
- Entries that are requested may vary both in number and length.
- Questions that may be used for direction include:
  - What is new to you about this material?
  - What did you already know?
  - Does any point contradict what you already knew or believed?
  - What areas need more clarification?

### Free Writes

- Students write as fast as possible about a predetermined topic for a given number of minutes (usually 2 or 3).

- The objective is to activate prior knowledge or generate new ideas through free association.
- Use at the beginning of class as a warm-up or at the end of class for a cool-down.

Topic possibilities:

Important points of the last class.

Key words on board from last class.

Exam review questions.

“Seed sentence” response. (A sentence given to stimulate thinking.)

### One-Minute Papers

- Similar to free writes.
- Ask students to summarize the “most important” or “most useful” point(s) for the day.
- Students write for 2 to 3 minutes.

Free writes and one-minute papers are valuable in that students are asked to digest, absorb, and internalize new material. This process assists in moving the new material from short-term and mid-term memory into long-term memory (Nilson, 1993). Free writes and one-minute papers are also two classroom assessment techniques. These techniques are a way to find out quickly if your class is learning what you are teaching. Also, with these techniques you have now discovered any erroneous learning and can make necessary corrections.

This is by no means a complete list of evaluation tools, only a short list of some of the most widely used.

All of the above listed evaluation tools may or may not necessarily be used for graded evaluation.



Davis, Barbara Gross. (1993). *Tools for teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Nilson, Linda B. (1998). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors*. Bolton, MA.

## Prepare Students Both Psychologically and Academically for Exams

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“Anxiety can interfere with students’ performance on tests” (Davis, 1993). As the instructor, you can help a student enhance his/her performance. When a student is provided with reassurance and encouragement, success is more likely. Following are some suggestions to prepare students to do their best:

- Ask students how you can help them feel less anxious about testing.
- Give a diagnostic test early in the term. (A brief non-graded pretest to find areas of student mastery and to locate students’ strengths and weaknesses.)
- Attach a pool of final exam questions to the course syllabus and distribute both on the first day of class.
- Put old exams on file in the department office or library.
- Distribute practice exams.
- Before an exam, explain the format to students.
- Give students advice on how to prepare for exams. For example:
  - Avoid cramming for an exam by spreading studying over several weeks.
  - Eat sensibly the night before a test and get a good night’s sleep.
  - Arrive early for the test.
  - Take deep relaxing breaths as the test begins.

Davis, Barbara Gross. (1993). *Tools for teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.



## Inform Students of Their Progress Throughout the Term

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Feedback throughout the semester may motivate a student who is doing poorly to improve. It may also enable a student doing well to maintain learning. Keeping students informed serves to stimulate and encourage good work by all students. "By keeping students informed throughout the term [semester], you also prevent unpleasant surprises at the end" (Davis, 1993: 283-284). Below are some suggestions for keeping students informed of their progress throughout the semester:

- Give students a sense of what their score means for each assignment (quiz, test, written work, projects, etc.).
- Consider giving a point total rather than a letter grade (Letter grades tend to have an emotional association that points lack).
- Show the range and distribution of point scores.
- Indicate what level of performance is satisfactory. (This information can motivate students to improve if they are doing poorly, or to maintain their performance if it is satisfactory.)
- One way to help students keep a point total over the semester is to prepare a tracking sheet related to assignments, exams, etc., and attach it to the students' syllabi. Throughout the semester, encourage students to compare their totals with your totals. Include within the syllabus a break down of points to a letter grade as well as a percentage that may be tracked throughout the semester.
- Provide correction, feedback, guidance, and recognition (verbal or written) that will enable a student to improve.

Express confidence in a student's ability through statements such as "I know you can."

Express confidence in your ability to teach. "I know I can teach you."

Use nonverbal behaviour such as a smile, nod, pat, eye contact, and upbeat energy.

Provide specific and ample feedback; mentoring the good with the bad. "Good coverage, yet a couple of flaws." "Let's go over this in detail."

Davis, Barbara Gross. (1993). *Tools for teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Howard, Pierce J. (1994). *The owner's manual for the brain: Everyday applications from mind-brain research*. Austin:

Bard. Erickson, Clifford E. (1955). *The counseling interview*. New York: Prentice-Hall.

## Believe You Make a Difference

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In teaching, you become a source of lifetime learning for your students, your colleagues and yourself. Believe you make a difference.



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He(She) Can Never Tell Where His(Her) Influence Stops."  
-Henry Adams

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