

Faculty Engagement and Student Success

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Abstract

Objective: Applying thirteen elements of employee engagement to engaging business faculty, this paper explains how engaging faculty contributes to improved student success and increased trust.

Methods: The paper explains the nature of engagement and its critical importance as a relationship-based means of motivating interpersonal commitment and performance.

Results: Citing the Gallup Press research about employee engagement, the paper defines those elements, explains how they contribute to student success and clarifies how they build trust by increasing faculty engagement.

Conclusions: The paper also identifies six action steps that administrators, deans, and department heads can undertake to promote student success and build trust.

Keywords: employee engagement; student engagement; student success; trust-based relationships

1. Introduction

It is not news that many colleges and universities have seen a significant decrease both in student enrollment and in public confidence that advanced education is a priority for personal success (Bormann, Niedlich, & Würbel, 2021). As is the case with many public and private sector organizations, this decline in trust at academic institutions mirrors the failure of many organizations to hire and retain competent leaders (Jamali & Caldwell, 2023).

The focus of this paper is on the importance of colleges and universities incorporating the elements of effective management to motivate, inspire, and engage their faculties and to increase student trust and student success. Although employee engagement has become a well-recognized requirement for achieving organization goals, an overwhelming number of colleges and universities have overlooked the importance of the factors that employees emphasize (Fasenfest, 2021) as critically important to their commitment to their employers (Clifton & Harter, 2019).

We begin the paper by identifying thirteen elements that are recognized by scholars and practitioners as essential requirements for great management and employee engagement. We then identify the practical significance of these factors in the college and university context as they relate to engaging faculty members who teach at those institutions. We explain how these factors contribute to student success and build trust in higher education. After suggesting six recommendations to assist academic leaders, deans, and department heads, we conclude the paper with encouragement to adopt these recommendations.

2. The Elements of Engagement

For nearly two decades, scholars (Markos & Sridevi, 2010) and practitioners (Wagner & Harter, 2006) have emphasized the correlation between effective management, employee engagement, and trust. Although there is no universally agreed upon definition of employee engagement, the term was defined by Kahn (1990) as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances.”

The consensus of many experts is that the engagement of employees is reflected by the degree of their personal investment in the success of their organization--largely because of their relationship with their manager or supervisor--and is a psychological and emotional commitment that reflects their degree of trust (Mahand & Caldwell, 2023). This interpersonal connection is associated with the belief that the work being performed is purposeful and worthy of one’s best efforts (Nguyen, L. T., Nguyen, Doan, & Tran, 2021).

In breaking down the key elements that make up employee engagement, Gallup Press has done extensive research over the past two decades and has identified thirteen elements that they cite as critical to the creation of the high employee commitment, personal ownership, and trust that make up employee engagement (Clifton & Harter, 2023). Each of those thirteen elements is briefly described here.

Knowing What's Expected – Employees perform more effectively when they have a clear understanding of how their job contributes to the success of their organization and the outcomes that it is seeking to achieve.

Materials and Equipment – Work performed successfully is dependent upon having the right tools and equipment to complete job tasks and responsibilities. Resources are required to ensure that materials and equipment are best suited to completing work.

The Opportunity to do What They do Best – Employees are most committed to their work when they know that the tasks which they are assigned mesh with their individual strengths and capabilities. Matching the right person to the right job is fundamentally important.

Recognition and Praise – Weekly management feedback and management acknowledgement that work performed is valuable to the organization are important parts of this element.

Someone at Work Cares about Each Individual as a Person – Having someone at work who validates oneself and provides a personal emotional connection and caring reinforces the importance of the workplace as a place where an individual has a personal investment.

Someone at Work Encourages Professional Development – Having been acknowledged as having the potential to make an even greater personal contribution at work demonstrates that an individual has value and is worthy of an organization's investment.

Employee Opinions Seem to Count - The opportunity to be heard, to express one's opinions about work, and to have those opinions acknowledged and considered reinforces an organization's commitment to individual employees.

A Connection with the Mission of the Organization – Understanding how one's work contributes to an organization's purposes and mission increases an employee's sense of her/his own purpose and role and establishes a sense of ownership and responsibility.

Coworkers Committed to Doing Quality Work – The regard of an employee toward the quality of work performed by her/his coworkers directly affects the degree of pride that an employee takes about the people with whom (s)he works and the significance of the organization.

A Best Friend at Work – A deep personal affiliation with another person at work drives increased individual commitment and performance, increases feelings of being part of a team, and provides emotional and psychological connection and support.

Talking about Progress – Feedback provided is most meaningful when it matches the nature of the work being performed. Receiving regular, insightful, and personalized feedback is extremely important to employees and is more important than the annual review.

Opportunities to Learn and Grow -- Being given assignments that convey an organization's interest in developing one's skills, providing training opportunities, and personalizing one-on-one coaching that emphasizes positive potential engender employee commitment.

Being Shown Personal Respect -- Acknowledging the unique capabilities of an employee, treating her/him with courtesy and high regard, and demonstrating respect for that employee's contribution creates a high degree of personal commitment.

These thirteen elements are individually measurable, identify the degree of an individual's level of engagement at work, and predict a multitude of performance outcomes from turnover probability to productivity and innovation (Cameron, 2021).

3. Engagement Efforts of Faculty

The application of engagement principles at colleges and universities, whether in the United States or internationally, has profound practical implications for faculty performance and directly impacts students' success. These thirteen engagement factors have their most important impact when viewed in context with a faculty member's treatment of students.

Although the faculty member's role is in many ways different than leaders and managers in government, military, and corporate contexts, the role of faculty encompasses responsibilities that include increasing personal commitment, effort, and ownership of the students that faculty teach (Layou et al., 2022). Scholarly articles have acknowledged that faculty members frequently play important interactive roles with students as organizational leaders or managers (Stewart & Dunbar-Morris, 2024). Table One, provided below, clarifies how each of the thirteen elements of engagement can have a significant impact on student learning, commitment, and trust (Leask, 2023).

Table 1. Engagement Efforts of Faculty and Their Impacts

Engagement Element	Academic Relevance	Contribution to Students' Success	Impact on Student Trust
Knowing What Is Expected	Syllabus defines course expectations and outcomes.	Honoring the delivery of course content must be correct and relevant.	Syllabus and criteria become a "contract of trust" with students
Materials and Equipment	Assignments, readings, and learning materials.	Demands cutting-edge information and practical application for students.	Honoring "state of the art" information ensures relevance
Focus on Students' Strengths	Enables students to identify and enhance their own focus	Faculty have an obligation to help students to understand where they best fit	Objective feedback and coaching help students to excel
Recognition and Praise	Faculty can bestow honest feedback to build confidence	Coaching students to develop their abilities and praising success	Reaching out to help students individually enables them to grow
Caring at a Personal Level	Faculty can actively create caring relationships	When faculty authentically care about their students' success, students improve	Authentic interaction inspires trust and commitment
Encourages Individual Development	The purpose of education is to help individuals to learn and grow	Faculty benefit students most effectively when they understand each individual student	People want to be treated as unique individuals, not as numbers
Honoring their Opinions	Listening and addressing strengths and weaknesses	Assists students to discover what they know and don't know and how to learn	Helps students to discover how truth is confirmed
Connection with Mission	Identifies practical relevance of information taught	Provides context for course information for student application	Enables the integration of facts and purpose
Coworkers and Quality Work	Holds all students accountable for learning	Reinforces the importance of concepts taught and their application for all students	Holds faculty accountable for every individual's learning
A Best Friend	Encourages team learning	Facilitates students working together and assists them	Reinforces concept of collaborative learning
Talking about Progress	Provides regular insightful feedback about progress	Assists students to understand how learning applies to the real world	Emphasizes the importance of future career applications
Opportunities to Learn and Grow	Communicates concepts clearly	Emphasizes what students need to understand and apply	Explains concepts so that all students can understand
Showing Personal Respect	Treats every student courteously and kindly	Models behavior expected of peers to each other and creates a safe learning zone	Honors the worth and value of every student without exception

The information in Table 1 clarifies how faculty members contribute to the learning process of their students while building a classroom culture of high trust and student engagement. The thirteen elements of engagement contribute to creating powerful relationships with students that reinforce the importance of every student (Moore, 2016). By creating such relationships, students not only learn concepts more effectively but recognize the most effective ways to apply their knowledge and the underlying principles in an external environment (Robinson & Kakela, 2006).

Research into the application of learning principles has confirmed that learning is enhanced when students are engaged participants (D'Errico, Paciello, & Cerniglia, 2016). Although cognitive learning is essential to acquire knowledge and facts, the ability of students to become engaged learners amplifies their ability to more fully understand the practical value of those same concepts (Boekaerts, 2016). When both cognitive and emotional engagement are integrated, student learning and retention are both increased (S. Y., Huang, C. H., Huang, & Chang, 2022).

4. Increasing Faculty Engagement Efforts

Although encouraging faculty to adopt principles of engagement in teaching is likely to improve student success and increase classroom trust, the unfortunate reality is that there are challenges facing faculty in understanding and implementing the elements of engagement. We offer six specific suggestions that can improve the ability of faculty to employ these engagement principles.

1. **Administrators, Deans, and Department Chairs must educate themselves.** Dr. Ronald Riggio (2024), an acknowledged expert in organizational leadership, emphasizes that those who lead are most effective when they understand and apply correct principles. For faculty to implement principles of engagement in their classrooms, their leaders must understand those concepts; encourage, coach, and assist faculty in their application; and then hold their faculty accountable for applying the elements of engagement in the classroom (Barkley & Major, 2020).
2. **Administrators, Deans, and Department Chairs must lead by example.** Academic leaders who seek to hold their faculty accountable for engaging students and improving student learning must also apply employee engagement concepts in their interactions with faculty. By modeling the principles that they seek to have their faculty apply, academic leaders must increase their own credibility, and earn the trust of faculty that they lead if they wish to see their faculty incorporate these principles to engage students and improve student learning (Kouzes & Posner, 2011).
3. **Create academic and private sector partnerships to improve employee engagement.** Colleges and Universities have the ethical responsibility to help governmental, non-governmental, and public sector organizations in their communities to understand and apply principles of employee engagement to enable those organizations to better serve the people of their communities. As academic leaders communicate to their faculties the importance of becoming involved in such projects, academic administrators demonstrate their commitment to principles of engagement while honoring duties owed within their communities (Anderson, Ndalamba, & Caldwell, 2017).
4. **4. Increase research about employee engagement and related topics.** As business faculty increase their research about employee engagement and related topics such as quiet quitting, they prepare themselves to understand and apply those same principles as faculty members [24]. The decline in trust in organizations of all types has become a problematic issue in modern society (Faber-Wiener & Gjecaj, 2024) and the failure of organizations to engage employees is costing organizations billions of dollars (Clifton & Harter, 2019).
5. **Expand teaching principles of employee engagement in Business curricula.** Requiring business faculty to emphasize the teaching of employee engagement in business classes is a timely issue of great importance to scholars and practitioners (Ellera, Jamali, & Caldwell, 2023) and is vital for the success of future business students who will serve organizations as tomorrow's managers and supervisors (Lunt, Chonko, & Burke-Smalley, 2018).
6. **Increase the hiring of full-time faculty rather than adjuncts and part-time faculty.** Like many other sectors of employment, academic institutions have hired part-time faculty in the quest to cut costs (Katz & Krueger, 2019). Although the cost of education has increased, the quality has also deteriorated (Sumra & Kataro, 2014)– a root cause of the public criticizing the value of the education provided to today's students (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013).

These six recommendations can enable colleges and universities to increase their ability to fulfill their purposes more effectively and are practical, common sense, and doable. More importantly, they are consistent with the mission and purpose of academia at a time when colleges and universities are struggling for credibility (Fleuriet & Williams, 2015).

5. Encouragement of Academic Leaders

The challenges facing today's academic leadership are difficult and burdensome in a world that has faced higher costs, rising inflation, and the decline in public trust at every turn. Unfortunately, those who lead colleges and universities and who teach in their business programs have failed to keep pace – not only with evolving new principles and ideas but with well-established and proven ideas that have been addressed by scholars and practitioners for decades but that have somehow fallen through the cracks in today's classrooms (Alexander, 2020).

Academia must be accountable. We encourage those who lead at colleges and universities throughout the world to raise the bar of their own accountability by applying the principles of engagement that have been demonstrated to be so critical to businesses and organizations worldwide (Pfeffer, 1998; Schneider et al., 2018). The opportunity to make a significant contribution is great and is critically needed if colleges and universities are to provide a better product for the students that they teach. Faculty engagement, student success, and public trust are closely related concepts that we encourage those who lead our academic institutions throughout the world to immediately address.

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