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# Understanding and promoting student engagement in university learning communities

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# **Understanding and promoting student engagement in university learning communities**

The word 'engagement' has been used to describe a myriad of student behaviours and attitudes which are deemed essential to a high quality undergraduate learning experience. But have we stretched 'engagement' as far as it should go, or are we simply using old paradigms to interpret changing student experiences in a new millennium? This paper uses national student experience data to challenge some of the current thinking about engagement - what it is and how we best foster it. Drawing on empirical evidence, the paper concludes by identifying strategies for understanding, monitoring and promoting learning community engagement within and beyond the classroom.

## **The concept of engagement**

'Engagement' has emerged as a cornerstone of the higher education lexicon over the last decade. It has become a catch-all term most commonly used to describe a compendium of behaviours characterising students who are said to be more involved with their university community than their less engaged peers. Engagement refers to the time, energy and resources students devote to activities designed to enhance learning at university. These activities typically range from a simple measure of time spent on campus or studying, to in- and out-of-class learning experiences that connect students to their peers in educationally purposeful and meaningful ways.

The long history of student experience research in the US agrees on the following basic formula: what students do during their university experience is more important than who they are or which institution they attend (Kuh, 2002). Astin's (1985) theory of student involvement contends that students learn by being involved. In turn, involvement in educationally oriented activities positively contributes to a range of outcomes including persistence, satisfaction, achievement and academic success (Astin, 1985, 1993; Goodsell, Maher & Tinto, 1992; Kuh & Vesper, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

This US-based research has justifiably spawned enormous activity in higher education systems around the world, including in Australia. A number of conflated factors have contributed to the sector-wide national interest in student engagement. Mass higher education has meant that university campuses are now characterized by diversity of all kinds, including diversity of ability, age groups and educational backgrounds. Institutions are keen to know how they can engage students from diverse backgrounds and with such diverse needs. Related to this has been a concerted effort to enhance access to and monitor the experience of under-represented and disadvantaged students in higher education. The challenge remains how to provide engagement opportunities for these students for whom the university culture is often a very foreign one. The internationalization of the higher education sector adds to the diversity of the student body, posing new challenges in regard to engagement of students for whom the university may be a culturally alienating place. Information and communication technologies have also played a significant role in shaping our thinking about new options for student engagement and how to foster this in online environments.

Engagement has become a pivotal focus of attention as institutions locate themselves in an increasingly marketised and competitive higher education environment. Meanwhile, the quality

assurance mandate has drawn attention to the need for universities to demonstrate that they add value and enhance the quality of the student experience through monitoring and evaluation cycles of continuous improvement. The focus on engagement has also been provoked by a growing awareness of a new Y Generation of university enrollees (Krause, 2005a), who enter higher education with a unique mindset and expectations which distinguish them from their baby-boomer and X Generation predecessors. Given this complex interplay of factors, researchers, practitioners, administrators and policy makers have come to recognize the imperative to devise ways of better understanding, monitoring and promoting student engagement in their institutions.

Nevertheless, the question remains: Have we stretched our conceptualizations of engagement as far as they should go? I believe not. While I support the present efforts to investigate and enhance student engagement, I do not believe we have done enough to address adequately the full meaning and implications of student engagement. Analysis of the concept has tended to be driven by the student involvement paradigm – a positive and largely unproblematic theorizing of student engagement. In fact, student engagement is much more problematic than such a paradigm would suggest.

In order to support this argument I will begin by documenting what we know about student engagement in the first year of university in Australia. I will argue that, to understand engagement, we need to analyse more astutely the alternatives – inertia, apathy, disillusionment or engagement in other pursuits. I will explore engagement and its alternatives by posing three questions in relation to the recent national study of the first year experience in Australian universities (Krause et al., 2005)<sup>2</sup>:

1. Do we have evidence that first year students are engaged?
2. Should we be concerned that inertia has set in?
3. Are other occupations threatening engagement in the first year?

I will conclude by contending that, to understand engagement more fully, we must investigate the concept in its broadest sense, through multiple lenses. There are several nuances of meaning<sup>1</sup> inherent in the word 'engagement' including the fact that at times engagement denotes a battle and a conflict in the lives of students for whom the university learning environment is a foreign and sometimes alienating one.

### **Question 1: Do we have evidence that first year students are engaged?**

The short answer to this question is "yes". The qualified response is a little more complex: yes, first year students are engaged, but there is great variety in the ways they engage and we have much to learn about what constitutes effective and successful engagement in the first year.

#### ***Engaging through class contact and study***

While time spent on a particular activity is a limited indicator of engagement, it is nevertheless a useful starting point. The mean number of course contact hours per week for full-time first year students has declined steadily over the past decade from 17.6 hours in 1994 to 17.1 in 1999 and an average of 16 contact hours per week in 2004. Students in part-time paid work reported significantly fewer mean weekly contact hours (15.5) compared to their non-employed peers (16.8 hours per week). In addition to class attendance, first year students in 2004 devoted an average of 11 hours per week to study. In view of the fact that they spent on average 16 hours per week in class it is clear

that the typical expectation that students devote at least two hours of private study for every one hour of class time is not in operation among the students in this sample. The minimum “two for one” rule of thumb is acknowledged in the literature as a factor contributing to students’ engagement (Kuh, 2003) with their study.

**Engaging online**

As well as spending time in class and private study, first year students used the web for study and research approximately 4.2 hours per week on average. More than two-thirds of first year students frequently used the web for study purposes and only three per cent said they never used the web for this purpose. There has been a notable increase over five years in the proportion of students who access online course resources, whether at home, at university or elsewhere. We are now witnessing an almost universal usage of online resources, with 95 per cent of first years saying they used web-based learning and course materials, and 80 per cent finding them useful.

Use of online tutoring has also increased since 1999 with about one-third of students now engaging in this form of online support for learning. The majority of students reported having used email to engage with peers or academic staff, though only one-fifth did so regularly. Part of the challenge of deconstructing the 21<sup>st</sup> century undergraduate is being aware of and fostering new engagement opportunities such as those offered by online technologies.

**Engaging with the institution**

There is evidence that first year students are engaging with the institution in a range of ways, but their perception of the utility of these engagement opportunities varies considerably. Almost half of the first year respondents believed that the orientation programs they had attended provided them with a good introduction to the university. Somewhat fewer (40 per cent) felt that these programs helped them to develop a sense of belonging in the university community. Perhaps more concerning is the view of a quarter of the students sampled that the orientation programs did not play a role in helping them to feel that they belonged at university.

In 2004 we asked students whether they felt they belonged in their university. While half responded in the affirmative, a disturbing 16 per cent did not feel as positive about their experience (Table 1).

**Table 1 Indicators of student engagement at the institutional level, 1994-2004 (% of students)** (1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609; 2004, N=2344)

		Disagree		Agree
I feel like I belong to the university community	2004	16	33	51
I really like being a university student	1994	8	18	74
	1999	7	19	74
	2004	8	17	75
I am not particularly interested in the extra-curricular activities or facilities provided	1994	44	28	28
	1999	43	31	27
	2004	37	31	32* <sup>2 3</sup>

\* significant at .01

<sup>1</sup> Denotes significant change 1994 to 1999. <sup>2</sup> Denotes significant change 1999 to 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Denotes significant change 1994 to 2004.

A more satisfying finding was that the majority really liked being identified as university students. This positive engagement has remained constant over a decade. School-leavers aged 19 years and under reported a significantly greater sense of belonging than their older peers, while students from rural areas felt more connected than city-based students. This may be partly attributed to the large number of rural students in residential colleges, which have strong support networks, and to the character of the particular institutions in which rural students were concentrated. Once again, the evidence of student engagement in the first year is apparent, but with notable variation across groups.

### ***Engaging with peers***

The literature repeatedly points to evidence of the critical role of peer engagement in the first year. The data provide mixed messages on the extent of student engagement in this regard. It is pleasing to know that almost 80 per cent of first year students had made at least one or two close friends during their first year at university. Nevertheless it seems that consistently a little under a third typically keep to themselves at university and do not interact with peers. Also gratifying is that approximately one-third worked with peers on course areas in which they had problems on a daily or weekly basis and 40 per cent said they got together with peers to discuss their subjects at least weekly (see Table 2). However, a little fewer than twenty per cent of students never did either of the above. Despite evidence of peer engagement, trend data suggest that proportionately fewer students are engaging with peers on a regular basis in the first year (see Table 2).

**Table 2** Peer collaboration trends, 1999-2004 (% of students)  
(1999, N=2609; 2004, N=2344)

		Daily/ Weekly	Irregularly/ Never
Work with other students on course areas with which you had problems	1999	44	56
	2004	31	69
Get together with other students to discuss subjects/units	1999	48	52
	2004	40	60

### ***Engaging with academic staff***

Academic staff play a key role in contributing to students' engagement with their study and the learning community as a whole. There is evidence of an increase in the proportion of first year students who engage with academic staff by seeking advice on a regular basis (see Table 3). In 2004, two-thirds of students were confident that at least one teacher knew their name. It is perhaps a concern that one-third did not share such confidence towards the end of their first year at university.

These examples of different forms of engagement provide evidence of the complexity inherent in deconstructing engagement processes and contexts, particularly as they pertain to different student subgroups. Nevertheless there is sufficient in the data to provide us with a relatively positive picture

of student engagement as it manifests itself in the national first year experience. In accordance with the large body of US research evidence cited earlier, Australian undergraduates who were engaged with peers, academics and the institution as whole were also most likely to: express satisfaction with their experience; report higher levels of achievement than their less engaged peers; and indicate clear plans to persist with their study at university.

**Table 3 Indicators of student engagement with academic staff**  
(% of students) (1994, N=4 028; 1999, N=2 609; 2004, N=2344)

		Disagree		Agree
I feel confident that at least one of my teachers knows my name	2004	23	11	66
I regularly seek advice or help from academic staff	1994	49	30	20
	1999	50	31	19
	2004	36	35	29**2 3

\*\* significant at .05

<sup>1</sup> Denotes significant change 1994 to 1999. <sup>2</sup> Denotes significant change 1999 to 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Denotes significant change 1994 to 2004.

## Question 2: Should we be concerned that inertia has set in?

Physicists use the term 'inertia' to describe the tendency of matter to retain its state of rest or of uniform motion in a straight line<sup>1</sup>. In the case of some students in the first year, inertia is a germane term to describe their attitude to university and their role in it. In this context I favour the term 'inertia' over disengagement. The latter suggests an active detachment or separation, whereas the former is more suggestive of doing nothing, which aptly depicts the state of being for the group of students who do not actively pursue opportunities to engage in their learning community. For some students, the interlocking of individual and institutional interests, goals and aspirations never occurs. They do not choose or see the need to waver from their familiar path to engage with people, activities and opportunities in the learning community.

One indicator of inertia is failure to participate in learning community activities, particularly class attendance (for on campus students). Close to ten per cent of full-time campus-based first year students reported frequently coming to class without preparing adequately or skipping classes altogether. There was a significant age difference in this regard, with school-leavers tending to skip classes and come to class unprepared more frequently than their older peers. Slightly more males than females admitted to underpreparedness, but the gender differences were minimal. Almost one quarter of respondents (23 per cent) expressed the view that you could miss a lot of classes in the first year because most notes were on the web. Just over half (54 per cent) of first year students sampled did not believe this to be the case.

Inertia is also signified by failure to self-regulate and motivate oneself. In 2004, more than a third of first year students (36 per cent) admitted they found it difficult to motivate themselves to study. While

this figure has decreased significantly over the past decade (from a high of 48 per cent agreement in 1999 and 41 per cent in 1994), it nevertheless accounts for a notable proportion of students. More than one in four students (27 per cent) in the first year said they kept to themselves when they visited the university campus. In cases where students lack motivation and connectedness, the potential is high for inertia to deteriorate into despondency and disengagement from the university community.

Twenty-eight per cent of first years admitted to seriously thinking about dropping out in their first year. The three main reasons were emotional health (52 per cent), wanting to change courses (42 per cent) and financial concerns (39 per cent). Fear of failure was also cited as a reason by more than a third (36 per cent) of students. Females were more likely than males to say that emotional and physical health were important reasons for considering withdrawal from study, while males were more likely to cite dislike of study and fear of failure as key reasons. In some cases, withdrawal from study is a sensible option for students who may be better off enrolling in another course or who, for various personal reasons, are best advised to withdraw from study. However, we should be most concerned when students who should otherwise be receiving targeted assistance in the form of student support, course advice from academics, or peer support are not receiving this because they failed to engage when the opportunities were available. These are the students for whom inertia and failure to act may ultimately result in failure to persist and succeed.

Yes, we should be concerned about the inertia apparent in some of the first year students in the national study. Firstly because it is closely aligned with student dissatisfaction and potential withdrawal from study. But secondly, because if not addressed early in the student experience, inertia may become a more serious concern in the second and subsequent years. It is hypothetically possible for inert students to proceed from one year to the next, but they will hardly be benefiting from the experience or contributing positively to the learning community of which they should be a part. Importantly, also, they will be far less likely to engage with the institution beyond graduation if they fail to take the initiative for engagement in the undergraduate years.

### **Question 3: Are other occupations threatening engagement in the first year?**

The evidence points to first year undergraduates who are occupied in various pursuits beyond those of study. It seems that for an increasing number of student workers, there is a danger that university engagement will be interpreted as a noun rather than a verb. For the multitasking Y Generation students, not to mention the X Generation or even baby boomers returning to study, university study runs the risk of simply becoming another appointment or engagement in the daily diary, along with paid work and a range of other commitments beyond the campus. In this context, 'engagement' takes on a whole new meaning.

The proportion of full-time first year undergraduates in paid employment during semester has increased from 51 per cent to 55 per cent in the last five years. However, contrary to popular perception, the average number of hours of paid employment per week for these earning learners has remained relatively static at 12.5 hours per week (compared to 12.6 hours per week in 1999). There is some evidence that paid workers avail themselves of opportunities to engage with the learning community less than their non-employed peers. More than half (57 per cent) of employed students said that paid work interfered at least moderately with their academic performance; nine per cent said it interfered severely. Paid workers were more likely than non-employed peers to have seriously considered withdrawing from their study.



Despite the earlier mentioned decline in the mean number of course contact hours per week for full-time first year students, evidence from the first year study does not support the perception that full-time students are spending less and less time on campus. In 1994, 78 per cent of the sample usually spent four or five days per week on campus. When we asked the same question in 1999, the figure had declined by 11 percentage points. The apparent downward trend did not continue in 2004 however, with 73 per cent of first year students now spending four to five days on campus. In 2004, students spent slightly more time on average on campus compared with their 1999 counterparts. The mean number of days per week spent on campus in 2004 was 4.18 compared with 4.38 days on average in 1994 and 4.07 in 1999.

What is notable, however is that first year students in paid employment spent significantly fewer days on campus (4.0 days) than their non-employed peers (4.4 days). Students who spent fewer days on campus were also those least likely to ask questions in class and contribute to class discussions. Conversely, those who typically spent four to five days on campus were significantly more likely to study and discuss their course material with peers. First year students who spent more time on campus were also significantly more likely to report that they felt as if they belonged and were part of the learning community than those who spent fewer days per week on campus. They were also more positive about their identity as a university student, were more likely to have made one or two close friends at university and were more involved in extra-curricular activities. However, the direction of causality between these factors is entirely uncertain.

Fewer students in 2004 expressed an interest in being involved in extra-curricular activities on the university campus (37 per cent were interested in 2004 compared to 44 per cent in 1994). A considerably smaller proportion (20 per cent) reported active involvement in such activities, including sport and club membership. These opportunities for social engagement are equally as important as intellectual pursuits but evidence suggests that the majority of first year students are looking beyond the campus for their membership of communities of this kind.

It seems, then, that first year students are otherwise occupied at times. They admit to managing multiple commitments, university study being just one of these. The challenge facing universities is to provide optimal opportunities for students to not only keep their appointment with their university studies but also to thrive in an engaging and intellectually stimulating environment during that time.

### **Extending our view of engagement**

This paper has explored several notions of engagement. In the context of student engagement with learning and learning communities, engagement is most commonly used as a verb referring to positive experiences and activities which attract, bind and hold fast the students enrolled in universities. However, some students attach a nominal denotation to the term, perceiving engagement with university as an appointment to be slotted into their weekly schedules.

There is a third shade of meaning which must be acknowledged if we are to stretch our understandings of the engagement process and the students who partake in it. For some students, engagement with the university experience is like engaging in a battle, a conflict. These are the students for whom the culture of the institution is foreign and at times alienating and uninviting. For instance, students from disadvantaged backgrounds typically lack the social and cultural capital required to 'talk the talk' and 'walk the walk' at university (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003). They lack the social networks which provide avenues for participating in casual out-of-class conversations and may

lack the social and cultural literacy skills necessary to navigate their way through the complex university terrain (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000).

International students, too, find themselves on foreign ground in more ways than one when they land on Australian soil to enrol at university. Their experiences of learning are typically very different to those in the Australian higher education classroom (MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003). Their cultural identity is challenged as they are immediately expected to integrate into the social and academic life of an Australian university campus (Tan Yew & Farrell, 2001). Many of the expectations formed as a result of reading online marketing hype about the course for which they have enrolled do not meet with the reality of their experience once enrolled. For these students, engagement is a battle. It may sometimes mean reshaping identity, letting go of long-held beliefs and approaches to learning and social interaction. There are times when the conflict which such engagement brings is a positive step towards growth and maturity. However, in order to ensure that this form of engagement has a positive result, support structures must be in place across the institution. Proactive steps are essential to provide students with the requisite 'armour' to win the engagement battle. Academics and student support staff need to work hand in hand in an environment which is at once intellectually challenging but also supportive for students.

In 2004, the national study of the first year experience (Krause et al., 2005) resulted in the development of the Comprehending and Coping Scale. It comprised a series of items intended to gauge the success with which students perceived they were engaging with their learning and managing their course requirements. The items were:

I find it hard to keep up with the volume of work (reversed)

I feel overwhelmed by all I have to do (reversed)

My course workload is too heavy (reversed)

I had difficulty comprehending my course material (reversed)

I had difficulty adjusting to the university style of teaching (reversed)

Each item was reverse coded and a mean score determined. Table 4 provides details of demographic subgroups who scored below the national mean on this scale.

Arguably, for the groups of students represented in Table 4, engagement is in some senses a battle. There may be several explanations for these subgroups emerging with below average scores on the Comprehending and Coping Scale. Linguistic barriers may impede the understanding of students from LOTE and international backgrounds. For those entering higher education from disadvantaged backgrounds, the approach to learning and the requisite strategies may not be in place, leaving students feeling isolated and overwhelmed (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003). Those who enter the university environment with unrealistic expectations also tend to have greater difficulty engaging successfully. School type is an interesting predictor here, as is age. Commencing students in the 20 to 24 year age group in the first year may be those who deferred study, completed another qualification or perhaps transferred from another institution. It is interesting that this age group is struggling to engage successfully with learning and the style of teaching in the first year. There may also be an element of harsher self-rating on these items, typical of the mature age high-achieving mindset.

**Table 4**      **Student subgroups showing *below average* engagement on Comprehending and Coping Scale**

<b>Subgroup category</b>	<b><i>Below average</i> engagement on Comprehending and Coping Scale</b>
Sex	--
Age	Age 20-24
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage	ATSI
Socioeconomic background	Low SES
Urban/rural background	--
LOTE	LOTE
First in family	--
School type	Catholic
Full-time/part-time	--
International/domestic student	International
Average mark	Less than 60%
Expectations of marks	Marks lower than expected

Regardless of the explanations for these findings, they nevertheless point to the need to challenge old paradigms which depict engagement in solely positive terms. The international subgroup is a case in point. As a group, international students score high on the usual measures of engagement. They spend more time on campus and in class than their domestic peers. They engage in online study far more than domestic students and devote relatively little time to paid employment. Nevertheless, they are having difficulty engaging with study and learning and feel overwhelmed by all they have to do. This finding points to the need for multiple indicators of engagement and a theorizing of the concept which allows for multiple perspectives. To understand engagement is to understand that for some it is a battle when they encounter university teaching practices which are foreign to them, procedures which are difficult to understand, and a 'language' which is alien. Some students actively engage with the battle and lose – what do we do for them?

## Implications

Nationally across the higher education sector, evidence points to a range of ways in which notable numbers of students are engaging in university learning communities. These are positive trends. However, some students show signs of inertia, finding it difficult to get motivated, just biding their time at university, and perhaps thinking seriously of dropping out. Others see university simply as an engagement – one of a number of appointments in their daily schedule. They are otherwise occupied in paid work and juggling multiple commitments. Any discussion of engagement must recognise these different sets of student experiences and their implications for what happens in class and across the campus – whether in real or virtual environments. We will only be successful in engaging students when we adopt a broader view of engagement which acknowledges that:

- a) engagement is a multidimensional concept which is at once positive for some and a battle others who may not be familiar with the rules of engagement in the university setting; and
- b) to make engagement meaningful we should prepare, support and empower students with strategies to build on positive engagement experiences as well as manage the conflicts which inevitably arise from attempts to engage with the challenges of university study.

To this end the following working principles are proposed.

### **Ten Working Principles for Enhancing Student Engagement**

1. **Create and maintain a stimulating intellectual environment**
  - Give students good reasons to be part of the learning community.
  - Provide coherent and current course structures.
  - Stimulate discussion and debate, exploration and discovery.
2. **Value academic work and high standards**
  - Actively encourage commitment to study by attaching importance to studying and spending time on academic work.
  - This may need to be modelled for students in first year so that they learn how to balance the different dimensions of their lives.
3. **Monitor and respond to demographic subgroup differences and their impact on engagement**
  - Make it a priority to get to know your students, their needs, aspirations and motivations.
  - Monitor the subgroup differences and develop targeted strategies for engaging students according to their needs and background experiences.
  - This provides a powerful platform for supporting and teaching students in a responsive way so as to maximise the possibilities for engagement.
4. **Ensure expectations are explicit and responsive**
  - Communicate expectations clearly and consistently across the institution and within faculties and departments.
  - Reiterate expectations at appropriate times through the semester and in different settings - before semester begins, and before and during peak stress times in the semester.

- Include students in the expectation-building exercise. Listen to their expectations. Be responsive where appropriate. Ensure that they know you have listened to their views, but be sure to shape expectations so that the highest standards of learning and teaching are maintained. Do not be driven by unrealistic expectations.
5. **Foster social connections**
    - In small groups: When students have many off-campus commitments, the value of in-class time should be maximised. Opportunities for active and collaborative learning are particularly important. Encourage problem-solving activities, small group discussion of reading and class materials, and provide intellectual stimulation and challenge.
    - In large lectures: Even here, student interaction can be fostered through question-answer sessions and a range of interactive activities which help to break down the potentially alienating barriers created by the large group anonymity syndrome.
    - Online: Provide for online discussion, collaboration and interaction.
    - Create opportunities for civic engagement with communities beyond the campus.
  6. **Acknowledge the challenges**
    - Let students know that you/ your department/ unit/ institution understand and are aware of some of the pressures they face.
    - Acknowledge that a large proportion of students will be juggling work and study commitments throughout the semester. This may be done in reading guides, lectures or tutorials.
    - Be explicit and proactive in dealing with issues and challenges which potentially jeopardise student engagement.
  7. **Provide targeted self-management strategies**
    - Seek to develop self-regulated learners who drive their own engagement behaviours.
    - Discuss strategies for time management and maintaining motivation, particularly during stressful times of semester.
    - Identify the various sources of help early in the semester and at key moments through semester so that students are prepared ahead of time. They need to know that they are not alone in facing the challenges and they also need to know where to go for help.
  8. **Use assessment to shape the student experience and encourage engagement**
    - Provide feedback and continuous assessment tasks early and often.
    - Use assessment in creative ways to bring peers together both in and out of the classroom
    - Engage students in self-assessment and peer assessment so that the focus is increasingly on their responsibility for becoming and remaining engaged in the learning process.
  9. **Manage online learning experiences with care**
    - Online resources: Placing lecture notes or audio streaming on the web is not a substitute for effective lecturing. Students indicate that even when all lecture notes are on the web, they will attend lectures if the lecture is interesting and presented well. Contact with academics and their peers is crucial.
    - Student involvement: When lecture material is presented online, academics need to develop strategies for encouraging student involvement during lectures. For example, integrate activities into the lecture timeslot.
    - In online learning environments, capitalise on the community-building capacities of online discussion forums to connect students to each other and to the learning community (see Krause, 2005b).

#### 10. Recognise the complex nature of engagement in your policy and practice

- Engagement is a binding of students to each other, to meaningful learning activities, and to the institution.
- Engagement is also a battle for some students which creates conflict and turmoil.
- Engagement is an appointment for some who see university as one of many engagements in their daily calendar of activities.
- It should be a promise and a pledge which brings with it reciprocal rights and responsibilities.
- Engagement should be an interlocking and a 'fastening' of students to learning and university learning communities in an engagement relationship which is mutually beneficial and continues well beyond graduation.
- The nature of students' engagement changes over time – monitor the changes from one year level to the next in transitions to and through the institution. Be responsive in supporting different forms of engagement throughout their experience.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The *Macquarie Dictionary* (1985) has been used to assist with definitions of terms throughout this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The work of my research partners at the CSHE and their contributions to *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from a decade of national studies* are gratefully acknowledged. Much of the information in this paper is drawn from chapter 4 of that report.

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