Student Engagement: Views from Inside One Postsecondary Institution

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
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Abstract

This thesis explores the complex and multidimensional topic of student engagement in one Ontario postsecondary setting. This study was designed to discover if faculty and students agree or differ in their understanding and perceptions of student engagement and, if so, how.

Using a qualitative approach, full-time faculty and students from one school in one college were observed and interviewed about their understandings and perceptions regarding student engagement in the classroom. Faculty volunteers had at least two years of full-time teaching experience and students were past their first year of study. Study participants confirm that student engagement differs in definition and understanding among and between individuals, shifts over time, and can be experienced in isolation or with others. There are cognitive, behavioural and emotional aspects of engagement that participants described as having a clear impact on their learning. In addition, various demographic factors were deemed to influence experienced and perceived variances in levels of engagement.

Discussions of demographic factors reveal a great deal of work needed in order to understand and work with these areas to foster engagement. Interviews revealed a narrow
interpretation of concepts, such as gender interpreted as sexual designation and socio-economic status as financial income. To support engagement a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for, these factors is needed. Added understandings of culture, race and ethnicity are needed to truly honour students in the classroom. Faculty need to take the time to look past surface behaviours, invite student collaboration and truly attend to individual needs to facilitate a deeper level of engagement in the classroom.

This study confirms that our perceptions and experiences with engagement are highly personal and complex. There was no common definition found; student engagement is as diverse as the student population. It is an elusive, evolving, complex phenomenon. To understand and promote engagement in the field of postsecondary education, it is imperative that student engagement remain a focus of ongoing dialogue and reflection. Implications for practice and consideration for future areas of research are suggested.
Acknowledgments

I would like to formally acknowledge a number of people that were instrumental in the culmination of my efforts.

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A doctoral panel plays a pivotal role in the evolution of a thesis, prodding further thought and focusing efforts. My committee, including my supervisor, Dr. James Ryan, and members Dr. John Portelli and Dr. Lorayne Robertson, were instrumental in the assistance, dedication, feedback and challenge they provided. Claire Cheverie provided essential feedback and expertise in the editing of this thesis.

I want to acknowledge the insights of fellow students I’ve met and worked with along the way. Their perspectives and contributions continued to stretch my own learning and offer up new lenses for exploring concepts and understandings.

This work would not have been possible without the eager participation of my work colleagues. From those who encouraged me to begin this journey through those who supported me along the way, I have been consistently reminded of the larger goal of facilitating learning. Their enthusiasm, interest, openness and commitment have been inspiring.

Last, and not least, I would like to dedicate the findings to the students in the postsecondary system. Their feedback and suggestions are instrumental in continuing to push us to develop excellence in the learning processes.
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Chapter I: Overview of the Study

Introduction

The postsecondary environment in Ontario is changing. College students of today are different from those of previous generations (Biggs, 1999; Northedge, 2003; Black, 2010). The college system is evolving in multiple ways: mandate, delivery methods and policies pertaining to relationships with students (Krause, 2005; Keith, 2005). Advancements in technology present opportunities for increased competitiveness, visibility and accessibility of colleges. The impact of economic strain is being felt everywhere. All of these factors create challenges and opportunities in determining what contributes to excellence in postsecondary education.

The importance placed on postsecondary education grows as employers demand increased competencies and institutions are held accountable for the quality of this experience. Many differing views exist on education and what constitutes ‘quality’ within education. Tinto (1997) connects quality education with student engagement, referring to varying degrees to which students are valued and meaningfully involved. “Institutions that more fully engage their students in the variety of activities that contribute to the valued outcomes of college can claim to be of higher quality compared with other colleges and universities where students are less engaged” (Kuh, 2003, p. 1). Student engagement is clearly linked to quality in education and is an integral part of strategic planning in colleges today. As reference to student engagement is integrated into college discourse, policies and procedures, it becomes critical that we deconstruct the term to be able to use it in an informed manner. However, in order to assess “the quality of the undergraduate education at an institution, we need good information about student engagement” (Kuh, 2003, p. 25).

Definition of the Problem
This section describes the purpose of the study, and its significance, context and limitations. It concludes with an overview of the organization of the study.

**Purpose**

Colleges strive to teach students the skills necessary for gainful employment in a variety of occupations. To successfully accomplish this, a significant body of research argues that student engagement is essential; engaged students are perceived to be open to learning, stay for the duration of their coursework and reflect positively on the overall image of the institution (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Umbach, 2004; Keith, 2005). The reality is that not all students are engaged (McInnis, 2001; Natriello, 1984). This study examines the complex and multidimensional topic of student engagement in a community college context so that we may better address student and faculty needs. As higher education evolves so should our understandings of student engagement. Current efforts may be too generic to facilitate the genuine engagement that can serve to maximize the quality of the educational experience. Failing to understand how each of the groups understands and perceives the concept of engagement means missed opportunities to engage our students, perhaps even actively facilitating disengagement. Directly, this research asks:

1. How do college students and instructors understand and experience student engagement?
2. How do college instructors promote such engagement?
3. What do college students believe enhances their engagement?
4. What various demographic factors are perceived to play a role in engagement?
5. What barriers/facilitators do college instructors and students recognize as influencing their levels of engagement?

**Significance of the Study**
College funding is tied to numbers in full-time attendance, so administrative teams aim to attract and retain applicants. “Graduation is increasingly used in accountability and performance systems as an indicator of institutional effectiveness, and student engagement is important because research shows that it’s linked to a host of desirable outcomes of college” (Kuh, Kinze, Schuh & Whitt, 2005, p. 1). Feelings of engagement may positively influence retention rates, secure funding and provide the student with the precise qualifications they need to pursue their chosen career. However, retention alone does not equate to engagement as some students complete programs without feeling engaged in the process or the college culture.

The League for Innovation in the Community College notes the 1990’s shift in focus to incorporate both student-centered and teaching-centered values to college mission statements. This evolution of the concept of the Learning College meant providing educational experiences for learners “any way, any place, any time” (O’Banion, 1996, p. 3). The face of postsecondary education changed as students became the focus, with everyone and everything else there to facilitate and support their learning.

Believing students are important requires that we acknowledge their needs, preferences and life experiences. This means we need to understand student engagement from a student perspective, involving them as active participants to ensure they have a voice in shaping policy and direction. To be inclusive we must also examine engagement from various perspectives, such as those of gender, class and ethnicity. While there may be support for this stance I believe current practices fall short of individualized approaches and understandings. Failing to consciously and critically address how engagement is individually understood and experienced results in missed opportunities to help students maximize their meaningful involvement in, and satisfaction with, their overall educational experience.
Student engagement is the focus of wide-scale research in postsecondary education (Kuh, 2003). This qualitative study differs in that it contributes to the perspectives on student engagement based on experiences of students who are past their first year of enrolment in one school in one Canadian college. The findings add to our understanding of how students and faculty view and understand engagement given the varied and competing needs, experiences and goals, not only of the individuals, but of the respective groups involved.

**Personal Background**

I have over 12 years of full-time employment as a faculty member in the Ontario college system, having worked eight years before that as a part-time instructor. In addition, I spent six years being responsible for the coordination and delivery of the professional development program for new full-time hires, introducing faculty to the foundations of teaching. I am well-versed in the challenges of a classroom and meeting the diverse needs of students, from both a direct and consultative role. In addition, my many years of experience working in the field of mental health highlights for me the various ways in which students can be ignored, marginalized and trivialized. My training in counselling in the social service field is evident in my sensitivity to the needs of others.

I am an advocate for students and believe strongly in facilitating access to opportunities for success. People are individuals with unique strengths and capabilities. However, during my doctoral studies it became apparent that I had slipped into a narrow definition of engagement based on my own assumptions and observations. Conversations with colleagues reflected similar patterns. This sparked a desire to explore the topic in more detail, examining understandings and perceptions directly to help redefine engagement.

**Context for the Study**
Ontario is home to 21 Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology and three Institutes of Technology and Advanced Learning, housed on more than 100 campuses, delivering a wide range of career-focused education and training programs that blend a mix of local and international partnerships (Colleges Ontario, 2008). Across the province these institutions vary in size, from 1,500 to 14,000 full-time students, and employ 15,000 full-time and 19,000 part-time faculty and staff in academic, support and administrative roles. There is a range of credentials, from certificates to degrees, offered in over 600 programs (Colleges Ontario, 2008).

In 2001 the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities released a report that articulated a vision for postsecondary education, entitled *Portals and Pathways: A Review of Postsecondary Education in Ontario*. The vision encompassed elements of excellence (in teaching, learning and research); a student-centered approach responsive to diverse student needs; affordable and accessible programs; evidence of collaboration to support student success; clear linkages with and benefits to local communities and partners; accountability to consumers and supporters; and the need to compete on a global scale. Traditionally, Ontario had a system of higher education in which universities granted degrees and colleges granted diplomas. The Act Respecting the Establishment and Governance of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology contained a clause allowing colleges to evolve, sparking what Auld (2002) refers to as “a debate about the transformation of a college into a polytechnic institute” (p. 2). He argues, “The emergence of polytechnic institutions – or university colleges as they are referred to in some jurisdictions – in Ontario will bring the province in line with changes in other provinces and countries around the world” (Auld, 2002, p. 4).

Programs offered in Ontario’s college system are focused on career training with an emphasis on applied learning. Within this group there is an alliance of nine institutions deemed
members of Polytechnics Canada, 2009. While the term is still gaining clarity in definition, the consensus appears that “what sets polytechnics apart from community colleges is that they offer applied degrees and … do applied research” (Colleges Ontario, 2008). Doern (2008), speaking on behalf of the Higher Ed Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), argues that polytechnics can be defined as institutions “of higher education, the majority of whose programs or degrees focus on education regarding applied technology” (p. 3). HEQCO’s 2008 overview of the environmental scan of polytechnics in higher education notes “improvements in the accessibility of higher education systems, including increased enrolment and the provision of a great variety of educational pathways for students” (p. 1). Auld (2002) adds to the definition stating, “A polytechnic institute would also be identified as an institution where there was a consistent approach to the learning environment for all applied degree programs. Such programs would most likely be supported by research” (p. 4). Despite the fact that these institutions offer applied degrees and do research, they remain separate and apart from universities because “the focus of instruction is on career-oriented skills and teaching … the model is so flexible, allowing students to obtain a certificate, diploma or degree” (Colleges Ontario, 2008). According to Polytechnics Canada, colleges advocating for such a shift in designation want to provide career-focused and community-responsive education opportunities that can lead to a wide variety of credentials.

Campbell College (a pseudonym) is a member of Polytechnics Canada and the host organization for this research. The college was also my employer.

Campbell College is a Toronto-based postsecondary institution serving thousands of full-time and part-time learners in hundreds of postsecondary programs specializing in applied knowledge and skills development. This institution asserts that student success (which it defines as including graduation rate, achievement of stated learning outcomes and educational goals) is
influenced, in part, by the degree and quality of each student's engagement in the learning process, recognizing that there are both institutional practices and student behaviours impacting on such engagement. Every semester the college administration distributes and collates findings for two surveys. The first one is distributed to first-semester students to assess early satisfaction and learning needs; the second survey is randomly distributed to students in other semesters to gather data on perceived teaching excellence and satisfaction with their learning experience. In addition, Campbell’s strategic plan clearly addresses student engagement as an indicator of success, linking engagement closely with graduation rates, retention rates, student satisfaction, placement rates and class size. The final report of the college Student Retention Task Force (2002) states that while intellectual capabilities contribute largely to academic success, those which impact on attrition are more directly related to student thoughts, feelings and perceptions regarding their college experience. While the college literature on Campbell College acknowledges engagement as influential in measuring student success, it fails to articulate a clear definition of the term and how it may be fostered. This study was designed to investigate those areas.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to one school in one college in the Greater Toronto Area, chosen through purposeful sampling. Participants were limited to full-time faculty and students in either their second or third year of study. The fact that part-time faculty and first-year students did not participate restricts the potential for incorporating unique findings from these points of view. Such a limited sample may not reflect experiences for those outside of this particular school.
The study also explored perceptions of the influence of demographic factors on student engagement. The potential for faculty demographic factors to influence those perceptions was not addressed.

As an employee of this college I worked very hard to remain aware of the potential for bias in gathering and interpreting the data. It is possible that my teaching experience influenced my findings in ways that I am not aware of.

Organization of the Study

Chapter II contains a literature review of engagement and the conceptualization of the framework for the study. Chapter III includes the research methods, participant description and analysis procedures. Chapter IV presents an overview of understandings of engagement. Chapter V reviews participant perceptions of the impact of demographic factors on engagement. Chapter VI contains barriers and facilitators reviewed by the participants. Chapter VII contains the overall discussion. Finally, Chapter VIII includes the conclusion and recommendations.
Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of the literature on student engagement. It starts with an overview of the more common definitions of the term and then examines various perspectives on the concept and the literature related to understanding the purpose, or goals, of engagement. The literature is then examined for existing research on engagement both in education in general and then, specifically, in higher education. Within the concept of engagement in higher education, the following topics are explored: retention, academic success, faculty role and instructional quality, and student demographics. The literature is then explored for constraints and facilitators of student engagement. Finally, these elements are incorporated into the conceptual overview of the study presented at the end of this chapter.

Definitions of Engagement

Despite the fact “engagement is increasingly cited as a distinguishing characteristic of the best learning in American higher education today … an explicit consensus about what we actually mean by engagement or why it is important is lacking” (Bowen, 2005, p. 4). Butler-Kisber and Portelli (2003) agree, referring to student engagement as a “popular catch phrase.” They assert it is a worthwhile aim with both practical and moral implications to focus on and, while the concept itself may not be new, what is new is the “explicit focus on this concept and practices that are deemed necessary to bring about engagement … there are complexities inherent in the differing conceptions and practices associated with student engagement” (p. 3).

There are many definitions of engagement in the literature covering elementary, secondary and tertiary education. Some definitions focus on: balancing strategies based on Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004); those that integrate the interpersonal and environmental factors (Chapman, 2003); groupings of factors that contain elements that precede college enrolment,
interactions within the postsecondary experience and personal development (Newman & Newman, 1999); those differentiating between academic and social engagement (Lipps, Norris & Pignal, 2003); and others which incorporate the idea of a continuum with various levels of definition from the conservative to critical democratic (Vibert & Shields, 2003). Chapman (2003), citing Fisher, et al. (1980) and Brophy (1983), asserts early definitions of student engagement looked at time-on-task behaviours. The term then expanded to refer to a student’s "willingness to participate in routine school activities, such as attending class, submitting required work, and following teachers' directions in class" (Chapman, 2003, p. 1). Natriello (1984) also defines student engagement as appropriate participation in school programming and identifies negative indicators of engagement, including behaviours such as absenteeism, vandalism and academic dishonesty.

Other definitions add to the behavioural indicators, incorporating the cognitive and affective aspects of student engagement in specific learning tasks (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Lemke, 2008; Sharan & Tan, 2008). Skinner and Belmont (1993) note that positive emotions connected to a task result in added time and energy being invested, along with a willingness to stretch skills and competencies. Lemke (2008) describes engagement as students actively involving themselves when pursuing deep learning, applying skills of critical thinking and integrating concepts to solve unfamiliar problems involving the cognitive, social-emotional and behavioural aspects of engagement. Sharan and Tan (2008) agree that engagement in learning fuses all three areas while stipulating engagement is broader than the “motivation to learn” (p. 41). Dennen (2010) supports Kuh (2009) in his summation of engagement.

The engagement premise is straightforward and easily understood: the more students study a subject, the more they know about it, and the more students practice and get feedback from faculty and staff members on their writing and collaborative problem solving, the deeper they come to understand what they are learning and the more adept
they become at managing complexity, tolerating ambiguity, and working with people from different backgrounds or with different views. (Kuh, 2009, p. 5-20)

A great deal of research has been generated by the Gallup Organization, with numerous studies focused on how personal strengths impact education. The senior director of research for Gallup, Dr. Shane Lopez (2010), summarizes engagement as involvement in and enthusiasm for school and argues building on strengths increases levels of hope and success in goal attainment. Findings that focus on the identification and use of personal strengths include significant increases in self-efficacy and self-empowerment (Austin, 2006), increased students’ levels of academic engagement (Cantwell, 2008) and increased students’ tendencies to set learning goals (Louis, 2008).

Current discussions on engagement support an even broader view, incorporating all aspects of the learning experience. Student contributions to curriculum design and delivery, interaction with peers, participation in social events and even the physical plant are all recognized as influencing levels of engagement (Kift & Field, 2009; Krause, 2006; Chapman, 2003; Voke, 2002).

Engagement, therefore, can be defined in many ways. For the purpose of this study, student engagement is defined as both an outcome and a process. It encompasses practices, interactions and emotions that maximize meaningful involvement in the learning experience. The definition of meaningful involvement reflects perspectives that are unique to each individual.

**Perspectives on Engagement**

While a myriad of definitions exist for student engagement there is underlying agreement that it is a goal to be attained, as supported by Hu and Kuh (2001), who advocate “the most important factor in student learning and personal development during college is student engagement, or the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful
activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes” (p. 4). Assigning student engagement such importance requires we deconstruct our understandings of the concept, integrating shifting student demographics, economic and accountability requirements, and technological advancements in the area of higher education. Exploration of the literature to understand the various perspectives on engagement further illustrates the complexity of the concept.

McMahon and Portelli (2004) present a framework for the conception of student engagement that depicts three major orientations. These include the conservative or traditional conception (in which student engagement is seen as based on academic achievement and behavioural indicators with the teacher holding the power); the liberal or student-oriented conception (which focuses on students being engaged by caring and inclusive teachers and gives credence to aspects of experience beyond the academic environment); and the critical-democratic conception (referring to students being involved democratically in critical inquiry as a transformational process). The work of Vibert and Shields (2003) categorizes conceptions of student engagement along similar themes. Their three analytical frames, on a continuum, include: a rational-technical perspective; an interpretive perspective; and a critical/transformative perspective. They argue all of these are needed for socially just and academically strong schools. Their rational-technical perspective focuses narrowly on engagement in terms of grades and skills for the marketplace. The interpretive perspective locates the student at the hub of activity, incorporating elements of choice and some independence. Their final analytical frame is the critical/transformative perspective, which revolves around student voice and choice, and emphasizes student input and democratic influence on the evolution of curriculum. Vibert and Shields (2003) argue that an individual’s position on this continuum significantly impacts how student engagement is defined and discussed. This raises the question as to whether students and
faculty define student engagement from a critical perspective in postsecondary education or if engagement is being used in reference to other, perhaps narrower, positions on the continuum. If there is a discrepancy in the orientation of groups or individuals in their efforts to facilitate or experience engagement, there is the possibility engagement is being undermined.

The literature further underscores the complexity of engagement, referencing varied levels of engagement (Skinner & Belmont, 1993) and how it can fluctuate over time (Lederman, 2010). Engagement is interrelated with a number of key areas in the provision of a ‘quality’ educational experience including retention, learning, motivation and voice, incorporating social and emotional dimensions of the educational experience that engage learners from an early age in ways that will develop skills to serve them in adult life (Murray, Mitchell, Edwards, Gale & Zyngier, 2004). ‘Quality’ relationships are “influenced by the extent to which negotiation, participation, and evaluation processes occur during the interaction” (Nuefeld, Rasmussen, Lopez, Ryder, Magyar-Moe, Ford, Ito, Edwards & Bouwkamp, 2006, p. 1).

Engagement is not, however, restricted to practices and processes designed to foster comfort. Krause (2005) addresses the need to challenge paradigms depicting engagement solely in positive terms, arguing that being in “a battle” can be one form of engagement (p. 11). Saavedra (1995), as cited in Taylor (2000), finds supporting evidence for this stance in that “embracing dissonance and conflict among group members strengthened the group experience and provided learning opportunities .... for exploring difference in perspective among group members and stimulating critical reflection” (p. 6). Newmann’s (1989) definition of engagement as “the student’s psychological investment in learning, comprehending and mastering knowledge or skills” (p. 34) infers the existence of conflict as a positive force as learners invest effort to accommodate new learning in a transformational process. Newmann (1989) urges we stretch our
typical understanding of engagement to consider it from a more critical lens; considering how conflict, controversy or other ‘negatively’ charged emotions might enrich the learning experience opens up new opportunities for understanding engagement.

In summary, the topic of student engagement is complex and multidimensional. It has been found to have the following considerations: can be conceptualized on a continuum; encompasses social, emotional and behavioural elements; is fluid over time; and is subject to internal and external influences. Engagement can impact retention, learning, motivation and voice. It is understandable why it is the subject of so much attention and research.

**Overview of Student Engagement in Education**

Numerous studies have explored student engagement since the mid-nineties (Butler-Kisber & Portelli, 2003; Bennett, 2001; Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2004; James, 2001; Kuh, 2003; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2002; Pascarella, Cruce, Umbach, Wolniak, Kuh, Carini, Hayek, Goynea & Zhao, 2006; Pike & Kuh, 2004, 2005; Vontius & Harper, 2006; Tinto, 1997). Research demonstrates a relationship between feelings of engagement and meeting learning outcomes (Huh, Kuh & Vesper, 2000; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996; Pike, 1999, Pike & Kuh, 2005) and retention rates (Bennett, 2001; NSSE, 2002). Research also indicates that engagement serves as a benchmark of effectiveness or quality (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Koljatic & Kuh, 2001; Vontius & Harper, 2006) and is viewed as an important “precursor to learning” (Earl & Sutherland, 2003). For similar reasons, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), as cited in Pike, Smart, Kuh and Hayek (2006), surmised that “it is important to focus on the ways in which an institution can shape its academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings to encourage student engagement” (p. 13).

**Engagement in Elementary and Secondary School Settings**
In the elementary and secondary school setting examining student engagement often highlights the student as the focus. However, quality education also involves unique influences of other individuals, such as peers, faculty, support staff and administrators, and systems, policies and practices of the institution (Coates, 2005; Smith et. al. 1998, as cited in Vibert & Shields, 2003). Factors inside and external to the actual school experience, from classroom conditions (Downer, Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2007) and teaching strategies (Chorzempa & Lapidus, 2009; Higgins, 2008; Dominguez & McDonald, 2005) through parental involvement and civic engagement (Cunningham, 2004; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Howe & Covell, 2009) can influence engagement. Key areas of focus in the literature presented here include overall school culture and reform, the classroom environment, and personal values and preferences.

**School Reform**

The High School Survey of Student Engagement (HESSE) Report of 2009, from the Centre for Evaluation and Education Policy of Indiana University, examines factors supporting success, engagement and persistence for the purpose of overall school improvement. The findings support the cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions of student engagement, and acknowledge gaps for various groups, such as gender, culture, race and ethnicity across these dimensions. Key recommendations focus on the quality of teachers, revisiting instructional practices, policies and procedures, and addressing existing inequities for student groups.

School reform, according to Voke (2002), can be structured to maximize engagement. The author cites numerous studies in articulating five key characteristics of engaging schools: appropriate academic challenge; inviting student input in decision-making processes; establishing caring relationships between all members of the school community; a curriculum that sparks natural curiosity; and providing a safe environment, both physically and
psychologically. “Despite the research on promoting student engagement, many schools do not
provide environments that foster it” (Vokey, 2002, p. 3). Insufficient time and financial resources,
and resistance to change are labelled as identified obstacles.

Lee and Smith (1995) find both achievement and engagement increase when high schools
move away from a bureaucratic organization to a more communal one, especially in the smaller
learning environments. The Ministry of Education of Ontario has developed a range of strategies
recognizing varied learning needs, entitled the Student Success Strategy. They state an overall
increase in graduation rate from 68 per cent in 2003-2004 to 77 per cent in the 2008-2009
academic year. Credit for retention is given to innovative, flexible interventions aimed at
engaging students through specialized programs, e-learning opportunities and transition
programs from elementary to secondary education.

There are both overt and more subtle influences on engagement within schools. The
Centre for Urban Schooling (2008) asserts there are two types of curricula and, citing Brady
(2005), state these include “The one mandated by the education authorities, and the ‘hidden’ or
‘corridor’ curriculum of engagement, which occurs through informal daily interactions with
administrators, teachers, peers, and others” (p. 5). Coates (2005) supports such a view, stating,

Student engagement is concerned with the extent to which students are engaging in a
range of educational activities that research has shown as likely to lead to high quality
learning. Such activities might include active learning, involvement in enriching
educational experiences, seeking guidance from staff or working collaboratively with
other students. (p. 26)

The overall school culture impacts student engagement; however, some factors have
more of an impact than others in the wider school culture. The one experience students share is
the classroom contact.

Classroom Environment
Shifting focus from the larger school to the classroom brings the teachers and the students into focus. Classrooms today are comprised of learners from diverse cultural, linguistic, economic and geographical backgrounds (Black, 2010). The changing student demographics impact directly on the classroom experience and how students are being taught. Each classroom may follow similar guidelines, share course outlines and cover similar topics yet leave students with completely different feelings. Nodding (1997), as cited in Dalton (1998), argues educational reform examines curriculum in terms of “what students need to learn but ignores teachers’ struggle with how to help them learn it” (p. 5).

Stronge, Tucker and Hindman (2004) examined the research for the key affective qualities of effective teachers and found the most frequently mentioned characteristics identified were: caring; listening; understanding; getting to know the students as individuals; demonstrating respect; and promoting enthusiasm and motivation for learning. In addition, the authors stressed the importance of the overall attitude towards the teaching profession and the openness to engage in reflective practice as a determinate of how effective and engaging teachers are as educators. Ryan (2001) gave added support to the need to attend to students in a respectful and inclusive manner.

Students’ perceptions of teacher support, and the teacher as promoting interaction and mutual respect, were related to positive changes in their motivation and engagement. Students’ perceptions of the teacher as promoting performance goals were related to negative changes in student motivation and engagement. (Ryan, 2001, p. 1)

What engages one in the classroom may not engage everyone. This requires consideration of personal values as a factor.

**Personal Values and Preferences**

Individual personal values, perceptions and experiences have a clear impact on engagement. The HESSE Report of 2009 investigates “attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of
students about their work, the school learning environment, and their interaction with the school community” (p. 1). Studies that explore the concept of individual perspectives identify factors such as: having choice (Flowerday & Schraw, 2003), the perceived value of an institution (Swanson, 2009) or a specific course (Floyd, Harrington & Santiago, 2009), and responses to varied pedagogical methodologies (Perrone, 1994; Biggs, 1999).

Persistence rates of students are sometimes linked to how much education is valued. The Canadian Council on Learning (2007) argues that high school graduates are more employable, have added career options and earn more money than those who do not graduate. They also assert that high school graduates have healthier lifestyles. Despite the steady decline in the Canadian high school dropout rate over the last 15 years, rates remain a concern. The League for Innovation in the Community College (2010) supports ongoing research due to growing recognition of public health and civil rights issues that underline an urgent need to increase persistence in high schools.

Overall, the research on engagement in education reflects that many factors are significant. These concerns, however, are not limited to secondary schools as similar issues are found in research in higher education.

**Student Engagement in Higher Education**

Current trends in postsecondary education make it important to understand the complex phenomenon of engagement. Among the changes colleges are facing are: an increased focus on accreditation, competition for applicants, higher standards of accountability, funding, aspiring to teaching excellence and new methods of instructional delivery. However, student engagement in college settings remains under-researched (Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan & Towler, 2005; Coates, 2005). Surveys provide a glimpse into understanding engagement in a particular area at a
particular time; the diversity inherent in the student population and classroom experience infers variability in interpretations by different people. A search to understand engagement needs to explore connections between and among individuals and their school to gain a more thorough understanding of experiences upon which to design effective policies and practices (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Key areas of focus in the research that will be discussed here include retention, academic success, faculty role and instructional quality, and student demographics.

**Retention**

College students face a myriad of issues and concerns and barriers to overcome. “Understanding … factors that influence college persistence the most has become a critical issue for policy makers and researchers alike” (Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn & Pascarella, 1996, p. 428). We do not know how many students will graduate; however, we do know that a number of them leave prematurely for a variety of reasons that have little to do with the quality of the education they receive. According to Donner and Lazar (2000) there is a sizeable body of literature that pegs the level of college attrition at approximately 45% in Ontario. According to Astin (2004), a focus on graduation rate alone can be misleading as an indicator of retention; attempts to retain every student would be highly unrealistic. Colleges may, however, lose an undetermined number of students for preventable reasons. “Major themes behind attrition in the literature are: academic boredom and uncertainty about what to study, transition/adjustment problems, limited and/or unrealistic expectations of college, academic underpreparedness, incompatibility and irrelevancy” (Noel, Levite, Saluri & Associates, 1985, p. 10). If some attrition arises from a lack of engagement, or active disengagement, understanding what counters this may foster increased engagement, potentially resulting in increased satisfaction with the learning experiences and retention.
The literature on postsecondary education is abundant with studies on retention and recommendations for motivating learners (Nora, Cabera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996; Banks, Slavings & Biddle, 1990; Beal & Noel, 1980; Black, 2003; Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2004; Noel et al., 1985; Newman & Newman, 1999). While various positions in extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are linked to engagement (Asselin, 2004; Strong, Silver, Perini & Tuculescu, 2003; Brewster & Fager, 2000; Brewer & Burgess, 2005), the concern is that motivational strategies alone do not seem adequate in order to understand student engagement from a deeper, more critical perspective in terms of meaningful involvement (Handelsman et al., 2005). Included in college efforts to improve retention is the area of academic success.

**Academic Success**

Academic success, referring to demonstrated proficiency in the stated learning outcomes, is a key goal linked to engagement. Pascarella and Terenzini (1996) find that student success is tied directly to the effort directed towards their studies and how involved they are in postsecondary life, underscoring the importance of attending to the impact of experiences inside and outside of the classroom. A large body of research incorporates measureable behaviours as part of this assessment. For example, HESSE (2006) suggests the transition to postsecondary education may be challenging as high school students are not in the habit of devoting enough time to learning outside of the classroom.

A general rule of thumb regarding doing well in college is that students should spend two to three hours outside of class for every hour in class. Yet, more than half of the HSSE respondents (55%) said they devote a total of three hours or less per week to preparing for all of their classes. (p. 3)

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) annually surveys hundreds of postsecondary students about participation in programs and activities supporting learning (the
modification or acquisition of knowledge, behaviours, skills or values) and personal
development (talents, self-awareness, identity and personal potential). NSSE 2005 finds “The
single best predictor of student satisfaction with college is the degree to which they perceive the
college environment to be supportive of their academic and social needs” (p. 12). Edgerton, chair
of the National Advisory Board for NSSE at the time, described the tool as “often referred to as
the gold standard for determining effectiveness. Yet the NSSE measures pretty basic stuff, like
time on task” (p. 5).

Engagement involves more than academic tasks; student needs go beyond the curriculum.
The college experience is much more than the actual classroom experience. However, when
asked about engagement students often talk about interactions with faculty and how they are
taught.

**Faculty Role and Instructional Quality**

A vast body of research and the documentation of principles of good practice in
education exist (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; NSSE, 2002). This research provides benchmarks
that steer much of the work in the area of student engagement and the discussion and practice
that surround it. The seven principles that Chickering and Gamson (1987) deemed pivotal to
student engagement include student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning
experiences, sharing prompt feedback, time on task, communication of high expectations, and
the respect for diversity in talent and ways of learning. The notion of *quality* of instruction was
based on subjective perceptions of value or excellence.

Students describe engaging teachers as those who integrate various domains of learning,
solicit and attend to student voice, treat students as unique individuals, and consciously integrate
opportunities for students to shape their own postsecondary experience. This is supported by
McKeachie (1986), who asserts, “Effective teaching depends on the students, the content and the goals of teaching as well as upon teacher characteristics. Nonetheless, enthusiasm, expressiveness, energy, and a real commitment to students and learning makes a difference” (p. 94).

Teachers can have a profound effect on student learning. “Excellent teachers are successful in facilitating student learning in ways that make a sustained, substantial, and positive influence on how those students think, act, and feel” (Bain, 2004, p. 5). To do this, Bain (2004) argues teachers arouse curiosity and challenge students to rethink their assumptions. “They will understand and remember what they have learned because they master and use the reasoning abilities necessary to integrate it with larger concepts” (Bain, 2004, p. 47). In fostering learning, faculty attend to the needs of individual learners, listen attentively, welcome and accept challenges, let go of control, and set the stage for the student to construct their own learning. Beattie (2001) agrees that teachers who recognize students as valued members of the learning environment know how to create and sustain relationships and open environments.

This kind of teaching cannot be reduced to strategies, plans, techniques, or styles. It cannot be prepackaged or prescribed. Making students’ learning the focus of teaching and emphasizing commitment, compassion, and the capacity for true collaboration with students in their learning, provides the impetus and inspiration for lifelong professional learning, ongoing inquiry, and professional joy. (Beattie, 2001, p. 3)

Excellent teachers and varied methodology do not always equate to engagement. There is a need to examine the impact of demographics on individual engagement.

**Student Demographics**

Students represent a diverse body of adult learners in postsecondary education; what engages one person may not engage another. They are “not simply the passive recipients of undergraduate education delivered by a college or university’s faculty” (Pascarella, et al., 2006,
p. 252). Students are not stagnant entities; experiences within the educational experience influence knowledge, values, attitudes and beliefs. Postsecondary education’s impact on students is the “cumulative result of a set of interrelated experiences sustained over an extended period of time” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, cited in Pascarella, 1996, p. 188). As students progress through their studies, there is a greater focus on educational rather than social concerns (Neumann & Neumann, 1989 cited in Tinto, 1997).

Postsecondary institutions, according to Sissel, Hansman and Kasworm (2001),

Often assume they are interacting with youth in transition to adulthood; thus, attitudes and behaviors of administrators, support staff, and faculty, as well as policies and procedures of these institutions, are frequently condescending to adult students and do not take into account adult lifestyles and adult life complexities. (p. 20)

The 2008 Colleges Ontario Systems-Level Report Summary, from the University and College Applicant Study, analysed the demographics of college applicants. The description of ‘typical’ college applicants is based on surveys from over 160,000 applicants to more than 40 colleges and universities across Canada. This study provides information about the typical applicant.

The typical applicant to an Ontario college is female, aged 18 or younger, most likely working part-time and residing in households reporting incomes of $60,000 or less. She attended a public high school, and reports a high school grade average in the B range (70-79%). She is seeking either a 2- or 3-year diploma, and is interested in programs in Health Sciences, Business, and Social and Community Services. (Academia Group, 2008, p. 4)

The Colleges Ontario Environmental Scan 2009 articulates a number of statistical facts showing some differences from the previous year. They report the average age is 23 with 60 percent of students not coming directly from high school; approximately one-third of applicants are reported to have some previous postsecondary experience. In addition, 17 percent are not born in Canada, 12 percent indicate they use special needs or disability services and 36 percent
are first-generation students. The literature contains numerous studies exploring engagement and the link to many of these demographic factors, such as culture, race and ethnicity (Quaye & Harper, 2007; Greene, Marti & McClenny, 2008; Harper, 2009; Harper, Patton & Wooden, 2009; Perez, 2010), language (Cheng & Fox, 2008; Northedge, 2003, Lawrence, 2005), gender (Price, 2006; Munsch & Marolla, 2005), socio-economic concerns (Colleges Ontario, 2008; Quaye & Harper, 2007), age (Krause, 2005; Gibson & Slate, 2010), ability (Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger & Lan, 2010; Lundie, 2009) and sexual orientation (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; Bannister, 2000).

In addition to the changing demographics, changing student expectations are also reflected in the literature. James (2001) notes the rising expectations for postsecondary education:

> Among other things, student preferences for choice, flexibility and in some cases fast-tracking, the pressure to accommodate the growth in knowledge, and the push to incorporate generic skill acquisition alongside subject specific knowledge have stretched the curriculum to the breaking point. (p. 10)

The literature also reflects a growing sense of support for student voice in shaping curriculum and policies, from the early grades through postsecondary institutions (Earl and Sutherland, 2003; Lee & Zimmerman, nd; Rudduck and Demetriou, 2003; Thomson & Comber, 2003). While postsecondary education advocates for student voice in many formal and informal ways, we may only capture the voice of those actively engaged or already vocal. To truly be inclusive we must facilitate hearing from those less vocal and reduce barriers to sharing. Once we get the input, according to Tinto (1997), students need to be listened to. Prensky (2006) supports this position.

> We need to include our students in everything we do in the classroom, involving them in discussions about curriculum development, teaching methods, school organization,
discipline and assignments. Faculty or administration meetings can no longer be effective without student representation. (p. 9)

In summary, the literature addresses various aspects of the college experience that impact on engagement. The focus here has been on retention, academic success, faculty role and instructional quality, and student demographics. The next section examines the literature for factors that either facilitate or constrain student engagement.

**Constraints and Facilitators**

As there are various perceptions influencing our understandings of engagement, there are also various factors to consider regarding what facilitates or constrains it. Facilitators and barriers to student engagement include everything from personal values to emotional responses to the physical conditions of the classroom. Examining facilitators from concrete and observable reinforcers to more complex and nebulous examples provides added insight into perceived similarities and differences. Facilitators of, and barriers to, student engagement may be concretely evidenced items or more intangible, or both (Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2007).

Perspective and experience influences our understandings of engagement. Students approach engagement from the perspective of a learner, and faculty from the perspective of teacher. For example, a student may find experiential activities uncomfortable and choose to disengage while the teacher believes kinaesthetic exercises are needed to fully illustrate the content, and this defines active learners as engaged. One sees the method as engaging and the other does not. Another example may connect to policy regarding attendance. To ensure students attend class some faculty grade attendance or make it mandatory to pass. Students may attend class for the marks but resent being there, seeing mandated attendance as manipulation. They
attend but are not engaged. What is identified as a barrier or facilitator may vary according to
perspective.

Roles also need to be considered. Ostensibly, students attend classes to further their
learning and faculty are there to facilitate that process. Students represent diverse backgrounds
and experiences that the teacher attempts to engage within a lesson. Various demographic factors
impacting the student experience may influence individual levels of engagement that have not
been accounted for in a lesson plan. If constraints and facilitators of engagement vary according
to individual perspective generic approaches to engagement will not work.

**Theoretical Framework**

I believe all individuals, regardless of race, class, gender or ethnicity, have a right to
quality education, respectful treatment and the building of learning partnerships through ongoing
opportunities for voice and experiencing success. In order to attain this it is critical we
deconstruct the idea of engagement and examine the processes involved, exploring and attending
to unique individual perspectives. Critical examination of the perceptions of educators and
students can help ensure that we address the needs of all students, not simply select groups.

The theoretical stance of this study is informed by the aims of critical theory. Foster
(1986) states that critical theory parallels the radical humanistic approach and, while
“sympathetic to the interpretive approach … it goes further by analyzing how constructed social
structures themselves become seen as real and so solidify the way power is distributed in
society” (p. 65-66). Criticism is also “more than a negative judgment … given the positive role
of detecting and unmasking existing forms of belief in order to enhance the emancipation of
human beings in society” (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 2000, p. 80). The world is not seen as
neutral; it is inherently political.
Power relationships exist, the context of which will vary from setting to setting. The teacher-student relationship is one example of this. Teachers and students have the potential to profoundly influence each other, positively and negatively, in both conscious and unconscious ways. While teachers may strive to invite voice and foster a climate of individuality and critique, they usually also have the ‘final say’ in assigning grades. Some may deem it cumbersome to teach in a way that invites critical discussion, dialogue and modified delivery of materials. Students who challenge or attempt to debate issues may be labelled ‘difficult’ or ‘testing’ of a teacher’s authority and expertise, illustrating the tensions between domination and freedom. The interpretation of such interactions may vary according to: the position or role one holds; comfort with student voice; lived experience and beliefs; personal perspective on the concept of engagement; and one’s own understanding of systemic issues and policies.

Critical theory helps deconstruct issues and uncover the underlying stance behind the issue, discovering who is invisible, who has voice, who is listened to and who is privileged. A critical examination of student engagement can serve to understand the issues, reveal potential hidden inequities, examine themes more closely, educate others and stimulate advocacy for change to the status quo. Research into student engagement may help understand how to move beyond the status quo toward more inclusive schooling experiences.

**Conceptual Framework**

Diagram 1 provides an overview of the conceptual framework for this study, depicting areas of focus that intersect and influence each other, unique to each individual. It illustrates the importance of exploring the phenomenon from both student and faculty perspectives in terms of meaningful learning experiences which, according to Bain (2004), facilitate sustained, substantive and positive influences on thoughts, actions and emotions.
It is critical we investigate what each group identifies as constraints and facilitators of engagement for further clarification of similarities or differences in understandings. We must consider how language, culture, race and ethnicity, gender, socio-economics, age, ability and sexual orientation influence engagement.

College students are influenced by numerous life experiences, positive and negative, many of which are connected to their previous educational involvement. Attending college may be interpreted as the student’s desire to learn skills and concepts needed for the workforce; however, multiple factors beyond cognitive readiness and motivation can facilitate or impede the process. Active participation can reflect a passion for learning, a fear of failure or a combination of both. In order to determine if a student is deemed ‘engaged’ or not, in what, for what and by whom, depends on individual perceptions and experiences.

Diagram 1: Conceptual Overview

Influencing Demographic Factors to Consider:
- Language
- Culture, Race and Ethnicity
- Gender
- Socio-Economics
- Age
- Ability
- Sexual Orientation
Reference to ‘learners’ as a homogeneous group of individuals who learn the same way, have similar value systems, aspire to similar goals and respond to various stimuli in a uniform manner supports an archaic view of education. Despite honouring the importance of individuality, some faculty may continue to frame discussion of engagement in a conservative manner, measuring it exclusively via overt visible behaviours, such as attendance, punctuality and adherence to deadlines. Others describe engagement as the degree to which they ‘allow’ student decision making in the shaping of classroom process, describing themselves as ‘learner-centered’ practitioners. However, this does not clarify what is meant when faculty argue they chose teaching strategies to maximize opportunity for student learning and if they equate student involvement to engagement. Despite the acceptance of individuals as unique entities, procedures and policies tend to force us to fit a structure rather than encourage us to adapt materials to maximize individual potential. Some faculty aspire to establish consensus and a settled learning atmosphere; others promote disagreement and alternate views to enrich discussion, leading to new insights and reflections. To determine whether one individual sees another as ‘engaged’ or not, and by what indicators, may depend on individual perceptions and experiences and where they locate themselves along the continuum towards critical inquiry.

Individual perceptions and experiences also complicate our understanding of what constrains or fosters student engagement as multiple, at times conflicting, lenses reflect differing priorities and preferences. Some see attracting and retaining applicants as a measure of engagement while others measure skill development; however, retention and skill mastery do not necessarily equate to feelings of engagement. In fact, some students who remain through graduation may never truly feel engaged. Understanding engagement requires exploration of more than the observable indicators of a conservative concept of engagement, including the
experiences and understandings of those involved, keeping in mind the systemic factors and conditions.

Engagement is a complex and multilayered concept, influenced by various conditions. It is not always a unique definable entity. Despite a considerable body of ongoing research into the topic, there is a need for further investigation at the postsecondary level to examine specific settings. Chapter III presents the methodology, describing the sample, methods and data analysis.
Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter provides a brief overview of qualitative research and my rationale for selecting this methodology. It then reviews the sampling process, describes the observation and interview process, and examines the data analysis.

Overview of Qualitative Research and Rationale for Approach

Strauss and Corbin (1990), as cited in Hoepfl (1997), claim qualitative research can result in new perspectives or add to existing research. They cite, based on the work of Eisner (1991) and Patton (1990), the importance of the researcher's ability to be sensitive to the data and to make appropriate decisions in the field. Crucial to qualitative research is researcher insight and the ability to assign meaning to data, understand information shared and separate out what is superfluous. I wanted to meet and converse with faculty and students to gain insights into their understandings of student engagement, gaining a more personal glimpse than a survey would offer.

Conceptions of student engagement can vary from setting to setting; therefore, observation and consultation within a familiar environment allowed for studying engagement within the natural setting. Classroom observations allowed for reflection on one of the contexts within which students and faculty formally interact and provided opportunities to watch for integration of student voice; attention to varied learning preferences; welcoming of diverse views; inviting deeper exploration of concepts; and the overall tone of the environment and interactions. Qualitative research approaches are “based on the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Combining observation and interviews allowed me to see some of the “social interactions expressed in daily life” and later explore “the meanings that the participants themselves attribute to these interactions” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 2). According to Patton (1990), “we interview people to find out
from them things we cannot directly observe … to allow us to enter into another person’s perspective” (as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 72). Interviews were conducted to gather insight into participant thoughts and perspectives that cannot be observed.

**Sample Selection**

Research indicates that college personnel influence student engagement (Noel et al., 1985; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2004; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) and the classroom experience is a significant part of the educational experience (Tinto, 1997). The classroom was chosen for this study as postsecondary personnel need to understand the complexity and significance of student engagement, recognizing their actions as educators may foster or constrain it. Not all colleges are the same, and as Kuh (2003) argues, “We’ve got to probe more deeply into the nature of student experience at a particular institution, and not assume that all colleges of a certain type and size are comparable” (p. 26). Pike and Kuh (2004) assert gathering data at the departmental level is promising because “faculty members are more likely to take responsibility for student engagement if they are certain the data represent ‘their’ students” (p. 20). Lopez and Gordon (2010) support this position and describe engagement as being local, happening at the departmental area. The “sample selection in qualitative research is usually … non-random, purposeful, and small” (Merriam, 1998, p. 8). Participants, therefore, were restricted to one school on one campus of one college.

College programs are grouped into schools of related subjects, such as the School of Business, School of Health Sciences, and School of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Of the schools offered by the college administration for this study, one school with all program offerings limited to one campus was chosen. A total of 20 interviews were conducted, 6 faculty and 14 student interviews, representing individuals from each of the four programs of the school studied.
Research participants were sought from volunteers who met criteria based on length of service or study and full-time status. Faculty were full-time personnel, having at least two years of full-time teaching experience in this particular postsecondary setting. Student participants were registered as full-time registrants who had entered their second or subsequent year of study.

**Faculty Demographics**

Faculty participants were full-time teachers from across all programs in the school who were teaching second-year classes. Personalized letters were issued to ask permission to attend two separate hours of their classroom instruction sessions, to observe the interactions in progress, and then spend 45–60 minutes completing an audio-taped interview. A total of 16 faculty met the criteria for inclusion in the study and were issued letters inviting their participation in this research. Each of these individuals was issued the faculty information package (Appendix I) and asked to initiate contact if they were interested in participating. Of the 16, two were not currently teaching students, having been seconded to a degree program, and five were teaching first-year students only. Of the remaining 14 who met the requirements regarding their length of service, only nine were currently teaching students in their second or third year of their program.

Six of the potential nine faculty volunteered to participate in both the observation and the interview components of the research, representing all four programs of the school. While three programs each had one volunteer, the other program had three volunteers. This resulted in one group of students being seen with two different faculty members. The data were examined in an effort to ascertain whether the themes that emerged for this group were different than what was emerging in the other programs. Of the three faculty members who chose not to participate, one indicated they were simply too busy, another did not have adequate class time to devote to the process, and one failed to respond to either the initial letter or follow-up email. The faculty
participant experience ranged from 2 to 20 years of full-time employment with the college in their current positions.

The study was limited to full-time faculty for a couple of reasons. Experienced faculty participants have evolved past what new teachers often describe as the urgency to focus first on the course content and then on the process. Part-time teachers may place heavier emphasis on whether the students like them and may not feel permitted to seek or create as many instances where students are pushed to stretch their skills. Part-time faculty usually teach one or two courses and spend little time on campus outside the actual classroom; full-time faculty have more intensive experience within the college system.

The timing in terms of minimal length of employment also coincided with the completion of the standard college system probationary period and allowed time for faculty to reflect on the formal and informal feedback received from both the students and their administrators. It was hoped that non-probationary personnel may have felt freer to welcome an observer in their classroom and express their perspectives more candidly.

**Student Demographics**

Many studies in the literature either restrict data to surveys and/or conduct interviews with first-year students (CCSSE, 2004; NSSE, 2002; Tinto, 1997). This study used experienced students to ensure that the classes observed and the individuals interviewed had experienced an annual cycle within the institution and had enough time to allow for the transition to the demands of a postsecondary institution. While this may have minimized the fresh perspective of incoming students, it was intended to reduce or neutralize the effect of special efforts designed to connect with first-year students and target more of the ongoing factors impacting on impressions of
engagement. It also provided the opportunity to explore if the concept of engagement evolved over time.

Student participants were volunteers from one of the observed classrooms, allowing for connection of the field observations and interview notes, and triggering potential questions for deeper exploration or revealing unexplored aspects of the phenomenon. The students chosen for interviews confirmed they were registered as full-time, carrying a minimum of 60 percent of a program course load. This helped ensure they had enough current exposure to draw from multiple experiences in answering questions, limiting the possibility of generalizing their views from one encounter. Interested participants submitted the *Informed Consent – Students* form to the researcher with contact information and available times. Those who volunteered represented three of the four programs within the school for a total of 14 students. They included those labelled by faculty as “highly engaged”, “somewhat engaged” and “not usually engaged” although their own ratings were restricted to “highly engaged” and “somewhat engaged”. Permission was granted for audio recording for all interviews. All observation notes and audio recordings were coded to protect the anonymity of the responder and their program, identifying participants only by role of student.

Students from three of the four schools within the program participated. While the reason for the lack of volunteers from one program is not known, it may be due to a variety of factors. One reason may be that in the classroom visited in this program the purpose of my presence was not shared until the end of the observation period, as the instructor began teaching without any introductions. Providing the rationale for my presence at the end of class instead of the beginning may not have given the students enough time to consider investing in the process and having questions answered.
Each student who volunteered was offered either individual or small group interviews (up to five participants in each) based on available times and comfort level. Three of the interviews were done as partners and the rest were individual meetings, although many indicated they would be comfortable either alone or with a small group. The actual scheduling of the interviews was structured around student availability and rarely did available times allow for group meetings. While only three of the four schools were represented by student participation, the themes that emerged through the interviews were not unique to any one program.

**Motivation to Participate**

My nine years of full-time teaching experience in college classrooms and six years of experience providing professional development training for faculty have exposed me to the challenges and possibilities of teaching, and also have provided some insight into the overall goals of many college programs. I have established connections within the college community and therefore did know some of the faculty who volunteered; however, pre-existing familiarity was deemed to facilitate comfort and an open dialogue. Students had no existing relationship with me, minimizing participation due to feelings of pressure or assumptions that there was an expectation of ‘correct’ answers that would reflect on them in their program of study.

A couple of clear themes emerged as each participant was asked to share their reasons for volunteering to participate in this study. For faculty the most frequently cited reason for participation was an interest in the topic of ‘student engagement’ itself. One faculty member simply indicated interest in the topic, inferring the fact it was seen as slipping in the importance placed on it in recent years. “… I like the title of it and that you were looking at engagement. It's something that I think has been slipping away over the last couple of years. I do what I can” (A.1).
Brookfield (1995) supports reflective practice as key for effective teaching and promotes the need for critical conversations with colleagues. Faculty want to gain information to aid in their own meaningful reflection and shape their teaching practices. For some the motivation was personal and connected to their goal of improved quality in the classroom setting. One faculty member maintained, “This is where I am at. This is important stuff to me. So anything that you can find out and figure out for me is only going to aid me in my classroom” (D.1).

There was clear motivation to access student and peer perspectives and then be able to utilize their feedback to enhance the learning experience. Faculty expressed a desire to hear the student perceptions and needs, and bring the area of student engagement to focus on a broader scale. One faculty member emphasised their own learning and how this had an impact in the classroom. “I love finding out new things because it makes life more exciting. And then there are things I can share with the students and then we get discussions going and it’s fun” (B.3).

There was also a clear theme of empathy that arose in that many of the faculty indicated their involvement was motivated by wanting to support a colleague involved in research. For some this was linked to personal connections and included reasons such as, “Commitment to you, as my colleague” (D.1). For others there was a stated eagerness to embrace research that may impact on their own practice or future educational goals. One professed to personal goals in the following disclosure, “I had a selfish reason for participating ... in the future I may need someone to help me out so I am happy to help other people out in that way” (B.1).

The most frequent reason for participating cited by students was that they wanted to help out, feeling they needed to volunteer as others may not. The students talked of feeling compassionate despite no former knowledge of or association with me. “Just to help out I guess.
I figured if I was doing a study I would want to get as many people as possible and I figured it may not be easy to get people to do it” (b.3.3).

While some simply stated they wanted to share their views, others spoke of the idea of reciprocity; if they were to help someone now then that person may feel so inclined to return the favour. Many spoke of feelings of empathy and how it can be a challenge to get others to help out. One student summed it up the following way.

I see you as a fellow student and if I was looking for someone to help me I would hope that they would be generous enough to you know, take a half hour out of their day and just help me out (d.1.7).

Students also wanted to have a voice and be involved in sharing ideas about an area they deemed to be important. One student voiced a perception that understanding engagement may also have some long-term implications, as the student stated, “What you are doing is really helpful and it will benefit us in the future too” (d.1.9).

Comments frequently spoke to the wider impact from their participation. One example of this was from a student stating, “I think it’s important to everybody, faculty and students” (d.1.2.). Students identified how their comments may facilitate continued improvement, attending to individual variation that exists. “It will be beneficial ... for students in general. I mean like as much as schools are good and the teachers are fantastic, I think that any kind of research can be beneficial” (d.1.5).

Classroom Observation

A total of 12 hours of observation occurred. Classroom observation information contained in Table 1 illustrates classroom visits spanning weeks 4 through 10 of the 15-week semester. Programs were randomly assigned capital letter codes and faculty were assigned that code along with a number corresponding to the order of their volunteering. In all cases faculty
had previously taught the course observed, although not all had taught that particular cohort of students before. Two faculty members chose to host observations after the mid-term period in order to feel more familiar with the cohort. Each of these, with the exception of one class, was completed on two separate occasions for a total of two hours with each volunteer faculty member. One class was observed for two consecutive hours due to smaller class size and the fact that the personal nature of the information shared meant that leaving part-way through or returning for another meeting could be highly disruptive to the process.

Timing of the observations was considered; entering classrooms too early in the semester may have resulted in observations of students still acculturating to the environment, especially if they did not have the assigned faculty member before. Leaving the observations until late in the semester may have interfered with testing and feelings connected to termination. Visits occurred when faculty identified the timing was optimal. This schedule can be seen in Table 1. A college semester at Campbell is 15 weeks in length with mid-term exams usually during week seven. This resulted in observations being fairly equitably split between before and after mid-terms with visits as early as week four and as late as week ten. While most visits were held in consecutive weeks, a couple of classes had gaps in between to allow for testing and scheduling conflicts. There was a fairly equal division between morning classes, midday and early afternoon classes visited.

Field notes taken during the observation included “descriptions of what has been observed … in natural social settings” (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 99). Descriptive notes were kept in one column (e.g. the physical setting, the participants, activities contained and the researcher’s role) and personal comments (including reactions, hunches, feelings, initial interpretations and working hypotheses) in a separate column, as recommended by Marshall and
Table 1: Classroom Observation Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty Participant Number</th>
<th>Program and Faculty Code</th>
<th>Weeks in Semester the Observation Occurred</th>
<th>Day of Week of the Observation</th>
<th>Time of Day</th>
<th>Timing Within the Class Periods</th>
<th>Class Size</th>
<th>Number of Student Volunteers for Interviews</th>
<th>Number of Students Actually Interviewed</th>
<th>Faculty Has Taught Course Before</th>
<th>Faculty Has Taught Group Before</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A.1</td>
<td>9 &amp; 10</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>12:45 p.m.</td>
<td>Start of Class</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>B.1</td>
<td>4 &amp; 5</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>8:05 a.m.</td>
<td>Start of Class</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>B.2</td>
<td>5 (for two hours)</td>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>1:30 p.m.</td>
<td>Start of Class</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>B.3</td>
<td>5 &amp; 8</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>11:45 a.m.</td>
<td>Start of Class</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>C.1</td>
<td>4 &amp; 5</td>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>11:45 a.m.</td>
<td>Start of Class</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>D.1</td>
<td>9 &amp; 10</td>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>9:45 a.m.</td>
<td>End of Class</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Program Code Letter = Faculty Member Code Number from that Program
Rossman (2006) and Merriam (1998). Notes were transcribed as soon as possible following the observed classes, including relevant direct quotes, ensuring caution was taken to distinguish between descriptive observations and interpretive reflections. It is also critical to remember that not all forms of engagement are observable, nor are all things that seem engaging going to appeal to everyone. For example, when classes were assigned group work the noise level increased with numerous conversations occurring simultaneously. Upon closer observation it became apparent that not all students were actively contributing or even attending to the discussion. In addition, some students became more overtly animated in their presentation when the faculty member was in close proximity and more subdued when the faculty was across the room.

During the observations I made every effort to maintain a relatively passive and unobtrusive presence, disrupting the regular routine as little as possible. I introduced myself at the beginning of all but one of the classes, explaining I was there to get a sense of the classroom environment to provide a context for later interviews that individuals could volunteer for. The one class in which I did not introduce myself was due to the fact the faculty member began teaching before there was a chance to do so.

The classrooms visited were all located on one campus of the college. Each was equipped with a computer podium, data projection machine and a whiteboard or blackboard. All had large windows on at least one wall and usually had the blinds drawn as a strategy for keeping classrooms cooler. Most room set-ups tended towards the more traditional arrangement with rows of desks or worktables and a center aisle, although a couple were in more recently renovated buildings and had tiered seating. In all but one class there was ample space for seating; while in the one exception there were students seated on the floor and in the aisles as there were not enough seats for those enrolled. The impact of the physical environment on classroom
process was observed as some faculty rearranged the seating for instructional purposes (e.g. small group work done in circles with and without tables, etc.) while others could not move the seating nor easily access students directly to distribute handouts or individually answer questions, as in the case of tiered classrooms.

Classrooms in the college are not assigned to programs but are shared space and housed in a variety of different buildings. Occupancy is described by the administration as being “at capacity” as the enrolment increases faster than any physical expansion, resulting in maximizing the use of available space. This means students are often waiting while the previous class exits, resulting in somewhat noisy and congested hallways. For the observation each faculty member showed up carrying a box or various bags with their supplies for the day (e.g. handouts, chalk, markers, props, etc.). Those who had classes first thing in the morning tended to be there to set up before class began, while those later in the day seemed to arrive just in time for the start of class, perhaps knowing they could not access the room until the scheduled time.

At the end of two hours of observation each of the faculty members left the classroom so that I could repeat the purpose of my presence, describe the focus of my research, invite participation in confidential interviews and share documentation with each individual student. The documentation package distributed included the information letter, informed consent form, a list of the interview questions and an optional form to allow for the collecting of participant demographics (Appendix II). This allowed those who wanted to complete and submit the informed consent to me without faculty awareness of their involvement. Students were able to take the information with them to more fully digest it and then follow up with me via email or phone if they decided they wanted to participate.

**Interviews**
Individual interviews were first completed with each faculty member and then with students from those classes. The vast majority of student volunteers completed and returned the forms to me upon distribution although there were four that contacted me following the observations. Of the three of the four programs within the school the volunteers came from, there was one from one program, six from another and seven from the third. Each student was assigned a lower-case letter code corresponding with their program, the number of the classroom they were a member of and a number that indicated the order of their interview from that classroom.

Each faculty brought a class list on which they rated each student according to how the faculty member perceived the individual student’s level of engagement. They rated each student with #1 for ‘highly engaged’, #2 for ‘somewhat engaged’ and #3 for ‘not usually engaged’. The data were then compared with the student’s self-ratings on the same scale (Table 2).

Table 2: Comparison of Student Engagement Ratings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Participant</th>
<th>Student Code</th>
<th>Student Self Rating</th>
<th>Faculty Code</th>
<th>Faculty Rating of Student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>a.1.1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A.1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>b.1.1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>B.1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>b.1.2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>B.1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>b.2.1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>B.2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>b.2.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>B.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>b.2.3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>B.2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>b.3.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>B.3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>d.1.1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>D.1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>d.1.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>D.1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>d.1.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>D.1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>d.1.4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>D.1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>d.1.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>D.1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>d.1.6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>D.1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>d.1.7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>D.1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rating Scale: 1 = Highly Engaged; 2 = Somewhat Engaged; 3 = Usually Not Engaged
Permission was granted for audio recording, for later transcription, by every individual interviewed. Recordings were made on both digital and cassette recorders to minimize loss of data due to equipment malfunction. All observation notes and audio recordings were coded to protect the anonymity of the parties involved and the write up of the findings used code letters and numbers, identifying participants only by their role without connection to a specific program. The transcribed interviews were shared with each participant, who was then asked to confirm the accuracy of the content. Every participant was offered the opportunity to access the final paper once completed.

Data Analysis

After all the data were collected, observation notes and interviews were each read multiple times and coded by hand for key words and patterns that arose. The data were examined to determine whether or not there was a discernable positioning in terms of an orientation towards engagement; the orientations were: 1) resting with a more conservative notion of teacher initiated; 2) student led actions; and/or 3) more critical democratic perspective. Within each of these orientations was room to probe for behavioural, cognitive and affective dimensions of engagement. Facilitators and constraints articulated were examined and patterns identified. In each case the data were compared to the patterns that emerged from input from the other group (faculty to student and student to faculty).

Conclusion

This qualitative study involved observations and interviews with experienced faculty and students, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of their perceptions and understandings of student engagement. Both faculty and students expressed direct interest in participating to contribute to the body of knowledge on student learning. Faculty noted a desire to hear student
views on the topic and be able to implement any relevant findings in their classrooms; students expressed wanting to share their views and have a voice.

Chapter IV examines data that describe faculty and student understandings of student engagement and disengagement, examining each from a behavioural, affective and cognitive perspective. It then explores how the perspectives of the two groups align.
Chapter IV: Understandings of Engagement

This chapter contains the information shared by faculty and students as they attempted to define their overall understandings of student engagement. Each participant was asked what came to mind for them when hearing the term ‘student engagement’ and to expand on their ideas in terms of the behaviours, feelings and thought processes they believe reflect engagement and disengagement. Each participant was also asked ‘engagement for what’ and whether his or her views were unique or similar to those of their peers.

Overview of Engagement

Faculty and students identified a wide range of considerations when asked to articulate what came to mind for them when hearing the phrase ‘student engagement’. Images of observable behaviours were most often contained in the initial responses given by faculty, citing evidence of preparation and active student involvement in that day’s lesson. Faculty report they seek concrete indicators of students following through on teacher-assigned work, fitting with a definition of the more traditional pedagogical practice, as in Barr and Tagg’s (1995) ‘instructional paradigm’. The instructional paradigm, in which knowledge is transferred from the teacher to the student during defined units of instruction, can be described as “teacher centered and controlled” (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 19). Barr and Tagg (1995) emphasize the need to shift away from this to the ‘learning paradigm’, where the focus is on what the learner does as opposed to what the teacher does, thus placing the student as an active participant at the centre of learning. The following example blends both these paradigms, including teacher-assigned work and then assessment of the student’s work with the content, albeit still within the teacher’s purview. Here one teacher describes students as engaged if they come to class having completed the assigned preparatory work and can apply it in a way designed by the teacher. “They have
come prepared so they have done their readings or whatever is required before they come into class. They participate in all aspects of the class, so large group discussions and the group work” (B.1).

Further supporting a learner focus was the notion that students are responsible for ensuring their understanding of course content and seeking added input if needed. Faculty use both verbal and nonverbal communication to determine if students understand the materials. The following example blends how the responsibility for ensuring understanding is assigned to the student and how the faculty observes body language and behavioural cues to assess this.

I imagine a student sitting in the chair making eye contact with me, I imagine a hand going up, having a comment, a question, even disagreeing, and having some discussion around it. I imagine a student sitting there looking puzzled, looking at me and me stopping and looking and saying ‘Yeah?’ and them saying ‘OK, could you go back to whatever?’ (B.2)

When asked to expand on their definition of student engagement, students talked about a range of considerations. Active participation in their education and learning was the initial and most often cited factor. Student responses connected to a sense of deeper involvement, lending support to the notion that, “Engaged learning requires a cognitive and affective learner connection with the methodology before it can occur” (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004, p. 9). Students saw themselves playing an active role in their learning and that a sense of ownership from within was important. One student summed it up as, “Involvement in your own educational experience and taking responsibility for your own education” (d.1.2).

Feeling heard and treated as a significant part of the process is of prime importance in being “engaged”. Being viewed as an active contributor gave a sense of connection in which the individual impact on outcome was held in esteem. Examples like the following one push past surface behaviour and reveal the desire to feel comfort, valued, connected and an integral
contributor. “To participate and voice my own opinions ... a sense of accomplishment, a sense of belonging … to be part of something” (b.1.2).

While there was support given for the behavioural cues faculty initially cited most often, students looked at it from the reference point of the teacher and then reconnected again to overall goals of the learning experience. Comments indicated the understanding that teachers set the overall framework and assess student reactions and responses, evaluating student ability to meet teacher-driven expectations. Students described their role as staying in tune with what the teacher was teaching and meeting the teacher expectations, taking ownership for following their lead. “The student knows that they are on the same page as the teacher and that they are learning the things they are supposed to be learning and they know basically what they are doing” (b.3.3).

Both groups shared comments on student satisfaction and the quality of the educational experience. Satisfaction was seen as one aspect of student engagement, with satisfied students feeling more connected to the school and the faculty member. Such connections were seen to link to engagement in both the content and the process, with a spill over effect to individual relationships and the larger school image. One faculty described it as, “Where people have engagement in the material or a process; they feel higher levels of satisfaction. It builds commitment ... it improves the relationship that I have with them” (C.1).

Although this study was focused on the classroom experience, engagement was also viewed as having implications far beyond that context, with both faculty and students acknowledging immediate and long-term implications. Faculty labelled graduating prepared employees as a key goal behind student engagement, insinuating that engagement in the learning process impacts on engagement in students’ professional careers. This assumes faculty remain cognizant of current demands and expectations of the workplace milieu and see employers
valuing similar evidence of engagement in their employees. “It’s more consistent with the position that we are trying to train them for as you are going to go out and be a professional where you will be an actor, you are not a passive recipient” (C.1.).

While students echoed the aim for a professional reputation, their comments also reflected on the marketing implications of engagement, introducing the aspect of the engagement strategies used by colleges for recruiting purposes. There was a sense of the college wanting to foster pride and interest through focusing on the array of options in both curriculum and activities available. Their comments focused more on recruitment instead of the workplace preparation the faculty referred to. “Engagement ... further I think recruits new students. I also kind of, in a sense, I also look at it maybe as a little bit of a marketing idea ... and we have all these things that you can enrol in” (d.1.7).

Many comments referred to the teacher responsibility for stimulating engagement. However, student comments expanded on their own role in the process. They acknowledge their responsibility and ownership, and the impact on their own success. “You have to do it for yourself ... it is personal development and learning” (b.1.1). One student linked student engagement to the interaction of the outcome and quality of the learning experience, describing these as correlated to future success. “I think if you are engaged you are probably more likely to ... how engaged you are probably is correlated to how successful you will ultimately be” (d.1.2).

Personal experience was credited with impacting perceptions; students noted how individuals sometimes feel they need to adapt to expectations whether they agree with them or not. The following excerpt illustrates how one student felt pressured to meet the norms set by others while continuing to question their validity. Their point was that active participation and high grades are not fair determinants of engagement for everyone.
I know throughout the years I have been trained to think it is how much you participate in discussions, how much or how high your grades are and all that stuff but I don’t necessarily agree with that though. For me personally I knew that I took a lot from classes even though I didn’t necessarily participate to a great degree. (d.1.3)

When first asked to define engagement faculty responses included descriptions of ‘ideal learners’. The vast majority described prepared, attentive, motivated and involved students who took responsibility to prepare and ensured their own comprehension of materials. One mentioned the relationship as key. Student comments clearly supported their need to taking responsibility for their learning although they did not necessarily agree with the indicators they believed faculty use to measure their engagement. While both parties did refer to eventual success, in general faculty comments were more focused on where the students were headed and students were more focused on where they were at this point in time. Participants were then asked to share what engagement looks like from a behavioural focus.

**Behavioural Dimensions of Engagement**

Behaviours or actions may be overt or subtle, conscious or unconscious. Faculty were easily able to list a variety of concrete, observable behaviours or shifts in behaviours that they linked to evidence of engagement in the classroom. These included body language, facial expressions and the more overt physical actions such as raising hands and taking notes. Many responses included reference to the direct connection between the faculty, the student and the course content as indicators of taking in the information. The following example shows how one faculty assesses learning content and demonstrated behaviours to determine engagement.

First of all it’s just their whole body language. You know if they are sitting upright, they are giving me eye contact. Other behaviours could just be responding to questions, responding to peers – either agreeing or disagreeing with what is being said in the classroom ... When I ask what we covered last week … if they can answer these questions I know they were engaged last week and did hear what was happening. (B.1)
Students indicated many of the same concrete behavioural indicators that faculty listed although an interesting difference was that student responses were more from a third-party perspective; thus, at times their responses appeared less personal.

Just attendance and basically engaging in conversations, so answering questions, being attentive. So being there on time, being there prepared, being there um going, checking emails regularly, like connecting and speaking with the teachers outside, like in the sense where if they don’t understand something they could email their teacher, things like that. (b.1.2)

When asked to describe the observable behaviours, a number of student responses indicated their underlying goal was to be seen by their teacher as being engaged. “I try to answer questions that they have. If they have any role plays I try to be one of the people that volunteers for that” (d.1.8). Students purposefully promoted such an image through demonstrating the participation faculty look for and reward with marks. “I try to do my readings ahead of time so I know what is going to be happening in class. I know we are being marked on participation so I push myself to participate a lot more” (b.3.3). When asked if they would actively contribute if not earning marks for participation, students took a moment to ponder, with many indicating they would not. “Probably not, I never used to in high school. I never really, like unless I had a question about something” (b.3.3).

Demonstrating polite behaviour or feigning engagement, even when disinterested, was seen as important. While the term was not directly labelled, students spoke of attempts to hide demonstrations of disengagement. “When not engaged I don’t know if you could tell ... I try to not be obvious because I don’t want to be rude” (a.1.1). The message from numerous students included the desire to be seen as an active participant, despite not feeling they had anything they saw as meaningful to contribute. “Although I may put my hand up and not necessarily have
anything good to say ... sometimes I put my hand up to crack a little joke and then see what happens” (b.2.2).

Students adapt their behaviour based on what they feel the teacher is looking for, either to meet teacher expectations or deflect attention to avoid being called upon. One shared how avoiding eye contact was a strategy to avoid being called on, especially when disagreeing with the faculty member.

Sometimes I want to look at the floor. I do not want to look at the teacher because she may ask me something when I do not want to participate. Sometimes I do not agree with them and I do not want to be the one to say so. When I disagree I do not want to be put on the spot; I would be challenged as to how to disagree. (b.1.1)

Students want recognition for efforts they individually invest. One spoke of commuting long distances for early classes after little sleep due to other responsibilities. This student felt that coming to class and making an effort was an indicator of being engaged.

I live so far, me coming all the way … shows engagement and it shows actually dedication because I am coming from that far and still being able to keep my head up, even though I may be nodding off, and still answering questions. (b.1.2)

The psychological climate was addressed by faculty, noting that comfortable students are more involved and experience a more successful outcome. While this supports Maslow’s (1954) hierarchical stages of belonging and safety and security, the comment speaks to the relationship of active involvement and student success.

It is your ability to fit in and feel like you are a part of that group. I mean I think that we have seen if they are more comfortable, and colleges work very diligently at making students comfortable in their classes ... the more you are involved the better you are going to do. (A.1)

Students echoed the importance of a sense of belonging in terms of connections and relationships they develop with others in the learning environment. The Center for Community
College Student Engagement (2009) agrees, defining ‘connected colleges’ as ones that do the following:

Effectively connect with their students and encourage them to build the relationships – with faculty, staff, other students – that are essential to student success ... Their language and actions communicate the belief that all students can succeed and demonstrate that everyone on campus is committed to facilitating success. (p. 3)

Cross (1999) agrees that “learning is about making connections” (p. 5). The following excerpt underlines how important these connections are for this student.

Being engaged is being with others, with other students or with things that are happening in the program or the school or with the teachers. Socially we engage by talking and conversations and dialogue and sharing information. (b.2.1)

Students saw the impact of establishing a sense of belonging with the cohort as essential. They spoke of a significant amount of time spent with peers in the same grouping and how important their connections are; these were not just people to work with but also friends. This student describes the isolation felt when first coming to college. In this example one talks about forming peer groups to augment the student’s own areas of weakness or provide assistance. Above all they note how friends provide comfort and a necessary outlet.

I didn’t know anyone and I realized that if I didn’t make any friends or if I didn’t like talk to anyone I wouldn’t be able to have a nice little study group with anyone which would lead to me not passing exams because I am not really good at studying … or to share information if I miss a class and I’d like … just to have someone to talk to. (b.2.2)

Comfort in the classroom also included relationships with the faculty. This was seen as directly linked to one’s willingness to take risks in that environment. Teachers were described as a source of knowledge, looked to for the answers or to stimulate thinking, and pivotal in setting the tone for the learning environment.

It’s the interaction with teachers…if I have a question during a lecture I can put my hand up and I can ask and they can clarify for me and then I can answer, or they can ask me a question to help me clarify it. (d.1.5)
Many students stressed the individual nature of engagement. The tendency to extroversion or introversion, and factors such as gender, culture and age were all mentioned. Comments reflecting engagement could be expressed in different ways or at different times by students, and may be neither immediately evident nor in the form of witnessed behaviours. The following faculty comment reveals the need to recognize the importance of individuality. “It means a few different things for me because I think there are different types of students and different types of learning strategies and different levels of responsiveness and all are equally of value” (B.3).

There were unique factors identified due to group composition. In the following example the faculty member noted how cohorts differ and that varying demographics and personalities result in different indicators of engagement, requiring looking past surface assumptions or definitions.

For some of our student population, this year and last year, it was culturally inappropriate for them to make eye contact with you ... They would email me questions whereas they will not ask them in class so they may appear not to be engaged but they really are engaged, the quieter people who are just not comfortable with talking. (B.3)

Student engagement was described as encompassing connections with people and materials inside and outside of the classroom experience. Teachers acknowledged that systemic factors can lessen engagement; students focused elsewhere are less likely to have the energy needed for forming the connections and relationships that help with learning. There was recognition that students may struggle with various challenges. The following example speaks to faculty feeling responsible for acknowledging and intervening to help with these challenges.

There are things systemically that we need to be looking at in terms of keeping students and maintaining their connections to us and engagement in learning... How are we supporting students that have LDs, children, have to work 40 hours a week ...? (D.1)
In summary, both groups clearly labelled behavioural indicators of student engagement. Faculty examples primarily included punctuality and attendance, attentiveness, responding to and asking questions, and verbal participation. Students agreed these were indicators used by faculty and spoke of how students demonstrate such behaviours to be labelled ‘engaged’. Students identified similar behaviours as indicators of engagement although there was a key difference. For students, indicators of engagement were described as more aligned with comfort in the learning environment and connections with others, both faculty and peers. Once they felt comfort in the classroom they reported feeling better able to display the overt behaviours identified by the faculty. Participants were then asked about the affective considerations of engagement, specifically how students ‘feel’ when they are engaged.

**Affective Dimensions of Engagement**

The affective domain refers to emotions or feelings, with either positive or negative connotations for the individual. If we believe engaged students behave in certain ways do we believe they feel in certain ways? I asked what feelings participants connected to engagement and how this determination is made because feelings or emotions in others may not be clearly evident or easy to identify. Sharing some emotions may leave a person feeling more vulnerable and perhaps reveal a deeper level of engagement.

When faculty and students were asked to describe their understanding of student engagement from an affective perspective in the classroom, responses were often based on observable reactions that contained indicators of increased energy and enthusiasm. These were also evident in how their responses were delivered. The following is an example of how one faculty determines learning occurred and the student ‘gets it’. “When they look at you there is
keenness, and when you say something their expression suddenly changes, like something went in” (C.1).

There were also a number of responses that spoke to behavioural indicators of the more emotional tone of the classroom and connections with the student that faculty use as an indicator of engagement. Comments included reference to a sense of belonging and emotional connection to both the materials and the process. Faculty spoke of how they determine the affective tone of the class, equating excitement and interest as indicators of engagement, and defining this from a personal perspective.

They seem interested. I can tell interest just by the tenor of the class, the sort of emotional tenor. You can tell if people are excited or interested in what they are talking about ... it is just sort of a gut feeling that I have if they are interested. (B.1)

Participants recognized the affective element, although describing it was not always easy. One example noted the impact of the emotion in terms of power within the student. In this example charged emotions were linked to increased assertiveness and freedom of expression.

I think when students are engaged they feel empowered ... they can actually change the class. They can change the environment. They can get the conversation to going a different way or they can explore things perhaps that maybe they are more interested in ... I just sort of see that spark you know. (B.1)

The importance of the personal connection and relationship were shared as important in being able to read the student. Faculty expressed seeking ‘evidence’ of this in nonverbal communication between the teacher and student. In this example is a belief that engagement can result in feelings of warmth and satisfaction quietly being shared.

This is going to sound, I don’t know odd maybe, but it’s in their eyes. There is this energy, that sometimes they just don’t need to say a lot … so there might be a student who is not talking a lot but their behaviour indicates that they are involved and I’ll look at them you know and sort of wink or smile and get the warmth back. (B.2)

The affective realm elicited indicators of satisfaction from the faculty. They presented in
a more animated fashion and acknowledged an added quality in the exchange when responding in the interviews. When describing the following example there was added laughter and nonverbal body animation. “The emotional is the connection to the stories and the feeling a part of it and so when they are engaged you can see that spark” (D.1).

Additional comments also reflected elements that were more sensed than seen. These comments were offered in a more tentative manner as participants tried to seek the ‘correct’ affective label. The following example reflects the positive emotional impact sensed when students understand the material:

And you can get that kind of energy going in the class ... That’s when they really feel you know that they know the stuff. They can apply the stuff. Plus they see how this is going to relate to their work and field. I think they feel good, they feel good … there are positive feelings, however you want to label them ... they feel proud of themselves ... excited, they feel good. (B.1)

Affective engagement was seen to exist if the students see the learning content as relevant. This faculty sees students emotionally engage if they can connect with how it matters for them. “I think they feel that this matters. They, they feel that it’s going to advance them” (C.1).

When expanding on the emotional tone, faculty noted increased energy in the room. They described people connecting with each other, and not just the materials, as an integral aspect of engagement. One participant noted how the impact and the coming together of the group felt palpable. “That just brings this group … you could feel the group pull” (B.2).

Student observations about feelings in the context of understanding and experiencing engagement also reflected a deeper level of connection with other people and the learning process. In their responses students spoke from a first-person perspective, sharing answers that reflected the more emotional aspects of engagement rather than resorting to the behavioural
indicators. They were also much more animated in their delivery when sharing their examples. “Well I like learning, I like learning new things, and I feel smart. I don’t know, I feel good. I don’t feel like I am wasting my time” (a.1.1).

Many students identified positive emotions as an outcome of engagement. Pride and inclusion were specifically labelled the most often. “Um pride … a sense of feeling connected… feel an integral part of the program” (b.1.2).

One student commented on the interconnectivity of engagement and positive emotions arising from a sense of inclusion. “It’s hard to feel happy about something you are not a part of it … and being a part of it is engagement. Engagement and feeling happy … it all works together” (b.1.2).

Bain (2004) describes excellent teachers as those who facilitate “student learning in ways that made a sustained, substantial, and positive influence on how those students think, act, and feel” (p. 5). A number of the students agreed and identified an emotional connection that triggered an appetite for learning. “Sometimes they’ll mention something I never knew before or something that I have always wondered about that is fascinating. I just kind of get excited and find myself searching up stuff afterwards” (b.2.1).

Emotionally engaged students feel the power of the momentum and want more. This indicates the potential for sustained impact of emotional engagement that can stem from learning new materials or from wanting more reinforcement from the teacher, as in the case of the following example. “And I want more I guess. Like whatever they are giving me I want more, information or smiles or nods or whatever it is” (d.1.6).

Joining with the teacher and viewing them through a new lens was noted for one student. One example illustrates how one student experienced a fundamental shift from their previous
view of the teacher/student relationship to a more powerful and positive understanding of the relationship. “It’s wonderful to get that connection with somebody and be able to sort of have that mutual sort of thing ... going from being an oppressor to an ally” (b.2.3).

With students there was some acknowledgement of engagement periodically involving emotions that are deemed less than desirable. Sometimes there was a positive side seen to this and sometimes a negative one, illustrating that engagement may not always be comfortable and involves risk. The following example includes how one student sees peer provocation as a form of emotional engagement. “Some people like to see how much further they can push it … It’s not a positive engagement but it is an engagement” (b.2.3).

Others referenced being drawn in so many directions that emotional engagement was difficult to obtain, almost being too tired to give any more. The realities of complicated roles and multiple demands were labelled by one student as a direct influence on their engagement from a practical, logistical point of view.

I have too many other things to do.... I want to enjoy it but you are so worried about what you have to do tomorrow, like what is due tomorrow that you can’t enjoy it properly like … like life is not easy. (b.1.1)

Discussion of the affective elements of student engagement elicited increased animation for both groups. Comments indicated perceived shifts in power and the formation of relationships and connections past those of filling the role of student and faculty. While positive emotions were labelled more frequently, negative emotions were also referenced. The area of cognitive engagement was then discussed.

**Cognitive Dimensions of Engagement**

Finally, participants were asked about the cognitive dimension of student engagement. They were asked how students thought and processed information if they were engaged. This is
another dimension that is not always easy to see or assess and I wanted to ascertain how the participants reached such a determination.

Faculty comments reflected using multiple methods to determine the cognitive impact of engagement. They indicated that they often used visual images and behavioural indicators. The following example illustrates how one faculty looks for indicators of student thinking, allowing for variability among students,

I have this sort of image of this plastic brain with these lights just sort of firing all over. So the idea is that hopefully they get another idea ... Cognitively for me that’s engagement. That’s my immediate vision ... but I’ve seen students sit back ... mulling things over, taking them in, sifting them through, rather than the sparks. So I recognize there is the variety of it and again somehow you see it on their faces. (B.2)

Another faculty member spoke to purposefully targeting thinking skills, specifically reflective practice and critical thinking. To foster ongoing reflection and cognitive engagement faculty strive to ensure relevancy of content and integration of materials in daily life. One faculty spoke directly to setting the stage and then supporting and allowing the students to take it further.

It is meaningful to them and so it is something that they notice ... so I see that sort of percolating of ideas and thinking ... I see some signs of it in some students where integrating information. So it is teaching kind of a way of thinking … critical thinking. (D.1)

Students shared some similar views as faculty in this area. One student clearly saw behaviour as an indicator of cognitive engagement. “I get really distracted really easily so when I am engaged I am more focused” (a.1.1).

Some students referred to in-class activities that engage them in focused thinking. One mentioned debates and the opportunity to experience opposing views, realizing that others may not gain the same sense of engagement from that activity. One student tried to describe how such a strategy stimulated new perspectives and critical thinking to deepen learning and challenge existing paradigms.
The discussion will go back and forth … so it turns kind of into a debate type of thing and I am very intrigued by that kind of stuff because I love to hear both sides. You start to analyze everything, you start to think there is that but then there is also this factor and that factor which leads to getting a new perspective. (b.2.2)

Students also agree the process isn’t restricted to the classroom; learning continues elsewhere if engaged. It was also noted that a deeper level of engagement embraces the learner in terms of behaviours, emotions and thought processes.

You want to learn more and you think about it more and there’s a desire on your part to put yourself into that person’s shoes and see what it would be like. There is a real thirst for knowledge … and you take it further and further. (b.2.1)

The impact on learning was a clear theme in the responses. One student referred to experiencing engagement in thinking it as a sense of it all coming together. The following identifies it as when the information makes sense and connections can be made to other materials and experiences. For this student it culminated in a sense of understanding and feeling confident about their knowledge.

I feel I am really taking it in like what we were saying the teacher is teaching and I am not only hearing it but thinking oh yeah, that makes sense. I feel like my mind is really connecting to other things I am doing. (d.1.5)

A deeper level of engagement surfaced in the following quote referencing openness to self-exploration and risking with others. Embedded in this comment is the message that students are individuals who want to be seen and recognized as such, not just for parts of who they are. In asking about the impact of engagement on cognitive processes one student indicated such engagement could result in a more genuine demonstration of the ‘real’ person.

We become more genuine and open and honest and some of that how we ‘should’ present kind of falls away … and there’s the real person. You want to be seen as who you are as an individual rather than all those systemic factors … being white is not the only part, or being Italian is not the only part or being living at home with your mom because you can’t afford anything else is not the only part of you. (b.2.3)
Deeper engagement was described as stimulating a more genuine motivation for learning. The following example highlights the connection for some between the desire to learn and ease that accompanies such internal motivation. “It is interesting to me. It’s not just something that you have to learn, well you do but a lot of it is really interesting and it’s easy to do well and want to do well in it” (b.3.3).

Cognitive engagement further elicited comments about a thirst for further learning. Using critical appraisal and consciously seeking opportunities for application were evidence of a desire to continue learning after class or exposure to the information. One example showed how application and reflection were stimulated when cognitively engaged.

I like to try and take what is in the class and apply it to outside situations. So again it adds to my mental thought processes. I start to think about how I can apply this and ... I also like to reflect on myself, in my life as well. (d.1.3.)

When examining the cognitive dimensions of engagement both students and faculty spoke about the impact on learning. Comments referenced both content comprehension and developing a thirst for ongoing learning. The next section asks participants to examine the other side of the issue and describe their understandings of disengagement from the same dimensions of behaviours, feelings and thought processes.

**Overview of Disengagement**

‘Disengagement’ infers that there has been some form of engagement that is interrupted or terminated, a sense of detachment or withdrawal from what existed previously. Alternatively, a lack of engagement or never engaging in the first place can be labelled ‘unengaged’.

“Student disengagement and apparent lack of commitment presents itself as a problem on a daily basis for academics” (McInnis, 2001, p. 1). McInnis attempts to veer away from a deficit view of disengagement in articulating some of the known realities many of today’s students are
attempting to juggle in terms of “the new realities of student choices, flexible delivery, the pressure to respond to student markets in the face of the decline in government funding, and the emergence of competition for diverse, well-resourced and highly creative alternative providers” (p. 4). In the patterns of disengagement studied, McInnis (2001) cites another of his studies (McInnis, James and Hartley, 2000) where findings indicated students are spending less time on campus, more time in paid employment and are attempting to juggle numerous responsibilities outside of academia. Harward (2008) agrees that there is a need to consider the larger picture.

All too many institutions of higher education – and even proponents of liberal education – are off-course, addressing only narrowly academic means and strategies rather than the integrated goals and ends that matter to our students and to our democracy. As a result, many of our institutions risk becoming complicit in the troubling patterns of student disengagement. (p. 1)

Participants were asked to expand on what they saw as the behavioural, affective and cognitive dimensions of students either disengaging or not engaging in the first place. Examples of all three were shared.

**Behavioural Dimensions of Disengagement**

Faculty quickly identified observable, overt behaviours they associated with disengagement. Among these were poor posture, sleeping in class, chatting with peers during lecture periods, playing with electronic devices or surfing online. The following example was shared as being among the more overt behaviours noticed. “Yeah, ... like this in the back [head on table], ... and I know there’s a couple of them back there on their computers or they are texting underneath and are not terribly engaged” (B.1).

Both behaviours and the lack of behaviours were seen as blatant illustrations of disengagement. The lack of focus, cessation of attending and lack of connection with the
instructor were examples shared. The following excerpt includes a sense of teacher responsibility for preventing disengagement, inferring teachers may feel responsible to rectify the situation.

Well they sit back like this, look like this [showing head down]. This week they were all so tired and loaded down … And they look up at the ceiling and they, they disengage. You know they don’t do much of anything, they stop writing and stop doing much of anything, and they are like just drifting. … I think I am losing them. (C.1)

This was supported with comments arguing faculty need to ‘read’ the body language of their classes to know when a change in pace was needed. This faculty member shared a strategy that they used to try to intervene before the students would disengage. “Nonverbal cues … that’s what I tell people anyway … ‘You look tired … you look like you need a coffee now. Go get a coffee, go get a smoke.’ Um, yeah so behaviour would be that body language, you know” (B.1).

Faculty also spoke of disengagement as a form of ‘freeloading’ or inequitable participation. One appeared quite chagrined at students who would not contribute fairly. “You are sitting back and you are letting everybody else do the work? Well, who are you to do that? That’s not okay, ever” (B.2).

Comments indicated rating a level of engagement was difficult. The following example illustrates that previously mentioned behaviours don’t always confirm engagement; not all who volunteer responses to questions are engaged and not all that present as attentive are truly listening.

Well, um, um, uh, there are certain students that I rated as high although they rarely raised their hand but and there are others that just, uh, they can look right at you but you can be a pink elephant for all they are seeing. (C.1)

A number of responses also included reference to difficulty assessing engagement when the behaviours could be interpreted in multiple ways. In one example the taking of notes was not necessarily deemed adequate evidence to determine whether or not students were engaged.
Last year I could say this is up on the course site – don’t write, print it off if you want to and bring it to class ... This year two or three cannot solve the technical problems for accessing it so that kind of slows them down. I can’t tell if they are engaged because they are so busy scribbling. (C.1)

A couple of faculty comments revealed different expectations for the students and their own behaviour when in the role of learner. This presented a self-identified double standard when one faculty member reflected back on the situation. The following excerpt speaks to demonstrating the same behaviour as a learner that they would not tolerate from a learner in their classroom.

I was actually a student myself again recently ... and I thought I am the worst student because I do everything that my students do. I multitask in the learning environment so, you know, when [named the instructor] is up there and talking about something I already know I’m phasing out, I doing my email. (B.1)

Faculty also admitted labelling students ‘disengaged’ was largely their interpretation of nonverbal communication. Despite interpreting a wide range of behavioural cues as disengagement, the following example acknowledges that it is not something that is actually put into words.

Not engaged is seen in body language, coming in late constantly into the class, sitting outside of the group. It’s not anything that is ever spoken … where somebody says ‘This really sucks’ or ‘I hate this stuff’ or ‘This is useless’. No one ever verbalizes that. Maybe they think that but they don’t verbalize it. So it’s again, it’s just observing. (B.1)

A teacher’s personal reactions were shared as directly influencing the norms established in the classroom. In the following example the faculty member acknowledges setting the standards for acceptable behaviour based on frustration experienced. The expected behaviours were simply announced.

I have one group who I would like to strangle and I actually like most of them, they are really good people. But they write notes in class and it’s very distracting and it’s rude. And I don’t like it. Um, and so my first way of dealing with it was to say to the class at large ’And for those of you that do write notes in the classroom – not going to happen and let me tell you why’. (B.2)
Students also listed a number of behavioural indicators of not being engaged. Among the behaviours agreed to were sleeping, focusing elsewhere and looking for distractions due to feelings of disinterest. The following illustrates that not only may the student ‘tune out’ but they may interrupt the learning process for others.

I’m totally either falling asleep or you can tell I am completely disinterested ... I am not paying attention, I’ll start playing on my computer or I’ll start chatting with the person beside me... that’s not doing anything for me so let’s do something more interesting. (b.2.3)

Students were also very quick to qualify that behaviour itself is not an adequate indicator of engagement. Many examples were shared that spoke to unfair assumptions faculty make based on observed student behaviours. Ironically, in the following example this student assumes the faculty make assumptions about underlying causes of student behaviour. “If someone is always late they will think maybe they are irresponsible or, you know we can’t count on that person, so why bother engaging with them” (b.2.2).

The perceived importance of grades varied among those interviewed. What became apparent were the impressions shared about the importance of marks. One student stated that when they are perceived as striving for high marks and do not achieve them, the faculty make an assumption correlated to level of engagement.

I don’t know how much emphasis teachers put on grades that are achieved but ... if they think that I think that grades are important to me and then I get a bad grade then they think that I am not engaged enough. (d.1.6)

Students linked the weighting of attendance to disengagement. They acknowledge the benefits from being in class but object to feeling forced to attend. One suggests such a requirement be re-examined. “Participation percentages need to be relooked … classes where it is 30 or 40% I think it is just way too much” (b.3.3).
Ironically, examples of strategies intended to minimize absenteeism were seen to result in students missing more classes than they would normally. Rules and procedures may inadvertently create unintended results. One student reveals how a policy designed to lower absenteeism actually had the reverse effect.

The majority of our classes have a rule or a regulation or whatever it is called where if you miss five classes you automatically fail the course – like a lot of people will miss up to four classes and they keep track and make sure they have missed as many as they can but not to the point where they will fail the course. (b.3.3.)

While faculty shared efforts to set norms that were respectful, there were frequent references to how the messages inadvertently impact on the students. In one situation a student with a self-professed learning disability stated a need to fidget with small items to help focus on the lesson. This was in exact opposition to what they heard the faculty member state in their list of acceptable classroom deportment.

Some professors … have a lot of pet peeves. One told us in the first class ‘These are my pet peeves and if you want to stay on my good side then don’t do them’ … It was unfortunate for me because a lot of those things are a lot of things that I do. (b.2.1)

The faculty aim to partner with students is complicated by the fact that the faculty are in the position of awarding or withholding recognition for efforts. One student spoke about being issued a copy of program policies and procedures to adhere to regarding situations such as missed tests or submitting late assignments. They described the expectation they sign a document to confirm receipt and acceptance of the contents of the guidelines. Students said faculty see this as a method to ensure equity and incorporate student feedback in practice. Students, however, described it more as another layer of bureaucracy they feel powerless to change. They feel powerless if they disagree with an item because the faculty can withhold their advancement. This results in attaining meaningless signatures on documents, at least from the perspective of
investment from one student. “Of course I am going to sign – it may look like I agree – I want my diploma – so I will sign but not necessarily agree” (b.1.1).

Such a power differential arose in other examples shared when students spoke about student behaviour going ‘underground’, implying a false sense of what is seen in the classroom. One comment argued forming impressions of student engagement on what is seen in the classroom is misleading.

A lot of the overt behaviour happens not in front of the teachers. 'Cause the students know if the teachers see it they will call them on it because they don't put up with that stuff. So the further away they are from the teachers the more they can feel free to be themselves. (b.2.3)

In summary, both groups agreed on a number of overt behaviours as indicators of disengagement. While faculty often labelled behaviours they saw as disinterested or detached, students tended to look past the surface behaviours. Frequent reference to policies designed to engage students were seen by the students as having the reverse effect. The division of power was also apparent for the faculty, who see their role as setting rules and standards of deportment, and for students, who need to meet the expectations or face repercussions. Next the affective dimensions of disengagement are explored.

**Affective Dimensions of Disengagement**

Faculty and students were asked to articulate how they perceive disengagement in terms of affect. Despite the lack of many specific examples, faculty referred to feelings and emotions such as boredom, apathy and a lack of confidence. Most interviews contained references to the lack of positive emotions or energy than an actual sense of something present.

When sharing impressions and understandings of disengagement from an affective focus faculty comments most often returned to a lack of behavioural indicators. One faculty questioned whether their expectations are realistic for every student and noted the interesting balance
between empathy and accountability. The following example illustrates how not following up on offered help is viewed as disengagement.

There’s also disengagement because there is just no response to anything ... I’ve offered help, I’ve offered to help her with counselling, I’ve offered to meet with her, I’ve offered to say let’s meet and we’ll strategize together – I will help you speak in class but you have to come to me and we’ll work on it. (B.2)

Students offered many more specific examples in this area. Examples included feelings of frustration, being misunderstood or not respected, and feeling their individual needs are ignored. Students gave examples of disengaging when uncomfortable. One student spoke of expectations for verbal participation causing anxiety. In the following example one shares how their peers disclosed this as a catalyst for disengagement. “They would say ‘I don’t like to talk’ and ‘I don’t like to raise my hand and put myself in the middle of the class’” (d.1.3).

Students also reported a level of discomfort being called on when they are not offering answers, feeling empathy for those caught in this experience. They argued that if pressured to respond, further disengagement was a potential and unintended result.

We have certain teachers who will, if you are sitting there quietly and not answering questions, they will pick on you and be like ‘So what do you think about this?’ or ‘Where do you think this notion comes from?’ ... They may not feel comfortable and they might withdraw even more in their engagement. (d.1.2)

Students who felt picked on and centred out withdrew from discussions. One shared an example of why they chose to stop contributing. The following statement reveals how one student believed that making an inaccurate statement or mistake in class left one the focus of ridicule for the following week. “If you said something a little out of line or if you said something a little weird or whatever she will use you as an example for like a week afterwards” (B.2.1).
The degree of connection to the teacher was identified as a direct influence. One student spoke of wanting individual contact with each teacher, initiated by the teacher. In this situation the student clearly wants teachers to reach out to students prior to students reaching out to teachers. When such a connection was missing, students clearly stated they would not make as much of an effort. “I am not connected to that teacher, I maybe don’t get to speak to that teacher, maybe I don’t feel that the teacher cares to engage me” (d.1.6).

Numerous students made comments that highlighted the restrictions that policies and procedures placed on them. In fact, many noted that the same policies and procedures faculty describe as facilitating fairness actually restrict individuals and result in unfinished or lower quality work to avoid penalties for late submissions. The overall feeling is that they have to fit into a set of prescribed rules and regulations that do not allow for individual student needs and realities. One student labelled the irony that while they are here to learn to be professionals they feel obligated to submit substandard work due to rigidly applied timelines. While many noted they end up feeling labelled as not making an effort, none of the students who spoke of this situation made any reference to the role they played in running out of time.

Sometimes we don’t receive empathy. Sometimes we receive 25% less if our assignment is late. … Sometimes you hand in an assignment and you know it is not great but you prefer to hand it in than get 25% less. (b.1.1)

The class atmosphere was another area that was identified as a cause for disengagement. In one example the student describes how they choose to withdraw when they feel the process is not professional enough. In this case they stated they would wait for the teacher to refocus the classroom.

I feel that sometimes … the discussion becomes a little bit immature and it becomes not very professional. At this point I choose not to engage in the classroom discussion even though the teacher is encouraging us. This is too immature for me. I close my books and I will wait for the teacher to deal with this and get back on track. (d.1.7)
Carrying numerous responsibilities outside of school was also identified as a catalyst for disengagement. When events influenced personal priorities students felt that any temporary shift in their energy or perceived effort. One student spoke of how personal circumstances influence how they prioritize their responsibilities; if things at home are out of alignment they take priority over school responsibilities. “Illnesses and personal lives change things a lot because if that is on your mind you don’t care about school” (b.2.1).

Some teachers were described as simply going through the paces. They were viewed by some students as lacking commitment, energy and passion for their role. Students said such a teacher’s main focus was on efficiency in the classroom and delivering information. The following excerpt describes a teacher who will teach to those who want to listen and not attempt to engage the others as long as they are not disrupting the process. “And some teachers, I am not even sure if they even care. It’s like everyone is being quiet and those who choose to pay attention pay attention and those who aren’t are at least not disrupting their learning” (d.1.4).

Group work was a strategy resulting in feelings of disengagement for many students. They spoke about how group work is utilized, indicating concerns with the process and lack of say they have in the matter. In the following statement one student speaks to the inequity in the amount of effort contributed by members. The resulting feelings of unfairness are seen to cause tension in relationships within the group and with faculty.

My group was chosen for me and I have somebody that is not giving the same amount or percentage that I have given … It puts a little bit of tension between faculty and students and it alters that engagement. I like group work – I just hate it when I am giving 100% and somebody is giving less than that. (b.2.2)

Students talked at length about disengagement and group work. They agreed that the faculty goals of equal division of labour, combining strengths and teamwork are not being met.
They shared frustration that it was overused as a strategy.

This last semester we did everything in groups and it was really, really hard because I had five different classes and five different groups … it just burns out students. And it is just tiring and aggravating because normally, not always, but the work falls to one person, or to one or two people in the group. (b.3.3.)

The bottom line for some has to do with how marks are assigned for group work. Faculty assigning the same mark for each student member, often based on the end product, are accused of ignoring the importance of the process involved. Some students commented on feelings of being treated unfairly if the group is deemed to not work effectively as a whole despite having invested a great deal of energy as an individual. Others talked of the lack of fairness if all but one member invest in the process. “It can hurt you at the same time because you are not working together as a group properly” (b.3.3).

Lastly, ineffective communication with teachers was identified as resulting in disengagement. There were a number of students who labelled feeling misled or ignored when they attempted to confront issues with the faculty. Students talked about being asked for input but the lack of faculty desire to consider and act upon what is heard. One student framed it as questioning how genuine their input was really desired. In the following example the student expressed futility in terms of sharing concerns.

When teachers say you can come to me with any concerns or questions … and then turn around after you do come to them and they say ’It just can’t change, it is going to be like that’ … like they really … are not receptive to what you want to do about it or what can be done about it. (b.3.3)

Some students stated they would disengage when feeling unimportant. Some spoke of giving up when they feel they are ‘in the way’ or simply ‘forgotten’ about. One student talked about feeling ignored or brushed off when attempting to talk to teachers, seeing themselves low on the faculty list of priorities.
Sometimes what disengages students, stops them from getting the maximum from the experience, is teachers presenting as having other priorities in terms of their agendas taking precedence around what they have to teach or they have to go ... And then you have the ones that forget and don’t email you back. (b.2.1)

In summary, faculty spoke little about the affective dimensions indicating disengagement while students had numerous examples to share. Comments from teachers referred to students as learners failing to demonstrate engagement. Student comments stressed their individuality with unique needs, personalities and experiences, and spoke of feeling disengaged. Finally, both groups were asked to comment on how they determined if students were engaged cognitively.

**Cognitive Dimensions of Disengagement**

Faculty and students were asked for their perceptions about the impact on student thinking and understanding when students feel disengaged. Faculty identified that it was not always easy to assess the cognitive connections of students with the classroom content and process but did note areas of communication and teaching strategies. The few comments describing disengaged students were most often behavioural examples.

One teacher gave an example showing they assess the lack of verbal input as being disengaged. In the following example the faculty member directly challenges the student assertion they are being attentive unless there are behavioural cues to support the declaration.

So they will say ‘But I am, I am really listening’. And I will say ‘But how do I know that? I need evidence’. ‘Well I am not writing notes and I am not on my laptop’ and that’s true and in your favour but when you’re out at work do you think that’s going to be enough at a staff meeting when everybody else is working by participating? (B.2)

Included in the range of observable behaviours was also a deeper question around trust in students to be self-directed learners. One faculty reveals the expectation that students should be fully focused on and thinking about the lesson content for the full class time. Disengagement was
defined as any conversation that did not have to do directly with the task at hand, such as the following example of how conversations could become more personal during small group work.

If there is a lot of talking or a lot of side conversations I would probably think they are not talking about the course materials … groups can get off topic and be not engaged in the curriculum, talking about what they did on a Saturday night. (B.1)

Many student comments on cognitive disengagement were directly linked to the thinking processes and impact on learning. Among the areas labelled were: a lack of connection to the teacher, additional responsibilities that had them directing their energy elsewhere and being treated disrespectfully. The lack of a connection to the teacher has a clear impact on learning. One student clearly stated that if they were not engaged in the class then they would not learn as much.

If I am engaged then I am going to learn more and I am going to try to absorb more and I am going to put more effort in. Whereas if I am not, … then I am not going to learn as much, I never do learn as much because I am not engaged … And so I don’t care to learn as much. (d.1.6)

Participants in this study stressed the need to be treated with respect, and to feel valued and important. This also includes their desire to be seen and treated as adults. At times there are mixed messages. One student talked about their reaction to having to follow direction without having a voice in being able to shape their own learning. “I don’t like being treated like a high school student or a kindergarten student. I am learning at an adult level” (b.2.2).

For many students, references to responsibilities or events outside of school were identified at the root of disengagement. Students spoke clearly of their need to balance life outside of school. In the following, a mature student talked of the reality of this balance and how this could interfere with her devotion to learning the subject materials. This student referred to the numerous responsibilities needed to balance with the demands of work, family and school.
“Yes and I choose to go back [to school] but that does not mean that the rest of my responsibilities disappear” (b.1.1).

The same individual expressed personal pride in personal effort, believing she chose a more difficult route than others. Despite feeling proud of her efforts, however, she did not think these were acknowledged by others.

I could be getting Ontario Works right now, but no I decided to go back to school. Or I could be working and being paid under the table, that’s what a lot of people do. But I decided to come back to school. (b.1.1)

The pace of instruction was seen as having a potentially negative impact for students whose second language is English. One way this was evidenced was suggesting inadequate time is allotted and people were being rushed. The following student identified how this then results in a disadvantage to those students who are not given the time they need to process the information and their responses. “I think some teachers are not, rude about it but they could try to like give them more time to answer out loud. Like you know basically what they are trying to say” (a.1.1).

Language factors were seen to play a role in the area of confidence and resulting learning. The following example expands on how uncertainty limits engagement in the content and process of the lesson.

If you are not comfortable with, like not as comfortable with speaking English, I think it could be hard to engage in the conversation or part of the discussions that are happening in class. Just because they are not as comfortable like speaking out and sure if they are using the right words and ... also with the teachers, if they don’t understand them they think they might get frustrated. (b.3.3)

This was reinforced in the following observation. This student sees her peers seeking out those who share some similar experiences, gathering with them for comfort. Although present in the class there is no sense of connection to the materials or effort seen to contribute.
I just know by talking to them that English is not their first language. And they, just my personal observation, they do not put up their hand in class. They are very, very withdrawn ... they are just, they sit together. I don’t see them participating or making extra effort to, to participate. (d.1.7)

Communication is written, verbal and nonverbal. All forms were acknowledged as important considerations and discrepancies in expression were seen to put some at a disadvantage. The following student talks about how a lack of confidence in one’s proficiency may result in disengagement because they cannot clearly articulate their thoughts.

When it comes to like the verbal part … some people would like to shy away, say if they are not confident in their communication skills. … Or even in what they write and how they write it and how they express it as they may think they are at a disadvantage because they can’t necessarily put it all in words. (d.1.3)

Students reported watching and assessing teacher behaviour and shared examples of how teaching style can be disengaging, both verbally and nonverbally. One example revealed student frustration with what they saw as a lack of teacher preparation. The message heard was if the teacher does not invest effort neither will the students.

One teacher, he takes the book and he sits at the desk and he reads through the book. ... I don’t know maybe he hasn’t prepared … it’s just so like ‘Look through the book and the test is on this chapter’. You don’t have to show up for that class. (a.1.1)

Lectures given regarding classroom behaviour were deemed unfair, with students objecting to blanket negative assumptions. One student said they disengage when a teacher assumes students are not invested in doing the work to learn the material. This student felt unfairly labelled as lazy and unmotivated. There was no mention about whether they would challenge the faculty when feeling unfairly maligned.

What would make me disengaged is when someone assumes things that are not true – like last week … the teacher said if you want to learn you have to do the homework and you have to do this ... otherwise you won’t learn and that is not right as she was assuming we did not do the work, that we don’t want to learn. (b.1.1)
Teacher’s style preferences also carry an impact. Students did acknowledge faculty efforts to incorporate various learning styles. However, they saw faculty relying on their own preferred style of teaching. The following student speaks to the challenge of varied teaching styles on their ability to learn.

What happens with this teacher, she has a very different way of teaching, a different style. The class, they want things like PPT and slides and things they can copy. They want activities. Because she does not have PPT, she is not didactic. ... It is a challenge to adapt to the various styles ... you want to survive you have to adapt. (b.1.1)

Energy seen invested in delivery of content can be a matter of perspective, and some students noted the lack of stimulation from the teacher resulting in decreased motivation to learn. The following student wants a lively learning environment but thinks the teacher does not. “And going back to [teacher’s name], in that class everyone wants to sleep and it’s boring but she likes that” (b.1.1).

Students look for indicators of investment and interest from their teachers, seeking currency of information that can be delivered with a human touch. One student talked about wanting to transfer out of a class if the faculty member did not relate on more of an equal footing with the students. In this excerpt the student describes how they disengage when they assess the teacher relays an aura of superiority.

The ones that you describe as more authoritarian are the ones that I would try to switch my classes from, or the ones who don’t really know that life happens. ... There is one, a teacher who paces back and forth with perfect posture and is very kind of ‘No, I am talking’ and it continues and they have a lot of attitude. I tend to be like, ugh. (b.2.1)

Students stated having a limited voice in shaping their educational experience regarding curriculum or the manner in which they could structure their learning. The reaction to being overly prescriptive tended to elicit feelings of ‘being talked down to’. This student talked about disengaging when treated immaturely.
A lot of students are adults and ... making them do it is kind of like they are back in high school. I don’t know, it’s just making them feel like they are younger than they really are and they don’t have a say in what goes on. (b.3.3.)

Students connect motivation to teach as influencing the classroom environment, stressing the faculty member’s ability or willingness to create a cognitively stimulating learning environment. When a teacher is seen lacking such investment, students disengage. The following excerpt shares how one student sees being in such classes as a waste of time.

So some of them … I think more or less are just here for a paycheque. That’s what I feel a lot of the time. If it is just reading off the PowerPoint overhead it’s like, really? I could think of a 100 better things to do with my time right now. (d.1.1)

Teachers are described as being entitled to respect, although some are seen as abusing their perceived position of power. Students voiced clear resentment while professing to feel powerless to create change. Such a classroom culture directly limited open communication between the parties, resulting in students not asking questions or seeking support.

I have a teacher this year who basically makes you feel like you are below her and its intimidating and I kind of feel like saying something but at the same time I kind feel that it would be cutting off my nose to spite my face because she is in charge of my marks. She comes off very, like “I know more than you, I am the teacher, you are the student, listen here” and … I just don’t feel engaged in that class and I don’t enjoy that class. (d.1.2)

Abrupt change was also reported to cause disengagement. In one example students talked about being reassigned to another cohort to equal class sizes. When they attempted to challenge the shift with faculty they felt a disingenuous response was given. The result for them was clearly linked to their learning. “When we got switched [sections] I felt less likely to engage because we thought we don’t know these people. And it kind of makes me not want to say stuff … I don’t know where people are coming from” (d.1.1). Some students feel manipulated by faculty in terms of attendance policies. One spoke directly about the use of marks to ensure students come to class, suggesting the more sensible solution was to examine the potential root
causes of absenteeism. In this example the student argues for the need to explore ways to get students wanting to come and learn.

When teachers make attendance really, really important it almost seems that ‘My class isn’t very interesting so I am going to make my attendance worth 15% so people show up’ … rather than thinking ‘Why aren’t people showing up?’ (d.1.7)

Another spoke of faculty using their power to ensure classes are attended. One student gave a mocking rendition of how a teacher thinks about their class, including a reference to ‘kids’ and feeling ‘made’ to go or face negative consequences. “The kids are getting bored with me but they are going to be here, regardless of whether they want to be or not” (d.1.4).

Students spoke directly about the use of student feedback questionnaires and viewing the results as unreliable. The following example directly reflects how one student admits to not taking the time to do the survey accurately and asserts others do the same.

Most students just go through and mark the highest or the second highest and not really think about what they are doing … I guarantee most of it is not accurate … I have literally just gone down the list and then okay I am going home. (d.1.4)

Numerous examples reveal students think faculty view them harshly. Many shared feelings of being unfairly labelled. In one example the student spoke about faculty making judgements about students based on false assumptions. “When I am really down and I am not really interacting I tend to feel that faculty are almost like they are just looking at me like I had a rough night and I was out partying” (d.1.7).

Disengagement was seen as directly linked to faculty making such assumptions about student behaviour. One student noted disengaging when assumptions are made but engaging when people take the time to get the facts.

The teacher thinking that you have done a long week of partying and so that’s why you guys are not answering questions … A lot of teachers can make that assumption but the ones that … engage their students are the ones that don’t assume and don’t necessarily jump to conclusions. (d.1.4)
Indirect communication and labelling were also linked to disengagement. For many there was a risk of misinterpretation and negative labelling that resulted if people were not direct. One student summed up feeling disrespected in that faculty made general assumptions about student attitudes. This example, shared with a sarcastic tone, asserts that faculty make assumptions about maturity and responsibility, and neglect to articulate what they expect to see in terms of classroom deportment. The message here is that the student will eventually figure it out if they want to be successful. “They think some students are just irresponsible and you will kind of figure out that you have to be here and be professional” (d.1.7).

Faculty were accused of making false assumptions and unfair generalizations. The argument that tardiness indicates disengagement was given by a number of students. One shared how inaccurate and unfair they believe this assumption to be.

I am always at my job on time and I try to be at school all the time but sometimes I am tired or there is traffic or whatever and then so I am 15 minutes late and now I look like I am less dedicated right? And it just, I really don’t think it’s fair … I am not less engaged, I woke up and I am here and I want to learn what you are teaching me and because I am 15 minutes late now I am a bad student that is how I feel. (d.1.6)

Students acknowledge that learning has to be a two-way process, active and interactive in nature. If teachers do not promote two-way exchanges then learning suffers. The following student comments about the importance of dialogue for stimulating thinking and learning. Here the student shares a negative view of simply sitting and being lectured to. “We never get to have a dialogue, she is always just spitting it at us and I really don’t absorb anything” (d.1.6).

While some stated a desire to be entertained, most spoke of the need for faculty to shift the pace on a regular basis. A teacher who did not bring relevancy or depth to the materials disengaged the learners. One student spoke to the impact of a dull style of presentation and the effect it had on them.
I don’t know for some classes I mean I find them ridiculously boring. Some teachers really don’t try to bring you into what they are teaching or just share perhaps references from the field, like a lot of teachers do that. And when you are just … reading off the slides most likely I will probably fall asleep in class … wake up and ask someone what we learned later. (d.1.4)

Faculty not knowing when to move on to a new topic and how to avoid duplication of materials were potential triggers for disengagement. One student shared how repetition resulted in them shutting down in a meaningful sense, continuing to contribute comments but not focused for learning.

Going over and over it and again doing test upon test upon test about all of that stuff and now learning it again. I am just like, oh who cares about this and I don’t want to hear it anymore. I’ll open up my book and start to doodle you know and then I am completely not engaged at all. I’ll put my hand up every now and then to participate only because I love those participation marks. (b.2.2)

Students acknowledge interaction with faculty is needed for them to actively embrace the content. One commented on the class atmosphere as lacking interaction they feel essential for engagement and noted if it was lacking the quality of their learning was impacted negatively. In the following example the student admits to being able to learn the content independently yet wants the interaction to take the learning to an “engaged” level. “There is not a lot of interaction ... and we could read it from the book and I would absorb it better” (d.1.5).

In summary, to become or remain cognitively engaged students stated they need: stimulation; teachers who care about them as people; teachers who are passionate about their role; and to feel respected. Disengaged students do not maximize their potential to learn.

The overall consensus of the study participants was that engagement was a much-preferred state over disengagement, and that there were behavioural, affective and cognitive dimensions of both for faculty and for students. It is not always easy to separate one from the other and often examples blended the actions, emotions and thought processes together.
Commitment, respect and power were key themes identified as major influences on engagement. Next the participants were asked if their understandings of engagement remained stagnant or shifted over time.

**Shifting Perspectives**

Faculty and students were asked if their understandings of engagement changed over time. Given the professed difficulty faculty shared when assessing engagement levels, I wondered if added familiarity with the student or experience in the role of faculty impacted the views shared.

Every faculty participant agreed that their understanding of student engagement has evolved from when they first started teaching. Maturation into the teaching role was seen as a catalyst for such a change. One spoke to understanding the role from a different philosophical perspective.

I think the big thing for me is that learning is a partnership. I look back to when I started teaching ... it was more that traditional way of teaching ... I would be more you know, ‘I’m the teacher and you need to listen to me’. (B.1.)

Many expressed how added confidence in, and exposure to, the role resulted in feeling more comfortable and willing to be flexible. One faculty talked of growing into the role and beginning to focus more on how to utilize time effectively instead of focusing on the time itself. With added experience and confidence this individual talked about the ability to play with time, either deleting or bringing in content as needed. “In my first three years I was just frightened about filling the time … like it would be a disaster if you were to end early kind of thing. But now I can elasticize time” (C.1).

One area of change had to do with a faculty member feeling they needed to put things into perspective. As this faculty member’s confidence increased so did his/her ability to more
objectively deal with disengaged students. This individual disclosed how initially if the students did not all seem passionate about learning then the faculty member took responsibility and questioned what they were missing in being able to spark interest and enthusiasm in all of the learners. “And there has been more of an understanding, like not taking student behaviour personally ... I can roll with it a little bit more and not take it all to heart and be a little less intense about it” (D.1).

Students also unanimously agreed that their perspectives of student engagement evolved over time. They labelled contributing factors as being new beginnings, life experience, studying areas of interest and evolving empathy. The importance of identity and the impression that people have of them were raised as factors impacting engagement. Students frequently referred to the ability to rid themselves of the reputation they had in high school. The following student saw starting college as a chance to begin again.

In high school I was a really bad student. I got bad marks, I talked all the time, I was really rude, … and then I don’t know I took it way more seriously when I came here – it was a brand new start. (a.1.1)

Added life experience and maturation were shared as factors that impact understandings and influence perspectives. One student shared an example to illustrate this change, citing increased tolerance for different or unique ideas. Students expressed pride in their increased openness and acknowledged this was different than their attitude in high school. “As I have gotten older I have become more open to listening to people who don’t necessarily have the same view I do and I am more open to learning than when I was in high school” (b.2.3).

Students clearly identified how they feel more prepared to acculturate to teacher expectations. In one example the student talks about a shift in energy from resistance to
accommodation regarding classroom norms. Embedded in this excerpt is the acceptance that one has to do things one is not always comfortable with.

I am more willing to accept the way that I am encouraged to be, like with the whole talking and raising your hand. I never, I was never really wanting to do that. I would only do that when I felt it was really necessary. So I have to engage in that type of behaviour because that is what they are looking at. (d.1.3)

Acceptance into a program of choice was a clear determinant of engagement from the point of view of feeling connected to and interested in the materials covered. One student spoke to how having the opportunity to learn to be good in the chosen career field is a major factor on engagement.

In high school … I was a write-off. … I did what I needed to do to get by and now I am on the honour roll and now I am wanting to do more … this field is what I am interested … Now I really enjoy what I am doing. (d.1.2)

Students stated that added empathy for teachers helped them view engagement differently. One shared how moving past a narrow personal view to seeing the challenges from a teacher’s view as a shift for them.

I guess I am looking at it more from a faculty standpoint now as opposed to just a student standpoint. Like before I was looking at it like how can they engage me … it must be kind of hard for them to engage 60 students at one time so yeah, I guess I am more understanding … from a teacher’s perspective. (d.1.6)

In summary, added life experience, maturity and exposure to alternate views contributed to evolving understandings of student engagement for both faculty and students. Next the data was examined to ascertain where the groups shared and differed in their understandings of student engagement.

Alignment of Perspectives

This section shifts focus to what faculty and students identified as similarities and differences in the views of students and the views of faculty members in understanding student
engagement. Faculty and students were in agreement approximately half of the time regarding the assigned level of engagement (Table 2). Where there were differences the students rated themselves as more engaged than as seen by the faculty member on two occasions and as less engaged on six occasions. Some variation in how the parties understood and experienced student engagement was seen across all programs that had student and faculty participation.

The following section presents the findings regarding the alignment of participants’ perspectives. First the data are examined to discover faculty views and then student views. Shared perspectives and unique differences are then highlighted. Each group was then asked to share how they perceive the understandings of the other group.

**Comparison of Perspectives Shared among Faculty**

Faculty shared many views on the topic of student engagement. Included in the responses were comments about learning having multiple layers and being a lifelong undertaking. All faculty connected engagement directly to learning, both current and future. When asked why we talk about engagement, learning was at the core of the responses, from understanding through to application.

I think it’s learning. You know if they are engaged, I think they really are able to understand the curriculum, not just understand it but they are able to apply it to different situations so I think it’s higher levels of learning. They are able to see the relevancy. They are able to take that information out when they are working in the field. (B.1)

Learning was also identified as a lifelong activity. The content and the process are seen as important considerations in terms of fostering inquisitiveness and curiosity. One faculty reflected on a desire to see students apply their knowledge and continue to challenge themselves and embrace lifelong learning. When responding to a question about x, the faculty member responded, “The ability to use knowledge I think. And to want to be able to investigate things on their own and to continue learning in the future” (D.1).
Faculty also made reference to the fact that there are added layers to learning. Engagement was described as resulting in learning the course content as well as a reflective piece regarding self-awareness, reaching beyond the core content.

The end goal is, to use a really general word, is for learning but it’s for self-awareness. It’s for them to seriously begin to know more about how they feel and what they think and what matters to them and how to take all of that awareness and use it. (B.2)

Lastly, faculty agreed that student engagement is pivotal to deeper learning. They agreed that varied levels of learning can occur and the process is not as meaningful without engagement. One teacher described it as follows: “I don’t think you can have effective learning without engagement. And I think you lose a whole layer of learning and processing and depth and breadth that you cannot get without that level of engagement.” (B.3)

Every faculty member agreed that the purpose of engagement is to foster meaningful learning in both present and future contexts. They indicated their peers would agree, perhaps with subtle differences according to life experience, values and roles. When expanding on the rationale for such similar views, one faculty member talked about sharing similar experiences and opportunities for ongoing communication regarding classroom issues.

In terms of my faculty group, I think we all do think along those lines. I am not sure if it is because we are similar, we have similar backgrounds, you know similar work lives and educational experience but we also meet quite regularly to talk about our classes and issues that are happening within the class so there is a lot of sharing. (B.1)

Most faculty definitely stated there was agreement within their team although others sounded less certain. The following teacher suggests that while team members may view the concept from similar perspectives there may be individual variance within the team. “There is a lot of us that feel like I do right? And so the work that we are doing as a team kind of reflects that” (D.1).
Some faculty identified themselves as being more willing to account for student individuality when considering student engagement, being more open to individual influencing factors. Here again, student engagement was equated with participation, although more subtle signs were considered. In this example the faculty member insinuates that his/her definition of engagement is more open than the view of their peers.

I am much broader in my perspective than many of my colleagues. So when I will take the passive, what I would call passive, person and I will consider them engaged … If they have all the attending skills there but are not making eye contact but the attending skills are there – to me that counts as participation. (B.3)

Others indicated engagement may elicit unique perspectives depending on the program one was affiliated with. One shared having similar views with their immediate colleagues but identified the potential for differences when being compared to other programs. “I think that some faculty might look at it from an outcome point of view more than a process point of view … as opposed to … [named another academic school]” (B.2).

Finally, there were examples that were shared that indicated the views of student engagement varied depending on the role one plays in the college. Those in administration were seen to approach the definition from a different perspective. In this example the filling of seats was described as an administrator’s measure of student engagement in a competitive marketplace. Here the faculty member asserts it is a different view from that of a faculty member. “The coordinator looks at the role of student engagement from more of that other level – numbers, retention … in terms of the demand that we fill our program … because of [College X named] and other programs opening” (D.1).

In summary, individual faculty responses showed a clear consensus regarding student engagement being linked to learning. Responses about the perspectives of other faculty also
contained clear messages of shared understandings with slight adaptations due to experience, values or the role. Next the student responses were analyzed.

**Comparison of Perspectives Shared among Students**

The only area of consensus in the student responses was limited to comments on learning. In every other instance each participant identified having a unique understanding and impression of the concept of engagement.

The one area students believed they shared a view with other students reflected agreement on the importance of engagement due to the perceived impact on learning. One student summarized it briefly as fostering learning. “We talk about engagement because we want students to be involved because that helps with the learning” (d.1.7).

Students clearly identified having unique perspectives from their peers. They clearly described their perspectives in concise and definitive answers, as in the following example. “Definitely different, it’s just kind of how we all have different ways of learning ... What I find engaging other people won’t” (b.2.1). Responses were clearly and confidently shared, highlighting differences in views. “I am sure we all probably have a different meaning of engagement or can be engaged in different ways” (d.1.6). Individual learning styles and preferences were seen as directly influencing our definitions. One student attempted to sum it up the following way: “How we learn has an influence on how we define it” (b.3.3).

In summary, faculty tended to describe their views of student engagement as similar to those of their peers and students consistently labelled theirs as unique from their classmates. Both groups articulated the goal of learning as being at the core of engagement. The next section analyzes the data when both groups were asked to share how they perceive the understandings of the other group as different from their own.
Perceived Similarities and Differences between Faculty and Students

Participants were next asked about cross-group agreement and disagreement on understandings of engagement. Faculty and students agreed on what they believe to be the perspective of the other groups, the areas of feeling connected, evident commitment, behavioural evidence of learning, and active participation and interest in the content.

Perceived Similarities – Faculty Believe Students Agree with Faculty Understandings

Faculty addressed a number of possible student views from the more intimate classroom setting to the wider college environment. One faculty summed it up as follows: “I think they might think engagement is like feeling a part of their classroom, feeling supported by faculty and then maybe connection to the college” (D.1).

Many faculty responses included indicators of behavioural evidence, including verbal and nonverbal attending skills, active participation, evident preparation and adherence to expectations. Norms regarding the respectful classroom decorum were also shared. “I think students would agree that evidence of engagement would be participation, verbal participation, body language, um not interrupting a speaker, whether it is a teacher or a fellow student” (B.2).

There were also examples shared that included the student view of faculty commitment to the process. One faculty noted the importance of connection with the teacher and relevancy of the content as facilitating excitement about learning.

Do they feel a sense of caring and commitment from me that they can get excited about? ... Do I make the material relevant to their work world? I am sure that when they think of engagement they think of ‘Is this boring?’ and ‘What the heck does it have to do with me?’ (D.1)

Faculty believe students want to be entertained and will use games or activities that capture and hold student attention. One teacher shared using a tool to foster learning.
They see engagement as ‘I’ll be engaged but it’s got to be exciting’ … the students do like that stuff like ‘Fling the Teacher’ … They said ‘I worked on that all weekend’ because if you answer a question wrong it kicks you off. And as soon as you get kicked off you need to start again. Obviously you know they are engaged in studying more. (B.1)

Others identified the opportunity for students to have input and provide feedback on the learning experience as engaging. This faculty member asserts that asking students to share their opinions is important. “Various student surveys that we ask them to do and probably any in class feedback they give helps them feel engaged” (C.1).

Perceived Similarities – Students Believe Faculty Agree with Student Understandings

Students did agree with areas identified by the faculty; however, their agreement was presented tentatively. Students presented these areas with exceptions or clarifications to the general rule. One example was given by one student who labelled the behavioural indicators teachers look for and quickly added why that may be difficult for someone.

They expect you, not expect, but they like to see you participating in class and like putting your hand up and volunteering to read out and all this other stuff but if you are kind of a quiet person that might be difficult for you. (d.1.2)

Students and faculty share the view that engaged students are responsible and work independently as adult learners. Trust in following through was identified as part of this.

I think one similarity would be just taking responsibility for your own education … make sure you read the book, make sure you do the readings, but they are not going to find you in the hall and say ‘Did you do your readings?’ (d.1.1.)

Successfully meeting behavioural indicators, such as meeting deadlines and submitting required work, were agreed to as accepted indicators of student engagement. When students gave examples, however, they tended to speak about their peers or other students rather than share personal examples. Here one student suggests that the quality and quantity of work submitted, and attendance and punctuality reflect engagement. “I guess the level of, the amount of,
assignments handed in generally. Handing their work in on time and their attendance and they are punctual” (d.1.3).

Outcome measures were also referred to as a way students and faculty view and assess engagement. One equated examples of quality work with a teacher’s assessment of engagement. The following supports the notion that engagement requires effort and investment from the learner.

I’m going to say success on your tests and assignments because ... if you are engaged then usually the general idea would be that you are retaining the information and you can do your best and succeed in them. And if you don’t then you are not engaged. (d.1.1)

Students directly supported faculty use of attendance as indicating engagement. Some also talked about assigning marks to encourage participation and attendance. This indicates that faculty view active participation and in-class involvement as central to student engagement. One student referred to the challenge of being engaged when not present.

Faculty will assist students in working with each other by putting us in groups, by having to be in discussions and stuff like that. The faculty always wants us to be engaged, participation … is 10% or sometimes 20% of our mark. So in some ways, in many ways they give us an incentive to be engaged. (b.2.2)

The desire of both faculty and students to be successful was labelled as an area that both parties would agree to in terms of understanding student engagement. One student sums it up as cyclical in nature; engagement leads to success and continuing to set goals higher. In this example one student links the importance of faculty belief in student efforts to engagement and continued effort and “I think you want us to do well and if we are engaged we are probably going to be more like ... we would come to class and get better grades and want to be better” (d.1.5).

Being active and participating members of the class were deemed important. Students described teachers as wanting a well controlled learning environment in which traditional
indicators of learning could be evidenced. One student described attending class, raising hands to answer questions and asking for added clarity among the behaviours teachers use to assess student engagement. In this example the student shares a sense of an overall calm and polite learning environment as being important for teachers. “Students’ attitudes, just being like respectful, ... asking for help would be engaging because like ... because if you don’t know it asking for clarification shows you really want to know about it” (d.1.5).

Both groups did note areas that were agreed to by the other as signifying engagement. Next each was asked what they believed were the differences between the groups.

**Perceived Differences – Faculty Believe Students Differ from Faculty Understandings**

Clear differences in perceptions were identified by both groups. Faculty identifying how they understand or experience student engagement differently from students were quick to point out how teacher investment was likely not considered. One faculty member identified lesson planning and behind the scenes preparation as components students may not appreciate or think about as engagement.

I’m not sure they would see or would label this as student engagement, engagement and what we do in class like ‘Here is the material and this is what we are going to do with the material’ ... I don’t think it would occur to them that that is part and parcel of that, that is the same thing. (C.1)

The self-professed ability of the students to multitask is an area that drew questions from one faculty. One individual doubted student ability to do more than one thing at a time. This faculty member clearly challenged those individuals in their self-stated ability to be meaningfully engaged when doing many things at the same time.

I have students that argue they can multitask perfectly very well so ‘Why can’t I write notes to my neighbour?’ or ‘Why can’t I be on my laptop and be checking this while having you know a split screen and having your PowerPoint here?’ And ... sometimes students will say, ‘Well I had my head down but I wasn’t sleeping, I was listening to you’
and my argument is, ‘How do I know that?’ So part of the engagement isn’t just what’s happening but evidence of what is happening. (B.2)

Individual personality and culture are factors bringing varying levels of engagement into question. The following faculty example illustrates that compliant behaviour does not automatically equate to student engagement on a meaningful level.

Then of course there are students who sit and listen, don’t disrupt, behave perfectly well, will look at you but never engage further, never discuss, never ask, never open, never do anything ... some of them ... don’t know what to say even though they are really interested or in their culture you really don’t say a whole lot. (B.2)

The expectation of reciprocity was raised in reference to how much faculty will continue to invite student involvement. The following faculty member comments on reaching a point where the responsibility needs to be handed to the individual student.

I think what happens from an engagement point of view is after a while I as a teacher disengage a little bit from those students too. It’s not that I don’t include them and it’s not that I don’t look at them, I do. I stop chasing and I stop saying this to them and I get to the point where I think all right if what I am saying and doing doesn’t matter then maybe your marks will matter. I’m not failing you, you’re failing you. (B.2)

The aspect of grades or end results in the form of measurement was identified as being important to the student; the focus on process and learning were more the focus of the faculty member. Faculty complained of students challenging how marks are allotted. Here one faculty talks about a student challenging a mark based on the time they invested in the assignment rather than the quality of the final product. The faculty member described engagement as resulting in meeting the learning outcomes rather than a measure of time invested. “This generation, over the last couple of years, has been the ‘But I am in class, why don’t I get a B? I put a lot of time into this’ and I understand that but all I can mark is what I receive” (A.1).

Faculty noted that the speed of response to electronic communication with students may influence how students measure engagement. They spoke of unrealistic expectations placed on
them as faculty and their view of students as impatient. Although this did not surface in the student interviews, one faculty member role-played their vision of what a student is thinking in the following example. Here they speak about the student wanting an immediate answer no matter what time of day and without regard for the fact the teacher may be occupied elsewhere. “I am writing to you at 1:00 and I don’t realize you are teaching two three-hour classes and you are not going to get to it until tomorrow and so I am mad at you” (B.3).

Faculty talked of surprise and frustration when students do not follow through on feedback given to support academic writing. This insinuates that faculty assume if input is sought it will be used and they are puzzled when that is not the case. One faulty shared their frustration after investing a great deal of time to provide feedback to find it was not used. “Only about 10% of them incorporated the feedback. About 40% left it exactly as it was, including my comments on it. And I said ‘Was it not useful?’ because I want to know” (B.3).

Attrition was an area identified as an indicator of engagement that faculty may think of that students would not. “So, I would suspect that my view of student engagement has that layer that we keep talking about that is numbers and keeping them enrolled and that kind of thing. I don't think students think of engagement like that” (D.1). In fact, students did suggest added insights could be gained from follow-up contact with students who prematurely withdraw.

One last difference noted by faculty was the view that faculty see the larger picture but students don’t. The following faculty member asserts students see engagement as more immediate than faculty.

I don’t know whether they take it to the next step which is like I do, I see more of a synthesis of ways of thinking about things, ways of talking about things, like those overarching skills perhaps where they are coming from is more immediate and concrete and focusing on time rather than that larger view. (D.1)

**Perceived Differences – Students Believe Faculty Differ from Student Understandings**
Students clearly identify faculty as holding views different than their own. Included in these were: varied interpretations of behaviour; teaching style; connections formed; attendance; and verbal contributions in class.

The following excerpt includes the notion that faculty and students may ascribe varying motives to the same behaviours. In this example one student talks about the potential underlying factors they do not see teachers stopping to think about.

I think that teachers think you coming to class on time and being prepared is really engaging. I think for students it’s, like I’m coming in late but I am still coming and I think that is showing dedication and engagement. ... Another difference would be students who don’t answer questions, or don’t participate in class discussion, they [teachers] may feel that they [students] don’t care or just don’t want to but maybe they really do care, or maybe they do but they are just shy ... Also I think a difference would be students who disagree but don’t really feel a need to express themselves. (b.1.2)

Students talked openly about a desire to be viewed and given consideration for who they are as individuals. One student indicated a lack of recognition for personal style or preference in style of presentation when expected to behave in certain ways.

Yeah there are students in my class who I know do the work and they are just quiet. They stay to themselves and sometimes I feel that it is kind of unfair for them to be missing points [marks] you know, like they are at the same level as everyone else. (b.2.2)

The style of teaching and relationships that evolve have clear implications for engagement. One student shared feeling tension between personal preference and teacher expectations and how they felt the need to comply.

I like to participate in discussions I like to give my two cents but a lot of time I like to just listen. I like to take things in. And I think a lot of … I feel like I am being forced to say something and to put my hand up. I feel like I just don’t have anything good enough to say … yet the hand goes up because you feel there’s that expectation to do that. (d.1.3)

One indicator mentioned by a number of students was attendance. Despite an expressed appreciation for what could be gained from being in class there was a clear desire to have faculty
look past the surface behaviours and not use tardiness as a measure of engagement. One student
tries to explain the need for consideration of circumstance.

Maybe for some reason something comes up and … I have to miss that class. That doesn't
necessarily mean to me that I am less engaged in that class. Maybe I am reading
everything I can read at home or I put extra effort into the assignments but it’s just for
some reason that I haven’t been there. I think that I am not necessarily less engaged but I
think that a teacher might see it as being less engaged in that class. (d.1.6)

The same student also spoke of the expectations for active participation and vocalization
in class as being different for students than for faculty. In this example the student argues the
lack of certain behaviours cannot be directly interpreted as a lack of engagement.

As well in participation some people just don’t like to vocalize in or during class. It
doesn’t mean that they are not taking it in; it doesn’t mean that they are not engaged … it
just means that’s their learning style. They just want to sit there and listen. (d.1.6)

Embedded in some student responses was resentment for wasting their time, with a sense
of being manipulated to attend through the allotment of marks. The assumption here is that
faculty assign marks for attendance as a facilitator for engagement.

I think that for me personally there are classes that I just am not engaged in and to have to
go to them at 8:00 in the morning for two hours and then do nothing for the rest of the
day … to me that is a waste of my time. … The only thing you would get for being there
is a participation mark and it’s just for showing up. So it’s like how worth it is that when
we have all these other things that I know I can do to pass the class? (d.1.1)

The perceived lack of empathy for the student position was identified. Many students
stated concerns about faculty making false assumptions about their levels of engagement. The
following example is one of many where students describe faculty not fully appreciating the
multiple demands placed on students, demands that leave them feeling tired and stressed.

The faculty want students that are 100% for everything … but I see it and I think
everybody is tired. And everybody is thinking I have to do this and I have to do that and
we have to read and we have to do an assignment and I do not want to say like that we do
not want to do assignment … We get, we get stressed. (b.1.1)
Teacher judgement was also labelled by the students. Many spoke about a lack of fairness, seeing the faculty there to help them grow but evaluating them on unrealistic expectations. In the following example the student shares a feeling of being evaluated as a graduate rather than as a student. “Like I knew that I was learning and I don’t know, to me it was just unfair to me to feel that I wasn’t good enough or I wasn’t performing at the level that they wanted me to” (d.1.3).

**Conclusion**

In summary, teachers commented on students not acknowledging their preparation work for lesson delivery, being focused on wanting marks, not seeing engagement from the bigger picture view, wanting immediate feedback without recognition for other responsibilities the faculty member carries out, and not using the feedback given. Students articulated gaps in how the two groups view engagement as including attendance, the perceived devaluing of student time, lack of recognition for the numerous demands on their time, being unfairly assessed, and measuring or assessing engagement from a standard behavioural set of indicators which do not allow for individual style or preference.

Overall comments indicated some similarities between how the faculty and students in this study view and understand student engagement as well as some unique differences. Faculty tended to look more at indicators of compliance, attentiveness, active involvement, verbal contributions and preparation for the workforce. They see behavioural, affective and cognitive indicators as evidence of engagement. Students agreed that ownership for their learning rested with themselves and saw verbal participation more in the form of having a voice and the ability to have input into their own learning. They stressed a need to feel they belong, see themselves as unique individuals and have a comfortable and safe learning environment. Many believed how
engaged they are in their own learning is directly connected to their potential for success, yet
often noted this engagement was not always overtly evident. Student statements were more
focused on the current situation or recent past than they were on future. Students were adamant
that what was seen in class often could not be construed either as engagement or lack of
engagement; personalities were often influential and witnessed behaviour could be learned and
demonstrated as a superficial rather than a genuine measure of engagement. Generally, the
behavioural examples deemed to illustrate student engagement were easier for all the participants
to articulate although the affective and cognitive responses elicited added enthusiasm and
seemed to reflect deeper levels of genuine engagement in the classroom.

This chapter examined how the participants understand student engagement. Chapter V
examines the data in terms of the impact of various demographic factors, including gender,
language, culture, race or ethnic identification, socio-economic factors, age, ability, and sexual
orientation on self-described understandings of student engagement.
Chapter V: The Impact of Demographic Factors on Student Engagement

Overview

This section examines the impact of a range of demographic factors on the participants’ self-described understandings of student engagement. Each volunteer was asked about how gender, language, culture, race or ethnic identification, socio-economic factors, age, ability and sexual orientation influenced their understanding of student engagement. In some areas, such as gender, language, and culture, race or ethnicity, there seemed more similarity of views than in others, such as age, sexual orientation, socio-economic factors and ability. Some faculty responses spoke to the ideal they were aiming for and others spoke to what they saw as the reality and the frustration in being able to ‘manage’ or support students in these areas. Student responses revealed thoughts on how faculty sensitivity in these areas impacted their own engagement and that of their peers.

The impact of various demographic factors found in the college student population is important to acknowledge. Northedge (2003) states, “With a diverse student body, no fixed start or end point can be assumed and, consequently, no selection of items can be appropriate to the needs of all” (p. 19). Participants were asked to expand on how they view the various demographic factors influencing student engagement. Each person began with how, if at all, they saw gender impacting on engagement. The main way that gender was seen to impact was in terms of active involvement, classroom dynamics, and sex roles and expectations.

Gender/Sex

All faculty acknowledged gender as a factor influencing their understanding of student engagement. They did not, however, necessarily want to admit it has an impact in their classrooms. Comments recognized systemic issues of gender discrimination and how it may pertain to the classroom environment. Embedded in the responses was the message that
engagement is closely aligned with active and overt involvement. One faculty stated not wanting gender to influence their class although acknowledged the reality it did in some settings.

I hope it doesn’t in my classes. I think it does in general ... I think it depends on the setting. I think in larger groups, and there is a lot of research in this area ... women tend to be more intimidated to speak out in larger groups, depending upon the forum. (B.1)

All but one of the classrooms observed had a higher percentage of females to males enrolled. The faculty indicated this was a factor in how much was contributed by the male students and the overall tenor of the classroom. One acknowledged having a bias towards having females in the classroom. The following comment reveals their belief that there is added time to devote to the actual lesson components and fewer disruptions are seen when females outnumber male students.

The more female students in the class the more engaged the entire class is. That’s not to say that they are better students they just don’t sit like the guys do... in the back row and turn and talk to each other all of the time. I find that females tend to take much more interest and the more females we have in a section the more interested they seem to be and the less problems that I have. I find that females seem to be, on the whole, more engaged. (A.1)

The faculty clearly stated they wanted to hear from all students in the class, whether in the minority or majority groupings. This infers the belief that verbal contributions equate to student engagement. One faculty described their efforts in this area. “I always try to ensure that everyone has a voice in my class” (B.1.).

In another instance one faculty member identified a more subtle difference in how the male students participate. The following comment suggests there may be more than a proportional difference as the participant describes how males and females contribute in different ways.

I find that the, that when the women participate verbally they tend to explain things more. The males tend to... when they do participate, and some of them do beautifully, it’s much more to the point. They have a point, they make it, done. (B.2)
Faculty were observed directly eliciting input from the males in the more heavily female-attended classes. This was acknowledged during the interviews by the students who commented on what they saw as the rationale for such a directed effort. “The guys don’t talk as much. They have to be prompted whereas I would just open up and tell you something whereas they need to be poked and prodded at to get it out” (d.1.5).

Student comments reflected systemic issues of societal stereotypes. One student pointed out their impressions of patterns believing there are gender differences in what students find engaging. “Males may get engaged by different things. When humour comes up I think the guys get engaged, when inequality comes up a lot of the females have more to say … I guess because they feel it more” (a.1.1).

Traditional sex roles were used to explain differences in observed behaviours. Here one student considers a generalization about how females may attend more to process and males to outcomes. In this example the student generalizes that females may seem more engaged if there is an emotional or caring quality to the concept.

As women we, we are perceived to be as more a caregiver than men so maybe we are seen as more engaged or something than they are, more than they are as they are seen as more, you know, pragmatic or practical. (b.1.1)

Some students spoke of efforts to purposefully empathize with the male perspective. A number expressed concerns that males feel unfairly judged and discriminated against. This was described as impacting on their comfort level in challenging others and reducing their verbal contribution. One infers that if they remain quiet they may not be viewed as engaged.

I just feel like in this program in particular guys get kind of bashed in a way. ... They are sitting there feeling like crap. We are saying ‘Guys are this’ and ‘Guys are that’ if I was a guy I would be scared to bring it up because then like you have like a whole room of women, including your professor. (b.2.2)
Female participants defended their male peers. They saw males as reluctant to honestly and directly express their feelings and positions, fearing a negative response from the majority. Some were seen trying to find ways to contribute in a safe manner.

He’s just like terrified to speak up and maybe say the wrong thing ... he is outnumbered ... it is very intimidating. He won’t speak up in class or he’ll lean over and whisper something to me and say ‘Say it’ and I’m like ‘You say it’ and he goes ‘No, if you say it they won’t get mad at you’... For a guy in this class, it’s like you have to ... it’s like stepping on eggshells. (b.2.1)

Many spoke to the unequal distribution of sex in the classes and resulting dynamics. Males are perceived to phrase their contributions carefully. One student insinuates females may react adversely if offended. “Because the males are so outnumbered ... I think a lot of them are very careful about what they say ... in a class full of women so as to not offend anyone” (b.3.3).

Others had various stereotypes of the female sex. In one interview the student describes a shift in presentation when both males and females are present. One sees females needing to consciously monitor themselves to encourage male participation.

The female sort of typical cattiness does come out. But I noticed that when we are round the boys ... we watch what we say. Like we can’t, we try not to be exclusive. They tend not to speak very much. They, they keep back and they listen. I don’t know if it is an intimidation thing. (b.2.3)

Societal norms and child-rearing practices of culture were seen as a contributing factor. One student spoke to their views of different expectations for females.

Well girls are taught to ... encouraged to talk and express their emotions and express their thoughts. I think that, well I think it could play a factor because the majority of the time the males in our class don’t really talk. (d.1.3)

There was the odd exception to these views noted as not all felt that gender impacted engagement. One student disagreed that gender played a role, stating it was the overall person that needed to be considered. “You know what, no I don’t because I find that ... it all depends on the person” (b.1.2).
Overall, traditional roles and gender differences in the western culture were seen to influence student engagement from the perspective of safety in self-expression. Generalizations were made by both faculty and students. The proportion of sex representation and classroom dynamics were influencing factors. Females were described as more involved than males regarding the expectation for verbal contributions. Next the study participants were asked for their views on the impact of language on engagement.

Language

According to Brookfield (1992), as cited in Tuinjman (1995), “experience should not be thought of as an objectively neutral phenomenon” (p. 6). He further states the reason as “our experience is culturally framed and shaped. How we experience events ... change according to language and categories of analysis we use, and according to the cultural, moral and ideological vantage points from which they are viewed” (p. 7). The use of language as a key instrument of instruction requires us to carefully attend to how we talk with students and how they hear what is being shared.

When asked about language there was also a great deal of agreement that language does impact engagement, often in more complex ways than simply learning English as a second language. The observed classrooms were taught by white English-speaking faculty and attended by a diverse student body, many of them new immigrants and students who had completed their previous education in another country. Faculty attributed some of the student struggles as due to their self-consciousness and fear of erring in front of others.

Language is a huge issue for them. It is a very diverse class and ... when students are speaking English as a second language it can be a barrier to engagement, in terms of the vocal engagement … I think it’s just a fear of making a mistake … thinking I’ll make a fool of myself or worry that people won’t understand me. (B.1)
Faculty linked the lack of observed participation directly to the challenge of comprehension. The perception is that without the language skills to be able to understand the content of some of the nuances students could flounder, indicating understanding the content is necessary for engagement. One faculty noted the impact of translation of materials necessary for learning.

There is virtually no, no participation. I think the vast majority of the time they are struggling to understand the simple exchange between English and Polish or English and Hindu or English and Farsi or whatever it is. They are just struggling to take the notes and put them into something they can understand. There are some students, at least two students in that section, who speak virtually no English at all and ... if they do not understand what I am saying then I think they are just lost. (A.1)

One faculty member acknowledged that language may have an impact but added that student perspective and personality influences their level of vocal involvement. They argued the more confident and willing to risk the more outspoken a student will be. One described how perceptions surpass linguistic skills.

I think it’s not so much about the language but how the student perceives their language ability. I have students who think they don’t speak English well and they really do but it inhibits them. And I have other students who don’t, who know that they struggle a bit with the English but it doesn’t stop them ... so it’s perception of how well they speak. (B.2)

It was agreed that language is much more than the verbal considerations. A strong grasp of English is critical to success in the field of employment. One summarized, “We are a language-based profession. We need to know how to communicate and express ourselves in written and spoken English” (D.1).

There was evidence of assigning Eurocentric cultural interpretations of nonverbal mannerisms. The traditional North American view of eye contact and head nodding as indicators of agreement can at times be interpreted as understanding. In this example one faculty indicates that nonverbal messages indicate following along with the lesson content. “I can tell by their
body language as they are giving me eye contact the whole time, or they are shaking their heads. So to me that student is engaged even though they are not speaking” (B.1).

Language enriches the learning opportunities in the classroom experience. Faculty stated the need to attend to the presentation of concepts so that all students are encouraged to learn. One summarizes the need to ensure clarity so that all the concepts are understood.

It impacts in terms of, it makes me a better teacher in the sense that I have some high-fluting concept and ... I am boiling it down as much as I can into the most four most important words ... How to de-stream my language so that they get it ... what I do give them I think they do understand. (C.1)

Faculty expressed empathy for those whose first language is other than English. This was coupled with varying cultural influences around education. One faculty member revealed the added potential for previous experience to play a role.

I find that they are very careful how they ask their questions. There’s a lot more … reverence in what they say .... To make sure they aren’t insulting they are trying to choose their words very carefully ... It is possible that in their country, there have been more issues of authority and so they are responding to that possibility as well. (B.2)

Most student comments agreed with those of their faculty. Most study participants spoke English as their first language although Spanish, Italian and Polish were also identified. One student requested an individual interview because of language, not wanting to hold others back while struggling for words in front of them. Many student comments included empathy for their peers in the area of language. Those interviewed talked of struggles to be clearly understood. “They will try to say something, like you know they know what they are trying to say. They speak English they just don’t have the vocabulary” (a.1.1).

Comments revealed more than empathy. A supportive network within the classroom, either during or after a class, is one way students cope with challenges with English instruction.

The class is taught in English. I think it takes that person … to overcome maybe being embarrassed or their feelings about it or actually asking if they don’t understand
something … A lot of students in my class will you know ask or maybe ask afterwards if they don’t feel comfortable. (b.1.2)

Fluency in English impacts on engagement in terms of limiting active input and participation. In addition it was seen to potentially limit full understanding of the lesson content. One student shared how not understanding content would impact engagement.

Depending on your grasp of the English language it could put a damper on your engagement because if you don’t know, if you are not retaining as much information or aren’t understanding what is coming across then you are probably less likely, I would think, to be engaged. (d.1.2)

Self-identified non-native English speakers talked of struggles connected to self-confidence and self-esteem. They were conscious of how they perceive their peers and teachers viewing them. One spoke of anxiety and how others equate this to their grasp of the content.

When I have to speak in public I get, I get nervous. So I cannot speak. So if you were to see me speak you would think. ‘She does not know, she does not speak well, she does not understand.’ I, I want to express something, but I have … my vocabulary is not as … fluent … as somebody else … that happens. English is not my first language. (b.1.1)

Some shared first-hand experiences of how language and the norms of classroom behaviour impacted on their transition to the Canadian school experience. One example illustrates how the pace and process of verbal exchanges act as barriers to contributing.

Me being an immigrant and knowing what it was like when I was in school and not knowing the language … it was very intimidating when the whole group is like shouting out answers and you know bouncing things off each other and you are, you don’t feel comfortable just shouting out with your voice. So you just kind of sit here and jot things down. So I see it, I think there is definitely a barrier in terms of language. (d.1.10)

Language was seen to impact comprehension. One student described the challenge that arises for students who need clarification but will not ask for fear of holding back the class. This example shows how students will share with each other things they will not share directly with faculty.
I know one student who has expressed to me that he doesn’t want to always put up his hand to have things clarified because he doesn’t want to hold up the class and that kind of stuff. And it’s hard because it’s like how do you know what they need to have clarified if they are not going to ask. The field is full of jargon it’s almost like a language within a language that could be very complicating. (d.1.6)

Students gravitate to others who speak similar languages. One describes how this may provide support and a sense of comfort and familiarity.

They speak similar or the same languages and they, I think because of that have become friends and can relate to each other. They can speak in their language you know because that could be the language that they speak at home, you never know, and maybe they are more comfortable speaking in that language because it may be their first. And I think that it just ... if that didn’t exist don’t think it would be as enjoyable to be at school. (b.2.2)

When those fluent in English were immersed in another language they reported feeling left out. In one case a student summed up how lack of fluency in a foreign language left them unsure as to how to form connections.

Sometimes it is difficult because it’s hard to relate to some of the um, foreign, I’ll call them foreign, students because it’s hard to understand what they are saying and they tend to stick together. (b.2.3)

Concerns were identified in course work and assessment of learning. Limited English was labelled a detriment to group process and peer acceptance. One felt peer resistance to their involvement in group work based on the assumption peers made about how it could impact on marks attained. “If you want to get a group together to do an assignment you don’t want someone who can’t understand you” (b.1.1).

In many cases those who did not speak English as their first language felt misunderstood. They acknowledged the potential for being unfairly labelled. One spoke of how not demonstrating the expected overt behaviours left them feeling negatively judged.

Maybe they will define engagement, base it in the amount, the times they participate, the marks they get in the assignments that we have … Students are seen to be engaged if they participate and come to class. I don’t participate because I don’t feel comfortable because
of my language but it doesn’t mean I am not engaged. I am proud of being a student here and want to be a graduate of this college. (b.1.1)

Language was definitely seen as having an impact on participants’ understandings of student engagement. Responses again revealed a great deal of attention being paid to how language impacts the frequency of verbal contributions during class, in both large class and small group activities. Affective implications were also identified in terms of self-confidence, learning, acceptance and peer connections. Individuals were then asked if they believe that culture, race and ethnicity impacts on engagement.

**Culture, Race and Ethnicity**

Participants were asked about their views on the impact of culture, race and ethnicity on student engagement. ‘Culture’ is defined here as shared practices, values, goals and attitudes that describe or characterize a group. ‘Race’ categorizes people into groups based on various inherited characteristics, such as skin colour. ‘Ethnicity’ may include race but also refers to groups of individuals who share cultural heritage or characteristics, such as nationality.

Faculty saw the diverse ethnic representations in the classroom as positively influencing student engagement. Among the benefits of an increasing diverse student body are the opportunities for expanding awareness, gaining broader perspectives and expanding knowledge. Comments reflect that identifying with the subject matter increases engagement for that individual and his/her peers. Faculty proudly shared their efforts to honour student experiences and present them as the expert voice over that of their own. One gave the following example.

I think that adds richness to the engagement … And in some of the case studies we do students are actually very happy to stand up and say you know ‘This is my experience and this is how it is’ … much more engaging than just reading the article… it is much more interesting to have a student stand up and say ‘Yeah I am from the Nigerian Delta and yes, this is how it is.’ (B.1)
The influence of immigrant families on students pursuing a college diploma was identified by one faculty. Students openly acknowledge their parents may financially support them in their studies; however, the ultimate aim was not to work in a career they are training for. According to this faculty member this is a reality for many students and impacts engagement.

The students will say this is not what their parents want, they want the student to do something else, like go into the family business. There is an awful lot of pressure on many of our students, parent-wise, to do something else. They think ‘Okay, I will indulge you, it is only college but when you are finished you are going to do what is culturally expected, what we have done historically, if our family has run a restaurant that is what you are going to do’. (A.1)

Conflicting values among students from differing countries raised many challenges and emotions. Conflicts in cultural values and beliefs triggered personal reactions for both faculty and students, resulting in ‘limits’ to differences that are tolerated. People were clear and articulate about personal values and the impact on interactions with those who do not share those values. The emotional investment when personal values are challenged was heard in a change in intonation as well as loudness and speed of speech during the interview. One faculty talked about the challenge of where to draw the line when beliefs are counter to laws and human rights.

We have students from different countries that may have different ideas ... that conflict with our ethics ... With wife assault there is an entrenched belief that the male, and this is from both the male and the female students … that the male has the absolute right to assault and complete homicide, and that it’s okay to stone people who have a different sexual orientation and that people with mental illness are possessed … And you try to shift these patterns ... that’s how I approach it at first but if they are entrenched and they are not willing to look at it then I would say I am not ethnically sensitive to that. If there is an adamant ‘I am not looking at it’ or ‘My way is the right way’ then I am not okay with that. (B.3)

Further stereotyping and assumptions applied to racial or ethnic groups arose in some of the comments. One faculty became quite agitated in sharing the following perspective:

This grouping of white people drives me crazy and the students will do that. They will do that to each other and they will do that to faculty. What is ‘white’? That doesn’t tell you anything, that doesn’t inform you and you lose the fabric, you lose the texture, you lose
all the different histories and recent impact that people bring that I think make us more interesting quite frankly. And because you hail from a particular area it doesn’t also mean that you hold these beliefs. (B.3)

Discrimination and prejudice impact on the faculty role. Faculty expressed disbelief and concern with unacceptable comments occurring among and between students. In the following example the underlying concern is that they may only be hearing part of what is transpiring.

And you know I feel like a police officer to some degree both this year and last year because of some of the comments ... sometimes the comments are just so hurtful … I don’t know how else to describe them other than hurtful and ill informed and you have to stop the class and you have to attend to that. Because if you let it stand then it gives the impression that you are colluding. And a lot of what is happening we aren’t even aware of and that’s sad. And if we don’t know how can we support that? (B.3)

Issues of cultural mores and norms, and learning those of a new culture were mentioned. Some students are acquiring a new language while simultaneously attempting to acculturate to the expectations of the new systems. One faculty made a plea for understanding and empathy in an effort to understand and work for inclusion on a more conscious level.

And I think that that is a huge uphill battle and even students who have had the majority of their schooling in a different area. For example, Africa – the way that they are expected to write papers and everything is different than here. It’s an honour to use people’s words for example as opposed to here where they get dinged for plagiarism. (D.1)

Students were vocal on the impact of culture, race and ethnicity on engagement. Volunteers represented some diversity as a group, identifying their backgrounds as including Hispanic, Caribbean, Filipino and African Canadian. Those who have become Canadian citizens referred to a unique perspective in terms of engagement, highlighting their struggles to get here being misunderstood by others. One student described mixed reactions during their process.

I am Canadian … but for me it is different, I’m old. I was raised in a different culture with a different language and the problem that forced me to leave my country is different. … It does not mean that you want to live in another place. … I have been able to live in three different countries, and so I know like I can understand when people accept you and when people do not accept you. … It’s like to come here we have to fight we have to go
through a process and sometimes people feel that we are taking something away from them. (b.1.1)

Students identified that struggles in the classrooms and individuality within ethnic groupings needs to be remembered. The following example calls for a need for understanding to facilitate a calmer, thus more comfortable, learning environment. Clearly contained here is the need to avoid alienating or hurting others.

It can be hard because everyone has different feelings towards things and everyone has different views on things. ... But you have to basically have that understanding of like everyone is different and even if they come from the same ethnic group the way they do something can be different. (b.1.2)

Varied strategies for dealing with issues eliciting emotion were shared by students. Here one notes how their peers formally withdraw from those sharing conflicting views.

So they shut down and pull back because they can’t relate to it or they get angry and involved because it triggers something. ... Some I have noticed will pull back and just won’t say anything or just start side conversations with someone who shares, shares the same values as them. (b.2.2)

A number of the responses labelled teachers not addressing ethnicity the same way they attend to language factors. Here one student proposed it may be due to fear of treading on personal feelings. “I think teachers are really careful with religion and stuff. I think they are maybe a little too careful with it, I don’t know if there is such a thing but they are” (a.1.1).

Students see peers gravitating to those they feel comfortable with. Conversely, they see faculty striving to see individuals without their ethnic identity, viewing students as a group rather than as unique individuals. One student shared how this was the case in their experience. “With the ethnic identification, I feel that once again people go to people they are comfortable with. … Our teachers … I don’t think they see ethnic. I think they just see students” (b.1.2).

Students saw faculty use ethnicity as a way to enrich the learning experience and provide opportunities for deeper exploration. There were clear references to the efforts seen to help
integrate individuals into the classroom environment. Recognition of the sensitivity needed and efforts to meet on a common ground were stressed.

They try to engage with them … understanding and being able to see past stereotypes and discrimination and all those things, seeing past the ‘isms’, then getting to understand someone for who they are and getting to interact with them on that level. (b.1.2)

Some students noted how conflicting values and norms result in heightened emotional reactions and impact on feeling comfortable and safe in the classroom. Implicit in these examples were evaluative comments regarding how the faculty should handle the exchange. Some reflected on the timing the teachers chose to shut the process down and others about teacher responsibility to allow for the airing of dissonant views. Personal comfort with and ability to handle conflict was noted by one student.

I can think of a couple of times when culture has sort of enraged people … they have gotten so passionate and heated about it that the professor feels obliged to resolve it and they don’t know what will happen afterwards. And some students get very heated, like they will stand up and start yelling. (b.2.1)

Students do not see groupings according to ethnicity confronted or challenged. One shared concerns about the racial divisions in the classroom, noting an uncertainty about how to confront it.

A whole section is all the black girls and then the white girls and then one row of white girls interspersed with one or two black girls but they always sit together. There is no intermixing. I don’t know why … And there is something there that is stopping us from confronting it. (b.2.3)

A fear of being misunderstood was shared as one reason for not openly discussing ethnic origin. In this example one student speaks to inadvertently offending their peers. The belief shared is the need to choose your words carefully to avoid triggering emotional reactions.

I think to an extent it kind of puts people on edge I think a little bit just because people are very careful now about what they say … like speaking whatever and saying whatever you think to being very careful to not to offend people because people will take things, like as simple as saying ‘black and white’ when you are referring to something
some people get very offended by it, some people don’t care but you have to watch what you say in class. (b.3.3)

Comments reflected underlying discrimination and the reactions experienced. In the examples was a tendency to group people according to their ethnicity, both those who are members of that group and those who are not. The following communicates the perspective that it was a problem for the group that felt maligned and not for the class as a whole.

Last year we had a situation where there was a question on a test that was related to a particular ethnic group and people who were also in this particular ethnic group went crazy, like they totally objected to it … they were really upset. (d.1.2)

Some shared examples of discomfort confronting issues of bias and discrimination. In more than one case the students gave examples of taking offence to comments in class but not confronting these in the moment. One student talks about not disclosing true reactions due to a self-described fear of creating tension and disrupting the process for the majority.

Our class is predominantly white class … I have felt offended about what was presented … if I say something it is not going to come out at all correct and I am going to cause a lot of crap to like hit the fan ... I will just sort of kind of keep it buried and curse out about it outside during break and just go about my day because I don’t want to affect everyone else’s learning. (d.1.4)

How impressions are interpreted and communicated impacts on further interaction and norms in the classroom. There were clear messages of not feeling able to share negative feelings in either a timely or direct manner. One student spoke of clear lines of discrimination by race, revealing generalizations being made and ascribed to other groups. In this example a student refers to an underlying tension between black and white students, stating that black students who have felt discriminated against will discriminate against white students. What this student does not acknowledge is the discrimination in their own statement. This student sees others as connecting tension or conflict to racial background rather than the specific issues being discussed.
The black girls start ... you know, I use the phrase ‘kissing their teeth’ and rolling their eyes and then they are like, ‘Oh – it’s you again.’ … It’s not spoken but they assume that whenever we have an issue with them it’s because of their colour but they sort of reverse it to use it against us … white is not right. (b.2.3)

Systemic and ingrained beliefs were identified as impacting engagement. The following excerpt reveals that we expect vast shifts in the values of others, adapting to fit our expectations and schema of what is ‘right’. The following example was shared in the context of a classroom discussion on homosexuality, referring to the cultural beliefs that it is ‘wrong’.

Some people are taught that you don’t talk about some stuff ... it would impact on how much they would reveal and how much they would share and therefore engage in the group work. If you’ve been told that’s not good, your whole life, it’s going to be really hard for you to try and do it. (d.1.6)

There were also students who saw evidence of honouring cultural differences and the effort to respect them. “I think we are really respectful of each other’s culture and values in our program” (d.1.6).

A key message heard during the interviews was the desire to demonstrate and receive respect while not having to sacrifice personal beliefs. Culture, race and ethnicity revealed strong emotional triggers and individual coping strategies. Reluctance to confront in the moment was noted. Triggering such emotions was not labelled as indicating engagement. Next socio-economic status is discussed.

**Socio-Economic Status**

Participants were asked how, if at all, they saw individual socio-economic status impacting student engagement. The comments were mixed. One faculty member was of the opinion that it may have an influence but not evidenced in their classroom.

I don’t, I don’t see it in my class but I think that does impact on people’s engagement. You know if you look at classes and I think people from higher, you know socio-economic backgrounds are more confident maybe to speak … I don’t know. (B.1)
For others there were contradictory responses. Empathy was expressed for students who need to work while in full-time attendance. However, it seemed accepted as a norm.

One faculty argued it had little influence in their classroom but shared examples of how, in fact, they saw an impact. Here one gives an example of how full-time attendance at school and working can leave a student tired to the point of drifting off to sleep in class. This faculty shared the need to intervene quietly in such a situation without embarrassing the student.

In my classrooms not so much ... Almost all my students work and most of them full time ... you know they are all just trying to make it through and they are struggling to survive if someone is kind of nodding off in class I go over them, to kind of whisper their name or something and nudge them to life but I don’t berate them or anything like that. (C.1.)

Some stated no evidence and then shared examples of the emotions they saw triggered. One faculty shared such an example focused on emotional engagement that could go one of two ways. First they described students as withdrawing and becoming quiet. Secondly they saw a more assertive reaction in which frustration and anger were expressed. The following example talks to being emotionally engaged with the issues, not the person making the initial comment.

My perception is that that does not seem to impact on their engagement that I can tell. In general where I think where it does is when somebody makes a comment about poverty and either I get a student who has been there/done that or is still there and you can see the face get a little hard. And either they get hard and silent ... or they will get quite vocal and challenge the comment, strongly with frustration, with anger but not in a combative way so they are engaged in confronting. (B.2)

The majority of the faculty comments heard identified socio-economic factors as carrying a significant, and not necessarily negative, impact on engagement in the learning process. The following example from a faculty member addresses the financial reality of students and how direct communication with faculty can remove assumptions influencing our impressions of student engagement.
That would speak directly I think to the number of students we have working. Those are ones who tell me they are working, those are the ones who come to me on a continual basis and say ‘I am really sorry I have to leave’ or ‘I have to come a little late’ or I get emails that say ‘I really apologise for missing your class but I have been called into work.’ … They are the ones that are engaged, they are the ones that are actively asking questions. Before, during or after class they are the ones that come to me. (A.1)

There was a sense of empathy coupled with frustration for not knowing how to effectively intervene when students were known to be struggling, perhaps exacerbated by the current economic climate. One faculty talked of their frustration and empathy.

The socio-economic factors I think really, really, really influence student engagement ... Because I think our students are working sometimes two or three jobs and I can tell you from that class I have now had five people pulled out because their parents have lost their jobs or their guardian has lost their job in the last couple of weeks. How can you expect someone you know to then go home and do their homework? (B.3)

The desire to support students was coupled with futility around how to proceed.

Embedded in this example is the reality of conflicting priorities that students carry.

Just think about the single parents in our classrooms, the students that need to work over 20 hours a week. How can we expect them to engage at the same level? They don’t have time to think about what they are learning. They are rushing from one task to another and that to me is huge. And I don’t know what we do about that one. (D.1)

Student comments about the socio-economic impact were more divided, or less certain.

However, the one exception to this was in terms of examples a student shared connected to tuition, materials and enrolment.

I think it does. It has a large impact because it’s hard to engage if you don’t have the right materials … And if you can’t pay to go to school then you can’t be here. So I think that sometimes it can be stressful because they have to find ways to continue their education. (b.1.2)

There were clear indicators of the struggles of others, if not oneself, and the recognition that the impact went far beyond the classroom experience. One was able to empathise for what some of the less fortunate struggled with.
My tuition is paid for, by my parents, so I don’t have the kind of barrier for me personally but I hear other people talking and I know that it’s hard sometimes and they have children and the whole paying for a book or paying for a class … just getting there sometimes it’s a problem. (b.1.2)

The overall tone of the conversation became louder when students shared examples of wasting resources. One admitting a limited income was appalled that others lacked the same concern for financial realities.

The only way I can really see it is, money being the motivator, seeing it as if I was to drop out that would be very bad because I can’t afford to go back in, whereas someone who is very wealthy can just apply again and it’s no, you know, no problem to them. (b.2.1)

The same student identified motivation as a critical factor, acknowledging those less invested in the program may be less engaged in their experience. They talked about the different paths to get to postsecondary education and how the responsibility for funding impacts on motivation.

I said ‘Why are you here, do you even care about it?’ And she is just well ‘it’s just something I took because you know it will shut my parents up.’ So it’s that kind of thing as they wanted her to go because she is just 19 and she has just gotten out of high school and I had to take several years off, after high school, to save up to come here. (b.2.1)

Student debt was also mentioned. In this example the student would rather avoid the topic, although acknowledged this reality left them more determined to succeed. “Paying … yeah I will be paying after for a long time. To be honest I don’t want to think about it.” (b.1.1)

Some saw personal income and expenses directly related to the degree of student engagement. Peers were described as more engaged if paying their own way while those who were not fiscally responsible were seen to care less.

Yes, I feel that the students that, like a lot of students that I know that actually pay out of their own pocket to be in school are very engaged and really into what they are doing because they are paying for it. … Some of them that don’t pay for their education really, I have noticed that they are not really as into it. They will go and do assignments you know
the day before or you know say ‘Oh I’ll just hand it in late, I’ll just hand it in tomorrow’. (b.2.2)

The area of student loans brought out some complicated perceptions. Students were not judged negatively if they needed the support but not all were seen to really require the loans. Many felt those who access such support are not as motivated to attend and learn because they do not see it as personally paying for their education. At the same time reference was made to the understanding that there is room in the process to take advantage of the loan program.

I know that there are a lot of people in my program who have or are on OSAP and they need loans and stuff … I think people … it is less taken advantage of, not taken advantage of but taken for granted maybe. It’s uh, if they are paying for it they have to come to class, they have to. (b.3.3)

Not all agreed this area played a significant factor. The influence of shared culture may decrease the actual act of considering socio-economics as a factor. Being ‘poor’ is simply accepted as the norm for students.

I really don’t think it, it affects us because nobody really talks about it. We don’t talk you know about who has what and who has less but usually the money does not come into play because everyone is a student and everyone is poor. (b.2.3)

Some guessed at the perceived differences in classroom behaviour. The more tangible areas were seen as having the potential to impact engagement. One area this was linked to was the ability to access resources.

I don’t know if it really plays such a big factor but maybe the things that come along with it might play a factor… Let's say somebody who is living in poverty might feel like they don’t have the resources they need. (d.1.3)

One individual considered the impact on motivation for the students who need to work to pay their own way, assigning value as key. “If you had to work for your tuition … It would make, I think, in a sense it would make you work harder because you know that this is your money that is paying for your education” (d.1.2).
The economic realities for the individual student seemed to make a clear impact on their positioning in this area. At times there was a sense of envy for those who did not need to support themselves through school. One spoke of work interfering on how engaged they could be with school.

For me like I know because I have to work and pay bills and stuff it takes away from my school work in some aspects. Like I know I could give more and do better if I didn’t have to do that. Whereas I see some people in class who still live at home and ... their parents still support them and I guess sometimes I wish that I didn’t have to worry about that stuff. (d.1.6)

One way it was seen as clearly having an impact was to do with priority setting and constraints regarding visible investment in other activities. One summed it up this way:

If you are well off you are more, you have more opportunities, you are less stressed … as opposed to someone who is struggling financially or struggling at home may not have the extra time to say well maybe I will use my Friday night to help out … if you are having financial issues there is probably priorities that you have that will stop you from engaging more. (d.1.7)

The rising cost of education and the current economic crisis has definite implications for full-time students considering tuition and other responsibilities they are carrying. Overall there was a sense of futility expressed; a problem is acknowledged but solutions seem elusive.

Students expressed wishing to simply be able to learn and faculty wanted those who could no longer afford it to be able to continue. Age was the next demographic discussed.

Age

When asked about the impact of age on student engagement the responses were less definitive, allowing a great deal for individual maturity and the impact of life experience. Classrooms were all described as having a range of ages represented, with the majority of students identified as post high school or post-university. Each faculty member who addressed the age range identified the ages interacted well together in the classroom, although the
individual’s self-assessment carried more weight. The following statement illustrates how faculty view mature students as having an added barrier to engagement when first returning to the classroom.

I have had some mature students who feel very insecure thinking ‘I have been out of school for so long, I don’t know if I have anything worthwhile to contribute’ and there are younger students who are very enthusiastic and want to share their ideas but again some who think ‘Oh I am 17 what do I know about this stuff?’ You know it can go so many ways … it is all so individual … I see sharing across the ages in my class. (B.1)

Faculty made generalizations about their groups regarding expectations and commitment. One shares that transition to college and new expectations carries a great impact. Here one faculty shares their views on some of the challenges they encounter.

The younger ones … the hard part is just to get them to realize that they are in a professional environment, everything counts. The young ones who are sort of in high school in a fairly practical course stream and then they come here and want to be babied along … they’re in here and this is, this is almost a, a punishing kind of a schedule. (C.1)

Some faculty described engagement as having a link between life experience and maturity with a socio-economic reality. The following faculty member shared a view that the younger students may not have this concept. From his perspective deeper engagement came with added responsibility and awareness of the financial consequences of failing.

A lot of the time I think the socio-economic factors are also linked with age and most of those people are working towards a goal and realize if they don’t pass here or they don’t achieve here it’s trouble. (A.1)

Age was seen to impact investment in the learning process with the older students demonstrating a more active commitment. One faculty clearly linked added life experience as a factor that increased engagement.

The older they are the more engaged. I think the older they are the more they have to lose. They have an added commitment … it's not as exploratory. The older students that I get are far more … they will break their necks to get to class. I had a kid last year who would come to class, an 8:00 class, he came to class straight from work, he worked every single night and he was there for every single class. (A.1)
Self-confidence, comfort and the ease of transition for mature students was identified. The mature student was described as entering the process with a different perspective. One shared how establishing comfort impacts engagement.

Occasionally I will get an older student who feels intimidated because they haven’t been back to school in so long but what I do find that is interesting is that once the more mature students have been there for several weeks and they are in the process of getting comfortable you see them begin to really take off. (B.2)

One faculty referred to mixed, and at times seemingly inaccurate, perceptions of self as being more a factor than the chronological age. Self-confidence was viewed as a potential obstacle to engagement.

It works both end of the spectrum, sometimes you get really young students that feel that they are really young and they can’t get it and they’ll stand in their own way and then you have the older crowd ... and they believe they have been there and done that. (D.1)

Students interviewed were between the ages of 19 and 36 years. They agreed that life experience and certainty regarding career path can influence engagement. Recent high school graduates saw themselves as less certain about the choices they had made. One compares their own commitment to the field with that of their older peers.

I think the older people may take it a little more seriously. … I mean I came out of high school, straight out of high school, even now I am thinking, like I am double thinking my choice and I think they have already done that thinking. (a.1.1)

Some believed prior life experience influences the level of engagement. This student shares how she sees this as more of a factor than age alone.

The younger people, and I am not saying that I am old, but those who are just kind of fresh out of high school are a lot more light hearted about stuff. They talk in class and I kind of tend to dread it when I walk into class and see that in the classroom most of it is the younger population in our group … And then we have like people who are close to their 50s, people who are in their 30s and they are there because they want a change in their career or they are there because they have had a divorce and they now need to support themselves and, or just personal issues or want to become more involved in their community. (b.2.1)
Comments were made about maturity rather than age as being a key factor. One student shared how with age you may get maturity but this is not necessarily the case.

Age makes a difference in terms of maturity and you can have age but not necessarily be mature. There can be someone who is younger and acts more mature than someone who is older. (b.1.2)

Age impacts the role students play within the class groups and tolerance for behaviour that is deemed immature or more naive. One mature student shared how they feel age helps shape the role they assume in the cohort.

Inevitably within the group the mature students end up being almost like the mothers. It’s like ‘OK guys, come on we have to get this done’ or ‘OK, come on guys clean up after yourselves’ or ‘OK guys, come on guys be quiet’. … And like the older we get I guess the more certain things get and the more we just can’t stand. (b.2.3)

There was an indication students compare themselves with others and ascribe wisdom to older peers. Here one student speaks to pulling back from those seen as wiser. Her feelings of insecurity and self-doubt were shared as a barrier to her engagement.

I remember sitting in class and … an older person who would say or present themselves in a certain way and I shy away from them and wanting to speak after them because they are so wise and they are so experienced and … more knowledgeable, just generally being more aware of who they are and just, yeah just being smarter. (d.1.5)

Added life responsibilities were seen as a detriment to one’s ability to engage fully in the educational experience. One student spoke of watching the transitions for a mature student needing to balance numerous responsibilities.

As you get older you have a family and you have a husband and you have a house and a mortgage or car payments and all this other stuff. And to throw school on top of it I think you … can’t afford to invest that much time into your education as maybe somebody who is 19 years old could because you don’t have all those extra responsibilities. (d.1.1)

Mature students shared feeling frustrated with the younger students. The following excerpt from a mature student provides an example of this.
Well you know you see an older person and you know … obviously I am a lot more mature … for me sometimes, being with the younger people, there is like a maturity difference and I can find myself getting like, I won’t say it out loud but I find myself getting like in my head I will be saying ‘You need to shut up and pay attention’, the tolerance level for those kinds of things goes down. (d.1.7)

Older students believe their opinions are sought out due to their age and added life experience. This was flattering and added to the sense of engagement for some but it resulted in frustration and feelings of added responsibility not welcomed by others.

I hear a great deal of issues from people who are younger than us in our class and I think they just come to us because they think ‘You guys have been through everything’. (d.1.6)

Overall maturity and lived experience were seen to impact student engagement more than age. Added responsibilities, where students were entering from and certainty of career path were identified as linked to engagement. The impact of ability on engagement was the next demographic area of focus.

**Ability**

When asked how varying abilities of students influenced engagement, the faculty had a range of comments to make. References to physical, medical, intellectual and learning differences were all made. There was clear identification of how an individual’s physical disabilities did not equate to lower levels of engagement. In fact, the following faculty member asserts they may be more engaged if there is a disability present. “Actually the couple of students I have had with cerebral palsy that were in wheelchairs where it was very difficult to understand their speech, they actually were very engaged in the class.” (B.1)

The less obvious disabilities, such as learning disabilities, were seen as having a different impact. The emphasis and examples tended to again focus on overt behavioural participation. “I think the hidden disabilities, you know that prevents participation for sure … maybe even more
than the visible disabilities. You know people with learning disabilities, learning in different ways.” (B.1)

Faculty spoke of being very aware of the unique needs of their students and their ability to adapt and have these needs met. Comments reinforced that any form of disability did not equate to lower engagement. In fact, many presented examples of these students as being more engaged.

One of my best students has a handicap or a disability and she is very engaged … I find that that does not seem to be a major barrier. It has with a couple, I think more maybe not just because of the disability but because of a lot of other things that were going on, but most students that have any ability issues I find have done pretty well. (A.1)

The ability or disability was only one part of what was considered in responding to this question. The following faculty comment reflects needing to look past the area of ability to the person. “I think that depends a great deal on really depends a lot on personality and what the disability is.” (B.2)

Within any given diagnosis there was a great deal of individual consideration. One example was from the faculty who spoke of variation in terms of investment in learning. “I think it’s hard to call that across the board. I’ve got LD students who are right out there and I’ve got LD students that really pull away.” (B.3)

One faculty member adapts to the cognitive level of the students in the program, seeing some as more ‘real world’ based and less conceptual in their thinking patterns and preferences. They spoke of assessing the key concepts and ensuring these are the ones they communicate.

And so for me who loves ideas and playing with ideas I find I really have to rein myself in and when I think, yeah that would be yet another really neat idea, or that would be cool if you knew it, ... and just be disciplined, this is what you need to know. (C.1)
In terms of ability, student comments referred to the intellectual challenges and learning disabilities as well as physical influences. Those interviewed included individuals with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, challenges with verbal processing and severe depression. One spoke of accessing resources as being helpful.

I mean I have a learning disability and I thought when I came here I would be challenged and … you do have to do work, … like I did most of my stuff in the test centre. (a.1.1)

Students were quick to acknowledge individual adaptations as separate from motivation. One spoke to the importance of not making negative assumptions. “If someone has a learning disability it means that they don’t learn the same way – the same way as somebody else – it doesn’t mean that they don’t want to learn” (b.1.1). Students viewed peers with a disability striving harder and engaging more. One student labelled this directly. “They actually engage more … so I find that disabilities doesn’t stop, it is not a factor” (b.1.2).

Individual perspective regarding potential was deemed pivotal in this area. Here one describes how overall attitude is a key factor.

Some people feel like it becomes a hindrance for them because they feel like they can’t do it. And then there are other people who accept it and say ‘I’m not going to try because I know I can’t.’ (d.1.3)

Students with disabilities disclosed how it impacted on their own engagement. In one case a student could not recall the name of a female icon in Black history and felt embarrassed in front of classmates. Being able to dialogue about it was deemed helpful in clarifying the issue.

I’m like ‘Who is that again?’ … and so they all just kind of looked at me, they all just looked at me like you’ve got to be kidding me and the girl next to me goes ‘Do you actually not know who that is?’ And I am like I don’t feel stupid enough as it is and she is like ‘Oh I am sorry I didn’t mean to say it that way’. (b.2.1)

Those with disabilities acknowledged how they are responded to in class carries a lot of weight, and previous experiences influence how they see others as viewing them. The perceived
frustration for others was felt deeply by some. One student shared how they assumed peers were
tired of their need to ask questions and quickly connected it to experiences that triggered such
feelings in grade school.

They are sick of my questions especially in that class because it’s particularly … I have a
very long history of being told I am not worth anything so it kind of hits me kind of hard.
(b.2.1)

Motivation to reach out and help others was seen with some scepticism by at least one
student. In one example the student questioned the motivation behind assisting those with
disabilities.

We had a student that was blind … but I didn’t see any type of segregation or anything
like that, everyone engaged with her. And I don’t know if they were engaging because of
the fact that she was blind, because some people will do that because ‘Oh I better talk to
her because if I don’t I will look really bad’ you know? (b.2.2)

One individual reflected on how a differently abled person can be shunned by the group,
in part due to a lack of understanding. In this example the student shared how a faculty member
intervened to bring a deeper level of understanding to the class.

We had a girl … She was blind and she had a seeing eye dog and the students on the face
of it they would be nice to her but when she was in groups and stuff they went out of their
way to make her feel left out or uncomfortable. Like in one project they made her do
graphs. The girl can’t see so how is she going to do a graph? It was hard on her. She
didn’t speak much. Then one time the teacher said ‘Why don’t you come up and explain
to us what it is like to be you’ – once she did that people began to understand a little bit
more. (b.2.3)

All faculty identified students as having various disabilities; however, students were not
always aware of them. Here one student admits not knowing anyone in their class with any form
of learning disability. “No we don’t, I don’t actually even know about any people in our program
that have any learning disabilities. I don’t know if it has played a part at all. … I don’t know of
anybody actually experiencing it.” (b.3.3)
In one interview it seemed there had been little previous thought to this area and its impact on the engagement of their peers. When pondering this question the following student describes how accessing resources may result in feeling different from others.

I can’t think of anybody off hand who has a disability that has prevented them from becoming engaged, however maybe I don’t know … the test centre and maybe that’s how it effects their engagement by being separated from the group. Maybe they feel differently because they feel distanced from the group … Maybe even from the teacher because our teacher doesn't get to be in there while they are writing the test. (d.1.6)

In the area of ability, personal nature and drive were labelled key determinants of engagement. Attitude, or outlook, was a significant factor as many differently abled people were described as highly engaged. Finally participants were asked about the impact of sexual orientation on engagement.

**Sexual Orientation**

When the area of sexual orientation was raised the responses tended to be succinct and commented on the least. It was recognized as a factor that could impact positively in terms of people speaking out for their rights or negatively in terms of prejudice and experiencing alienation. One faculty member shares how it can be a factor for students.

With a number of our students, their ethno-cultural backgrounds or their religious upbringing is very homophobic ... We did have a couple of students last year come to the faculty team and say that they felt that they were being persecuted by some of the other students because they were gay and because other students knew it. (B.1)

Faculty acknowledged conscious efforts made to bring prejudice into the open for discussion and direct confrontation despite the challenges this presents. “Most of them have the same prejudices in society and they try to soft peddle them so I just go right up at those, those prejudices. But they are hard, hard to dispel” (C.1).

Sexual orientation was described as the hardest demographic to identify, making it a challenge to determine its impact on student engagement. Among the reasons shared were
ingrained cultural beliefs and the desire to keep personal orientation private when counter to their cultural values.

That’s tricky because we don’t always know. I’ve got some students who are right out there, really confident in a comfortable way. Then I’ve got another student in first year, and he is adamant that he never be in the spotlight and no one knows ... he is from another country and a culture which would be horrified. I think that the culture plays a bigger piece in how they engage in terms of their sexual orientation than almost anything else. ... In other countries, it’s not that it’s just unacceptable; it’s that it’s illegal and you will be put in jail ... very ingrained ... don’t even see it as a belief – it is a truth. (B.2)

One pattern in responses was the use of pronouns ‘we’ and ‘them’. This became apparent in the responses referring to faculty views and treatment of students who are homosexual or transsexual.

I don’t see that one because I think that the subject matter and because we are liberal in our views and we accommodate in our classrooms ... I don’t think we alienate them entirely ... we are kind of liberal in our views and inclusive. (D.1)

The area of sexual orientation required the most tact and patience in ensuring input was accurately heard and represented. Students questioned how genuine they feel others are when talking about this area. They wondered about the ‘political correctness’ people feel required to espouse. The sense was that both faculty and students talk about being open and talk about being inclusive but in reality there are still some barriers experienced. Prejudice and discrimination remain most hidden in this particular area, as students believe that faculty do not tackle this area with the same attention as other areas of social justice.

Like they say what they have to say I think, but I am not sure if they believe it like the whole everyone is ‘equal’... it comes out in class and people are not very sensitive about it. (a.1.1)

Students spoke about not treating discrimination on sexual orientation the same way other areas are treated. The following comment was shared to show discrimination is present, although in one case it is kept hidden and the other it is more overt.
In certain topics like if someone in class is let’s say racist, like visible minority or whatever, they won’t feel comfortable saying it in class because it is not an acceptable thing to say. Whereas the sexual orientation it is still acceptable. (a.1.1)

Sexual orientation was seen to be a matter of personal privacy and one that can be separated from student engagement. In this example one student admits the sexual orientation of other students may not even be known by peers or faculty. In any case, this individual argues for tolerance of everyone’s views, no matter what their orientation, and that sexual orientation does not play a role in engagement.

Most are very private about it, you wouldn’t really know. I know some people whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual and their view sometimes can be different but you have to, once again, you have to respect that their view … sexual orientation doesn’t play a factor. (b.1.2)

Students who are gay were labelled as more committed to various causes. Here one student shares their assessment of gay peers openly disclosing their sexuality if they feel supported by those around them.

I know of there are a few who have openly expressed their sexual orientation with us and are active in their movements … they have people that are open-minded around them. (b.2.1)

Sexual orientation was described as challenging given cultural values and in relation to other areas of equality. Society was seen as being more resistive to change and openness around sexual orientation. In this interview a student speaks about watching a film in class and being surprised by peer reaction. They identify sexual orientation as an area that people continue to struggle with.

We actually had issues with that which was so surprising to me, I was so like ... I don’t know what the word is but ... oblivious maybe. When two males were getting married and kissing each other on a picture people would start laughing, in the class. I just think it’s pure ignorance and … with any other issue we can get past it you know we get educated and then things shift a bit, you know and we start understanding but with sexual orientation I just don’t understand. It’s like this huge hill that people just can’t seem to get to the top of. (b.2.2)
Religious beliefs were described as directly influencing engagement in this area as it linked to acceptance of individuals. Here a student shares how people continue to keep their beliefs private as many will reject differences or ways of being based on a lack of fit with their values.

Well very few people will openly speak about it a lot of the fundamental Christian women, … had facial gestures of disgust and eye rolls the whole time he was speaking. Because they are thinking that’s revolting, that’s disgusting. … So a lot of people won’t openly say one way or another what, what their orientation is. They just keep it to themselves and keep going, let people assume what they want. (b.2.3)

Questions of safety were flagged and people were seen choosing to remain silent rather than risk disclosing. One student inferred trust as pivotal, stating this was a matter of safety for the individual. “How safe do you feel disclosing it?” (b.2.3)

Overall, this demographic was the most challenging for the participants to align with student engagement. While some progress was seen in being able to be open and inclusive, it was generally agreed that a lot of work was still to be done.

A little bit sometimes. People have become a lot, like after first year and learning about it I think a lot more people are a lot more accepting of it and more open-minded to it. You can still sense a little bit of discomfort when certain topics come up … (b.3.3)

Disappointment in the lack of progress society has made in this area was voiced. One student acknowledged the need for added work. “I just feel like there’s a lot of pressure because there’s still a lot of misconceptions. It’s like why don’t you … as open- and broad-minded and accepting as we are we tend to still stereotype” (d.1.3).

Some stated surprise at the existence of others with gay friends. The following reinforces that many misconceptions remain. One student shared their thought that they were unique to have gay friends.
I was just surprised actually at the number of people who had friends who are in gay relationships and are capable speaking about that experience because I just didn’t think a lot of people had that many gay friends – I thought it was just me, and it wasn’t. (d.1.4)

The language that faculty use was seen to have an impact on reinforcing stereotypes; however careful they are seen to be in using non-judgemental language, certain references can reinforce bias. One shared examples of sex-based language that results in peers disengaging and not feeling part of the group.

Our teachers are very conscious of the language that they use in terms of sexual orientation and, however sometimes it may slip and then like, they might say like ‘When you go home to your boyfriend tonight...’ or ‘to your girlfriend’ or whatever – they don’t feel like a part of the whole. (d.1.6)

Sexual orientation drew the vaguest responses of all of the demographics asked about. While many viewed it as clearly having an influence, participants shared generalizations and focused more on the need to be accepting than about the impact on engagement.

**Conclusion**

Overall demographic factors were seen as having an influence on student engagement and patterns arose in reviewing the summaries for each one. While their perceived influence varied across participants, most faculty and students agreed there was an impact. One area of agreement is that none of them were seen in isolation. Each demographic of gender or sex, language, culture, race and ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, ability, and sexual orientation could also interact with and have the potential to influence each other.

Despite describing these demographics as interconnected, some faculty stated they can minimize the effects of some in their classrooms. The classroom was seen by faculty as presenting a level playing field. One faculty acknowledged the larger societal influences of gender and socio-economic status but believed that treating all students the same meant it did not influence her classroom. Another spoke to providing added time for English as second language
students to formulate and share their ideas. Both examples fail to include student voice and support the status quo.

Examples of a deficit mentality also arose. Discussions of age reflected expectations of mature behaviour and the assumption that older students were more committed to their studies. Interview segments about disabilities reinforced how such students were expected to seek needed resources, whether or not there was a formal diagnosis. Faculty were often aware of the less visible disabilities, as in learning disabilities, but felt at a loss as to how to proceed if the student did not take responsibility and initiative.

The hidden curriculum became evident in the use of ‘we’ and ‘them’ when speaking about sexual orientation and cultural backgrounds. Faculty spoke of inviting varying perspectives while students saw teachers as side-stepping conflicting values and beliefs. The result for students was the view that important issues are driven underground.

In addition, some of the definitions of and attitudes towards the demographic terms were of concern. When discussing gender many comments more narrowly referenced the differences of males and females. When asking about socio-economic factors comments often focused more narrowly on the financial aspects of the concept. If the breadth and depth of demographic factors are not fully understood there is a significant risk of ignoring individual needs and limiting the more inclusive schooling environment.

Chapter VI examines how faculty and students view the facilitators and barriers of student engagement.
Chapter VI: Facilitators and Barriers of Student Engagement

Both the factors that enhance engagement and those that hinder it need to be addressed in postsecondary education if students are to have a meaningful educational experience. Consideration of what works and what impedes engagement needs to occur at all levels of the institution.

To be a meaningful experience for our students, it is necessary for academic staff, administrators, policy makers and researchers to seek ways to better understand what factors and influences will lead to an institutional culture which promotes and encourages student engagement … need to also consider institutional factors that might mitigate against engagement for some students. (Stefani, 2008, p. 2)

Facilitators of Student Engagement

Participants were first asked to identify facilitators of student engagement. Faculty shared various strategies utilized to promote student involvement in the classroom, reinforcing that active participation in the learning experience is viewed as a foundation of engagement.

Responses also included the qualities important in the relationships they have with students, encompassing the classroom environment and communication processes. Students spoke of connections, the need for voice, and qualities they deemed an integral part of quality instructors – credibility and passion.

Facilitators from a Faculty Perspective

Faculty agreed it is not always readily apparent if a student is engaged, and if they are, to what degree. One faculty explained this the following way: “I changed my pitch to this group because I thought they were not engaged at all. Well that’s not true; some of them were engaged, but they were marginally” (B.3).

Many strategies were mentioned. One faculty assigned preparatory work to facilitate understanding the materials that would be covered in class. Marks given for completion of the
task indicate that simply assigning it may not be enough incentive for the students to complete the task. “I always get them to read something before the class because I think they need to take some responsibility for their learning … they know they get marks for doing their readings.”

(B.1)

Another strategy identified as fostering engagement was the use of tests or ‘pop’ quizzes. Strategies to get students to attend class are used to build a more personal connection with individuals.

I try with the quizzes ... simply by doing the quizzes it gets them there. When they are handing my quiz back I always, I try to always take it from them and I steal a quick glance at the name and say you know, ‘Thanks David’ or ‘Thanks to whoever’. (A.1)

There is a conscious effort to employ strategies to honour the varied preferences in a given group. Faculty spoke of supporting student requests for delivery of auditory, visual and kinaesthetic teaching strategies.

Not lecturing at them for three hours.... words seem to have a numbing effect on them. Varying some of your practices and your methodologies and strategies in terms of content delivery, more along with what their needs were and what they were asking for. (B.1)

Sharing personal experiences from the field and making the content relevant were facilitators mentioned by all faculty. Two-way communication in the classroom fosters contributions, questioning, reflection and discussion. It is important to share experiences and invite input. One talked of how they weave this together.

Illustrative stories and the, the ability to be able to take a point that is not too far off of their own experience and discuss it in a group and use it to have a discussion with somebody next to them. (C.1)

Faculty spoke of incorporating research findings on adult learning into their classes. Integrating techniques found in cooperative learning strategies, familiar mediums in technology and anecdotal stories to reinforce a theme were all used. One faculty member shared a sense of
needing to not only entertain and stimulate interest in the students, but also attend to the range of needs and preferences found within any group of students. Faculty talked of delivering content in a manner that was stimulating and enjoyable. One shared that it is important to view it from the student perspective.

I think we need to pay attention to that kind of thing so I think that anything in their world that sparks them or hooks them is good. So for example movie clips, music, the YouTube moments, a story, storytelling, sticks with them right? (D.1)

The faculty in this study clearly stated that materials must be relevant to the student and the field of work they are studying. Students were described as more engaged if they were interested in the material or content, could relate to it and could see how the information would be of use to them in their career. One faculty member describes how such connections are linked to engagement. “They are more engaged if it is of more interest to them. I think if it relates to what they are doing out in the field or they’ve had some experience with it in their own life I think they tend to get more engaged.” (B.1)

The first class is a key time to set the stage for student engagement. Here faculty play a key role in clarifying expectations and setting the stage, welcoming students and inviting them into both the content and the process of the classroom experience. Invitational approaches help facilitate a positive emotional climate in the classroom. One noted how demystifying the process increased comfort.

The way that we do that I think is that very first class, that we need to go in there to help them become engaged with our syllabus, with the expectations … and it may allay some anxiety too because you can’t become engaged if you are too anxious about if they can do it or not. (D.1)

Faculty agreed that more than words are needed to set the stage for active involvement. In the following example one teacher shared a strategy for reinforcing the stated desire for student input. One faculty encourages active participation from the initial meeting to set the stage for the
semester. “I set that out from the very beginning. Everyone, everyone, every person speaks in my class the first day, they come up they shake my hand, they introduce themselves and I like to sort of step back.” (B.1)

These faculty agreed that different strategies or approaches work with different groups to varying levels of effectiveness. Some stated particular cohorts were more challenging to engage and that each class is unique; a ‘canned’ presentation will not reach all students. One faculty member noted the need to actively and regularly seek feedback from the student groups.

If you get feedback from your audience you are liable to build something that is not only better in an ongoing sense but meet the specific characteristics of the group that change year by year. I am surprised. It’s like giving birth to a new child every year, how different they are. (C.1)

Nonverbal cues are used to take the pulse of the group, at times indicating a need to stop the process and elicit feedback spontaneously. Inviting student suggestions and feedback regarding their interests facilitates engagement.

I polled them and said, ‘You know guys this doesn’t seem to be meshing with you.’ I can’t remember how I put it, so ‘What would help?’, ‘What would help stimulate your interest?’ (B.3)

Feedback can be both written and verbal. Some students are more comfortable with anonymous feedback and others prefer verbal input. Student feedback shared in class and on survey forms do not always match up. One faculty member considers the anonymous written forms a closer reflection of what the student really feels and thinks about the class content and process. “When I get my student feedback questionnaires I will know because I always find what they tell and what I read in the student feedback questionnaires are not the same things” (B.3).

Some faculty expressed disappointment in the outcome of their efforts to incorporate student input. This was based on limited evidence of change. One implementing the requested changes did not see any change in resulting engagement. “And they said movies, more movies
and okay so fine I spent time looking at different movies and got them in and yet I don’t know if that helped because I look at students sometimes and they are sleeping” (B.3).

Challenging their students, using debates or investigating varying opinions on issues engages students on many levels. Of paramount importance for one faculty is the need to present as accepting of varied positions. One describes the need to help them think for themselves as engaging.

Bantering is part of that engagement, it is critical for the teacher to not be judgemental, not be dismissive, and not be negative. So what I find I try to do is be very positive with them, even while I am disagreeing. ... And that to me, that’s another way to engage the students because then they feel heard, valued but they also know you are not going to just ‘yes’ them to death. (B.2)

Incorporating disagreements and challenging perspectives promotes critical thinking and the expression of alternate views. Stimulating discussion using various points of view facilitates engagement. One describes their own enjoyment of the method. “I love a dissenting view so let’s discuss it. Look at all the issues because there is no one right answer” (B.3).

Relationships within the group can facilitate student engagement. In one instance, a smaller class allowed the faculty member to connect with the students on a more intimate level in terms of interaction and the exploration of materials. A sense of being able to connect with the students as individuals and foster a sense of belonging was clearly communicated as ideal. One fondly reminisced about a small group and the benefits in relation to engagement.

I only had a small number of students and it was outstanding … it was the best class I ever had. They came to every class, all of them and it wasn’t really a convenient time for them, it wasn’t like a class and then an hour and then my class. For some of them it really messed up their day but they came all the time and I loved it. I knew every student’s name you know … community and attachment. (A.1)

Student voice is important and faculty work at having students believe their contributions are valued. When students communicate more with the teacher than their peers one faculty talks
about redirecting them. “Sometimes people will speak only to me. And I know the people at the back can’t hear what the person said ... [I tell them] ‘What you have to say is just as important as what I have to say’” (B.1).

Commitment to the role of teacher and interest in the content and students are critical to student engagement. Dedication to the role and the learners was described by one faculty member as being at the root of engagement. “It’s the teacher’s enthusiasm, passion, interest ... and not just interest in the material, but interest in the student as a person. … As a teacher we have to seriously believe that the learning is possible” (B.2).

A genuine interest in students as individuals includes faculty taking initiative when they notice shifts in patterns of behaviours. One shared the powerful impact of approaching a student when they had concerns.

I had said you know ‘Your work is not what it used to be ... I had you in first semester or I had you in third semester and I notice that there has been a very big decline’ and she said ‘My mom is in end-stage cancer and she is drifting by the day’. And I didn’t know if anybody else in the class knew but … somebody noticed. (A.1)

Such interest and caring from faculty also involves confronting struggling students while simultaneously giving messages of confidence and belief in student capabilities. One faculty acknowledged the importance of inviting students into the process in terms of focusing on successful outcomes, recognizing the timing is not always ideal or easy to gauge. “I haven’t really known at what point I should take a student, call a student who I know is struggling … to call them in and say you know ‘Is there some way I can help you?’” (C.1)

Relationships and connections with faculty facilitate engagement when trust is established. One faculty notes how trust needs to be both for the faculty team and for the individual. Faculty who truly listen and can keep confidences were described as essential components by one teacher.
Part of what helps is the relationship, making the personal connection. … I think trust is a major factor ... trusting that they are speaking to us as a group and feeling I am being heard. And when they speak to us individually that it, we are not using that for anything other than what it was intended for. (A.1)

The quality of relationships varies from student to student. One faculty admits everyone does not like everyone else; some connections are more tenuous than others. The following faculty member stresses the need for acceptance and response for each student regardless of the individual relationship.

You are not going to have a relationship with every student.... You know there are some students you really connect with and some that you actually don’t like very much. I mean I have students that I actually dislike um, but I still have to be open enough to these students to be available. When they need you, you have to be able to respond. (B.2)

Heightened levels of frustration indicate engagement. One faculty sees giving students a forum for complaints as a facilitator of engagement in their learning experience. The faculty member, however, was not certain if the student would regard it as such. “If they are finding a class particularly heinous we hear about it, which is kind of cool because that means they are engaged, they just don’t like it. Passion has been triggered” (D.1).

Strategies designed to facilitate engagement can have unforeseen outcomes. In one example intentions to recognize student efforts and accomplishments actually resulted in added tension and competition among them. One faculty member shared their surprise at an unexpected result.

They are very competitive with each other in the way that we are not used to. … The people that went to the Honours’ breakfast were sort of teased about it, sort of like a teacher’s pet thing as opposed to saying ‘Isn’t that great’, ‘That’s fabulous and congratulations’. (B.3)

Varied needs and preferences within a given classroom cohort provide challenges. One such example shared referred to varying levels of formality that students want in their classroom
experience. One faculty member disclosed feeling caught between opposite preferences in trying to engage all students.

I think they mostly like a sense of personability although a small subsection likes formality. So it is a bit hard. There are certain cultures in there that don’t like that personability whereas the others do. (B.3)

Faculty agree that students need to feel respected and treated as individuals. Here one speaks about the importance of modeling and caring. “This is a human job and they need to know that I am not at the front just reading something to them” (A.1).

A positive classroom tone and feelings of safety facilitate engagement and are the responsibility of the faculty member. Concerns included behaviours that interfered with learning. Snide comments, interruptions, judgemental gestures and side conversations were among the examples that faculty indicated were not acceptable. When these occur one faculty labelled the need for direct intervention. “When a student is disruptive I will say ‘No, please stop’ and if not then ‘Please leave’.” (B.3)

In summary, faculty labelled facilitators that addressed both content and process in the classroom. Among the examples of facilitators of student engagement shared were: specific strategies; the need to vary the strategies used; currency and relevancy of information; a comfortable and safe psychological environment; teacher passion; forming connections; and the solicitation of feedback. The next section summarizes student descriptions of facilitators.

**Facilitators from a Student Perspective**

Students spoke openly about elements of engagement contained in relationships and processes, including both more surface-level factors and deeper levels of connections. They described a commitment to the course materials, strategies used that support engagement with learning and then quickly moved on to the relationship qualities critical for their engagement.
Student goals and learning about their chosen field of study are at the root of engagement. One spoke about both current and future relevancy.

Courses which hold my interest is something that I think of. I think that dedication affects engagement, to like graduate and become a really good professional. So it’s all about the work skills and the learning and the process. (d.1.5)

The relevancy and applicability of the information influences engagement. One student shared how course calendar descriptions helped to direct program selection. “These courses are ones that it looks like I’ll be able to be interested enough to want to learn them as well as thinking they are actually useful.” (b.2.1) The tone of the classroom also impacts engagement. One student talked about needing to feel comfortable in the setting. “I think it’s also the tone, the tone and the setting and how the environment feels.” (d.1.3)

Strategies that allow for student input and learning were described as facilitating engagement. Specifically, comments included examples of questioning to stimulate critical thinking and use of reflective practice as meeting a range of student preferences. One student described the use of well-crafted questions as engaging as they probe for deeper thought. “You know questions, but like questions that make you think. Like some teachers ask questions and I don’t even know why they ask the questions. I like questions that have no right or wrong answer” (a.1.1).

In addition to the strategies, feedback is important. Students who share look for an encouraging response from the teacher to remain engaged. Even if incomplete some form of feedback was sought. One described the feedback as essential in their learning.

Discussions because I benefit really well from having someone throw a question at me and have me try to kind of throw my own ideas up there and if they are wrong have them corrected or like ‘Well that’s a good start, maybe you can build on your answer’. (d.1.5)
Teachers who invite student participation in their own learning facilitate engagement. Teaching to various learning styles, invitations to participate and share ideas, and being presented with challenges in learning were examples given. One student identified variety as necessary.

It’s really good like with learning and different types of learning strategies that they will do different things like the PowerPoint and the readings and the class discussions and like hands on stuff and in the field work. They kind of touch on all of them, so if you can’t get something from one thing you can get it from another. (b.2.1)

Students agree with faculty that attendance is important. The in-class process was identified as adding to the richness of the learning experience. One student refers to another level of learning that comes from being in class and being exposed to the content and process.

I don’t think you can get everything out of just a textbook. I think part of the learning is from the experiences our professors have and the experiences the other students have and hearing about it helps learn about it. (b.3.3)

Students describe faculty as engaging when they bring materials to life. Students determine this through faculty sharing personal experiences, expanding on the materials and facilitating an emotional connection with the content. One student describes the importance of anecdotes and life stories. “When they tell their own personal experiences and also when they add in more than what is on the PowerPoint” (a.1.1).

Pace and variety of strategies used are key facilitators for an engaging learning environment. This is seen as a challenge given the diversity within cohorts. The following student supports the faculty notion that lessons need to fit the given needs in the class and not be a ‘canned’ presentation.

It takes a while for teachers to get a sense of what their students, what their learning pattern is and how they, what they connect with more ... It’s a good thing to kind of mix it up in terms of those learning preferences. (b.2.3)
Faculty expertise and effort to meet varied learning styles were mentioned by every student participant. Relevancy and shared life experience while offering content in varied ways were deemed important.

It is understandable, they are making it applicable, they got the connections, and they’ve got the experience. Also I think the learning style because some people prefer to sit in a lecture, some people prefer to sit and watch a video, … so they use a wide range … things that basically hit everybody’s needs. (d.1.2)

Personal preferences for teacher presentation style facilitates engagement as much as learning styles and needs. One student describes it as tied to their learning disability.

I am dyslexic so reading a textbook has never been a good idea for me but because of the lectures and me being able to ask thousands of questions I tend to ask, I can have that reinforcement. And the thing that has helped me is how patient they are and they don’t make me feel guilty for asking a lot of questions. (b.2.1)

Many see engagement as a shared responsibility between the student and the faculty member, although some students identified the teacher as key in keeping their interest and facilitating the motivation for attending class. The message from one student was that they were engaged if more focused on the content than the clock. “If the teacher captures your attention, if you are not bored or waiting for the class to end … Interaction I guess, it’s nice to feel comfortable enough to interact with the teacher and ask questions” (a.1.1).

Some students want to be entertained and see the teacher providing the motivation or stimulus for engagement. One student describes it as the teacher capturing and maintaining student interest. “Engagement, something to get our interest I suppose. Something to keep us um, kind of passionate and involved” (b.2.1).

Faculty need to accommodate various learning styles and take the pulse of the group. One talks about faculty needing to shift in response to the emotional tone. One spoke of the teacher needing to look for indicators of disengagement and then change gears.
They are very aware of people needing different things to keep people interested. And they try to keep a wide range of ... learning styles and topics in general. You know they can tell when the class is kind of starting to droop. (b.2.1)

Students empathise with the complex faculty role, seeing a lot to their job and only so much time to work with. One student gave a sense of settling for less than the ideal when asked about facilitators. “But I think what they are doing now ... there’s not too much more they can do with the time constrictions” (b.2.3).

Students want value in their college learning experience. One believes a smaller campus and more personal in-class experiences provide that. “I want my monies worth. I have a feeling like if I was in a big university with a lot of people that would be more of a problem” (a.1.1).

Work experience brings credibility to the faculty member. In one example the skilful sharing of anecdotal stories left the student feeling the content did not have to be formally ‘taught’.

What I really love especially about one of my classes is that the teacher has so much experience. And so many stories that are so relevant to the class that she doesn’t even need to teach the actual course content because she has got it all in experience. (b.2.2)

Students agreed with faculty that availability and accessibility are critical facilitators of engagement. They were not always convinced the teacher would be there if needed during posted office hours. Students differentiate between a true desire to support them and what they see as more of a false invitation.

The fact that when you need time with them they will give it to you … Usually you get a feeling from the professor whether they really mean it or not. They will all usually give you a number to call if you need whatever but you can tell how genuine they are. (a.1.1)

Personal contact outside of the classroom facilitates confidence, potentially leading to overall engagement. One student tentatively tried to explain the impact it has. “Sometimes I try
to connect with my teachers outside of class just to have a little bit of dialogue... I don’t know what it really does for me when I do that but I feel more confident in that class” (d.1.6).

Online communication and timely responses to email are facilitators. Being able to seek clarity around expectations and assignment requirements are needed at various times of the day. The following student expressed appreciation for faculty who take the time to respond.

I have this one professor I wonder if she just sits by her computer and waits for an email. ... I had such trouble with her project and I kept emailing her 50 questions and I would get 50 responses, within the same day. (b.2.1)

Faculty who embed opportunities for feedback within the classroom are seen to care about the student opinion. Students voiced such an appreciation for open and non-defensive dialogue regarding feedback of the classroom experience that they could share with the teachers. “They are always open for, for criticism and isn’t judgemental … ‘Tell me if you think what I am doing is wrong’. ‘Tell me if I can do something better’” (b.2.1).

Faculty effort to customize a classroom practice gives the message of respect and valuing student input. In the following example a teacher customizes feedback forms to get input as to how to adapt the class to fit student needs.

It means you feel respected. … Some of the teachers will make their own [feedback forms] and by asking for that it again kind of makes you feel valued. Like this person is changing their teaching method to improve your learning experience. (d.1.2)

Surpassing college requirements and personalizing the process are valued by students. One student talks about the impact of following up on the input sought, reinforcing that student voice is important.

It was all anonymous and we handed it in and then we talked about it in class the next day. To me that was a lot more beneficial than handing me a Scantron [a computer answer card] with 20 questions that I don’t really ... it’s not that the Scantron tells you if the teacher is engaging. (d.1.4)
Students feel validated when teachers ask for feedback to improve the learning experience. Those seen as genuinely wanting feedback are respected by their students. With reference to one of her teachers, a student observes that: “He also asks for a lot of feedback. He wants to know what he can do differently and that is something that a lot of teachers don’t do to engage you – because it is helping us help him to get better.” (d.1.6)

Students spoke of wanting meaningful feedback from their faculty. Balanced feedback, shared directly, gives them a clearer sense of what they do well and where the identified areas of growth are. One student spoke of how individual and personal feedback is a facilitator of engagement.

I feel like I am a good student and I am doing well but it is nice to hear from your teachers what your teachers think about you, like your participation, like what you do good and what you do not so good. (d.1.5)

Teacher passion fosters a deeper connection to, and interest in, the content. Many students talked about their passion and enthusiasm being contagious. One talked about faculty enthusiastically delivering first-hand experiences.

The topics and because of how passionate our professors are and how they give their own personal views and experiences ... They are such great teachers and they keep you interested. They make it sound exciting. (b.2.1)

Teacher passion was seen as more influential on student engagement than the structural aspects such as timing and scheduling. One student talked about how the teacher motivates them to attend. “If ‘X’ was teaching, it could be 7:00 in the morning on a Saturday and I’d still want to be there” (d.7). Another echoed how critical style is to their enjoyment of the class.

Today, we only have one class and I love this class because of the way the teacher teaches it and because of the material presented in it. It could be the driest material presented but because of the way the teacher teaches it, it’s amazing. (d.1.2)
Genuine enjoyment of teaching as a profession facilitates student engagement. Students appreciate faculty who care about student lives and the struggles they face. The message was that faculty who believe in them won’t give up. One sums it up as, “You can tell he is really into us” (d.1.5).

Faculty commitment to their role and to the students is determined based on student perception of caring. One notes the most important faculty attribute is caring. “Bottom line is that he cares.” (d.1.2) They present as enthusiastic, motivated and non-judgemental, which results in the students feeling respected.

He wants to teach us. That’s how I feel. He really wants us to understand whatever it is that he is teaching us and he will deliver it to us in whatever different ways that he has to ... He accepts me, he knows I am trying and he looks beyond my grades. (d.1.6)

Faculty effort is connected to engagement. When students decide faculty invest in the process they describe a reciprocal effect. One student commented on the effect of seeing value added, getting more than was possible through simple access to the content.

I show up when I see effort being made and I want to be even more engaged because like when someone is putting that much work into the materials and delivering them in an interesting way or a way that targets your learning style, you see that person making an effort and not just you know reading off of a PowerPoint or a newspaper. (d.1.2)

One way faculty investment is assessed is through evidence of preparation. Students believe they can tell who took the time to tailor class notes and lesson plans. One talks about how variety acts as a facilitator.

The ones you are there for because they are more engaging ... it’s something different every day. It is not the same PowerPoint, it is always something different. So variety is something that ... we need, you need to do more of. (d.1.4)

The teacher, however, is not the only other person that students engage with. Peers are key players with the potential for facilitating engagement. One student shares the impact on learning.
When I notice that a student in our class is always there is always participating, always had good input and all that, I am really attracted to that person and I want to go and talk to them because I think they can teach me something. And if they can teach me something then maybe I can teach them something they don’t know, the circle continues. (b.2.2)

Having friends to work with is a facilitator of engagement. One student described faculty as separating friends when assigning group work and argued why this was the wrong thing to do.

I don’t just choose my friends in groups because they are my friends. I choose them because I know that they are responsible, I have all of their contact information. … It’s comfortable and things will get done, things will get done properly. (b.2.2)

The entire classroom milieu can facilitate shared responsibility, professionalism and genuine caring as critical elements of engagement. A feeling of community was seen as important, described by one student as, “In our class people try to help each other and everyone has to you know reach out to each other in a certain professional, you know caring, empathizing way” (b.1.2).

Students want to be seen as individuals within the classroom experience. Faculty who knowing who the students are students who feel like more than a face in the crowd are significant in terms of how engaged the students describe themselves. In one case a student sarcastically notes that a faculty member consistently called her by another’s name. “Well it’s nice like when they know who you are. There is one teacher that always calls me ‘ X’ always” (a.1.1).

Students want faculty to reach out to them. If the teacher senses any struggle they want the faculty to approach them. Faculty initiation makes the student feel important and facilitates engagement. “And you never know someone could be having a frustration or someone could be having a tough situation or someone could be … a teacher could make a connection and you feel like the teacher cares” (b.1.2).
Teacher initiative was mentioned by many students. A number agreed that any shift in student behaviour patterns should be investigated without assigning cause based on assumptions.

If the student would have issues or if they are just feeling some conflicts within the course or the class I feel that the teacher should kind of notice that. Not to come in and … see these guys are asleep in class and think ‘Oh well, they probably had a rough night’. Just to check up on students just to make sure everyone is kind of, feels good. (d.1.7)

The personal touch communicates caring. Offers of support without overstepping demonstrate caring while respecting boundaries. In the following the student talks about how being noticed and treated with respect is important.

I suffer from severe depression and it is a barrier for me sometimes but I come to school and I notice when some teachers that they will see me and they will see the mood that I am in and X will literally try to like pull me out … that shows me that he notices … And I would like to get more of that from other faculty, the other teachers. (d.1.7)

Students want faculty who care about them. They want faculty who look for and comment on changes in patterns and are interested and aware of the individual in their classroom. When faculty did not take the time to understand or get to know their student they were described as disconnected.

With some teachers you are just another number in their class, just another student. Yeah, they know your name but they don’t know really anything else about you. I feel it needs to be more about me, someone cares about me. (d.1.4)

Respect for individuality fosters engagement. This was raised in reference to wanting a more personally tailored educational experience. One student spoke of wanting choice in shaping their learning path to better match their own preferences and interests.

Allowing the students some choice … rather than giving you a whole menu you are going to go through, is there room for us to look at well, I learn this way or I would like to expand in this way … that’s different. (d.1.3)

Others talked of the importance of voice and recognition in the classroom. They argue that sharing and risking have a positive impact on the individual student, the faculty member and
everyone else in the classroom. Faculty who challenge students and elicit their input communicate faith in their ability. One spoke about the need to feel valued.

I want to feel that my thoughts and opinions and feelings are valuable … I want to feel that, that I have an opinion and I voice my opinion and if a question is asked that I can give an answer to the best of my ability. (b.1.2)

Having voice also builds a sense of a personal relationship with the faculty member so that students feel like more than their role; they are individuals. A good relationship encourages open dialogue and taking risks, pushing students to do more than simply agree with the instructor. One talks about the importance of the relationship on students being able to share.

I think teachers should just basically try to engage and push your students more to find out what they really think... building that foundation of a relationship with them helps them to open up more. (b.1.2)

Students want to be recognized and treated as equals. Such interactions communicate respect, genuine interest and concern. One describes how such a relationship facilitates engagement. “It’s like you feel like you are at the same level almost ... being genuine in general and being honest about what happens and who you are ... but also being on the same level as the students” (d.1.1).

Eliciting opinions and an effort to establish a relationship was mentioned by all students in this study. Faculty need to see and treat students as individuals. One student describes how positive connections make it easier to share.

I think it has a lot to do with the way the teachers relate to the students ... more of a personal level instead of a 'You are the students and I am the professor' … You feel more inclined to share with someone who you feel had more of, who has made an attempt to, have more of a connection with you. (d.1.2)

A clear demonstration of respect and faith in student ability to be successful are key components of engagement. One describes the impact as a reciprocal process that fosters learning. “Students will respect them because we feel respected in their classroom and because
the learning environment is conducive to our learning and that we can, you know, do better in the class” (d.1.2).

The overall comfort level with the faculty member influences opportunities for open dialogue and the sharing of opinions. One student describes how faculty play a critical role in setting the overall tone for setting the psychological climate.

If I feel comfortable speaking in their class and just comfortable with the professor it makes it a lot easier for me to come out and say ‘Well this is what I think’ or to come out and say my options and stuff. If I am not comfortable with the teacher I am less likely to or not as willing to talk about my views and how I think. (b.3.3)

Some students want faculty to reinforce classroom rules to minimize interference in the learning environment. Some spoke of wanting classrooms where the teacher is in control and holds students accountable so that learning does not get interrupted. One student notes how being ‘tough’ helps give some a push and communicates respect for those who do their work.

I have great respect for a teacher that has control over their class. If they are really tough with people who are late, with people who are talking endlessly or don’t do their readings and stuff because personally sometimes that’s what they need is that push, that there are repercussions for their actions. And it also takes a lot out of the experience for the people who do the work ... just to be fair to the people who really try. (b.2.1)

Getting to know students as individuals allows for recognizing shifts in behaviour and the ability to reach out and offer support. One student shares how faculty need to initiate contact about the needs behind the surface behaviour.

And then I think that students who have issues with attendance or I think if they are noticing something, like a behaviour with a student, like it takes a teacher to actually understand and come to them. They should be able to come to them and talk to them. (b.1.2)

Students care about how they are seen by their peers. When ‘negative’ feelings are evoked students report holding back and not always sharing openly. One reported keeping ideas
to them self when angry, preferring to share feedback or confront individuals on a private basis, if at all.

If I say something it is not going to come out at all correct and I am going to cause a lot of crap to like hit the fan, I am just leaving it alone. Like I won’t engage in it, I will just sort of kind of keep it buried. (d.1.4)

When asked what stopped them from airing disagreements in the classroom, the needs of the class as a whole was identified. The following student talks about how they would handle the situation so that opinions were shared but not at the expense of disrupting learning for others.

I just think causing a huge disruption would be bad from my own personal opinion or my own feelings or emotions toward a situation isn’t going to benefit the whole class so I’ll just withdraw … But if someone says something and it is really offensive to me I will approach them but I will approach them outside of class … not disrupt the class. (d.1.4)

When asked if an individual would challenge somebody who disagrees with them, conditions were applied to the response. The following student stressed the desire to put the needs of others first.

At certain times I do. I will pick and choose when to speak because sometimes if something is said and say it’s unnecessary and it provokes a debate that just gets out of hand that wastes the class time then no. I’d rather go up to the teacher and talk to the teacher after class. (d.1.3)

Comments regarding students who are recent immigrants to Canada elicited examples of how they were given assistance. One student described how faculty encourage them.

They are learning English as a second language and everyone is very supportive of them. Like if they are having a presentation they are stumbling the teachers aren’t like [illustrates by tapping finger on the table] they’re like ‘You are doing good, keep going’ so the fact that there is such a huge support for them. (b.2.1)

In summary, students listed a variety of facilitators of engagement, both similar too and different from those of faculty. Included in the examples shared were: relevancy and connections to their chosen field of study; strategies aimed at fostering critical thinking and reflection; teacher credibility; expertise and passion; varied teaching strategies; faculty availability;
opportunities to have voice; share and receive feedback; establish relationships that included respect and value for individuals; peer relationships; and the existence of a safe psychological environment. Next, barriers to engagement were explored.

**Barriers to Student Engagement**

Study participants were asked to describe what they consider to be barriers to student engagement. Their responses again included some similar and some very different perspectives. Themes that were most prominent in the faculty responses included issues of accessibility, organizational elements and external demands that impact on the many roles students fill. Student responses clearly supported these factors while also noting the importance of trust and relationship issues.

**Barriers from a Faculty Perspective**

Limited faculty accessibility, both face-to-face and online or by telephone, was labelled a barrier to engagement. Faculty spoke of not having enough time to devote to student needs. This leaves faculty needing to triage situations, perhaps deferring issues to a later date if added time is needed. The following response communicates a desire to be direct and honest about time limitations to avoid the student feeling unimportant, although they are not giving the time they would like to devote when they want to.

If a student comes to me and says ‘Can I, I really have to talk to you’ and I’ll say, ‘Look you can but I only literally have five minutes’ ... not dismissing them but being honest about what you can and what you can’t do. ’Cause they know if you say ‘Sure’ and then you are running off looking at your watch that feels dismissive and they don’t know why. (B.2)

Changing student roles and responsibilities are seen, at times, to interfere with good intentions. One faculty member shares how students plan to follow through and meet
expectations but often have to deal with conflicting realities of life that interrupt their focus. “We are hearing from them that the intentions were there and then life stepped in” (B.3).

External influences and the multiple role demands are potential barriers to engagement. Students in the classrooms are more than learners; many juggle responsibilities of school with those of family, work and social obligations. One faculty member believes this is not intentional.

When I think of my students who aren’t engaged I just think they are not engaged with me because there are other things interfering. So again it’s behavioural, it’s exhaustion, distraction, ... all those things that mean they are not really present in the room. (D.1)

Competing demands on student time impede student engagement in the classroom. One example speaks to the lack of preparation seen as optimal for engagement.

I think they have multiple, multiple things on their plate that reduces engagement. You know, most of them are working, they are single moms, they’ve got kids ... they’ve got all of those barriers to coming to class prepared to be able to fully participate. (B.1)

Another perceived barrier relates directly to the academic workload. Students carrying a full load take a number of courses a semester, each with rigorous demands that may feel overwhelming to students.

You know we work them like dogs. Do you know they have nine courses in a week and they have assignments and, and you know every instructor is working them hard and they get ‘Read this’ and ‘Here’s a role play on that’ and ‘Here’s a presentation coming out on that’ and we are stimulating the heck out of them ... a lot of them are ‘What?!’ (C.1)

Student timetables are a potential barrier to engagement. One described the expectation to commute to the campus for days they may only have one class. This was seen as interfering with other demands on their time. “I have seen timetables here where the students have a one-hour class on Tuesdays and that is all. I am not sure that fits for the student that works” (A.1).

Faculty shared examples of hearing directly from students that the schedules are not student-friendly. Students complain they are unable to work to meet other responsibilities. One faculty noted the increased significance of this in the current economic climate.
And again I think there is a shift with the economic times and they were talking about resenting having to come in and how the timetables are ... It is costing them work time in terms of their part-time employment and it is interfering with family and they really resent it. ... They resent it, coming in three days a week each for just one class. (B.3)

The physical setting and impact of the facilities on teaching and learning can be barriers. One faculty noted real obstacles were felt in the classroom. The overcrowded space and awkward layout of the rooms were cited as challenges. “Things like class size, the layout of the classes … are issues that need to be dealt with” (A.1).

Faulty equipment is a barrier to engagement. When technology does not function well student engagement suffers due to frustration and lost time. One faculty noted that recurring patterns take a toll.

Something is always going wrong or not working and we are behind as we are waiting for the computer person ... that adversely affects their engagement because they get really quite frustrated. (B.3)

Increasing class sizes limits faculty ability to connect with individual students. Many shared frustration at not being able to get to know the individuals in their classes the way they would like to. One spoke of needing to forgo icebreakers because they could not devote the necessary time given the large numbers.

In my opinion I see one of the continuing barriers, and what may be the biggest barrier, and this is simply my opinion, is the increasing class sizes on a yearly basis. We used to ask the students, the typical icebreaker was to go around the room and tell the classroom who you are and where you come from … but I can’t do that now. (A.1)

Numbers in the classrooms were described as influencing who attends college programs. One faculty spoke to their personal belief that college students want smaller classes and if they do not get them then they are not as engaged. “A lot of our students can’t function in a university environment. They could never go to a lecture hall of 1,000 for Psych 101. They need small classes” (A.1).
Colleges have increased intake numbers over the last few years. Some faculty expressed scepticism regarding these increases, believing that increased numbers would not increase retention rates. One faculty asserted their belief that no more would graduate. “I’ll bet you our attrition rate at Christmas time and by the end of the year will match the rate of increase in our class sizes. I am willing to bet there is a direct correlation” (A.1).

Increased class size and demands on faculty time work at cross purposes with getting to know their students. They feel unable to form connections and relationships that are key factors in engagement. One summarized it as becoming increasingly more difficult every year.

I find it very difficult, much more difficult each year, to connect with every student in the class. And inevitably I am going to miss some people. And with the number of people that we have and the resources that we have I don’t think, that at this point, that it is perceived by the students as being student-driven or student-centered. (A.1)

Faculty identified the inappropriate ‘fit’ between a student and program of study as a barrier. One faculty member talked about registering students that would never be eligible for hiring given specific disabilities that would interfere with the safe performance of a job in their field.

Those are the ones that I generally feel very a) close to and b) bad for because they love the job, they love [the field] but they will not be [employees in the field]. And it’s unfortunate but for those with physical disabilities they just simply will never be [employees in the field]. (A.1)

Another example that spoke to question of fit acknowledged commitment but that standards were not being met. One faculty identified a barrier when a student is motivated but the challenges are seen to be unmoving impediments.

She is so motivated, verbally, I mean to tell me how motivated she is and how interested and how she really tries and she really works … but, she can’t do it. I feel awful for her because she, she’s got to be counselled into a place where she can succeed. (B.2)
Student ability is a growing challenge in the classroom, impacting on teaching methodology and need for additional supports to be put in place. This was seen as a barrier for some as one faculty suggested this was becoming much more prevalent in the classroom. “I have a lot of students with learning disabilities or learning problems and that sort of thing. Probably as much as 25% this year” (C.1).

Numerous policy and procedural changes, including increased enrolment numbers, a changing applicant pool and shifting acceptance requirements impact engagement. In one case entry level cut-off scores from high school were lowered and the faculty were aghast at the student output. In this case the faculty member questioned how the student could hope to succeed or feel engaged when the basic literacy skills were deficient. One summarized it with, “I have never seen such atrocious writing in my entire life” (B.3).

Faculty feel responsible for the tone of the classroom and setting a safe environment; one in which dissenting opinions are welcome and individuals feel comfortable taking risks in asking questions and sharing opinions. When they miss key exchanges the overall tone of the class may never feel safe again. One faculty reflects on the potential for this and not knowing how to re-engage students.

And if you don’t manage it ... and I don’t know how to get around it because I don’t hear and I don’t see everything ... There are things that are said or there is a nuance that you don’t catch that makes for an unsafe learning environment and if I miss that teachable moment then I don’t know how you fully recover from that quite frankly. (B.3)

The sex of the faculty was noted as a potential barrier. Here one faculty member reflects on the heavy predominance of women faculty and questions how this could impact the male teachers and students, wondering if a reluctance to challenge a dominant sex could impede engagement through silencing the minority. “The culture of our classrooms is kind of feminized because we are a bunch of women teaching a bunch of women most often” (D.1).
Language struggles may be barriers to engagement in the learning process. Faculty recognize the challenge some may face when not understanding the materials being taught. “And then again sometimes it’s hard to get engaged if you can’t understand the language or materials” (B.1).

When this was coupled with rising class sizes, faculty expressed concerns for the learners. One faculty labelled the layers of understanding that may result in disengagement for students.

It’s a language within a language and they are struggling to learn the official language. In my experience in particular over the last three or four years I have seen a dramatic increase in other cultures in the program, which is outstanding … Their understanding of [the field] is vastly different. (A.1)

Honouring various learning styles and preferences with a class grouping is important to faculty as facilitators; yet it can also become a barrier for some. The wide range of ability to grasp concepts impacts engagement. One faculty describes how either not enough review or repeating the concepts too often will act as a barrier for some.

Having to pitch the same concept many times in different ways drives some of the students around the bend and yet satisfies, from the feedback I get, satisfies the bulk of the students. And then I get the other end of the continuum who don’t think it is enough. (B.3)

Few responses elicited barriers that spoke to instructional methodologies as barriers despite being such a focus when asked about facilitators. One comment did raise the need to continuously reflect on how delivery can get in the way of engagement.

Some of the barriers are that I might not have enough switch offs into an activity, like in a PowerPoint … It’s like I may leave them to hang out there a little bit too much, you know it’s just too much or my material is not sufficiently well organized to, it’s not that I don’t get to the point but it dances all around the point. (C.1)
Group dynamics and image within the cohort carry enormous weight. While a group can be extremely cohesive and inviting, it may also evolve to one that is rejecting and cliqueish. Overall, faculty felt that comfort was needed to facilitate learning.

If they feel connected to even a few people in class they are better. If they have become the scapegoat or they are not a strong student or they are struggling with group work or they feel bullied ... if they don’t feel comfortable in their learning environment then how are they going to engage in learning? (D.1)

Limited attendance is a barrier when viewed from the richness of the process in a classroom. Students were seen as missing key learning opportunities if they did not attend class.

I’ll tell you one thing to me that is wonderful about attendance … is the actual experience of diversity. That your classroom is sort of like your lab, right. That means they are right there and get to think out loud and have people given them feedback. (D.1)

Faculty agreed lateness could be a barrier to engagement from the perspective of how it is handled. One acknowledged there could be some emotional response; it was not reacting to the lateness but to the manner of entry into the classroom. The challenge here was presented as how to confront behaviour in a manner that does not close off communication.

If someone just slips in late that is fine with me … That is way different with the coming in with six in a group and it takes them 10 minutes to get settled and they disrupt our process. I get as bugged as the next person when it seems like arrogance, right, when there is no respect for what’s going on in the room. (D.1)

Policies and procedures were frequently referred to as being in place to support students. However, the priorities of the institution were described as usurping the focus of student engagement. One tried to connect it to a disconnect they see with the purpose of college education.

And the reality of the field isn’t necessarily being taken into consideration at all. Policies and procedures and the institutional goals … are driving things … to the detriment of student engagement frankly. (D.1)
Despite the many barriers perceived, faculty enthusiastically described examples of students who experienced success. This illustrates how faculty intervention may renew a sense of student engagement. Caring about individuals as people was seen as a driving force here. One example shared stated, “And sometimes it’s just the fact that you care about the student and no one ever cared about that student before” (B.1).

Caution was noted in that shifts do not necessarily occur quickly; significant time and patience are often required. Here, again, the relationship needed time to develop:

We have a student who … had some amazingly horrendous times, really awful times … she would do really well and then she would sabotage herself ... X took her under her wing and her whole engagement has just escalated. (B.2)

The anecdotes shared reinforced how students respond to treatment with respect and being treated as an individual. One faculty shared an example of a student on hard times that needed flexibility on due dates. When able to respond, the student was seen to engage despite the presence of incredible obstacles.

I had a kid living out of his car several years ago, trying to make ends meet … as long as they know that they are not simply a number and that this is not a rigid institution ... we understand that life exists outside. (A.1)

In summary, when asked to talk about perceived barriers to engagement, the faculty in this study referred to time demands on both students and faculty as allowing for decreased flexibility in availability. In particular faculty identified multiple barriers as including: complex student roles pulling them in other directions; workloads colleges assign; various policies and procedures such as timetabling and increased class size; the physical challenges of the environment; poor intake fit; the range of learning needs and perceived cognitive abilities of students; language struggles; classroom management; and faculty representativeness. They also
described examples of disengaged students re-engaging in their learning experience. Next, the barriers are described from a student perspective.

**Barriers from a Student Perspective**

There were some unique barriers to engagement identified by students, although many were similar to those shared by faculty. The differences were often in focus or intent. Many were the reverse of those identified as facilitators and others were items that had not been raised previously.

Students agreed with faculty that aspects of the physical environment can serve as barriers to engagement. Poor air circulation, inefficient lighting and rooms either too hot or too cold were deemed to interfere with full engagement in the classroom. “The physical environment can be very influential in terms of the atmosphere within the learning setting” (d.1.3).

One student commented on the lack of a comfortable and recognizable program area that students could feel at home in, indicating the need for warmth and a sense of ownership of space. They shared disappointment in not having an inviting area to label as theirs. “Our building is just a sterile building, just sitting there” (b.2.3).

Role demands of both students and faculty can act as barriers to engagement. Increased demands on students were seen to result in spending less time on campus than previous cohorts. One student spoke of how such demands limit the time students may have to invest outside of the classroom.

They may not have time to stay after ... sometimes I think that like students, their life and where they are may interfere with them from engaging in activities, and engaging then into school and engaging more in college. (b.1.2)

Students did not always feel faculty were empathetic despite the fact that faculty clearly acknowledged the demands the program places on students. In one case a student asserted
that faculty fail to understand the numerous and at times conflicting requirements on their time.

When I am at school I have to worry about placement, I have to worry about class, I have to worry about work, home and … I have to go to seven classes and seven teachers to report to and seven different things of homework to hand in (d.1.6)

The workload was raised by students as a barrier. However, their focus was that there was more stress at certain times of the semester. “When a lot of assignments come due or during exam time trying to stay focused when you know you have a million other things going on and to do by a certain time. It’s really hard” (b.3.3).

Students identified feeling unimportant due to the impact of policies and procedures. One participant voiced it the following way, believing that scheduling does not take student life needs and realities into consideration.

This schedule makes it so difficult for us to … like it’s ridiculous. This year, this semester the scheduling is horrible. Tuesdays we don’t start class until 3:30. Like really I can’t go to work after and I probably couldn’t go to work before and like it just kind of makes you want to not go. There are three days that you are only here for one class! (d.1.2)

Policies and procedures that override individual needs reduce engagement. One gave an example of having to fight for accommodation given a prolonged, documented illness. The student was upset that the person came second to the rules.

They eventually said ‘Okay you can take it again in the summer and you won’t have to pay for it’. … She really had to fight for that which I thought was ridiculous, almost like the rules took precedence over the individual situation. (b.2.2)

Program practices can override individual faculty decision-making, adding extra time and steps that complicate decision-making. In the following scenario the student expressed frustration with added layers of bureaucracy needed to determine if a teacher could accept a late paper. “Another thing that frustrated me last year was with … the teacher let me know and that
because it [an assignment] was late ... she had to go to the weekly meetings and see if it was okay to accept it” (d.1.4).

One student expanded on how practices can violate confidentiality and create the risk of disengagement. They linked having to disclose having the need for accommodation as taking them right back to what it felt like in elementary school.

In grade school ... all the people in special needs had to get up and leave the class in front of everyone to go to a different classroom. I don’t want to do that anymore. You are constantly being reminded that you are kind of broken. (b.2.1)

Monitoring attendance was seen as a barrier if it forced attendance that was not seen as essential. This was particularly true when the curriculum was fully contained in the textbook. Students need to feel there is value added connected to attending class.

I hate that class because I feel like I could go and read the course package and come back and write the exam and pass because really it is common sense. … You get the textbook and you could get a 100% on the exam. (d.1.2)

Rules around classroom deportment elicited frustration when enforced inconsistently or without consideration for individual circumstances. The message was that if the rules are seen as more important than the person or unfair then the rules are actually barriers to engagement. The following also infers that not having input into the rules is concerning.

Some teachers have their own set of rules which can be a little annoying. Like you can’t come to class like if you are late you can’t come in, which I understand they don’t want a disturbance, but like most teachers if you walk in quietly and just sit down they are fine with it. I am usually there on time but I just I don’t think it is fair, that particular rule. You don’t have a chance to explain why you are late until after the class. (a.1.1)

Faculty reactions to lateness have a clear impact on students. A teacher’s perceived wrath was experienced by more than one student entering the class late. This results in students not wanting to communicate their reasons for fear of worsening the teacher’s view of them.
I feel really anxious and like I am bad. You get lots of looks when you come in, like the teacher is mad at me ... it’s not a good feeling. I don’t even want to explain myself because then it is like I am making an excuse you know? (d.1.6)

Student interpretation of such faculty displeasure was based on making assumptions from nonverbal behaviour. None of the students spoke of raising these concerns directly with the faculty member.

Some of the teachers – you can walk in late and sit down and you can just see the look on their faces. And you think, okay, well hopefully she stops looking in this corner or she or stops giving that look that makes me feel uncomfortable like I have done something wrong. (d.1.4)

Students felt that some teachers took student lateness as a personal affront. Many of the students spoke to feeling disengaged when assumptions are made that reflect student disregard for the expectations.

Even like being late, like sometimes you can’t control the traffic and stuff comes up and you are late and … sometimes I think the teachers take it personally and it’s not meant as a personal thing. … It’s not you who I am trying to offend you as the teacher. Like you’ll walk in and they will roll their eyes and you are like ‘Wow, it’s five minutes past time!’ (d.1.2)

Classroom behaviour and the impact on learning can be viewed as a barrier to engagement. In one case a student talked of the strategies used to help stay focused but noted how side chatter or late arrivals are extremely distracting and hard to refocus from. “I might have like slight ADD but I will be paying attention to the teacher and I will lose my attention” (d.1.4).

Students wanted to be treated as individuals but they also wanted consistency in adhering to rules around class deportment. The lack of follow through on established ‘rules’ was seen as a barrier by one student who challenged the rationale of setting a code of behaviour if it was not to be followed.

What are the rules of this classroom? People are leaving their cell phone on and all the people that do it are the same ones saying ‘I don’t want this to happen in our class’ and then they do it. (b.1.2)
Many students gave examples of a negative classroom atmosphere being a barrier of engagement. When not feeling supported, respected and safe, students shut down. “I don’t want to be part of that shouting out group so I just sit back and I just think this is not the way I want to learn” (d.1.7).

Issues of inequity were also identified. Students want to have input and voice and want faculty to ensure everyone has a chance to be included. When the more vocal students control the dialogue for the majority of the class it limits shared input and decreases engagement for their peers.

You could see on the faces of some other people that they probably wanted to say something but these people were just talking and talking and talking and so it was difficult for them to give their two cents. (d.1.3)

Classroom interaction can result in anger and frustration and disengagement. During their interviews, students shared the devastating impact on some of their peers. One noted how specific interactions interfere with the overall learning experience.

Someone has actually come up to me, from our program, and simply disclosed that ‘I am afraid of putting up my hand in class because are other students make fun of me, and make comments, that really put me down, and it’s a barrier to my education’. (d.1.7)

Students want faculty to consider student perspectives. Students hold faculty accountable for the overall safety of the classroom environment but believe they may not be sensitive to all student reactions. If faculty miss or misunderstand the potential impact of a situation, they are still held accountable for it. In this scenario the student spoke of talking to the faculty in a follow-up conversation if they felt the teacher missed something important.

I definitely would talk to the teacher about it because they may not notice it or think it was disrespecting us in the way it has. But if it was something that was really offensive I would go in and present it to the teacher and go like ‘You know you really need to be careful about something like that because if it offended’. (d.1.4)
The power differential and inequity between student and faculty member is a barrier when needs clash. One student reported feeling dismissed and at a disadvantage trying to share concerns to their teacher and feeling heard. She describes making an effort to challenge a faculty member and then feeling patronized or brushed off.

They have more power ... I am really horrible at conflict and sometimes I have an idea and don’t know how to communicate it verbally. ... I say ‘Well, when you do this I feel like this’ and she’ll be like ‘Oh well I was just trying to do this, OK? OK, great we’re good’ and walks away. You try to follow her and she’s like ‘What? I have a class’ or ‘What? I have to get to my next class’ or ‘Would you please wait I have to finish this’ or ‘There are other people waiting to talk to me’. (b.1.2)

Messages indicate that students who view themselves as less important than the faculty will disengage. One reported being empathetic to the faculty and simply wanting the same understanding.

I am busy too but I am still trying to do what I need to get done and it’s just they are basically not helping me do what I have to do. Yeah it’s a lot of work but you have to just do it as well for the student. (b.1.2)

Students labelled barriers related to teaching style in the classroom setting, noting that how the teacher approaches the materials factors in. The following example illustrates how the use of language plays a role in setting the stage for engagement.

Once you get into that really dry mode students just shut down and shut off and don’t even bother. The teacher could say this material is going to be a little ‘intense’ or ‘lengthy’ but don’t use the word ‘dry’. Students will shut down and say this is really boring ... whereas ‘challenging’ carries a bit of a different meaning or weight. (b.2.3)

Adding to this were time constraints and the volume of content. Students expressed empathy for the pressure on teachers to cover the curriculum within stringent timelines. The following student describes her view of the impact of pace and scope on learning.

You’ve got all this material that you have to dump on the students because the curriculum states that you have to and you don’t have enough time to give them this information because you’ve got so much in so little time. (b.2.3)
Engagement connects to grasping the materials covered, feelings of confidence increase when individuals are comfortable with the pace and method of delivery. One student identified how personal comfort with the rate and style of content delivery directly impacts her degree of engagement.

I would say I engage differently based on how much I do absorb ... and whether or not I am working at a pace that’s comfortable for me. I am a very visual learner and so I need more than ... if the teacher is there reading and for some that is how they like to teach the class but sometimes that doesn’t work for me. (d.1.3)

Self-confidence and comfort levels can be barriers as well as facilitators. One student talked of how not grasping content results in self-doubt. If they do not feel they are keeping up with peers, confidence suffers and risking decreases.

It’s frustrating because then you don’t know what’s blocking you from understanding. Your insecurities obviously make you feel less capable … If I am more confident around the people I am with then I am more comfortable to take risks. (d.1.3)

Students disengage when materials covered in class are deemed superfluous. For one student this directly felt like he was wasting valuable time and negative emotions were triggered. “When this is something that could be discussed outside of class we don’t need to do it in class because we still need to get over the lesson. It frustrates me.” (d.1.3) This emotional connection to the classroom connects to the effort invested in learning. Some classes were described as punishing. Another student stated: “We would sit there and be looking out windows and thinking of freedom, it was like you were in jail more than you were in class.” (d.1.4)

Where teacher passion and motivation were earlier identified as facilitators of student engagement, rigidity and distance were seen as barriers. The following exchange denotes a lack of connection that results in students feeling disengaged.

Yeah, some of them... just kind of take your test, mark it and give it back to you, like on your evaluation and there’s just no kind of way of going around it. Like if you ... have a complaint or anything like that and they are just ‘Well this is the way it is’. (d.1.2)
Students spoke of their desire to openly explore alternative patterns of thought or ideas and when faculty are not open to being challenged it shuts students down. One student talked about an example where they were challenged to feel engaged because they were required to agree with the faculty member.

I am thinking of one teacher in particular who is very, has a very, he is very opinionated. … If you give a different opinion than his, actual opinions with proof, he doesn’t like that. Like if you give his opinion he is cool with that … with certain people you can just tell they are dismissing it before they respond you basically go in knowing you have to come out with what he wants you to come out with, instead of making your own opinion. (a.1.1)

The lack of energy and motivation invested in teaching are barriers. Students spoke of making such determinations through observation and interactions with faculty. One student shared insights into seeing a range of such emotions in faculty.

Some people I feel don’t really want to be here as much as like other people … I just don’t know if all of them enjoy teaching as much as others. It’s like they are just moving through the motions. (d.1.5)

Rigidity in terms of process is a barrier. Faculty who present as unwilling to change or consider new options disengage students. One shared frustration when tradition superseded rationale for responses.

A barrier for me is if a teacher is, like if they are set in their ways I think … no flexibility. ‘I don’t care if it doesn’t work for you because that is how we are doing it and that is how we have always done it’ is the message. (d.1.6)

Students want personalized, face-to-face feedback. When not given this opportunity they report being less engaged. Written comments are not sufficient. One student specifically stated a suggestion for improvement.

We would like for our faculty in our program to have meetings with us … one on one, with each student … about their progress to see how they are doing and what they could do better and what their strengths are and stuff like that. … Rarely do I get the chance to speak with them about my progress. (d.1.6)
Feedback for students also brought examples of the need for clarity and supportive criticism. In one example a student concern included questioning the definition of realistic expectations, at times feeling unduly criticized for where they should be in their learning.

Well I did the best I could with what I had and for them to tell me ‘Oh you, you are not good enough’ and all this stuff it’s … well that’s why we are in school and yet they are totally being hypocritical. (d.1.3)

Students in this study stressed individual relationships with each faculty member significantly impacts how students perceive and articulate their own engagement. Examples of times students felt they were treated unfairly or felt uncared for were shared as impacting negatively on their levels of engagement. One student talked about being bounced from one faculty to another instead of the first person taking the time to listen and provide support.

I really want to stress that the relationship between a teacher and a student really impacts on their engagement ... I understand they are busy just like you are, and everyone has different things to do so you have to understand that but for some people it may be a sense of you know not caring. ... I don’t feel it’s as important to her as is to me because you know she is sending me to a, b and c ... instead of dropping it somewhere I can easily have access to it. (b.1.2)

Students believe faculty make unfair assumptions that can negatively impact on the individual students. Such assumptions impeded the level of engagement with that particular faculty.

Like there is one girl who can’t keep eye contact and they are like, they see a girl doodling and they may think that she really doesn’t care but she is probably the one more aware in the class. So they could be more aware, I guess, of people’s habits. (b.2.1)

Students believe faculty perceptions carry strong influence, with small incidents having a long-lasting impact on faculty impressions. Many students spoke about feeling able to share information in the interviews that they could not share directly with their faculty.

I’ve seen some students where they won’t even bother... they see the teacher as completely thinking ‘I don’t like her’ or ‘I don’t like him’. Their relationship with their
teacher is like basically shattered just because of one little incident or one little mistake. ... You have to be very careful what you say. (b.1.2)

Students expressed a clear belief that teacher impression is the bottom line. If a teacher thinks something is true of a student then that is what they believe, despite the student feeling it may be an inaccurate assessment. One expressed futility felt in trying to convince them otherwise.

The teachers I think, even if I say I was paying attention, they have no proof ... If I look like I am zoned out they are going to, they are going to believe what they saw and what they think before looking at if I say I am not, like before believing me. (b.3.3)

Trust factors into levels of engagement. One example revolved around student concerns about faculty talking about them without their knowledge. Questions raised here were in terms of making assumptions when not knowing the student.

‘Oh well that person is not the type to be missing this assignment’. How do they ... where do they get that? What, how do they know one person is the ‘type’? One person said it to me when I missed one, they told me like ‘You are not that kind of person’ and I am like ‘You don’t know me’ ... ‘Like you have not been my teacher before I came into this classroom’. (d.1.7)

Students believe faculty make unfair assumptions about student motivation. These were clearly seen as unfair and examples of bias that were barriers for engagement. One student spoke of how such labelling needs to stop.

I told the teacher but because I have missed a lot of classes she had decided ‘Oh well she never comes to class plus she never does her work so we are not going to give her the grades – she doesn’t deserve it’. While meanwhile I could have been at a funeral and I just wasn’t capable of contacting you, or didn’t have the means to contact you. So I think … the labelling ... should stop. (d.1.4)

A perceived lack of caring is a deterrent to engagement. When students view faculty as there to deliver the content and not attuned to the individual needs they were very critical. One talked about the priorities missing some of their classmates.
Some teachers who are really like just at the front of the classroom and ‘Oh you are disrupting please be quiet’ … Like I said you can put your head down and go to sleep and they are not going to care as long as you are not affecting those who are trying to learn. (d.1.4)

Lack of access is a barrier also felt by students. Lack of access blocks connections. One student voiced their frustration in even trying to get a question answered.

It’s hard sometimes obviously as their schedule and your schedule may be different ... I think that trying to reach them is the hardest thing. So contacting them is basically frustrating, especially if you have like open question that you want answered right then and there. (b.1.2)

Students feel expectations from their peers as well as the faculty. Assumptions they make about themselves in relation to peer expectations can also limit engagement. One labels the stress this puts them under.

I feel that when I do say something that it has to have some sort of substance and it has to be significant and it has to be right so ...yeah that usually impedes on my level of engagement in the class. (d.1.3)

Demographic factors were also raised by students as barriers to engagement. Evidence of systemic discrimination and feelings of marginalization were mentioned. Students see faculty oblivious to some of the group undertones and conflict among the students.

I think the teachers are very, ... I think they hope, in their minds, that people engage with each other on a non-judgemental, non-exclusionary level. I think they really have that hope but the students know different. (b.2.3)

Racial tension is a barrier that is difficult to address as it often is hidden. The following student talks about students knowing this but that faculty are unaware. In this example one student shares feeling shunned by members of another racial group. While in class this student believes that there is an air of acceptance presented but that such acceptance is not genuine. One referred to subversive actions such as eye rolling or ignoring input during group work as
indicators of tension that faculty do not see. “Myself and several students have experienced … a lot of racial tension. Like it is not overt, like the teachers don’t really see it” (b.2.3).

The sense of the majority of opinion can limit engagement. One shared how difficult it was to go against the opinion of the majority, preferring a state of anonymity instead. “Maybe not a lot of people are not … going to bring up their opinions or … go against the flow of everyone else because they don’t want to stand out” (d.1.4).

Students feel being put on the spot is not something faculty see as a barrier. One gave an example where sex was noted as a factor. In this example the student believed that faculty may see their efforts aimed at being inclusive whereas, in fact, they may be increasing the awkwardness and decreasing student engagement.

[The message is] You’re a male in this class and you are going to talk and I think that makes them want to hide out even more, because they are being singled out. So, while we think we are drawing them in we are also putting incredible pressure on them. (d.1.3)

Barriers to engagement can arise when students are so uncomfortable they choose to avoid further contact. One example reveals a student’s discomfort after being asked to speak on behalf of the male sex to be so strong he did not return to class after a break. While he was not able to label the situation directly with the faculty member he did communicate it to a peer.

At the break he was just like ‘I am going back upstairs.’ He said ‘I don’t feel like going back downstairs for the discussion’ and I said ‘No, because we are going to want a male’s opinion’ and he’s like ‘I don’t want to give it to them’. He was just feeling really sort of cornered. (b.2.1)

Student sub-groups or cliques were labelled as a barrier. In the following example there was also a sense of futility communicated regarding what to do with the resulting dynamics.

I do, sometimes I do feel students are definitely, they definitely group up. There is definitely a lot of groups in our program which I didn’t actually expect. ‘This is my group and we are going to battle with your group’. Sometimes I feel like that and that is just... I think that is just very wrong … I don’t know how to change that. (d.1.7)
Students also see being separated from their friends to be a barrier to engagement. They spoke of strategic separation being used by faculty to reduce the cliques and groups. While students agree cliques can be a problem they do not see this in terms of their own group.

Being separated from friends … I have no classes with any of them and it kind of makes me sad. I don’t see why we are being treated almost as if we are in high school again ... or even kindergarten. And they [teachers] have the power and it’s to their advantage and they are going to use it because they can and you know, what can I do? I can just wait for next semester, cross my fingers and wait until I see a familiar face. (b.2.2)

Students see ineffective communication as a barrier. Language is the instrument of instruction and all forms of communication are important. Students spoke of examples where faculty did not devote the time required to ensure clarity and accuracy of interpretation needed.

I think that they sometimes shut down students in a way that they don’t realize, they don’t realize it. You take what you want and you are imposing, you know... listening, pseudo-listening. You take what you want and put it into your own words and that might not be what they were trying to say at all. (b.1.2)

The pressure to move on interferes with the ability to listen effectively. At times the pressure to cover the content is deemed to interfere with accurate understanding and reflection for the learner. One student shared how they felt when their contributions were misunderstood.

I would answer something and they would change what I had said into their own words and I would be like ‘Yeah’ and then when I thought about it I would say ‘Hey that’s not what I was trying to say’. But it’s a little too late. … The teacher is trying to hurry along and … didn’t really try to understand where I was coming from. (b.1.2)

Balance is a consideration when determining if something is a facilitator or barrier to engagement. One student remarked on wanting to be challenged but not to be pushed to the point of embarrassment. “Challenges but not being singled out challenges. There is one professor who kind of picks on you for the rest of the class” (b.2.1).

Group work often resulted in barriers to engagement. It is a strategy that students talked about needing to be implemented or utilized effectively to be engaging. Many students indicated
a great deal of frustration with their experiences working with others. One student acknowledged their difficulty confronting conflicting opinions as having a negative impact on their comfort and their overall sense of engagement.

If you don’t feel comfortable, if you don’t feel like you belong or you don’t feel a certain way then you are not going to want to have these relationships or talk in certain ways or talk to people about certain things. It’s going to be harder for you. (b.1.2)

A number of students identified group work as a barrier. Many of the comments addressed concerns about the lack of process. Here one student reflects on the difference between faculty ideals aimed for and the reality of the experience.

A lot of people really have a hard time with it [group work] because as much as they say it is about group process … a lot of these groups don’t really learn about group process because it’s not group process. … I don’t think everybody is really getting it, that everybody is really benefiting in the way they are supposed to benefit. (d.1.3)

The lack of fairness and generalizations made were clearly identified as barriers. Here one example was to the inequities that occur.

Group work is really hard because you have to come to an agreement, like everybody had to come to the agreement and … there are some people who are really strongly opinionated about certain things. ... So like if you were to work on an assignment and you did fairly badly you have yourself to blame for that whereas in a group you work your butt off and you get a ‘C’, everybody gets the same grade ‘cause it was a ‘group’. (d.1.3)

Students harbour negative feelings about such events, further impacting communication and feelings of comfort in that classroom. When they take concerns to faculty about the inequities they sense little active intervention to support them. One reported feeling a lasting effect from this perceived lack of support.

There are negative feelings and you don’t necessarily want to get involved with that faculty member in their class. (d.1.3)

Overall, students in this study labelled many similar barriers to those identified by their faculty. Among the barriers mentioned were: influences from the physical environment; multiple
demands and responsibilities carried; the rigidity of policies and procedures; and the psychological environment of the classroom. Examples that varied from faculty included: having assumptions made about them; teacher investment in their role; relationships established between students and their faculty; power differential experienced; issues of social justice; communication; group work; and peers.

**Conclusion**

Both students and faculty identified a number of specific facilitators and barriers regarding student engagement. There were both clear similarities and differences in the perspectives shared.

When reviewing facilitators of engagement there were many examples held in common by both groups. Use of various teaching strategies, relevancy of materials, classroom tone, regular and personal feedback, active solicitation of student voice, genuine care and concern, and a commitment to the role of teacher were seen as enhancing engagement by both groups. Faculty also noted the importance of respect for the students and the need to acknowledge their individuality. Students agreed strongly with this position but did not feel there was adequate access to or contact with faculty.

Both groups also labelled some similar constraints to student engagement. The most notable commonality was in relation to the physical and organizational aspects. The lack of space, cramped timetables, short semesters and heavy workloads were mentioned by both groups. Students did not always communicate they felt the support that faculty expressed in terms of the numerous responsibilities students carry outside of school and the competing demands they are balancing. Areas students stressed more than faculty reflected the student
desire to be seen as an individual. They identified needing more proactive communication, and faculty who care about and make time for them, and understand and promote equity.

Chapter VII presents a discussion of the findings of this study. Included are themes that emerge regarding the impact of various demographic factors, structural challenges experienced, and the paramount importance of teacher passion and commitment to their role as it impacts student engagement.
Chapter VII: Discussion

This chapter focuses on the major findings of the study. Participants revealed understandings and perspectives of student engagement that carry both similar and unique perspectives, among and between, faculty and students. The areas of focus in this chapter include demographic influences, teacher commitment and passion for their role, and relationships between and among the groups, including student voice, trust and respect.

**Impact of Demographic Factors on Student Engagement**

Changing student demographics are influencing the postsecondary experience. “As increasing numbers of diverse learners enter higher education in the coming decades, a more comprehensive conceptualization of student engagement as “engaged learning” will enhance higher education’s ability to facilitate the learning process of all students” (Schreiner & Louis, 2008, p. 19). This requires understanding who our students are.

Educators are competing with other forces in the student’s life for a share of that finite time and energy ... that the student invests in family, friends, job, and other outside activities represent a reduction in the time and energy the student has to devote to educational development. (Astin, 1984, p. 523)

Demographics explored in this study included gender, language, culture, race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, ability and sexual orientation. Following is an overview of the main findings in each of these areas.

**Gender/Sex**

The impact of gender itself on student engagement is difficult to assess. In part this is due, according to Price (2006), to the challenge of “separating the effects of gender from the effects of other societal factors ... there are a considerable number of differences in the background and status of men and women” (p. 349). A further complication was due to the study participants focusing their comments on the aspect of male and female designation rather than
gender. What was apparent in a number of the participant comments were examples of assigning stereotypic views of male and female contributions. Both faculty and student participants shared beliefs that male and female students differ in how they communicate and what they communicate about. Both student and faculty participants made reference to female students as more nurturing and sensitive and males as more pragmatic and to the point.

Other studies have explored these and other gender differences. In a study on the relationship between gender and college student engagement Kinzie, Gonyea, Kuh, Umbach, Blaich and Korkmaz (2007) found that there was a difference between the sexes in terms of participation in educationally purposeful activities. Overall, males were found to dedicate less time to studying and investing effort to meet expectations. The authors also found males to participate less during collaborative learning exercises and activities. Kinzie et al. (2007) present conflicting studies regarding participation in classroom discussions; some report more frequent contribution by females and others argue males participate more. The vast majority of students in all but one of the classrooms observed in this study were female. Thus, while the females were heard from more often than their male counterparts it may simply have been due to the increased number of females present.

Questions regarding gender elicited student empathy for males as the least represented group in this study. Comments identified connecting with them with added sensitivity. Students agreed that faculty efforts to draw out the underrepresented group had the reverse effect from what was desired; drawing attention to the ‘male point of view’ actually left the males less willing to voice opinions and take risks in sharing perspectives.

Kinzie et al. (2007), citing the work of Astin (1993), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991; 2005) and Smart, Feldman and Ethington (2000), argue that “frequent, meaningful interactions
between students and faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, are important to learning and personal development, and a host of gains including academic skill development, social self-confidence, academic and social integration, and leadership” (p. 7). However, research on gender differences in relation to the value of student-faculty interaction presents varied outcomes. Kinzie et al. (2007) present varied findings referencing a study by Kuh and Hu (2001) that finds no meaningful difference found between the genders and one by Sax, Bryant and Harper (2005) that found females interact more frequently and positively with faculty than do males. Every student participant in this study, regardless of sex, indicated that the relationship they have with their faculty member is directly connected to their level of engagement.

It is also critical to note that the majority of faculty participants were female and may themselves have been influenced by “organizational cultures that shape and reinforce socially appropriate roles for men and women” (Lester, 2008, p. 1). “Lester (2008) indicates that the roles of female faculty members include: nurturing, caretaking, and a focus on the emotional health of students and colleagues (Blackwell, 1996; Boice, 1993; Dallimore et al.; (2003), Stien (1994), Tierney and Bensimon (1996), as cited in Lester (2008). In fact, one faculty comment made direct reference to the impact of the majority of the faculty being female. Such influences may in turn shape how they view similarities or differences between male and female students.

While students agreed sex was a factor influencing student engagement, faculty appeared less comfortable admitting any difference, at least in terms of how they treat the students. This may, in part, be due to faculty wanting to be seen as unbiased. Faculty who articulate differences in student engagement between male and female students may fear being accused of stereotyping. Despite minimizing any differences noted some of these faculty interacted differently with the male and the female students, as in the observed effort to solicit the ‘male
perspective’ although the ‘female perspective’ was not directly sought. It may also be true that acknowledging and addressing differences between the sexes in terms of engagement may feel like added work for faculty who already feel they carry a heavy and complex workload.

Whatever the underlying influences, ignoring the impact of sex or gender differences on student engagement may limit opportunities to facilitate it and actually promote disengagement.

In summary, examination of gender is a challenging area as it is difficult to tease out as an entity separate from a number of the other demographics explored. The next demographic explored was language.

**Language**

An increasing number of international students and English as second language students are enrolled in postsecondary education (Cheng & Fox, 2008). Cheng and Fox (2008) reference numerous studies that explore influences affecting how these students learn and the impact of faculty and student perceptions that affect their learning. They described empathy for those at a ‘disadvantage’, seeing them as hesitant or resistant to participate or challenge due to limited mastery of English. These authors report “a relationship between self-perceived language proficiency and group participation” (Cheng & Fox, p. 317). The student participants in this study had similar concerns supporting that finding. These students identified struggles for non-English speaking students in understanding concepts and clarity of verbal expression. This was noted to be an added challenge when learning terms and phrases that may be specific to a particular discipline. Stefani (2008) agrees, stating that: “Language as used within different disciplines may initially be alien to some of our students depending on their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds” (p. 2).

Students need practice at participating both vicariously, as listeners and readers, and generatively, as speakers and writers, so that they can develop identities as members of
the knowledge community and move from peripheral forums to more active, competent engagement with the community’s central debates. Since knowledge communities always encompass a wide range of members participating at different levels, students from diverse backgrounds and levels of experience can very effectively participate alongside each other, provided that the educational programme is designed and the teaching delivered with this in view. (Northedge, 2003, p. 31)

Teaching methodology and assessment practices can create frustrations for students and faculty. Ryan (2000) argues that international students may lack the ability to articulate a strong argument on paper or the language skills and self-confidence required for verbal presentations. Both groups shared examples of how second-language students present as anxious and concerned about how others view them, talking about a fear of making mistakes or feeling reticent about seeking needed clarification as it may hold others back. In fact, speaking about international students Ryan (2000) finds that they “will often not dare to ask for clarification” (p. 43). While faculty in this study related to these findings they also shared examples of students who excel despite the perceived ‘language barrier’, actively persisting until they grasp the material. Ryan (2000) further argues students may “feel disadvantaged by the methods used, and by their lack of background knowledge” (p. 43). The author also states that “teachers are concerned about maintaining standards and about practical implications, such as the amount of energy involved in doing things differently for international students” (Ryan, 2000, p. 43). Faculty in this study spoke about the challenge of ensuring everyone comprehends the concepts covered and the extra time and energy required.

Students in this study also noted peers form groups around similarities, like language, to gain emotional comfort and support. This confirms Cheng and Fox’s (2008) finding that “many students relied heavily on their compatriots for support” (p. 320). Ironically, students gaining emotional support and added comfort working with those from similar language backgrounds were sometimes deliberately split by faculty who labelled the formation of ‘cliques’ or
homogeneous groups a concern. The vast majority of faculty in this study were English-only speakers and they may rationalize such efforts arguing their need to understand what is being discussed in classroom work. The inherent irony is that while students seek language sameness for added comfort faculty may break them up for their own comfort.

Some students in this study articulated their struggles in attempting to disagree with faculty members. They shared a belief that they could not articulate their position clearly enough and admitted to agreeing to faculty interpretations even when the students thought that those interpretations were erroneous. Faculty did not refer to any difficulties with students being able to challenge views expressed on a level any deeper than articulation. In fact, many faculty involved spoke with pride about how inviting they are of dissenting points of view. Students identified issues of self-confidence in language and feeling pressures of limited time as the underlying causes for their hesitancy. Despite faculty stating they allow students with English as a second language extra time to formulate their thoughts clearly some students did not feel this was adequate.

In summary, faculty spoke of fluency in English as influencing levels of student engagement in terms of observed classroom behaviour. It is critical to remember, however, that “Vicarious participation should not be equated with passivity. Reading a journal article ... can be a very demanding activity” (Northedge, 2003, p. 20). Students in this study spoke to not only active participation but the affective and cognitive impact of language on meaningful engagement as well. Some felt that if allowed to converse in their mother tongue they may gain added confidence and understanding. Not being given the chance to do so may contribute to disengagement.
Overall, students in this study with English speaking backgrounds expressed empathy for their English as a second language peers and praised faculty encouragement and patience. Both English as a first language students and faculty seemed oblivious to the challenges other than the need to allow added time for self-expression. In addition, faculty comments focused on concern for satisfactory performance in the workplace, making the assumption that communication in the workplace will be in English. If English as a second language students are not encouraged to discuss, analyze and critique ideas in their mother tongue deeper levels of engagement may be sacrificed.

**Culture, Race and Ethnicity**

Marshall (2002), as cited in Guo and Jamal (2007), asserts cultural diversity is defined as “distinctions in the lived experiences, and the related perceptions of and reactions to these experiences that serve to differentiate collective populations from one another” (p. 7). The author also states,

> Although cultural groups share commonalities in perspectives, behaviours and ways of being in the world, they are rarely homogenous. Within each cultural group, there are differences that affect the way individual members in the group relate to one another and to the group as a whole. (Marshall (2002) as cited in Guo and Jamal, 2007, p. 13)

Faculty clearly value diversity in the classroom; however, the focus tends to be on how to help students acculturate to the North American way of thinking as the ‘right’ way. “Responding to a diverse student population requires educators to transform the curriculum to include multiple ways of knowing, centering previously marginalized knowledge” (Guo & Jamal, 2007, p. 15). Comments heard and strategies shared reveal the need to be sensitive and respectful; there was little data in the study to indicate that instructors were incorporating culture, race and ethnicity in ways other than sharing experiences and knowledge. Adams (1993), as cited in Guo and Jamal (2007), asserts,
Culture plays a part in shaping the ways in which students learn and communicate, how they relate to other students and instructors, their motivation levels, and their sense of what is worth learning. The degree to which students feel comfortable in the learning environment will depend on the congruence between their cultural background and the dominant culture of the educational institution. It is important, therefore, that educators become aware of the ways in which the traditional classroom culture excludes or constrains learning for some students and learn how to create classroom environments that acknowledge the cultural diversity that new students bring. (p. 13)

Assessment of student work also requires sensitivity to student backgrounds and understandings. “International students may have been previously rewarded for academic performance which drew heavily on the work of others. In some cultures this is regarded as a compliment to those whose work they copy” (Ryan, 2000, p. 54). One faculty shared an example of how those educated outside of Canada may have these different norms they follow and how in this setting the same behaviour could result in anything from a marking penalty to a formal reprimand around cheating and plagiarism.

Guo and Jamal (2007) argue that seeing people without considering their cultural, racial or ethnic background “negates the histories, backgrounds, and experiences of diverse cultural groups, and ignores the ways in which these affect their experiences in the learning environment” (p. 14). They argue that “educators must be colour sensitive to affirm and validate difference rather than minimize it, striving to gain a fuller understanding of their students” (Guo & Jamal, 2007, p. 14).

Efforts to implement diversity initiatives within educational institutions are often met with avoidance of the issue, or denial of the necessity for responding to diversity. The ‘colourblind perspective’ sees cultural, racial, and ethnic background as irrelevant, and assumes that treating all individuals the same will erase issues of inequity and injustice. (Solomon and Levine-Rasky (2003), as cited in Guo and Jamal, 2007, p. 14)

Taylor (2000) states that a prime factor contributing to a sense of group ownership was “the need for participants to have the opportunity to share their social, political, and cultural history with each other in relation to the overall objective and in a setting that makes an
intentional effort to be collaborative and democratic” (p. 5). The area of ethnic identification is a complex area with personal values and beliefs, discrimination and prejudice, and religious and personal experience all playing pivotal roles. “Most undergraduates ... have significant interactions with members of different races and ethnicities, and these interactions result in learning about the experiences of different groups” (Jaschik, 2009, p. 1). Study participants spoke of divisions among groups of colour that were uncomfortable and not being addressed. Students spoke of feeling ‘left out’ and some faculty referred to deliberately separating students into more heterogeneous groupings. Students described faculty efforts to treat everyone the same while they wanted to be treated as individuals. Recognizing people as individuals requires attending to culture, race and ethnicity as opposed to ignoring them. Study participants spoke of treading carefully around topics of race and ethnicity but not of directly exploring them. Faculty may be reluctant to pursue such exploration due to the highly personal and potentially conflicting nature of various views. Many faculty are trained in specific disciplines and not in communication, mediation or group process they believe necessary to facilitate a deeper exploration. In addition, the personal background of the faculty in this study did not mirror the diversity of the student profiles; faculty may not be as aware of the impact of culture, race and ethnicity given their own backgrounds. This introduces the need to actively unpack and understand white privilege and the impact on student engagement. Students in this study, both minority and majority groups, acknowledged the impact of culture, race and ethnicity on feelings of comfort and problem resolution. The gap in perspectives between faculty and students is significant. If not addressed, maintaining the status quo is reinforced. In summary, the topics of culture, race and ethnicity were viewed differently by the students and faculty in this study. Faculty spoke of either minimizing focus on differences or
integrating experiences of class members into the content area being discussed. Students spoke of feelings of isolation when in the minority and not knowing how to confront the stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination they experience. This area clearly impacts on student engagement.

**Socio-Economic Status**

Defining socio-economic status involves consideration of numerous factors, including income, wealth, occupation and values. The primary area focused on by the study participants revolved around financial considerations.

Providing and acquiring formal, quality education costs money. This “poses a financial burden for many students and their families. For many students ... this is the first time they will be paying for tuition, books and accommodation (Ministry of Training and Education, 2001, p. 21). The Academia Group’s study (2008) for Colleges Ontario found “half of Ontario college applicants come from households that earn less than $60,000 per year, and one-quarter (25%) from high-income households (more than $90,000)” (p. 4). A review of postsecondary education in Ontario in 2001, entitled *Portals and Pathways*, asserts “Students in Ontario pay among the highest tuition fees compared to students in other Canadian provinces (p. 22). Tuition for the 2005-2006 academic year averaged $1,900 per year for a diploma program (Colleges Ontario, 2008, p. 2). The Canadian Council on Learning (2006) reports the doubling of student debt loans and that growing costs present a barrier for many students. Students and faculty agreed the rising costs of tuition create challenges for many students.

Students in this study both supported and refuted findings from previous research. For example, Hu and Kuh (2001) found no clear correlation between engagement and socio-economic status, although they did report an added number of disengaged students in the below-average socio-economic group (p. 12). Student participants in this study said they work harder if
they were paying for their own education and have little tolerance for those who did not seem as
invested when they were not concerned about money. Research also points to students who work
while in college being “more likely to spend fewer days on campus, to not work with other
students on areas of their course, and to have studied inconsistently through the semester”
(McInnis, 2001, p. 5). These students did not believe their academic work suffered because they
had to work but they acknowledged the demands of work factor into how they need to allocate
their time. They also clearly stated a need to use alternate forms of contact and strategies for
getting their work done, both individually and as group members; they did not feel a need to
physically be present to get things done.

students who work during their studies had increased considerably” (p. 97). CSSE (2009) found
that 21 percent of full-time students work close to full-time jobs (p. 5). While a number of the
student participants expressed a desire that they did not have to work to pay for college, most
saw financial responsibility as bringing added commitment and engagement in the learning
process. They felt better able to assert themselves and demand value for their money. There were
a couple of students who acknowledged their envy of peers who did not have to support
themselves but then quickly refocused on their pride in their ability to manage multiple demands.
Students in this study tended to identify being ‘poor’ as part of the reality of being a student,
bringing a sense of unity to the group.

Faculty interviewed considered the impact of socio-economic stress differently, perhaps
due to being outside of the student financial experience. They cited the costs of college and
economic realities as the reason many students withdraw prematurely. One faculty spoke to
students being pulled out of school because the economic needs of the family were a priority over paying for higher education.

Some faculty empathized with the number of students that work full-time hours while enrolled in full-time programs although they did not mention accommodating these students in any way. Despite professing empathy there was an underlying desire to treat all students the same, adhering to standardized policies and procedures. Faculty communicated examples that spoke to supporting struggling students inside the classroom (with access to materials and resources needed) while leaving them responsible for their own needs outside of the classroom. However, in terms of engagement the views varied. Some faculty agree that energy devoted to employment detracts from engagement in the classroom and others argue it fosters added commitment and engagement.

In summary, while financial considerations are a reality, individual factors such as organizational skills and initiative seemed to be more important for these students than financial income. The faculty involved agreed it was a concern but not one that was theirs to solve, perhaps because it is deemed to be the role of another college department. Students focused on the effort they need to invest and faculty addressed more pragmatic aspects of continued enrolment. Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) argue the changing undergraduate student population and the shrinking financial support for higher education combine to create challenges and opportunities for adapting to the heterogeneity of our learners and our educational processes. What did not surface in these interviews were any ideas regarding solutions for when socio-economic status is deemed a concern. For faculty this may be seen as outside of their role and for students it may be because they seem resigned to being ‘poor’.

Age
Students in this study ranged in age from 19 to 36 years and commented on the fact they are referred to as ‘adult learners’ but did not always feel treated that way.

Colleges and universities ... often assume that they are interacting with youth in transition to adulthood; thus, attitudes and behaviours of administrators, support staff, and faculty, as well as policies and procedures of these institutions, are frequently condescending to adult students and do not take into account adult lifestyles and adult life complexities. (Sissle, Hansman & Kasworm, 2001, p. 20)

Students in this study referred to having higher expectations placed on them than was the case in high school although they still felt they were being treated as younger adolescents. Students shared feeling talked down to and that numerous inaccurate assumptions were made by faculty. Such comments may reflect the notion of deficit mentality. Portelli (2009), citing Cooper (2009), argues deficit thinking “places the blame for student failure squarely on the shoulder of the student and student’s lack of the traits necessary for academic success. This type of thinking leads to policies designed to instill those desirable traits/behaviours in students” (p. 1). Students spoke of the inequities created by policies and procedures that faculty argued were put into place to support fairness. Many students in this study often did not feel respected and expressed frustration when not being given any consideration for responsibilities they carried outside of school, such as family and work.

Stefani (2008) asserts we have many mature students entering into undergraduate and postgraduate studies and we need to capitalize on their experiences “through a curriculum designed to provide authentic learning experiences and authentic assessment of and for learning” (p. 2). Sissle et al. (2001), citing Kasworm (1993), point out: “Adult students are often labelled with special words, such as non-traditional, commuter, or re-entry. These labels define them as other, as marginal, and as needy” (p. 19). The more mature student participants in this study acknowledged insecurities that come with such labels. They felt as if they may have less in
common with the younger students and were anxious about academic requirements given the gap in their studies. They also noted the impact of their age in relation to the group; the older members of the class saw themselves taking on parenting roles or being looked to for added wisdom that is perceived as coming with age. This left some students anxious because they were being looked to for answers that they still needed to learn. Where they did feel confident was in their ability to contribute to discussions given their added life experience.

The area commented on more frequently by faculty in this study was the gap between their age and that of their students. Such patterns revealing “differences between teacher and student generations must be recognized, analyzed, and addressed if faculty in higher education are to meet the needs of students” (Black, 2010, p. 92). One way this was apparent was in the area of technology.

“College students today are proficient in technology and communicate more continually with their parents” (Black, 2010, p. 92). Referred to as ‘digital natives’, many college students of today grew up with computers and digital communication forums that are second nature to them and their ways of learning. “Students today live in an environment in which reading and writing, through digital media as well as traditional texts, are pervasive” (Considine, Horton & Moorman, 2009, p. 471). Student participants noted when faculty were and were not proficient in the use of technology and how this impacted their engagement. Faculty also noted their desire to communicate with students in the forums students were most comfortable. For many faculty the examples were limited to email and PowerPoint rather than social networking sites.

Students spoke of the various ways they felt that age impacts engagement. While these students felt they could all work together, they confessed to prefer to interact with those close to their own age; however, such a determination was often accredited to maturity over strictly age.
In summary, student participants wanted added voice and individualization of curriculum; respectful treatment as adults; and open and direct communication. They clearly want to be seen as individuals and active participants in their education. Faculty focused more on attempting to understand the latest fads or systems that students are drawn to. Ironically, student messages communicated a desire to be viewed as an adult and faculty were trying to gain the ‘youth perspective’.

**Ability**

Colleges Ontario (2008) reports that 11 percent of college students in Ontario report using ‘special needs’ or ‘disability services’. Of the 14 student participants, there were four that self-disclosed diagnosed disabilities. These included two with Attention Deficit Disorder (one also had a specific learning disability in the area of verbal processing), one with dyslexia and another with severe depression. Students and faculty involved in this study agreed the impact of ability on engagement depends on the individual student. According to Willment and Andres (2005), many students with disabilities “perceive themselves as visitors to class as they try to adjust to different classroom environments, people, communication patterns, and styles of teaching and learning” (p. 1). This was not evident in these interview comments. Those students who self-disclosed disabilities did speak to their need to adapt to various teaching strategies and the range of accommodations available. While some acknowledged feeling uncomfortable when not able to retain information or needing to seek added clarification, they did not label themselves as ‘visitors’. In fact, such students were described by themselves and by others as making even more effort than their non-disabled peers to engage and integrate within the classroom.
The vast majority of examples shared by both faculty and students referred to the strength evident in disabled students, especially the more obvious disabilities of sight and manoeuvrability. Both groups acknowledged individual disabilities are not always apparent or known, although when aware of the diagnosis study participants described their efforts to be flexible and supportive of those with challenges in either physical or cognitive areas. While disabled students were seen as included in the classroom, a couple of students questioned genuine comfort and motives of others who interacted with people with recognizable disabilities. On occasion it was suggested that efforts to work with disabled peers may have more to do with the image this gives them with the faculty member than from genuine desire to be inclusive.

Not all disabilities are clearly noticeable. According to Matthews (1994), as cited in Frymier and Wanzer (2003), “Approximately 40% of persons with disabilities possess "invisible disabilities," which are hidden and go unnoticed by the co-interactant except under unusual circumstances or when the individual with the disability discloses the disability” (p. 175). When disabilities were less obvious, as in the case of learning disabilities, students tended to avoid or deny labels. Some student participants denied having a disability when completing the demographic data gathered on participants and then disclosed their diagnosis during the interviews. Such initial denial may confirm that stigma continues to be attached to such labels. Frymier and Wanzer (2003) agree, stating: “Persons with disabilities are often treated differently from persons without disabilities. This differential treatment is often based in the stigma associated with disabilities” (p. 1).

Faculty in this study acknowledged the fact they and their students may or may not have confirmation of an ‘invisible’ diagnosed disability, creating challenges and potential frustrations with learning. Ability does factor in to admission decisions and potential placement
opportunities, leaving some students unable to gain access to their desired employment. However, both students and faculty placed less emphasis on a disability being at the core of engagement and focused on the student’s perception and attitude as being more important.

Sexual Orientation

The impact of sexual orientation on engagement elicited the vaguest answers from both faculty and students interviewed. For faculty it seemed ‘off limits’, with many prepared to leave it at the fact they may never know. Many students felt uncomfortable trusting faculty with such personal information as they were not sure how it may be ‘used’. Students who did disclose were praised by faculty as being able to risk and explore their true selves.

There is an important difference between disclosing one’s sexual orientation and a critical discussion of the topics. When addressing issues of sexual diversity, Lopez and Chism (1993) and Tierney (1992), as cited by Getz and Kirkby (2003), state that “faculty and students affairs professionals may find it difficult to engage with students and as a result, students from the LGB community are left with feelings of isolation” (p. 22). The authors further quote Tierney (1992), stating that “as research indicates, students are most effective when they are able to study and learn in an atmosphere where they feel appreciated and affirmed” (Getz & Chism, 1993, p. 22). There was support for these statements among the students interviewed through the sharing of reference to the lack of inclusive language, use of stereotypic examples and the fact that discriminatory comments are ignored, if not tolerated.

Critical diversity, as defined by Ukpokodu (2010), is “the intersecting dimension of human differences that may serve as basis for differential treatment of individuals, with the potential to diminish their access to opportunity, equality, social justice and fulfillment of their dreams” (p. 28). The author includes the area of sexual orientations in the dimensions referred
to, arguing for a curriculum “representing multiple points of view about diverse human experience and competing constructions and understandings of social, historical, and natural phenomena when concepts, theories, paradigms, events, and issues are studied (Ukpokodu, 2010, p. 28). The study participants clearly addressed the desire to honour individual differences and accept diversity in personal orientation although there was no mention of proactive steps taken to foster such inclusion. Instead, faculty comments revealed surprise when gay students revealed they felt ostracized or targeted by their peers, and student comments indicated disbelief that homosexuality could be laughed at or met with disgust by others.

Overall, open dialogue about sexual orientation proved difficult with study participants. Religious beliefs, cultural upbringing and personal privacy were the most common responses to questions about the impact on student engagement. In summary, input on this demographic area was the most elusive; some students spoke of keeping personal preferences private to avoid feeling ostracized. It also raised concern in that examples of prejudice were felt to be tolerated in this area of discrimination more than in any other area discussed. It may be that faculty feel unprepared to facilitate direct dialogue. It may also be that even if able to do so students may not feel safe sharing such personal aspects with faculty. Whatever the blocks may be, there is an impact on student engagement.

In this study faculty acknowledged the changing demographics and shifting and multiple demands on students, and expressed empathy for those they saw struggling to balance these responsibilities. Every demographic area discussed was seen as influencing student engagement. However, there was little attention paid to how accommodations could be made in the educational experience beyond consideration for varied teaching strategies. Minimal reference was made to specific resources or other strategies to help students engage more in the classroom
experience. Resources that were labelled were described as ‘add-ons’ the student needed to pursue outside of class instead of integrating them into the classroom learning experience.

Ironically, Keller (2001), as cited in Schreiner and Louis (2008), states: “As increasingly diverse types of learners enter higher education, the challenge of engaging those students in their own learning so that they experience success becomes more imperative” (p. 2).

In addition to the impact of demographics, structural challenges impact on student engagement. Issues of time, workload and scheduling were described as organizational issues interfering with engagement.

**Structural Challenges**

Students in this study spoke about their need to feel important. Numerous expectations and structural issues interfere with adequate time and effort devoted to fostering this. The main areas of concern that arose during the interviews revolved around inadequate access, workload and scheduling concerns.

**Time**

A crammed curriculum and growing complexity of learner needs interfere with the stated faculty desire to make personal connections with individual learners. Compounding this is a concern that pre-class preparation, which would allow for a richer in-class experience, is not embraced by many students. This view is supported in research indicating “Students spent less than half the amount of time preparing for class than faculty claim is needed to do well in college” (About Campus, 2003, p. 11). Among the reasons that students shared were not having adequate time and knowing the information that was important would be stressed in class anyway. Faculty believe they need to devote every minute to the content of the curriculum to the detriment of forming connections pivotal to engagement. For some this included eliminating
more casual discussions or the use of icebreakers and for others it meant assigning extra out of classroom readings and research. Both options place the spotlight on curriculum content to the exclusion of personal connections and process that carry implications for student engagement.

Personal connections were seen to have a strong influence on engagement, connections to materials, the processes and the people. Increasing class size was one example of what interferes with providing individualized attention, either to the people or to the questions that arise.

“Frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student institutional characteristic” (Astin, 1984, p. 525). Both groups expressed a sense of loss in not having adequate time to spend interacting. Faculty indicated their priority needed to be the curriculum and the push they feel to get the content covered. Students want to be acknowledged as individuals and be able to access faculty when they have questions or concerns. Finding time to get to meet or talk outside of class time was seen to be a huge challenge.

**Workload Pressures**

Faculty workloads were seen as an obstacle to engagement; students expressed an inability to connect with their teachers as often as they would like to. There is a need for such access to occur in a way that does not leave students feeling they are adding another burden to an already full plate. Some spoke of not wanting to be a bother and others about feeling brushed off as faculty were heading to their next class or meeting. In general there were many examples that indicated the faculty were not fully listening to what their students were asking. Although there was no mention of any direct dialogue regarding faculty workload, many students commented about how busy they view the faculty to be, raising the question as to how that conclusion was reached.
Students carrying a full-time course load also carry a heavy workload. Each course comes with assignments, assessments and preparation. Many of the assignments were described by these students as complex and involving group work. Among the major concerns expressed by students was that group work requires scheduling an added number of timetables and responsibilities, above and beyond getting the work done.

One area where students and faculty disagreed was in regard to the expectations regarding quality of work. Faculty gave examples of students wanting marks because they had ‘tried hard’ despite not having met the learning outcomes. Conversely, students stated they were being marked with high expectations so that they could feel satisfaction with the marks they received. What the students did want was added feedback on what they were doing well and where they could improve.

**Scheduling**

Increased enrolment and expansion of program offerings also result in extended hours of operation to accommodate physical space needed. Higher demand for space results in less flexibility regarding timetabling which disadvantages students. However, while students noted early morning classes as less than ideal, when interested in the content and feeling connected to the faculty member the timing of classes was not seen as an issue. The issue seems more connected to the view that effectively coordinating their time on campus is not considered, impacting on their ability to work and attend to other varied responsibilities. Examples cited single classes held midday as inconsiderate given lengthy commute times and interfering with students needing to work.

Another issue with regard to scheduling shared was the perceived conflict between student and faculty timetables. Often when students were available faculty were in class or not
on campus and vice versa. When students did see faculty they were often rushing off to another commitment. Ironically, students did not express concerns about access to part-time faculty that were any different than access to full-time faculty. In summary, time, workload and scheduling were all seen as potentially impacting on student engagement. However, more significant factors shared by the study participants are those that revolve around teacher passion and commitment to the role.

**Teacher Passion and Commitment to the Role**

Classes labelled ‘painful’ to attend were initially described as early morning or the only class held on a particular day of the week, inferring it was a waste of time. When energized by a particular class, however, these same students saw the timing as inconsequential. The energizer identified was always a faculty member described as caring, concerned and genuine in their presentation. Such commitment and passion was described as permeating the classroom experience and positively impacting on the engagement of these students.

Many college faculty enter teaching roles as a second career, teaching in the area of curriculum expertise they were first employed in. In other words, many teaching in the college system do not have any formalized training in how to teach, as it was not necessarily a career goal when they entered the workforce. Students believe faculty expertise lends credibility and allows for a deeper understanding of the field they have chosen to work in. However, experience is not enough; faculty must have passion for and a desire to work as an educator to foster engagement.

The best teachers create a natural critical learning environment in which they embed the skills and information they wish to teach in assignments (questions and tasks) students will find fascinating – authentic tasks will arouse curiosity, challenge students to rethink their assumptions an examine their mental models or reality. Students feel safe, will try, will come up short, will receive feedback, and try again. They will understand and
remember what they have learned because they master and use the reasoning abilities necessary to integrate it with larger concepts. (Bain, 2004, p. 47)

Engaging teachers are passionate about their field of work and about teaching others. Students in this study spoke at length about how they determine how interested faculty are in working with students. This shows up in the kinds of relationships that faculty have with students.

**Student and Faculty Relationships**

The importance of quality relationships between faculty and students is a central theme of this study. Many studies, according to Taylor (2000), overlook the student-teacher relationship factor or at least the subjective elements of the process. Taylor (2000) cites Sokol’s (1998) work identifying several key functions of effective teaching, such as preparation and flexibility, and using varied teaching strategies, “but she overlooked how the more complex issues of trust, honesty, and genuineness were established in the classroom” (p. 10). Students in this study directly linked these areas to their engagement.

Relationships significantly influenced engagement in this study. Major themes that arose included the importance of the psychological atmosphere of the classroom, using varied teaching methods, communication, feedback, power and student voice, respect, and trust. Each of these is explored next.

**The Psychological Classroom Atmosphere**

“Student engagement requires a campuswide commitment, but much of the heavy lifting occurs in the classroom” (Marklein, 2008, p. 1). Martins (2005) argues, “The classroom experience has significant effect on retention” (p. 38). The author posits that as the classroom is the only location the two parties may meet then it needs to be understood as an important environment.
The classroom is the arena where student engagement matters the most for students. The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2009) also shows that “students are more engaged in the classroom than anywhere else” (p. 11). It is here they feel connected with their peers and faculty, being seen, heard and treated as individuals. “Students’ needs for relatedness can be supported by learning environments that foster a sense of community .... The primary opportunity for developing a psychological sense of community on campus occurs through classroom experiences” (Schreiner & Louis, 2008, p. 24). Schreiner and Louis (2008) further assert that a sense of community is fostered in classrooms with the interaction of the elements of membership or belonging, ownership or voice, relationship or emotional connections, and partnership or interdependence. This study confirms the importance of the classroom for making connections with both faculty and peers.

To engage in the classroom, students in this study want a safe and trusting environment. Their comfort directly impacts on their perceptions of quality of the experience and freedom to take risks. The teacher is pivotal in setting this tone in the classroom right from the beginning, and the responsibility for classroom management is seen as their responsibility by both groups. Students want teachers who partner with students to set fair expectations and then take responsibility for maintaining these.

The cohort model impacts relationships students form over the course of their studies; while they may only have an instructor for one course they take the vast majority of classes with the same group of peers. Cohorts support engagement as the students form strong friendships and alliances. Cohorts may also decrease engagement if students feel uncomfortable or are attributed a negative reputation.
Each group noted the ‘cliques’ the other group associated with. Faculty saw student sub-groups as relationships that needed to be interrupted while students argued to keep them intact. Many student participants argued for the right to work with friends and disagreed with the faculty view that some groupings were dysfunctional, as in the case of inequitable division of work. Students described seeing which faculty associated with each other as an indicator of how open and flexible they were as individuals. In a few cases students noted how disagreeing with one faculty would leave them hesitant to approach another. Both groups were making assumptions about the relationships of the others.

Teaching Methods

Employing varied teaching strategies enhances student engagement. To connect with students, teachers need to “find ways to link their own disciplinary concerns and interest with those of the students” (Bain & Zimmerman, 2009, p. 10). The range of student needs requires conscious planning to ensure an assortment of methodologies is used each class.

Students assess the effort faculty invest in planning their classes. According to Bain (2004), “Effective teachers design quality learning experiences for their students because they conceive of teaching as fostering learning – everything they do stems from their strong concern for the understanding and development of their learners” (p. 67). Students want individualized versus pre-packaged lessons and to have input in determining the most effective strategies.

Cameron (1999) states students must be active participants in the learning process to become effective thinkers, utilizing active learning in that they are not only acquiring the content but also using it. Study participants repeatedly stressed the need to make the content come alive.

Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just sitting in class listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, apply it to
their daily lives. They must make part of what they learn part of themselves. (Cameron, 1992, p. 12)

Middlecamp (2005) expands, arguing that engagement is much more than the selection of interesting content; we need to engage students on multiple levels that are “interconnected in complex and meaningful ways” (p. 18). The author asserts that the process is also reciprocal in that as we engage our students they in turn engage us, cognitively and emotionally, so that we are involved in the process of teaching as much as we are delivering content. This was confirmed by students and faculty who spoke of being energized by each other and indicators of learning continuing outside the classroom.

Group work requires careful planning and implementation to be an engaging learning tool. Students do not resist group work, in moderation, but note that inequities in workload carried or decision-making leave them feeling unfairly treated. Faculty need to carefully structure and closely monitor group process to facilitate engagement in the learning experience. Students also want flexibility in marks assigned to reflect varying levels of effort they invest.

**Communication**

Communication, in all forms, impacts engagement. Many participants view student engagement as a shared responsibility between teacher and learner and acknowledge that the other group would view it somewhat differently. Despite both groups identifying the importance of direct dialogue about engagement, no one had direct conversations about it. Faculty articulated wanting to understand the student perspectives although no one had specifically, or directly, asked their opinion. Such a lack of proactive communication counters what students repeatedly identified as important to their engagement; students see being asked for input as valuing their opinions.
Simply transmitting knowledge decreases engagement. The Center for Community College Student Engagement (2009) asserts, “Communicating information is a one-way, self-contained event. The individual for whom the information is intended may or may not receive it, understand it, care about it, or act on it” (p. 3). “If lecturers plough on using highly specialised language and technical terms without any consideration of the audience’s ability to understand, it can give the impression of superiority. This can lead to further barriers between the teacher and the learner” (Matthews, n.d., p. 8). Engaged learning requires dialogue, critical thinking and reflection to “capture both the students’ imagination and challenge some of the most cherished paradigms” (Bain & Zimmerman, 2009, p. 11). Students in this study supported the need for discussion, opportunities to critique or challenge existing paradigms, and time for thinking and self-reflection as positively influencing their engagement.

Feedback

Feedback includes information about student progress and course evaluation. It may originate from the student and from the faculty. Both feedback for student growth and feedback for course satisfaction were discussed.

Students want to share their thoughts and get direct feedback from their instructors, regarding both perceived strengths and recommended areas for growth.

Many empirical studies confirm that the human learning process, at all levels from preschool to higher education, in class and out, can be substantially enhanced with knowledge of progress and specific directions for improvement. Without such feedback, learning can be slow, difficult, and sometimes virtually impossible. (Astin, 1993, p. 12)

Written feedback is not enough. Students stated a desire for face-to-face, individual feedback. This supports studies reporting, “Students generally want more feedback, in particular, rounded formative feedback. University professors typically do not provide students with feedback adequate in either quantity or quality” (Piccinin, 2006, p. 23).
Balanced feedback is also needed. Students clearly expressed wanting input on what they are doing well in addition to areas they need to improve. Louis (2009), citing Cantwell (2005), argues a strengths-based approach to teaching and feedback “can be highly individualized, as efforts are made to personalize the learning experience” (p. 5).

“There is hardly an institution that does not ask students to complete forms rating a number of teaching dimensions, and providing written feedback on a teacher’s performance” (Piccinin, 2006, p. 14). Piccinin (2006), in the work of Chickering and Gamson (1987), reported an analysis of research in higher education and the critical examination of the literature on teaching and learning. “They identify seven principles for “effective practice” in university and college teaching. One of these principles is feedback” (Chickering and Gamson, 1987, p. 12).

Fuhrman and Grasha (1983), as cited in Lewis (2007), support the notion that improved teaching and learning experiences require ongoing evaluation that is continuous, broadly based, descriptive, diagnostic and reflective of teacher goals. While there are various strategies to facilitate this, gathering student input was labelled as important. Cohen (1980), as cited in Piccinin (2006), asserts: “A number of studies demonstrate that feedback can improve teaching skills. Teachers who receive mid-course student ratings of their instruction are able to make adjustments, which lead to improved course ratings at the end of the course” (p. 13).

Faculty want to hear what students have to say and students want to be asked their perspectives; however, for these participants it was noted that standardized surveys are not seen as the optimum vehicle for such an exchange of views. Some faculty believe that anonymous forms allow students the freedom to share openly, although students feel standardized surveys are too restrictive and not an accurate measure of engagement. ‘Survey fatigue’ sets in as students feel they comment on things that will not make a difference or they fill in the form too
quickly to make the findings informative. Late semester implementation often meant the results could not be utilized with the group giving the feedback. Both groups agree complicated issues are easier to talk about directly. The exception was when a student wants to criticize something a faculty member does when that faculty member is responsible for their grading.

**Power and Student Voice**

Faculty made no reference to incorporating student voice in an inclusive and proactive manner regarding curriculum. However, students want to help shape their own learning path. They want to select areas of specialty, decide how to structure their learning and have increased opportunities for feedback.

Current curriculum structures places students in a subordinate role and the shift from subordinate to the role of a participant in a shared journey of learning is the benchmark of learner-centeredness. The student will be part of the co-creation of the learning experience …. The appropriate environment for the role of learner to fully flourish and develop. (Cleveland-Innes & Emes, 2005, p. 14)

Faculty efforts to invite students into policy making are viewed sceptically by these students. Some feel they offer ideas only to be met with excuses from faculty as to why they will not work. Others feel they cannot be honest because the faculty can punish them through withholding marks. Faculty talked about informing students about policies and practices in an effort to promote fairness and student awareness. Ironically, students describe such efforts as added bureaucracy that reduces individuality. Faculty see inviting students into this process as a way to respect them as partners; students see it as added layers of rules and restrictions.

Despite efforts to be deemed ‘student-centered’ or ‘learner-centered’ in approach, the teacher is in control in the classroom and much of the overt behaviour is geared to what the teacher wants to see. Many traditional classroom practices continue to exist. Comments clearly reflect that teachers lead and students follow. The teacher is described as the class leader,
responsible for planning the content, structuring delivery, setting deadlines, and determining and implementing assessment techniques. They are also responsible for classroom management and the delivery of consequences for inappropriate behaviour. Students are described as there to learn and actively participate in exercises assigned by teachers. They do not see themselves as equal partners. This sentiment is supported by bell hooks (1994), who argues that teachers who use control and power over students can disengage them as students learn to conform instead of embrace learning through more relaxed and creative approaches. Instead, hooks (1994) advocated for active collaboration to facilitate engagement. Students in this study agreed, describing feelings of heightened engagement in classes with teachers who involved and treated them respectfully as equals.

Students who described being treated as equals reflected Friere’s (1970) notion of shared democratic social relations. “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously students and teachers” (Freire, 1970, p. 72). The teacher can be the learner and the learner can be the teacher. Students reflected on engaging teachers as those open to re-examine pre-existing notions through interactions with their students versus simply convincing them of the right way of thinking.

Respect

Faculty see themselves as fairly unified in their experience; students see themselves as unique and want to be treated that way. According to Lopez (2006) every student needs personalization of the learning experience. This desire is reflected in student responses that are from the first-person perspective and label individual needs. Conversely, faculty usually referred
to themselves in the context of a unit or group rather than individually. They also tended to refer to students as a group with many shared characteristics.

When speaking of respect both groups noted the esteem held or felt for others. Strategies intended to recognize accomplishments were described as respecting students and positively influencing engagement. Ironically, acknowledging some students alienated or marginalized others; efforts to celebrate may actually result in disengagement for some. For example, celebrations recognizing honours students left others feeling ignored. This clearly demonstrates how efforts to formally recognize others do not always achieve the intended results.

Students have difficulty contributing in class when values conflict. Faculty miss some of the subtle challenges and barbs that students experience. Cultural influences and religious beliefs complicate exchanges where views differ. Ignorance may be interpreted as disrespect and when feeling disrespected students disengage.

When speaking of wanting to feel respected, students reinforced their desire to be included in conversations, consulted about options and not have assumptions made about their motives or rationale. They want to be viewed and treated as individuals while faculty spoke about efforts to ensure fairness and consideration for all students. When exceptions to the norm were encountered faculty in the study spoke to reasons why they needed to enforce standard policy rather than individualize problem solving. In essence this seems in direct conflict with what the students were describing as respectful.

Trust

Students believe that faculty make assumptions about them that are unfair, demeaning and long lasting. While angered by this they believe direct confrontation is futile, primarily due to the negative repercussions they fear. This brings up the question of genuineness in the
relationship; do students share openly when they feel they are in a subservient role and may risk failure or labelling by faculty?

Students reported performing various functions that appease their faculty, despite not really feeling engaged in the learning environment. This ‘real’ versus ‘feigned’ engagement raises questions as to how we determine genuine engagement and if, in fact, it is critical for us to do so. Students want faculty to be genuine but are not always willing to do the same given the power differential.

Harward (2008) asserts that various national surveys report more than 40 percent of what is referred to as the ‘millennial generation’ “report episodes of depression sufficient to disrupt their academic work, yet students report only occasional faculty awareness of the crises the students see among fellow students or the pain they themselves endure” (p. 1). Students in this study want faculty to approach them around personal needs. Whether or not they would disclose would depend on the level of trust with that individual.

Conclusion

Students spoke of wanting many things they believe are not being provided. Students want active, meaningful, individualized involvement as partners in their education. Faculty espouse the same aims however seem to reinforce the neoliberal culture of education through focus on covering curriculum content, meeting deadlines, and adhering to policies and procedures. Faculty acknowledge students are unique entities however tend to fit students into existing structures and institutional processes forgoing the opportunity for students to meaningfully influence curriculum. In efforts to present as unbiased, faculty focus leans towards sameness versus uniqueness. The result is that the groups end up with varying concepts of student engagement.
What students identify as factors that would increase their engagement can be found within the concept of democracy in education. Levin (1994) describes democracy in education as “a moral conception of how people ought to live together, driven not by consideration of efficiency, but by a powerful vision of what is right and proper” (p. 9). Among the qualities in the concept, Levin (1994) describes an environment that includes: respect for and tolerance of divergent views; soliciting the active involvement of all; ensuring equity; placing reason and knowledge above rank and authority; being able to question and change practices; and focusing on moral principles aimed to improve the world in a just and caring manner. Students in this study support such a concept and articulate wanting a more open, collaborative and participatory form of interaction in the classroom, such as described by Portelli and Vibert’s (2002) *curriculum of life*.

A *curriculum of life* centres on the possibilities for the co-construction and coproduction of knowledge, rather than on knowledge as simply teacher transmitted or simply student created ... it takes substantive and possibly controversial issues in students’ personal, social and political lives very seriously; it does not avoid dealing with the controversial nor hide behind the pretense of neutrality. (Portelli and Vibert, 2002, p. 39)

In summary, this study found various demographic factors, structural challenges, and teacher passion and role commitment all influence student engagement. Demographic factors included gender, language, culture, race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, ability and sexual orientation. Each impacted on student engagement, often interacting with other factors. Teachers espoused the value of student individuality; however, they often cited organizational challenges of time, workload and scheduling interfering with their ability to facilitate such engagement. Teacher passion and commitment includes student–teacher relationships, the psychological atmosphere, teaching methods, communication, student voice, power, feedback, respect and trust. Again, most of these areas are acknowledged by the faculty while those of
power, respect and trust were added by the students. Overall, despite similarities there are
significant differences in understandings of engagement between students and faculty. Where
there is agreement there is also variance in priorities. Such discrepancies can serve to undermine
student engagement.
Chapter VIII: Conclusions and Recommendations

This study explored the complexities involved in understanding engagement in one Canadian postsecondary institution for students past their first year in college. There are a number of conclusions and recommendations stemming from the data gathered. This chapter will summarize the answers to the research questions. The implications for practice will then be articulated and areas for further research suggested.

Research Questions

How do college students and instructors understand and experience student engagement?

This study confirms that student engagement is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. The definition and understandings varied from person to person, shifted over time and were influenced by context and experience. Engagement was described as influenced by others or happening in complete isolation. Those who were labelled disengaged were seen to be able to re-engage. Nuances were reported as elusive.

Meaningful engagement, knowing that our notions of ‘meaningful’ influence our definitions of engagement, involves support for critical investigation of the topics at hand, welcomes diverse views, is inclusive in process and reflects an ongoing responsive interchange between parties. Engagement, in terms of meaningful learning experiences, was seen to impact thoughts, actions and emotions. Behaviours were described as often misleading or inaccurate indicators of engagement; alone they are not enough to define the term.

Despite definite agreement between these faculty and students that engagement is tied to learning, there was no common definition found. Faculty participants stressed the importance of graduating prepared employees as a focus whereas student comments focused more on the
process of learning and the relationships impacting on their learning experience; faculty were more future-focused and students more current in their focus.

An additional difference was the tendency for faculty participants to focus on observed behaviour and students to direct attention to the underlying motivation or rationale. Faculty language reflects standardized expectations and demonstrated grasp of learning outcomes while student participants want to be accepted as individuals with their unique circumstances taken into consideration. One possible reason that faculty seem less comfortable highlighting differences among and between students may be the worry that it will reflect negatively on them as impartial teachers, leading to allegations of favouritism.

The areas of behaviour, emotion and cognition are all linked to engagement. Most faculty responses included behavioural references. They looked for clues to determine whether or not a particular student was deemed to be engaged. When directly asked about affective or cognitive engagement, behavioural indicators often remained the reference point used for the determination. Student participants also shared behavioural examples, yet spoke directly about the impact on their personal motivation and enthusiasm and how these connected to emotions and thinking processes. This may be due, in part, to the fact that only the student can truly be in touch with what he or she is feeling and thinking. It does, however, serve to reinforce the student belief that faculty misunderstand them and make false assumptions about their level of engagement. A heavy reliance on behavioural evidence is concerning in that behaviours can be misinterpreted and deeper levels of engagement ignored. All student participants admitted they do not consistently demonstrate behaviours commonly accepted as measures of engagement, nor demonstrate them at the moment. From their perspective this does not equate to a lack of engagement.
Astin (1984) defines student involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. A highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students” (p. 18). The author further asserts, “It is not so much what the individual thinks or feels, but what the individual does, how he or she behaves, that defines and identifies involvement” (Astin, 1984, p. 519). While this may be the case for a definition of overt involvement, such a definition fails to incorporate the affective and cognitive influences for the broader concept of engagement as reported by the participants in this study.

**How do college professors promote such engagement?**

This study revealed that the relationship between students and faculty is central to whether or not engagement is experienced. Students described engaging faculty as those who genuinely care about their students and bring a passion to both their role and their concern for students as individuals. They like faculty who connect learning to real life experiences and see students as possessing unique talents and struggles.

Faculty were described as engaging when they presented a lesson they had taken the time to tailor to the particular cohort. Students believed they could sense whether what they were getting was a standard lesson plan or one devised with them in mind. Integrating cohort specific details and examples helped to foster this feeling and left students with the sense that the faculty member took the time to prepare the lesson just for them.

Students and faculty were clear about the importance of implementing varied instructional techniques. Appealing to a range of learning styles and preferences was a strong
theme in the interviews. Faculty attended to this in methodology and planning and students noted the impact on their levels of attention and integration of learning.

More important than individualized lesson planning and integration of varied techniques, however, was the importance of the quality of the relationships established. Students spoke of wanting faculty to respect them by inviting their input and truly listening to their contributions. To have this happen they also wanted faculty to manage classroom behaviours so that when students took risks they would feel safe and supported rather than in fear of humiliation. The underlying message from students is that faculty need to demonstrate genuine care for their students. Students spoke to being able to tell if faculty really wanted to be in the classroom or if it was ‘just a job’.

When asked how faculty promote engagement, students were united in their messages regarding feedback. Students want individualized feedback. They appreciate written comments and the fact that faculty provide specifics regarding marks through the use of explanatory tools, such as rubrics, but they also want faculty to take the time to meet with them and give them personal feedback. Feedback described as balanced and constructive engages them more effectively. If they feel they are to get the most out of their educational experience they want the opportunity to dialogue individually with each faculty member, not necessarily requiring a lot of time but enough to provide them with feedback to foster growth and continued development.

In summary, faculty promote engagement a variety of ways. They customize lessons, employ varied instructional techniques, are inviting and respectful, manage behaviour effectively, listen well and provide balanced, personal feedback. They are described by their students as observant, accessible, fair and caring. They invite student input, support mutual decision-making and are non-judgemental. In other words, these students described engaging
faculty as those committed to the role of teacher in terms of how they approach both the content and their students. Overall they treat each student as an active partner in their education.

**What do college students believe enhances their engagement?**

Overall, students spoke of wanting to learn how to excel in their chosen profession. They want relevant, current and meaningful learning experiences that they evaluate as contributing to their professional development. They described the content and lessons they found most engaging as relevant, something they could relate to and information they could use. However, what was more important than the content was the style of delivery.

Students described themselves as more engaged when faculty listen, consult, communicate respect, expect success and create a safe learning environment. They connected these to fostering a sense of belonging and importance pivotal to student engagement. Those invited to be partners in their learning expressed added satisfaction and commitment to their education, labelling themselves as more engaged in the overall experience.

One way students said that they become engaged is through having a voice in the classroom experience. They want faculty who elicit student opinions, listen to their feedback, acknowledge their contributions and know who they are. However, having voice reaches further than the classroom; students in this study wanted a more equitable distribution of power. As adult learners, college students want to be consulted on decisions surrounding their educational experiences. How they study, when they study and, to some extent, what they study were all given as examples of how they would like to be included in shaping their own learning. Examples included how often group work was assigned, the option of access to online or hybrid learning experiences and the ability to focus on particular areas of interest within a curriculum.

Students in this study desired a more critical democratic approach than their faculty provided.
Students also identified faculty respect for students as individuals as a cornerstone of engagement. They object to faculty making assumptions about their behaviour, asking instead for direct and open communication. Those who work or care for families in addition to attending school want a sense of understanding and empathy for the multiple demands they carry. These students did not want lower or different standards or expectations; they want to feel a sense of empathy and recognition for how hard they work.

What various demographic factors are perceived to play a role in engagement?

Demographic factors of gender, culture, race and ethnicity, language, age, socio-economic status, ability and sexual orientation were the areas addressed in this study. Both faculty and students acknowledged the potential for each of these factors to impact student engagement. However, the two groups came from different perspectives on various issues. Students agree that certain demographics influence engagement more directly, such as language, culture, race and ethnicity, and sex. Faculty described the most influential as language, culture, race and ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Both agreed there were some effects resulting from age and ability, but had the least to say about the impact of sexual orientation on engagement.

Faculty and students, however, were not always in agreement as to how the various demographic factors make an impact. Faculty pride themselves in making conscious efforts to treat students equally, which may decrease the focus on individuality that students stated they want. For example, faculty stated having similar expectations for work and participation for both male and female students. When faculty called upon underrepresented male students to facilitate more of an equitable voice in class discussions, they actually disengaged them through the
resulting anxiety and withdrawal. Students wanted to be trusted to contribute if they had something they wanted to add.

Another difference that appeared in the study responses involved motivation or focus. Faculty responded with answers connected to outcome and workforce preparation. In the case of language there were concerns about the ability of some English as second language students to be able to effectively communicate, both verbally and in writing, for an employer. Students examined language from a process perspective with added focus on ensuring the building of a solid foundation for learning. Faculty looked more at outcome; students viewed engagement more from a process perspective.

Student comments on culture, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation and disabilities reveal there is a lot of work to be done regarding acceptance of others. There were numerous references to discriminatory attitudes and practice of their peers, especially when the interviewee was the one in the minority. Students believe that many unhealthy attitudes, values and behaviours exist despite attempts to hide them from the faculty. Students believe their engagement continues to be influenced by these factors in terms of who they can work with, how much they will involve themselves in the class process and how comfortable they feel being genuine. Many students in this study spoke to the need to fit in, sacrificing personal beliefs and attitudes to gain acceptance and approval.

Each of the factors explored impacts student engagement, potentially in a positive or negative way. However, individuality was seen more directly related to engagement than were the demographic factors.

What barriers/facilitators do college instructors and students recognize as influencing student levels of engagement?
College systems present organizational barriers that challenge engagement. Both students and faculty noted limited access, workloads and timetabling as obstacles to engagement. Students also reported unnecessary levels of bureaucracy as a deterrent.

Policies and procedures, formal and informal, can impact engagement, often in unpredicted ways. While they may control surface behaviours, they may not truly engage. A policy regarding marking penalties for absenteeism may result in students attending class; however, attendance does not equate to engagement.

Faculty and students agree learning transpires through the connections in the classroom although it is more than simply attending class. The atmosphere in the classroom and connection felt with the teacher not only gets students there but sets the stage for learning.

These students argue making assumptions is another barrier to engagement; getting to know students as individuals decreases assumptions and results in higher levels of engagement. The underlying theme communicated is the need for respect for the individual. Included in this is a clear message from the students in this study that they want to be treated as adults. Engagement is facilitated through genuine, honest, proactive communication. Time needs to be allotted for face-to-face dialogue and the provision of personalized learning experiences and feedback.

Faculty and student relationships can either act as a facilitator or barrier to engagement. To be a facilitator these students spoke of their need to feel important, listened to, consulted, challenged professionally, given credit for efforts and held accountable. They seek fairness, maturity, partnering and caring.

The most clearly stated facilitator of engagement shared by students was the passion and experience that a motivated and committed teacher brings to the classroom. They not only need the expertise but they must be able to share their knowledge in a way that honours the students.
These students stated sharing energy, enthusiasm and passion for the content and for the role of teacher was the most powerful influence on engagement.

Barriers and facilitators depend on individual perceptions and perspective. What engages one person can disengage another. Specific methodologies, such as role play, engage some while others express dislike of the technique. Some rise to the challenge of debate and others withdraw, waiting for order to be re-established. Some students wanted active learning and others more quiet, reflective practice. However, it is critical to consider the entire student in making such differentiations, as such statements were often connected to language, cultural or experiential differences.

**The Overall Aims of Student Engagement**

A clear theme in the interviews of this study is the significant difference in the overall aims of student engagement between the student and faculty groups. While learning was stated as an aim of engagement, the focus varied for the groups. Students want to be actively involved in their classroom experience. They seek respect, the opportunity for input in decision-making and to be treated as equal partners. Faculty spoke more to their role of preparing students for employment in their chosen career, imparting the skills required for successful job performance. Student comments focused on the importance of process and faculty comments on outcomes.

In the classroom environment faculty spoke of attempts to solicit student input and meet varied learning styles; however, the planned curriculum is seen as central given their perceived need to address content and meet stated learning outcomes. These faculty did not involve their students as partners in the classroom community.

Students clearly want to be treated as individuals. They want caring teachers who are invested in their students and passionate about the role of teaching. The desire for relationships
with their faculty was a clear theme. Conversely, faculty spoke about interacting with students in regard to policies and procedures that ensured fairness and equality. Faculty tended to downplay differences of demographic influences or expressed a sense of futility in regard to what role they could play. Again, while students expressed wanting time to talk and share, faculty were focused more on solutions or minimizing challenges. These faculty clearly focus on the performance of their role as it pertains to the classroom versus attending to the whole person as the students’ desire. While faculty may personally value the ideals of democracy in education they are not readily evident in these classrooms.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study support those of McInnis (2001) in that there is much more to be learned about the attitudes, values, desires, expectations and aims of our students’ engagement. Not understanding their perspective may result in the implementation of strategies or interventions that are ineffective. Focusing only on students at risk of withdrawing or failing results in tunnel vision and missing insights into what is working.

When referring to ‘student engagement’ it is imperative that the purpose and understandings of the term be clarified within the context of the particular discussion. Ongoing dialogue is needed to gain information to advance our understandings of engagement and how it can be used to inform practice and policy. Study participants, especially students, support exchanging perspectives in an open forum through face-to-face interaction allowing for the sharing of genuine concerns without fear of reprisal. They want opportunities to share whenever they need and can take advantage of it, perhaps through the establishment of a formal forum such as that of an ombudsperson.
This study focused on the classroom. Not all of the barriers and facilitators of student engagement are confined to or controlled within that setting. Student resources and supports available to the wider college community could be better integrated into the learning experience. Accessing additional resources outside of the classroom can facilitate student learning and engagement. For example, students who admitted struggling with disabilities can access a wide range of tools and strategies designed to facilitate success.

An unforeseen discovery in this study was the realization that many faculty these students labelled as ‘engaging’ carry course loads that result in them teaching first-year students only, eliminating their participation in the research. From a strategic planning perspective there may be reasons to keep more of the full-time faculty with the students first entering the college system. However, this also may result in limiting ongoing classroom contact between the full-time faculty and the graduating students. Assigning faculty courses across semesters may expose students to those teachers throughout their studies, potentially impacting positively on retention. It is recommended that engaging faculty be strategically distributed across the various years of study.

These students identified various teaching styles of their faculty yet labelled them as expecting students to meet expectations the same way. This requires that some demonstrate behaviours or present in certain ways that don’t actually honour who they are. To honour the individual learner we need to think about various ways to approach the teaching and learning process. It is imperative that we unpack the hidden curriculum and carefully explore the influences of demographic factors and how we can address inequities that exist.

The stated importance of the student-teacher relationship requires such relationships be unpacked and, as part of the overall psychological climate, recognized as an integral part of
teacher training in the postsecondary environment. Part of this infers that faculty need to be able to articulate why they want to teach. Study participants agreed that engaged faculty present as having pride in the quality of the graduates of their programs and when there is engagement on the faculty team it came through in the classroom experience as well.

Schools are unique, as are the students, faculty, staff, administration and many of the policies that steer them. Fitting policies around student needs reflects the respect and inclusion colleges aspire to; genuineness, respect and trust in the classroom environment need to be embedded in the classroom culture. This study revealed examples of policies and practices that work against the initial intent, creating barriers that may not have been there to begin with, emphasising the need for objective evaluation of strategies to evaluate the efficacy of the process or outcome. It is essential that students feel recognized and treated as individuals within any process.

The time to sit back, talk and attempt to understand where people are coming from was seen as a priority for these faculty in terms of their own learning and growth. Changes in how they define and understand engagement speaks to the need to recognize that faculty expectations shift as they grow into their roles, just as student views evolve as they proceed through their studies. Talking and reflecting on the act of teaching allows for reflecting on best practices, sharing philosophies and integrating new ideas. It is imperative that time and space be allocated for reflective practice on teaching and learning, incorporating the views on student engagement.

Teaching strategies impact student engagement. “If higher education is to offer genuine opportunities to diverse student audiences, we cannot persist with models of teaching as ‘knowledge transmission’, nor rely on unfocused student-centered approaches that leave the students floundering within everyday discourse” (Northedge, 2003, p. 31).
The lecture seems safe because it gives the instructor control over the material and the pace at which the class progresses. The lecture is a teacher-centered environment; active learning is student-centered. Active learning techniques give more control of the learning process to students, which may slow or accelerate the pace of the class. With active learning, the class becomes a flexible learning environment keyed to the learning speed of the students. (Cameron, 1999, p. 15)

The Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) suggests “most community colleges are not teaching their students in engaging and experimental ways” (Moltz, 2009, p. 2). The message received from students in this study is that they want to actively participate in the learning process to develop effective thinking skills. Faculty need to ensure they are cognizant of the reality that ‘active participation’ may not mean group activities or even observable behavioural indicators; some may deem active learning as more of a cognitively stimulating experience. Frustration was expressed regarding the inability to contract around assignments or not having options to choose from. As the learners change there is added pressure to deliver programs in varied ways. There is a need to examine systemic influences of policies, from admissions through curriculum, to provide seamless and flexible options.

Recommending faculty become more familiar with individual student needs, build in opportunities for reflective practice, ensure varied methodologies are utilized and participate in the evolution of policy become further complicated when considering the fact that many of the courses are delivered by part-time faculty. Many part-time faculty maintain full-time employment outside of the college or teach for more than one college; thus, often having contact with their students and colleagues is somewhat limited by their time on campus. This speaks directly to the recommendation to invest energy and resources into the needs of both the full-time and the part-time workforce, for the benefit of all parties.

The timing of the study needs to be considered in the analysis of the results. Limited contact between faculty and student can influence ratings of engagement; added time together
may increase faculty awareness of nuances in student behaviours, emotions and cognitive processes. Every participant noted that their understandings and perceptions of engagement had shifted over time, and there is no reason to assume they may not continue to do so.

**Areas for Further Research**

Colleges becoming more involved in research augers well for future studies that can be seen to link classroom practice and learning. Student engagement needs a place on the research agenda of colleges regarding best practices and experiences in teaching and learning.

The importance of passion for the role of college teacher warrants further scrutiny. Examination of faculty engagement may reveal interesting correlations to student engagement and could have potential implications for hiring practices, such as student involvement in the process.

The role of technology was not explored in this study; however, its impact on engagement in the online environment provides another area for study. Student exposure to rapid technological development has exposed them to new forms of media literacy (Considine, Horton & Moorman, 2009; Prensky, 2006). It is possible that engagement of the online learner carries unique considerations from that of the face-to-face classroom learner.

Demographic factors influence engagement in a myriad of ways. These require further exploration in postsecondary education. Consciously unpacking the hidden curriculum in regard to notions of success, involvement, values, quality and purpose all impact our understanding of engagement and disengagement. Such research could help advance our understanding of individual needs, offer insights into effective interventions and empower faculty with confidence to assist students. In the end a more democratic form of education could evolve.
Students experiencing monumental struggles were often seen to engage despite the challenges faced. It is recommended such ‘success stories’ be examined for what they can reveal about student engagement. It is also recommended those who see themselves as ‘unengaged’ or ‘disengaged’ be interviewed to see how their perspectives and understandings can enrich our understanding of the concept.

Faculty who were too busy may have had unique perspectives to share that were not contained in the results offered here. It is also important to note that there are more part-time faculty that teach in this school, perhaps resulting in the students spending more time with part-time than full-time teachers. Examination of the differences of part-time faculty may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding.

“Administrators and faculty members must recognize that virtually every institutional policy and practice (e.g., class schedules, regulations on class attendance, academic probation, and participation in honours courses; policies on office hours for faculty, student orientation, and advising) can affect the way students spend their time and amount of effort they devote to academic pursuits” (Astin, 1984, p. 523). The same can be argued about decisions on non-academic issues such as new buildings, extracurricular activities and events. While this study concentrates on the classroom experience, student engagement transcends all levels of the student experience. Karp, Hughes and O’Gara (2008) assert that social integration is critical and developed through networks initiated in classroom activities. “Classroom discussions, for example, help students feel academically connected to the college while also promoting relationships that extend to social activities outside the classroom. The networks allow students to navigate the campus environment, access knowledge about the college, create a sense of social belonging, and, ultimately, feel that there are people who care about their academic welfare”
Cross-campus, cross-divisional exploration impacting the larger college culture of engagement is needed.

There is no doubt that student engagement requires a commitment across all layers and services and departments of a college and its campuses and beyond. There is also little doubt that what happens in the classroom is significantly influential in this regard. This requires recognition for the two-way process that has been identified in this study as critical for us to acknowledge.

As Cameron (1999) asserts, “The learning process can be guided, coached, and modeled by the teacher, but it is the involvement and active participation of the student that results in learning” (14.). We cannot teach students in isolation; there is a social fabric to be aware of, campus wide. Being able to assess engagement across multiple settings could lead to valuable information and added insights in what factors contribute to student investment.

**Final Thoughts**

Colleges invest time, energy and resources in the area of student engagement and pay careful attention to what the research indicates. The CCSSE Report of 2007 found improving student achievement engagement requires intentional intervention, although it matters more for some than for others. However, measures put in place labelled as ‘student engagement practices’ will not meet the needs of all students. This does not suggest efforts to do so should be tabled; it simply means that single efforts will not be adequate and should not be viewed as meeting the needs of all students. Student engagement efforts need to be diverse, reflecting varied and shifting needs. Students need to be actively involved in defining and shaping experiences that they find engaging. In general, we can do a lot better at genuine student engagement.

Our perceptions and experiences with engagement are highly personal and complex. I believe student engagement is an elusive, evolving, complex phenomenon and there are exciting
opportunities to work with our learners to more fully understand and promote it. To accomplish this in postsecondary education, it is imperative that student engagement remain a focus of ongoing dialogue and reflection.
References


Louis, M.C. (2009). A Summary and Critique of Existing Strengths-Based Educational Research Utilizing the Clifton StrengthsFinder®. Retrieved September 20, 2009, from [http://api.ning.com/files/-x6WS1SdW44d92YNRvoQWDNc-Q0uLUpTapsgVdfdBXHqc12toKPs1Pb7ZPsQflAzhq7iIM1skI8CEM0jGmwB8UsjKYeRkP1/Louisresearchreview09.pdf](http://api.ning.com/files/-x6WS1SdW44d92YNRvoQWDNc-Q0uLUpTapsgVdfdBXHqc12toKPs1Pb7ZPsQflAzhq7iIM1skI8CEM0jGmwB8UsjKYeRkP1/Louisresearchreview09.pdf)


Appendix 1

Faculty Information Package
Research on “STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: VIEWS FROM INSIDE ONE POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTION”

My name is Deborah Dunbar and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Administration of the Theory and Policy Studies Department at OISE/UT. I am independently conducting a qualitative research project, which will fulfill partial requirement for my Doctor of Philosophy degree. This research project is supervised by my advisor, Dr. J. Ryan, a PhD in the Educational Administration, Department of Theory and Policy Studies. Consequently, Dr. Ryan can be reached at anytime during this research project to verify everything that I outline in this information letter and to answer any questions about the project that you may have. His contact information is listed at the bottom of this letter along with my contact information.

The purpose of my research project is to learn more about how college students and faculty view and understand student engagement. By participating in this research, you will be helping us gain a deeper understanding of the concept of student engagement. It is hoped this understanding will facilitate a better learning experience for students as findings from this study may potentially assist in various areas such as the creation of policy, design of curriculum delivery strategies, successful retention of students in the postsecondary education system and faculty professional development. What I learn as a result of this research may benefit the college community in ensuring that we are attending to engaging students in a conscious and dedicated manner.

I wish to accomplish my goal by conducting classroom observations and interviews, either individual or small group, with at least 24 volunteer participants: 8 faculty members who have taught at the college for at least two years in a full-time capacity and a minimum of 16 full-time students in at least the second year of their current program. For every faculty member who volunteers I would like to arrange to observe two hours of scheduled classroom teaching (over two visits) and then a follow-up interview. Each student volunteer interviewed, either individually or in a small group, will be a member of those observed classes. Each interview will last approximately an hour and will be audio-taped only with the permission of the participant. The interview will be conducted at a date, time and location that is convenient for the participant. I would also like to request permission to contact participants by telephone or email after the interview if I need to clarify any information. Copies of the interview questions for both faculty and students are attached.

All information that the participants provide will be fully confidential. All notes, interview tapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home office. The tapes and transcripts will be kept for five years, after which they will be systematically destroyed. The results of this research project will inform my thesis research. When writing up the results of the research, I will change the participants’ names to protect their anonymity. I may write up the results of the research as an article in a journal and/or present them at a conference.
There is no known risk associated with your participation in this research although it should be made clear that gathering your ideas regarding strategies to improve student engagement does not necessarily mean they will be implemented. The information you provide and your identity will remain entirely confidential with transcribed excerpts simply identifying the participants as either a student or faculty member. Participants are not obliged to answer all the interview questions and may withdraw from the research study at any time. Participants will also be given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and to change or delete any information that may identify them or that they do not wish to include in the study.

I would be happy to notify you when the study is completed and share information on how to access a summary or complete report of the results of the research if you would provide me a personal email address.

If you are interested and willing to volunteer, please sign the attached consent form and return it to me (Deborah Dunbar). I would be pleased to describe the research in more detail and to answer any questions that you may have. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and for considering my request. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Deborah Dunbar

Student Investigator
Name: (Mrs.) Deborah Dunbar
PhD Candidate, OISE/UT
Phone Number: 905.857.5734
Email: deborah.dunbar@utoronto.ca

Thesis Supervisor:
Name: Dr. Jim Ryan
Professor, OISE/UT
Phone Number: 416.978.1152
Email: jryan@oise.utoronto.ca

University of Toronto
Office of Research Ethics
McMurrich Building
12 Queen’s Park Cres. W.
3rd Floor
Toronto, Ontario
M5S 1S8
Consent Form for Faculty Participants

I, ________________________, have carefully read the attached Information Letter for the research entitled STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: VIEWS FROM INSIDE ONE POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTION. Deborah Dunbar has explained this project to me and has answered all of my questions about it. I understand that if I have additional questions, I can contact Deborah at any time during the research project. I also understand that I may decline or withdraw from participation at any time without negative consequences.

My signature below verifies that I have agreed to participate in the research entitled STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: VIEWS FROM INSIDE ONE POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTION as it has been described in the Information Letter. My signature below also verifies that I am fully competent to sign this Consent Form and that I have received a copy of the Information Letter and the Informed Consent Form for my files.

Agreement to Participate

___________________________________   __________________________________
Participant’s Signature                              Date

___________________________________
Print Name

Preferred Method of Initial Contact (please check and complete):

____ Telephone: (___)_____-__________

____ Email: ___________________________@___________________

Please return completed form to Deborah Dunbar - Room EX201, North Campus or deborah.dunbar@humber.ca
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: VIEWS FROM INSIDE ONE POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTION

Faculty Interview Questions

I. Background information

1. How long have you been a full-time faculty member with this college?
2. What drew you to participating in this research?

II. Student Engagement

1. What kinds of things come to mind for you when you hear the term ‘student engagement’?
2. When you think of engagement, you think of engagement for what?
3. How is this unique from the perspectives of other faculty?
4. How do you see the following influencing on your understanding of student engagement?
   - Sex
   - Language
   - Ethnic identification
   - Socio-economic factors
   - Age
   - Ability
   - Sexual Orientation
5. What do you perceive as specific similarities and/or differences between the views of students and the views of faculty members in understanding student engagement?
6. How do you determine your students are engaged? How do they act? How do they feel? How do they think?
7. What helps engage them?
8. How do you determine that your students are not engaged?
9. What barriers impede a student’s engagement?
10. Can you describe examples of student engagement despite barriers?

11. Has your concept of engagement changed over time? If so how?

III. Other

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences or thoughts about student engagement that you would like to add?

________________________________

(Mrs.) Deborah Dunbar
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CANADA
deborah.dunbar@utoronto.ca
Appendix II

Student Information Package
Research on “STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: VIEWS FROM INSIDE ONE POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTION”

My name is Deborah Dunbar and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Administration of the Theory and Policy Studies Department at OISE/UT. I have spent a couple of hours over the past couple of weeks observing your faculty and now am interested in talking to you as students to gather your thoughts and experiences to complete a research study on student engagement. The purpose of my research project is to learn more about how college students and faculty view and understand student engagement. By participating in this research, you will be helping us gain a deeper understanding of the concept and it is hoped this understanding will facilitate a better learning experience for students as findings may assist in various areas such as the creation of policy, design of curriculum delivery strategies, successful retention of students in the postsecondary education system and faculty professional development. What I learn as a result of this research may benefit the college community in ensuring that we are attending to engaging students in a conscious and dedicated manner.

I am looking for a minimum of 16 full-time students in at least the second year of their current program. My plan is to interview the faculty of each classroom I observe and seek student volunteer participants from those same classes. Each student volunteer interviewed will be able to be interviewed individually or in a small group. Each interview will last approximately an hour and will be audio-taped only with the permission of the participant. The interview will be conducted at a date, time and location that is convenient for the participant. I would also like to request permission to contact participants by telephone or email after the interview if I need to clarify any information. Copies of the interview questions for both faculty and students are attached.

All information that the participants provide will be fully confidential. All notes, interview tapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home office. The tapes and transcripts will be kept for five years, after which they will be systematically destroyed. The results of this research project will inform my thesis research. When writing up the results of the research, I will change the participants’ names to protect their anonymity. I may write up the results of the research as an article in a journal and/or present them at a conference.

There is no known risk associated with your participation in this research although it should be made clear that gathering your ideas regarding strategies to improve student engagement does not necessarily mean they will be implemented. The information you provide and your identity will remain entirely confidential with transcribed excerpts simply identifying the participants as either a student or faculty member. Participants are not obliged to answer all the interview questions and may withdraw from the research study at any time. Participants will also be given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and to change or delete any information that
may identify them or that they do not wish to include in the study.

This research is being independently conducted in order to fulfill partial requirement for my Doctor of Philosophy degree. This research project is supervised by my advisor, Dr. J. Ryan, a PhD in the Educational Administration, Department of Theory and Policy Studies. Consequently, Dr. Ryan can be reached at anytime during this research project to verify everything that I outline in this information letter and to answer any questions about the project that you may have. His contact information is listed at the bottom of this letter along with my contact information.

I would be happy to notify you when the study is completed and share information on how to access a summary or complete report of the results of the research if you would provide me a personal email address.

If you are interested and willing to volunteer, please sign the attached consent form and return it to me (Deborah Dunbar). I would be pleased to describe the research in more detail and to answer any questions that you may have. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and for considering my request. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Deborah Dunbar

Student Investigator
Name: (Mrs.) Deborah Dunbar
PhD Candidate, OISE/UT
Phone Number: 905.857.5734
Email: deborah.dunbar@utoronto.ca

Thesis Supervisor:
Name: Dr. Jim Ryan
Professor, OISE/UT
Phone Number: 416.978.1152
Email: jryan@oise.utoronto.ca

University of Toronto
Office of Research Ethics
McMurrich Building
12 Queen’s Park Cres. W.
3rd Floor
Toronto, Ontario
M5S 1S8
Consent Form for Student Participants

I, ________________________, have carefully read the attached Information Letter for the research entitled STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: VIEWS FROM INSIDE ONE POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTION. Deborah Dunbar has explained this project to me and has answered all of my questions about it. I understand that if I have additional questions, I can contact Deborah at any time during the research project. I also understand that I may decline or withdraw from participation at any time without negative consequences.

My signature below verifies that I have agreed to participate in the research entitled STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: VIEWS FROM INSIDE ONE POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTION as it has been described in the Information Letter. My signature below also verifies that I am fully competent to sign this Consent Form and that I have received a copy of the Information Letter and the Informed Consent Form for my files.

Agreement to Participate

Participant’s Signature ___________________________ Date ______________

Print Name____________________________________

Preferred Method of Initial Contact (please check and complete):

___ Telephone: (___)___-___________

___ Email: ___________________________@___________________

I prefer to be interviewed individually _____ OR in a small group (up to 5 students) ____

Please initial each of the following to verify:

- you are over the age of 18 years ______
- you are in your second or third year of studies in this program ______
- you are registered as a full-time student (i.e. over 60% of course load) ______

Please choose ONE of the following to describe your own level of engagement:

1 = Highly Engaged _____ 2 = Somewhat Engaged _____ 3 = Not Usually Engaged _____

Please return completed form to Deborah Dunbar - Room EX201, North Campus or deborah.dunbar@humber.ca
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: VIEWS FROM INSIDE ONE POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTION

Student Interview Questions

I. Background information

1. How long have you been in full-time attendance at this college?

2. What drew you to participating in this research?

II. Student Engagement

1. What kinds of things come to mind for you when you hear the term ‘student engagement’?

2. When you think of engagement you think of engagement for what?

3. How is this unique from the perspectives of other students?

4. How do you see the following impacting on your understanding of student engagement?
   - Gender
   - Language
   - Ethnic identification
   - Socio-economic factors
   - Age
   - Ability
   - Sexual orientation

5. What do you perceive as specific similarities and/or differences between the views of students and the views of faculty members in understanding engagement?

6. How do you know when you are engaged? How do you act? What do you feel? How do you think?

7. What helps engage you?

8. How do you know when you are not engaged? What does this look like? What does this feel like?
9. What barriers *impede your* engagement?

10. Can you describe examples of being engaged *despite* barriers?

11. Has your concept of engagement changed over time? If so how?

III. Other

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences or thoughts about student engagement that you would like to add?

________________________________

(Mrs.) Deborah Dunbar  
PhD candidate  
Educational Administration  
Department of Theory and Policy Studies  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education / University of Toronto  
252 Bloor Street West  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6  
CANADA  
deborah.dunbar@utoronto.ca
Demographic Information of Student Participants

1. Your age in years ____

2. Your sex: Female ___ Male ___

3. Is English the first language you learned? Yes ___ No ___
   Other: Please specify _________________________

4. Do you consider yourself a member of a visible minority group?
   a. No ___
   b. Yes ___
      If yes, please identify which group(s):
      ________________________________

5. Do you consider yourself as having a disability (emotional, mental, physical or learning)?
   a. No ___
   b. Yes ___ Please select one of the following
      i. Learning
      ii. Mobility
      iii. Sensory
      iv. Other: Please specify ________________________________

6. Regarding financing your education, how concerned are you about having enough to pay for your school and living expenses this year?
   a. Very concerned ___
   b. Sometimes concerned ___
   c. Rarely concerned ___
   d. Never concerned ___