

# Teaching university students how to learn matters for retaining them

April 5 2024, by Deena Kara Shaffer

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It's acceptance letter season. High school students across the country are waiting, nervous for that "yes" or "no" from the colleges and universities where they've applied.

These offers come with big promises. Students' hearts hold big hopes. But what happens when students arrive where they've so wanted to go?

Where incoming students have optimism, I have concerns. Against a strained [financial backdrop for universities, with cuts](#) and [mounting deficits](#) as administrators revisit budget allocations, I want to shout, "prioritize student retention!"

Helping learners stay who want to stay has been at the center of my post-secondary career. In my doctoral work in holistic learning strategies, in professional [consulting work supporting students and in my publications](#), I have focused on how learning interventions can support students.

As an adjunct faculty member in Toronto Metropolitan University's Faculty of Arts, I am teaching a learning and development [course on student thriving](#), and at York University, I lead a student services department focused on student retention in the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change.

## **Learning and teaching gaps**

Post-COVID-19 learning gaps are heavy on educators' minds. Pandemic-related school closures led to significant learning losses. As [Ontario researchers warned](#), these losses particularly affected "[low-income families in which racialized and Indigenous groups, newcomers and people with disabilities are over-represented](#)."

Educators are [slowly understanding and addressing gaps in student learning](#), but lots was lost for learners, many of whom are soon to start [post-secondary education](#). Some are already there, and are wondering how to keep going.

Turns out, we shouldn't only be concerned about students lagging behind

via missed curricular learning, [but also a "theory-practice"](#) lag as well—meaning the very way many courses have been designed too often assumes students understand *how* to learn.

## Learning how to learn

The importance of learning strategies (sometimes called metacognition) has [been well studied](#), and it's clear that acquiring learning strategies has a positive impact on students. Yet for many students I work with who are struggling with post-secondary studies, the notion of learning strategies is new.

Offering learning strategies doesn't mean offering tutoring, academic advising, psychological support or formal disability counseling—yet it incorporates threads of each.

Teaching learning strategies is about teaching how to plan and prioritize, how to take notes and focus, how to study and take tests and how to research and work collaboratively in groups. Underneath every school task are strategies for how to do them.

Each academic year, colleges and universities experience students not returning. Attrition rates average between [10 to 20 percent of their learners](#).

In the 2023 academic year [in Canada, McGill University had the highest retention rate at 94.3 percent, while Laurentian University had the lowest at 71.4 percent](#).

## Role of academic performance

What's known about students who leave? After family and finance,

academic performance is a significant variable. Leavers are "[less likely to have higher grades during their first year of post-secondary education](#)."

In a six-college attrition study, available student services like academic support and on-campus tutoring were [barely relied upon by the majority of students who left](#). In this same report, early leavers said they weren't "academically prepared for their program." They also "seem[ed] to accept personal responsibility for this" and didn't consider whether college resources could have helped them.

What if these students had more explicit education about how to learn? Ability and performance [increase when learners are taught how to learn](#), yet metacognitive skills [continue to be](#) minimally implemented.

## High cost for leavers

There are many challenges to retaining students, including how to measure it. Graduation rates are an incomplete metric, because this misses students who [step away](#) but not drop out—who transfer, or take parental or medical leave. What counts as retention, [it turns out, is far from straightforward](#).

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario highlights that a quarter of post-secondary students haven't finished after eight years. This comes with a high cost: for institutions via lost tuition, and for students who won't "[reap the benefits of a completed credential, such as increased earnings and lower unemployment rate](#)."

## Challenges with student retention

Why don't post-secondary institutions retain more students—learners

who've been asked and accepted to attend?

More emphasis is placed on recruitment rather than retention. Retaining students is often framed as being about individual learner inabilities, instead of being related to existing barriers and social realities.

For example, [one-fifth of Canadian students struggle with significant mental health challenges](#). [Half of domestic and 75 percent of international students experience food insecurity](#). Post-secondary students [experience high incidents of gender-based violence](#).

Whether students feel [they belong](#) affects retention. Feeling welcome, experiencing affinity and healthy relationships with peers and professionals on campus are essential to a student staying.

## **Importance of academic skills**

Supporting students' learning also needs to be included in retention conversations. A [2019 study on "academic skill deficiencies"](#) revealed through surveying more than 2,200 students at four Ontario university campuses that over half were "at risk" or "dysfunctional" in their scholastic abilities. And that was pre-pandemic, and before generative AI like ChatGPT became widely available to users.

There are campus learning centers and supports, but students' engagement with these are typically optional. This means these co-curricular services remain unknown or out of reach to many, like students with [long commutes](#) and [irregular or long work hours](#).

## **Financial and moral consequences**

[In Humber College's 2014 report on student attrition](#), the average cost of

recruiting 100 students was just over \$101,000. The average cost of losing those students after their first year, in the form of lost unrealized grants and a spectrum of expenses, was just over \$4.4 million dollars.

To retain a student isn't just a financial gain, it's a moral obligation. They were invited to come.

This time of university and college offers of admission is also when many students decide whether to return. There'll always be things out of a post-secondary's purview—but sharing how to learn isn't one of them.

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