

# How Do You Keep Students From Checking Out in a Large Lecture Hall?

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## THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

Happy Thursday, and welcome to Teaching. This week the newsletter is curated by Beckie. First up, Beth shares a scene that stayed with her from a recent reporting trip — and what it means for colleges' efforts to innovate. Then I'll fill you in on an effort to improve introductory math, share a list of new books compiled by two of our colleagues at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and run through the highlights of a report on assessing student learning.

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### **Personalizing the Large Lecture**

Recently I visited Michigan State University to report a story about academic innovation centers. And while there was enthusiasm to spare for the work of its Hub for Innovation in Learning and Technology, what stayed with me were not the whiteboards, sticky notes, and optimistic talk of design thinking, but the students in the back of a psychology class. Inside this vast lecture hall, one professor had the thankless job of trying to manage a class of more than 600 students. He tried to make the course engaging with short, relatable descriptions of the material and pop-up quizzes to keep students involved. But a bunch of them were checked out. They were scrolling through Twitter, scanning the course catalogue, and listening to music. One enterprising student had *Grey's Anatomy* playing on her phone. When it came time to take one of the pop quizzes — all students had clickers — she scanned her PowerPoint slides, gave her answer, and kept watching. How, I wondered, can you innovate your way out of that problem?

That's one of the biggest challenges these innovation centers face, I think. They can attract the early adopters, crunch data, and jump-start conversations about curricular redesign. But they can't shrink the size of Psych 101 or give the professor more teaching assistants. At Michigan State, this professor is going to create mandatory online study groups, so students can get to know each other a bit, at least virtually. What else might work? What do you do to personalize a large lecture class and keep students engaged? Email me at [beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com](mailto:beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com).

### **Getting Past a Roadblock**

Math is widely seen as a barrier for students. When the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities announced this week that it will work with a dozen institutions to study various

approaches for using active-learning techniques in introductory math courses, it called those courses “the most common roadblock to a degree” in the STEM disciplines.

The project, which is funded by the National Science Foundation, is focused especially on helping students from underrepresented minorities succeed. By examining the 12 universities’ approaches, it aims to develop models “that can work at virtually any institution.”

Math can trip students up even if they don’t intend to major in STEM. Our former colleague Shannon Najmabadi took stock of efforts to make math “more relevant and engaging” in [this article](#) last year. And [Stan Yoshinobu](#), one of the innovative teachers profiled in our [special report](#) on classroom trailblazers, is working to bring inquiry-based learning to math students of all stripes.

Is there a course that dissuades students from pursuing your discipline? Has your department found a way to help students succeed in it? Share your experience with me at [beckie.supiano@chronicle.com](mailto:beckie.supiano@chronicle.com), and I may mention it in a future newsletter.

## **New Books**

Several of the new books on higher education compiled this week by our colleagues Ruth Hammond and Brianna A. Tucker pertain to teaching and learning. Among them: *Teaching Interculturally: A Framework for Integrating Disciplinary Knowledge and Intercultural Development*, which “encourages the use of ‘productive discomfort’ in the intercultural classroom,” and *Promoting Social Justice Through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, which “describes how educators and students can promote equity and social justice in diverse disciplines.” Check out all 10 titles [here](#).

## **Improving Assessment Practices**

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment released its latest look at how colleges collect and use evidence of student learning today. The report, based on a survey of provosts, documents the growing use of “authentic measures of student learning,” such as rubrics and classroom-based performance assessment. It also describes challenges facing assessment efforts, including communicating effectively about student learning and improving professional development for faculty members. You can read the full report [here](#).

What does using authentic measures of student learning look like in practice? This 2016 [story](#) from Dan that follows a group of professors at Central Connecticut State University provides a nice illustration.

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us at [dan.berrett@chronicle.com](mailto:dan.berrett@chronicle.com), [beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com](mailto:beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com), or [beckie.supiano@chronicle.com](mailto:beckie.supiano@chronicle.com). If you have been forwarded this newsletter and would like to sign up to receive your own copy, you can do so [here](#).

— Beckie and Beth

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