



Student Engagement, AI, and Education: Author Rebecca Winthrop Visits St. Andrew's

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Rebecca Winthrop, co-author of *The Disengaged Teen: Helping Kids Learn Better, Feel Better, and Live Better*, visited St. Andrew's to discuss student engagement and AI.

As part of Opening of School faculty dialogue, St. Andrew's hosted guest speaker Rebecca Winthrop, a senior fellow and director of the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution, and author, with Jenny Anderson, of *The Disengaged Teen: Helping Kids Learn Better, Feel Better, and Live Better*. Winthrop's August 20 visit was the culmination of greater faculty discourse around the topics of teaching, learning, and the intellectual culture of St. Andrew's.

Dean of Teaching and Learning Emily Pressman, who initiated Winthrop's visit, was fascinated with Winthrop's work after listening to her on an episode of *The Ezra Klein Show* titled "We Have to Really Rethink the Purpose of Education."

"No sooner had I begun to type an email to department chairs to listen to this episode, I had an email sitting in my inbox suggesting I do the same," said Pressman, who included Winthrop's book on the faculty "summer mixtape," a curated list of reading and listening opportunities to inspire conversation.

Throughout her presentation, "Student Engagement, AI, and Education," Winthrop and faculty members tussled with big questions: What is the purpose of education? What signals an engaged student? How do educators redefine the purpose of education in an AI world?

"Why should we care about student engagement?" Winthrop asked. "Educators might tell you engagement is 'nice to have' after you deal with the *real* stuff. But my messaging is engagement is not the cherry on top—it's the whole ice cream."

Bolstered by a discussion model that championed audience participation, Winthrop analyzed the four dimensions of student engagement: behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and initiative. She also shared the modes of engagement, with students falling into either passenger, resister, achiever, or explorer roles, and asked faculty to choose which most fit their teenage experience and discuss with peers.

The conversation then shifted to students and generative AI.

“When we think about our roles as educators, and as stewards of young people’s minds and hearts, there is nothing with more seismic impact than generative AI,” Winthrop said. “It’s almost like a new species is evolving—there is now this other ‘thing’ that impacts how we work and how we teach. Yet it all depends on what we do as humans with agency.”

Winthrop shared research from the Brookings Global Task Force on AI In Education and spoke about the educator’s role in equipping students with the skills to navigate this new world and in deepening students’ intellectual curiosity.

Next week, when faculty members joyfully fling open their classroom doors again, they will do so having reflected together on teaching priorities with enhanced learning from Winthrop, and with a strong reminder that the foundation of the St. Andrew’s experience already prioritizes engagement, authenticity, and wonder.

“As Dr. Rebecca Winthrop shared what the science shows about student engagement and agency, we affirmed our core St. Andrew’s approach—our focus on relationships and being present together, our work to engage students deeply in their learning and help them develop their authentic voices,” said Associate Head of School for Academic Affairs Gretchen Hurtt ’90. “We have a unique opportunity to enhance and push student engagement because we are already fully residential, phone-free, and community-focused. Dr. Winthrop encouraged us to hold to our mission and values while also preparing leaders who will think creatively and wisely about the ethics, questions, and opportunities afforded by new AI technology.”