

Unlocking the Magic of Student Engagement: Making High Impact Programming (HIP) Work for You

IDEAS FROM NCAN 2025 Workshop by Carlos Ojeda Jr.

At the 2025 NCAN Conference, educators came together in the Unlocking the Magic of Student Engagement workshop to take on a challenge: **design a powerful, student-centered college-going event.**

Carlos Ojeda Jr. asked participants to consider every part of the experience: how to set the vibe at the start, break the ice, energize the group, and create activities that would leave a lasting impact.

The ideas collected here are the result of that collaboration, showcasing the creativity and commitment of educators who believe in keeping students motivated, engaged, and inspired about their futures.

STARTING CHECK LIST (SET THE VIBE)

***“The moment students walk in, they should feel it’s different.
That’s the vibe. That’s the start.”***

- College-themed decorations
- School mascots present & participating
- Selfie frames for photos
- College drumlines or step shows
- Goodie bags for participants
- Food & snacks tied to the theme
- Raffle prizes
- Collect songs from students during registration for a playlist



ICEBREAKERS (BREAK THE ICE)

"Icebreakers aren't just games, they are the bridge to trust, comfort, and connection."

- **This or That:** Students choose between two options by moving to one side of the room or the other, physically showing their preference in a quick, visual way.
 - **Perfect School Edition:** Move based on preference for your perfect school: large or small, commuter or residential, in-state or out-of-state, small town or city, and public or private schools, etc.
 - **Hot Takes:** Students move in response to common college misconceptions by moving to the side of the room labeled "true" or "false," sparking conversation and reflection on what they've heard about higher education.
- **Bingo:** Students play a customized bingo game with cards designed specifically for your program, location, or student group, encouraging interaction and discussion about shared experiences or knowledge.
- **Career Pathway Match:** Students receive name tags representing various majors and careers, then move around to find their correct match and introduce themselves by discussing the connection between the two.
- **Student + Parent Dream Job:** Students ask their parents about their favorite childhood dream job and then identify a related college or major that could lead to that career, creating meaningful family and career connections.



ENERGIZERS (KEEP THE ENERGY HIGH)

“Energizers aren’t fillers. They’re sparks. Use them to bring the room back to life and remind students this is supposed to be fun.”

- **Zip / Zap / Zop:** Players stand in a circle and keep a fast rhythm by passing energy with “Zip” (next to you), “Zap” (anyone), or “Zop” (across/return), with optional twists like body movements, elimination rounds, or adding a “Boing” to bounce it back.
- **Rock, Paper, Scissors:** Players start in pairs playing Rock, Paper, Scissors; the winner finds a new opponent while the loser joins their cheering squad. The game continues until two finalists face off, each backed by half the room, with one ultimate champion emerging.
- **Line Up By:** Divide into 2-3 teams, and without talking, students must line up by different categories (birthday order, shoe size, height, alphabetical). The team that does it the quickest and correctly wins
- **Red Light, Green Light:** Students start on one side of the room and move forward based on college exploration questions: Do you know your major, have you secured financial aid, are you going in/out of state, etc?
- **Ninja Game:** Stand in a circle, strike a ninja pose on “3, 2, 1, NINJA!,” then take turns using one move at a time to chop or kick opponents’ limbs until the last ninja is standing.



ACTIVITIES (DEEP ENGAGEMENT)

"Ordinary games turn into extraordinary lessons when you remix them with purpose."

- **The Weight of College:** Students build straw bridges and place decorative rocks labeled with personal challenges onto them, using the bridges to represent colleges and the rocks to symbolize barriers, then reflect on how compatibility and priorities impact their college choices.
- **Lotería Game:** Students play a customized version of the traditional Lotería game where the cards and prompts are tied to the college-going process and their own personal pathways
- **Campus Scavenger Hunt:** Students participate in an interactive scavenger hunt across a campus, discovering resources, locations, and services that help them envision themselves in the college environment.
- **College Exploration Scavenger Hunt:** Students complete a scavenger hunt designed to help them learn about colleges, majors, and opportunities at the campuses they're visiting.
- **The College Is Right:** In groups, students brainstorm 10 important college choice factors, narrow them down to their top three priorities, and then research which colleges align with all three.
- **Balloon Preference Pop:** Groups of 6 play by having 5 students hold balloons labeled with different college profiles while one student shares their preferences, and balloons are popped when they don't align until the last balloon left represents the best fit.
- **College Charades:** Students draw 2 colleges and two performance styles (such as a poem, rap, or skit), then act them out for peers to guess which school they selected.
- **Map It Out!:** Groups choose a U.S. region, research colleges in that area, and add the information to a collaborative map until all 50 states are represented by the end of the session.

