

Creating Community in ALP Courses

Many community college students struggle to feel a sense of community on campus. Community colleges generally do not have on-campus housing, so students come to class and leave immediately afterward, seldom partaking in extracurricular activities. This is especially true of students who attend classes in the evening, on the weekends, or online. This singular focus on coming to class, and, more urgently, leaving class, makes it difficult for these students to connect with their college. Yet research shows that students who develop deeper connections to campus are more successful[1]. When students are struggling merely to make it to class, how can they develop lasting bonds with each other, their professors, and their college?

Accelerated learning programs (ALP) offer an opportunity for instructors to foster a sense of community among students. ALP courses combine two semesters of English into one—a traditional first semester English composition class and a brush-up English course. ALP classes are smaller and more intimate. They provide students more opportunities to engage with the material, their fellow classmates, and their professor. There is a strong focus on the learning-centered model, and the professor walks away from the environment learning more about how to successfully structure a class. ALP classes also move students through material twice as fast as a standard model, increasing retention rates and helping students graduate more quickly.

To encourage the collaborative aspect of the ALP classroom, or indeed any small cohort class, here are a few strategies to use:

1. **Complete a traditional icebreaker.** I often use games such as Scattergories as an icebreaker in my freshmen composition courses. In my ALP classes, I also go around the room and have each student introduce him- or herself and provide a bit of personal information, including details about career and family life. This worked so well that one semester, I found my students had completed the exercise themselves while I was out of the room! Right away, students learn that they have a lot in common with each other, and they feel less alone on their journey.
2. **Have students exchange contact information.** This reinforces interdependence and encourages students to look to one another for missed assignments.

It also encourages students to communicate and meet up for study sessions outside of class. Many ALP students matriculate through their degrees together, and the bonds they form in the classroom carry on throughout their college experience.

3. **Create a safe environment.** There is an assumption that classrooms are safe spaces, but many students feel uncomfortable sharing aspects of their personal lives. I use members of my family as personal examples for language concepts and in anecdotes. By sharing my own personal experiences, students feel more at ease sharing theirs.
4. **Create a safe environment.** This is not a misprint. I repeat this instruction as I instill the old fashioned “Vegas Rules” Treatise: what happens in the classroom, stays in the classroom. This allows students to trust the process and understand that they have nothing to be ashamed of when it comes to learning. It is also in compliance with FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act). It is important to let the students know that there is empathy, not apathy, in the classroom.
5. **Engage in the learning.** Professors should participate in some of the assessments students have to complete. Answering one of the questions posed in an online discussion board along with the students is a quick way to engage. Besides confirming that the assessment you posted is correct, it gives students an appropriate blueprint for their own responses.
6. **Share your story.** Students returning to the educational environment are often intimidated by the sheer vastness of the process they are undertaking. It may sound hyperbolic, but they have shifted their whole existence to make room for their education. It does not come without substantial stress. While it’s very easy to speak from a lectern (or smart podium) about what they need to do to succeed, it is important to understand that at this stage, students often have not developed that growth mindset that will increase their retention. I give my students some background information about myself, including the fact that I am a graduate of the very community college where I teach.
7. **Check in periodically.** Give students a sense of where they are in the term, what deadlines are

approaching, and how they might manage their time. Don't be afraid to schedule time for reflection. During midterm week, I pause the pace of the course and play Angela Duckworth's TED Talk on grit. It's a great reminder of what they will need to continue to succeed in the course, in school, and in life. In addition to playing the video, I have them complete an essay on how gritty they have been.

8. **Celebrate their success.** At the end of the semester, I congratulate my students for surviving a hard semester and have the entire class give themselves a hand. I also present the ALP students with certificates. They cost no money as they can be generated from a standard word processor, but seeing their faces as they receive the certificates is like seeing them receive their diploma.

Engaging in these small practices brings ALP students into an educational mindset, which in turn develops hardy students who not only succeed, but excel. Moreover, it creates a sense of community and belonging at our college. This community feel does wonders in transforming students into partners of learning far beyond the classroom.

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[1] Roof-Ray, Regina. "Let Me Take a Selfie." *Innovation Abstracts*, Volume XL, No. 24, August 2, 2018. https://www.nisod.org/2018/08/02/xl_24/