



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

May 3, 2018 ♦ Vol. XL, No. 16

Fostering Belonging in Community College Classrooms

Recent data from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) indicates that there are 22.7 million students enrolled in the country's massive higher education system, which is comprised of over 4,300 colleges and universities. The system's size and capacity to accommodate so many learners is surpassed only by the diversity of institutions and students who attend them. For example, there are 100 historically Black colleges and universities, 260 research universities, and approximately 1,200 community and technical colleges. Community and technical colleges vary in terms of their geographic location, size, and resources, but generally, they are open-access institutions that serve large numbers of students who aspire to obtain higher education degrees.

Today's community and technical college students are diverse and quite different from college students of bygone eras. For instance, women represent the majority of students on most college campuses today, including at community and technical colleges. Racial and ethnic minorities represent a larger proportion of today's college students than was once even *possible* due to ending de jure segregation in the 1960s, Black students being admitted to predominantly White institutions in the 1970s, and shifts in public policy and student financial aid programs (e.g., Federal Pell Grants) since the 1980s. ED data indicate that there are two million Black students in higher education, two-thirds of whom are Black women. Fifty percent of Black and Latino men who attend postsecondary institutions start their postsecondary careers at community and technical colleges. Virtually one-third of all college students identify as "first in their immediate family" to attend college, and it is estimated that those numbers are higher at community and technical colleges.

Enrollment rates for underserved or "vulnerable" student populations are significantly higher at community and technical colleges compared to four-year universities, since community and technical colleges tend to be more accessible, more affordable, and career oriented. The term "vulnerable" refers to students who are considered susceptible to academic failure due to factors over which they have little or no immediate control (e.g., age, ability). Even though "vulnerable" students can more readily get admitted to community and technical colleges, their ability to get enrolled does not guarantee their degrees. These stats are disconcerting for a number of reasons, chief among them is that all evidence points to the fact that the maximum return on students' investments in college favors those who

complete their degrees, not just those students who attend classes for a few weeks. Indeed, educators' efforts to provide access to community and technical colleges for underserved students must be strategic and forward-thinking, connecting at all times with plans that ensure student success. Remember, access without success is relatively useless.

The accumulating evidence makes it clear that academic success in community colleges is not solely an individual process driven by differences in students' abilities, aptitudes, attitudes, aspirations, or study time. Rather, academic success is clearly a social process influenced powerfully by the extent to which students feel cared about and connected to others in the learning environment. Through my research I have discovered the critical factor that has been empirically linked to students' success in community and technical colleges: **Having a sense of belonging in academic environments.**

Having a sense of belonging is defined as "the extent to which an individual feels like a valued, accepted, and legitimate member in their academic domain" (Lewis, Stout, Pollock, Finkelstein, Ito 2016). Belonging is a basic human need—everybody wants to belong.

Having a sense of belonging is a fundamental need, almost as basic as air, water, food, and shelter. It is so vital to our existence that we constantly monitor levels of belonging (consciously or subconsciously) by interpreting contextual cues. We're wired to detect even subtle threats to our belonging. Threats to belonging can negatively impact an individual's functionality and adversely affect behaviors and reactions, especially in educational settings.

How does this work? Having a sense of belonging shapes the interpretive lens that individuals use to make meaning of moments, encounters, and experiences. For example, in academic settings, a student who feels a strong sense of belonging may dismiss a cancelled meeting with an instructor, being overlooked in class, or laughter by his or her peers after he or she made a comment in class as ordinary, irrelevant, or coincidental. However, a student who has a low sense of belonging is likely to view these same incidents through a more pessimistic lens—that the cancelled meeting reflects how the instructor feels about him or her, that the class may think that he or she is stupid, or that his or her comments in class were off target or made very little sense, even when none of these thoughts are true. The subjective experience of feeling out of place, lonely, or as if you do not belong threatens self-esteem, cuts confidence, hijacks abilities, and compromises success. Having a sense of belonging can remove doubts, restore self-esteem, raise confidence, nurture abilities, and ensure success.

Attending to students' subjective feelings of acceptance

and belonging is a promising avenue for instructors interested in increasing students' success. Below I offer specific and proven recommendations for boosting students' sense of belonging, based on empirical evidence presented in my book, *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*.

1. **Normalize the experience of feeling a lack of belonging (or alienation) and help students understand that these concerns are temporary and dissipate over time.** Go to "Week One" of your lesson plan for the course you're teaching next semester, or next week's plan if you're in the classroom now and at the start of class, greet students at the door with a smile, inviting them into the classroom (or learning lab). If possible, refer to each student by name: "Good morning, Lakisha. Come on in. I'm glad you're here." Once everyone is seated or you're ready to start instruction (whichever comes first), affirm with students that they belong in your class and they have what it takes to succeed in the course and at the institution: "Before we get started today, I'm going to take a moment to tell each of you that you belong here...you're in the right place, at the right time, and you have what it takes to excel here. Regardless of what grade you earned on the last quiz or in another class, you can do this. And I'm here to help any way I can. If you're doubting yourself, just know that's normal—everyone has doubts—and those doubts pass with time."
2. **Practice vulnerability in the classroom and share aspects of yourself with students.** Student have high expectations of educators. That's why students are so surprised when they run into their instructors acting like normal human beings while shopping for groceries. Students also assume that academic work was easy for their instructors. In most cases, nothing could be further from the truth. Instructors can help students feel like they belong when they practice vulnerability in the classroom and open up about their own academic struggles, losses, and worries, as well as how they coped with those situations. Not only does this reassure students that they can succeed despite adversity and stress, but such discussions also share with students a part of instructors they rarely make time to reveal. By getting to *really know* their instructors—their wisdom and wallows—students feel more connected to them and start to trust them. Ultimately, students will see their instructors as caring, *real people* who are concerned about their students' success, which boosts students' sense of belonging.
3. **Structure classroom practices in ways that maximize students' opportunities to cooperate, collaborate, and create positive social connections.** Remember, education is a social process, and most people "go to college" because they want to experience the social aspect of learning (Weinstein, Park 2014). Instructors

help students feel a sense of belonging when they structure classrooms in ways that compel students to positively interact with their peers. Assignments that place students in groups with diverse abilities, backgrounds, and demographics create optimal conditions for belonging, since group members are dependent on one another to successfully complete a task, solve a problem, or run an experiment. Make sure all group members are actively engaged and that women, minorities, and those prone to feeling like *outsiders* aren't relegated to peripheral support roles (e.g., recorder, note taker) or silenced altogether.

Another strategy that positively impacts community and technical college students' sense of academic belonging is a brief writing exercise where students log important goals and personal strengths and receive personal, encouraging messages from their instructors. The message from the instructor should signal that the students matter. Instructors can also provide feedback on students' assignments that praises effort and encourages hard work.

Conclusion

Educators help students succeed when they assist students increase their sense of belonging in the classroom. It is my hope that this paper arms educators with empirically-based strategies for modifying the learning environment and building social connections that foster a sense of belonging for all students.

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