



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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COMMUNITY BUILDING

At Richland College, our motto is "teaching, learning and community building." Historically, my interpretation of community building is to provide students with the education and training that will allow them to function and succeed in their community and to assess the needs of business and industry to insure that the college is providing the necessary training for prospective employees. In the last few years, my definition of community building has changed. I have developed a new sense of awareness that our college is the community and the only community that many of our students know.

When we look at the statistics of students in community colleges, we realize that for many reasons they may feel isolated—i.e., disenfranchisement from family and peers as first-generation college students, over-commitment with full-time jobs and parenting responsibilities, and lack of opportunity for interacting with fellow classmates on the college campus. Realistically, the time they spend in our class may be their only opportunity to build community. As community college instructors, we are challenged, not only by teaching subject matter, but also in providing an opportunity for students to interact in meaningful ways with their peers.

We have been challenged by business and industry to develop team players. Many of our students do not know how to connect with others, and they lack social skills that would promote connections. We are aware that whatever our level of expertise and our skill as instructors, it is the bond that students feel with other students and the instructor that promotes attendance.

Letting go of prejudices and preconceived ideas

Many of our instructors start the class with an emphasis on getting to know their students and helping them become acquainted with other students. One professor starts the semester by asking his students to formulate ideas about who he is—is he married, what kind of car does he drive, what does he do for leisure activities? In this way he opens his students' minds

about prejudging those around them, and he creates an atmosphere of interest and curiosity about fellow classmates. Another instructor pairs students and provides them with a checklist that offers choices about their partner—do they have a cat, do they like to dance? After marking their choices, without consulting their partner, students ascertain what they guessed correctly about the other person.

Wanting to go where everyone knows my name

Most instructors make an attempt to learn all of their students' names, but a few go further by emphasizing the need for students to know each others' names. One professor has students choose an affirming adjective that begins with the same letter as their first name. Students sit in a circle, and the first student gives his/her name with an adjective—e.g., Marvelous Mary. The second student must repeat this and add his name—e.g., Robust Robert. This continues around the circle with each student repeating the names and adding his/her name. Whatever methods or devices are used, it is evident that students flourish in an environment where they are perceived as being valued.

Needing to connect before we can work

Data from work/study groups confirm that there is more productivity when students or co-workers feel comfortable with each other. Trust must be established before ideas or opinions will be exposed. The most innovative ideas often are not voiced because the author fears peer rejection.

The same thing holds true in the classroom. But how can we establish trust in a class that may meet for only 15 weeks? One way is to have students connect by sharing non-risk information about themselves. Students working in groups are found to perform better if they first connect by sharing something about themselves—e.g., what is your favorite dessert, what was your favorite trip, who was your favorite elementary teacher and why, and what is your favorite color? Connecting in non-risk ways before work begins helps



students bond and makes them more comfortable in working with others.

A colleague asks students to share a treasured article and its significance as an activity. I decided to try this in my own classroom. One of my students was a middle-aged Vietnamese gentleman who was extremely shy. He had little in common with students in the class and had difficulty communicating. On the day of the treasured article activity, he came to class with a wooden flute. He explained that he and his father had made these flutes for the small village where he lived. He started to sit down; then changing his mind, he returned to the front of the class, raised the flute to his lips, and started playing a beautiful, haunting melody. The classroom sat breathless as his music enfolded us. Everyone was stunned and speechless. But from that day on when Ngo entered the classroom, there were smiles, greetings, and a tangible difference in the respect afforded him by his fellow students.

Building community with teaching colleagues

As greater effort is made to build community in the classroom, it is being developed further throughout the college. Richland College instructors and staff are inclusive and sharing. All of the techniques that I have mentioned in this article were not my own, but they came from colleagues who willingly have shared and contributed to my teaching. In seeing the college as a community where every voice is equal, we send a message to students that they are valued. In acknowledging their personal needs and interests, we help students invest more of themselves in a course. Their achievement increases, and they act more often and more proactively to help peers achieve. Students see me as a guide, not as an authority figure. I have learned to draw from the rich pool of knowledge provided by my students. It is my belief that to draw from that pool of knowledge enriches not only the teacher, but all of the students in the class.

The community circle is complete—instructors and students working together to master course material, instructors reaching out to colleagues to help them perfect and vitalize their teaching skills, and all working together to provide the community with future employees who have the academic and social skills necessary to make a positive contribution to the community.

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"The View from Here: What's Ahead for
Teaching and Learning in Community Colleges"

Tuesday, May 29

Sandra Acebo, Superintendent/President
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"Fulfilling the Highest Promise of
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