

# THE NISOD PAPERS



An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.

## Building an Academic Culture for Success

Many first-generation college enrollees fail their first semester because they have not been inculcated into an academic culture. Academic culture means the specialized norms of college life: for example, developing the particular study habits, knowledge of essay citation formats, or stylized speech appropriate for a college-level demographic. Even understanding academic decorum, such knowing who to address as “Dr.” or not, becomes a transformational agent for student success.

Academic culture is ultimately transmitted through action and imitation. College-educated parents from middle-class and upper-class families subsume academic culture during formative years by way of repeated reminders such as, “You better start thinking about your college plans.” In turn, these parents approach their own children’s college preparation similarly.

Children who receive a barrage of early cultural cues and strategies to prepare for college generally tend to succeed once there over those who do not receive the same structured planning. For many students, this academic priming, or a cultivation of academic culture, begins early—usually during middle school when parents take their children to museums, enroll them in summer camps, or give them detailed summer reading lists that provide a head start advantage. However, not all students receive the bounty of college-educated parents or parents who are adequately prepared to cultivate an academic culture for their children.

*Catch the Next* is a transformative college success program that helps first-year, first-generation college students to learn and understand academic culture to support their own success in college. Six markers of the program exist to help first-generation college students develop a critical understanding of the academic culture so that they can be successful in college and beyond:

1. Understanding the nuances of academic language.
2. Learning information culture.
3. Encouraging long-range, deferred gratification.
4. Living within vs. outside of a typical “college experience.”
5. Development of metaphorical thinking.
6. Nurturing critical and active learning.

Below is an explanation of, and purpose behind, each of the six markers of the *Catch the Next* program and their learning

outcomes. Each of these markers is a great resource, tool, and reminder for helping first-generation college students transition into the academic culture of higher education.

## The Nuances of Academic Language

I grew up reading the local paper, mainly because I saw many adults drinking their coffee and reading the newest community or city publications. I viewed this exercise of engaging locally as the “thing to do” when you became an adult, so reading local newspapers became a daily ritual for me. In time, I came across national newspapers at the library. I had never heard of the Washington Post or The New York Times before then. After reading these national publications, I quickly understood that the basic reading level required for local and national news was much different. The national papers had uncommon words, words that I had to look up in order to understand journalists’ points, and seemed geared toward an audience of college-level readers, while the local papers were written for a general, pre-high school public.

Comparing and contrasting the differences between the writing styles of national papers and local newspapers is an easy, inexpensive resource that can help first-generation college students develop a deeper understanding of the nuances of academic language. Using the two types of newspapers to demonstrate variations in audience and tone also allows student to recognize the difference in knowledge necessary to understand and distinctions between each genre, leading them to enhanced literacy.

## Learning Information Culture

Today’s social media savvy culture has created a system of prompt connection and information by encouraging digital linkage with cultures globally. However, social media psychologists point out that, among millennials, while digital culture is very fluidly connected online it is not socially connected in real-time. In other words, constant contact has become a necessity for millennials, but human contact is no longer a requirement. As a result, students tend to take the publicly aggregated data they consult for understanding online as valid and at face-value without ever inquiring into the particulars or cultural nuances of the human source behind it.

An example of this in academic culture is how, whenever asked to research information about something new, students will generally defer to Google or use Wikipedia, whereas instances of seeking out peer-reviewed articles are far and few between, if not nonexistent. Though databases

---

for credible information, such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, SocINDEX, and EBSCO, are available for students at participating college and university libraries, students do not popularly use these resources.

One important factor in a student's development of critical understanding of culture-based knowledge versus fact-based information is to be able to differentiate between "fake news" and legitimate news. Learners need to understand the differences between online material that is socially directed with specific, goal-oriented psychological purposes in mind (in other words, "fake news") and those sources that provide fact-based information (minus the editorializing). Generating awareness of and teaching students how and when to use academic databases to return information is an effective tool for refining critical understanding of what is and is not credible material in academic culture.

### **Delayed Gratification and Immediate Gratification**

Students who are underprepared for college usually struggle with understanding the complex system of credit "hours" used by colleges. This system is confusing for new students at first, but especially for first-generation college students who have never been exposed to this type of course credit management system. Over time, first-generation students begin to figure out that it may take, on average, about 30 hours (not counting summer terms) to complete a full academic year, but many do not understand the social sacrifice and discipline it takes to accrue this amount of credit hours. Long-range goals, such as successfully completing a semester or an academic year, clearly become challenging for students because of social distractions or personal distractions. Staying single or maintaining a part-time job while in school can be just as difficult as keeping the goal of graduation in sight, but it is imperative to continuously remind first-generation students of the bigger payoff in delaying immediate gratification for the rewards of college graduation.

### **Living Within vs. Outside of a Typical College Experience: The New Student**

Commuter colleges are institutions without dormitories or college-owned apartments. What sets them apart is that students have no opportunity to gather together, dine together, or live together while experiencing the rigors of college. Unfortunately, colleges that do not offer the typical on-campus social and academic experience lose the cultural momentum that institutions with a full "on-campus" experience offer.

Learning how to navigate the academic world can be treacherous without being immersed in or being able to read the social codes embedded in classrooms, dormitory life, and meeting with professors. Moreover, in the past, the non-traditional student who attended school part-time and worked full-time was an anomaly. Now, the reverse is true: studies point out that the non-traditional student has become the norm. Students at community colleges across

the country typically work more than 25 hours while also attending college full-time, juggling work, a social life, and academic responsibilities at once. Awareness of this new reality, and anticipating being personally a part of it, is not only helpful for first-generation students, but also for the faculty, staff, and administrators that will serve as student support systems on campus.

### **Thinking Critically Through Metaphors**

Listening carefully to the metaphors a particular person uses offers others an open window to that person's socio-cognitive formulations and how he or she critically absorbs the world. Metaphors provide the ability to think spatially, understand analogies and references that are part of critical thinking, and are usually distinctive of particular cultural and ethnic groups. For example, at my neighborhood bakery I notice that some Spanish-speaking customers use animal metaphors to describe certain pastries (Cuernos, or "Horns," for croissants, for example), evidence of an historical link to their working-class, pastoral roots.

The social groups we are a part of, what we read, and what media programs we engage with all determine our personal perspective. However, groupthink and media have contributed to many of the obstacles we face when it comes to social advancement, particularly in groups who follow tribal rituals and ideologies. Teaching first-generation college students to discern and analyze their own inherent social tendencies and how they inform their choices can be illuminating if the goal is to help them understand the concept of an individualized critical lens, rather than the content they are reading or viewing. Nurturing awareness of social predispositions at a personal level allows for students to recognize the diversity of thought and other predispositions, ultimately allowing students an ability to see ideas through different lenses.

### **Active Learning and Participation**

In elementary through high school, students learn and advance primarily by way of rote processes, making memory a more triumphant tool over creativity when it comes to academic success. However, college students are expected to exercise cognitive analysis and creative problem solving. This dramatic shift in gears can be confusing and difficult for students who have not been immersed in prior academic curricula that activates critical thought processes.

The basic truism is that active learners become better thinkers, develop an increased capacity for comprehension, become more adept at understanding contextual phrases, and maintain a mindset of persistence and confidence. Therefore, the more students participate in their learning, the greater the chance they have to succeed beyond their first year of college. To encourage active learning, college instructors often ask open-ended questions that require critical thinking and alternative perspectives. Assertive students will engage the questioner regardless of the

---

novelty of learning through questions, while reluctant students are those usually uninformed of the dialectical goals of open-ended questioning. The point to keep in mind is that a silent student does not always equate to a student who is unprepared for class, but potentially a student who is underprepared for entering into inquiry-based conversation and learning. Structuring conversation in the classroom to accommodate this type of student offers a level playing field for a range of academic backgrounds, and especially in promoting academic success through active learning.

Because some students may never feel comfortable participating in inquiry-based classroom discussions, encouraging all students to take notes during lecture or discussion provides for an alternative area for activating critical thinking, as students become engaged in their learning through listening, jotting down ideas, and later reflecting on those ideas. Another bit of useful knowledge is that, according to educational statisticians, a front row seat in the classroom translates to better visual and listening advantages. Moreover, studies have shown that “front row students” get higher grades.

### **Academic Culture and Academic Success**

The hegemony of academic culture is not going anywhere because it is perpetuated by students continuing to enter into college and thereby into it. However, many first-year, first-generation students in higher education will not successfully practice or adopt academic culture unless they are guided to do so. Students must understand the stakes and incorporate the cultural nuances of an academic culture in order to succeed in college, whether that occurs prior to entering college or while in college. I hope that understanding some of the core concepts and learning outcomes of Catch the Next’s program will help your efforts to support and build an academic culture for success in your classroom that allows all students, and especially first-generation students, to succeed in their first year of college and beyond.

**Dr. Rafael Castillo**, *Director, Publications and Special Projects, Catch the Next, Inc. and Professor, English and Humanities, Alamo Colleges District*

Contact the author at Alamo Colleges District, Palo Alto College, 1400 W Villaret Blvd., San Antonio, TX 78224.  
Email: rcastillo3@alamo.edu