

Creating a Sense of Student Belonging: A Quick-Start Guide

Part of creating a sense of student belonging is recognizing that all of us come from different backgrounds, filled with cultural mores, commonalities, expectations, and more. Instructors can establish norms for classroom behavior while honoring the individuality of each participant and their backgrounds. Listed below are some quick-start steps to set the stage for a successful semester that fosters a sense of student belonging in the classroom as well as in the greater University community.

1. Start with the Syllabus

Effective design in the syllabus is advantageous for all student learners, particularly those who may be neurodiverse. The order and organization of the syllabus should be user-friendly, aesthetically pleasing, and lead to student understanding. Key components of the course should appear early in the document (ACUE, n.d.-a) The document should not include language that would impede a growth mindset or a student's willingness to actively participate. See the following resource for more detailed descriptions of creating a syllabus that underscores belonging:

<https://cetl.udmercy.edu/syllabus-statement-suggestions-to-reinforce-student-belonging/>

2. Structure Your Course on Blackboard to Create a Sense of Belonging

Blackboard course design rivals the syllabus for first impressions. It is a common myth that our students inherently understand technology or, more specifically, know how to use a learning management system (LMS) like Blackboard. With the varied backgrounds and identity groups of our students (including adult returning learners), we cannot make any assumptions about how well students understand how to use Blackboard. To effectively utilize the LMS to foster student belonging, instructors should:

- Open their courses as early as possible with their posted syllabus and a short welcome announcement. Students should feel welcomed and have a basic idea of what to expect when the first day of class arrives.
- Have a clear, organized structure throughout the semester. This helps all learners know what to expect and what is expected of them. Students will learn to mirror those exemplary organizational skills and practices.
- Review and follow these guidelines: [Guidelines for Universal Accessibility - Detroit Mercy CETL](#) and [Guidelines for Organizing Your Course Site - Detroit Mercy CETL](#) to maintain structure and accessibility.



3. Underscore Belonging from the Very First Day

Whether a course is meeting in person or online, faculty can use the first class meeting(s) to model the behaviors outlined above. Instructors can start by introducing themselves and sharing their challenges as lifelong learners, stating they would like to be addressed, recalling their college experiences, and explaining their family situations (caring for children, and elders, balancing work/life, etc.). Instructors should be warm, welcoming, and compassionate. If educators show their humanity students may be more willing to show theirs (Sturtevant, 2014).

Icebreakers can be painful for the socially anxious, so instructors can modify them by creating small groups or instead, providing an informal personal survey asking questions such as the following:

- How comfortable are you with computer learning?
- What is your experience with X subject?
- What do you feel are your strengths as a student?
- Which areas do YOU feel are your weakest *right now*?
- What are your goals for this school year?
- What are your goals for this class?
- What are you most concerned about in this class or school in general?
- Are there triggering topics I should know about? Answer this only if you're comfortable.
- Is there anything else you want me (the instructor) to know?

Such practices help students to feel safe and seen, which in turn can lead to meaningful in-class engagement.

4. Allow for Student Voice by Creating Learner-Centered Activities and Engagement

As instructors plan learning activities throughout the semester, they can regularly incorporate opportunities for students to contribute and share. These can be formal or informal activities such as brainstorming, answering questions, leading presentations, etc. Scholarship and research regarding teaching and retention suggest that lectures should only comprise one aspect of the classroom experience; research suggests students retain more knowledge after engaging in learner-led activities (Blandin & Lietaer, 2012). Shorter lectures (sometimes referred to as micro-lectures) can provide content and information to help students prepare for learner-centered activities in the classroom (ACUE, n.d.-b)

Informal discussions and conversations, such as those during class when students can engage in conversations with one another and their instructors, also hold significant value. These interactions demonstrate that students are genuinely recognized as individuals with



their own lives and experiences (Sturtevant et al., 2018; Boonk et al., 2018).

5. Provide Resources

Ensure that you include University relevant resources and support services, such as the Writing Center and Student Success Center, during class discussions. Demonstrate the process of scheduling appointments and connecting with staff members. Invite representatives from various offices to serve as guest speakers in your courses to provide insights into their respective roles. As the academic semester advances, it is imperative to consistently remind students of the variety resources that are available to them and their practical applications.

6. Reflect

The foundation of any teaching practice lies in reflection. Instructors can strategically incorporate various check-in points throughout the semester to assess students' feelings of belongingness. These check-in points may include informal polls and surveys, as well as written reflections such as journal entries or personal response essays. In turn, professors can engage in self-reflection with colleagues within their department or seek guidance from the CETL through discussions and reviews.

Examples: Communication to Promote Belonging

Establishing an inclusive classroom environment starts with the selection of appropriate language. Thoughtful and respectful communication fosters trust and guarantees that all individuals, irrespective of their background or personal attributes, feel valued and supported. The provided guidance offers straightforward and professional methods to communicate effectively and compassionately.

Communicating with Consideration for Everyone

Referencing Persons and Roles

Use neutral terms when speaking generally, for example avoid phrasing like "he/she" or "(s)he," which can be awkward and unnecessary. For example, using "they/them" when the gender is unknown or irrelevant helps keep language simple and inclusive:

"Each student should bring **their** textbook to class."

When referring to people in roles or professions, terms like *chair*, *flight attendant*, or *staff member* are preferred over gendered alternatives. Choose language that focuses on the role



rather than assumptions about the person filling it.

Acknowledging Unique Backgrounds

Where appropriate, speak about individuals or groups with specificity and respect. When mentioning heritage, culture, or nationality, it's best to use accurate and consistent terms. Avoid generalizations and try to reference people as individuals with unique experiences, rather than as representatives of a group.

Include a variety of perspectives in course examples and materials—not to check boxes, but because it reflects the richness of the world we live in and helps more students connect meaningfully with the content.

Respectful Language Around Ability

When referring to health, accessibility, physical, or learning needs, use respectful and person-centered terms. Instead of focusing on limitations, concentrate on the individual's unique needs and characteristics:

"A student who uses a wheelchair" is more considerate than "a wheelchair-bound student."

Ensure that your course materials are accessible to all students, including those utilizing assistive technology or learning tools. This is not merely about accommodating students; it is about designing materials that are inclusive and beneficial for everyone.

Welcoming All Ages and Experiences

Students come from all walks of life. Avoid assumptions based on someone's age or appearance, and remember that valuable contributions can come from anyone, regardless of when or how they arrived in the classroom.

Fostering a Respectful Learning Environment

As educators, we have the opportunity to set a tone that encourages openness, respect, and participation. When students feel they are welcomed for who they are—and that their learning matters—they're more likely to engage deeply.

Some helpful practices include:

- Being mindful of assumptions or stereotypes.
- Providing flexible pathways for students to succeed.
- Listening generously and encouraging civil dialogue.



Through thoughtful communication, we can foster an inclusive environment where all individuals, regardless of their educational background or life experience, feel valued and supported.

References

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