

**“Community” is in the name: A university teacher’s guide to foster a sense of belonging  
by learning from community college students**

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Fostering learning communities and belongingness have been central to my teaching. I intentionally utilize group work, discussions, and community partnerships. My teaching experience has primarily been at a large, 4-year public university. I have taught courses ranging from 17 to 150 students, with a “traditional” student population, specifically in age (i.e., young adults) and life course (e.g., transitioning from high school). Despite institutional efforts to diversify student populations, large universities historically target white, middle-class students (Thornhill, 2019).

Recently, I had the opportunity to teach at a community college. The 29-student class was diverse, specifically in age (i.e., middle-aged adults, young adults, and adolescents) and life course (e.g., parents in the workforce). Additionally, community colleges tend to target people from marginalized groups (e.g., people from low socioeconomic status and racially minoritized groups) to support socioeconomic mobility (Cuellar & Gándara, 2021). Throughout the semester, I noticed a sense of belonging emerged organically at the community college. Students spontaneously sought opportunities to learn collaboratively and to support each other. One student told me that they chose this particular college precisely for the “community” aspect. I

wondered what motivated these students to seek and offer support, and how we could facilitate student-driven approaches in large universities?

I observed two main differences in teaching at a 4-year university and a community college: Community college students appeared to be more willing to 1) advocate for help, and 2) support each other. In the following sections, I provide examples for each observation and recommendations for educators.

At a community college, I noticed students were more willing to ask for help. Throughout the semester, I regularly overheard students turn to their neighbor to ask, “Do you get [topic]?” “Oh yeah, it’s like [example].” These students valued their peers’ insights. For example, students would lean on their own experience to interpret course content. In comparison, university students often individually contacted me after class and would rarely turn to their classmates for help. They may have perceived me as the professional, due to my age, authority, and classroom position (e.g., everyone faces me), while disregarding their peers’ experiential knowledge (e.g., if I don’t know, then my peers don’t know). Although I could target a specific question, I would miss students who did not have the time, were not confident, or did not even know where to start. Additionally, individualized feedback is time consuming. At a research-intensive university, faculty are encouraged to focus on their research, which may limit their teaching efforts.

University instructors should embrace and model that they are not the only experts in the room. Students come from various backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives; their contributions enrich the course material. Unfortunately, students may not feel comfortable providing their feedback, which could be due to systematic barriers, such as low cultural capital (Jack, 2016), lack of academic knowledge, inexperience in application of knowledge, or fear of vulnerability. Therefore, it is necessary for the instructor to establish an open dialogue with students. In addition to peer-to-peer conversations, I encourage educators to be aware of student barriers such as academic stress. Educators could provide multiple opportunities for students to seek help such as incorporating peer evaluations, utilizing anonymous polling, or compiling common questions in a FAQ blog. Finally, instructors should be intentionally

transparent about their own experience such as acknowledging gaps, confusions, or mistakes they have made.

Community college students also appeared to be cognizant of others' needs and proactively provided support. One student posted where to find technology lending services because they noticed technology was an integral part of the course. Another student provided child-care resources to a peer who was bringing their child into class because they wanted to "support [their] educational journey." Lastly, one student shared information about a local summer camp for autistic children because another student expressed concerns about finding such opportunities. In contrast, at a 4-year university, I have frequently noticed students so focused on their own success that interacting with their peers was not a priority.

This begs the question: why *would* students support the lives of others? After asking university students, they communicated universal ideas about support— everyone is struggling. Their motivation could be due to a collective frustration within academia, wondering who can support them if they are all struggling. Students may be concerned about lack of time or awareness of resources, not knowing which resource is relevant. They may also be concerned about challenges that arise with new life transitions, such as an instability in identity. Or students may be worried about competition, such as why should they support others if they do not feel supported. In comparison, community college students offered apparently altruistic motives – they knew what it felt like to be unsupported or not belong. Their motivation could be due to age diversity with older students mentoring their younger peers. They also might have first-hand experiences with navigating inequitable systems. Or the physical size and structure of campus may have created value in seeing familiar faces in-between classes. Despite similar challenges across student populations, differences in academic environments and life courses prompt distinct solutions.

In a classroom where students are exploring their personal and academic identity, social support is critical. When needed, instructors should intentionally scaffold peer support networks within their courses. Although large universities have a plethora of resources and funding

opportunities, students are expected to navigate specific pathways and advocate consistently for themselves – but where do they even begin? There are structural systems in place, such as academic advisors, but large universities may not have the capacity to individually support every student. Therefore, by creating spaces for students to lean on each other, students may become comfortable in the sea of resources. I recommend implementing cooperative projects to encourage teamwork, introducing class note-taking on communal online documents to facilitate supportive networks, or inviting on-campus organizations like the Student Writing Center to promote familiarity with student resources.

In sum, both students and educators are essential facilitators in creating community. Although I provided recommendations for educators, I acknowledge my experience is based on specific groups of students, embedded in a unique socio-historical context. I encourage educators to investigate their own classroom dynamics. It may be necessary to ask your students: how can we build community together?

### References

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