

## The Relationship Between Community and Belonging

For many of us, cognitive presence comes relatively easily, but social and instructor presence are the elements that transform a class into a community. When students feel that they are an accepted, respected, and valued part of a learning community, they experience a sense of belonging that is positively correlated with attributes like motivation, engagement, learning success, and likelihood of taking future courses in the discipline or persisting in the major.

In particular, students of color, first-generation college students, female-identified students (in certain disciplines), LGBTQIA students, and students with other social identity characteristics that are traditionally underrepresented or marginalized in higher education may be less likely to experience a sense of belonging in higher education and in individual courses. Without careful and intentional planning on the part of the instructor, social identity threat (the often unconscious worry about confirming stereotypes about a social identity group to which one belongs) and experiences of microaggressions and overt bias can simultaneously leave these students feeling alienated from the learning community and tax their cognitive and emotional resources, leaving them less likely to perform well or have a positive experience of the course.

Beyond fostering presence, inclusive instructors construct a respectful classroom community for student to grapple with challenging concepts, normalize the experience of challenge, foster a collaborative atmosphere, create space for each individual voice, validate unique and divergent student contributions and values, use transparent assignments, and reflect on and employ approaches to minimize their own biases.

## The Arc of the Semester

The same underlying principles for building community and fostering a sense of belonging throughout the semester apply both in-person or online. However, we may want to use different strategies, in different learning spaces, at different times as the community evolves.

### First Three Weeks: Engaging, Evoking, Connecting, Building Trust

Community-building at the beginning of the semester is often explicit and intentional. Especially during the first week or two, it may be useful to include community-building activities that are not explicitly related to course content, and that instead center students and faculty as human beings with full lives and multiple intersectional social identities (such as [icebreakers](#), [introduction videos](#), [values affirmations activities](#), and collaboratively crafting [community agreements](#) for in-person and online interactions).

Subsequent early community-building activities may bring in cognitive presence in ways that intentionally overlap instructor and social presence – such as, explaining why the content is exciting to you, asking students to share topics of interest, questions, or hopes for what they will learn from the course, and discussing what problems the content can help solve in the real world.

### Mid-Semester: Deepening, Extending, Collaborating, and Mentoring

Mid-semester community building may feel a bit more like standard teaching practice: Active, collaborative work that allows students to grapple with content, test their understandings against one another's, and learn and grow *together* helps to establish social presence. As group projects kick off, providing space for students to

to select their own team names and team charters, discussing common ways that implicit bias can show up in group work and how to disrupt those patterns, and including early temperature checks through low-stakes, anonymous self-and-peer team evaluations can help teams develop trust and effective collaboration routines. Throughout, inviting students to bring their opinions and personal experiences related to the content into the course in ways that are relevant and respectful of peers can help deepen the social connection and sense of belonging.

Fostering instructor presence can include providing timely [“wise” feedback](#) that guides student learning and communicates confidence in their ability (in writing, through short videos, or in individual or small group workshop sessions). Transparent grading criteria help students have a fair and equitable chance at success, while activating [blind grading](#) settings on Moodle can help minimize implicit bias. Short recorded lectures or introductory videos for students studying remotely helps them feel connected to a human being on the other side of the computer. [Highlighting work by professionals in the field](#) who represent the full range of your students’ social identities helps them see themselves in the discipline. Finally, using students’ names, checking in on their well-being (and being flexible with deadlines when challenges arise), getting to know their interests and hobbies, and asking about their life plans and goals all show you care about students as whole people, and can help them invest deeply in your course.

### End of Semester: Coming to Fruition, Celebrating, and Reflecting

In the last few weeks of the semester, groups are presenting final work together, and the course learning community as a whole is coming to a close. During this time, you might ask students working in teams to highlight and laud one another’s strengths and accomplishments, and to reflect on their experience of working in teams and what they want to carry forward to their next collaborative project.

As a class, you could engage in activities that ask students to identify connections between what they learned in your course and others, highlighting both the unique contributions of each individual and the shared learnings of the community. Finally, you might explore the potential of final exams that celebrate student learning and growth in fun and engaging ways.

### Further Resources

- Dreon, O. (13 May 2013). Tips for Building Social Presence in Your Online Class. *Faculty Focus*. Retrieved from <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/tips-for-building-social-presence-in-your-online-class/>
- Harriett W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning. *Strategies and Resources about Implicit Bias*. <https://www.brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-learning-resources/inclusive-teaching/implicit-bias>
- Killpack, T. L., & Melón, L. C. (2016). [Toward inclusive STEM classrooms: what personal role do faculty play?](#). *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 15(3), es3.
- Murphy, M., & Destin, M. *Promoting Inclusion and Identity Safety to Support College Success*. <https://tcf.org/content/report/promoting-inclusion-identity-safety-support-college-success/?agreed=1>
- National Equity Project. *Developing Community Agreements*. <https://nationalequityproject.org/resources/featured-resources/developing-community-agreements>
- University of Michigan Inclusive Teaching. *Icebreaker Grab Bag*. <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/sample-activities/icebreaker-grab-bag/>