Using Student Interests and Goals to Foster Inclusion, Belonging, and Pedagogical Strength

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Teaching at a Hispanic-Serving Institution with a large first-generation college student population, I regularly meet students who come to university already feeling excluded based on who they are. Stereotypes are rampant about whose voices belong in higher education and many of our students have faced a lifetime of implicit and explicit messages that theirs is not one of them. Given this, I am intentional about gathering information from my students, in turn using what I learn about them as a tool to both teach and help them feel like they belong at our university. Like many faculty, I routinely begin the semester by asking each student to create a flashcard that includes their roster name, preferred name, and major. A few years ago, though, I began asking students in my behavioral science research methods classes to also provide information about their academic interests and professional goals on their flashcards. I asked students to describe a subject or area within their major that they like learning about (e.g., substance use disorders), an occupation that interests them (e.g., physical therapist), or a setting (e.g., outpatient treatment facility) or population (e.g., individuals with psychotic disorders) with which they would like to work. After receiving this information, I deliberately seek out both new and classic research studies related to their academic interests and professional goals that we then use as examples in class. The course serves several majors in the social and health sciences, so student interests and goals are wide-ranging. Our classes have addressed studies with broadly ranging foci such as occupational therapy interventions for donning socks, gastric emptying in cyclists, and social media-based interventions for suicide prevention.

When students see that their academic interests and professional goals are the tools that are helping them learn and apply class concepts, they seem genuinely *excited* about a class where

they may have initially thought, "Research isn't for me." Students engage more with me, asking questions as well as responding to those that I pose to the class. Drawing upon students' academic interests and professional goals for class examples also seems to help students engage with their classmates. I have observed students who have learned that they possess common interests and goals talking with one another, sharing recommendations for resources (e.g., books and websites) or professional development activities (e.g., volunteer opportunities and student organizations). To further create a sense of belonging, I explicitly name specific students before we begin a new example, linking it to the student's academic interest or professional goal (e.g., "Alyssa, you may like this example about child neglect because of your interest in working at a substance use treatment center. Many people in treatment have a history of childhood maltreatment"). This reinforces the connection between students and the activities of university such as research, as well as between academic activities and students' professional goals. Students begin to see how higher education relates concretely to their goals and in turn, think of how someone with their goals belongs at the university. A young woman who is a Hispanic, first-generation student told me that she felt "heard" due to this because professors seldom used her interest area (occupational therapy) for examples in her classes, even within her health science major.

Some of the course's assignments also provide opportunities to foster inclusion and belonging. Students in the course review primary-source journal articles related to a research question that they create; when one of their assignments is a particularly good example of a research concept that we are currently covering, I ask the student to describe the study and how it exemplifies current class concepts to the other students. In that moment, the student takes on the role of a teacher; when students take on this role, it reinforces that they are important to the learning of every student in the class, not just their own. Cooperative learning experiences such as this minimize the negative academic effects posed by stereotype threat. By working together toward the common goal of learning, students who may be questioning their presence in the university environment craft a new part of their identity as someone with important information to share and who belongs in the classroom (Wen et al., 2016). When working through class

examples in this way, students have the opportunity to see again and again that their interests and goals have a place in higher education. My hope is that as the "owners" of these interests and goals, students see that they themselves belong in higher education, too.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives have come under scrutiny recently, being viewed by some as a distraction that weakens universities and threatens their ability to educate students (Moody, 2023). My experience integrating inclusion and belonging into the classroom in this way, though, has produced the opposite effect. Pedagogically, my classes are now stronger. Rather than relying on a narrow scope of examples, we explore a breadth of interesting methodologies and variables. For me, this makes teaching a challenging course much more exciting and something to which I truly look forward. For students, exposure to such diverse studies seems to help the concepts "stick." During class-opening review sessions, for example, students are often able to respond to questions without having to consult their notes as they remember information from class examples that seemed personally relevant to them. When information is relevant, students feel more motivated to attend to and engage with it; in turn, they form better memories of it (Miller, 2011; Prinski et al., 2018). With this knowledge of important course concepts, students are better equipped to advance in their learning; for example, by applying what they know to novel problems (Nkhoma et al., 2017). Now when I prompt students with questions about how a study could be modified, they seem more willing to suggest new variables that could be introduced or describe how it could be adapted to become a different research strategy. Some even volunteer novel questions for the class to analyze. These changes have fostered a classroom environment in which students are more active in their learning.

I plan to continue to gather information about students' academic interests, professional goals, and areas of expertise in my future classes to improve my pedagogy in this way. Happily, this effort to foster students' inclusion and belonging *within* the classroom has produced opportunities to build inclusion and belonging *outside* of the classroom as well. Because I know more substantive information about each student, I am better able to suggest specific community

service opportunities and campus organizations to students, further encouraging their sense of belonging in our university community. Going forward, my plan is to help connect these students with information about internships and career programs available through the university, as well as provide them with information about graduate programs. I want them to see a place for their future selves in higher education, envisioning themselves completing a college degree and beyond.

References

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