Building a Classroom Community

Academy for Teaching and Learning Excellence

University of South Florida

**Strategies to Help Build Community**

*First Day of Class:*

* Learn names: it communicates a fundamental level of concern for students
* Try to include the name of the student when commenting: “as Claire was saying”
* Introduce yourself: share your passion for the subject and how you got to choose your career path
* Market your course - enthusiasm is contagious!
* Have students complete index cards listing their outside interests - you can use these to relate course materials to their own personalities
* Select one or two class spokespersons
* Assess the room together: the acoustics for instance, the seating arrangement
* Use **unique** Icebreakers:
  + Develop class rules/policies together with students
  + Scavenger Hunt: Ask students to circulate around the room and locate classmates who fit in certain categories (i.e., only children, lived abroad, bi- or multi-lingual, same major, etc.). You can also include statements that revolve around course content.
  + Have students work in groups and answer questions such as these:
    - What do you hope to gain from this course?
    - How can the instructor do to help you reach these goals?
    - What resources and background in the subject do you bring to this course?
    - What student conduct rules should we set up to foster the course’s success?
    - What aspects of a class or an instructor impede your learning?

*Throughout the Semester:*

* Strive to communicate regularly with students
* If possible, arrive early and leave late- have informal discussions with your students
* Pair high-achieving students with those who need extra help. Instills a sense of support from classmates.
* Utilize or solicit the expertise of students majoring in other disciplines
* Ask that students use each other's names when having class discussions
* Build in opportunities for students to speak to a wide variety of their classmates
* Give students space to disagree with each other and the instructor, and coach them on how to disagree respectfully. Feeling safe to speak without ridicule is important. Ask open-ended questions with no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers, and give students the ability to ‘pass’ if they aren’t comfortable contributing
* Reserve the right to intervene in response to behavior that could be considered prejudiced, biased or discriminatory in nature
* Change your own language and behavior from ‘yes but’ to ‘yes and’ which does not negate the point of the previous speaker’s point
* For some students, participating in class discussion may never be comfortable for them, and regardless of how welcoming an environment we provide, they cannot speak freely in front of their peers. Offering alternative ways to express opinion and knowledge of subject matter may be of utmost importance for these students’ feelings of inclusiveness.
* Consider altering the style in which you compose assignment prompts (from a "business memo" style to a friendlier tone, more like a personal letter. "describe the assignment components, but not in a checklist kind of way. Instead I try to "speak" to them as human beings and describe in friendly language what I'm looking for. "

Adapted from “Building Community in the College Classroom,” Katherine J. Nevins