

The Power of Connecting:
How Faculty and Peer Connections Enhance Student Learning

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In the blockbuster film *Avatar*, the Omaticaya people possess a unique idiomatic expression for recognizing the singularity of an individual: “I see you.” To *see* someone means to see beyond his/her exterior; it means to see inside the person and understand him/her.

As faculty, we sometimes either forget to “see” or fail to “see” our students. Our eyes might travel across a classroom but only register a sea of nondescript, indistinct bodies. Other times, we might look at our students and unconsciously make assumptions about their identity, which is simply another form of not “seeing.”

Seeing is acknowledging the student as a person—with interests, conflicts, goals—and seeing is a pathway to creating connections. When we find ways to connect with our students and provide a means for them to connect with each other, we enhance the way they perceive themselves. And when students begin to “see” themselves as capable college students, learning occurs.

There is no single, correct way to connect with students. However, Johnnie Terry, Professor of Philosophy at Sierra College, suggests doing more than placing an email address or phone number on our course syllabi. In his presentation at last month’s Student Success Institute in San Jose, Terry emphasized earnest connections that reach out to students. Simply learning students’ names can be a powerful way to say “you are important to me.”

We can also create connections by enabling students to “see” us. Sharing our career or educational path, our passion for our discipline, or our fascination for a hobby not only *humanizes* us but also allows us to find common ground with a segment of our students.

Finally, faculty need to encourage and, if possible, facilitate connections between students within our classrooms. Terry recommends forming groups to use throughout the semester as well as creating different groups with varied members. This gives students the opportunity to work with a different set of peers. Even though lecture courses offer little to no opportunity for student connections (i.e. group work) during class time, faculty can encourage these connections via study groups, out-of-class projects, or labs.

Faculty and peer connections cannot be over-emphasized. When students feel connected with their instructors and classmates, they develop a “positive academic identity.” For some students, this new identity is needed to replace a “negative academic identity,” which inhibits learning. For other students, connections help strengthen their existing academic identity, which may be “neutral or insecure.”

Faculty can help shape this positive academic identity in various ways. For example, providing precise feedback on assignments (such as *reasons* why the exercise/exam/essay was not successful) can empower students. As a result, explains Terry, a student’s mindset may alter from “Nothing I can do” to “I just need to do x, y, and z.”

Faculty can also provide specific steps for learning course material and how to achieve those steps. For example, we can explain that all assigned reading should be completed before going to lecture, and we can provide instruction on *how to read* the material in order to best comprehend the textbook or work of literature. As part of the course introduction, consider including a “Ways to Succeed in This Course” handout or PowerPoint slide and reinforce those concepts throughout the semester. Learning tools, such as these, may also positively impact a student’s mindset.

Through “modeling, direct instruction, and verbal reassurance,” peers additionally influence a student’s academic identity, which is why student connections are a powerful classroom component.

With the high volume of students faculty teach, we cannot “see” every one of our students. However, we can connect with a large number of them each semester during class, lab, or office hours. We can also encourage and facilitate connections between our students. When students feel connected to us and their peers, their view of themselves as college students is validated. And within this environment of validation and belonging, learning flourishes.

Suggested Resources for Connecting with Students:

Barkley, Elizabeth F. *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Gabriel, Kathleen. *Teaching Unprepared Students: Strategies for Promoting Success and Retention in Higher Education*. Sterling: Stylus Publishing, 2008.