

Creating and Maintaining Inclusive Classrooms

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Abstract

Student populations at institutions of higher education are increasingly diverse. To maximize students' feelings of inclusivity and belongingness within heterogeneous communities – both of which have been linked with greater educational outcomes – it is imperative for faculty to create and maintain inclusive classroom spaces. The aim of this qualitative study is to analyze student feedback regarding what creates a sense of inclusiveness and belonging inside undergraduate classrooms. The researcher conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with students at a diverse, highly selective, private research university in the American South. Interview transcripts were coded using inductive analysis methods. Findings indicate students' self-reported sense of inclusivity and belongingness are predominately within a professor's control. For example, students' senses of belonging increase when faculty members use diverse examples in class, relate course content to the real world, enable small-group discussions during class, model open and inclusive language in the classroom, and eliminate (or mitigate) tokenism. Student feedback was consistent across demographic diversity of respondents.

Introduction

College student populations are increasingly diverse.¹ While questions of inclusivity are not new to American higher education,² the demographic shifts in contemporary college-going populations, coupled with political uncertainty and volatility across the US, draw renewed attention to this issue. Students of color made up 29.6 percent of the undergraduate student population in the US in 1996, increasing to 45.2 percent in 2016.³ While rationales for inclusivity often center around economic and demographic arguments,⁴ this paper argues that inclusivity is a necessary companion to a sense of belonging as a means to augment students' academic success.

In addition to feeling included, students' sense of belonging matters.⁵ The desire for belongingness has been well documented within the student achievement literature and emerging adolescence literature in general.⁶ The importance of belonging spans racial and ethnic lines and its significance

¹ Dedman, Ben. 2019. *College Students Are More Diverse Than Ever. Faculty and Administrators Are Not*. March. <https://www.aacu.org/aacu-news/newsletter/2019/march/facts-figures>.

² Osei-Kofi, Nana, Sandra L. Richards, and Daryl G. Smith. 2004. "Inclusion, Reflection, and the politics of knowledge: On working toward the realization of inclusive classroom environments." In *Transforming the First Year experience for students of color*, by L. I. Rendon, M. Garcia and D. Person, 55-66. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina.

³ Dedman, *College Students Are More Diverse Than Ever*.

⁴ Hurtado, Sylvia, Jeffrey F. Milen, Alma R. Clayton-Pedersen, and Walter R. Allen. 1998. "Enhancing Campus Climates for Racial/Ethnic Diversity: Educational Policy and Practice." *The Review of Higher Education* 279-302; Rendon, L. I., and R. O. Hope. 1996. *Educating a new majority*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁵ Walton, G. M., and G. L. Cohen. 2007. "A question of belonging: Race, social fit, and achievement." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 82-96.

⁶ University of Leicester. n.d. *Sense of Belonging Literature Review*. Accessed September 2019. <https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ssds/projects/student-retention-project/dissemination/papers-and-publications/Sense%20of%20Belonging%20Lit%20Review.docx/view> .

can be magnified for students of color.⁷ Regardless of the students' background, when students are asked what makes them feel included – and that they belong – in the classroom, the factors they describe are overwhelmingly within a professor's control. Student interviews, written correspondence with faculty, and course evaluations all support the notion that professors can create and maintain inclusive classrooms.

Literature Review

According to Saunders and Kardia, inclusive classrooms are:

Classrooms in which instructors and students work together to create and sustain an environment in which everyone feels safe, supported, and encouraged to express her or his views and concerns. In these classrooms, the content is explicitly viewed from the multiple perspectives and varied experiences of a range of groups. Content is presented in a manner that reduces all students' experiences of marginalization and, wherever possible, helps students understand that individuals' experiences, values, and perspectives influence how they construct knowledge in any field or discipline.⁸

Students who perceive their campus climate as inclusive and nondiscriminatory show greater willingness to accept intellectual challenges.⁹ Inclusive college experiences better prepare students for the workplace and increases the value of their degrees.¹⁰ Inclusive classrooms are places in which academic excellence is valued and promoted across all students and so instructors in these classrooms use a variety of teaching methods to facilitate the academic achievement of all students.¹¹

Osei-Kofi, Richards, and Smith posit the process of creating an inclusive classroom has three salient components: the self, pedagogy, and curriculum.¹² Throughout the literature, there is much discussion of what faculty members can do to create inclusive classrooms. Osei-Kofi, Richards, and Smith, for example, suggest faculty “must continually critique and interrogate [themselves], [their] scholarship, [their] pedagogy, and [their] curricula” in order to engage in the work of creating inclusive classrooms.¹³ Given the findings of study, this emphasis on faculty action seems well placed.

⁷ Johnson, Dawn R., Matthew Soldner, Jeannie Brown Leonard, Patty Alvarez, Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas, Heather T. Rowan-Kenyon, and Susan D. Longerbeam. 2007. "Examining Sense of Belonging Among First-Year Undergraduates From Different Racial/Ethnic Groups." *Journal of College Student Development* 525-542.

⁸ Saunders, Shari, and Diana Kardia. 1997. *Creating Inclusive College Classrooms*. Accessed 2019. http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/p3_1.

⁹ Pascarella, Ernest T., Marcia Edison, Amaury Nora, Linda Serra Hagedorn, and Patrick T. Terenzini. 1996. "Influences on Students' Openness to Diversity and Challenge in the First Year of College." *The Journal of Higher Education* 174-195.

¹⁰ Lenckos, John. 2018. *4 best practices around diversity and inclusion in higher ed*. April 27. Accessed September 2019. <https://www.ecampusnews.com/2018/04/27/4-best-practices-around-diversity-and-inclusion-in-higher-ed/>.

¹¹ Saunders and Kardia, *Creating Inclusive College Classrooms*.

¹² Osei-Kofi, Richards, and Smith, "Inclusion, Reflection, and the politics of knowledge: On working toward the realization of inclusive classroom environments."

¹³ Osei-Kofi, Richards, and Smith, "Inclusion, Reflection, and the politics of knowledge: On working toward the realization of inclusive classroom environments."

Feeling included is only one piece of the puzzle. Inclusive classrooms are most influential when individual students also feel they belong in the space. According to Strayhorn, sense of belonging is whether or not students feel respected, valued, accepted, cared for, included, and that they matter, in the classroom, at college, or in their chosen career path.¹⁴ Students' sense of belonging has implications for both academic outcomes and general well-being.¹⁵ Sense of belonging is related to college students' cognition, affect, and behaviors.¹⁶

In non-academic domains, feelings of belonging are a protective factor against conduct problems,¹⁷ depression,¹⁸ and suicidal ideation.¹⁹ Feelings of belonging also increased cross-cultural interaction for international and domestic students.²⁰ According to Osterman, students who experience a sense of belonging in educational environments are more motivated, more engaged in school and classroom activities, and more dedicated to school.²¹ In academic domains, studies report positive associations between sense of belonging and academic achievement and academic help-seeking behaviors.²² Perceived belonging also impacts student persistence in college.²³

Although it is important for everyone to feel a sense of belonging, college students experience belonging differently based on their identities and experiences.²⁴ Furthermore, connecting back to the importance of inclusivity, research has shown that minority students tend to report lower sense of belonging than their peers.²⁵ Across demographic groups, students who feel they belong in the college classroom are more likely to be successful there and in the future. The connection between

¹⁴ Strayhorn, T. L. 2012. *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. New York: Routledge.

¹⁵ Asher, Steven R., and Molly M. Weeks. 2014. "Loneliness and Belonging in the College Years." In *The Handbook of Solitude: Psychological Perspectives on Social Isolation, Social Withdrawal, and Being Alone*, by Robert J. Coplan and Julie C. Bowker, 283-301. Wiley.

¹⁶ Hurtado, S., and D. F. Carter. 1997. "Effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on Latino college students' sense of belonging." *Sociology of Education* 324-345; Strayhorn, *College students' sense of belonging*.

¹⁷ Loukas, Alexandra, Lori A. Roalson, and Denise E. Herrera. 2010. "School Connectedness Buffers the Effects of Negative Family Relations and Poor Effortful Control on Early Adolescent Conduct Problems." *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 13-22.

¹⁸ Sargent, J., R. A. Williams, B. Hagerty, J. Lynch-Sauer, and K. Hoyle. 2002. "Sense of belonging as a buffer against depressive symptoms." *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association* 120-129.

¹⁹ Van Orden, Kimberly A., Kelly C. Cukrowicz, Tracy K. Witte, and Thomas E. Joiner. 2012. "Thwarted Belongingness and Perceived Burdensomeness: Construct Validity and Psychometric Properties of the Interpersonal Needs Questionnaire." *Psychol Assess* 197-215.

²⁰ Glass, Chris R., and Christina M. Westmont. 2014. "Comparative effects of belongingness on the academic." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 106-119.

²¹ Osterman, K. F. 2000. "Students' need for belonging in the school community." *Review of Educational Research* 323-367.

²² Dorman, J. P., and J. M. Ferguson. 2004. "Associations between students' perceptions of mathematics classroom environment and self-handicapping in Australian and Canadian high schools." *McGill Journal of Education* 69-86.

²³ Zea, M. C., C. A. Reisen, C. Beil, and R. D. Caplan. 1997. "Predicting intention to remain in college among ethnic minority and nonminority students." *Journal of Social Psychology* 149-160.

²⁴ Strayhorn, *College students' sense of belonging*; Walton and Cohen, "A question of belonging."

²⁵ Johnson et al., "Examining Sense of Belonging Among First-Year Undergraduates From Different Racial/Ethnic Groups.;" Strayhorn, T. L. 2008. "Fittin' in: Do diverse interactions affect sense of belonging for black men at predominately white institutions? ." *NASPA Journal* 501-527.

inclusiveness at the classroom level and belonging at the individual level are co-prerequisites for maximized academic success among today’s diverse college student population.

Research Methods

This qualitative study took place at a highly selective, private research university in the American South. Research participants were traditional-aged undergraduate students in good academic standing. One item in the standard student course evaluation tool at this institution asks students to rate the extent to which “The course had a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment.” The invitation to participant as an interview subject was sent to students in classes where the mean score for this course evaluation item were 4.83/5.0 and 4.50/5.0 (compared to an institutional mean of 4.34/5.0). Given the high rating of an inclusive classroom environment, the researcher felt these students would be able to reflect upon what made classrooms feel inclusive (and what made students feel as though they belonged in the classroom). The primary researcher employed a semi-structured interview protocol: a combination of an interview guide approach (topics and issues decided in advance in outline form—the protocol) and a standardized open-ended interview approach (exact wording and sequence of questions determined in advance and in open-ended format). “Open-ended interviews add depth, detail, and meaning at a very personal level of experience.”²⁶ Questions were organized according to the major issues of the conceptual framework: college student inclusiveness and belongingness and the extent to which faculty and pedagogy factor into these senses of inclusion and belonging.

Interview participants were recruited via an email from the researcher and there were no monetary incentives provided to participants. Students were told their responses would be used to help their campus understand what makes them feel included in the classroom and hoped to use this data to inform policy decisions. The researcher interviewed eight students. Descriptive demographic characteristics of these students are available below. The interviews took between 45-75 minutes each.

Table 1. Grade-level and race of interview participants

		Students identifying this way (n)
Grade	Sophomore	6
	Junior	1
	Senior	1
Race	Latinx	1
	Black	3
	Asian	2
	White	1
	Multi-racial	1

²⁶ Patton, Michael Quinn. 2002. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, p.17.

Interviews were transcribed and uploaded into NVivo 12.0 for ease of coding. Researchers used inductive analysis to build towards general patterns in the data and to code the emergent patterns.²⁷ Once themes emerged and the transcribed text was coded in NVivo, the researchers collapse the codes into broader categories that aligned to the conceptual framework. The three collapsed categories were: items within a professor's control (part of the "self," the "curriculum," and the "pedagogy" from Osei-Kofi, Richards, and Smith's model), items not exclusively within a professor's control (part of the "self" from Osei-Kofi, Richards, and Smith's model) and items not within a professor's control. See Table 2 in the Results section for the breakdown within these categories.

Results

Much of what students' identify as augmenting their sense of belonging is within the control of the professor, as guided by his/her established classroom norms and pedagogical choices. The findings align with the model outlined by Osei-Kofi, Richards, and Smith that indicates it takes a self-aware professor, pedagogy, and curriculum to create an inclusive classroom.²⁸ Students consistently identify several practices that influence the extent to which they feel included in the classroom. These include: setting the tone early ("I feel more comfortable when there is focus on getting to know each other first -- both student-to-student and student-to-teacher -- this prevents students acting out later to get attention"); using inclusive language and example ("classrooms feel inclusive when the professor uses a wide variety of examples so all students can relate to something"); relating course content to the "real world" ("real life application of content is critical"); and facilitating small group work during class ("have small group discussions regularly to increase comfort with classmates").

Students indicate that a professor can also create an exclusive classroom space through their words, actions, and pedagogical decisions. Students indicate professors create exclusive environments by exhibiting harsh judgement in front of a students' peers (i.e., "In one of my classes a professor said to another student "that wasn't the best idea, that was dumb" and then after that I totally shut down"). Professors also make classroom spaces less inclusive when they "are pretentious or arrogant, especially when they imply you should already know things." Another student noted feeling excluded when the professor implies 'there is only a single definition of "scholarly".' Students also indicate a lack of belonging when the faculty member singles them out as a token ("demographic groups need a critical mass").

The other students' in the class can also foster a sense of belonging. For example, one student noted: "I like to be in groups that are balanced to make an even playing field. It is nice to be with more experienced people. That facilitates the *feeling of a team effort to do well rather than a team effort to survive* [emphasis added]." Another student indicated he felt more included when there were "small group discussions in every class and we were sitting with desks together [not in rows] so you feel like you're a part of a group."

The coded transcriptions examined both the number of times a specific theme was mentioned

²⁷ Patton, *Qualitative Research*, p.51.

²⁸ Osei-Kofi, Richards, and Smith, "Inclusion, Reflection, and the politics of knowledge: On working toward the realization of inclusive classroom environments."

(frequency count) and the volume or length of time a student interviewee discussed the topic. The themes that fall within a professor’s control constitute both the majority of the topics mentioned (frequency count = 137 or 64.6% of the number of coded items) and the depth of the response (76.5% of the interviews were discussing items within a professor’s control). These values, along with the specific codes in each broad classification, are delineated in Table 2.

Table 2: Coding Results from Student Interviews

	Number of times mentioned (freq count) [percent of total]	Depth of response (percent coverage)	Inductively-generated themes included in this category
Within a professor’s control	137 [64.6%]	76.5%	Discussion facilitation; professor inclusion in discussion; early matters; feedback; harsh public correction; tokenism; professor sets the tone; related to the real world; small groups during class
Not exclusively within a professor’s control	54 [25.5%]	16.6%	Student competition; community; “that one kid”
Not within a professor’s control	21 [9.9%]	6.9%	Demographics of professor; class size; Demographics of students

Discussion

The coding and the emergent themes were relatively consistent across interview respondents, suggesting that what makes a student feel included in a classroom is consistent across demographic sub-populations. This consistency also suggests that use of inclusive classroom practices has no deleterious impact on any specific sub-population of students. From a policy perspective, the only cost of inclusive classroom pedagogies to individual faculty members are the time costs required to critically reflect on one’s pedagogical tools, curricular decisions, and self-awareness/preparedness; there are not negative externalities in the traditional sense. While some interventions may require financial investments on the part of the institution, these are nominal compared to the net gains of students’ increased senses of inclusivity and belonging (and, consequently, the mitigation of risk of negative behaviors, both academic and non).

Another noteworthy observation was the use of the terms “teacher” and “professor.” More often than not, students used the term “teacher” with a positive connotation and they used “professor” with a neutral or negative connotation. This word choice merits further exploration in future research.

There are several limitations of this study. The sample size, albeit diverse, is small. The sample represents only one institution and only students based in the US. This interview protocol could be reproduced at other institutions (and diverse institution types) to both increase the sample size and to better determine the generalizability of the results across institution type.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Practice

As our student populations are increasingly diverse, it is critical that all students feel included in academic spaces. Not only do students need to feel included, they also need to feel that they belong. The majority of what contributes to students' sense of inclusivity and belonging can be fostered and cultivated by individual faculty members. Analysis of student feedback from course evaluations and interviews lead the research team to the following recommendations for practice for individual faculty members:

- Introduce yourself to your class. Create and model an open space from day one. Provide feedback – preferably in a one-on-one setting – early and often.
- Relate course content to the real world. Feel comfortable incorporating life lessons into your classes.
- Enable small group discussions in class.
- Eliminate the “back of the classroom.” Touch all four walls each class period.
- Do not single out your students. Provide constructive feedback using a positive tone. Create groups and discussions that mitigate or eliminate tokenism.

Some of the factors that augment a students' sense of belonging are outside of an individual professor's control. Many of these factors are, however, within the control of the institution. Analysis of student feedback lead the research team to the following recommendations for practice at the institutional level:

- Give final exams in the same room as the regular course instruction.
- Offer ongoing pedagogical and cultural competency training for faculty.
- Ensure ADA and equivalent accommodations are met.

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