

Promoting Faculty–Student Relationships: Building Connections with First-Year College Students

Jennifer Tygret, *Online Course Developer and Instructor, Department of Education, Illinois College*

Pat Green, *University Supervisor, College of Education, University of Colorado Colorado Springs*

Sylvia Mendez, *Professor and Department Chair, College of Education, Leadership Research and Foundations, University of Colorado Colorado Springs*

Hannah Lane, *Graduate Student, University of Colorado Colorado Springs*

Quality academic experiences for first-year college students are dependent upon positive relationships with faculty. Supportive faculty–student relationships have the potential to impact students’ sense of belonging, level of academic adjustment, and persistence to graduation in the higher education setting. Faculty can promote positive relationships through simple in-class activities in which students are heard and seen. This article shares the responses and implications of an in-class activity in which first-year college students in a required social foundations of education course were asked: What do you wish your teacher knew about you? Four themes emerged: (a) social-emotional well-being status, (b) personal and family backgrounds, (c) learning styles, and (d) passion for teaching.

The purpose of this article is to share the responses of first-year students to a classroom activity entitled “I wish my teacher knew” and the implications of implementing this activity on faculty–student relationships in college classrooms. Students were asked to complete this sentence on a sticky note on the first day of a required social foundations teacher education course in order for faculty to learn about and address any challenges or concerns that were shared. This activity was inspired by Kyle Schwartz, an elementary teacher in Denver, Colorado, who conducted this activity with her third-grade students at Doull Elementary School. The activity stirred worldwide conversation when she shared her students’ responses through social media.

Student responses from 10 sections of the required course resulted in 252 individual sticky note responses, which were analyzed for this article. The vast majority of students were seeking a bachelor's degree in education and aspired to be teachers. The focus of this activity was to discover: What do first-year students wish faculty knew about them? The openness and vulnerability of the "I wish my teacher knew" responses were extraordinary, considering students completed this activity on the first day of class when they were still adjusting to the class, the instructor, and their peers. Responses primarily fit into four major themes: (a) social-emotional well-being status, (b) personal and family backgrounds, (c) learning styles, and (d) passion for teaching.

Student Responses

Within the first theme of social-emotional well-being, students candidly shared the fears, struggles, and anxieties that affect their everyday lives. In each course, many described diagnosed anxiety or depression with which they dealt on a daily basis and its impact on their ability to focus, complete their work, and stay involved in class. Students also shared general anxieties about college life. As most were first-year students, many noted feeling overwhelmed by college.

Regarding students' personal and family backgrounds, the students shared their experiences with illnesses and the death of relatives and friends. Several had dealt with the loss of friends due to suicide, while others had experienced the loss of parents or close relatives due to cancer or other illnesses. Other personal information was shared, such as being a single parent, the struggle of divorce, the reality of financial difficulties, or the impact of having a partner who was deployed with the military.

Relative to learning styles, students articulated their personal modes of learning and the ways in which the professor could best meet their needs, such as the use of PowerPoints in class discussions. Furthermore, students provided information about their academic or physical disabilities and the accommodations needed to learn the content and experience success in class. Students also conveyed their expectations for a positive, safe, and open learning environment in which ideas and opinions are communicated freely with no fear of rejection.

Finally, within the theme related to a passion for teaching, students expressed their desire to become teachers and the experiences that inspired them to follow their chosen career path. For example, students cited previous teachers who made an impact on their lives, as well as their own positive and negative educational

experiences. Many shared their anxieties and indecisions related to the content area or age level they desired to teach. Students also candidly shared their hesitations about becoming teachers due to specific challenges, such as being a male in the elementary school setting or a minority in education.

Implications in the Classroom

The responses from this activity permit faculty to learn more about students' interests, concerns, and challenges, as well as ways in which faculty can meet their students' needs. The common thread of mental health concerns and their corresponding stress directly relates to current research, which has found these issues have a significant impact on students' persistence and success in college (Bledsoe et al., 2018; Gutierrez & Gutierrez, 2019). A therapeutic quality was noted in how students described their social and emotional well-being in clear terms of anxiety and depression. Students' open self-disclosure about their concerns demonstrated strong self-knowledge regarding the impact of their mental health on their ability to connect with others, their academic confidence, and their daily lives.

Students were transparent about their mental health diagnoses. By allowing them to reveal their mental health challenges in a way that was private and anonymous, faculty may have communicated the perception that they were able to direct students to needed supports. The students' revelations also suggested a desire to be known, even when addressing difficult topics or more private matters on the first day of class and with a new professor.

Their desire to be known was further demonstrated in their vulnerability and openness about their personal lives and the struggles they faced due to loss, financial concerns, and life balance. Students did not evade discussing the difficult situations they faced with a professor they had just met. One student even remarked, "You are the first professor I've had that has tried to get to know me." Positive relationships with faculty provide students with a stronger sense of belonging and can positively impact their college retention. Asking students to share what they wished their teacher knew provided the first step in building a positive relationship. Furthermore, this simple activity presented the opportunity for meaningful one-on-one conversations, as well as group discussions, which allowed faculty to normalize student fears and anxieties and begin to build connections.

Students were open about what they needed in order to be successful in the academic environment, demonstrating a sense of self-knowledge as they identified specific modes, tools, or accommodations for learning that would be beneficial in the

classroom. By sharing the ways in which they learned best, students provided the professor with valuable strategies to employ in the classroom to meet those needs. When this information is taken to heart and known strategies or tools that benefit students are implemented, faculty promote positive faculty–student relationships and support student needs.

While the majority of students wrote about mental health challenges, some shared their motivations and passion for pursuing a teaching career, which evoked optimism relative to goal commitment. When faculty understand how students are motivated and energized, they can leverage the information in the classroom and promote out-of-class activities and programs sponsored by the university or local community that relate to students’ interests. Engaging with students’ passions and motivations also demonstrates that faculty are supportive and responsive.

Conclusion

The results of this activity provide insight into the ways in which faculty can connect with students through short and simple classroom-based activities. The depth and authenticity of the “I wish my teacher knew” student responses were remarkable, considering students completed the activity on the first day of class. Responses were powerful and vivid, as they reveal students crave affirmation, acceptance, and compassion from their faculty and peers. Findings indicate the importance of positive faculty–student interactions, which can begin with merely soliciting information from students, listening empathetically, and responding constructively to their academic and personal needs and worries.

Furthermore, the findings from this activity are consistent with the need for higher education institutions to develop practices and policies that create supportive and inclusive learning environments to positively increase students’ perceptions of belonging (Guzzardo et al., 2020; Meehan & Howells, 2019). Higher education institutions must commit to providing the necessary supports that address stress and mental health issues experienced by students. Relationships clearly matter as students are more likely to access resources when engaged with knowledgeable and caring faculty who are able to direct them to and assist them with services that meet their needs.

References

- Bledsoe, S., Baskin, J. J., & Berry, F. (2018). Fear not! How students cope with the fears and anxieties of college life. *College Teaching*, 66(3), 158-165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2018.1472064>
- Gutierrez, D., & Gutierrez, A. (2019). Developing a trauma-informed lens in the college classroom and empowering students through building positive relationships. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 12(1), 11-18. <https://doi.org/10.19030/cier.v12i1.10258>
- Guzzardo, M. T., Khosla, N., Adams, A. L., Bussmann, J. D., Engelman, A., Ingraham, N., Gamba, R., Jones-Bey, A., Moore, M. D., Toosi, N. R., & Taylor, S. (2020). "The ones that care make all the difference": Perspectives on student-faculty relationships. *Innovative Higher Education*, 46, 41-58. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-020-09522-w>
- Meehan, C., & Howells, K. (2019). In search of the feeling of 'belonging' in higher education: Undergraduate students transition into higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(10), 1376-1390. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1490702>