“As an instructor, you are also an ambassador of the academy to these groups, and you are close enough to them to reach out and include them. How you relate to these students has a powerful impact on their performance and retention (Ferguson, 1989; Grant-Thompson & Atkinson, 1997; Guo & Jamal, 2007; Jones, 2004; Kobrak, 1992)” (Nilson, 2010 p 14). **The following are just a few techniques instructors have used to connect with their students.**

### Get to know students

- Learn their names
- Questionnaire (major/minor, interests, hopes for the course, etc.)
- Arrive early to class and stay later to engage in conversation with students about topics unrelated to the course
- Ask questions to get to know students personally, professionally, and academically
- Meet individually during office hours
- Ask for mid-semester feedback
- Recognize students in distress
- Share information about yourself, such as how you became interested in the field

### Class structure

- Incorporate diversity (in choosing what texts, films, etc. students will encounter during the course)
- Create and use personally relevant class examples
- Use a variety of teaching strategies
- Move around the room as you teach, if possible
- Be consistent with class policies
- Work closely with your TA(s) to engage students in and out of class

### Get students to know one another

- Use icebreakers
- Incorporate regular peer-learning strategies from the first day of class (think/write-pair-share, group work, one-minute papers, clarifying notes, etc.)

### Be reflective

- Acknowledge your comfort level with topics or issues that might arise
- Look critically at your practice
- Ask for help
- Consider how your students are developing at the various stages of their lives and how this influences their behavior in class, their motivation, and their overall learning experience
- At some point in the middle of the semester, ask for anonymous feedback from students about their comfort level in your class.

### Communicate approachability

- Be aware of your body language to ensure that you come off as approachable (smile, relaxed, eye contact, etc.)
- Review your course syllabus for tone; for example, when presenting policies, is the tone punitive or rewarding?
- Use humor in your interactions with students in and out of class
- Encourage students to use office hours

Sample mid-semester feedback check on classroom climate:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I feel comfortable participating in this class: a) always</th>
<th>b) sometimes</th>
<th>c) rarely</th>
<th>d) never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

One thing that would make me more comfortable would be: _____________________________
Some thoughts on connecting with your students...

“Our findings suggest that faculty do matter. The educational context created by faculty behaviors and attitudes has a dramatic effect on student learning and engagement. Institutions where faculty create an environment that emphasizes effective educational practices have students who are active participants in their learning and perceive greater gains from their undergraduate experience” (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005, p. 173).

“In his research on the topic, Bob Boice (1996, 2000) found that when professors are uncaring (i.e. disparage students, seem cold), students typically respond in suit. Instructors’ apathy or hostility leads to increased student classroom disruptiveness and decreased constructive course engagement” (Meyers, 2009, p. 208).

“Astin (1993) investigated the impact of personal and situational variables on several college outcomes; some of his findings naturally dealt with the relationship between climate and learning. In his study of more than 200,000 students and 25,000 faculty at 200 institutions, he identified several factors contributing to the college experience. The factor that relates to course climate the most is what he terms ‘Faculty Student Orientation,’ and includes items such as students perceptions of whether faculty are interested in students’ academic problems, care about the concerns of minority groups, are approachable outside of class, and treat students as persons and not as numbers. He found that this factor positively impacts retention, the percentage of students who go on to graduate school, and self-reported critical thinking, analysis, and problem-solving skills” (Ambrose et al., 2010 p 177-178).

References and Resources


One final note...

Consider involving students in the formation or (re)design of your course by asking their input on class activities, readings, assignments, and tests. Angelo & Cross (1993) list a number of techniques for doing so. One such technique is Quality Circles, which involves a group of volunteer students that meets with the instructor once a month to give structured feedback. A less involved technique is asking 1-5 students to sit in the front row and fill out a short class evaluation survey throughout the lesson. This can be done multiple times throughout the semester; take the opportunity to ask different students each time you incorporate this.

For further information on this resource and more, please contact the CTE at:
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