

WHAT OUR BEST COLLEGE INSTRUCTORS DO

Reflections by students about meaningful learning experiences



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*Embarking on the college journey can be both exciting and daunting. In designing the class, teaching the class, and assessing the class, instructors have significant control over students' course experience. Regardless of the many ways a class can be delivered, the classroom is one place that should undoubtedly be student-centered. **Student voices should be elevated, student bodies should feel welcomed, and student minds should be engaged.** A professor may not always get it right the first time around, but those who remain open-minded, actively seek student feedback, and use this knowledge to grow will garner much respect from the students they serve. This project, What Our Best College Instructors Do, is proof, directly from students, that professors do indeed get it right, and sometimes, it can be life changing.*

- Kiara Williams, Georgia State University, Class of 2021

Introduction

In 2004, Ken Bain challenged faculty in higher education to teach in a manner that supports student learning rather than placing the burden of learning solely on students. His call to action, set forth in his book *What the Best College Teachers Do*, defines teaching as a toolbox of practices that faculty use to engage students in learning and to help students succeed at learning. Some of these practices focus on the actual teaching itself, such as carefully planning out lessons to maximize student learning as opposed to lectures prepared around content coverage, starting a class with a question or a mystery, and treating students with respect based on trust. Other practices focus on teaching students to learn, such as collaborating with each other, learning from failure, and taking ownership of their own learning. Bain encourages teachers to act less like gatekeepers, who only allow some students into their discipline, and more like storytellers, drawing into their disciplines as many students as they can. Bain (2004) also observes that the best college teachers behave much like researchers in that they continuously improve their teaching craft by trying new techniques and using various tools to evaluate the effectiveness of those techniques.

Bain explains in his methodology that he and his team interviewed between sixty and seventy teachers at two dozen institutions as well as small groups of their students (Bain, 2004). However, he does not mention the demographics of the faculty or students whose ideas about good teaching inform his work. Most telling, while the book mainly focuses on the stories of faculty, Bain himself states in his introductory chapter: "If we want to know if students think that something has helped and encouraged them to learn, what better way to find out than to ask them" (p. 13). Bain's 2012 follow-up book, *What the Best College Students Do*, was aimed at a student audience. Bain and his team conducted a literature review of nearly 40 years of research on "good students" followed by interviews with "several dozen people who have become highly successful and creative people ... and a few current college students" (Bain, 2012, p. 11).

As with his 2004 research, there is no mention of diversity or equity and no demographic breakdown of Bain's interview subjects.

Diversity is an important factor in the 2021 publication *What Inclusive Instructors Do: Principles and Practices for Excellence in College Teaching*. Tracie Marcella Addy and her co-authors make a point of describing the demographics of their faculty survey respondents as well as the diversity in the institutions at which they teach. However, in contrast to Ken Bain who understood that students should be consulted in research about good teaching, Addy and her co-authors write this about their approach to investigating the features of inclusive teaching: "We asked these instructors to define what inclusive teaching means to them in addition to the inclusive teaching approaches implemented in their courses. The voice[s] of these instructors ring loudly as we draw on their responses, allowing them to be the experts and frame the conversation about what inclusive teachers do" (Addy et al., 2021, p. 173).

Our approach in writing *What Our Best College Instructors Do* is twofold. First, we do not distinguish inclusive teaching from good teaching because good teaching is inclusive teaching. Said another way, **any teaching approach that is not intentionally inclusive cannot be universally "good" teaching** but only good for the particular demographic of students around whom it is designed.

Second, our approach is to allow students, not faculty, to frame the conversation about what good teachers do. We have been intentional about including a diverse group of students in this conversation, creating space for their perspectives and experiences of good teaching to shine through. As the author of *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers* (now in its 14th edition) once stated, "Students are in class almost every day and they know what's going on" (McKeachie, 1983, p. 38). We trust that students can recognize and articulate the actions and traits of the college teachers who have made a difference in their lives.

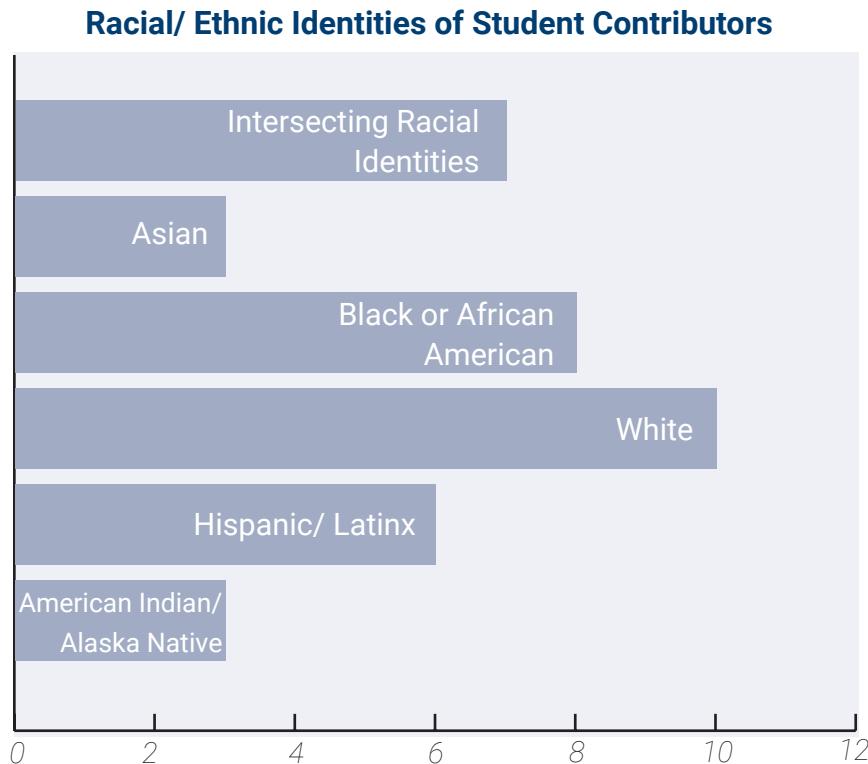


Methodology

In April 2022, we put out a request for proposals to students affiliated with the Every Learner Network who are either currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program or have graduated from one since May 2020. Our proposal prompt for students was to “summarize a story about a teacher whose way of teaching really made a difference for you in terms of wanting to engage in the class, wanting to learn, or successfully passing the class.” During the month of June 2022, we worked with students to enhance their proposals with more robust descriptions and relevant details. Some students chose to describe “good” teaching or their best instructors in general terms, some shared multiple examples, and still others went into great detail about a specific instructor and class. All student contributors were compensated with a modest honorarium for their time and reflections.

Participants

While our pool of 22 student contributors is small by the standards set by Ken Bain and Tracie Marcella Addy, their voices represent a large cross-section of students at U.S. institutions of higher education today. Approximately 60% of student contributors are under 25 years of age, and 40% are over 25 years of age. Our student contributors identify as male, female, nonbinary, immigrants, parents, and caregivers, and many are affected by poverty. Two students describe themselves as neurodivergent and highlighted teaching methods that supported their learning preferences. Participants identify as Black, white, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian, and seven students identified as having two or more intersecting racial identities. Nine of the students (41%) are first-generation college attendees.



Approximately three-fourths of student participants attend 4-year institutions and one-fourth attend 2-year institutions. Finally, all but one of the student contributors attend public institutions across five geographical regions in the United States, with the majority (77%) attending college full-time.

Three students attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), two attend Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), and three attend Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs). Six students are at institutions that serve Asian Americans and Native American Pacific Islanders (AANAPISI), and one student attends an Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian Serving Institution (ANNH).

Classification of Examples

For many years, researchers have been working to define good, great, and effective teaching, examining behaviors, characteristics, and skills of instructors at the postsecondary level (e.g., Bain, 2004; Brown & Tomlin, 1996; Feldman, 1976; Slate, LaPrairie et al., 2009; Young & Shaw, 1999). Terminology can often be nebulous, with many discussions attempting to measure/define not only what good teaching looks like, but how one might attain the characteristics or hone the skills of a good teacher. When researchers delve into the characteristics of good teachers, vocabulary becomes even more varied, with different interpretations and levels of inclusivity in definitions of terms and categories. For the work presented here, we focus on student voices and avoid changing their words through excessive interpretation and analysis. We have chosen to share true student stories rather than summaries of discovered trends and themes, which distinguishes this collection of student insight from other studies.

For practitioner usefulness, we have organized student examples into two groupings of patterns or themes which presented themselves throughout the student submissions.

- The first grouping is quotes which illustrate instructional actions and pedagogical techniques which are aligned with evidence-based teaching practices examined by Peters and Means (2022).
- The second grouping is quotes which illustrate characteristics of instructors and themes which extend beyond instruction and relate to equity and inclusion in the higher education environment.

Some student examples could be placed into more than one category, and in those cases, we present the statement with the more prevalent theme but include it in all relevant counts.



Learning from Our Students: Student Perspectives on Good Teaching

Twenty-two students trusted us with their stories and their reflections on good teaching. We honor that trust and hope that instructors who read this document gain as much insight about teaching from the students as we did. While we often write of students in the plural, each one of these students had an individual experience with learning and therefore a unique story to tell about good teaching. The key takeaways from their stories are:

1. **Students want to be recognized as individuals and appreciated in the classroom.**
2. **Students want real life in the classroom.**
3. **Students want to be treated with respect and trust.**

We hope readers will likewise ask their own students, “What do your best instructors do?” and use that feedback to continuously improve their craft as teachers.



Instructional Practices of Our Best Instructors

OUR BEST INSTRUCTORS MAKE US FEEL WE BELONG

Sense of belonging was tied for the most common theme with 18 out of the 22 student contributors including examples in their submissions of instructors creating a sense of belonging and an inclusive learning environment. Not only is this a general evidence-based teaching practice (see Peters and Means, 2022), but a sense of belonging is also one of six best practices that have evidence of reducing equity gaps in chemistry (White, Vincent-Layton, and Villareal, 2021, as cited in Paz Buenaflor, 2021). For the student participants here, high levels of communication and in-class discussion facilitated community building and value affirmation.

While we were in class, she also opened up space for us to discuss with our classmates and work together on problems and also be able to ask the professor any questions we might have ... Since I took her class when COVID-19 first hit, I was able to see how understanding my teachers truly were and she was definitely very understanding with her students.

**- Venus Rodriguez,
Elementary Statistics**

The class was open, personable, and full of discussion ... The community involved in a classroom setting was very beneficial for me, I had struggled with my grades and feeling energized about school until I started those classes.

- Christa Elrod, Art

The instructor held a high-impact course by incorporating the following:

- Reserved online/in-person class meetings for questions and extra learning about topics
- Willing to meet anytime (within reason) via Zoom or in person
- Held a discussion for questions or topics outside of the course book topics

The instructor involved class members in discussion and kept open opportunities to revisit previous topics... WOW, He was great!

- Kimberli Bruso, Leveraging IS in Business

He was super encouraging and made sure to dedicate as much time as necessary for each student to succeed.

- Vickiana Supriana, College Mathematics

Sometimes it's helpful to come with questions that other students have asked you in the past. When a student asks a question, they are being vulnerable, and sometimes teachers will expect you to know the basics and that can be embarrassing. But I've seen other teachers handle it with grace and not make you feel less than. That encourages other people to ask basic questions.

- Eeman Udin, no class specified

The highlighted instructors intentionally used practices that were culturally responsive, equity-minded, and helped students feel they and their unique backgrounds have a place in the life of the classroom. Some of these examples were affirming of all members of the course and created an inclusive atmosphere in general.

Throughout the semester he always made sure to reach out and ensure that all of his students were adjusting well to the pandemic... He also included his pronouns in his email unlike other instructors which helped make him seem more open in my opinion. Considering that is a relatively new practice that helps an individual self-identify, I believe it helped my peers in the LGBTQ+ community feel especially welcome. He even went so far as to send personalized emails to students at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester to congratulate and check in with our progress.

- Zaire McMican, Pre-Calculus Algebra

Equitable teaching means being consciously inclusive and respectful about accurate representation in course materials with regards to race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and ability.

- Timmy Thongkham, no class specified

My professor used our preferred names and pronouns, making sure we felt respected and valued. At the beginning of class, we always had a recap of the previous lesson, and she allowed us to share feedback on the media or activities we did so she could improve her lesson plans in the future. The environment was welcoming and safe for everyone regardless of race, socioeconomic status, gender, or sexual orientation.

- Jules Castillo, History of US Pop Mass and Counter Culture



Some inclusive practices made students feel that their instructors were invested in them as individuals. Personalized messages and outreach to students helped promote belonging and inclusion in the educational setting. In their systematic review of evidence-based teaching practices, Peters and Means (2022) found positive student outcomes in studies exploring Sense of Belonging Interventions, including higher overall course grades, higher 1-year college persistence, and improved exam performance.

People like Mrs. O'Neill help people like me feel I am important and I matter and that I am not alone in my educational journey. It can get isolating online and can also get uncomfortable in a classroom if experiences are not shared and perspectives aren't welcomed or understood ... I took this class online and I can honestly say that I feel that I formed bonds with people and that professor because of the type of discussions that were being written. It forced the conversation to higher levels and to take on different tones, and that actually helps the real lesson sink in.

- Renee Restivo, Medical Ethics

My professor had a HUGE impact on me and inspires me constantly with the ideas she taught me. Through the assignments designed for us to reflect, I was able to understand my career goals better; my passions suddenly felt attainable through her guidance. Professor Reid was incredibly invested in our personal aspirations, which made it very easy to trust and learn from her.

- Grace Davenport, Making a Living in the Arts

We all approached this differently, but it was the same assignment ... I was able to use my own skills and passions and combine it into an assignment on a fascinating but predetermined subject. Other students recited poems, sang songs, did hypothetical podcast interviews, wrote magazine articles, etc. The point is, we all got to insert ourselves into our assignment and in a way that we were comfortable with. The course design was helpful in allowing me to understand the material, but also gave me a voice, and I would guess many of the students felt that way. Even though we had to learn the same material, the way we got to demonstrate our learning was individualized and because of that, at least for me, for the first time, I truly felt like I was a part of something greater than a grade and learned the true value of learning new concepts.

- Kristina Tucker, Research Design

One element of creating a sense of belonging for students was the availability of instructors, labeled by Bledsoe, Richardson, and Kalle (2021) as “approachable” in their recent analysis of student perceptions of great teaching. The best instructors make it clear that they are never too busy for their students.

Prof. Wyatt had more confidence in me than I had in myself; it was abundantly apparent. I spoke with her again as I worked my way through her class. I was afforded meetings with her, as well as online tutoring if I asked for an instructor session with her. She never left me “to the wolves of mathematics” – she continuously encouraged me to push beyond my fear and boundaries ... She provided confidence to me that with perseverance I could still pass the class even though I wasn't passing tests. Prof. Wyatt helped me understand that my grades were such that if I kept going, I would pass the course.

- Jennine Wilson, Survey of Mathematics

The best college professors I have had in my college experience were quickly responsive, dedicated, and thorough. They cared deeply about their students and helped them to do their best in the course. That included offering limited office hours to talk about success and/or concerns. The professors also would be sure that everyone in the class understood the information before moving forward. These types of professors made my college experience better than I could have expected.

- Lauren Otto, English/Writing Methods

Emails and correspondence were all replied to within a timely window, usually 24 hours or less, and Sykes was readily available in her office hours, and these hours stayed mostly consistent throughout the year ... It's teachers like Professor Sykes that go above and beyond in her practice to ensure her students are prepared, confident, and well-informed that makes the biggest mark on students.

- Luke Lauzon, Nursing Concepts 1&2



OUR BEST INSTRUCTORS DO MORE THAN LECTURE

Equal in mention to sense of belonging, 18 out of 22 contributing students provided an example of a professor engaging them in active learning, or “learning by doing.” Since Freeman et al.’s 2014 meta-analysis of active learning and its positive effects on student performance in STEM courses, there can be no denying the importance of stepping away from lectures and engaging the whole student in the classroom. Collaboration, conversation, and discussions can foster a sense of classroom community and allow students to share ideas and be engaged in their own knowledge-building.

Also in class, we did a lot of group activities where we could discuss ideas; participation was not required, but there were often lively conversations about what we were learning ... We did have to turn in a research paper for this class, it was a requirement of the course, but we were able to use the research article we had been studying in class as a template; essentially, we were all writing our own research article on information processing, which allowed us in some ways to collaborate on ideas and the way in which we would be formatting our own work.

- Kristina Tucker, Research Design

Discussions are 100% beneficial and applying the knowledge to outside of the classroom.

- Eeman Uddin, no class specified

The class was discussion-based and the topics were interesting. I believe that this strategy is what got students engaged, because it's rare for instructors to ask students about what they think.

- Jonathan Dabel, Intro to Sociology

The instructors for these classes and departments made it where class blended lecture and lab in a seamless way, where you're working on the topics as you're learning about them, and with that came a lot of discussions. Though I know art courses may have more free space to have these discussions, I don't think it should be limited to only art; I remember really enjoying moments in psychology courses where we got to really discuss and reflect on the topics we were learning and this was always what was happening in Design and Composition, alongside a lot of my other art classes. By discussing topics, themes, colors, ideas, etc., I got to know not only my fellow classmates but my instructors, because artists are generally inspired by other artists that speak to them and their experiences ... These instructors really understood how to discuss various issues and media and relay it back to the topic at hand, they were easy to talk to, and I got to know them, as artists and as people.

- Christa Elrod, Various Art Courses

Dr. Grymes would constantly set time during lectures to ask questions and have discussion, which helped the class stay engaged and feel like our voices mattered.

- Daniel Crisostomo, Music History

Active learning contextualizes content with relevant examples, guest speakers, and overt connections that help students make sense of what they are learning. A meta-analysis by Theobold et al. (2020, as cited in Enyon and Iuzzini, 2020) found that not only did active learning pedagogies benefit all students, but that “students from minoritized groups benefited the most, reducing differences in achievement and closing the equity gap” (p. 25).

Sometimes my professor would introduce the lesson by playing a TikTok video on the screen that relates to what we will be discussing, and then we would have a group conversation about how we interpreted and what we learned from the video. I think my professor used what she knows about the generation that she is teaching to make the lesson introduction more interesting and attention-grabbing. My generation uses technology for virtually every aspect of life and my professor used her knowledge of that to bring a familiar platform into the classroom. Many students my age spend a lot of time on social media, especially TikTok. It brings a sense of comfort and familiarity, which can be essential when choosing the best way to introduce a new lesson ... When it came to learning new topics, my instructor didn't focus on the scientific theories (like Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory); she taught us about that, but for the most part we reflected on more real-life examples.

- Aajahne Seeney, Child Development

My instructor would relate math to the real world; for example, the Pearson correlation coefficient can show the relationship between hours studied and As on a test.

- Vickiana Supriana, College Mathematics

We had several guest lectures from the authors of the texts/films we covered, allowing us to get to know their stories, the writers, and form connections with them.

- Jules Castillo, History of US Pop and Mass Counter Culture

My instructor was very helpful and cool, and she always tried to incorporate games, memes, and other fun things to do to help the class become more fun. She also had guest speakers come in and it was very cool to have a little switch-up.

- Danyelle Imani Pope, First Year Experience

To supplement the teaching, Sykes would incorporate real-world scenarios into her lectures. For example, when discussing the condition of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV, a condition that causes mild cold-like symptoms commonly seen in young children), Sykes was able to include her own daughter in the lecture, who has been seen for RSV in the past. Pictures were included, and because it was Sykes's own daughter there was no issue of a breach of confidentiality. Her unique experience with this topic, and her ability to relate her own personal journey with evidence-based information about the condition, really cemented this concept in my mind. I know that many other students found that when a professor is able to relate coursework to real-world issues that he or she has actual experience in, it can be extremely beneficial.

- Luke Lauzon, Nursing Concepts 1&2

In this course, in order to enable the students to engage, we were given real-life examples of the things we would learn in class, and after every lecture PowerPoint, she would put a link to podcasts and also minority scientists that have helped do further research in the topics we learned during the semester.

- Ariana Castro, Biology



Active learning and group work is one of six best practices that have evidence of reducing equity gaps in chemistry (White, Vincent-Layton, and Villareal, 2021, as cited in Paz Buenaflor, 2021). Active learning can be fun and games, and it can also be engaging problems that require higher-order thinking skills. "These practices can be potentially more inclusive and account for the different learning strengths of each student" (Paz Buenaflor, 2021, p. 8).

The instructor involved class members in discussion and kept open opportunities to revisit previous topics. He considered all questions welcome and equally important. He involved students on a higher level by providing the regular course content and then added the above extras for an immersive experience into the world of information systems. For me, I could not help but to learn more because the instructor made the information interesting and pertinent in today's technology. He added value using real industry leaders. This brought the text to life and did not feel like just another memorized theory.

- Kimberli Bruso, Leveraging IS in Business

She gave us discussion posts and research assignments from many people's real life stories. She made sure people from all populations were represented from the story of Henrietta Lacks and how wrong she was done because of her race, socioeconomic status, and beliefs at the time, to persons with disabilities that cannot speak for themselves. Her assignments made me think about the real-life ethical issues going on in our country in the medical and science fields that I might one day encounter or even help perpetuate unknowingly.

- Renee Restivo, Medical Ethics

By telling us real-life examples, it helped with retaining the knowledge because it was based on practical usage ... One cool assignment we had was to design an experiment from the ground up. For this, he told us to pretend we had unlimited resources to literally anything that came to mind. He gave both a verbal and written example of his own and told us to follow any topic we found interesting. With this freedom to decide, I opted to select an experiment on making jerky from a variety of meats from the most renowned farms in the world. I would have VIP planes provide any materials necessary in the most optimal conditions to keep them fresh. By finding the most cost-effective yet delicious jerky, the plan was to provide preserved foodstuffs for areas in the world who required rations for their people.

- Tony Woods, Seminar in Scientific Literature and Research Design

Occasionally, student examples of active learning extended beyond instructors using real-world examples in class into instructors helping students connect in-class content with career paths and professional desires. This created high levels of student engagement with not just the class, but the entire field of study.

At the end of the semester, we did a research project in which we put in thought what we wanted to do in the future and to also see what types of jobs are in the pathway we investigated. The assignment served as a planner to see in the future and to put into thought what needs to be done in order that I can be on the right track.

**- Ariana Castro,
Chemistry**

This particular course taught through hands-on experience – project-based assessment or learning – skills that are more memorable, though time-consuming. It does stick more than simply writing essay after essay or cramming for another exam. Within each area of degrees, this should be a standard – isn't the point of education to also prepare you for the workforce? Perhaps if the skills were taught, the emphasis on years of experience would not be as detrimental. Businesses would know college students were well equipped to utilize the software and do the job proficiently.

- Barbara Gooch, Social Media for Entertainment and Computer Applications

One of the assignments we completed was to list out our values and people we trusted. Our professor believed that any career goal should be looked at through the lens of how it would relate to our life values. Up to the point of taking her class, I was scared to pursue theater for its unreliability, but after, my entire perspective changed.

**- Grace Davenport,
Making a Living in the Arts**





WE GET LOTS OF PRACTICE AND FEEDBACK FROM OUR BEST INSTRUCTORS

Ten students shared examples of instructors providing them with opportunities for formative practice, including low-stakes assignments and timely feedback before a final product was due. Debriefing assignments and assessments were particularly important to students, helping students learn from the assessments they have participated in and from the mistakes they may have made.

She also took part in the discussion and gave real, thoughtful feedback.

- Renee Restivo, Medical Ethics

Every week there would be a quiz, and there would also be a practice quiz to take so we were able to find out what to improve on before taking the actual quiz ... We also were required to meet with his TA to discuss our final essay so that we would be able to have feedback from his TA. We were then required to peer-edit the essay for another assignment before he would give us feedback so we could make any changes that were necessary.

- Daniel Crisostomo, Music History

I appreciate one-on-one feedback; I'm used to critiques as it relates to my field of study and know that a combination of positive and constructive feedback is important to developing a good product. I would say the only way I would like feedback to change is getting some kind of feedback before something is a final due piece. Part of learning is having a mentor or educator help build the proper way to do things; it's harder to maintain successful traits when you are graded before you're told where you are lacking in a field.

- Christa Elrod, no class specified

She would engage during lecture and would leave thoughtful feedback on assignments.

- Ariana Castro, Biology

Students appreciated having a lot of practice with topics, especially before high-stakes assignments. Having an ungraded or informal feedback loop can help guide students toward mastery, and sometimes comes in the form of adaptive courseware, as described by one student contributor. Rodgers (2022) cites both individuality and data-driven decision making as central dimensions of equity-first digital courseware, highlighting the need for instructors who can skillfully use these elements to meet student needs.

Our homework assignments were not graded for correctness, but instead evaluated on the knowledge of our answers, so that she could assess what we did or did not understand ... We did practice writings for gaining IRB approval, participant consent forms, and she helped us navigate the university website to find research articles that elucidated the research article we were evaluating as a class. Again, these assignments were evaluated not for what we got right, but for what we did or did not understand, and then we were given opportunities in class to ask questions ... The truth is that equitable teaching means offering multiple ways of demonstrating knowledge and giving clear feedback that allows an instructor to meet a student where they are – that was the essence of this class.

- Kristina Tucker, Research Design

I also liked the use of discussion boards in each module because I could interact with my peers and my professor would often reply to the discussion posts with helpful feedback ... In the end of each module, we would have quizzes that were not locked down and would have multiple trials.

- Ariana Castro, Philosophy

Another thing that she would do is work out real problems and examples during class, to remove any confusion.

- Venus Rodriguez, Elementary Statistics

I really enjoy Pearson MyMathLab. I love that it gives you a chance to figure out the problem, and if you get stumped, because math is done in steps, if you can't get the right answer, it gives you examples to help you along the way to figure out what step you may have missed. By doing this, I can correct future errors with that kind of problem. I have been using this software for a couple of years now and I have not gone wrong with it.

- Jennine Wilson, Survey of Mathematics

We had recap sessions for tests which consisted of small groups and large group discussions where we went over questions and answers that would be on the quiz.

- Jules Castillo, History of US Pop Mass and Counter Culture

He pre-recorded his lectures; he then willingly showed up for in-person lectures that would be voluntary attendance and assigned an assortment of assignments that would be, to an extent, voluntary. By increasing the accessibility of the class, he also tailored his educational expectations for each student to be independent.

- Julie Thackston, Consumer Behavior Marketing

METACOGNITION HELPS US BECOME BETTER STUDENTS

Nine of the student participants cited examples of instructors providing them with opportunities to learn to be better learners and take control of their own learning process. This teaching technique includes providing students with opportunities to practice metacognition, self-assessment, self-regulation, and agency (see Peters and Means, 2022). This might be as simple as helping students learn how to navigate an online learning system or supporting students in understanding the process of starting and completing an important assignment.

This course taught detail within Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Access. This course became important as it allowed shortcuts and better information for other courses later on. Microsoft Word is an everyday usage for me for most courses. To learn more functions within Word has been invaluable. Integrating programs, such as Microsoft Office, into other courses allows practice and builds application of information taught.

- Barbara Gooch, Computer Applications

Another thing that made him such an effective instructor is that he made sure we understood the courseware we were using at the time, which was Cengage. Given it was my first time working with online courseware as a college student, I believe this first positive experience was a very big deal for me. Having someone actively help me throughout the courseware even if they didn't fully know what to do at times was such a relief compared to the experiences of other people ... He would even ensure that we could see the assignments due before ending class by having us pull up the assignment and report any issues or questions regarding the technology or work. I believe this maximized student productivity and success.

- Zaire McMican, Pre-Calculus Algebra



Students appreciated instructors who didn't make assumptions about their understanding and abilities, and although this teaching practice is sometimes related to feedback, it is often more broadly associated with helping students learn to navigate the rules and culture of academia. The cited instructors guided students in learning how to be successful students.

A cool thing he did for each project was he would provide an online recording of him explaining the assignment, the instructions involved, and give a few examples of approaching the assignment. Sometimes he would provide a written example of his own to use as reference for when we worked on our own paper. By having both verbal and written explanations available, it was much easier to absorb the information as we did our research. With a recording on hand, I was never concerned about missing a vital detail from any of the lectures.

- Tony Woods, Seminar in Scientific Literature and Research Design

When reviewing answers for practice problems, Sykes would include the rationales not only as to why the correct answer was correct, but why the wrong answers were wrong. This was extremely helpful. Many of our professors would just read word for word the questions, answers, and then tell us which was correct without informing us why it was correct, or why any of the others were wrong.

- Luke Lauzon, Nursing Concepts 1&2

I would say this course was the most challenging, and without the thoughtfulness and concern from my instructor, I wouldn't have passed. In the beginning of the semester, my grade was a 52. I was failing the course and I was worried, because as a straight A student, I have never failed a course. I then made a meeting with my instructor and what happened in the meeting was remarkable. Through Zoom, we made a plan for how I should study during this course and what extra things I needed to do in order to bring my grade up. I would attend every Zoom meeting he would have, and he would provide me with thoughtful feedback. In the end, I passed the class with a 96.

- Ariana Castro, Physics

Providing opportunities for self-assessment aids students in reflecting on their learning processes and needs and "develop[s] their potential for continued learning" (Stenmark, 1991, p. 6). By providing space for reflection, some of the instructors described here helped students build awareness of their own role and responsibilities in the learning process.

Dr. Grymes also pushes for every student to succeed by incorporating self-assessments and practice quizzes that enable a student to become aware of their areas of weakness.

- Daniel Crisostomo, Music History

My professor also used a self-assessment instead of a final exam. He asked questions about what students think of the class and their participation during discussion. To calculate the final grade, he compared and added both the self-assessment and class participation.

- Jonathan Dabel, Intro to Sociology

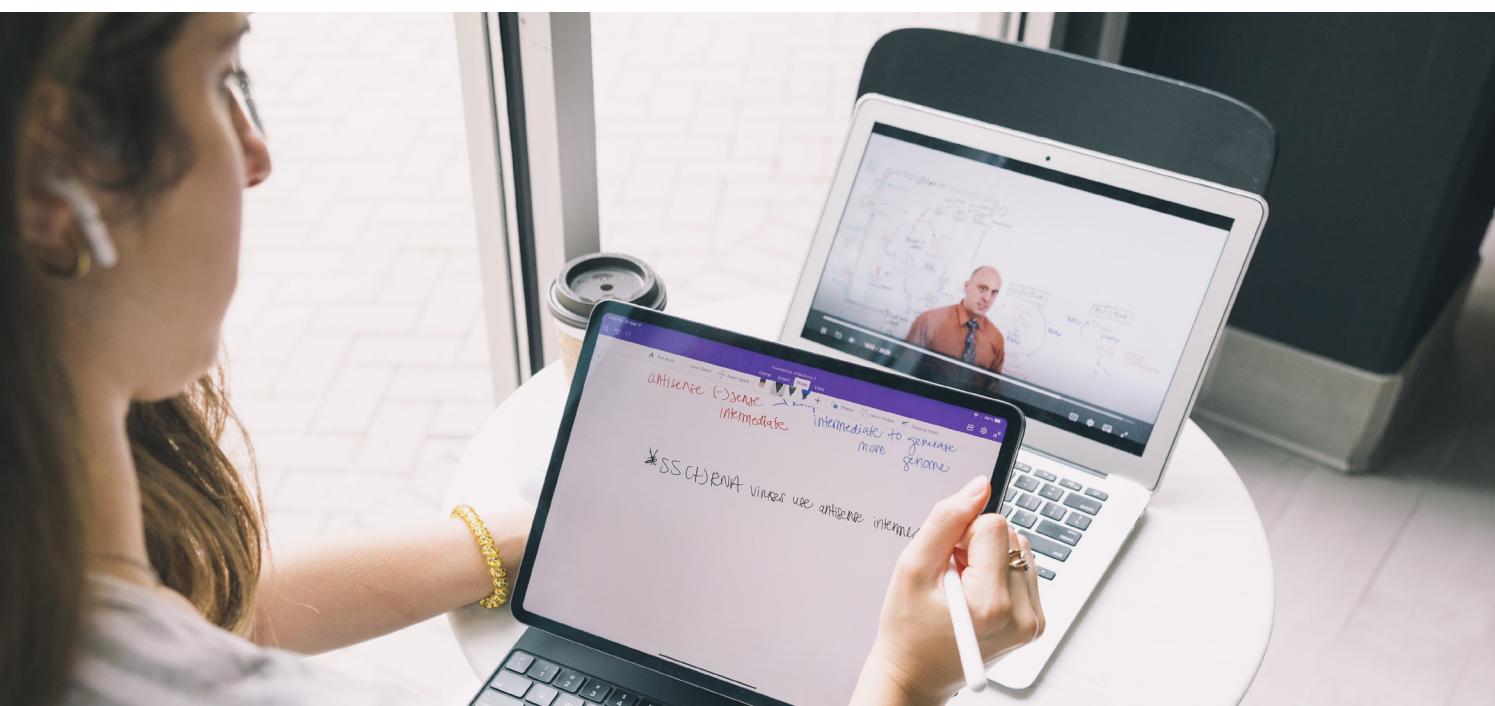
One way to guide students toward agency and taking control of their own learning process is for faculty to care for and respect students as “multidimensional human beings” (Bledsoe, Richardson and Kalle, 2021, p. 25). Student participants cited faculty who treated them as equals or adults, building the student-teacher relationship on trust.

Here, for the first time in over 15 years of education, as a 21-year-old, I was finally given the chance to be accountable to my own self! Dr. Fennell empowered his students through extra effort as a professor to make his class curriculum accessible through all modes and to give the students a chance to act as humans with free will. He had the expectation that we can fulfill the basic principles of a student to advocate for ourselves with self-discipline. I was finally treated as a colleague. I finally had the freedom to be a person before a student. I was not striving to meet the expectation of a model student, but I was discovering how to learn for the purpose of myself. For the first time, I loved learning.

- Julie Thackston, Consumer Behavior Marketing

I personally believe that one of the most considerate actions that can be done is reframing how syllabuses and courses address these issues, by breaking away from the mold that sets up stress, a lack of trust, and meeting standards that don't always show that the student is learning in ways that can be continued on outside the classroom.

- Christa Elrod, no class specified



OUR BEST INSTRUCTORS ARE TRANSPARENT AND PROVIDE CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Making learning transparent by providing students with a clear overview of course content, learning outcomes, and assessment criteria is one evidence-based teaching practice that was mentioned by 7 out of 22 student participants. Transparency can also include utilizing rubrics which clarify grading expectations and explicitly reviewing learning goals and rationale for assignments with students. As active partners in learning, students appreciate clear expectations and an alignment of course activities and assessments, and transparency has been shown to increase underserved college students' success (Winkelmes et al., 2016, as cited in Enyon and Iuzzini, 2020). A common place for transparency to present itself is in the course syllabus, which, as Bain (2004) states, is a series of promises that faculty make to their students.

In this course, what I enjoyed was that the professor already had study guides made so that our job was to only look through the PowerPoints and jot down all the necessary information. She would also use similar questions from the study guides on the test, which I found helpful because it narrowed down what I actually needed to learn for the course and to also know what I needed to know for the exam. It was a very organized system that each professor should try to do so that the students are paying more attention to the material rather than focusing on how to organize the material and guess what topics would be on the exams.

- Ariana Castro, Microbiology and Public Health

A high-quality syllabus allows students to know scheduled times to meet, course outlines, assignment deadlines, and how to contact the teacher.

- Kimberli Bruso, Leveraging IS in Business

I liked the practice quizzes because they gave me the opportunity to see how questions would be formatted and what to expect on the test. Also, they allowed me to see what else I needed to study for the test and better prepare.

- Daniel Crisostomo, Music History

There are many ways in which Professor Sykes enhanced all of our learning, one of which was exam "blueprints" (essentially content and study guides), which were well thought out and available early before an exam so students had plenty of time to prepare.

- Luke Lauzon, Nursing Concepts 1&2

Some ways that she would balance working problems is through making her own lecture notes for the whole class to refer to, and we would go through problems that she said would be on the homework or on the test.

- Venus Rodriguez, Elementary Statistics

OUR BEST INSTRUCTORS ARE AWARE OF OUR NEEDS AND CHECK IN ON US

Three of the student participants cited examples of instructors using real-time data to inform teaching and ongoing course improvements to optimize student success. This often looks like faculty monitoring attendance, missing assignments, and exam scores to determine which students they should contact to offer help or to do a general check-in. In today's classroom, data analytics from courseware and learning management system dashboards can also inform teaching and ongoing course improvements to optimize student success, uncovering patterns in how students are engaging with the content and where barriers might exist to student mastery.

He also checked in when students went absent without notice.

- Zaire McMican, Pre-Calculus Algebra

She was set on assisting me with all that I needed, whether it was tutoring or one-on-one time working out math formulas as well as techniques I could use to remember formulas.

- Jennine Wilson, Survey of Mathematics

She took the initiative to reach out to me and see if everything was OK because she noticed I wasn't turning in assignments. She spoke with me and told me that she thought I was a great student and that's why she reached out because she knew it wasn't normal of me to not do my work ... There was no way for her to know that I don't have a support system at home or anything that I was or am going through. This small act of kindness and concern for my success meant so much to me and I will never forget her or any of my professors like her.

- Renee Restivo, Medical Ethics



Characteristics of Our Best Instructors and Ways They Promote Inclusion

OUR BEST INSTRUCTORS OPEN DOORS FOR US AND CELEBRATE OUR PRESENCE

Many professors and university personnel work to broaden the participation of people, partners, and perspectives to reflect the equity that students and their institutions deserve. Although often overlapping with creating a sense of belonging in the classroom, nine student contributors cited instructors opening doors to students and populations who may not yet have recognized themselves as part of the higher education community. Often, this takes the form of strategic and expansive curricular choices, which is one element of decolonizing the curriculum (e.g., Arshad, 2021).

The TikTok video that she showed us was of a Black man talking – he was outside in what looked like his backyard, which gave a very informal, lighthearted, and personal feel to the video. I liked that it was a Black man that was speaking because, #1, it's not very often that Black men are in positions to speak about this (maybe by choice or not by choice), and #2, everyone in the class was Black or biracial, so it was someone we could relate to in a way.

- Aajahne Seeney, Child Development

As a Latinx student in the Music Department of UNCC, it can be difficult to find representation in music and its subsequent subjects. Classical music has “endowed” white wealthy men with privilege that minorities and women have not had. As a minority student, it’s disheartening to realize classical music was never meant for you. However, despite the lack of diversity in classical music, Dr. Grymes, the professor of music history at UNCC, pushes for the inclusion of composers and musicians which history has overlooked due to their skin color. Dr. Grymes combats the lack of diversity within music’s history by acknowledging lesser-known composers of color within his teachings. Dr. Grymes opened a door for me and affirmed my identity in music. My professor made me feel like I matter and that this professor cared about students as an individual.

- Daniel Crisostomo, Music History

I had never read a queer story about a Filipino American person, let alone someone who was born/raised in Hawai‘i. This was a first for me. My teacher did a lot of research in curating stories and films that incorporated Hawai‘i themes that were not only written by locals but Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) and other people of color. There were some readings that transitioned between ‘olelo Hawai‘i (Native Hawaiian language) and English or Pidgin (Hawaiian Creole English) and ‘olelo Hawai‘i. It was such a nice contrast to the previous books I read in other history classes, where everything we learned was by primarily white authors. There was a disconnect between what I was learning and the environment I grew up in. I couldn’t relate to the content, which was difficult at times, especially when it came to writing essays. But, in the class with my professor, writing came easily. I was able to recall parts of the text as evidence for my responses and I understood the lessons more clearly.

- Jules Castillo, History of US Pop Mass and Counter Culture

Some of the instructors promoted inclusion through classroom norms and establishing a welcoming environment. In ways that changed their students' lives, instructors helped students have confidence in their place in higher education.

A prime example would be one of the first projects we ever did, which was creating imagery that portrayed the four elements; almost every classmate brought something different to represent earth, air, fire, and water. Some were culturally based, some were media-based and showed their influences, and others showed their love for linework and shading, but in the end, we all got to watch the process of each other making it, presenting it, and have a healthy place to learn how to critique in ways that weren't harmful to an individual but knowing tools to employ to help best convey each person's unique message. This, of course, was all guided by our instructors, who many times would ask us about why we were picking that character or that color for a piece. These instructors really understood how to discuss various issues and media and relate it back to the topic at hand; they were easy to talk to and I got to know them as artists and as people.

- Christa Elrod, Design and Composition

Additionally, we did a lot of soul-searching and working toward tangible goals in the class, which actually led me to coming out to my family. I had been keeping this from them for years, and was scared of who I was for a very long time. In our first assignment, we had to create goals to attain by the end of the year, and one of those was to come out to my mother. I believe that in my professor's attempt to make us look within, I was able to realize the importance of being authentic – not only with what I wanted to dedicate my time to, but also with who I was.

- Grace Davenport, Making a Living in the Arts



OUR BEST INSTRUCTORS ALLOW US TO BE OUR FULL SELVES

Seven students wrote of how their instructors implemented policies or taught in a manner that was optimistic, anti-deficit, and sustainable so that a student's background, life circumstances, and/or lack of familiarity with higher education are not barriers to overcome but opportunities to enrich their learning. Students' best instructors teach with flexibility – a key best practice for instructors wanting to support student mental health according to Coleman (2022) – grace, and by meeting students where they are.

Some students may experience internet access issues and may need to rely on outside sources for connecting to the courses. Other students may experience tedious work or family care schedules, hence reducing the amount of time for meeting deadlines on assignments or scheduled meeting times. The student scenario lends itself to strict schedules, less time to understand the course content, and restricted times to find tutoring or teacher guidance. Office hours of teachers can pose problems due to the teacher providing limited times to meet online or in person. My best instructors have learned from students what time and modalities work best for them for class and office hours and then worked to make that an option.

- Kimberli Bruso, no class specified

Many students don't have financial security, even more so with us taking on loans that put us in sometimes perpetual debt. This means students could be working odd hours to afford a roof over their head or food while trying to gain education. This also means as instructors, being flexible with structure could not only alleviate stress but could literally mean whether a student can continue their education or be able to make rent this month. This also applies to mandatory attendance, such as meetings and in-person class ... Offering flexibility in these areas allows students to not have to make these difficult choices, but also gives them a standard in which to expect leniency and consideration when they move on to a professional environment.

- Christa Elrod, no class specified

My teacher provided links to the videos, PDF, or scans of the reading materials. She also made sure to let us know of the library hours for the students that needed access to the internet or a computer.

- Jules Castillo, History of US Pop Mass and Counter Culture

Some students don't have the liberty of keeping their mic on in class or being in a silent environment. Some people are stuck at home and also don't have the liberty to keep their cameras on. Sometimes keeping your camera on can be more of a distraction for you or someone else. My best instructors allow students to do what is most comfortable to them.

- Eeman Uddin, no class specified

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a set of “educational guidelines that reduces barriers to learning and takes into consideration learner variability” (Adams et al., 2021, p. 20). Faculty can use UDL strategies to establish opportunities for all students to participate through careful content selections, reflections on course accessibility, and promotion of tools and resources. UDL is also one method of designing courses for student mental health and well-being according to Coleman (2022).

I was used to the world being against me as a student, with my access to education being challenged by my rare auditory processing disorder, but with the pandemic, now I began to witness the challenge of education becoming limited-access to all students. The bridge of technology was able to protect the members of the education industry, but the replacement of traditional learning began to affect neurodivergent and neurotypical students alike. Technology, environment, and other current influences gravely impacted our education, but the transformative educational efforts of Dr. Fennell encompassed multiple modes of access for students, not just one model of student being achieved through a similar route.

- Julie Thackston, Consumer Behavior Marketing

Some of my best instructors have worked with students to determine the support they need to be successful in the course, including:

- Connecting students to faculty who speak other languages;*
- Providing accessible forms of course materials and resources;*
- Understanding that every student is different, and they should be taught in a way that fits everyone's understanding in the class.*

- Jonathan Dabel, no class specified

Being neurodivergent and disabled means classrooms aren't the most welcoming for me. I struggle with the lighting, the seating which can make it hard for me to walk, and not knowing the social norms of many lecture classes where I naturally want to have discussions so I can apply all the information I'm learning in a real way. I've always been a very hands-on person, I like getting to know others, and I'm a horrible information recaller unless it is very specifically something I'm hyper-interested in. These classes and instructors gave me tools so that I could show I was learning what they were teaching without the overwhelming fear of make-it-or-break-it tests where my anxiety would hit and I was scared about looking around too much to gather my thoughts and getting definitions confused.

- Christa Elrod, no class specified

OUR BEST INSTRUCTORS REMOVE BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

The American system of higher education is inherently racist and inequitable by design. Two student contributors described instructors who are willing to do the hard work of critically analyzing and continuously improving the systems, structures, cultures, policies, and processes which are affecting education. The importance of the student educational experience cannot be overstated, and positive student experiences have been associated "with reduced likelihood of earning a D, F, or W (withdrawing) from a course for all students, particularly for students from structurally disadvantaged backgrounds" (Student Experience Project, 2022, p. 12).

My best instructors work with their students, not only learning more but allowing the student to be vocal about where their education may not be inclusive to their needs in this area. This may also mean that the structure of school may clash with aspects of their cultural needs, such as important holidays and gatherings. This also extends to students' abilities to do work within their own communities, such as being available for community work, religious practices, and even groundwork for systemic change they need, such as protests and advocating to local, state, and federal bodies. Flexibility in allowing students to explore important parts of their identities can be addressed by being open to discussion, moving away from western traditions in how students take in their lessons and how they show what they learn. This can also include students bringing up how they best learn, letting them relate the subject matter in the course to their experiences and also just allowing them time to deal with important aspects of their identities.

- Christa Elrod, no class specified

Asked for feedback throughout the course in normal discussion and by students submitting a separate individual course review out of the scope of the regular university end-of-course reviews.

- Kimberli Bruso, Leveraging IS in Business

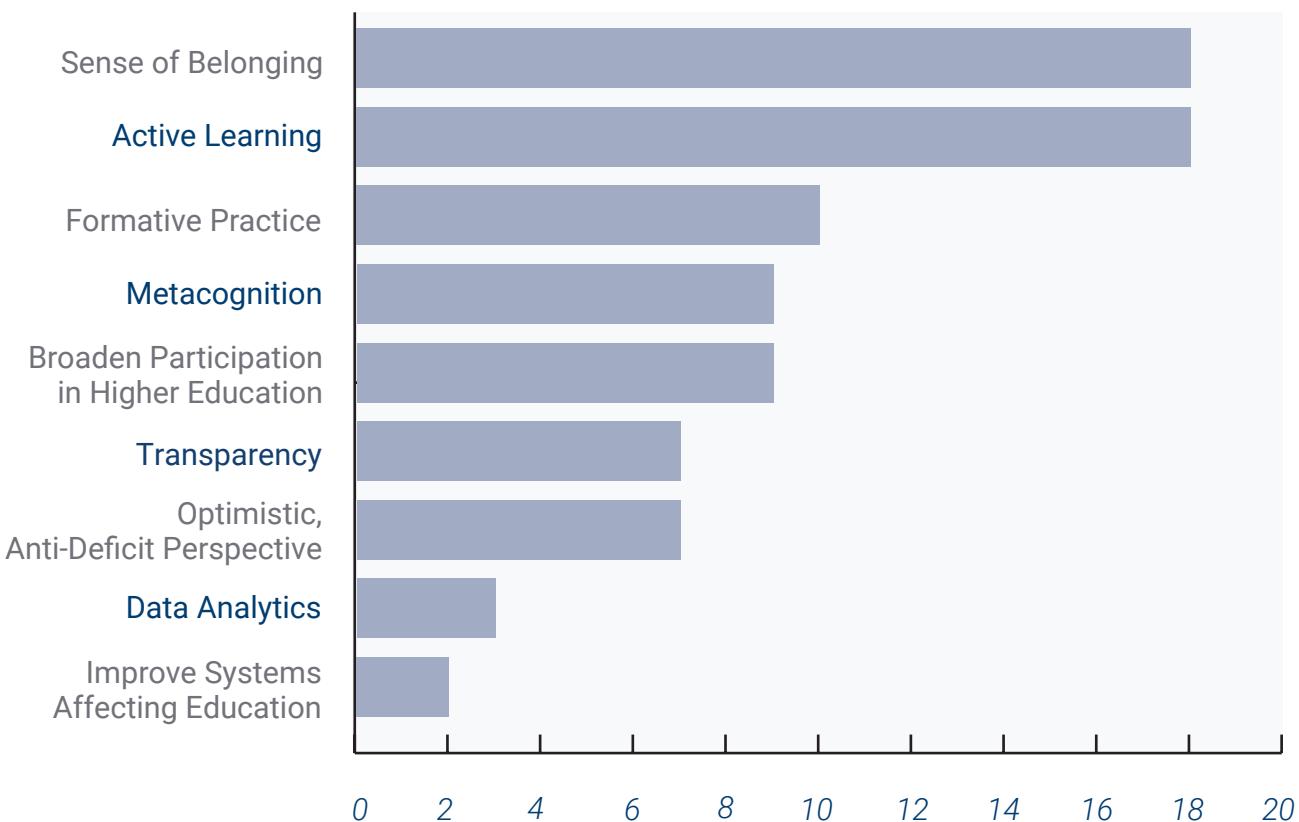


Conclusion

Through their actions and characteristics, instructors have the power to improve students' experiences in higher education, which "in turn supports greater retention in college and degree attainment" (Student Experience Project, 2022, p. 3). The 22 students who have generously shared their reflections on their best college instructors here clearly tell us that they understand what good teaching is and that they appreciate how good teaching supports them in their learning and their lives. We were able to connect student reflections on good teaching to particular evidence-based teaching practices and to equity principles in higher education.

Every Learner has a library of written resources which can help instructors further unpack these practices and principles. See Appendix C for suggestions.

Number of Students Mentioning the Theme



Without over-summarizing, the student stories shared here help raise awareness of three key takeaways about life-changing teaching:

- 1. Students want to be recognized as individuals and appreciated in the classroom.** Sense of belonging was tied for the most common theme in our students' stories about their best instructors. For many students, a sense of belonging boiled down to being part of a class community where they could engage with other students and with the instructor with their whole identity. Students frequently mentioned instructors who checked in with them personally, who celebrated their successes as well as supported them when they struggled, and who conveyed to minoritized students that the class is a safe space for them.

2. **Students want real life in the classroom.** Students value the connections instructors make between course content and “real life.” Our student contributors used the word “real” fifteen times across their submissions, mentioning being able to work on and discuss “real life” examples, problems, and scenarios as well as enjoying listening to and engaging with “real” industry leaders and practitioners. These active-learning activities were not described as supporting “real” learning, but as the real learning itself.
3. **Students want to be treated with respect and trust.** The desire to be respected and trusted came through so many of our students’ stories. Students mentioned the tone of the syllabus, instructors’ timeliness with communication, flexibility around policies, giving students time to learn, giving students the resources to succeed, and asking students for their feedback on how to make the class better. Students who feel instructors are on their side and who want them to succeed in their class are more engaged in the class and feel a stronger connection to their instructors.

We end now as we began, with Ken Bain, who wrote in *What the Best College Teachers Do*, “The moments of the class must belong to the student—not the students, but to the very undivided student. You don’t teach a class. You teach a student” (Bain, 2004, p. 97).



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Appendix A: Project Limitations

It is important to note that student contributors volunteered their stories, and this self-selection contributes bias which may provide an incomplete picture of what college students nationwide view as their best college instructors. We acknowledge that some students - particularly those from marginalized identity groups - may have experienced harm and hurt throughout their education process that could prevent them from participating in a project such as this or lead them to experience reflections such as this as a retraumatizing process. We are sharing the descriptions and examples here as authentic student stories, which may help inform instructors and future researchers who are interested in ways that instructors have created meaningful learning experiences for their students.

Appendix B: Every Learner Student Fellows

While not all the student contributors were Every Learner Student Fellows, the Fellows also contributed to this project with their thought leadership in the development stage, recruiting other students as contributors, reviewing the drafts, and always making sure the project centered student voices. [The Every Learner Everywhere Student Fellowship Program](#) is a term-based and project-based fellowship that enables undergraduate college students from across the United States attending 2- and 4-year institutions to work on organizational projects and develop professional relationships with Every Learner Network partners.

To learn more about the Every Learner Student Fellows Program and to hear from the Fellows in their own words, please visit the Student Fellows page on our website: everylearnereverywhere.org/student-fellowship/.

Appendix C: Resources for Further Learning

EVIDENCE BASED TEACHING PRACTICES

[Caring for Students Playbook: Six Recommendations](#) suggests equity-focused strategies that put student care into practice by acknowledging student challenges while identifying student assets.

[Caring for the Whole Student: How Faculty and Department Leaders Can Address Their Students' Mental Health](#) outlines extracurricular burdens that contribute to student anxiety and depression and offers recommendations for faculty and administrators in addressing and mitigating student stress.

[Equity Review Tool: A Process Guide for Equity-centered Instructional Materials](#) poses critical questions of course materials that illuminate privilege, bias, exclusion, and misrepresentation and promote equity-minded language.

[Learning Analytics Strategy Toolkit](#) provides campus champions of learning analytics with information and tools to assess, compare, and plan an adoption strategy that acknowledges the need to deliver more equitable academic outcomes through a snapshot of the current (2019) state of learning analytics adoption and use on college campuses in the United States.

[Optimizing High-Quality Digital Learning Experiences: A Playbook for Faculty](#) aims to guide faculty in thinking and designing strategically to amplify the opportunities the online environment provides in both their digital spaces and physical classrooms. By integrating teaching and design principles, this guide assists faculty in positively impacting student learning, especially for students who are minoritized because of race, gender, disability, or socioeconomic status.

[Time for Class: 2022](#) examines how faculty and institutional leaders are using instructional materials to implement teaching practices that can improve student learning and outcomes, especially for students historically underserved by higher education.

PROMOTING INCLUSION

[Caring for Students Playbook: Getting Started with Key Terms, Challenges, and Approaches](#) provides an overview of key terms (i.e., diversity, equity, and inclusion), challenges (i.e., academic, financial, and socio-emotional), and approaches (i.e., culturally responsive teaching, trauma-informed teaching, and universal design for learning or UDL) that are integral to caring for students.

[Getting Started with Equity: A Guide for Academic Department Leaders](#) is a resource for faculty and institutional leaders to start conversations in academic departments about advancing equity and justice in curricula and teaching.

[Improving Departmental Equity Using the IMPACT Framework](#) includes worksheets for anticipating, acknowledging, and redressing racism perpetuated by academic departmental policies and practices.

[Strategies for Implementing Digital Learning Infrastructure to Support Equitable Outcomes: A Case-based Guidebook for Instructional Leaders](#) focuses on building infrastructure for high-quality digital learning and outlines specific recommendations and examples.

[Teaching and Learning Toolkit](#) synthesizes research from the field and stories from colleges and offers a vast array of worksheets and planning templates to support college teams in building institutional capacity in teaching and learning.

MORE STUDENT VOICES

[Student Leaders Speak](#) shares personal stories from 25 GlobalMindED/Every Learner Everywhere Student Ambassadors as they reflect on their lives, their learning, their digital experiences, their challenges, their setbacks, and their triumphs.

[ASU REMOTE 2022: Students Share the Most Impactful Inclusive Teaching Strategies](#). In this 30-minute video, current undergraduate students discuss what inclusive teaching strategies have been most impactful in their college experience.

[APLU Adapt 2021: Student Reflections on the Adaptive Digital Learning Experiences](#). In this 50-minute video, students discuss their experiences with adaptive courseware and other learning technologies and how these have affected their learning in different courses.

[ASU Remote 2021: Engagement and Impact: A Conversation with Students](#). In this 30-minute video, students discuss what it means to create an inclusive classroom and learning environment for engagement and impact.

Sponsoring Organizations

Every Learner Everywhere is a network of twelve partner organizations with expertise in evaluating, implementing, scaling, and measuring the efficacy of education technologies, curriculum and course design strategies, teaching practices, and support services that personalize instruction for students in blended and online learning environments. Our mission is to help institutions use new technology to innovate teaching and learning, with the ultimate goal of improving learning outcomes for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, poverty-affected students, and first-generation students. Our collaborative work to advance equity in higher education centers on the transformation of postsecondary teaching and learning. We build capacity in colleges and universities to improve student outcomes with digital learning through direct technical assistance, timely resources and toolkits, and ongoing analysis of institutional practices and market trends. For more information about Every Learner Everywhere and its collaborative approach to equitize higher education through digital learning, visit everylearnereverywhere.org.

Intentional Futures is a Seattle-based design and strategy studio. We work closely with clients across the public and private sectors to solve hard problems that matter and make big, ambitious ideas come to life. Our core offerings include human-centered strategy, data-driven storytelling, intentional, collective learning, and product design and prototyping. To learn more about iF or see our past work, visit intentionalfutures.com.

