

Insights from Guided Pathways Webinar:

“Student Belonging and Psychological Safety: Creating Conditions of Success for Students of Color”

Presented in October 2021 by Diego Navarro,

professor emeritus at Cabrillo College and founder of the Academy for College Excellence (ACE)

Who can use this: Instructional faculty, counseling faculty, classified staff, administrators

PRESENTATION OBJECTIVES:

- Connect more deeply with students of color by designing a classroom and program environment where students have the psychological safety they need to learn.
- Learn to create a culture of dignity for students’ success.
- Design onboarding to foster belonging and help students of color successfully transition to college and careers with “promotion-ready” professional skills for 21st century careers.

Keywords: Unconditional belonging, equity, Guided Pathways, onboarding, Pillar 4, professional skills, teaching and learning



Create Conditions of Success for Students of Color

STRATEGIES TO CULTIVATE BELONGING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

In the first three weeks of college, engaged learning is critical for setting new students up for success in their educational journey, according to the Center for Community College Student Engagement’s Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) initiative. A sense of belonging – a feeling of inclusion and community – is a fundamental human need that is especially important at the start of school for students of color to engage and excel.

Diego Navarro underscores that starting community college can be a big shift for students of color, who often come in with complex real-life experiences due to systemic inequities. Students of color also bring in strengths from their cultures and backgrounds, such as deep adaptability, resilience and the ability to support each other. Students feel psychologically safe to learn when they feel like they belong, which can cross many dimensions such as belonging to the classroom, with peers, to campus and to a life of higher education. A sense of belonging can be threatened through

microaggressions, stereotype threat, and other forms of implicit and explicit bias; the natural stress response is fight, flight or freeze, which inhibits their ability to learn and persist. Creating a culture of dignity, in which students have the resources, support and community they need to succeed enables them to reach their full potential.

Navarro highlights that, historically, colleges have asked “How can students prepare for college?” rather than “What are colleges doing to prepare our classrooms, programs and pathways to create the conditions for learning for students, particularly for students of color?” His research shows that when colleges leverage students’ strengths and nurture belonging, students of color outperform their peers in school and career. Navarro suggests the following strategies to design onboarding and programs for students that cement belonging and enable students to develop valuable 21st century workforce skills.

“ We need to create a culture of dignity where each person in the classroom feels responsible for the whole community.

— Diego Navarro,

Professor Emeritus of Cabrillo College and Founder of the Academy for College Excellence

STRATEGIES

1. Prepare yourself for students’ success

You have the opportunity to create a learning environment that taps into students’ “window of tolerance” – a sweet spot where people’s brains are calm, focused and engaged. Doing so requires looking at yourself and your relationships with students as well as the strategies you use to teach. Students pick up on how faculty treat them and other students to see whether the classroom environment is psychologically safe for learning. It is also important to acknowledge that many students of color may have had previous negative experiences in school that evoked feelings of shame. Navarro recommends the following to create classroom conditions where students feel like they belong.

- **Solicit feedback, and share about yourself:** Use the Johari Window¹ to learn about yourself and your relationship with others. Solicit feedback regularly to gain greater awareness of yourself and how your actions are perceived and to ultimately reduce incidences of unknowingly causing harm to others. Connect with students by letting them get to know you better and sharing your own challenges you have faced in your education and career.
- **Expand students’ window of tolerance:** Practice [simple exercises](#) that can help your students trigger a relaxed state for studying and learning. There are evidence-based breathing, focusing and mindfulness



¹ Luft, J. and Ingham, H. (1955). The Johari window, a graphic model of interpersonal awareness. Proceedings of the western training laboratory in group development. Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles.

activities, known as parasympathetic nervous system training, that take just a few minutes to help access that calm, focused state that is conducive to learning. Exercises that build community and connection also help students feel safe to learn.

- ♦ **Address your implicit biases:** Through empathic intelligence, people sense when there are negative feelings toward them, causing them to no longer physiologically be open to learning. Discover your own potential implicit biases to avoid harming students. One example is encouraging students to say “ouch” when they feel harmed, “oops” when they realize they are causing harm and “whoa” when they witness harm to another person.
- ♦ **Explore experiential and affective professional development:** Expand your ability to teach the vital affective skills students need in today’s workforce, such as listening and communicating with others. At ACE, the [Faculty Experiential Learning Institute](#) provides opportunities for faculty, staff and administrators to engage in personal reflection and activities to examine their working styles and communications techniques. The experience helps college professionals grow their interpersonal, social and emotional skills that enhance student learning and support deeper connections with all students.



STRATEGY IN PRACTICE:

In “[Using Student Support \(Re\)defined’s Success Factors to Ensure Student Learning \(Pillar 4\)](#),” Navarro and co-author Kathy Malloy share exercises they have used in their classrooms that have had a positive impact on students. One activity, called “whip arounds,” is a sentence-completion exercise. At the beginning of class or after a break, create a sentence starter about something students want to know about each other, e.g., “The most important thing I’m learning this semester is ...” Write it down for all students to see, and ask for one student to start. The student answers the sentence in one breath, and when their breath runs out, time is up. They then choose the next student to do the same. Anyone can pass, and then go at the end. Through simple exercises like this, students build community, get to know each other and develop a sense of belonging to ensure learning.

2. Design classrooms and programs to cultivate promotion-ready professionals.

Design with the end in mind, championing your students to become promotion-ready professionals who are competent, self-adjusting, and loving with collaborative leadership skills. To help students reach their full potential, build experiences that help them understand and leverage their strengths. It is also important to develop their soft skills, professional skills and collaborative leadership skills for in-demand employment. In doing so, you can equip students with essential workplace competencies so they will be able to learn on the job, deal with stress, and prepare for and address racism in the workplace. Consider the following when designing classrooms and programs to help students of color transition to college and careers:

- ♦ **Develop students’ employability skills:** Support students in learning soft skills to show up on time, complete tasks, prepare and participate, and reduce the impact of their complex lives and help them balance competing demands. Nurture professional skills such as project management and monitoring

progress. Help students use strategic planning tools for their future – learning who they are and their strengths to create the life they want.²

- **Teach collaborative leadership skills while building community during onboarding:** Collaborative exercises help students understand the phases of a team, working styles and how to resolve conflict. The exercises also help them to use listening as a leadership skill. In ACE, students in the Social Justice Research Course worked in cooperative teams to conduct primary research, determine community needs and outline an action plan to address an issue relevant to them. Through such projects, students learned to communicate and contribute to a team.

STRATEGY IN PRACTICE:

Cabrillo College has seen significant success from implementing the [ACE](#) program, which teaches students to understand and value themselves – their purpose, their will, their goals and the obstacles that may stand in their way. Coursework centered around fortifying students to become career ready through experiential learning opportunities, small-group activities and project-based social justice projects. Students receive tools to lead teams and communicate effectively, leaving with 21st century workplace competencies they carry with them throughout their careers. A report found that six years after graduation, ACE nursing students earned roughly \$45,000 more in wages than their non-ACE nursing peers.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- For an overview of ACE student outcomes, see WGU LABS’ [“Academy for College Excellence – Evidence for Success.”](#)
- To explore activities to ensure learning, see the RP Group’s [“Using Student Support \(Re\)defined’s Success Factors to Ensure Student Learning \(Pillar 4\).”](#)
- To learn about ACE’s professional development, see WGU LABS’ [“Academy for College Excellence – Faculty Experiential Learning Institute.”](#)
- For more information about teaching promotion-ready professionals, see RP Group’s [“ACE 21st Century Professional Skills – Insights From a Longitudinal Evaluation of the Academy for College Excellence.”](#)
- View more of Navarro’s work at www.diegojamesnavarro.com

The Success Center at the Foundation for California Community Colleges independently prepared this overview based on the presentation; the overview may not fully represent the presenters’ viewpoints.



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² To learn more, visit <https://www.diegojamesnavarro.com/>.