Improving Classroom Climate: Taking Action for Positive Change

UMass Amherst JEDI Conference 2023

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The University of Massachusetts Amherst acknowledges that it was founded and built on the unceded homelands of the Pocumtuc Nation on the land of the Norrwutuck community.

We begin with gratitude for nearby waters and lands. We recognize these lands and waters as important Relations with which we are all interconnected and depend on to sustain life and wellbeing. The Pocumtuc had connections with these lands for millennia. Over 400 years of colonization, when Pocumtuc Peoples were displaced, many joined their Algonquian relatives to the east, south, west and north. That includes Mashpee and Aquinnah Wampanoag, Nipmuc, Narragansett, Mohegan, Pequot, Mohican, communities and Abenaki and other nations of the Wabanaki Confederacy. These Native peoples still maintain connections and relationships of care for these lands today. We also acknowledge that the University of Massachusetts Amherst is a Land Grant University. As part of the Morrill Land Grant Act, portions of land from 82 Native Nations west of the Mississippi were sold to provide the resources to found and build this university.

As an active first step toward decolonization, we encourage you to learn more about the Native Nations whose homelands UMass Amherst now resides on and the Indigenous homelands on which you live and work. We also invite you to deepen your relationship to these living lands and waters.

https://www.umass.edu/diversity/umass-land-acknowledgment

https://native-land.ca/maps/territories/pocumtuc/#images
What we hope you’ll get out of today’s session

We hope you’ll leave the session inspired and better equipped to

• Adopt strategies and practices that will contribute to a positive and inclusive classroom climate for enhanced student engagement and success.

• Incorporate evidence from the Campus Climate survey data to identify areas for growth and improvement in your areas of control and influence.

• Develop actionable steps to foster a positive classroom climate.

• Consider both individual and collective agency, and identify potential allies, accomplices, and co-conspirators to support your efforts.
Session Agenda

**Opening Reflection:**
Imagining an ‘ideal’ inclusive learning environment

**Strategies:**
Exploring practices to enhance an equitable classroom space

**Action Plans, pt 2:**
Partnering for collective experimentation and growth

**Campus Climate Survey:**
Using data to identify growth areas and inspire goals

**Action Plans, pt 1:**
Setting goals for independent learning and transformation

**Closing Reflection:**
Affirming our commitments
Norms & Agreements

- **Practice Active Listening**: Be present and engaged, avoiding distractions and side conversations. Ask questions! Seek to understand before seeking to be understood.

- **Allow Authenticity**: Permit yourself and others to speak “in the first draft”. Share, even when you don’t have the “right” words.

- **Assume Good Intent**: Give other learners benefit of the doubt; trust that we are each doing the best we can.

- **Open Up to Diverse Perspectives**: Practice embodying both curiosity and inclusivity.

- **Speak From the “I” Perspective**: Own and express personal experiences and opinions without generalizing or speaking on behalf of other people and groups.

- **Hold Space for Discomfort**: Productive dialogue invites us to explore our growth edges—remember that uncomfortable does not necessarily equal unsafe.

- **Honor Confidentiality**: Stories stay, learning leaves.

- **Expect & Accept a Lack of Closure**: Seek value in process, not just product.
Opening Reflections: "Ideal" Inclusive & Equitable Classroom Climate

• What would an “ideal” classroom and teaching climate look and feel like considering cultural learner diversity and accessibility?

• What would be evidence for achieving such a deeply inclusive classroom environment?

Contemplate & Share
What Does the Campus Climate Survey (CCS) Data on Classroom Climate Tell Us?

Both undergraduates and graduate students were asked how often each of the following happens to them at UMass Amherst:

- You feel excluded in class on the basis of an aspect of your social identity
- You feel like your point of view is dismissed in class on the basis of an aspect of your social identity
- You are targeted unfairly or singled out unfairly by course instructors because of your social identity
- Course instructors stereotype, make negative remarks about or tell jokes about an aspect of your social identity

Both faculty and graduate student instructors/TAs were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

- Students in my course have enthusiasm for learning about diverse perspectives
- Students’ resistance limits the free expression of ideas in my classes
- I would value guidance about how to more effectively address diversity issues in my courses
- I have difficulty managing diversity-related topics/conversations in my class
- My department’s undergraduate curriculum includes diversity of identity, experience, and perspective (only for faculty)
What Does the Campus Climate Survey (CCS) Data on Classroom Climate Tell Us?

As you review the survey findings, consider...

- What are your initial reactions to the CCS data on classroom climate? Do the findings align with your personal experience? Why or why not?
- What questions and concerns does this data raise for you?
  - I worry...
  - I wish...
  - I want to understand...

Social identity aspects that students flag as the basis of the exclusion and/or dismissal they experience in the classroom

- Gender: 12%
- Race/Ethnicity: 10%
- Political Viewpoint: 6%
- Sexual Orientation: 5%
- Socioeconomic Background: 5%
CCS Key Findings: Faculty

- 90% of faculty and 78% of graduate student instructors/TAs across all identity groups agreed (either somewhat or strongly) that their students have enthusiasm for learning about diverse perspectives.

- 80 - 86% of TAs and faculty disagreed, either somewhat or strongly, that student resistance limits the free expression of ideas in their classrooms.

- 70% of faculty agreed that their department’s undergraduate curriculum includes diversity of identity, experience, and perspectives, although Black (26%) and Latinx (17%) faculty were more likely than their peers of other races/ethnicities (8% or less) to Disagree Strongly.

- Only 20-22% of TAs/faculty indicated that they have difficulty managing diversity-related conversations or topics in their classes; however, 70-77% agreed either somewhat or strongly that they would value guidance about how to address diversity issues in their courses more effectively.
Faculty

I would value guidance about how to more effectively address diversity issues in my course.

*Umass Mean is on the left

*data collected in survey but not available in the public dashboard

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<th>Black Faculty</th>
<th>Clinical/Research Faculty</th>
<th>Faculty Aged 65+</th>
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<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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<td>Agree</td>
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<td>Disagree</td>
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<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
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CCS Key Findings: Students

● Students’ sense of belonging is one of the strongest predictors of one-year retention for UMass Amherst undergraduates. Students who indicated feeling excluded in the classroom or that their point of view is dismissed were less likely to report a strong sense of belonging.

● About a quarter of all students reported they sometimes or often feel excluded based on their social identity, and a similar percentage reported that their social identity has caused their point of view to be dismissed in classroom settings.*

● While an encouraging 89-92% of students report that they never experience faculty targeting them, singling them out, stereotyping them, and making negative remarks or jokes about their social identity, there are some notable differences among identity groups.
CCS Key Findings: Students

- Black undergraduates were four times more likely to report feelings of *exclusion* than their white peers, and *transgender undergraduates* were more than three times as likely to report similar experiences than their cisgender counterparts.

- In terms of being targeted, unfairly singled out, or stereotyped by course instructors, experiences also vary by social identity, with *less positive experiences* being reported by Black students and students with a learning disability.

- When students who reported challenging classroom experiences were asked to indicate which aspects of identity were targeted, *gender and race* were the aspects *most likely to be selected* among both undergraduate and graduate students.
UNDERGRAD
How often do you feel excluded in class on the basis of an aspect of your social identity?

GRADUATE
How often do you feel like your point of view is dismissed in class on the basis of an aspect of your social identity?

TRANS UNDERGRADS

BLACK UNDERGRADS

GRAD STUDENTS W/ 2+ DISABILITIES

NONBINARY GRAD STUDENTS

*Umass Mean in the center

Legend:
- never
- sometimes
- often
UNDERGRAD
How often do course instructors stereotype, make negative remarks about or tell jokes about an aspect of your social identity?

BLACK UNDERGRADS
- Never: 89%
- Sometimes: 16%
- Often: 9%

TRANS UNDERGRADS
- Never: 39%
- Sometimes: 29%
- Often: 18%

GRADUATE
How often are you targeted unfairly or singled out unfairly by course instructors because of your social identity?

BLACK GRAD STUDENTS
- Never: 90%
- Sometimes: 9%
- Often: 4%

NONBINARY GRAD STUDENTS
- Never: 77%
- Sometimes: 18%
- Often: 5%
Small Group Discussion: Interpreting and Responding to CCS Data
Think back to your description of an “ideal” classroom climate…

- If the concerns raised by this data were effectively addressed, how would we know?
- What observable evidence would signal change and growth?
A Sampling of Practices for Fostering an Inclusive and Equitable Classroom Climate

- Diverse Representation in Course Materials
- Demonstrate Caring and Encourage Help-Seeking
- Peer-to-Peer Connection & Support
- Empowering Students as Knowledge Makers
Diverse Representation in Course Materials

Examine & Supplement
- Exclusions, stereotypes, and bias?
- Content by diverse authors, with author bios and photos.

Use Diverse Visuals
- Free media websites
- Generative AI-created content

Use Technology
- Zoom in guest speakers
- TED talks, podcasts, National Archives Oral History Project, Storycorps, Open Educational Resources Commons
## Demonstrate Caring and Encourage Help-Seeking

| Names & Pronouns | Ask for students' chosen names and pronouns  
Use Name Tents |
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<td>Invite</td>
<td>Invite students to meet with you other than &quot;asking for help&quot;</td>
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<td>Reminders</td>
<td>Schedule regular reminders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outreach</td>
<td>Reach out to students who appear to be struggling early.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questions &amp; Feedback</td>
<td>Provide regular opportunities for students to anonymously ask questions and provide feedback to you</td>
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Peer-to-Peer Connection & Support

Regular community-building activities

Regular Pair-Share activities

When possible and appropriate, regular in-class small group work
Empower Students as Knowledge Makers

Choose Your Own Text or Topic

What's Your Story?

Multimedia Projects

Performance Projects
3 Minute Individual Action Planning

Diverse Representation in Course Materials

Demonstrate Caring and Encourage Help-Seeking

Peer-to-Peer Connection & Support

Empowering Students as Knowledge Makers

1. Immediate Action
2. By Mid-Semester
3. Preparing My Next Course
15 Minute Strategy Feedback Session with Partner

Partner up and do 2 rounds!
- 2 min share with partner
- 2 min receive feedback from partner
- 3 min conversation

Switch and Repeat!
Locating Our Agency: Spheres of Influence and Control

Once we have set clear intentions about what we collectively wish to move toward, it is imperative for each community member to consider where our individual time and energy will be best spent in support of this vision.
Locating Our Agency: Spheres of Influence and Control

By focusing most intently on the circles of control and influence, we set ourselves up for success by creating achievable goals that will build momentum and resilience when met.
Partnering for Collective Action & Accountability: Pair - Share - Square
Small Group Discussion: Partnering for Collective Action

• Which actions can we personally take to...
  • leverage our collective power and agency?
  • move closer to the ideal vision we’ve articulated?
• How will these choices move us closer to the future we are imagining into?
• What can we act on today? This month? This semester?
• How will we hold ourselves and one another accountable to these goals and commitments?
Closing Commitments

Leaving this session, what will be your next step(s)?
A1. Create opportunities for students to revisit, review, and resubmit materials after receiving timely, specific, and actionable feedback.

A2. Provide opportunities and pipelines for student peer-to-peer support and connection.

A3. Reduce dependence on final grades on mid-semester and end-of-semester assessments by offering multiple assessment opportunities through the semester and flattening areas project assignments.

B1. Provide classroom activities and learning experiences that connect content to students' lives in and out of the classroom.

B2. Provide opportunities for students to share their own experiences, perspectives, and questions. Offer opportunities for students to develop critical thinking tools to contextualize their personal lives.

B3. Connect course content to career opportunities, goals, and increase awareness of and encourage participation in GEPs by students from marginalized groups.

C1. Use the correct pronunciation of student names, including providing an option for students to record their pronunciation, i.e., https://namepronouncer.com. Encourage and model the use of applicable pronouns and students' chosen names available in SWEPl in course materials and settings.

C2. Choose course materials, create learning experiences, and invite speakers representing and/or drawing on a variety of identities, voices, and perspectives.

C3. Ask for any other information that the instructor should know at the start of the semester with a Get-To-Know-the-Student Google Form or Index Card.

D1. Offer multiple clear and easy opportunities for students to communicate with the instructor, i.e., individual/small group meetings, flexible Zoom and in-person office hours, out-of-classroom interactions. Normalize meeting with the instructor for reasons other than grades.
Resources

• [Equity Action Plan Instructional Resources - UMass Amherst](#)

• [Campus Climate Survey Engagement Toolkit: Classroom & Teaching Climate](#)

• [The Inclusive Classroom Resource](#)