

Insights from Guided Pathways Webinar:
**“Strategies for Building Student Engagement,
 Connection & Belonging”**

Presented by Dr. Linda García, *Executive Director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) in March 2021*

Who can use this: Faculty and classified staff. Administrators and other staff may also find this useful.

PRESENTATION OBJECTIVES:

- ◆ Understand the importance of creating a sense of belonging for students
- ◆ Be equipped with conversation starters to explore what students are experiencing
- ◆ Learn strategies to intentionally design experiences for students that will help them see their metamajor as a place in which they belong

Keywords: belonging, connection, community, student engagement, metamajors, pathways, career planning, inclusion, equity



Build a Sense of Belonging and Connection at Community College

STRATEGIES FOR DESIGNING EXPERIENCES THAT ENHANCE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING

When **students feel accepted** by their college community and that their educational experiences are preparing them for the future they want, they are more engaged and successful in school, according to research on academic mindset from CCCSE. Findings from more than 15 years of focus groups conducted by CCCSE also show that relationships and a **sense of belonging** are core to students' success and make the difference between staying in college and leaving.

Dr. García suggests the following strategies to design experiences that increase student engagement within meta-majors, or areas of interest that inform student choice before declaring a major. These can be conversation starters about what matters to students and what they are experiencing. Helping students feel a sense of belonging and connection creates a space for them to see themselves as learners, view setbacks as part of the learning journey, and perceive school as a place where they belong.

“This was the only place that said ‘yes’ to me.
—Student

“Engagement doesn't happen by accident; it happens by design.
—Dr. Kay McClenney, former director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement

STRATEGIES

1. Know students by name

Simply knowing a student's name and saying their name correctly is a fundamental part of creating a sense of belonging. Having faculty, staff, and peers know their name boosts their confidence and builds intimacy.

STRATEGY IN PRACTICE:

“I make sure that I **use their name frequently** when I talk to them and I ask them if they're feeling safe, if they're feeling supported, **just generally to check in with them and have a human interaction with them.** I think when you're a smaller school, it probably feels less institutional for the students and they feel like...**part of the family group.** And that's one of the best things we can do on all levels whether we're staff, faculty or administration.
—Faculty Member



2. Creating safety nets for the whole student

Plan for the holistic needs of the student inside and outside of the classroom such as academic supports, career planning, health and wellness, social support, work-school balance, family responsibilities, technology access, and financial health. Many community college students work while in school. Consider holding conversations with students that can help them balance work and school life.

STRATEGY IN PRACTICE:

In Kentucky, one college uses an intake form to ask students about their academic history, goals, transfer plans as well as life questions such as how many hours they work and their access to technology. This provides an avenue to have custom conversations with students.



Other examples of safety nets can include placing students in **cohorts or learning communities** where peers can study and network together or **calling or meeting with a student once a semester**.

After receiving calls from a program advisor and from a cultural advisor to check that they were on the right path, one student shared that this process made them feel like college was **“somewhere I could call home”** and that **“they had my back the same way my family would.”**

3. Incorporate career goals and planning into the classroom

Build opportunities to focus on careers directly into every student’s college experience. Providing career supports to students shows care for their future and connects their college work to their employment and life goals—helping them be more engaged in their college experience.

STRATEGY IN PRACTICE:

One way faculty have done this is by bringing a **specialist from career services into the class** so students can work with them to research careers and develop portfolios. **Former students** can also visit the classroom and be a helpful resource to share what to expect and what exciting things are ahead.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Dr. García suggested the following resources from CCCSE provide further guidance to build a sense of belonging and connection:

- ◆ For more guidance on student belonging and career goals and planning, view the report: [A Mind at Work: Maximizing the Relationship Between Mindset and Student Success](#)
- ◆ To learn more about how colleges can help students who work, view the report: [The Intersection of Work and Learning: Findings From Entering Students in Community Colleges](#)
- ◆ To find tools to support implementation of Guided Pathways Pillar 4: Ensure Students Are Learning, view the web toolkit at www.cccse.org/ESAL. This toolkit includes:
 - [Teaching and Learning Within a Guided Pathways Framework: A Playbook](#): Insights based on surveys with community college faculty members across the country
 - [Equity Tools](#): Issue briefs and spotlights exploring equity-centered practices
 - [Video Clips and Narrative Search](#): Descriptions of innovative teaching practices based on interviews with over 250 faculty members (Under Components of Pillar Four, select “Equity-minded, asset based teaching”)

This overview was prepared independently by the Success Center at the Foundation for California Community Colleges based on the presentation and may not fully represent the viewpoints of Dr. García or CCCSE.