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11-13-2020

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Recommended Citation

Bagar-Fraley, B. (2020). Foster Inclusion by Focusing on Student Names. Retrieved from <https://fuse.franklin.edu/i4blog/79>

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Foster Inclusion by Focusing on Student Names

November 13, 2020 | By Brandy Bagar-Fraleay
Inclusive Strategies
Teaching Effectiveness
Instructional Practices

“To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students,” writes bell hooks, “is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (hooks, 1994, p. 13).

An inclusive and equitable classroom is a manifestation of that respect and care. Instructors who deliberately cultivate an environment in which all students feel acknowledged and valued can reduce barriers to success and give all students the opportunity to flourish (Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, 2016; Walton & Cohen, 2007). And there are many small, but significant, alterations to practice that can immediately improve a student’s sense of belonging and impact overall achievement of outcomes.

One of the first and simplest of these approaches begins with special attention to names on the course roster. As N.A. Marrun (2018) notes, instructors who implement the correct pronunciation and use of student names in the classroom have already taken “the first step in becoming a multicultural and culturally responsive educator” (p. 6).

Of course, instructors have long been encouraged to use the preferred names of students. Research indicates that calling students by preferred names is a characteristic nonverbal immediacy behavior, and that such immediacy behaviors provide widespread benefits to students (Burroughs, 2007; Frymier et al., 1996; Houser & Frymier, 2009). This may be especially vital in online courses, where the lack of physical presence can lead to students feeling isolated from their instructor and their peers.

Further research indicates that the use of student names in the classroom may be even more impactful than previously thought. A 2017 study (Cooper et al.) revealed that when instructors intentionally use student preferred names as a part of course interactions, most students feel valued and invested in the course, express greater comfort seeking help from the instructor, and perceive that their performance will improve.

Particularly, for underrepresented students, being correctly named and acknowledged can have even greater impact.

Marrun (2018) points out that naming is particularly vital as an inclusive practice and that “when educators mispronounce, Anglicize, or (re)name students of color” (p. 6), they risk heightening existing inequities. Moreover, students of color might be accustomed to encountering the deliberate mispronunciation and othering of their names as a subtle form of racism (Kohli, 2012). However, if mis-naming, mispronouncing, or trivializing the names of underrepresented students results in the alienation of students, then ensuring the correct pronunciation and use of students’ names achieves the opposite: it assures students that their identity, culture, and context matters and has value.

The following strategies can ensure that instructors use and pronounce student names with care:

- 1. Make a commitment to learning the correct pronunciation of student names and using those names to create a hospitable and inclusive classroom environment.** Knowing a student’s name is the first step to knowing and acknowledging them as individuals (O’Brien et al., 2014). Treating every student as an important and valuable participant in the course can only improve outcomes, and choosing to intentionally value students’ names contributes to a welcoming classroom environment. Additionally, instructors who model appropriate naming practices may also influence other students in the course to mirror this behavior (Cooper et al., 2017).
- 2. Ask students for their preferred names.** Many students use nicknames or names other than what might be formalized in a course roster. Additionally, the names on a course roster can sometimes contain misspellings or outdated information. Asking students for their preferred name in an introductory session demonstrates respect and give them agency.
- 3. Take the necessary steps to pronounce student names correctly.** For names that seem difficult or ambiguous to pronounce, instructors might consider writing out names phonetically for future reference, or noting cues or sounds that will remind them of how to pronounce the name correctly. Instructors can also invite students to pronounce their own names either during a class meeting or as part of a video introduction to the class. However, instructors should take care that earnest efforts to pronounce a student’s name do not become a spectacle or a source of humor for others.
- 4. Avoid trivializing, making jokes about, shortening, or otherwise altering student names.** Instructors should avoid settling on a mispronunciation as “close enough,” nicknaming students without an explicit request to do so, labeling names as difficult or confusing, or teasing students for names perceived to be difficult. Names should be pronounced as students request, with no modifications.
- 5. Apologize for inevitable mistakes.** Instructors who make a pronunciation mistake or mangle a name are only human! The best response is to apologize briefly and try again: “I’m sorry, I believe I’ve mispronounced your name. Could you help me to say it properly?” Additionally, if a student’s name is mispronounced by another student, instructors can offer a gentle correction.

With these strategies in mind, instructors can begin building an inclusive and welcoming classroom environment from day one, setting the tone and sending a message to students that they matter and are valued.

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