

Connections Are Everything: Embed Connections Are Everything* in Our Wolak Learning Fellows Program*Context:**

Southern New Hampshire University has 180,000 learners who are mostly online learners. The University College Campus in Manchester holds mostly face-to-face classes for its 3000 undergraduate students. One of University College's signature programs is the Wolak Learning Fellows program. Recommended students who have earned a B or better in an identified, high-DFW class are hired as "Wolak Learning Fellows." A team of three Learning Fellows work together to provide embedded support in a specific course section. The Learning Fellows also meet weekly with the professor and a representative from LEAI to reflect, analyze, adjust, and plan for future instruction. New Learning Fellows also take SNHU-398, a course designed to provide fellows across all majors with foundational skills related to pedagogy, engaging learners, and design thinking.

Goals:

Concepts in *Connections are Everything* relate directly to the relationship-building work of the Learning Fellows. Our goal for the pedagogy course is to teach Learning Fellows how to best support students in the classes they serve. We focus on supporting students holistically, not simply academically. We assess the effectiveness of Learning Fellows through formative class assessments, comparison data (Learning Fellows sections vs. Non-Learning Fellows sections), final grades, and course evaluation data.

What we plan to do:

We plan on integrating *Connections are Everything* into SNHU-398 and the weekly prep meetings (called huddles). Excerpts from the book will be used to spark discussion and reflection.

Example One:

Start Huddle 0 (meeting with professor and Learning Fellows before class starts) by reading the story about Jose (from the introduction. Reiterate the importance of community and the idea that an LF can be "that one person who lights a fire within you"

Example Two:

Orientation/Training Quote Activity – a number of meaningful quotes from *Connections are Everything* have been identified below. These excerpts will be used to spark discussion, reflection, and collaboration. Learning Fellows and faculty will be sitting in groups for the orientation. A handful of quotes will be placed on each table. Participants will have several minutes to explore the quotes to find one that especially resonates with them. After time to individually reflect, participants will be asked to share out in their groups.


Example Three:

During the first few weeks of class, students in SNHU-398 will be asked to participate in a Connection Tic-Tac-Toe activity. They will "compete" with a partner to get three in a row. In order to mark the space, the student must answer the prompt. See choice board below.

Tic-Tac-Toe Choice Board

Directions: Compete with your partner to get three in a row. In order to mark the space, you must answer the question.

Describe a time when someone passed off some essential knowledge to you to aid in your adjustment to college. Have you done this for others?	How can you help students realize the strengths they bring to the table?	What was the most significant challenge when you made the transition into college? Do you think some of the students you're working with are experiencing similar challenges? How might you support them?
Could you help someone else start their relationship building? What could you do to help that person make meaningful connections in college?	Looking back on your life, what are the things you've worked toward and achieved? What did you do and what did you believe that made it possible for you to achieve those things? How can you apply those same practices and beliefs to your college experience?	What questions might the students in your class be asking themselves? How might you alleviate some of their concerns?
Can you think of a moment when someone's comment or action moved you from feeling at the margins to a place of belonging? Could you make a comment or take an action that would do this for one of your peers?	How can you show the students in your class that their perspective and voice matters?	Name a peer you admire. What are the qualities of this person that you respect?

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Excerpts for quote activity/discussion:

I feel like too many times students sit there and really struggle because they're too scared to ask for help. I know sometimes my pride gets in the way of asking for help and acknowledging that I don't understand something. My professors are always willing to help me, but it can be intimidating to go to them. For me, as far as a support system, college clubs really have been big. I am part of kinesiology club, and it's a lot of students with the same majors and interests. Those are my people. When school's stressful, I go to the club

A national poll of 30,000 college graduates found that alumni who reported having one professor “who cared about them as a person, made them excited about learning, and encouraged them to pursue their dreams” were more than twice as likely as their peers to be thriving professionally and personally—even many years after graduation. - 12

Another national poll showed that graduates who had a handful of meaningful relationships with staff and faculty were more than three times as likely as those with no such relationships to say that their time in college was “very rewarding.” - 12

You don’t need dozens (or tens of thousands) of connections to be successful in college. One meaningful relationship can serve as a catalyst for meeting new people and developing the skills and confidence you need to get on the path to a relationship-rich college experience. The intentional steps you take to cultivate meaningful connections will help you thrive academically and personally in college. - 18/19

For some students, this may be the first time being on their own, away from their parents. Maybe they’re in a different state or a different country than where they grew up. Maybe they’re experiencing a totally different culture. Or maybe they’re uncertain about what they want to do with their life, and they’re having to make all these big decisions right now. - 21

As a first-year student at the University of Iowa, Alexa Oleson had a plan for dealing with peers: avoid them. “I was super shy when I first came to campus,” said Alexa. “I was really bad at talking to people, especially strangers. I would just freeze up. When I would go to class, I would sit down and look as unwelcoming as possible. I did not want anyone to sit next to me.” -23

Even for student leaders, interacting with peers might not be as easy as it looks. Jennyflore Andre is a learning assistant, a peer educator responsible for facilitating interactions among students in the classroom, at FIU. The goal is to have students actively sharing ideas with one another and learning together. Before college, Jennyflore had years of experience working with children, but engaging with her peers seemed different: “At first, it was scary. I have always been a shy student. I am better at interacting with little kids than my own college classmates.” However, Jennyflore soon became comfortable and skilled at helping her peers connect with each other and with the course content. - 23

Oftentimes small steps—like saying “hi” to a classmate on the first day of class, responding positively to a peer’s post on an online discussion board, inviting someone to have coffee after class, joining a pick-up basketball game, sending an email to a professor, introducing yourself to a staff member in the career center—can spark meaningful connections. Kayla soon discovered

that college does not need to be as difficult as some make it seem: "It's so refreshing knowing that college is different. It's so much better than high school, because the people here actually care about you and what you are doing. They want to help you learn." - 24

Students fear failure and being challenged beyond their limits. They may not have been challenged academically in high school, and for the first time are really experiencing academic rigor. They fear embarrassing their families— being afraid to come home and say, "I am not achieving in college right now. I'm struggling." They fear talking to a professor because a professor represents an intimidating authority figure. They are not sure how to approach them. They also resist asking for help or asking for a tutor, because utilizing a tutor is perceived as not being smart. They do not want to go to counseling when they have emotional concerns, because that's for people who are weak. The fear of shame is everywhere. - 24/24

Describe what may make your students fearful and/or shameful.

Fear and anxiety are serious barriers to a relationship-rich college experience and are related to "imposterism" or "imposter syndrome." It is common for students—and for all people—to sometimes doubt whether they have what it takes to be successful and to fit into new, challenging environments.³ Experiences in college may magnify these doubts, causing students to feel like "imposters" who are only pretending to belong in college. In many ways this is a normal part of adjusting to college.

-How might imposter syndrome affect the students in your class? How might you help to mitigate it?

And students often have habits of studying, reading, writing, and thinking that do not always serve them well in the face of the rigors of college courses, so even students who were successful in high school cannot necessarily rely on what has worked for them in the past.⁵ The experience of being academically unsuccessful on an assignment or exam (particularly if you're used to earning high grades) adds to a feeling of not being as prepared as everyone else. - 27

While feelings of imposter syndrome are common among all college students, students with historically marginalized identities in higher education may feel more pressure and more like imposters than their peers. Being the only student of color in your classroom, not seeing professors or college leaders who look like you, not feeling like you have financial access to academic or social opportunities, or reading textbooks that make no mention of your culture can make you feel like you do not belong. - 28

One student told us that she finally came to the realization that “it was not cheating to use college resources” like the tutoring and counseling centers. Indeed, not only are these services vital to your success, but they are staffed by caring people who could become some of the most encouraging mentors you will find in college. In our experience, the sooner college resources are a part of your support system, the sooner you will feel connected to your community, and you will be on the path to academic and personal well-being. - 30

As a student, you have what some call “agency”—the ability to make choices and to take actions that matter. How you choose to use that agency will have a profound influence on your college experiences. In fact, scholars who study higher education have found that “what students do in college is far more important than the type of institution they attend.” -40

Anthony Mota, a LaGuardia Community College student and trained peer mentor, told us that college can feel like a place where you are being evaluated and graded all the time, but connecting with peers can give a person the chance “just to be themselves in a non-judgmental space. That can be really hard to find in college. It’s important to just listen to their story because everybody’s story here is dif-ferent.” - 47

. One day Nellie paired up with a peer who had a “horrible attitude. He didn’t seem to know why he was there, and his grades were suffering.” The student reminded her of her younger brother, so she decided to take him under her wing and help him academically. She talked to him before class, encouraged him to speak up in discussions, and invited him to study together before the next exam. Thanks to Nellie’s support—and his own hard work—he went from failing almost all of his classes to earning good grades that semester. Nellie was surprised to find that “encouraging and working with him actually improved my grades too,” and she ended up with a 4.0 GPA that quarter. - 51/52

I saw that as new incoming students, they were as lost as I was. They didn’t want to talk to anyone. They didn’t know how to reach out to professors. They didn’t know how to speak for themselves. But because I was one or two years older than them, I could help them navigate. I helped them find classes, use the learning management system and the student portal, and discover resources available to them. I was there as a friend and a mentor, and they trusted me, even with aspects of their personal lives. - 55

Slowly she came to realize that what at first made her nervous—his habit of asking specific students a question in class—was his way of checking in to see if everyone was understanding the material. When he'd ask in class, "Hey Paula, what do you think of this?" I sometimes would say, "I don't know," and he would then slow down. "If you didn't understand something, you always felt like you could tell him, and he'd help you learn." - 63/64

Part of why effective professors contribute so much to students' college experiences is that they both challenge and support them. This echoes the research about what the best college teachers do.³ In our interviews, we heard this over and over from students who described their favorite professors as the ones who knew them well enough to push them academically and to encourage and believe in them personally - 66

"I think the first step that I made in building a relationship with professors was being okay with being wrong and admitting that I don't know the answer to every thing. That meant I had to get used to being vulnerable in that moment" of asking a question, sending an email, or stopping by office hours. Small steps like these can make all the difference in your education as you build relationships with your professors. - 75

Many colleges are embedding high-impact practices directly in the curriculum, so you likely will experience relationship accelerators in some of the courses you take, such as a required first-year seminar, a capstone experience, or a writing-intensive course in your major. Sometimes, though, students don't fully embrace these potentially powerful opportunities. Group work can be difficult to manage on a busy schedule, but if you approach the assignment and your peers with a relational mindset, you'll be more likely to learn some of the interpersonal skills that will serve you well even after you graduate (like collaboratively working toward deadlines and giving constructive feedback to peers), as well as earn a better grade. - 96

All students need to sense that they matter to other people in college.¹ Laura Rendón, professor of higher education at the University of Texas at San Antonio, has done decades of research that shows how this validation—the feeling of being valued as a student and as a whole human—is essential for academic success and personal well-being in college, particularly for students of color and first-generation undergraduates. -112

This is one of the most important mentoring conversations for many students: assurance that their ideas matter and that their voice and perspective are significant. And it's something you can do for your peers if you are willing to offer them affirming and encouraging words. - 113

If you notice a peer who seems to be stressed or in trouble, even asking “How are you doing?” can create an opportunity for them to talk with you, if they are willing and able to do so. Remember, you do not have to solve their problems or become their therapist, but you can connect them with college resources—and make a warm handoff to be sure they feel supported along the way. - 119/120

**concept of warm handoff for LFs

Many students also do not realize that they are not only on the receiving end of these exchanges. Often, you can act as a “mentor of the moment” for a peer by initiating a meaningful conversation. That requires you to be aware of the needs of the people around you, to show genuine interest in and openness with others, and to be willing to take the risk of asking for or offering kindness, guidance, or generous listening. This doesn’t have to be complicated. In our interviews, many students commented on the power of someone simply caring enough to pause and genuinely ask, “How are you?” - 122

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