



The Student Experience Project:

Fall 2020 Bright Spots

The Student Experience Project (SEP) is a network of university leaders, faculty, researchers and national education and improvement organizations committed to innovative, evidence-based practices that increase degree attainment by transforming the college student experience and creating equitable learning environments.

Fall 2020 Bright Spots

2020 was an immensely challenging year for college campuses and students. In light of this, we are encouraged by the energy, creativity and dedication of the Student Experience Project (SEP) campus teams and instructors to create equitable learning environments - both in the classroom and beyond. In this publication, we celebrate just a few of the many instructor voices across our growing SEP community that are improving student experience in ways that promote academic success and equity. These early results point to what can be accomplished as we extend these practices and continue our work together.

The SEP bright spot data is a celebration of our community and a way to learn more deeply from each other about which combination of changes - or specific ways of implementing them - are most powerful. Importantly, these bright spots are the result of just some of the many changes that SEP-participating instructors utilized in their courses. While we hope that these highlights can be used to help other instructors build upon or adapt their own practices to support the students, it is important to recognize that no single change in a classroom will be a "silver bullet" for improving student experience. Instead, the most impactful approach often includes a diverse range of practices in the classroom that work in concert with each other to create a learning environment where all students feel valued and supported to succeed.



What is the Student Experience Project?

When students enter college or face transitional moments - like starting a new course, or wondering if a major is the right fit - they are asking themselves important questions such as: "do I belong here?" and "can I do it?" Students' answers to these questions are deeply impacted by cues they receive from the environment, including their experience in the classroom. An instructor's words, practices or policies influence how students face the challenges that arise and whether they reach out for support -- which ultimately affects retention and academic achievement in college. This is particularly important for students from structurally disadvantaged or numerically underrepresented groups who are paying particular attention to signals from the institution, their instructors, and the other students about whether they, or people like them, belong on campus and are capable of succeeding.

"I really enjoyed the SEP experience. The materials were put together and the community was fun and supportive. I got a great foundation on how I can create more inclusive environments in my classes. I highly recommend it to all faculty."

When students run into challenges like struggling with course material, feeling intimidated by instructors, or difficulty navigating campus resources to get help, students who are already questioning their place in college or a particular field can interpret such experiences as a sign that they don't belong or can't succeed. Research shows that once students draw this conclusion, it can lead them to disengage academically and socially, negatively impacting academic performance and retention.

SEP works to interrupt this process. By providing college instructors with strategies to convey confidence in students' potential to succeed and to foster belonging, our work helps students engage and persist through academic challenges. By improving students' experiences, colleges can create more equitable learning environments that support all students to achieve at their full academic potential.



How SEP Promotes Equitable Learning

SEP functions as an improvement network which connects universities together to learn faster about how to put evidence-based changes into practice to improve student experience and ultimately increase equitable student outcomes. The SEP includes six university partners from the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) and the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU): University of North Carolina at Charlotte, the University of Toledo, the University of New Mexico, Portland State University, Colorado State University and University of Colorado Denver.

As part of the SEP, each campus assembles college instructors into action-oriented communities of practice to learn, test and implement changes that improve student experience in classrooms. While the changes are grounded in years of research, they have not yet been widely applied in a systematic or sustained way in higher education. Thus, instructors are testing how to adapt and implement these changes to work in their context and teaching practice. To help instructors, SEP has developed a set of evidence-based tools, including training modules, the SEP Practices Library, and Ascend, an online learning platform that enables instructors to receive feedback on student experience and apply insights to make improvements across the semester. Each university shares learning, data and resources with each other monthly on a national network level as we work together towards our collective aim. While SEP is initially focused on STEM, it has been designed so that the change ideas and learning can be spread to other disciplines and departments.

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I learned (and continue to learn) so much – from the workshops, handbook, meetings with colleagues, student presenters, email communications, etc. I hope the SEP Team finds that their investment in us faculty has been worthwhile.

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Early Progress

Early results from SEP show that with the right tools and support, colleges can improve student experience systematically. In the first-term of implementation in STEM classrooms, students' experiences improved across all demographic groups, with especially large gains for Black, Latina, and Native women experiencing low levels of financial stress. We also found that, consistent with previous research*, improvements in students' experiences were highly correlated with better academic outcomes. Within the Fall 2020 term, improvements in student experience predicted better academic performance - a greater likelihood of earning an A or B, and decreased likelihood of earning a D, F, or W. When compared to student performance in instructors' previous terms teaching the same courses, we see that instructors who fully participated in SEP communities of practice reduced DFW rates by 45 percent and increased AB rates by 20 percent.

In an effort to learn more deeply from our community and our data, the SEP began identifying "bright spots" — student experience data indicating significant improvements. As a continuous improvement network, we want to learn from variation in our data to inform how we adapt changes and practices to achieve what may not yet be possible today across a whole system. For example, across the first term of implementing SEP changes in classrooms, the average instructor had a 14 percent gain in identity safety, but the top quintile of improvers increased it by 28 percent or more.

The specific strategies and behaviors that spur these "bright spots" (or positive deviants) provide insights that can be spread to others so that these results may be achieved at scale across the system.



Samantha Furr-Rogers

University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Lecturer, Department of Biological Sciences



Tonya Bates

University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Senior Lecturer, Department of Biological Sciences

Practice Spotlight: Encouraging Connections

Dr. Furr-Rogers and Ms. Bates provide a number of ways for students to experience connection with peers and the teaching team in their large-enrollment introductory biology course. Each week, they host a "coffee and conversation with the prof" that students can drop in to discuss the course or socialize with one another. They use the GroupMe app as an additional way for students to interact with one another and form connections. To encourage engagement with the broader campus, they post a weekly "Feature Friday" in the learning management system highlighting campus events, diverse scholar research, and other supports such as tutoring, counseling services, or student organization activities.

Resources: See these [tips and resources](#) to encourage social connection and belonging in large-enrollment STEM courses.

Improvements: Implementing the same set of practices, both Dr. Furr-Rogers and Ms. Bates increased the share of students experiencing social belonging and identity safety in across the term by 20 percentage points (reaching over 600 students), with even higher gains for women and students with financial stress (i.e., housing or food insecurity)



Amy Cailene

Colorado State University
Career Education Manager, College of Natural Sciences

Practice Spotlight: Promoting Social Belonging

Teaching a course that is 100 percent online, Amy was most concerned about students' social connectedness and social belonging. So she decided to "lean in" to see if she could improve student experience in those areas. She began by revising her syllabi, to promote social belonging and signal her belief in students' potential to succeed, a message that she reinforced on the first day of class, in canvas messages, and through verbal and written feedback to students across the term. Throughout the course, she incorporated positive and inclusive representations of diversity, including readings, employer panels, online discussions, and reflection papers. Weekly community groups were designed for students to discuss course content and also help one another.

Improvement: Social belonging increased steadily across the term, improving by 33 percentage points by the end. Similar gains were seen in students' experience of social connectedness with an increase of 25 percentage points.

Resources: See Amy's [presentation](#) for more information on her course changes, or get [tips from SEP scholars on how to revise your syllabi to promote social belonging from day one](#).



Sushilla Knottenbelt

University of New Mexico

Senior Lecturer III, Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology



Practice Spotlight: Seeding Diverse Representation

The Gallery Project - Highlighting Diverse Alumni

Dr. Knottenbelt contacted former students to request that they share their experiences in her General Chemistry course and provide advice or encouragement to current students. She compiled their responses and asked students to read and reflect on a few, including tips they found useful and would try. Many of the tips from students were ones she would have provided herself, but were more powerful coming from peers, and normalized that it's hard at the beginning but with the right strategies and effort, students can succeed. At the end of the course, she posted a second assignment asking students to envision being 10 years in the future, and to share their own story and advice to encourage others.

Resources: See Dr. Knottenbelt's [instructions](#) and [video](#) on how to construct a gallery project highlighting diverse alumni.

Improvement: Across the term, Dr. Knottenbelt had a 27 percentage-point gain in students' experiencing identity safety and a 20 percentage-point gain in social belonging. These gains were even higher for women, Black, Latinx, and Native students.



Andy Rowland

University of New Mexico

Professor, College of Public Health

Practice Spotlight: Promoting Social Belonging

An adaptation of "We Belong in College" for the classroom

Dr. Rowland began his population health course with an anonymous survey of students in his class. The responses helped him understand the diversity and complexity of students' lived experiences and some of the many challenges they face. He used this information to communicate that he values all that they bring to the classroom. He also shared his own struggle to fit in and belong in college, and how a caring instructor helped him overcome doubts, get the support he needed, and eventually embark on a meaningful career. As an adaptation of SEP's "We Belong in College Campaign," he asked students to write or share a video about their own belonging stories, and to give their advice to help others facing similar challenges. The course also integrated small groups, active learning and an emphasis on social justice to frame the relevance of coursework to students' lives. Finally, Dr. Rowland used the course's public health content to help students better understand COVID-19 and to give them a place to talk about the impact of the pandemic on themselves and their families.

Improvement: Student experience improved in several areas, including a gain of 20 percentage points in identity safety, and an increase of 13 percentage points in social belonging for female students.

Resources: See Dr. Rowland's [video presentation](#), or his [belonging story and classroom instructions](#). Want to create your own belonging story? See SEP's [guide](#).



Satya Witt

University of New Mexico
Senior Lecturer, Department of Biology



Practice Spotlight:

Dr. Witt introduced a number of changes to create a culture for equitable student experience in her course. She included a late assignment and caregiver policy in the syllabi, which normalized students asking for an extension because it was a formal policy and not viewed as an exception. She sent twice-weekly announcements at a regular time with reminders about the course, and wise feedback framing statements. Wise feedback is a way to comment on exams or assignments that conveys the instructor has high standards and believes the student is capable of meeting them.

Resources: See Dr. Witt's [late assignment and caregiver policy](#) language included in the syllabi. For more information on wise feedback in your class, see [SEP's step by step guide](#).

Improvement: Identity safety increased by more than 11 percentage points, with even greater gains among students with high financial stress (i.e., food or housing insecurity).



“Participation in SEP has allowed my students and I to grow simultaneously. Despite the challenges of teaching virtually, I feel connected to my students on a deeper level because I better understand some of their struggles and how I can mitigate them. I feel certain that returning to in-person teaching/learning will raise this bar of growing together.”



Marta Maron

University of Colorado Denver
Associate Professor C/T, Department of Chemistry

Practice Spotlight: Modeling and Encouraging Growth Mindset Throughout the Term

Dr. Maron practices good modeling from the start of the semester. She acknowledges that the learning process is frustrating and ebbs and flows, and shares stories and tips from her own learning process, where appropriate. This is paired with frequent reminders about resources. She introduces CU Denver student resources at the start of the semester (both by reviewing the student resource webpage and talking about them), and then repeats this over and over again throughout the semester. She also acknowledges and talks about her own mental health and how she copes.

Improvement: Over the semester, Dr. Maron increased institutional growth mindset (e.g., the extent to which students think that Dr. Maron believes they can grow their abilities in her course) by 17 percentage points for Black, Latinx and Native students and students with high financial stress. Identity safety increased 15 percentage points among all students.





Andrew Rice

Portland State University
Associate Professor, Department of Physics

Practice Spotlight:

To promote social engagement among students in a fully synchronous online course, Dr. Rice automatically assigned students to breakout groups in the first several weeks of the course, allowing them to then organize themselves into stable groups for the rest of the term. These groups allowed students to both meet new peers and form long-term working relationships with a stable group. He also employed a flexible grading scheme that gave greater importance to problem-solving efforts, and emphasized individual students' strengths, industry, and growth - conveying his belief in their ability to grow their skills (e.g., growth mindset), and encouraging them to do the same.

Improvement: Dr. Rice saw gains in multiple areas, including a 15 percentage point improvement in social belonging and an 8 percentage point improvement in institutional growth mindset.



Defne Apul

University of Toledo
Professor and Chair, Department of Civil & Environmental Engineering

Practice Spotlight: Setting a foundation for social belonging and growth

To promote belonging and convey a "growth mindset culture" before class started, Dr. Apul revised her syllabi and created a welcome video aligned with SEP evidence-based practice. Her goal was to demonstrate that she cared about students' experiences and believed in their potential to succeed as civil engineers. She made other changes across the semester to reinforce this culture: referring to students as "first year civil engineering students" and designing activities to develop identity as a civil engineer, introducing small groups to foster student connection, and intervening when students were feeling down to provide encouragement, resources and support.

Resources: See Dr. Apul's [welcome video](#) and [message](#), where she welcomes her incoming students as part of the discipline, conveys her belief in their abilities, and encourages them to connect to resources and strategies that will promote their success.

Improvement: By the end of the term, 90 percent of students continued to feel self-efficacy in the course, and social belonging increased by 14 percentage points.



"Being an Equity Champion has opened my eyes to how I can create a more inclusive classroom. I feel the tools I implemented, from exam wrappers to sharing my own personal struggles, have helped me become a more effective instructor and improve student success"



Learn More!

SEP has developed a set of resources that support faculty on the SEP campuses to increase academic success and equity by improving student experience. These resources are being piloted and refined for broader use:

- SEP Professional Development Modules: a training series for colleges to assist faculty in developing knowledge and practical skills to improve classroom experience.
- The SEP Practices Library: a set of evidence-informed practices that faculty can adapt to foster social belonging, identity safety and a growth mindset culture within the classroom.
- Ascend: a professional learning program that enables college instructors to understand how their students are experiencing courses through an adaptive and continuous process.

To gain access to these and other SEP resources as they become available, [sign up for the SEP newsletter](#) or visit www.studentexperienceproject.org. To learn more about practices that faculty can use right away to improve the classroom experience, please visit the [Bright Spots page on the SEP website](#).

Any questions on the Student Experience Project? Contact info@studentexperienceproject.org.



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“I feel like SEP was a valuable support system for me as a junior faculty member. I have received a lot of push back from senior colleagues (who are white, and/or come from upper-middle class backgrounds) whose feedback suggests that I don't "push" students hard enough, and that my policies are too lenient. My classroom is arranged to support marginalized students especially and it looks different from "traditional" classroom spaces. I feel emboldened to stick with many of the SEP strategies and I know I have SEP to refer to for resources and help if I should need it.”

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*Canning, Meunks, Greene and Murphy (2019) (https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/2/eaa4734?utm_source=15-faculty-minds)

Murphy, Gopalan, et al. (2020) (<https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/advances/6/29/eaba4677.full.pdf>)

Paunesku et al. (2015) (https://p3.perts.net/static/documents/paunesku_2015.pdf)

Cohen, G. L., Steele, C. M., & Ross, L. D. (1999). (https://ed.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/the_mentors_dilemma.pdf)



Who Is The SEP?

The Student Experience Project (SEP) is a network comprised of university leaders, faculty, researchers and national education and improvement organizations:



The SEP is also proud to work with a number of other institutions of higher education who make up the Peer Learning Network.

For more information on our partners, please visit our website at studentexperienceproject.org/about or reach out to info@studentexperienceproject.org.