



CARES



A FRAMEWORK FOR HOW EDUCATORS CAN
SUPPORT FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS



Clarify



Access



Reflect



Engage



Support



Clarify

Clarify involves making content and expectations clear, teaching for transparency; e.g. explaining what students are doing and why, and helping to demystify the norms and disciplinary expectations connected to your course (what is commonly referred to as the “hidden curriculum”).

STRATEGY

EXPLANATION

Be explicit about expectations for assignments and activities

Students that were provided greater transparency on assignments demonstrated significantly improved learning benefits, including increased academic confidence, sense of belonging, and mastery of skills. These benefits were largest for first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students ([Winkelmes et al., 2016](#)).

Transparent assignments and activities include a description of: 1) purpose (skills practiced, knowledge gained), 2) task (what to do and how to do it), and 3) criteria (what excellence looks like, criteria in advance to help students to self-evaluate).

Explain purpose of office hours

First-generation students often report an unfamiliarity with the purpose, process, and structure of office hours.

Quote from a first-generation student from: “I didn’t understand what office hours were all about... I mean, the office hours are there on the syllabus, “Ok, what’s that got to do with anything?” What am I supposed to do with “office hours?” I didn’t know that a teacher was available at a certain time for me to come and talk to if I had a problem. I didn’t know that as a freshman or a sophomore, even though it is right there on the damn syllabus, I didn’t know it” ([Collier & Morgan, 2008](#)).

Clarify disciplinary practices

Every field has its own discipline-specific ways of thinking, reading, and writing. Make these practices transparent for students by providing them with examples of annotated writing from your field (example [here](#)). Explicitly identify what types of questioning/thinking and what skills of the discipline your students are using in each class meeting.

Students’ success in college is determined not only by their explicit understanding of course content but also by their implicit understanding of how to demonstrate that knowledge in ways that will satisfy each professor’s expectations ([Collier & Morgan, 2008](#)). Even when two students have an equivalent mastery of the explicit content of their course work, the one with a better understanding of their professors’ implicit expectations will be more likely to succeed.

Be clear about course policies

Provide clear expectations and rationale related to areas such as technology use in the classroom, collaboration, late work, attendance, etc. Be explicit about the process of submitting late work and asking for extensions. Do not assume your students have an implicit understanding of university culture and practices.





Access

Access is both strategic and material. It involves helping students develop the skills and strategies they need to navigate campus life, as well as making content accessible for a range of students with different experiences, abilities, and backgrounds. It is important to think about potential barriers for students like cost of course materials, competing demands of work, school, and life, and the challenges of navigating large institutions.

STRATEGY

EXPLANATION

Provide free textbooks and digital editions

Be mindful of the additional financial burdens students face in higher education. Unless students absolutely need to buy specialized material for your class, consider using open source software (e.g., R, Inkscape), open source textbooks, and other free course materials.

Set longer assignment windows

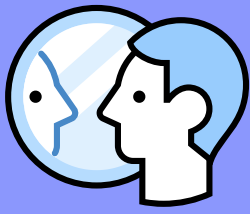
First-generation students often commute, work many hours, and have unusual schedules. You can help students manage their coursework and competing responsibilities by designing assignments with longer submission windows and sending reminders at least 24 hours before assignment deadlines ([Collier & Morgan, 2008](#)).

Allow for multiple ways students' to reach you

Many TA's have found it helpful to share their personal cell phone number with students for the specific purpose of being available to answer student questions. There are also many text apps (e.g., Remind, Discord, Slack, Piazza) that can be used to provide answers and assistance to students when needed. (Note, these are often more timely and accessible than email.)

Be transparent about course terminology and the linguistic norms of your discipline

Many first generation students are bi/multilingualand/or multidialectal. You can support their learning of academic language by clarifying terminology, explaining the etymology of key terms, using synonyms, pairing course terms with images and icons, and explaining thelinguistic norms of your discipline. You can help students succeed by being transparent about how language is used to communicate disciplinary content ([Nagy & Townsend, 2012](#)).



Reflect

This part of the CARES framework is focused on internal, reflective work that we must do as educators. Reflection is integral to pedagogy; therefore, these suggested strategies are focused on instructors. As part of reflective teaching, it is important to solicit feedback from first generation students. Their input and your own reflections undergird all other action-steps in the framework. There are both formal and informal processes on the continuum of reflective practice. You could simply start by thinking of responses to the following questions: What worked well in my instruction? Who will I share this news with? What needs work? Who can help me think through this? What will I do differently? How will I know it is working?

STRATEGY

EXPLANATION

Become a reflective scholar

A *reflective practitioner* is someone who actively engages in thinking about teaching, as reflections on practice inform future instruction ([Schon, 1987](#)). More recent scholarship suggests that “reflection [is] a process in which a person tries to make sense of something while acting on it at the same time” ([Bishop-Clarke & Dietz-Uhler, 2012](#)).

Examine your own experiences, expectations and biases

Establishing a consistent reflective practice is important to teaching. According to Brookfield, “Critically reflective teaching happens when we build into our practice the habit of constantly trying to identify, and check, the assumptions that inform our actions as teachers.” As we continue to engage in culturally-responsive teaching practices, we must be cognizant of teaching practices that place added stress and hardship on students of color ([Brookfield, 2005](#)). It is important that we understand students’ lived experiences through their own sharing and storytelling. You can start by reading personal accounts of first generation students that discuss the “hidden curriculum” in college.

Get feedback from students

Part of effective teaching is soliciting frequent feedback from our students about our teaching methods and content-delivery. You can develop your own student surveys (example: [Classroom Inquiry Questionnaire](#)) or you can allow time at the end of class for students to anonymously reflect on what they enjoyed most and what they struggled with. In turn, you can use their feedback in your own reflection and think of ways to improve the student experience in the future. Consider having focus groups with first generation students.

Reflect on your teaching practice

Plan. Deliver. Assess. Repeat.
As you plan your session take time to reflect on questions such as: What sort of bias or preconceptions do you anticipate bringing into your classroom? How could you work to overcome the challenges brought out by these biases/preconceptions?
While you deliver educational material, be intentional about the type of learning environment you create by asking yourself questions such as: In what ways do you create a safe space in your classroom, where ethnic, racial, cultural, religious, and gender differences are respected? When creating learning assessments keep in mind questions such as: What kind of learning are you trying to measure with your assessments? Do your assessments effectively measure what you intend? How do you know this?
For more helpful tools read the Reflection and Metacognition Series in [UC Davis Just In Time Teaching Guide](#).





Engage

First generation students struggle to feel a sense of belonging and to be socially engaged in campus life. With remote learning, the sense of connectedness among students in the online classroom is a greater challenge for all students, especially first generation students who continue to juggle work and home responsibilities ([Engle & Tinto, 2008](#)).

Cultivating a sense of belonging in students is key to increasing student engagement and meeting learning outcomes.

STRATEGY

EXPLANATION

Try teaching dialogically

Dialogic teaching creates more balanced and equitable learning. Simply stated, we learn more when more perspectives are shared. Dialogue deepens classroom instruction and gives learners the opportunity to ask questions, explore ideas, connect content to their prior knowledge, and think critically ([Resnick et al., 2015](#)).

Use different modes of participation

Learning is enriched when we activate multiple modalities in our instruction. Provide opportunities for students to interact with the material visually, verbally, and kinesthetically. Multimodal instruction benefits all learners and gives them multiple opportunities to engage with content ([Kress, 2009](#)).

Implement authentic activities and assignments

Authentic activities and assignments are connected to the larger goals of your discipline. Students should be challenged to think and create for real-world applications. When designing your course around authentic assignments and practical tasks, the goal is to help students understand how to apply their learning in the future. For example, inquiry- or problem-based projects provide students with opportunities to engage in the types of writing and problem-solving common in their disciplines or careers. Design projects with practical skill takeaways (e.g., research they might continue in the future, documents they can use later, etc.).

Additionally, you can invite guest speakers in to share their experiences and professional expertise with students. This is especially valuable in remote or hybrid contexts ([Kane & Mushtare, 2020](#)).

Be clear about course policies

Tap into students' prior experiences and prior knowledge and help them explore how they can apply it to the new content. Linking content to prior knowledge and experience is the best way to scaffold learning ([Vygotsky 1978](#)). First-generation students have valuable knowledge and experience, so create opportunities for them to apply their knowledge and share their experiences.





Support

Support is both a stance and an action. It begins with presenting yourself as a resource, presenting yourself as a person students can go to ask questions, seek advice, and receive mentorship and guidance. In supporting first generation students, you should be cognizant of other avenues of support you can guide them to like campus resources, peer groups, and more. In enacting your supportive stance, you are creating a culture of support, normalizing asking for help, and nurturing the needs of your students.

STRATEGY

EXPLANATION

Share campus resources

Many first-generation students lack knowledge about academic resources (e.g., library, writing centers, free tutoring) and basic needs services (e.g., counseling, food pantry, computer loan programs) offered by their campus. You could reference these resources in your syllabus, lectures, and/or personal communication with students. It may also make sense to design specific activities in class that introduce students to how to navigate particular resources (e.g., the library).

Position yourself as a resource

First generation students come from families who lack experience with the transition from high school to college, so they often look to teachers as a primary source of help with solving both course-related and personal problems ([Wang, 2014](#)). In this role, teachers have the opportunity to not only provide specific advice on how to succeed in their class, but also can connect first generation students with other campus resources designed to help them succeed.

Teachers who share demographic characteristics with first generation students (e.g., socioeconomic status and ethnicity/culture) are encouraged to minimize power distance and share relevant stories about their own experiences. These stories help first generation students see that they have the potential to persist, and can encourage students to extend the relationship beyond pedagogy alone and evolve into a more interpersonal relationship ([Ramos, 2019](#)).

Create opportunities for peer support

For first generation students, peer support (or lack of needed peer support) is a stronger predictor of college grades and adjustment than support from the family. Although the family members of first generation college students can provide vital emotional support, first generation students tend to rely on their peers to solve academic challenges ([Dennis et al., 2005](#)). Despite the advantages of peer support, first generation students are less likely than continuing generation students to be socially engaged in college because their financial need or commuter status limits their involvement in campus experiences ([Lundberg et al., 2007](#)). Consider having in-class activities or asynchronous online activities to help foster social connections among students. Provide opportunities or suggest resources that offer peer advising, tutoring, or mentoring.

Normalize asking for help

To normalize for students the process of being vulnerable, seeking support, and receiving feedback, make asking for help and seeking feedback an integral part of your class activities. For example, make sure your syllabus has a clear process for asking for an extension and submitting late work, otherwise only the privileged students will do so.