



Sense of Belonging in Agricultural Education Research to Practice

Fostering sense of belonging in class through collaboration with Chicana/o Studies

Background

Museus' (2014) Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model identifies two aspects of experience that contribute to student sense of belonging: *cultural relevance*, how relevant a campus or course is to the student's culture, and *cultural responsiveness*, how the needs and voices of diverse students are taken into account. Cultural relevance includes feelings of familiarity and validation, and can be built through community service, meaningful cross-cultural interaction, and engagement with knowledge pertinent to the student's culture. Cultural responsiveness is linked to a sense of community and supported through humanized educational environments and proactive, holistic support of learners. These indicators serve as a guide for updating agricultural curricula to better meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population and increasing retention of Rising Scholars¹.



image credit: UC Davis Student Farm

“Most of the conversations we had have been things I grew up with - for example *los nopales, la hierbabuena, y todas la plantitas*. Davis is already far from my home and knowing that there is *this* at Davis makes me feel welcomed for being who I am.”

What we did:

Over the course of six years, staff and student educators at the UC Davis Student Farm engaged in a process of listening, learning, reflecting, and relationship building to begin better serving our university's student population. We met with faculty in Chicana/o Studies and Native American Studies to **understand where there might be opportunities and barriers to engagement with work in agriculture, food systems, and the Student Farm community.**

The curriculum for two courses – *Latin American Women's Engagement in Social Movements* and *Women of Color Reproductive Health and Reproductive Politics in a Global Perspective* – were updated to include a virtual field trip to the Student Farm. The activity involved a welcome, land acknowledgment, gratitude for people who work the land, a tour of the Student Farm and explanation of its history, guided small-group activities to nurture connection to place and co-participants, and a video that welcomed students. The video was written collaboratively and included interviews with alumni who are children of farmworkers and found meaningful careers in the agricultural industry.

¹ We follow the lead of the UC Davis Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) Task Force by referring to these underrepresented students, especially first generation, low-income undergraduates, and students of color as “Rising Scholars,” moving away from deficit-oriented labels to an asset-oriented view that acknowledges the value that Rising Scholars bring to their institutions (Aldana et al. 2019).

After the course activities, we surveyed students to learn more about their experiences. 102 students were enrolled in these courses. 63% of students self-identified as Chicanx/Latinx. Of survey respondents, 82% indicated that their sense of belonging increased with the field trip. Notably, 14 of 15 of students who are children of farmworkers reported that their sense of belonging increased.

We also updated the curriculum for a course, *Experiential Learning in Gardens and on Farms*, that was developed and is taught by Student Farm staff. To make it more culturally relevant and responsive, we incorporated new readings, activities, and guest speakers to address indigenous ways of knowing and inclusivity in garden-based learning. It is significant that the students who take this course, go on to guide activities for children from nearby schools who come to the UC Davis Student Farm on field trips that help them understand food systems. This visit to agricultural programming at a public land-grant university is another point when educators have the opportunity to foster a sense of belonging to the broader public. The students leading the field trips also deepen their own sense of belonging by sharing knowledge and the space with others. In a Year 1 survey, we found that, through taking the course, both a sense of belonging and an interest in Food, Agriculture, Natural and Human (FANH) sciences increased for more than 60% of students.

Best practices

- **Listen, read, learn, and reflect on visible and invisible barriers** that exist on your student farm. How and why do the demographics of your farm community match your university, city, and state? What disciplines are represented among students and faculty who interact with your farm and why? What different ways of knowing do you acknowledge and use in your space? What are students telling you?
- **Provide workshops in equity and inclusion** for all student employees and staff. In workshops, our community leaders grew together in acknowledging and understanding the challenges of agricultural spaces. We developed new ways of communicating, delved into our personal and community values and positions, and practiced centering those values in our daily work. This provided a productive and safer context for the coursework.
- **Collaborate with groups on campus already putting CECE into practice**, including student cultural centers, Ethnic Studies faculty, and student organizations. Meet with partners early in the process and actively invite partners to the farm.
- **Build trust, not just curricula.** Trust between partners and quality of collaboration are critical to building and sustaining a sense of community to which students can connect.
- **Engage students in place-based reflective activities** that help them surface their understandings of food, plants and land. Activities can include planting a garden bed together with relevant crops, harvesting and bundling herbs for drying, garden exploration that highlights plants that students may find meaningful. Prompts can include questions that encourage students to reflect on what they observe in the space, how they relate to it, and what memories or stories plants or their smells evoke.
- **Recognize power dynamics within universities** – such as elevating biological and physical sciences over social sciences and other fields – that make it hard for some students to feel that they belong. Help students recognize the knowledge, assets and questions they bring from their personal, cultural, and family experiences.
- **Plant crops that students recognize to create opportunities for connection.** Work with students to identify plants they want in the farm or garden. Revisit planting and management decisions each year and be willing to change.

- **Develop inclusive language together** that is used in classes, repeated in the field, and amplified between peers. We did this in several ways: formally, through intentional conversations and sessions in which participants shared and agreed upon appropriate language, and more informally and publicly, through acknowledging language differences during our welcome, asking for input on appropriate language, and modeling inclusive language use in both field and workshop activities.

Resources

- (video) [This is your farm - come explore it with Chicana/o Studies and the Student Farm](#)
- [Example Plan for Chicana/o Course Virtual Visit to the Student Farm](#)
- [Experiential Education in Farm & Garden course outline](#) with readings and highlights
- [When Students Lead: Leadership Development Training Program Toolkit](#)

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References

Museus, S.D. (2014). The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model: A New Theory of Success Among Racially Diverse College Student Populations. In: Paulsen, M. (eds) Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research. Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research, vol 29. Springer, Dordrecht.
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