

Supporting Student Success Through Teaching

A Resource for Instructors



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The Institute for Teaching, Innovation, & Inclusive Pedagogy is a hub that facilitates educational development for instructors across schools and disciplines at Rutgers University-New Brunswick. TIIP staff developed this guide in valuable partnership with additional units and groups including the Tyler Clementi Center, the Center for Faculty Success, as well as the TIIP Advisory Committee to support instructors in facilitating learning experiences that can help our learners thrive. In addition to reviewing this guide,

members of the Rutgers community are encouraged to participate in initiatives facilitated by TIIP and campus partners. To stay informed of TIIP initiatives, bookmark and access the [website](#), sign up for the [newsletter](#), and follow the Institute on [LinkedIn](#).

This resource is divided into the major sections listed below that provide strategies and resources to complement existing course plans. Instructors can implement the practices in classes across disciplines and formats, adapting them to their teaching contexts whether for onsite, online, or hybrid courses.

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Introduction

This resource contains classroom management strategies that can promote inclusive course environments and positive learning experiences for both instructors and students. The emphasis is on methods that support the creation of welcoming spaces where students can learn and thrive, focusing on actions in which instructors have some degree of control. The approaches described can be tailored to disciplinary and course contexts to proactively foster inclusive courses prior to and throughout the term.

Fostering an inclusive course environment begins even before the course starts with the messaging and tone of the course syllabus, course site, and communications sent to students. Once the course starts, discussing, modeling, and upholding standards of respectful dialogue is of critical importance.

We can learn a lot about the characteristics of inclusive classrooms by asking students who experience them. In a national study where learners were asked about how their instructors fostered an inclusive environment, several themes emerged, including that their professors welcomed all students and acknowledged and respected student differences (Addy et al., 2024). Below are sample student comments from this study. My instructor created an inclusive environment:

[By] [s]tating what are the main principles for a class environment, how we should respect and address each other and be mindful that everyone is from a different background. (p.63)

[When they] [c]onsistently encouraged class etiquette and treated all opinions as valuable [and] encouraged a respectful learning environment. (p. 64)

[When] [t]hey made me feel safe to ask questions. (p. 69)

Another student indicated:

This professor, from day one, was really good about setting the ground rules for our discussion, which were simple ground rules, like, we need to be respectful of what other people are going to say in this class, and we should all be willing to debate with each other over these topics. But we need to understand that these are sensitive topics to many people, and we might come out feeling different ways about them. (p. 83)

Among our greatest opportunities in teaching is cultivating welcoming environments for our learners.

Attending to the course environment intentionally and with care will remain critical for instructors regardless of the discipline or course type. Ensuring that classroom spaces do not welcome antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of hate is imperative.

Simultaneously, maintaining well-being is critical and acknowledging that there are circumstances beyond an instructor's control. Teaching with compassion while simultaneously having high expectations and setting boundaries will remain important. Described below is how instructors can engage in these efforts before the course starts and throughout the semester.

Setting the Tone Before the Course Starts

Welcoming Course Announcements

One of the first opportunities that an instructor has to set the tone for a welcoming course environment is through their initial correspondences with students. In a manner that is most authentic to them, instructors can initiate communications the week prior to the start of the course that conveys their excitement for working with their students in the upcoming term. Instructors can also include a welcome message and video on the course site. This can be beneficial for both onsite and online courses, and particularly meaningful for asynchronous courses where there might not be synchronous meeting time. Below is an excerpt from a sample message adapted from [Addy et al. \(2021, p. 180\)](#).

Dear Students, Welcome to [name of course]! My name is Professor [last name] and I will be your instructor for the next [number] weeks. Let me start by telling you a little about me. I have a graduate degree in discipline [name of discipline] from... My course goal is to help you develop a new appreciation for [subject matter] and spark your interest in learning more about the subject after you leave every class! I'm so excited to teach this course because [add motivations]. You might be excited, but also a little nervous too. I understand there is a lot of new material to learn, and you want to do well.

I took this course when I was at the same academic stage as you, and I had similar feelings. Don't worry. We'll start with your individual baseline knowledge and build it from there...

Fostering a Welcoming Environment at the Beginning of the Term

Humanizing Course Syllabi

The language on course syllabi can set a welcoming tone for a course. Humanized syllabi read less like legalistic documents and may have any of the following characteristics (from Harnish et al., 2011):

- Positive or friendly language
- Rationales for assignments
- Self-disclosure (within the comfort level and context of the instructor and course)
- Humor (non-hostile)
- Compassion
- Enthusiasm

These syllabi have growth mindset messaging and language demonstrating that the instructors believe in their students (Dweck, 2006). The syllabi reveal hidden curricula, integrate a degree of flexibility, and list campus and other resources that can help students thrive. They also follow the principles of [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) to support learning. See [sample syllabus language](#).

In addition, welcoming syllabi include statements that address inclusivity. While having such statements on a syllabus is a good practice when shared authentically, they are insufficient on their own to building an inclusive learning environment. They must be accompanied by action through discussion of, and engagement with, the stated ideals.

Resource Call Out: The [Syllabus Resource Library](#) is a valuable resource co-created with Rutgers students.

Student Information Form

To humanize students' experiences, whether in small, medium, or large-sized classes, students can be asked to complete an information form using a survey tool to share information about themselves. This information can help the instructor learn more about the students in their courses and build community. An instructor may tell students in advance that they will share the information in aggregate and de-identified to help students better understand the classroom community. A few recommendations for these forms are to:

- Keep them short.
- Ask for completion as part of an initial, low-stakes assignment for the course.
- Given students a rationale for why the form is being administered and how the information will be used.
- Be mindful about the types of questions asked and your intent. Students may not feel comfortable answering certain questions unless they are anonymous.
- Always focus on how the information provided can support honoring diversity in a class. Avoid any deficit-minded usage. For example, this information should never be used in biased or harmful ways.

Creating or Co-creating Guidelines for Respectful Dialogue and Engagement

Clear and transparent expectations are important for any course to support respectful dialogue and student engagement. These guidelines can be created by the instructor or co-created with learners. There are factors to consider. For discussion-based courses (both online and in person) or those discussing sensitive topics, having classroom norms is critical. However, even in other course formats where students engage with one another either through group or other learning activities, and with the instructor, such guidelines are also important. Co-creating guidelines with the class gives students voice and more agency in the development process. Co-created guidelines may take more time to develop, which can be more effective given the level of student involvement. Giving students prompts to respond to can support this process. Examples might include: What aspects of respectful classroom behavior have you most valued? What have you not appreciated? Why?



As a few recommendations:

- Post guidelines in an accessible place on the course site and send them electronically to students.
- Remind students about the guidelines during key moments in the course - e.g., prior to a discussion or other activity for which respectful dialogue is important.
- Inform students at the beginning of the course that the guidelines are open to revision.
- Consider making guidelines related to specific contemporary issues. For example, should students be able to make class announcements about campus events? If so, under what conditions?

Sample Course Guidelines: All members of the class (the instructor and students) will:

- Actively listen to each other so that everyone feels seen and heard.
- Engage in respectful dialogue to model and exemplify civil behavior.
- Seek first to understand.
- Disagree with the statement, not the person.
- Not interrupt or talk over others.
- Avoid using profane or disrespectful language.
- Be comfortable or uncomfortable with silence.

- Revisit our classroom norms and revise them as needed if they are not adequately serving our needs.

Sample Methods for Creating Course Guidelines: Below are three approaches to creating course norms adapted from Coomber (2011).

- **Instructor-prescribed:** The instructor drafts classroom norms and presents them for class discussion until mutual agreement is reached. Students are not involved in the initial development of the guidelines.
- **Student alternatives:** Instructor gives students various alternatives for classroom norms that are discussed. Students select the top ones that they would like to include. Similarly, students are not involved in initial creation of the guidelines; however, this method affords them some choice.
- **Controlled democracy:** Instructor facilitates students in developing the norms. Students vote as a class to reach agreement. Instructors finalize the norms. This method takes more time and facilitation and allows for more student voice.

Maintaining a Positive Climate

Building Community

With community guidelines in place, students can engage with each other knowing there are transparent expectations for respectful dialogue. Such establishes groundwork for building community in a space where students can engage intellectually with their peers and the instructor, as well as form new connections. Consider implementing learning experiences where students work together in pairs or structured collaborative groups that allow them to connect and apply the guidelines.

Reinforcing Guidelines

Reminding students about the guidelines throughout the semester, especially during times where they interact with each other, is critically important. There are many ways to address scenarios where a student engages in behaviors that do not align with the guidelines. How such cases are handled is also good to discuss while they are being developed. For example, the instructor can call a timeout and facilitate a discussion to better understand what happened, revisit the guidelines, and address any harms. Some interactions will be most suitable for one-on-one conversations with a student.

Soliciting Student Feedback

How will an instructor know that these approaches are working to facilitate an inclusive classroom? One option is to administer a midcourse survey to obtain feedback from students. Reviewing this feedback, and informing students of what changes will or will not be made and why or why not, is important for building a trusting, responsive course environment. Instructors might also conduct an end-of-course assessment to better understand the effectiveness of the guidelines.

Resource Call Out: The Office of Teaching Evaluation and Assessment Research ([OTEAR](#)) works with those interested in conducting midcourse surveys in the Blue platform.

Fostering an inclusive climate is important for students. In the national study referenced above, students shared which approaches were not inclusive to them. Sample comments are (Addy et al., 2024):

[The instructor] makes jokes about mental health. (p. 50)

[The environment was not inclusive when I was] [b]eing made to feel embarrassed by teachers if I didn't agree with their point of view, in front of the class. They made me feel somewhat humiliated and not really interested in asking more questions. When I spoke to one teacher about this, she seemed very dismissive of my feelings. (p. 96)

These comments illustrate how the dialogues occurring in a classroom can greatly impact whether students feel that it is a welcoming space.

Special Considerations Instructors might also be concerned about how to manage specific situations that could arise in a course. Below are questions and responses to a few scenarios.

Frequently Asked Questions



Q: What do I do if a bias incident occurs in my course?

In this situation, reinforcing classroom guidelines governing a respectful environment is critical and some helpful frameworks can assist instructors such as the RAVEN approach described below (Harris and Wood, 2020). Instructors might consider other [restorative justice models](#) as well, which are humanized approaches to addressing harms. Role-playing to practice using these frameworks can help instructors feel more prepared if situations occur.

RAVEN Approach

- Redirect the interaction to prevent further harms
- Ask probing questions to better understand the intent of the comment (e.g., What did you mean by that?)
- Clarify values (e.g., the classroom guidelines)
- Emphasize your own thoughts and feelings
- Suggest next steps

Resource Call Out: Sometimes the instructor may be unaware of a student-student bias incident. Students can also be informed that they can report such incidents through [Bias Incident Reporting](#).

Q: What is the university's policy on academic freedom and freedom of speech?

Rutgers Policy 60.5.1 states:

Since the very nature of a university and its value to society depend upon the free pursuit and dissemination of knowledge and free artistic expression, all members of the faculty and teaching staff of the university, whether tenured or nontenured, full-time or part-time, are expected, whenever and wherever they engage in teaching, research, service, professional practice, or clinical practice, as well as in their research and professional publication, freely to discuss subjects with which they are competent to deal, to pursue inquiry therein, and to present and endeavor to maintain their opinions and conclusions relevant thereto. In expressing those ideas which seem to them justified by the facts, they are expected to maintain standards of sound scholarship and competent teaching.

The Free Expression at Rutgers linked below contains additional information.

Resource Call Out: [Free Expression at Rutgers](#)

Dr. Sandra Tomlinson-Clarke, Past Provost and Special Advisor to the Chancellor, serves as the first point of contact for any faculty crisis or issue-management support. Her role is to ensure that any concern is received promptly and routed to the appropriate university leaders and offices. She will coordinate the intake and initial distribution of information so that each matter is directed efficiently to those responsible for managing its complexities—such as classroom scheduling, safety, or other operational and academic

considerations. This approach helps maintain clear lines of responsibility while providing a streamlined and responsive process for our faculty. She is reachable for this purpose through the email address: NBFacultySupport@rutgers.edu.

If you perceive an immediate threat to your safety or the safety of students, you should immediately contact RUPD.

Q: How do I handle policies on classroom recordings?

Remind the students about the [Student Code of Conduct policy on undisclosed recordings \(Section VI, R\)](#) (stated below) and include it in course syllabi in addition to your own policy on classroom recordings as relevant.

Recording, live streaming, or transmitting images, audio, or video of private, non-public conversations and/or meeting on University premises without the knowledge and consent of all participants. This may include recording instructors without consent. Students must consult with instructors for guidance on their recording policies. This provision does not extend to the recording of public events or discussions, to recordings made for law enforcement purposes, or to any registered disability accommodation.

Please be aware that if a student has accommodation that does not align with the way that you teach you can say no, but not to the student and you will need to reach out to the Office of Disabilities coordinator indicated on the Letter of Accommodation to discuss an alternative. For example, instead of using classroom recordings, some instructors might crowdsource notes, have designated notetakers for class sessions, or provide students with a worksheet or outline of course material. Please also see the resource on lecture recordings on the [Office of Disabilities Services website](#).

Q: What do I do if a disruption occurs in my class?

A disruption can violate the [Student Code of Conduct \(Section VI, P\)](#) if it has any of the following features:

1. “Intentionally or recklessly interfering with any University activity or University sponsored activity.
2. Disrupting or obstructing an academic class or lecture, an administrative or support function, or official University business.

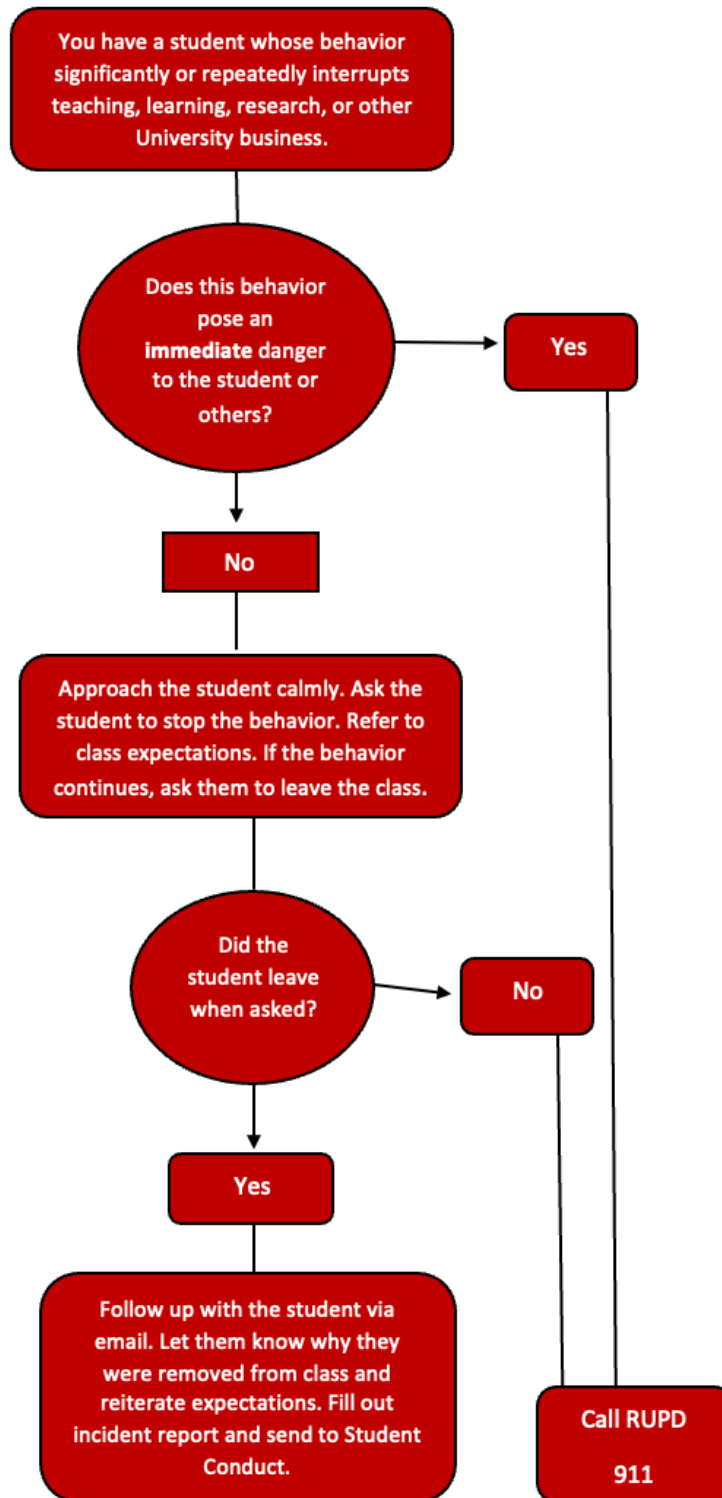
3. Engaging in classroom conduct that is prohibited by the faculty member or is in violation of the law or University policy.”

The Student Code of Conduct also indicates that:

“It should be noted that this policy is not intended to punish students for classroom dissent or hinder organized, peaceful, and orderly protests that are undertaken within reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions placed upon the same by the University.”

Resource Call Out: The Office of the Dean of Students-Outreach, Advocacy, and Support can consult on matters implicating student success.

Below are steps recommended in the event of a disruption (Source: Offices of the Dean of Students)



If there is a need for de-escalation, consider using the CLARA Method described below (Nonviolent Peace Force, n.d.).

CLARA Method

- **Calm/Center** yourself so you can suspend judgmental thoughts and recognize our shared humanity
- **Listen** to understand what they are saying and find something on which you can agree
- **Affirm** by making a connection with the other person thus conveying you have heard and understand them
- **Respond** in ways that show respect, even if you disagree (people want to start here)
- **Add/Ask** information, communicate in ways that convey you want to continue the conversation

Additional Resources: Proactive methods for discussion-based/group discussion style classrooms include:

- [Interfaith America's Bridge the Gap Program](#) - Provides facilitation guides for "Story Circles" which allow all parties to be heard (timed) on selected prompts, allows for cross talk (also timed), and wrap up. The goal is deep listening and belonging not solving issues.
- [Peer-Led Deliberative Dialogue from UMD-CP](#) - Provides structured space for students to unpack a "wicked problem" by breaking discussion down into four components: (1) Dimensions; (2) Options for Action; (3) Consensus; (4) Intended & Unintended Consequences. Good for very contentious and polarizing topics.
- [CLARA In Practice: Advanced Strategies for Polarized Dialogue](#) from the Tyler Clementi Center - Includes additional learning and practice on how to respond to biased statements or polarizing statements by (1) attending to emotions; (2) acknowledging power dynamics; (3) anchoring in dignity and accountability; (4) addressing misinformation; and (5) analyzing goals, values and means to connect further
- [Resetting the Table](#) - Provides information about how to facilitate disagreements between individuals so that both sides can be heard deeply, the core disagreement can be named, any harmful speech can be attended or addressed without the assumption of harm, and more.

Resource Call Out: The [Tyler Clementi Center](#) provides professional development sessions on the CLARA method and tools that can support bias prevention.

Q: How do I maintain an inclusive environment if protests or other events are happening on campus or beyond?

One of the most important actions that instructors can take is to acknowledge that such events are happening. Students can significantly differ in how they are affected by them. The next section further discusses strategies for supporting socioemotional learning.

Q: How do I effectively facilitate discussions on challenging topics in my course?

Engaging in the practices previously described can set the tone for creating and reinforcing a welcoming environment in a course where difficult or controversial topics are discussed. Including norms such as critiquing the idea and not the person, focusing on evidence in course material over opinion, and respecting diverse perspectives can help achieve these ends, in addition to instructor modeling of such behaviors. Content warnings provided in advance also can help students prepare for the discussion.

Attending to the Socioemotional Environment

Although courses may not have learning objectives that focus on current events, outside of the classroom situations can still impact the learning environment because of their effects on students. These affective elements of the course climate can be referred to as the **socioemotional environment**.

Social emotion is defined by the American Psychological Association as, “any emotion that depends on one’s appraisal or consideration of another person’s thoughts, feelings, or actions. For example, pride arises when one feels favorably evaluated by others and perceives concurrent gains in one’s status and rank relative to those others, whereas shame arises from one’s feeling poorly evaluated by others and perceiving losses in status and rank.

Other commonly studied social emotions include admiration, embarrassment, envy, guilt, and jealousy” (APA, 2018). A student may experience any of these emotions within and outside of a course setting.

Some life events might be traumatic for students. SAMHSA (2023) defines trauma through three E’s - “Individual trauma results from an **event**, series of events, or a set of circumstances that an individual **experiences** as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that may have lasting adverse **effects** on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being” (p. 2). Such events include racism, discrimination, oppression, violence, war, and terrorism to name a few. While the role of the instructor is not that of a therapist, it is important to be aware that traumas and various events can impact the way students engage with their learning. Instances of trauma can be experienced individually and in particular groups and communities. Mass traumas affect large numbers of people. Trauma can have many impacts on individuals--emotional, behavioral, physical, developmental, cognitive, interpersonal, and spiritual. As such, one might imagine how difficult it might be for a student to engage in a course if they are experiencing trauma. They might exhibit a variety of behaviors such as missing classes, difficulty concentrating, sadness, and more.



There are several principles of note when taking a trauma-informed approach (adapted from SAMHSA, 2023). Key to these approaches is being aware of the trauma and resisting re-traumatization.

- **Safety** - cultivating a supportive environment
- **Trustworthiness and transparency** - engaging in open dialogue and respectful interactions
- **Peer support** - helping learners form connections that provide support
- **Collaboration and mutuality** - viewing interactions as a partnership
- **Empowerment, voice, and choice** - focusing on student strengths to help them navigate the situation
- **Cultural, historical, and gender issues** - mitigating biases and their harms

Relevant resource:

Cavanaugh, S. (2024). *Mind Over Monsters: Supporting Youth Mental Health with Compassionate Challenge*. Beacon Press.

Below are sample practices that can apply to course settings and support the socioemotional environment. These methods are meaningful to implement at any time and particularly salient before and after major events occur.

Check-ins

Take the pulse of the class by performing a check-in. There are a variety of ways to approach check-ins. One method popularized during the pandemic involves showing a scale (e.g., 1 - 10) based on emotions and asking students where they stand. This can be conducted as an anonymous poll using a tool like Mentimeter, Poll Everywhere, or Slido. These tools can also be used for asynchronous courses. Instructors have access to Slido through a university-wide license. First login to <https://rutgers.webex.com> then go to <https://slido.com>, click "login" and "login with webex". Some tools such as [Mentimeter](#) and [Poll Everywhere](#) have basic free accounts that have some limitations as to the number of participants or number of questions that can be asked. Additionally, instructors can set up anonymous quizzes in [Canvas](#).

Individual Journaling

Give students a few minutes to respond to a prompt and write about how they are feeling now, not with the intent to share, but rather to help them process their feelings before class starts. In an online course, students might be encouraged to journal asynchronously.

Mindfulness & Well-being Exercises

Various well-being exercises have been shown to help university students thrive (Seppälä, 2020). Some instructors may incorporate mindfulness exercises to encourage presence. These exercises may or may not be elaborate, and students might have a choice about whether they want to engage in them. For example, some instructors might start their course with a moment of quiet to provide a pause and time for recentering. Some instructors might lead a mindfulness exercise or have students engage in breathing exercises. Not all instructors may feel comfortable implementing some of these approaches, but even small efforts can have a significant impact in supporting the socioemotional environment.

Resource Call Out: If you have a concern about student well-being, [Counseling Services \(CAPS\)](#) can consult on any of the following: “Concerns about the welfare/mental health of a particular student, concerns about the university community’s reaction to a traumatic event, and suggestions/help on how to refer someone to CAPS services.” Instructors can also report concerns.

Instructor Wellness

Instructors may also be affected by current events, the demands of their work, and occurrences in their personal lives. Difficult situations might arise outside of their control. Establishing boundaries and engaging in activities that enable refueling can promote wellness. Being intentional and regularly prioritizing this time is important to supporting wellness.

Relevant Resources:

Denial, C.J. (2024). *A Pedagogy of Kindness*. University of Oklahoma Press.

Norell, E.A. (2024). *The Present Professor: Authenticity & Transformational Teaching*. University of Oklahoma Press.

Resource Call Out: [ScarletWell](#) offers several resources for students, instructors, and staff members to support their wellness.

Self-Reflection & Action Steps

- After reviewing this resource, consider your responses to the following questions: Who are the students in your courses? Consider their backgrounds, beliefs, values, and prior experiences.
- What have you found to be effective in creating welcoming course environments?
- What challenges, if any, have you experienced fostering inclusive learning environments?
- What steps can you take to cultivate learning experiences that are inclusive?
- Which pedagogical topics might you further investigate or explore?

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Campus Resources

- [Bias Prevention and Reporting](#) - reporting system for bias incidents
- [Counseling Services \(CAPS\)](#) - mental health support for students
- [Office of the Dean of Students - Advocacy, Outreach, and Support](#) - student success support
- [Office of Student Conduct](#) - responsible for the student disciplinary system
- [Office of Teaching Evaluation and Assessment Research \(OTEAR\)](#) - supports usage of [midcourse surveys](#) in Blue and provides recommendation for administration on [other platforms](#) and more around the evaluation of teaching
- [ScarletWell](#) - facilitates initiatives that support the well-being of Rutgers students, faculty, and staff members

Additional Articles & Resources

- Bovill, C. (2020). Co-creation in learning and teaching: the case for a whole-class approach in higher education. *High Educ* **79**, 1023–1037.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00453-w>
- [Campus Compact. Better Discourse: A Guide for Bridging Campus Divides in Challenging Times.](#)
- Denial, C. J. (2024). [A pedagogy of kindness](#). University of Oklahoma Press. [Inclusive Teaching ACUE Toolkit](#)
- Longo, N.V. (2023). [Practicing Democracy: A Toolkit for Educating Civic Professionals.](#)
- Sathy, V., & Hogan, K. A. (2022). [Inclusive teaching: Strategies for promoting equity in the college classroom.](#) West Virginia University Press.
- [Transparency in Learning & Teaching Framework \(TILT\)](#)