

ENVIRONMENTS THAT SUPPORT BELONGING

The purpose of this handout is to describe ways to cultivate environments that support belonging and engagement. This information draws from two models, the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model, and the Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE). Both models have been widely tested and utilized in various campus settings with positive outcomes for students with various identities and backgrounds.

Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE)

The CECE model of student success seeks to support success for racially and ethnically diverse student populations. The model acknowledges various forces, such as external influences (e.g., employment, family input, finances) and precollege factors (e.g., academic preparation, reasons for college enrollment) on college success outcomes (e.g., learning, persistence, completion) (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017), and focuses on additional factors of success, including:

- Sense of belonging
- Academic self-efficacy
- Motivation
- Intent to persist

The CECE model outlines nine elements of a culturally-engaging campus that fall under two categories: cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness. Studies utilizing these elements demonstrate that six of these constructs (listed in the table below in order of impact) were most strongly correlated with a sense of belonging for students across all racial identities.

Construct	Qualities
Collectivist cultural orientations	Focus on teamwork and mutual success rather than competition and individualism.
Proactive philosophies	Faculty who not only offer information and support, but ensure that students have this knowledge and take advantage of opportunities, support, and information.
Cultural familiarity	The ability of students to connect with faculty, staff, and peers who understand their unique backgrounds and experiences.
Cultural validation	The feeling that one’s cultural knowledge, backgrounds, and identities are respected.
Humanized educational environments	Environments with faculty who are committed to, care about, and develop meaningful relationships with students.
Holistic Support	Having a faculty member who students trust will provide the information and support they need, or who will connect them to that necessary information and support, no matter the question or problem facing the student.

From *Museus et al., 2017, pages 192-193*

Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE)

The MMDLE recognizes variation in racial climate (the experiences one has in a setting based on their racial identity) and outlines the many ways that the campus environment can shape diversity activities and learning on campus. It centers students and their multiple identities at the core of educational processes, and accounts for internal, historical, social, and political forces (Hurtado et al., 2012).

According to the MMDLE (fig. 1), a curricular context that supports a diverse learning environment requires the instructor to utilize four areas to inform their instructional processes. Faculty should have knowledge of their particular **students** and understand how to transform their **course content** to be reflective of the multiple social identities represented in their classrooms. This includes the ability to support students' sense of belonging through validation, inclusion, and socialization. Faculty should also understand how their **instructor identity** influences classroom practices, interactions with diverse students, and their ability to engage in critical and inclusive **pedagogies**.

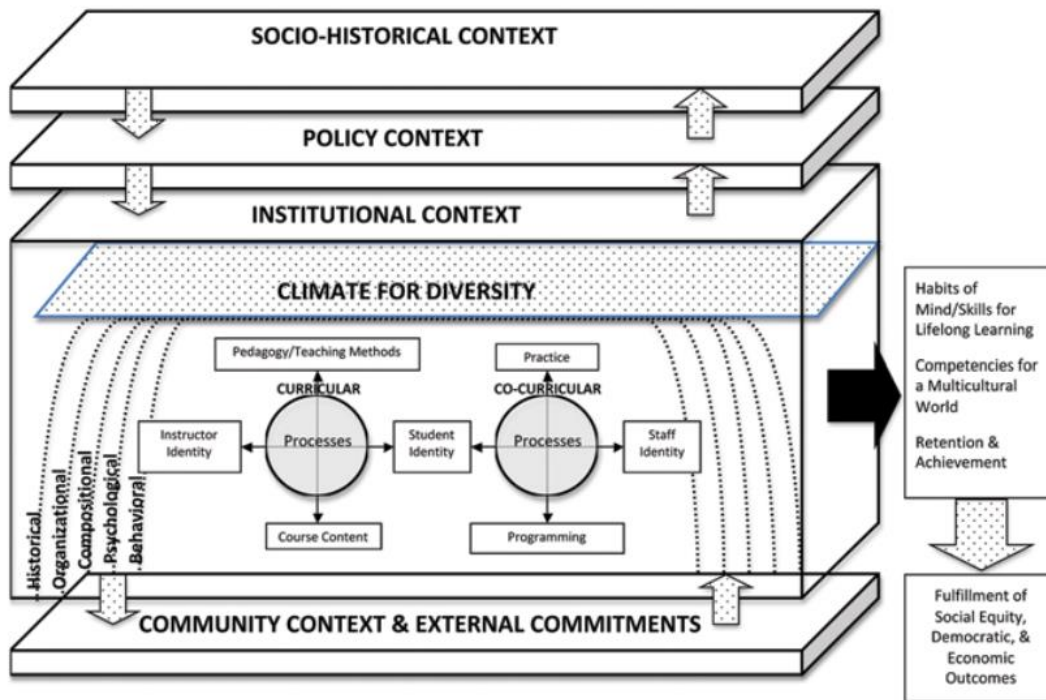


Fig. 1: Multicontextual model for diverse learning environments. From Hurtado et al., 2012, p. 48

This model outlines the many forces contributing to the environment for learning, including historical and psychological aspects and institutional and policy contexts. Most important for faculty is the curricular context, which is pictured as a circle with four arrows indicating the areas of student and instructor identity, course content, and pedagogy/teaching methods. Outcomes, indicated with the black arrow, include skills for lifelong learning, retention and achievement, and fulfillment of social equity, democratic, and economic outcomes.

Pulling it all together: Cultivating an environment for belonging and inclusion

Using elements from the MMDLE and CECE model and studies that put these elements into practice, we provide a list of strategies to support students across their many differences and engender meaningful learning connected to those differences. You do not need to implement all of these strategies, but utilizing more than one can help cultivate an environment for belonging rather than an exercise to promote belonging.

Strategy	Suggested practices
Utilize a collectivist orientation	Encourage students to talk and work with each other, emphasize the need for collaboration in solving problems or tackling complex assignments, create and use group agreements, co-construct elements of the syllabus or assignments, promote positive group work.
Proactive and holistic philosophies	In addition to including information on various support offerings and opportunities (e.g., office hours, tutoring, counseling) in a syllabus or ICON module, take time in class to explain the purpose and benefit of these supports. Remind students of opportunities for engagement and support throughout the semester or as they arise. Strive to answer students' questions or direct them to support services.
Cultural and contextual familiarity	Give students an opportunity to connect across shared identities or situations. You could have students organize themselves into discussion groups based on the size of their high school graduating class or the distance of their hometown from the University of Iowa. You could take an anonymous poll to ask about level of concern over an upcoming exam to show students that they are not alone in their worries, or have students share pictures or names of the places where they feel most comfortable.
Cultural validation	Examine the course content to see if certain viewpoints, groups, or voices dominate the curriculum. Consider adding or exchanging content to have a broader representation of ideas or identities, being careful not to position the additions as outliers or alternatives to the norm. You might also ask students to share answers to the question, "what does it mean to be a student?" You could model a thoughtful response by sharing your own experiences as a college student.
Critical and inclusive pedagogies	Understanding the basic elements of critical and inclusive pedagogies can support your choice of content, assessments, and instructional strategies. Pedagogies that align with the types of strategies listed here include culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2014), engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994), critical constructivist pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2005), sentipensante pedagogy (Rendón, 2012), and equity pedagogy (McGee Banks & Banks, 1995).
Reflection on teaching identity	Take time to understand your purpose and methods for teaching. Consider personally formative learning experiences, aspects of your identity, your sense of why education is valuable, and assumptions about how learning happens.

Citations

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