

***FACULTY POCKET GUIDE TO  
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT...RETENTION...AND WELLNESS***

***CONNECTION***

***AND***

***RAPPORT***

***McDOWELL INSTITUTE***

**TEACHER EXCELLENCE**  
in Positive Behavior Support

***Bloomsburg University • College of Education***  
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The McDowell Institute was established in 2012 at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania through the generosity of Susan W. McDowell. The McDowell Institute is dedicated to supporting the facilitation of social, emotional, and behavioral wellness of children, youth, and young adults across school and community settings. This mission is accomplished through training, technical assistance, and information dissemination.

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## **Simple Instructional Strategies to Enhance Student Achievement...Retention...and Wellness**

While it can sometimes feel overwhelming to address the needs of our increasingly diverse student body in our classrooms on campus, there are a few well-documented instructional strategies to enhance student achievement, retention and wellness that have proven to be time efficient while highly effective.

Encouragingly, these strategies are not new concepts, which in many ways can help faculty to both understand and implement the approaches. The challenge, however, is in a consistent use of these inter-related strategies to the point where they become habitual.

The three, most fundamental strategies include:

- 1) providing clear, positively stated performance expectations
- 2) building a connection (rapport) with each student in your classroom, and
- 3) providing a sufficient degree of acknowledgment (positive reinforcement) for effort and performance in meeting your established expectations.

While each of these three inter-related practices is both effective and efficient, this brief resource will exclusively highlight the importance of connection (rapport) regarding student achievement-retention-wellness. Further, a couple of examples of high impact connection/rapport building strategies for use in any university classroom will be highlighted.

Please feel free to contact Tim Knoster (Executive Director) or Danielle Empson (Director of School-based Behavioral Health) at the McDowell Institute should you have interest in additional information on the practices highlighted in this brief resource ([tknoster@bloomu.edu](mailto:tknoster@bloomu.edu) or [dempson@bloomu.edu](mailto:dempson@bloomu.edu)).



## The Power of Connection / Rapport

There are a variety of reasons why given students struggle to achieve, and in turn, we struggle to retain those students. These various reasons...or factors... tend to be multi-faceted and inter-related, meaning there is typically no one causal root of why given students fail to thrive in college.

There are many examples of risk factors that are present in the lives of an increasing proportion of college students. These risk factors can have an adverse impact on not only academic performance, but as well on overall life functioning including increased risk for suicidal ideation. The encouraging news is that risk factors can be ameliorated to varying degrees by supporting our students to expand the number of protective factors in their lives and subsequently to become more resilient. Resilience, simply stated, is about having the coping and skill sets to thrive through life circumstances...even when those circumstances are uniquely challenging.

One of the most powerful protective factors is in feeling connected and belonging as opposed to one of the most devastating risk factors of feeling isolated and alone. Of course, no one can make someone else actually feel connected or belong, as this is a personalized experience that emerges over the course of time.

However, there are some simple, specific things that faculty can do to develop a reasonable level of rapport to facilitate students gaining this sense of connectedness and belonging...of feeling important and valued. The following simple strategies are by no means new, and certainly not proverbial "rocket science." However, when put in to practice on a regular basis they can make all the difference in the world.



## **Simple Strategies to Build Connection and Rapport**

### *Personal Interactions Prior to Officially Starting a Class Session*

As simplistic as it may seem, using the few minutes prior to officially starting class to interact with students about general, non-course related topics can have a profound impact on your students. This can be accomplished in many ways including greeting students as they enter the classroom...or upon arrival circulating around and merely asking, "How are you doing today?" Building connection (rapport) can be efficiently accomplished by using repeated, short little interactions over the course of time. The key is in repeated use of this approach in a manner that distributes your brief interactions equitably across your students over time.

### *Use of Student Names, Eye Contact and Active Listening*

It is easy for us as instructors, given the amount of course content that we need to cover within a limited amount of time, to become distracted from the human element of our interactions with students during class sessions. This can happen to any course instructor, regardless of expertise or years of experience as these time demands are real across all disciplines. Be sure to be self-aware...tuned-in so to speak...to your affect (what you look and sound like) when responding to student questions, posing questions, and providing encouragement. Learn student names...and use them on a regular basis from day one. Students generally do not expect you to know their names from day one...so early on...feel free to ask them their names. In turn this will help you to learn their names and demonstrate your interest in getting to know them. This is important, especially early in a semester. When you don't know a student's name and a student poses a question, ask them their name...then state, "Thanks for the question \_\_\_\_" ...then respond to the question. Processing interactions within the context of instruction in this manner can significantly enhance connections.



### *Using Student Attendance as a Screening – Intervention Mechanism*

As faculty, we play a significant role in the transition process for our students toward self-actualization and professional careers. One key to this successful transition is for students to regularly attend and engage in learning activities associated with their coursework. In an ideal world, all students show up to class, on time, ready to participate in the learning process. However, daily reality indicates that this is not always the case. Bottom line, a student missing from even one given class session is increasingly at-risk for undesired outcomes. In the event that a student is “missing in action” without timely communication as to a legitimate reason for the absence, it is important to reach out to that student proactively (e.g., via e-mail) to let them know 1) you noticed they were missing and 2) that you are concerned as to their health and wellbeing. Communicating in this manner dramatically enhances healthy connections that serve as a protective factor and improve the likelihood of positive outcomes. To be clear, indicating a clear sense of awareness and concern is not pampering. Rather, it is showing sincere interest that can make all the difference in the world.

### *Targeted Interaction with Students that Appear At-Risk*

As you interact with your students, there will likely be a few that for a variety of reasons the connection you are trying to establish just does not occur on its own. The solution set with such students who are at-risk lies in ramping up (or increasing) your use of the previously noted strategies. Consciously being aware, and in turn making a visible effort, should significantly enhance connectedness and increase the the liklihood of achievement-retention-and wellness with these specific students.



## **Student Success: We are in this Together**

This resource highlights the importance of, and skills to form connections with your students to support achievement, retention and wellness. Interestingly, fostering your students to develop a feeling of connectedness and sense of belonging is not unique to instructional practice by faculty. In fact, this serves as the bedrock of the mission of units across campus within student affairs. The alignment of our collective efforts to help students to connect and acquire a sense of belonging further enhances the likelihood of improving student outcomes. The reality is that students, like faculty and staff, have multiple aspects to their life experiences here on campus. A healthy degree of synergy can be realized as we consciously align our efforts to support student success. To this end, the McDowell Institute has been increasingly collaborating with BU Health and Wellness and kindred campus entities to help students develop a healthy degree of connectedness through their BU experience. This alignment is not mere coincidence, but rather strategic in nature and further supports both academic and student affairs outreach and initiatives that support student success. Feel free to contact the McDowell Institute if you have interest in also exploring such connections and/or resources to support your instructional endeavors...we are in this together.



