

CREATING INCLUSIVE ONLINE COMMUNITIES

*Practices That Support and Engage
Diverse Students*

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Foreword by Kathryn E. Linder

Sty/us

STERLING, VIRGINIA



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Published by Stylus Publishing, LLC.
22883 Quicksilver Drive
Sterling, Virginia 20166-2019

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The CIP data for this title has been applied for.

13-digit ISBN: 978-1-64267-304-3 (cloth)
13-digit ISBN: 978-1-64267-305-0 (paperback)
13-digit ISBN: 978-1-64267-306-7 (library networkable e-edition)
13-digit ISBN: 978-1-64267-307-4 (consumer e-edition)

Printed in the United States of America

All first editions printed on acid-free paper
that meets the American National Standards Institute
Z39-48 Standard.

Bulk Purchases

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Call 1-800-232-0223

First Edition, 2022

DEFINING COMMUNITY

The Foundation of an Inclusive and Engaging Course or Program

Community is a vast and complex concept. Community can be understood in terms of its boundaries (where it begins and where it ends) or its membership characteristics, as well as the experiences individuals have when they are in a shared space. In this book, *community* is defined as an activity center where students have feelings of membership and receive social, emotional, academic or professional support (Ke & Hoadley, 2009; Lai, 2015; Yuan & Kim, 2014). This definition is important because it allows practitioners to consider what students *feel* when they are in community as well as what they *do* collaboratively.

Feelings of community can take many forms. McMillan and Chavis (1986) focus on four feelings that are central to community—membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Membership refers to the feeling that one belongs to a group. Influence is the feeling that one's membership matters to the group members, and that one can effect change in the group. Fulfillment of needs refers to the feeling that the group provides support for its members' individual and shared goals. A shared emotional connection is a feeling that one has relationships with group members where positive feelings are reciprocated.

Researchers and practitioners have focused on other feelings that are central to community as well. For example, belonging has been noted as a key component of community. Strayhorn (2012), drawing on Rosenberg & McCulloch (1981) wrote that a sense of belonging “refers to a feeling of connectedness, that one is important or matters to others.” He further writes that “the absence of a sense of belonging is typically described as a sense of

alienation, rejection, social isolation, loneliness, or ‘marginality,’ all feelings that have been associated with adverse mental health outcomes” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 2).

These feelings that encompass community do not develop organically, especially when students are separated by physical distance. Instead, feelings of community are cultivated through the intentional efforts of students, faculty and staff to work collaboratively, show up authentically, and participate fully in teaching and learning.

The aforementioned definition of community also allows us to focus on the type of work that occurs in communities. This book focuses on educational communities, the kind that occur in formal academic courses and degree-granting academic programs. The formal structure and function of educational communities is what differentiates online educational communities from other types of communities, such as interest communities, professional communities, or communities of practice (Carlen & Jobring, 2005). The work of these communities is, on its face, clear. Students are pursuing a shared goal, which is course and/or degree completion. However, simply being in the same cohort, course, or program together does not constitute being in a learning community. Students must have shared goals and work together to complete educational artifacts that reflect their shared goals (Lai, 2015). In a community, the collaborative activities resonate in ways that are both personal and professional. Students in communities do not just connect over academic work, they connect in ways that enrich their lives (Berry, 2017b).

The experience of community is fluid, flexible, and subjective, and depends as much on structure and formality as on students’ personal evaluation of their experience. While community can sound like a fluffy concept, there are many steps that faculty, staff, and administrators can take to make it more concrete. This book explores the teaching strategies that create community, as well as the academic and extracurricular experiences (activities, course structure, pedagogical strategies) that contribute to feelings of connection and closeness in online courses and programs.

The work of creating community belongs to everyone connected to an academic program. Instructors can lay the foundation for community by creating norms around experiences that support authenticity and collaboration. Administrators can support learning communities by preparing instructors to engage all students, and by providing extracurricular support for online students. Instructional designers can help faculty leverage technology to develop dynamic learning experiences that maximize student participation. Faculty developers can provide training and guidance on best practices for online teaching and learning. Other staff can support students’ sense of community

by making sure that all students feel connected, supported, and engaged in the online program. Everyone has a role to play in creating and maintaining community. This book offers strategies and perspectives for how a range of stakeholders might more thoroughly engage in the work of creating and supporting community in online courses and programs.

Why Does Community Matter? The Academic and Social Benefits of Community

Research has found that a sense of community has social, emotional and academic benefits for students, regardless of the program structure or setting. In *Classrooms as Communities*, Tinto (1997) wrote that the more connected students feel to instructors and peers, “the greater their acquisition of knowledge and development of skills” (p. 600). Tinto argued that strong interpersonal connections, positive interactions with instructors and collaborative engagement with peers all contributed to feelings of belongingness and support within the academic environment, which in turn supported learning. In a nationally representative study, Gopalan and Brady (2020) found that a sense of belonging was a predictor of increased persistence and engagement, as well as better mental health for 4-year students.

Community is both an indication of and a contributing factor to student engagement (Brown & Bursdal, 2012; Torres-Harding et al., 2015). Students who are more engaged in the institution are more likely to feel a sense of community, and students with a strong sense of community are more likely to participate in and engage with their institution (Price & Tovar, 2014). There are many ways to consider what engagement means. Engagement can be intellectual, referring to deep and authentic interactions with curriculum and instructors. Engagement can also be activity-based, and refer to student participation in learning opportunities, extracurricular offerings, and support services. Engagement also refers to the deep connections students make with peers, including their participation in formal programming offered by the institution, involvement in affinity-based networks, and simply through having friendships with peers at their institution. It is hard to think of an aspect of participation, academic or social, that does not require engagement and is not bolstered by a sense of community.

Rovai (2003) found that online students also experienced deeper academic engagement when they felt a sense of community, and that they were more likely to persist in an academic program than their more socially isolated peers. Berry (2017b) found that online students who felt they were in a community were more likely to give and receive academic, social and

emotional support to peers, including career and family advice, tutoring, and other academic support.

A sense of community has social and emotional benefits as well. In a survey of nearly 700 students, Stubb et al. (2011) found that a sense of community can act as a buffer against feelings of stress, anxiety, isolation and burnout. Pyhältö et al. (2009) found that feelings of membership in a community can be a source of empowerment for emotionally overwhelmed students, and can help them manage stress and exhaustion. Stubb et al. (2011) and Pyhältö et al. (2009) found that students who felt they were in a community received psychological benefits from their membership, including encouragement, inspiration, academic assistance, and emotional support.

Characteristics of a Learning Community

The core features of a learning community include:

- membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986)
- a sense of belonging and connectedness (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981)
- shared collaboration around learning goals (Berry, 2017b)
- student engagement (Berry, 2017b)
- equity and inclusion (Bensimon and Malcolm, 2012)

Challenges to Community

Communities are not value-neutral. Communities can be both inclusive to some and exclusive of others. Underrepresented students and those from historically marginalized backgrounds can experience marginalization and exclusion from online courses and programs. Sometimes, these experiences take the form of microaggressions, such as being ignored in discussion threads or over-talked in oral discussions. Other times, these experiences can be more overt, and can include discrimination and harassment. Scholars have used the term *the outsider within* to describe the peripheral role that minoritized and marginalized students play in learning communities (Collins, 1986). Underrepresented students may form their own communities to navigate their experiences as “outsiders.” Still, the marginalization that minoritized students can experience in academic spaces can have adverse impacts on learning and overall wellbeing.

It is important for educators to consider the ways in which the online community in their program can be inclusive and supportive for some students, but exclusionary for others. It is also important for educators to consider that some students may experience both inclusion and exclusion simultaneously, finding support in some aspects of the academic program, and experiencing exclusion in other parts of it. Community is not an either/or experience, it is complex, contextual and constantly shifting. By taking a more critical look at what community is, how it occurs, and who experiences it, faculty, administrators, and staff put themselves in a position to actually create more inclusive online courses and programs.

External factors can present challenges to community as well. Natural disasters, instances of mass violence, and pandemics can force institutions to rapidly change delivery methods and instructional practices. Appendix A provides considerations for emergency remote instruction and online teaching during a pandemics and other disruptive and challenging events.

Frameworks for Understanding Online Community

Researchers and practitioners have used many frameworks to understand how online communities work. In the section that follows, some common frameworks will be explored and their limitations will be considered.

The Community of Inquiry Framework

Community and its benefits are relatively easy to understand, but harder to cultivate. Many factors contribute to students' sense of community, though some are more widely understood and explored than others. Online practitioners and researchers in the field of online learning have often used the community of inquiry (COI) as a framework to understand the online experience (Garrison, 2016; Garrison et al., 2001). The COI framework suggests that a students' sense of community in an online classroom is informed by the cultivation of three interdependent elements, which they call "presences." These include teaching, social, and cognitive presence. Instructors can cultivate teaching presence through the way they structure and facilitate their online courses, social presence through the ways in which they engage students and help facilitate peer interactions, and cognitive presence through reflective learning activities.

The COI provides a useful starting point for understanding how community is formed in online courses. First, it helps practitioners recognize that teaching and learning online are very different experiences than teaching and learning in face-to-face environments. Second, it provides a neat organizing

schema for instructors and administrators to consider the significant elements of online learning. The focus on the relationship between instructional and social practices offers clear guideposts for faculty development. Finally, the COI framework highlights the centrality of peer-to-peer interaction in the online student experience. This is important because some students and faculty view online learning as an independent, autodidactic experience. While online learning offers a significant measure of autonomy for learners, the COI framework and the research that has used it suggest that interaction and collaboration play a critical role in student success.

Theory of Persistence in Distance Education Programs

While the COI framework is a helpful starting point for understanding community, it has its limitations. Online learning communities are not created in a vacuum. They are influenced significantly by a range of contextual factors that surround the classroom, including individual and program-level factors. Rovai's (2003) theory of persistence in distance education programs provides some insight into what those factors might be. Rovai argues that like all students, online students' sense of community is influenced by students' precollege experiences, during college experiences, and life events. Precollege experiences include academic preparedness and technology skills. Life events include things like birth, death, divorce, pandemics, or loss of employment, as well as a range of personal experiences that might impact students' persistence or engagement in the academic program. In his articulation of the experiences that impact students' during college, Rovai presents a more expansive portrait of what impacts students' sense of community than many online scholars. While a sense of community, labeled here as a COI, in an online class is a central factor, it is one of several. Other factors that impact students' sense of community include technology that enhances student communication, positive interactions with faculty in and outside of classes, and successful engagement with a range of student support services.

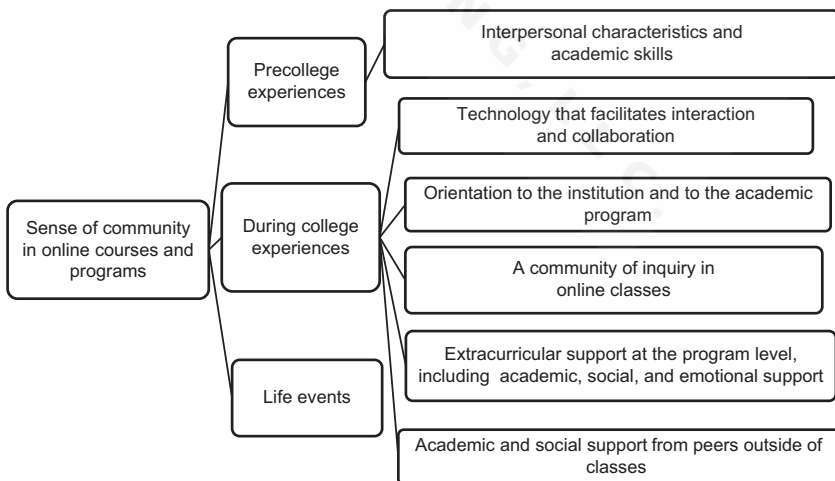
One distinct advantage of Rovai's model is that it looks at student experiences in online *programs*, rather than focusing on students' experiences in online courses. Given that 14% of undergraduate students and 30% of graduate students are enrolled exclusively in distance education courses (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), this distinction is helpful in understanding students' experiences. By considering online teaching and learning at the program level, educators and researchers can see how students' experiences both within and across courses impact their sense of community. Additionally, a program-level perspective helps individuals consider the impact of student support services on online students' sense of community.

Berry's Integrated Framework for Community in Online Courses and Programs

Both the COI framework and Rovai's theory of persistence in distance education programs offer great insight into the elements that shape online students' sense of community. More contemporary research has suggested that online students can engage in community-building in ways that can be invisible to researchers (Berry, 2019). Berry's integrated model for community in online courses and programs (see Figure 1.1) builds on other frameworks to highlight more contemporary experiences of students in online courses and programs. For example, the framework notes that in addition to connecting inside of virtual classrooms, students in online programs use a wide range of technology, including social and mobile media, to connect to peers (Berry, 2019). Students in online programs might create Facebook groups to connect with classmates and cohort-mates, and use mobile apps to create groups and text threads. In these groups, students can ask peers questions about assignments and give and receive encouragement. Given the role that social media plays in community formation more broadly, it is not surprising that online students find it to be an important space for creating and maintaining connections.

Berry's framework also notes that online students can and do connect offline. In some programs, online students might work with peers in-person, forming study groups on campus and in the larger community. Online students in some programs also socialize together in-person, attending sports events and participating in other group activities. This perspective on online

Figure 1.1. Berry's integrated framework for community in online courses and programs.



students disrupts the binary of students, even those in fully online programs, as being either fully online or fully face-to-face.

Finally, Berry's framework highlights the significance of the cocurriculum in shaping online students' experiences. Because of the binary thinking that students are either online or in-person, practitioners in online programs and scholars who research them have often failed to consider the role of the cocurriculum in supporting online students. However, research by Berry (2018a) notes that support services for online students, particularly in-person supports, can provide online students with vital connection points that can be beneficial throughout the duration of the online program. In one online program, students who met for an in-person orientation were able to build friendships with peers, even those who lived in other states. The in-person meeting was particularly helpful for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students, who were able to make connections with other Students of Color who may not have been in their courses but may have been enrolled in the same degree program. For students in some contexts, an in-person meeting, particularly when out of the state or out of the country, may not be feasible. However, some students may welcome the opportunity to travel to connect with peers. Administrators should survey their students to find out what types of in-person connections may be possible for their student body. Additionally, administrators can encourage and facilitate local and regional meet ups for online students, so that they can connect with peers that live nearby.

Cocurricular offerings for online students need not be fully online either. Hybrid and fully online services can provide vital support for distance learners. The point here is that online students need and want more support than simply classroom-based interactions. Online students benefit from the same engagement that in-person students benefit from, including academic, social, emotional, cultural and extracurricular support.

What Is Missing From Theories of Community in Online Courses and Programs? A Need for More Inclusive Frameworks

While Berry's integrated framework for community in online courses and programs offers a more expansive framework for understanding online community, it does not explicitly engage elements related to diversity, specifically inclusion and exclusion for underrepresented and nondominant students. This is reflective of larger gaps in research on online learning. Researchers have tended to view online students as a monolith, and many scholarly articles on the topic have failed to explore in detail the experiences of diverse students, particularly as they relate to issues of race and class. As a result, there is a dearth of evidence-based practices that focus specifically on these or

other areas related to diversity. This book lays the foundation for an expanded conversation about what diversity might look like in some online courses and programs. By taking an inclusive approach, researchers and practitioners can have a conversation about online teaching and learning that is at once broader and more specific to the experiences of historically marginalized and underrepresented students.

One way to do this is to move away from the term *diversity* as a catch-all term for nonwhite students. This book uses BIPOC to highlight racial/ethnic diversity. When addressing the experiences of minorities, the book uses the U.S. Department of Education's definition, which refers to *minorities* as people who are American Indian, Alaskan Native, Black (not of Hispanic origin), Hispanic (including persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Central or South American origin) and Pacific Islander.

Racial and ethnic diversity is not the only type of diversity considered in this book. In addition to considering the role of race in online learning, I consider the impact of gender, socioeconomic status, and ability and disability on the online learning experience. It is important for educators to note that these identities are not experienced separately or apart from each other. Legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1990) argues that identities can overlap, and that oppressions can overlap as well. Crenshaw uses the term *intersectionality* to note the ways in which overlapping spheres of oppression combine and constrain students' experiences in unique ways. For example, intersectionality is not just concerned with the fact that I am Black, female, and from a middle-class background, it is concerned with how racism, sexism, and classism work as interlocking forces of oppression to impact my life, constrain my choices, and cause disparate and potentially adverse outcomes in my life.

Intersectionality is a framework that is not often applied to explorations of online teaching and learning. There are many reasons for why this might be the case. The overwhelming whiteness and maleness of the field of technology and online learning could be one factor. Techno-optimism about the potential of technology to bring about radical social transformation for all may be another factor. Whatever the case, I join the chorus of so many others to argue that substantive change and lasting innovation in education require honesty about the impact of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and so many other oppressive "-isms" on the educational system. Researchers and practitioners must do more to consider the racialized experiences of BIPOC students, the gendered experiences of women and LGBTQ students, and the ableist experiences that some students with disabilities may encounter in online courses and programs. Social class is something that is also underexplored in the literature on online teaching and learning, including the experiences of low-income students, rural students, and students on tribal lands. While this

discussion serves as a starting point for critical conversations in these areas, more thorough and comprehensive frameworks are needed to address the wide range of student experiences and needs. Toward that end, this work takes a broader and more inclusive lens at exploring online teaching and learning than many of the perspectives that permeate popular scholarship. This lens allows practitioners to consider the perspectives of students that are not often included in online learning.

Practitioners who seek to help all students cultivate a sense of community will be deliberate and persistent about their work around inclusion. According to the Association of American Colleges & Universities (2021), *inclusion* is defined as “the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity.” This involves a recognition of individual and group differences, and an appreciation of similarities and differences as they relate to race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, religion, ability, and other identity characteristics. In an inclusive environment, the needs of historically marginalized and underrepresented people and groups are considered in every aspect of decision-making, informing both policy and practice. Further, in an inclusive environment, practitioners seek to identify and remove barriers to community, including discrimination and other forms of marginalization.

In order to move toward inclusion, practitioners must utilize equity-minded approaches. Figure 1.2 provides a high-level overview of equity-minded strategies that practitioners can incorporate into teaching, leading, and planning. According to Bensimon and Malcom (2012), an equity-minded approach considers the role of race, racism, and other forms of oppression in creating and maintaining inequality, both on an interpersonal level and on

Figure 1.2. An inclusive, equity-minded approach to online teaching.

1. Acknowledges that online learning is not a neutral space, and that the systematic, structural, and interpersonal oppression that is embedded in the broader society influences higher education
2. Explores how identity and identity-related oppression impact students' academic program
3. Includes the needs and experiences of underrepresented students in decision-making and planning
4. Considers structural issues that impact online learning, including access to computers and to high-speed internet
5. Recognizes the assets that underrepresented and historically marginalized students bring to higher education

a structural and systemic level. It involves directly engaging various forms of inequality and their antecedents and taking a critical lens toward manifestations of inequality in policy and practice. Further, Bensimon and Malcolm (2012) note that an equity-minded approach is fundamentally data driven. Often times, taking an equity-minded approach to teaching will require educators to gather their own institutional data about best practices, so that they can continually monitor what works in their unique contexts. Such a key point cannot be overlooked, even in a book like this. While strategies will be presented and considerations will be offered, the diversity of the higher education landscape means that there is no one size fits all approach. It is up to the reader to engage in critical reflection and systemic inquiry around the ideas offered, and to modify them to meet their unique context. An equity-minded approach, then, has an intentional connection between reflection and action. Bensimon and Malcolm (2012) note that an equity-minded approach behooves all educational stakeholders to take action in their respective capacities to promote change. The strategies outlined in this book will help educators and administrators take action-oriented steps to creating more inclusive online communities.

It is important to note that while an equity-minded approach recognizes structural barriers created by racism and other forms of oppression, it also bears in mind that deficits are often in systems and structures, not in students. An equity-minded approach recognizes that there are many assets that historically marginalized and underrepresented learners bring to academic space and seeks to shape teaching practices and institutional policies in ways that build upon these assets.

Diversity in Online Courses and Programs

Now that diversity, equity and inclusion have been broadly considered, it is important to explore some of the unique experiences that students from underrepresented, underserved and historically marginalized backgrounds may encounter in online courses and programs. The sections that follow will explore the role that class, race, sex, gender, sexual orientation and disability play in online courses and programs.

Low-Income, Rural, and Tribal Students

Online learning can present unique challenges for low-income students. Only 51% of households with incomes of \$25,000 or less have desktop or laptop computers, and 59% have internet access (Ryan, 2017). These numbers increase to 86% and 89% for households with income of \$50,000-99,999

and are in the 90th percentile for households with income of over \$100,000 (Ryan, 2017). Without access to the internet or computers, participating in online learning will be difficult.

Rural students and students living on tribal lands may also experience challenges with technology access. The PEW Research Center found that rural Americans have consistently lower levels of broadband adoption than Americans living in suburban or urban communities (Perrin, 2019). According to a 2019 report, 63% of rural Americans had access to home broadband, compared with 75% of Americans in urban communities and 79% in suburban communities. In addition, 69% of rural Americans reported access to a desktop or laptop computer at home, compared with 73% of urban Americans and 80% of suburban Americans. The digital divide between rural and suburban Americans reflects greater challenges in telecommunications infrastructure. Rural adults in both higher and lower income households report challenges in accessing high-speed internet. In the FCC's report on broadband access, approximately 26% of rural Americans and 32% of people living on tribal lands lived in places that did not meet the minimum threshold for high-speed internet, compared to less than 2% of Americans in urban areas (FCC, 2020). Several factors contribute to the disparities in access. Rugged terrain and harsh temperatures can make building and maintaining infrastructure difficult. Internet service providers may not find it economically beneficial to offer service in areas with lower population density.

Educational institutions can do much to address these gaps. For example, institutions can offer computers and hotspots to distance learners that cannot afford them. Educators must also recognize that these interventions may still present challenges for students living in rural areas or on tribal lands, as distance and transportation issues can make it difficult to access a college campus, and terrain and infrastructure challenges can result in weak connectivity. Addressing these larger systemic issues of technology access requires collaboration between postsecondary administrators, and government policy makers.

BIPOC in Online Courses and Programs

Students that have been historically marginalized in society face similar experiences of marginalization in higher education. Ribera et al., (2017) note that first year students experience peer belonging and institutional acceptance differently based on race and ethnicity. In their nationally representative study, African American and Latinx students had a significantly lower sense of belonging than white students. For BIPOC students, feelings of belonging to

an academic community can be situational and context specific. Historically marginalized students may feel included in some classes and not others. They may find some academic spaces and services (online and in person) to be supportive, while others may be hostile. Strayhorn (2012) notes that for BIPOC students, their assessments about sense of belonging are complex, and influenced by their interactions with a range of education stakeholders, including peers, faculty, and staff. Strayhorn notes that BIPOC students can have positive interactions with faculty, but feel isolated from peers, and vice versa. Guillermo-Wan et al., (2015) add that BIPOC students' feelings of belonging and community are influenced by their perception of campus racial climate as a whole. Toward that end, administrators who wish to ensure BIPOC student success must be mindful of these students' experiences in classes, as well as their experiences on campus, with extracurricular offerings, and with support services. Additionally, administrators should consider BIPOC students racialized experiences in online classrooms. Topics that deserve further attention include racist cyberbullying of online students and faculty, faculty management of microaggressions in the online classroom, and equity and inclusion in online courses.

Another way that educators can support historically minoritized students in online programs is to implement high impact practices like learning communities, faculty research partnerships, service learning and leadership opportunities. In face-to-face programs, these practices have been associated with increased feelings of belonging for Black and Latinx students (Ribera et al., 2017). Administrators in online programs would do well to consider which of these practices could be replicated at a distance, and what new practices could be deployed with BIPOC students' sense of belonging in mind. Administrators and staff should also consider how they can use institutional resources to support BIPOC students' unique needs as they relate to community.

Like all students, BIPOC students benefit from feelings of connection and social support. Identity-based peer networks can provide underrepresented students with an additional layer of support as well as space to receive encouragement, mentorship and share targeted resources (Patton & Harper, 2003). These networks can be particularly important for minoritized students who are in fields or at institutions where they are particularly underrepresented. One space that has historically helped college students create and maintain these networks has been cultural centers. Black Cultural Centers emerged on college campuses 50 years ago, and since then, cultural centers have emerged to support other racial and ethnic groups as well. These spaces can help students with racial identity development and support students in cultivating feelings of institutional membership and belonging. Hypolite (2020) notes that cultural centers can help connect

underrepresented students with campus support services. Hypolite (2020) argues that institutions can leverage the potential of support services to strategically coordinate support services for historically marginalized students. While cultural centers were initially developed to support in-person students, that does not mean they cannot support online students as well. Educators can connect online students to cultural centers and other campus supports, encouraging them to communicate with on-campus staff and find out about virtual programs that exist.

The work of supporting minoritized students goes beyond cultural centers. Educational leaders who wish to ensure that their communities are truly inclusive must also ensure that the broader campus is one that fosters a sense of belonging for all students, particularly those that are underrepresented or historically minoritized. While the role of safe spaces on campus cannot be overlooked, the racial climate of courses and classrooms as a whole plays a significant role in whether or not BIPOC students' feelings of community are supported or undermined (Hurtado et al., 2015). Faculty, staff, and administrators, including those who are not BIPOC, should be intentional about helping BIPOC students connect with networks of supportive people and services on and off campus.

BIPOC scholars are increasingly using the internet as a space where they can give and receive support to other Students of Color. There are numerous Twitter hashtags and social media profiles dedicated to amplifying the experiences of Students and Scholars of Color, and sharing resources about how to navigate the academy. Hashtags like #CiteASista, #FirstGenDocs and many others allow users to share their experiences with a global network of students from similar backgrounds. These hashtags can benefit users professionally and personally. Professionally, students might use these hashtags to connect with mentors and locate post graduate job opportunities. Personally, students might use these hashtags to find local meet ups, including study groups and social events. Students might also use these hashtags to organize against racial injustice on specific campuses. Such digital engagement can be beneficial for BIPOC students, especially for those who are at institutions where their population is small. Instructors and administrators should encourage online students to use social media as a tool for networking, mentorship and support.

Gender and Sex in the Online Classroom

Working, parenting, or caregiving women may be drawn to online programs for their flexibility (Berry, 2017b). Despite these benefits, online programs are not without their challenges for women. Chief among these challenges is the difficulty of balancing multiple roles. Women, even those

who are involved in partnerships, may find that gendered social expectations require them to take on the lion's share of childcare or domestic work. Familial and professional obligations may add to female students' stress, even in online programs (Müller, 2008). Female students can benefit greatly from being in programs where these multiple roles are recognized, and where school leaders provide resources and support around work life balance for women. Female students, particularly those engaged in mothering and caregiving, have found peer support from online colleagues to be helpful (Berry, 2017b; Müller, 2008). Having a sense of community can be a protective factor for these students, as it provides a space to receive support for shared challenges.

The experiences of sexual minority students specifically in online programs is a topic that is underexplored in the literature. While experiences of marginalization and harassment do not go away for these students in online courses, LGBTQ students may find the online space to provide a buffer from some of the micro and macro aggressions that occur in person. Instructors can create inclusive courses by displaying LGBTQ friendly iconography on their course pages and through virtual backgrounds, and by allowing students to utilize screen names and pronouns that reflect their gender identity.

Cyberbullying refers to "online exchanges where there is an intent to harm the recipient" (Faucher et al., 2014, p. 2). These exchanges can occur via email or via social media. While cyberbullying impacts students of all genders, it is more likely to impact women. Additionally, women are more likely to experience harassment that is often more severe, and causes greater emotional distress than the violence that men experience (Fox et al., 2015; Hess, 2017). In a survey of 1,925 Canadian university students, nearly one-quarter of female students reported experiencing cyberbullying over the course of one school year (Faucher et al., 2014). Females were more likely to experience cyberbullying by a friend or acquaintance at their university (13.6% vs 9.4%), while males were more likely to experience cyberbullying by someone they did not know (19.3% vs 12.2%). 2% of females and 1.85% of males in the study reported experiencing cyberbullying by a faculty member (including teaching assistants and tutors). Females cited gender as a primary reason for being cyberbullied. Victims of online harassment reported a loss of emotional security, decreased concentration and productivity, increased desire to drop out, and increased anxiety, depression, and suicidality.

The prevalence and the harms of cyberbullying suggest that faculty, administrators, and staff in online programs should take a proactive role in addressing this. In Faucher et al., (2014) study, students suggested that universities do more to create and model a respectful culture of online student

behavior, including clear anti-cyberbullying policies, create anonymous reporting systems for cyberbullying, quickly suspend or expel online harassers and provide counseling and support for victims.

It is important to note that cyberbullying impacts female faculty as well. Faucher et al., (2014) found that, of 1925 Canadian university students, 5.1% said they had engaged in cyberbullying, and 2% had bullied faculty members. Students who admitted to cyberbullying said that they did so because they did not like the faculty's "teaching style," or that they found the instructor to be a "bad professor." Some respondents expressed wanting to "hurt the faculty member" and tarnish their reputation. Female scholars who experience online harassment may be harassed by students, but they might also be victimized by disgruntled internet users. In addition to the high personal costs associated with navigating online harassment, including lost work time and legal fees, online harassment can have significant adverse impacts on female scholars' mental health.

Cyberbullying does not impact all women in the same ways. Citing Veletsianos and Kimmons (2016), Veletsianos et al. (2018, p. 4,690) wrote that "researchers often assume that scholars' online participation is egalitarian, and often suggest that scholars' online experiences are the same regardless of race, religion, ethnic origin, ability, age, and so on." However, for female scholars who have other underrepresented identities, online harassment can be different than it is for white scholars who experience online harassment. Cottom (2015) writes about the ways in which racism and sexism influence the type of online harassment she has received as a publicly engaged scholar. Cottom reflects on how the focus of the harassment she has endured online as a Black woman has not been so much around sexual violence, but about "putting her in her place," questioning the legitimacy of her work, and suggesting that her intelligence is limited. She cites examples of other Black women scholars who have experienced online, and notes that many of the attacks focus on contacting these scholars' employers to say that they have no place in the academy. Cottom (2015) notes that, like all women, Black women scholars who are cyberbullied are subject to threats of violence, but these threats also focus on harming the women at their workplace, presumably to further highlight their lack of belonging there (Cottom, 2015).

Sexual minority students also experience cyberbullying at rates that are higher than their heterosexual peers. Walker (2015)'s study found that LGBTQ students were more likely to receive unwanted inappropriate and pornographic messages, have personal information shared without their consent or have sexual behaviors and preferences outed than their heterosexual peers.

Students With Disabilities in Online Courses and Programs

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in four adults in the United States has some type of disability (CDC, 2020). These 61 million individuals experience a wide range of disabilities, including things that impact mobility, cognition, hearing and vision. Disabilities can also include mental, emotional, and psychiatric conditions. Postsecondary students also live with a range of disabilities. According to NCES data, 19% percent of undergraduates and 11.9% of graduate students reported having a disability (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). According to the NCES, 20.8% of the undergraduate students who reported having disabilities were white, 17.2% are Black, 18.3% were Hispanic, 15.2% were Asian, 23.6% Pacific Islander, 27.8% American Indian Alaska Native. Reported disability rates were higher among veteran students than nonveteran students (25/8% vs 19.1% for undergraduates and 17.1% vs 11.6% for graduate students).

Students with disabilities may experience many challenges in higher education. Colleges and universities are required by federal law to ensure that facilities and to academic content be accessible to all students. However, college students still experience ableism in higher education. Examples of ableism include invasive questions about ones' disability, utilizing learning materials that are inaccessible in course sessions, assuming that people are faking disabilities because they do not appear visible, and making derogatory remarks related to disability. Instructors and administrators can support students with disabilities by ensuring that all aspects of the online program are accessible, and that accommodations are made in a swift and supportive manner. Universities should facilitate collaboration between faculty and instructional designers to ensure that course materials meet a wide range of needs.

Peña et al., (2016) note that the experience of disability is not a monolithic one. Some students may view their disability as the most prominent characteristic of their identity, and it may be the most prominent factor informing their daily experiences, including those on campus, as well as their interpersonal and extracurricular experiences. Other students might feel that other aspects of their identity are more personally salient than their disability. It is important to note that an individual's experience of their own disability may vary over time and depending on the context (Peña et al., 2016) Disability also intersects with multiple social identities including race, gender and class, and these social categorizations can impact the perception, diagnosis and support for people with disabilities whose identities transverse multiple categories (Mitchell, 2006; Peña et al., 2016). Because disability

intersects with other identities, individuals with disabilities can experience different, overlapping forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, and classism (Annamma et al., 2018).

Disability critical race theory (DisCrit) scholars encourage educators to be mindful of the ways in which matrices of oppression can intersect on college campuses, manifesting as erasure, exclusion, marginalization and harassment of BIPOC students with disabilities. For example, using the framework of #disabilitysowhite, a social media dialogue and movement that emerged in 2016, Fovet (2020) calls out some examples of the ways in which traditional disability services might overlook BIPOC students. Examples of erasure include a lack of visual representation of BIPOC students in disability service outreach materials and a lack of nonwhite disability support professionals on certain campuses. Fovet (2020) also explores the importance of intersectional and culturally relevant disability support outreach and delivery methods. Because BIPOC and international students may have different beliefs and experiences around disability disclosure, they may not utilize support services in the same way as their white peers (Fovet, 2020). Administrators, faculty and support staff must adopt an approach to service delivery that is culturally and contextually relevant. Additionally, scholars and practitioners have rightfully pointed out that the work of disability support is not strictly the province of disability support services. Abes and Wallace (2018) write that educators must resist manifestations of ableism in courses and classrooms by moving from accommodation to inclusion of students with disabilities. Inclusive practice requires educators to see the intersectional experiences of students with disabilities, to view students with disabilities as individuals and as members of multiple social groups, and to actively resist the ableism that permeates the dominant culture. (Abes & Wallace, 2018).

Strategies for Creating Community for Historically Marginalized and Underrepresented Students

Figure 1.3 synthesizes the strategies that have emerged in this chapter. While the remainder of the book will focus on cultivating community more broadly, it is important early on to establish some of the unique needs that underrepresented and historically minoritized students have in online courses and programs, and offer suggestions for how online faculty, staff, and administrators can meet these needs. These strategies promote community in several ways. First, they ensure that all students have access to the prerequisite technologies needed to engage in learning. Second, they ensure that instructional materials and learning spaces are accessible to all students, particularly those with disabilities. Third, they ensure that courses and programs are

Figure 1.3. Strategies for creating community for historically marginalized and underrepresented students.

Strategies for Promoting Community for Low-Income Students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that all students have access to prerequisite hardware and software needed for full academic participation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize spaces like computer labs and lounges to increase on-campus access to computers and to the internet
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make students aware of off-campus spaces where they can use internet for free or for a low cost
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide computers and hot spots for students in need
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider creating programs to help students pay for utilities or connecting students to pre-existing local programs that offer such support
Strategies for Promoting Community for BIPOC Students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement high-impact practices associated with increasing students’ sense of belonging, including identity or affinity-based learning communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create opportunities for faculty collaboration outside of the classroom, such as student-faculty research opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect online students to in-person support, such as cultural centers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop parallel, identity-based support networks for online students
Strategies for Promoting Community for Women and Sexual Minorities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize the unique needs of students in caregiving roles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer training and bystander intervention support for LGBTQIA allies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop policies around clear cyberbullying, including suspension and expulsion of harassers and anonymous reporting systems for victims
Strategies for Promoting Community for Students with Disabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand that a disability is only one aspect of a students’ experience • Avoid overarching narratives of students’ experiences with disability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that faculty and staff are aware of federal and campus accessibility policies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that teaching practices promote accessibility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide faculty with training in universal design for learning and other practices that promote accessibility

developing experiences that promote the core characteristics of community, including membership, belonging, trust, social support, equity and inclusion. Finally, they reduce instances of marginalization, which are antithetical to community.

Considerations for Administrators, Instructional Designers, Faculty Developers, and Support Staff

- View online students' experiences from both the classroom level and the program level.
- Be mindful of the ways in which student support services and extracurricular experiences can impact online students. Connect online students with on-campus experiences. If no extracurricular offerings exist for online students, create them.
- Take an intersectional approach to understanding students' experiences. Regularly evaluate program components via syllabi and curriculum audits, evaluations of teaching strategy, and a review of instructional materials to ensure that courses are culturally relevant and meet the needs of a diverse set of students.
- Develop services and offerings specifically for BIPOC students and other historically minoritized students.
- Collect data on the racial climate of the online program.

Conclusion

Communities are dynamic, engaging learning spaces where students engage in shared collaboration around learning goals. Core components of community include membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, shared emotional connection, sense of belonging and connectedness. For a classroom or program to truly become a community, equity and inclusion must be cultivated as well. The chapters that follow explore community development for all students.