Building a Sense of Community in Undergraduate Psychology Departments

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Imagine you are a student sitting among 300 others in your psychology class. You look around and wonder, "How am I going to fit in? Will I ever make friends in this department? Will my professors ever know my name?"

Although feelings of disconnectedness are common among students, these experiences do not have to occur. Building a sense of community within a department can accomplish a great deal: decrease the number of students who feel lost; ameliorate students' feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness; and improve personal growth, motivation, and retention rates (Bailey, Bauman, & Lata, 1998; Cartland, Ruch-Ross, & Henry, 2003; Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996). In addition, students who feel connected to their department exhibit a decline in classroom disruptiveness and an increase in remorse when they are not prepared for class (Royal & Rossi, 1996). Further, a well-developed sense of community provides an incentive for alumni to recommend their department to high school students and provide psychological, social, and economic support for the institution (Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996). Overall, a strong sense of community within a department improves the quality of the educational experience. Moreover, it is enjoyable to teach in a department in which faculty, staff, and students are connected.

Practical Ideas on Community Building Within Psychology Departments
Identify Social Leaders. The first step in increasing the sense of community and cohesiveness in a department is to enlist the help of social leaders. The mere presence of strong social leaders increases feelings of community (Zaff & Devlin, 1998). Social leaders are able to identify ways to promote community and inspire others to participate in carrying out ideas (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000). Moreover, social leaders persuade others that investing energy in a specific cause (i.e., a psychology department) is akin to investing in oneself (Fiol, Harris, & House, 1999).

Faculty should approach engaged and outgoing students in the classroom to see if they are interested in taking on leadership roles. In addition, faculty can make announcements in classes and post fliers for recruitment; leaders know who they are and will be drawn to the opportunity. It is important that these student leaders have at least one faculty member who can support them and act as a liaison between faculty and students.

Provide Common Physical Space. Providing an area where students can interact with each other and with faculty facilitates community building (Appleby, 2000). Ideally, physical space should be designated as a student lounge. Although some students will use this space for schoolwork, the space also should afford students the opportunity to relax and engage socially. Include comfortable furniture, computers, coffee maker, refrigerator, books and other resource materials, and anything else that makes the space inviting. Students will take ownership of the space if they decorate it. Our student lounge, for example, has posters of the anatomy of a neuron and a portrait of Sigmund Freud. The student lounge provides a useful place to post announcements and photographs of department events. If it is not feasible

for the department to offer building space, a common area may involve a picnic area or space in a hallway. What matters most is that students have a place to claim as their own.

Promote Programs that Emphasize Collaboration in Support of Academic and Career Success. Students should feel that in joining a department they are joining a community that will help them succeed. Departments should emphasize to students that collaboration and interaction facilitate academic success and that psychological science is a community endeavor. Hosting regularly scheduled activities — such as those listed below — promotes community.

Have current students maintain an advice book (hard copy or online) for new students on how to succeed in the major. Some suggestions for topics are: study techniques for specific classes, lists of helpful resources for content areas (e.g., statistics tutorials on the Web), writing and APA style tips, and general study aids.

- Host career fairs and graduate school information presentations. These events should occur every semester in order to reach students in varying stages of their educational career. They should be made by a variety of individuals: successful alumni, directors of graduate programs, local faculty, current students, and professionals in the field.
- Support student clubs and national honor societies such as a local Psi Chi chapter, research club, psychology club, or journal club. Student clubs are one of the most successful avenues to building a sense of community. Department chairs should appoint energetic, knowledgeable, and approachable faculty to seek out institutional support (e.g., club space, funding), act as advisors (for ideas on promoting active student clubs see Giordano, Hammer, & Lovell, 2004).
- Host an annual undergraduate conference where students can present their research projects. Include a keynote speaker and a celebratory luncheon to recognize the presenters. Schedule this event during class time and cancel regularly scheduled classes to promote attendance. Attendance of students who are not presenting supports those who are presenting. It also allows non-presenters a no-risk view of a conference, thereby encouraging future participation.
- Provide opportunities for students to work closely with faculty mentors. Students can serve as teaching assistants (TAs) and research assistants (RAs) (see Davis, 1999). Build these experiences into the departmental curriculum so students can earn college credits for serving in these roles.

Create Celebratory Rituals that Mark Achievement. Ceremonies and rituals are an important part of developing group cohesiveness (Appleby, 2000; Mullis & Fincher, 1996; Taub, 1998;), as they initiate students into a community and create a sense of pride in membership. In fact, students on campuses that do not offer unique rituals are more likely to complain that they a lack of sense of community (Manning, 1994). Ceremonies and rituals also provide vivid memories that help sustain a feeling of belonging. There are several traditions and ceremonies that departments might adopt.

- A Psi Chi induction ceremony allows faculty and students to celebrate student academic achievements. A strong faculty presence is important to communicate that the department values this event. Encourage students to invite family members and friends so that faculty and other students better understand who students are.
- An annual ceremony acknowledges student and faculty achievements. Highlight psychology related internships, research presentations, academic awards, and service awards. To promote

appropriate goals to first and second-year students, encourage underclassmen to attend. Hold a luncheon for research assistants, teaching assistants, and faculty mentors to celebrate and discuss their collaborative work. Host a commencement party to recognize graduating majors.

To foster a departmental sense of community, these rituals should be public and include as many members as possible. For example, sophomore and junior psychology majors could be in charge of organizing the commencement party.

Host Purely Social Events. Social events and group recreation lead to an increased sense of community.

- Create a student/faculty intramural team, or have an annual recreational event (e.g. softball or volleyball). Our department recently held its first annual faculty versus student bowling tournament, and it was a huge success. For several weeks after the competition students bragged about beating faculty, which has sparked interest in planning similar events.
- Organize social events that occur in conjunction with a conference, a seasonal holiday, or the beginning or end of a semester. For example, host an end-of-the year picnic or holiday party.
- Encourage faculty to host potlucks at their homes or participate in on-campus ones. One possibility is to host an annual progressive dinner where faculty members serve various parts of the meal at their respective homes or in different classrooms on campus (e.g., appetizers at one location, salad at another). It might be fun to have a themed dinner: "An evening in Vienna" as a tribute to Freud or "Beyond Borscht" to celebrate Pavlov's contributions.
- Develop a psychology social group that meets bimonthly for social events (e.g., social hours, bowling). Give your group a catchy name. One department has a group called PITFALL (Psychologists In Training For A Life of Learning). Invite faculty to attend.

Collect, Maintain, and Display Artifacts of the Community. Group cohesiveness increases when symbolic representation of the group identity is physically displayed (Elsbach, 2004). Departments should display symbols that present who they are and what they value.

- Create a physical and/or virtual space devoted to student achievements. For example, design a "Wall of Scholars" that acknowledges winners of department awards and display photos of student poster presentations and papers on the departmental Web site.
- Produce a department newsletter that highlights events and achievements. Involve student organizations in its creation or recruit an editorial board of faculty and students.
- Take pictures at department events and post them on the department Web site and on the department walls. Maintain a physical or virtual scrapbook so new students understand that departmental involvement is part of the department's culture.
- Display pictures of faculty in a central location to promote familiarity. To increase perceptions of faculty accessibility consider posting a short biography with each photograph that describes the faculty member's specialty and his or her career path.

Lessons Learned
We cannot be certain which ideas will work to build a sense of community in your department; however, common pitfalls exist that will almost assuredly hinder your attempts. Below are some lessons that our department and others have learned over the years.

- A lack of faculty involvement guarantees failure. Although student leaders play a large role in developing a sense of community, their efforts must be reinforced with faculty encouragement, guidance, support, and recognition. Reward faculty involvement by including this type of departmental service as part of faculty evaluations.
- Activities should be directly relevant to students. We have included ideas that should be relevant to most undergraduate students; however, departments should tailor activities to meet the interests of their particular student population.
- To maximize attendance at any event, publicize it early and often. Use multiple media, including in-class announcements, posters and flyers, mass mailings, email, Web sites, and discussion lists.
- Beware of cliques. The goal is to foster a sense of departmental community, however some of the ideas (e.g., a research club and Psi Chi) can lead to the development of smaller cliques of students. Be vigilant of subgroups, and encourage students to be inclusive of peers. Some departments have instituted a policy of revolving leadership, where officers in a research club or Psi Chi can only serve a single semester or year, thereby minimizing the chances of a small cadre of students monopolizing a club.

Challenges to Consider
Although there are a number of ways to promote a sense of community within a Psychology department, there also are challenges and obstacles.

Number of Psychology Majors and Students. There is probably a minimum size below which a department does not have enough students to implement many of the ideas presented. Smaller departments may need to combine with related departments for some events and/or be selective in choosing which ideas to implement.

Institution Type. More than 80 percent of U.S. college students are commuters (students who do not live in campus dorms) (Horn & Berktold, 1998). Commuter campuses face the challenge of competing with other aspects of their students' lives. Many commuter students are "non-traditional," holding full-time jobs and raising families. Although they tend to have hectic schedules, many still want to feel connected to their learning environment (Orlando, 2000; Taub, 1998). Departments have a responsibility to promote a sense of community with this population by implementing programs that fit their varying schedules. For example, offer events that repeat at morning, afternoon and evening times.

Residential campuses face other concerns. One problem is competition from other communities on campus such as Greek groups and sports teams. Departments on these campuses will need to implement programs that appeal to their students and provide opportunities not available through other groups.

Diversity. College student populations are becoming more and more diverse (Boyer, 1990). This diversity is a challenge to a sense of community because students of various races, ethnicities, ages, socioeconomic statuses, and sexual orientations have varying needs. In addition, prejudice can hinder community building. Education and information regarding the diversity of the student population should be included in efforts to promote community.

Influence of Technology. The increase in dependence on technology creates an additional barrier to promoting community. Students increasingly replace face-to-face interactions with online communication, allowing themselves to "disengage physically and psychologically from campus

community" (Taub, 1998, p. 414). Departments should be aware of the technological habits of their students and utilize them in building communities.

Ethics. Ethical boundaries between faculty and students should be monitored. Both parties need to be aware of the general expectations of their behavior. When faculty are serving in multiple roles — such as instructor, evaluator, sponsor, mentor, or even teammate — ethical issues may arise. Faculty members need to maintain their multiple roles with integrity, being careful not to use their status in a coercive manner or allow personal relationships to contaminate professional decisions. In turn, students need to respect the ethical boundaries that faculty face. Awareness of these issues and open and frank discussions between faculty and students will go a long way towards avoiding problems.

Assessment of Community Building

To maintain a strong sense of community, departments need strategies to detect and combat entropy. Regular assessment of community building efforts is crucial; it reveals the present sense of community and also signals that building a sense of community is a priority.

- Solicit student and faculty input through informal conversations and suggestion boxes.
- Use a formal assessment instrument to measure department-level attachment. To determine how best to focus efforts, survey classes of all levels. Junior and senior level students may feel connected to the department, freshman and sophomore less so.

If assessments demonstrate a need for increased effort — experiment! Implement some of our suggestions or contact colleagues from other departments to learn about strategies that have worked for them. Try new ideas; if they flop, seek feedback and try again. A small energetic corps can create the momentum that invites others to become invested in building and maintaining a strong sense of community.

Conclusion

Building a sense of community within a psychology department is challenging yet immensely beneficial. Begin by implementing just one or two of the suggested ideas and monitor their success. Identification of social leaders and development of a physical space for students are good places to begin. A few changes will make a big difference in the overall feel of the department. In addition to increased student achievements and positive regard for the department, being a part of a department with a strong sense of community is rewarding for all involved.

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