Cultivating a Holistic, Student-Centered Learning Culture

Classroom practices that center dignity, agency, and community so learning becomes mutual transformation.

In a holistic, student-centered environment, instruction is flexible and collaborative, and students take an active role in shaping their own education. That culture does not emerge automatically in a carceral setting. It has to be deliberately built, centering dignity and agency to support both academic success and transformation beyond the classroom.

KEY CONCEPTS

1 Students arrive already knowing things that matter

Encourage students by uplifting what they already know as important and valuable, not just what they are learning in class. Their existing knowledge is part of the curriculum, not an obstacle to it.

2 Clarity is empowering

Name what is going on and why things work the way they do. Share the goal openly: not only learning the content, but participating in an opportunity for mutual transformation together.

3 Lower the hierarchy

Faculty and students learn and construct together. The community of learning is not specific to students; it includes everyone in the room.

4 Predictability alleviates stress

When students always know what to expect, such as a validated, strengths-based assessment built into every session, that predictability itself helps relieve stress.

5 A learning culture requires protection

A culture of learning is collaborative, inquisitive, and ongoing. Sustaining it takes consistent planning, communication, and protection by faculty, administrators, students, and stakeholders alike.

WHAT A HOLISTIC CULTURE LOOKS LIKE

- Flexible, collaborative instruction
- Students shaping their own educational journeys
- Critical and creative thinking with personal growth
- Inclusive, responsive, creative, adaptable programming
- Learning culture extending beyond the classroom
- Faculty learning alongside students

STRATEGIES YOU CAN USE

Open every class with a question of the day

Make it a fun, discussion-based question connected to the day's lesson or chapter. It sets a welcoming tone, opens discussion, and helps you learn names.

Use note cards, and shuffle them

Have students fill out note cards at the start of the semester with the name they prefer. Use the cards to take roll and call on people, mixing the order so it is never the same twice.

Name what is going on

Tell students why the class works the way it does, and that the goal is mutual transformation, not just content. That clarity is itself empowering.

Build in a predictable strengths-based practice

Always include a validated, strengths-based assessment so students know what to expect when you walk in the room. Knowing what the session will focus on helps alleviate stress.

QUICK CHECKLIST

- ☐ Ask students their preferred names and use them
- ☐ Tie each opening question to the day's lesson
- ☐ Vary the order in which you call on students
- ☐ Tell students why the class works the way it does
- ☐ Include a strengths-based practice every session
- ☐ Plan and protect the learning culture with all stakeholders

KEY TERMS

Holistic learning environment • Flexible, collaborative instruction fostering critical and creative thinking and personal growth.

Strengths-based assessment • A validated tool focused on students' strengths rather than deficits.

Mutual transformation • Faculty and students learning and changing together, beyond content mastery.

Learning community • An ongoing, collaborative culture shared by students, faculty, administrators, and stakeholders.