



# What We Wish Professors Knew: A Practical Guide for Course Design

Blossoming from the  
brilliant insights of  
John Jay College  
PASS student leaders,  
Mia, Wendy,  
Yexayra, and Aleena

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## Classrooms as worldbuilding

What kind of worlds are we building based on how we are co-designing our classrooms with our students? This workbook is an invitation to for us to dream up new ways, or celebrate the ways we are already integrating student-centered approaches into our course planning. Drawing from the authentic experiences shared by PASS (psychology peer academic support system) student leaders, it offers practical strategies to foster connection, recognize students as whole people, and create safe, brave, and kind learning environments.

"By fostering a more compassionate environment, we can build an educational structure and a culture that feels empowering for students and professors. Let's commit to embracing discomfort, dismantling assumptions, and building a supportive environment that uplifts every voice." - Wendy



## Part 1: Building Student-Faculty Connection & Accessibility

Inspired by Yexayra's  
insights



## Reflection Questions

- What aspects of your academic/professional journey might inspire your students?
- What barriers might prevent students from approaching you for guidance?
- How accessible are you beyond scheduled office hours?



## Practical Strategies



### Make Your Journey Visible

- Add a personal academic journey section to your syllabus
- Share relevant struggles/challenges you faced as a student
- Discuss your path to your field of expertise in early class sessions

### Create Multiple Access Points

- Offer varied office hours (including virtual options)
- Create a system for students to request brief appointments
- Consider a rotating "coffee chat" schedule for informal conversations



### Be a Guide, Not Just an Evaluator

- Schedule at least one required individual check-in with each student
- Create low-stakes opportunities for students to receive feedback
- Include discussion of career pathways and graduate opportunities

# Course Design Worksheet: Connection & Accessibility



Week	Connection Strategy	Implementation Plan
1	Example: Share your academic journey and why you chose this field	During introduction, show photos from your undergraduate years
2-3		
4-5		
midterm		
7-8		
9-10		
11-12		
Final weeks		





## Part 2: Recognizing Students as Whole People

Inspired by Mia's  
insights



## Reflection Questions

- What external factors might affect your students' engagement and performance?
- How do you currently accommodate the diverse life circumstances of your students?
- What assumptions might you make about student behavior without considering their full context?



## Practical Strategies



### Acknowledge External Realities

- Include a "life happens" policy in your syllabus
- Create flexible assignment submission options
- Discuss the impact of current events when relevant

### Build Flexibility into Course Structure

- Offer assignment options that accommodate different schedules and strengths
- Drop the lowest quiz/assignment grade
- Create buffer time in the course schedule for unexpected events



### Check the Temperature



- Implement regular, brief check-ins about how students are doing
- Use anonymous polling or feedback mechanisms
- Acknowledge when external events might be affecting student focus

# Course Design Worksheet: Seeing the Whole Student



Current policy	Potential Barriers	Modification for Flexibility
<p>Example: Late assignments penalized 10% per day</p>	<p>Students with unpredictable work schedules or caregiving responsibilities</p>	<p>Implement a "flexibility token" system where students can extend one deadline per term without penalty</p>
<p>Attendance policy</p>		
<p>Participation requirements</p>		
<p>Assignment structure</p>		
<p>Office hour accessibility</p>		



# Course Design Worksheet: Seeing the Whole Student

May your course schedule against potential external factors.



Month	Academic Pressure Points	Potential External Factors	Course Adjustments
September	Adjustment to new semester	Work schedules changing with fall season	Implement a "flexibility token" system where students can extend one deadline per term without penalty
October	Midterm convergence		
November	Research paper deadlines	Holidays, family obligations	
December	Finals preparation	End-of-year work demands, holiday stress	





## Part 3: Creating Brave and Kind Learning Spaces

Inspired by  
Aleena's insights



## Reflection Questions

- What makes a classroom feel "safe" for intellectual risk-taking?
- How do you navigate difficult conversations while respecting student identities?
- What strategies help ensure all voices are heard and valued?



## Practical Strategies



### Establish Clear Communication Guidelines

- Co-create discussion norms with students
- Develop protocols for addressing sensitive topics
- Distinguish between debating ideas vs. debating identities

### Diversify Participation Structures

- Implement think-pair-share before full class discussions
- Use written reflection alongside verbal participation
- Create small group spaces for initial exploration of ideas



### Model Intellectual Humility



- Acknowledge the limits of your own knowledge
- Invite different perspectives on course material
- Demonstrate how to change your mind based on new information

# Course Design Worksheet: Creating Brave Learning Spaces



Topic Type	Potential Sensitivities	Discussion Structure	Support Mechanisms for Brave Conversations
Example: criminal justice statistics by demographic	Students from affected communities may feel their experiences are being reduced to data points	Begin with acknowledging limitations of data; use small groups for initial discussions	Provide multiple ways to participate; offer follow-up opportunities





## Integration Planner

Use this section to bring together insights from all three areas into your comprehensive course design.





Key student insights to incorporate:

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## Course Elements to Revise

- Syllabus:
  -
- Assessment Structure:
  -
- Office Hours/Availability:
  -
- Class Activities:
  -
- Content Delivery:

## Implementation Timeline

- Before semester begins:
  -
- First two weeks:
  -
- Mid-semester check:
  -
- End-of-semester:



## The symposium that led to this workshop...

On February 28th, four students from our PASS (Psychology Peer Academic Success Support) program - Wendy Larios-Nava, Mia Ramos, Aleena Uddin, and Yexayra Cabrera Martinez - represented John Jay College at Caldwell University's Social Justice Symposium. Their presentation, which focused on student experiences in higher education, was warmly received by an audience of approximately 50 educators and students. Following the presentation, the symposium organizers personally approached our students to share the exceptional feedback they had already received about our students' powerful insights.

Below are some of their reflections from their presentations. They offer thoughtful perspective on the student experience that might complement our ongoing conversations about pedagogical practices. Below are some highlights from their presentation, in their own words:

### On Being Seen as a Complete Person in the Classroom

"I cannot see someone stripped from their human rights and expect me to go on about my day. That's not who I am... I felt like my voice wasn't important. And from PASS, where I've been almost two years now, my voice has always been important. As a minority, as a woman, my voice has always been pushed to the higher horizons."

"The things that are going on outside of the classroom, that are going on politically and just in terms of human rights, they affect how students participate. They affect how engaged students are. It affects whether they finish their assignments... Sometimes the classroom is a space where everything that's happening in the outside world is inescapable."

### On Mental Health and Showing Up

"I have PTSD. PTSD is not really something that people have found a cure to... Struggling for me in college is probably rougher than my peers. For me, some days are hard. And my professors appreciate the attendance, me showing up in the room, but I don't think they realize that just me showing up is a lot. It takes a lot of me."



"I want my professors to understand that sometimes there are moments when students are stepping into the classroom and they're fully willing and fully able to separate what's going on in their personal lives... But sometimes the classroom is a space where everything that's happening in the outside world is inescapable... so I think as students we really just want to emphasize to give us grace."

#### On Classroom Discussions and Safety

"Let us have the struggle of engaging in a productive conversation and not in an emotional targeted one... We cannot debate someone's humanity. My humanity."

"Having difficult conversations is very difficult and we understand that professors might be afraid of having these discussions because they don't want anyone to get offended. But I think we can all recognize that these discussions have to happen and they're important to happen."

#### On Feeling Academically Inadequate

"I was worried I wouldn't fit in. I was worried that I wasn't smart enough to be among my peers... As I sit in lectures and a lot of concepts are being thrown at me and they're very detailed and very nuanced, sometimes I struggle with comprehending it all at once. And sometimes I also struggle

with asking questions to my professors. I fear that if I say, 'Hey, I need to slow down,' I'm afraid that the professor will think, 'Wow, she's just really not getting it.'"

"None of my parents finished high school and I obviously want to go to grad school, want to get my PhD. I finally found something that I have passion for, but in the classroom it feels like the professor is lecturing and it's cool and everything... but it's incredibly hard to not be able to ask about certain things like grad school. What's that like? What kind of connections do I have to make?"



## On Creating Community and Mentorship

"PASS has definitely helped me realize that I can step into my own person. I don't have to be one person every single day for the rest of my life. I can choose what shoes to wear. I can choose where I want to go."

"That's the peer success that I want - them helping me get to where I want to be because they know I will have their back when they want to go somewhere."

"I joined PASS where I met a community of loving girls who told me that I'm not the idiot, he's [my professor who discounted my experiences as a Muslim student] the idiot."

Student Reflections on Teaching Approaches  
Our students thoughtfully offered several observations about teaching practices that have meaningfully supported their learning:

### 1. Creating space for difficult conversations with respect:

"We understand that professors might be afraid of having these discussions because they don't want anyone to get offended. But I think we can all recognize that these discussions have to happen and they're important."

"When he suggested that the male student needed to be protected from the potential backlash, it almost felt like female students in the classroom were being demonized... which is a stereotype for women is that we overreact."

### 1. Supporting first-generation student

"Let us have the struggle of engaging in a productive conversation and not in an emotionally targeted one... We cannot debate someone's humanity. My humanity."

### • Acknowledging that life circumstances affect learning:

"The things that are going on outside of the classroom, that are going on politically and just in terms of human rights, they affect how students participate. They affect how engaged students are... we can't step inside of a classroom and kind of ignore everything that's going on."

"When I return to school and sit in class, I find it difficult to separate myself from the reality of [my father's] illness... sometimes the classroom is a space where everything that's happening in the outside world is inescapable."



### 1. Supporting first-generation student journeys:

"I'm also a first generation college student and a lot of the time I feel pretty incompetent and like there's not a lot of space for me in the classroom... I want to go to grad school, want to get my PhD. I finally found something that I have passion for, but it's incredibly hard to not be able to ask about certain things like grad school."

"A lot of professors acknowledge that speaking out and participation is difficult, but I feel that as the semester goes on, a lot of this isn't reinforced. There's no consistent reassurance..."

"It's important to acknowledge in the diversity of your classroom that certain students might not necessarily know anything about their field at all and all they know is that they love it... I'm still learning about the field itself."

### 1. Balancing evaluation with inspiration:

"The performance-based environment that we all know very well, which is based on just grades and evaluation, sometimes can take away from the joy of learning, the joy in understanding and thinking critically about things."

"It accelerates your joy for the field that you're in... I don't believe that our field deserves to be cold or hyper-independent. I think that we can create a culture that fosters connection."

### • Mentoring alongside teaching:

"It's that bumping heads that we need with professors and students where we come at one where I can tell them my pushback and they can accept it and guide me, not tell me right from wrong... I want to hear how can I get to where I want to be - guide, don't just be my professor, be my sherpa."

The students concluded with this thoughtful reflection: "By fostering a more compassionate environment, we can build an educational structure and a culture that feels empowering for students and professors. Let's commit to embracing discomfort, dismantling assumptions, and building a supportive environment that uplifts every voice."





Thank you for worldbuilding  
with us!

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