

Cultivating Community through Student Engagement

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This presentation will detail the development of a series of student engagement opportunities that were designed to increase student sense of belonging by building community and creating connections for first-year engineering students. Student sense of belonging to a department or program is positively associated with student motivation, self-worth, and academic success. A recent survey of engineering and design students at ABC university showed that pre-major students, people of color, and non-male identifying students have a significantly lower sense of belonging in the department than their counterparts. With a focus on increasing belonging through engagement, the department created a peer support and engagement program that aims to connect students across disciplines and build social networks for engineering students. This new student-led program, called the Student Engagement Liaison (SEL) program, uses the department makerspace to host a variety of engagement activities including non-technical workshops, DIY themed events, and discussions centered around topics related to inclusion and equity. Program activities are designed to appeal to pre-major students, are open to students of all ability levels, and require no prior experience with tools, equipment, or the makerspace. The SEL team, which consists of major-level students, designs and creates activities that provide opportunities for first year students to connect in an informal learning environment allowing them to focus on building relationships with their peers rather than on developing technical proficiencies. The activities and events are designed to encourage the development of basic skills, create shared experiences in the department makerspace, and to provide opportunities for students to connect with one another. Emphasis is placed on the development of an inclusive learning environment with a focus on providing opportunities for first year students to work in department spaces and to connect with the larger community of students. The authors will share details related to the events themselves along with their personal reflections on the challenges and successes of creating student engagement opportunities. In addition, the authors will share how they developed and executed accessible and inclusive events designed for students of varying ability levels with diverse interests. By creating and hosting activities designed to support, connect, and engage all students, the SEL team aims to increase students' sense of belonging and connectedness in engineering program, with emphasis on supporting the first-year students.