

Leveraging Positive Relationships to Cultivate Student Motivation

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Introduction & Need for LCT Strategy

Over the past decade, education at all levels has faced a paradox. Despite unprecedented access to engaging digital content, innovative pedagogical frameworks, and well-intentioned interventions, student motivation, particularly among adolescents from under-resourced backgrounds, has declined. The post-COVID-19 landscape has intensified these concerns. Eighty percent of educators believed the pandemic had reduced students' willingness to put forth academic effort, while approximately one-third described students in their schools as unmotivated (Prothero, 2023). Motivation is one of the greatest challenges college students face in higher education. Sustained motivation among college students is exacerbated among students with diverse experiences and changing educational environments (Mirzaei et al., 2025). Eighty-two percent of students expressed hopelessness about their future compared to 69% in 2020 (Prothero, 2023), which is connected to personal relationships with others.

Connection to Literature

Although students benefit from relevant activities and innovative educational methods, they need to feel connected to the adults and institutions that support their academic and individual growth (Meehan & Howells, 2019). Research shows that positive teacher–student relationships foster a sense of belonging, academic engagement, and motivation to learn (Corpus, Robinson, & Liu, 2022). In higher education, it is essential for professors to build authentic relationships with their students, identify shared interests, set clear, attainable short- and medium-term goals, and offer opportunities for choice in the learning process (Johnson & LaBelle, 2017). These practices not only strengthen intrinsic motivation but also create the conditions for the effective implementation of student-centered approaches (Norell, 2024).

Learner-Centered Teaching (LCT) is based on the premise that students should take an active role in building their own learning (Weimer, 2013). However, for students to participate actively, take intellectual risks, collaborate with peers, and persevere through obstacles, a climate of trust and mutual support must first be established (Payne et al., 2023). From this perspective, positive teacher-student relationships are not simply a complementary element of learner-centered teaching; rather, they are an essential condition for this pedagogical approach to foster motivation, engagement, and meaningful learning (Koca, 2016).

How It Works / Implementation of LCT Strategy

The implementation of this learner-centered teaching (LCT) strategy began with a collaborative design process. The six authors met for two hours to identify practical ways positive relationships can cultivate student motivation across undergraduate and graduate learning contexts. Drawing from their experiences as educators, researchers, mentors, and learners, the group organized the strategy around five relational tenets: respect, student voice and choice, mentoring, belonging, and community. These tenets align with learner-centered teaching by

shifting the instructor's role from simply delivering content to creating conditions in which students feel known, valued, supported, and responsible for their own learning (Weimer, 2013). At the center of this strategy is the learner-centered relational teacher: an instructor who intentionally builds trust, humanizes the learning process, and creates a classroom culture of respect and recognition. In practice, this includes learning and using students' names, acknowledging students' backgrounds and perspectives, inviting feedback, connecting course content to students' goals and interests, and structuring peer interactions that promote support rather than competition. The relational teacher also maintains clear expectations, provides constructive encouragement, and creates space for students to take intellectual risks. Through these practices, positive relationships become a motivational pathway by strengthening students' confidence, belonging, student voice, perceived value of learning, and willingness to persist (Bennett et al., 2023; Conner et al., 2022).

Results to Date / Implications / Impact

The strategies in Table 1 emerged through a collaborative design process among the six authors, drawing on shared experiences as faculty members, graduate instructors, researchers, and learners across diverse educational contexts. Through structured brainstorming, the authors identified relationship-centered practices that have supported student motivation in teaching and mentoring settings. These strategies were contributed from experiences in teaching, advising, extension, and research, and then refined and organized into five learner-centered tenets: respect, student voice and choice, mentoring, belonging, and community. To reflect the collaborative nature of the framework, each strategy includes the initials of its contributing author while representing the collective review and consensus of the full team. The framework offers practical examples for both undergraduate and graduate learners, recognizing that relationship-building may look different across contexts while remaining grounded in shared learner-centered principles. Collectively, the strategies show how positive relationships can strengthen motivation by fostering respect, support, connection, confidence, engagement, and persistence across disciplines and educational settings.

Future Plans / Advice to Others

Building positive relationships is an ongoing process that requires intentionality, reflection, and responsiveness to students' changing needs. Relationship-building should be integrated into course design, mentoring, and daily classroom interactions rather than treated as an added task. These strategies are adaptable across disciplines and can be adjusted to meet the developmental needs of both undergraduate and graduate learners. Future efforts should continue refining these practices through implementation and feedback from students and educators in diverse settings. Instructors are also encouraged to collaborate with colleagues, share effective approaches, and reflect on their relational teaching practices. Prioritizing positive relationships can help create learner-centered environments that strengthen motivation, engagement, persistence, and meaningful learning.

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Table 1: Strategies to Cultivate Undergraduate and Graduate Students' Motivation

Tenets	Undergraduates' Strategies	Graduates' Strategies
Respect	(i) Learn and correctly pronounce students' names. EO (ii) Ask students to share their funds of knowledge. NK (ii) Acknowledge diverse perspectives during class discussions. EO (iii) Incorporate students' backgrounds, identities, and lived experiences. EO (iv) Maintain an environment that is inclusive of various perspectives. EA	(i) Help students connect their scholarly interests to their identities. NK (ii) Value students' research ideas and intellectual contributions. EO (iii) Include graduate students in scholarly discussions and decision-making. EO (iv) Uplift students' professional goals, expertise, and independence. EO
Student Voice & Choice	(i) Use reflective activities that encourage/allow students to share their experiences. EO (ii) Form small group discussions in class. EA (iii) Implement student feedback surveys mid-semester and visibly respond to suggestions. CP (iv) Give students choice in which roles they will perform in a group project or let students choose from a list of assignment options. NK (v) Collaborate with students to refine assignment rubrics. DD	(i) Encourage students to contribute during group/lab meetings. EO (ii) Create spaces for students to discuss professional goals and challenges. EO (iii) Invite graduate students to co-design research agendas, methodologies, and publication timelines. CP (iv) Create opportunities for input on course readings, assignments, and evaluation criteria; honor their expertise and experience. CP
Mentoring	(i) Establish clear, written expectations between mentor (instructor/TA) and mentee (student) at course start. CP (ii) Provide timely, specific, and encouraging feedback on early drafts and low-stakes assignments. CP (iii) Give students questions to practice asking industry experts that model how to build mentoring relationships. NK (iv) Ensure that moments of reprimand address the quality of work or behavior correction and not student identity. EA (vi) Connect students to internal and external opportunities that lead to professional development. DD	(i) Establish expectations between both mentors & mentees. EO (ii) Have weekly or regular meetings. Discuss academic and career goals. EO (iii) Provide timely and specific feedback on research writing. EO (iv) Actively listen to career concerns and guide navigation of academic/industry pathways. CP (v) Provide critical feedback on presentation skills. DD

Belonging	(i) Learn and use students' names in class. EO (ii) Create opportunities for classroom interactions and friendships. EO (iii) Incorporate students' cultural references, languages, and identities in course examples and readings. CP (iv) Create opportunities for leadership and decision making. EA (v) Create opportunities for students to meet people who have similar life experiences or similar goals. EA	(i) Encourage participation in professional associations. EO (ii) Support integration into scholarly groups. EO (iii) Create spaces for students to share their experiences and scholarly outputs. NK (iv) Connect students to affinity groups, internal and throughout the community. DD
Community	(i) Create a culture where students support and celebrate each other's learning. CP (ii) Host community-based learning experiences (e.g., service learning, field trips, guest speakers from student communities). CP (iii) Intentionally create opportunities for student interaction that are low-stakes and do not include class work. EA (iv) Create physical spaces, or guidelines for physical spaces that are welcoming. EA	(i) Organize social and professional gatherings (e.g., writing groups, research talks, social events) to build a scholarly community. CP (ii) Establish supportive groups in which students review their goals and progress with their peers. CP (iii) Establish laboratory or cohort routines and shared values for research collaboration, communication, and mutual support. CP