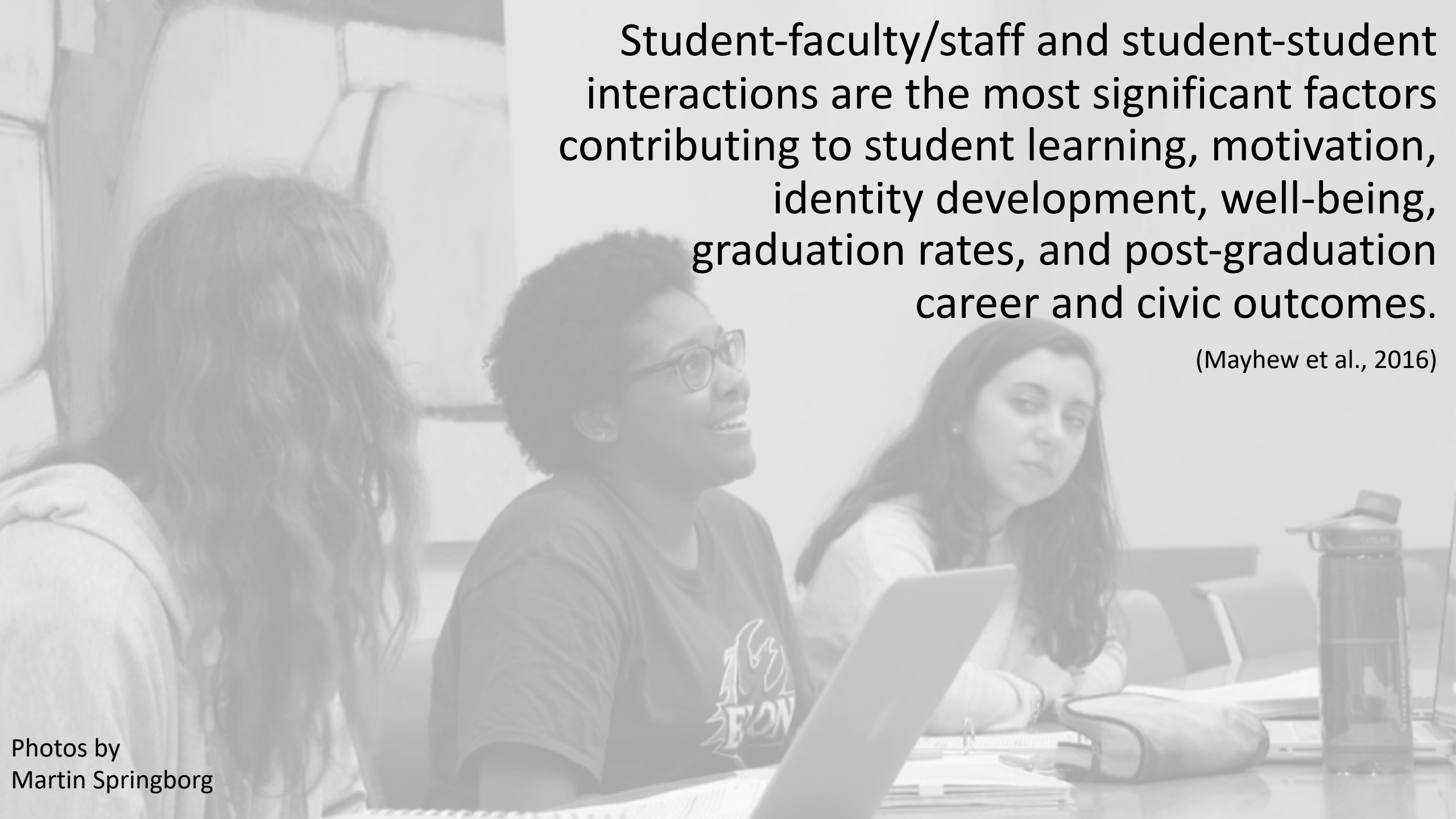


Learning and relationships in (and beyond) our courses



Peter Felten | Center for Engaged Learning | Elon University

A grayscale photograph of three students in a classroom. On the left, a student with long, wavy hair is seen from the back. In the center, a student with short, curly hair and glasses is looking towards the right. On the right, a student with long, dark hair is looking down at a laptop. The background shows a whiteboard and other classroom elements.

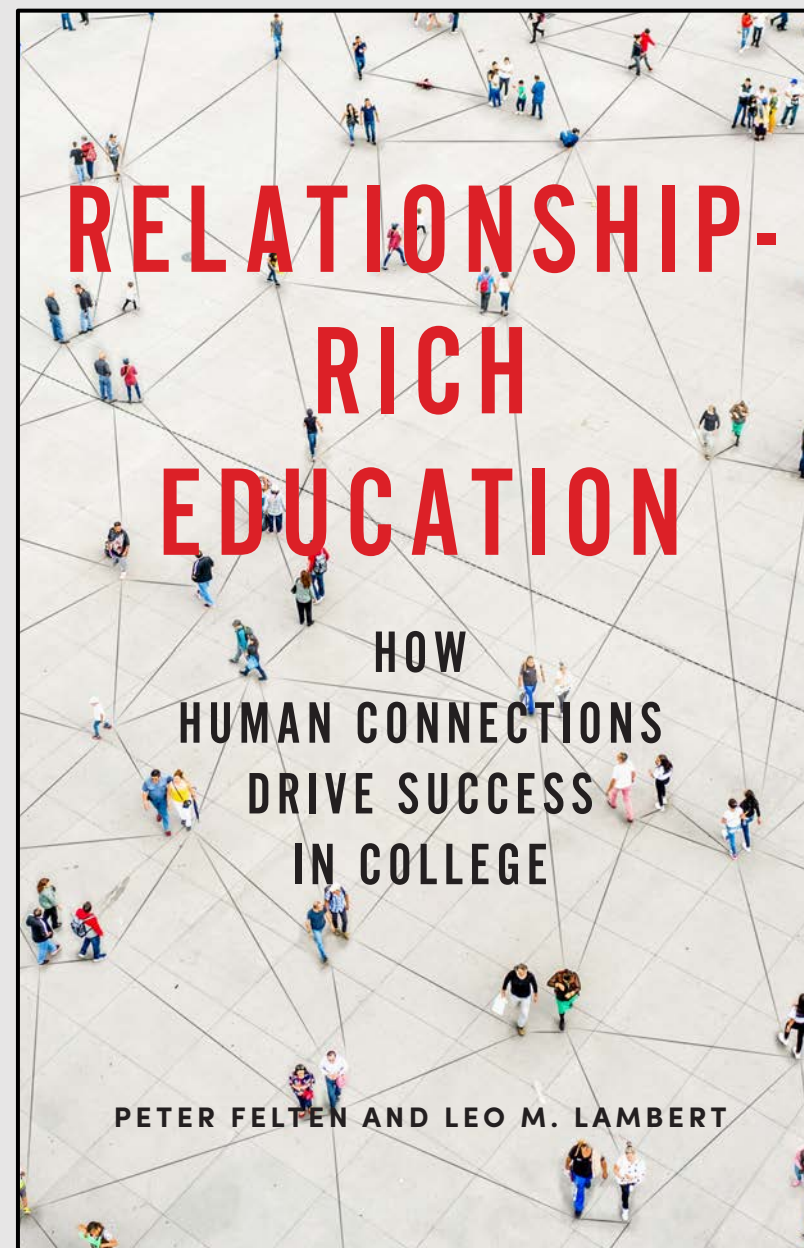
Student-faculty/staff and student-student interactions are the most significant factors contributing to student learning, motivation, identity development, well-being, graduation rates, and post-graduation career and civic outcomes.

(Mayhew et al., 2016)

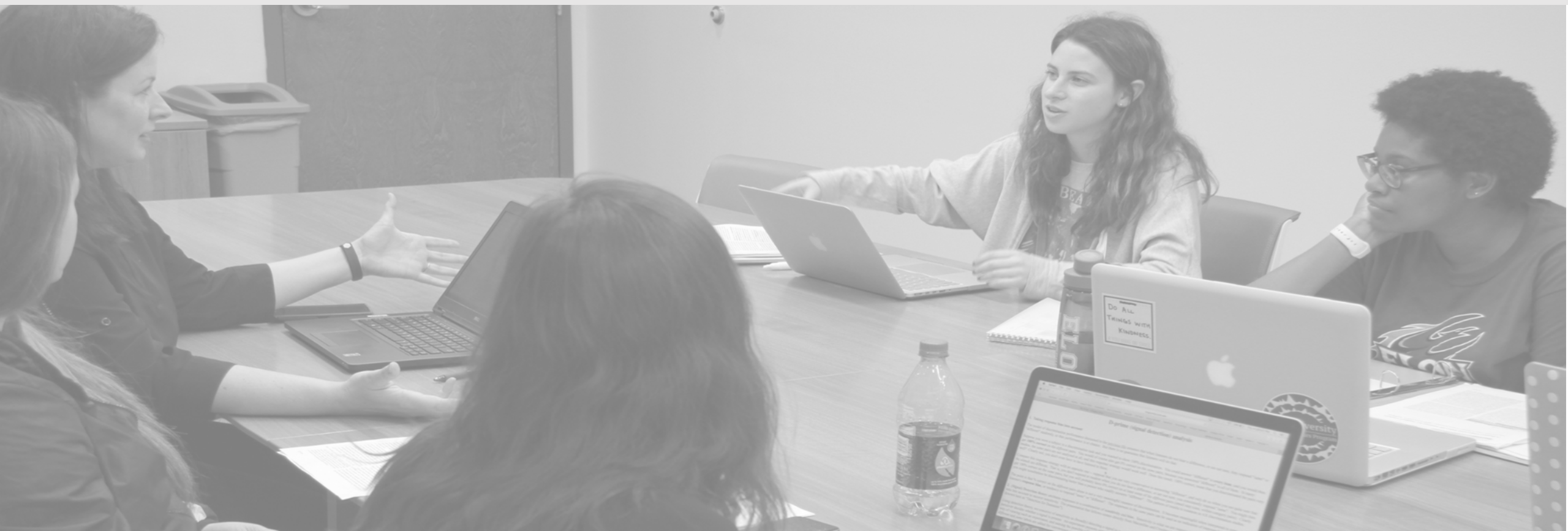
These effects are “particularly strong”
for “students of color and first-
generation college students.”

(Kezar & Maxey, 2014, p. 31)





1. All students must experience **genuine welcome and deep care**.
2. Relationships are a powerful means to **inspire all students to learn**.
3. All students must develop **webs of significant relationships**.
4. All students need meaningful relationships to help them—and to challenge them—to **explore the big questions of their lives**.



What do you do to cultivate educational relationships?

What are significant barriers to developing educational relationships?



“Students fear failure and being challenged beyond their limits. They may not have been challenged academically in high school and for the first time are really experiencing academic rigor.

They fear embarrassing their families—being afraid to come home and say, ‘I am not achieving in college right now. I’m struggling.’

They fear talking to a professor because a professor represents an intimidating authority figure. They also resist asking for academic help because that is perceived as meaning you’re not smart. They do not want to go to counseling when they have emotional problems because that’s for people who are weak.

The fear of shame is everywhere.”

(David Latimer, City Tech – CUNY)



“When I moved into my dorm, I was thrilled to be at UW. But I kept thinking that as a wait-listed student I’m probably on the lower end academically here. Sitting in these large classrooms – Chemistry 142 had 500 students – I convinced myself that they’re all more successful than me. I was comparing myself to others and imagining all of their accomplishments. I was freaking out, to be honest.”

(Gigi Gaultier, University of Washington)

“This is not the kind of place where you ask for help.”

(Undergraduate, University of Michigan)





“One of the biggest hurdles our students have to overcome is the feeling of being adrift in online classes where they don’t get to see each other face-to-face and when they can’t go up to their instructor or to a friend in class to say, ‘I’m really struggling with this’ or ‘I’m excited I’ve learned that.’”

(Erin Perry Schreier, Southern New Hampshire University)



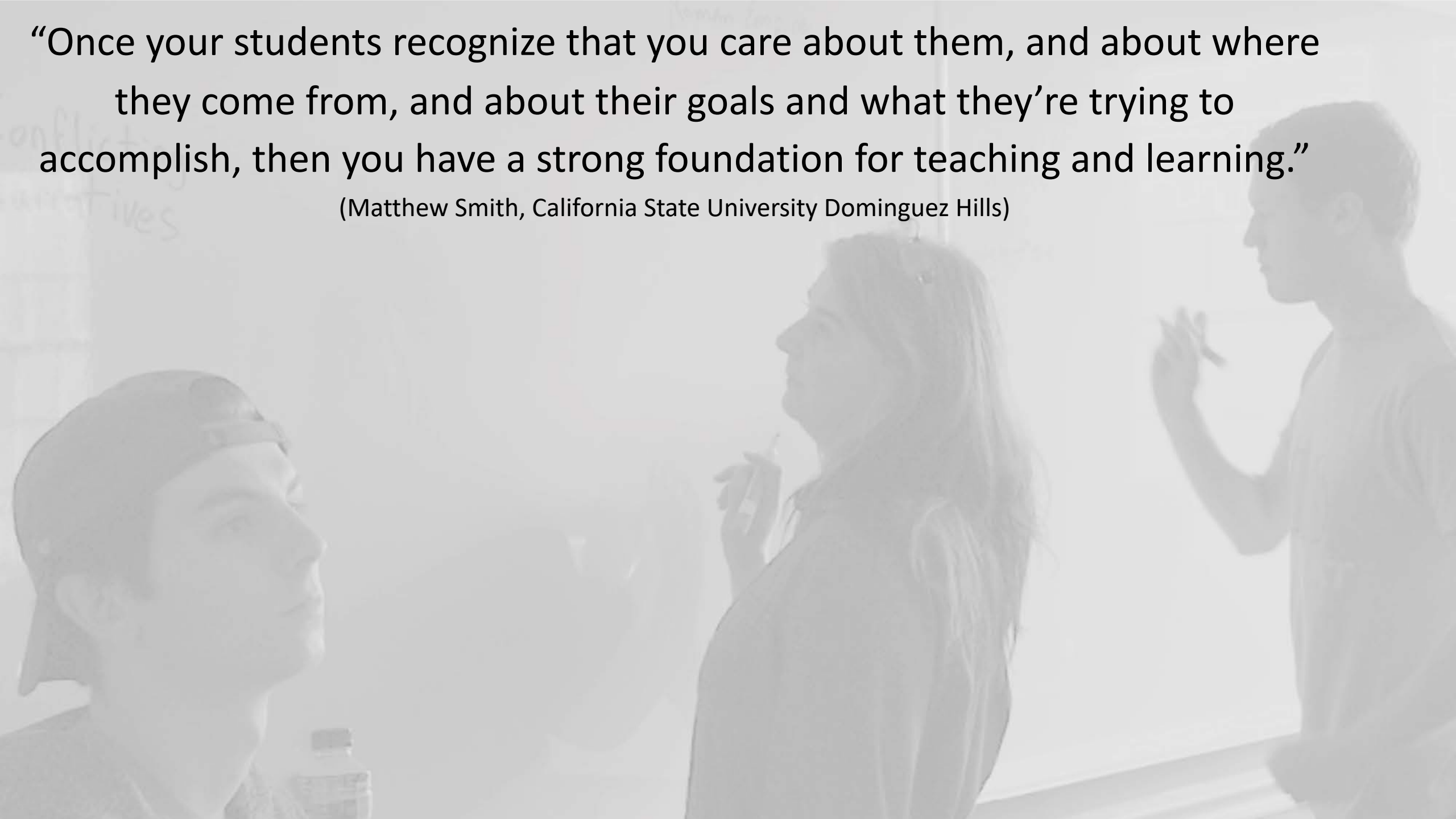
“Coming to college was a difficult experience for me. There was the just being away from home part. And then there was race. I never felt like I was a student first. I was always Black first, and then a student.

For example, during my junior year, I remember walking into class on the day after Tamir Rice was killed by police. I was distraught. I walked into class and sat there, and it seemed like no one else was fazed by it. The day went on as usual for other students. It was just so surreal to have all of this weight on me because of something that happened, and not feeling that reflected at all by the students and professors around me.”

(Khadijah Seay, Bryn Mawr College)

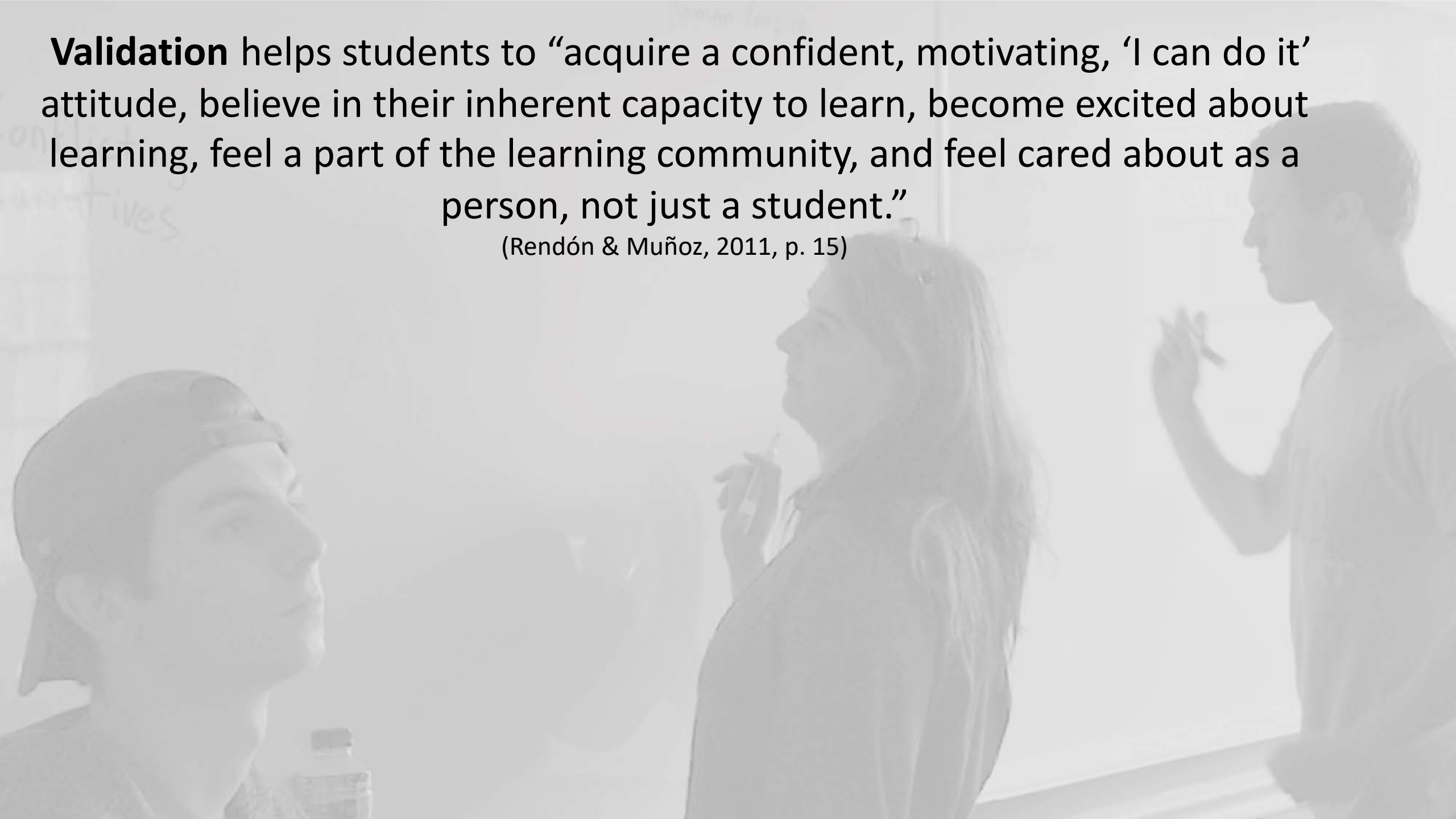
“Once your students recognize that you care about them, and about where they come from, and about their goals and what they’re trying to accomplish, then you have a strong foundation for teaching and learning.”

(Matthew Smith, California State University Dominguez Hills)



Validation helps students to “acquire a confident, motivating, ‘I can do it’ attitude, believe in their inherent capacity to learn, become excited about learning, feel a part of the learning community, and feel cared about as a person, not just a student.”

(Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 15)

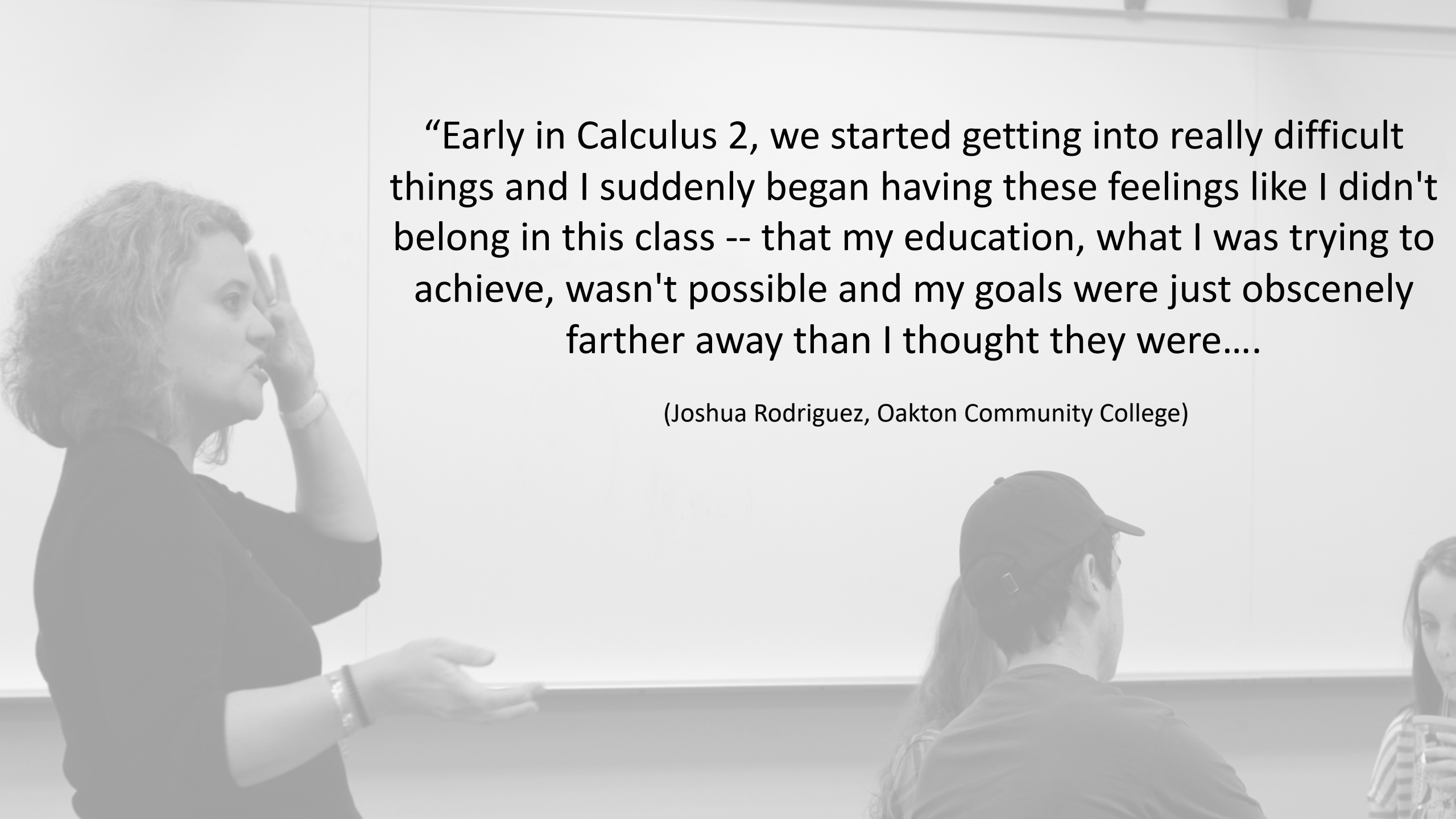




Feedback that validates conveys:

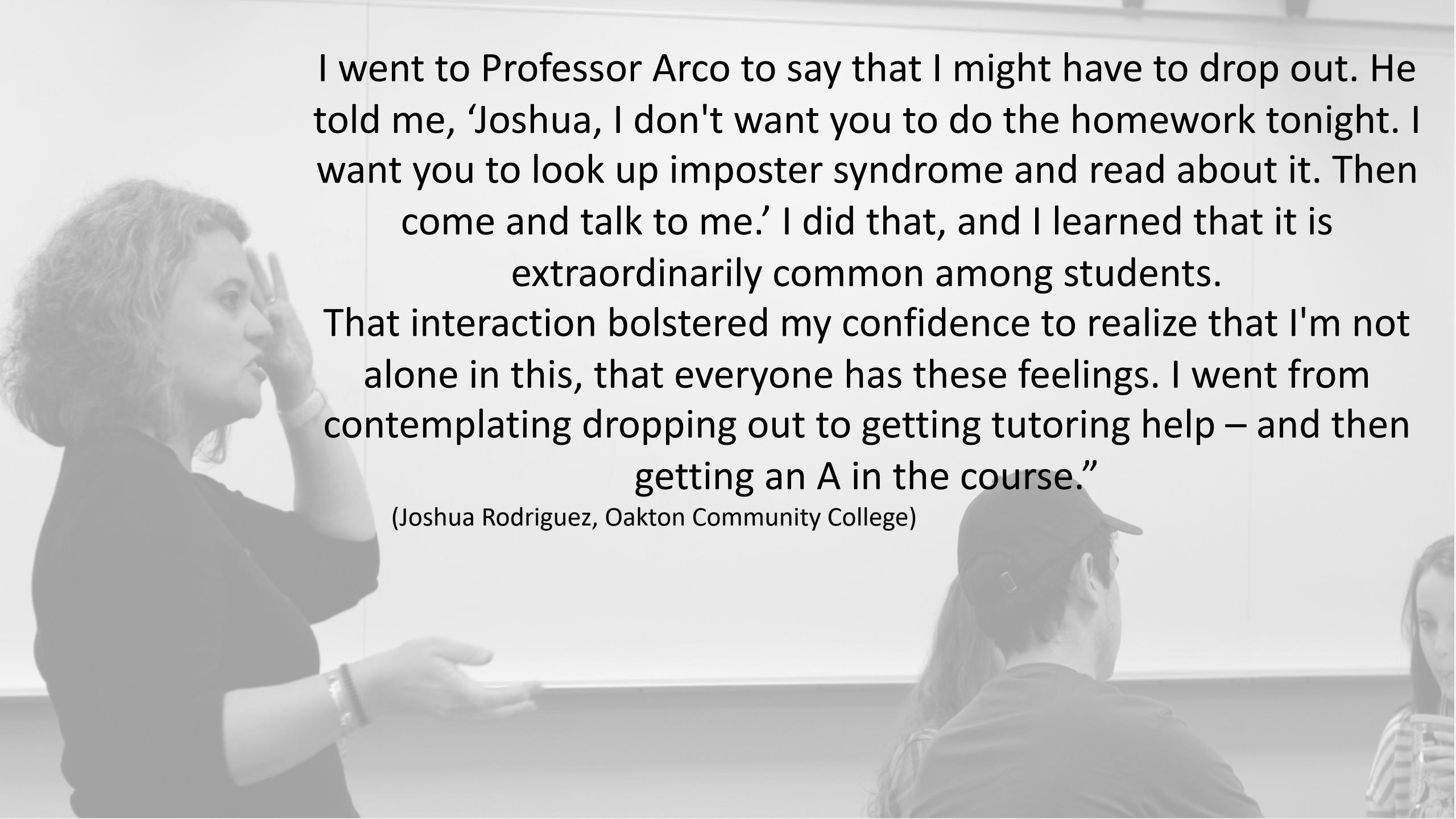
1. High academic standards/expectations;
2. Belief in the student's capacity to meet those standards, even if their work does not do so right now;
3. Specific guidance about how to improve;
4. Availability of resources to support the student's improvement.

(Cole, 2008)



“Early in Calculus 2, we started getting into really difficult things and I suddenly began having these feelings like I didn't belong in this class -- that my education, what I was trying to achieve, wasn't possible and my goals were just obscenely farther away than I thought they were....

(Joshua Rodriguez, Oakton Community College)



I went to Professor Arco to say that I might have to drop out. He told me, 'Joshua, I don't want you to do the homework tonight. I want you to look up imposter syndrome and read about it. Then come and talk to me.' I did that, and I learned that it is extraordinarily common among students.

That interaction bolstered my confidence to realize that I'm not alone in this, that everyone has these feelings. I went from contemplating dropping out to getting tutoring help – and then getting an A in the course.”

(Joshua Rodriguez, Oakton Community College)



Example 1: Use Student Names

When students perceive an instructor knows their names, they report feeling more valued, motivated, and comfortable asking for help.

(Cooper et al., 2017)



“I didn’t understand why the instructors asked us to use name tents. At first, I thought it was pointless, no one really cares what your name is. Now I [see that] knowing someone’s name will help you talk to them. Calling people by name is better than, ‘Hey, want to study later?’”

(Erika, p. 10, in Cooper et al., 2017)

Example 2: Persistence Project, Oakton Community College

During the first 3 weeks of the semester, faculty commit to:

1. Learn and use student names;
2. Articulate high academic standards paired with supports for when student struggle;
3. Return an assignment with formative, success-oriented feedback;
4. Meet one-on-one with each student for ~10 minutes.



“I’ve been teaching here a long time, and I still am in contact with some of my students from twenty years ago, but when I added the one-on-one conferences, it transformed me and my students. I am not just getting to know the students with whom I might have the greatest affinities; instead, I am getting to know all of my students, and there’s a big difference between those two things.”

(Holly Graff, Oakton Community College)





Example 3: Note-taking pairs

Periodically pause class to ask students to compare their notes with those of a couple of other students.

Encourage students to talk about both the content and the format of their notes.

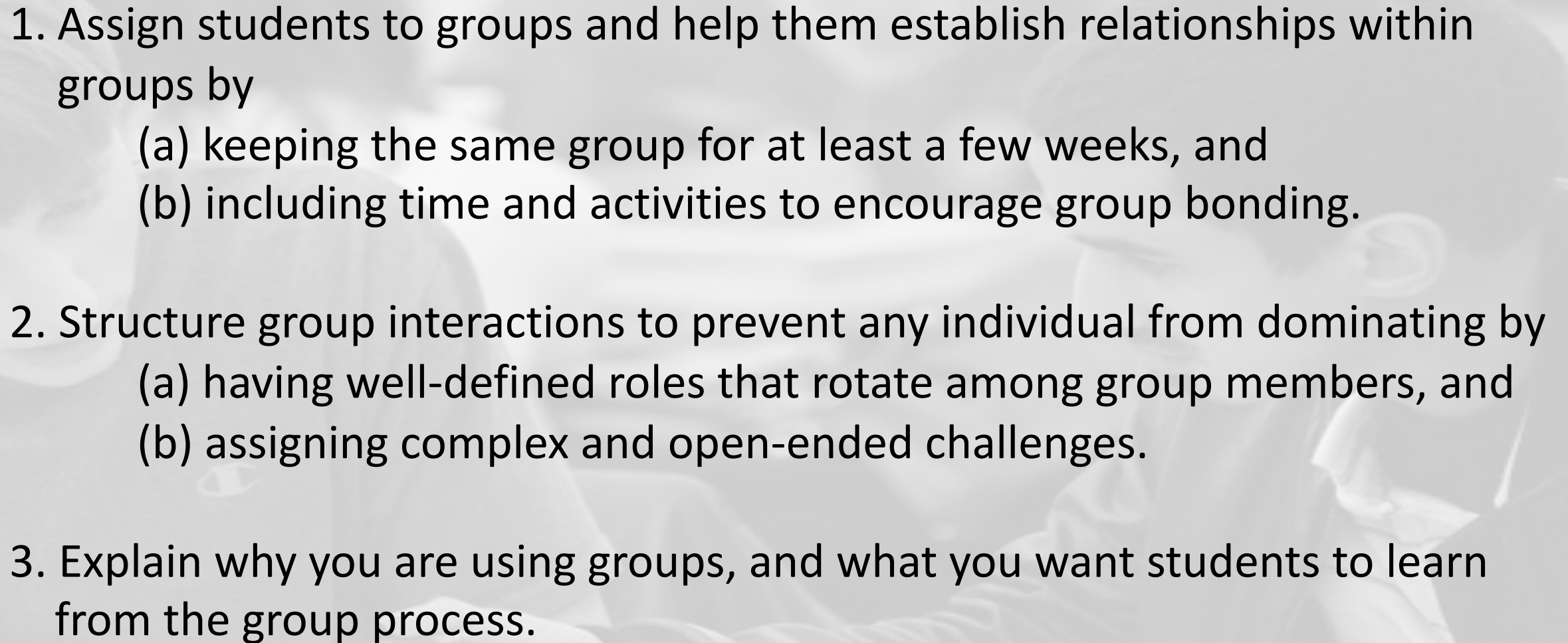
Ask for volunteers to show (and discuss the merits of) different note-taking approaches.

(Major, Harris, Zakrajsek, 2016)

Example 4: Structuring groups to support all students

“Our data raise the possibility that perhaps instead of students being lazy or unmotivated, students face barriers such as anxiety about group work, low perceived value of peer discussion for their learning, or contending with other students in the group who are dominating. Reframing inequities in participation in this way puts the onus on the instructor to structure the interactions in peer discussions to promote equal opportunities for allowing students to participate in the learning activity.”

(Eddy et al., 2015)

- 
1. Assign students to groups and help them establish relationships within groups by
 - (a) keeping the same group for at least a few weeks, and
 - (b) including time and activities to encourage group bonding.
 2. Structure group interactions to prevent any individual from dominating by
 - (a) having well-defined roles that rotate among group members, and
 - (b) assigning complex and open-ended challenges.
 3. Explain why you are using groups, and what you want students to learn from the group process.

(Eddy et al., 2015)

Keep doing what you already do to cultivate educational relationships.

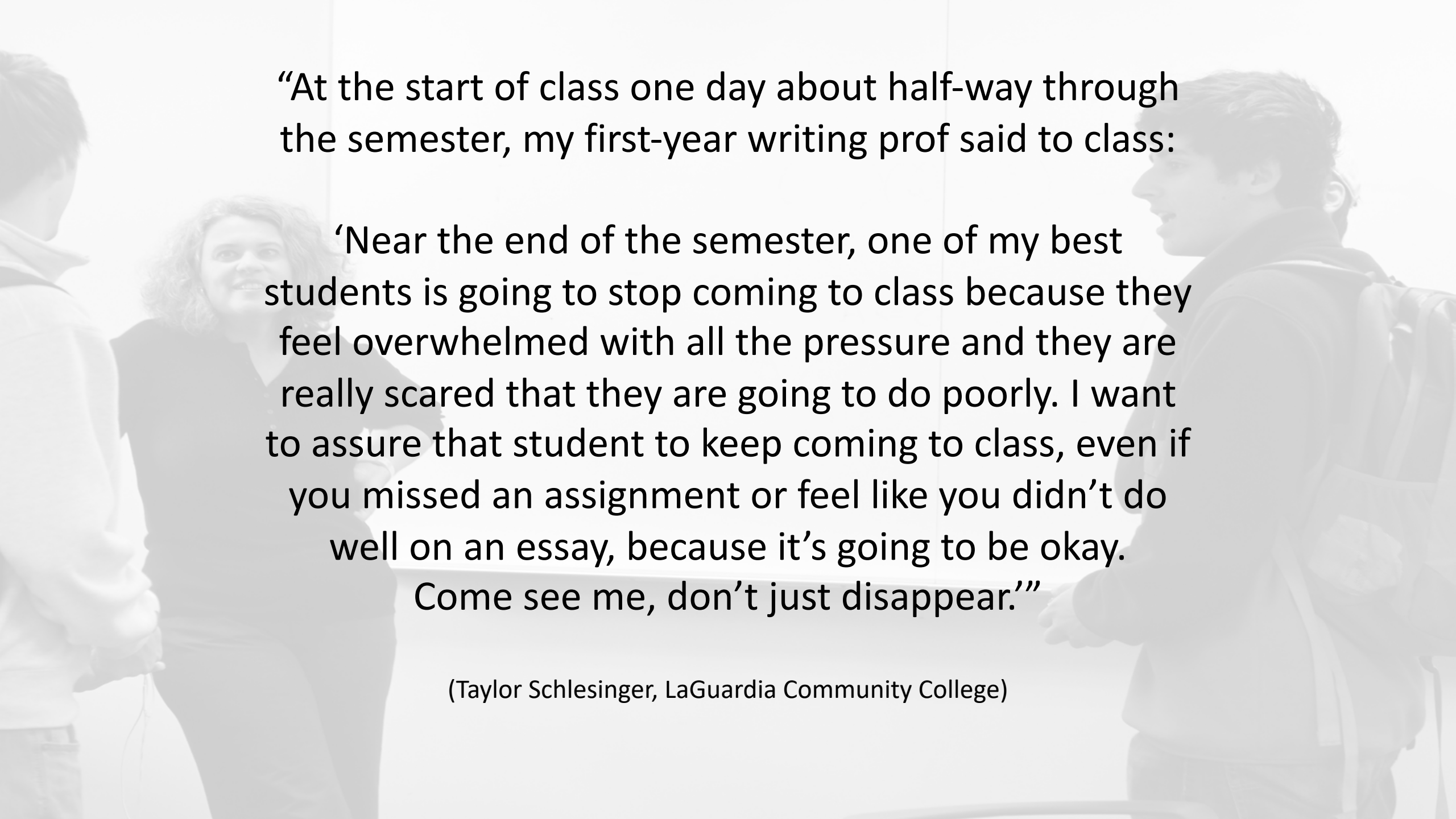


What will you do to cultivate relationship-rich education...

... with your students?

... with your colleagues?





“At the start of class one day about half-way through the semester, my first-year writing prof said to class:

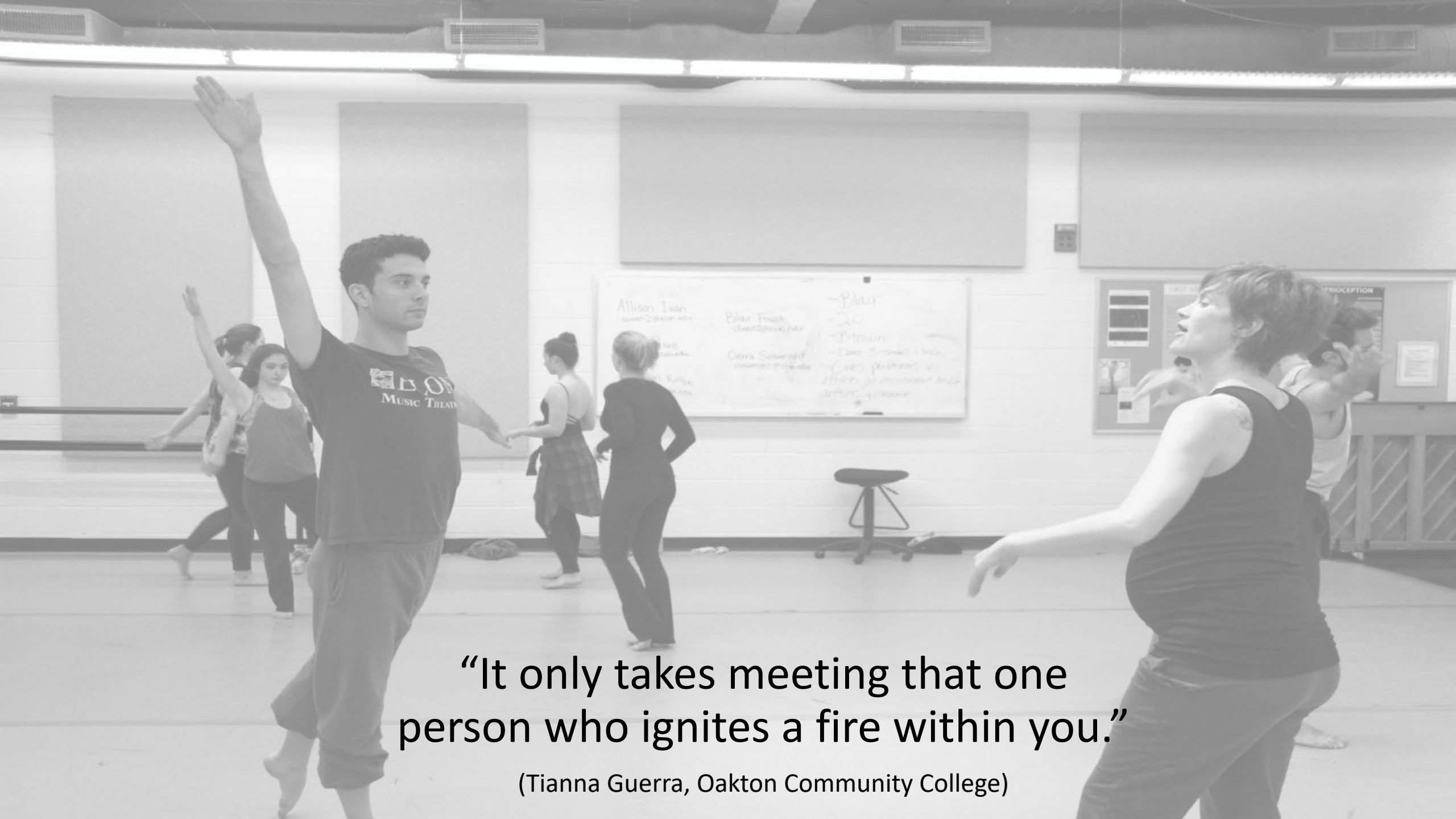
‘Near the end of the semester, one of my best students is going to stop coming to class because they feel overwhelmed with all the pressure and they are really scared that they are going to do poorly. I want to assure that student to keep coming to class, even if you missed an assignment or feel like you didn’t do well on an essay, because it’s going to be okay. Come see me, don’t just disappear.’”

(Taylor Schlesinger, LaGuardia Community College)

“Many of our students haven’t necessarily tapped into the gifts and the skills they already have—their own tenacity, their own intelligence. We help them understand that they are fully capable—every single one of them—of earning their degrees. We ask: ‘What are the things that you’ve worked towards and achieved?’ That is essential to them being able to say and believe, ‘I am good at things, I can commit to things, and I can finish them.’”

(Donna Linderman, ASAP – CUNY)





“It only takes meeting that one
person who ignites a fire within you.”

(Tianna Guerra, Oakton Community College)

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