



# Relationships Matter


Moving Relationship-Rich Experiences  
from the Periphery to the Center  
of Teaching and Learning

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THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Learning and Teaching Conference

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

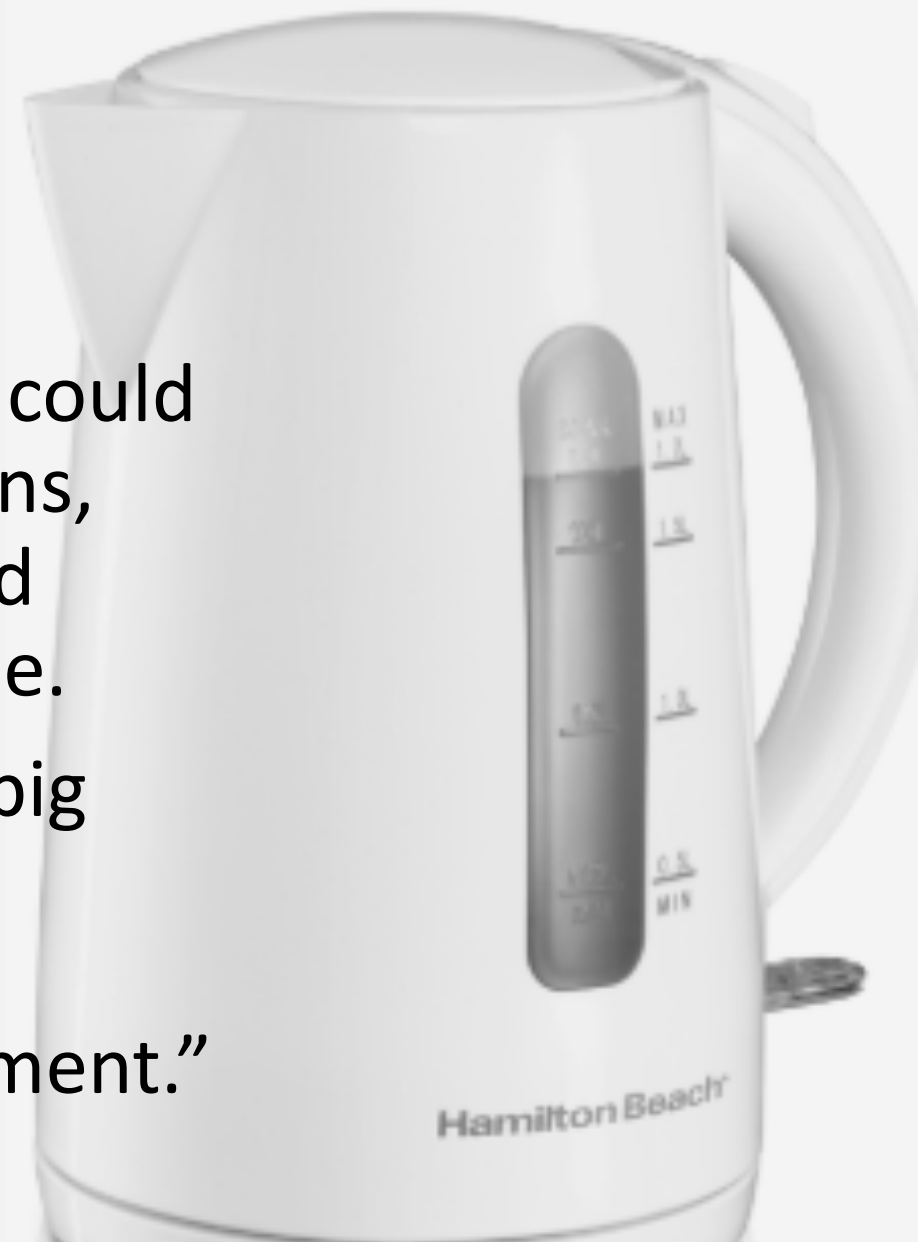
(Mayhew et al., 2016)

“After hearing from a number of wonderful initiatives, I realised I had heard one thing mentioned over and over again: a kettle.

Face-to-face spaces, where students and staff could meet to chat and share experiences or concerns, seemed to be determined by where they could find a place that had a socket to plug in a kettle.

It seems we don't need grand gestures and a big budget; what we need is dedicated spaces – physical, temporal, and emotional – to bring people together in a trusted and safe environment.”

(Scoles, 2019)



**“Relentless welcome”**

(David Scobey, Bringing Theory to Practice)

**“Inescapable opportunities for  
meaningful interactions”**

(Joianne Smith, Oakton Community College)

**“A constellation mentors, including  
mentors of the moment”**

(Brad Johnson, U.S. Naval Academy)





What do you do to cultivate educational relationships?

What are significant barriers to developing those 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.”

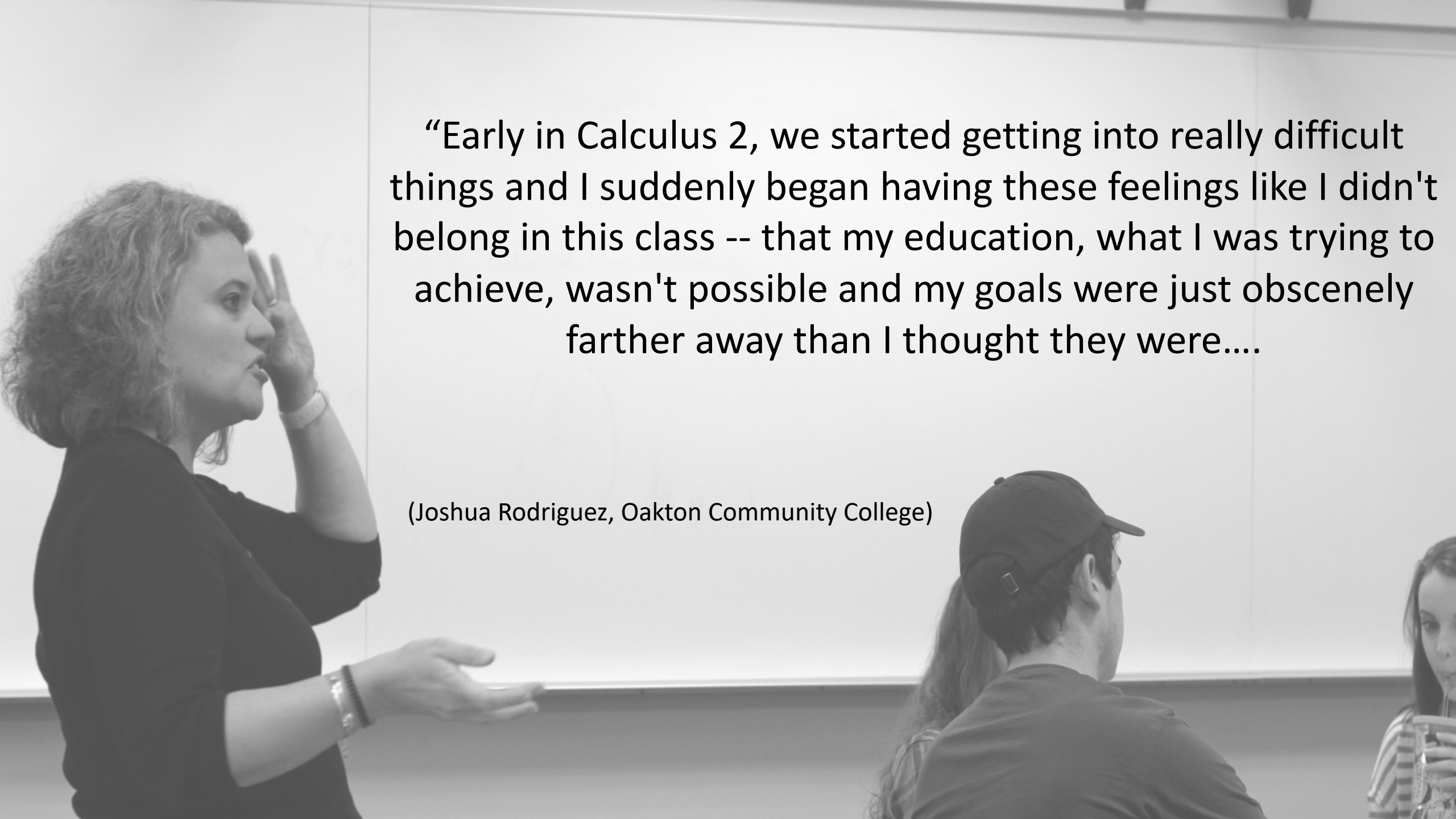
(David Latimer, City Tech – CUNY)





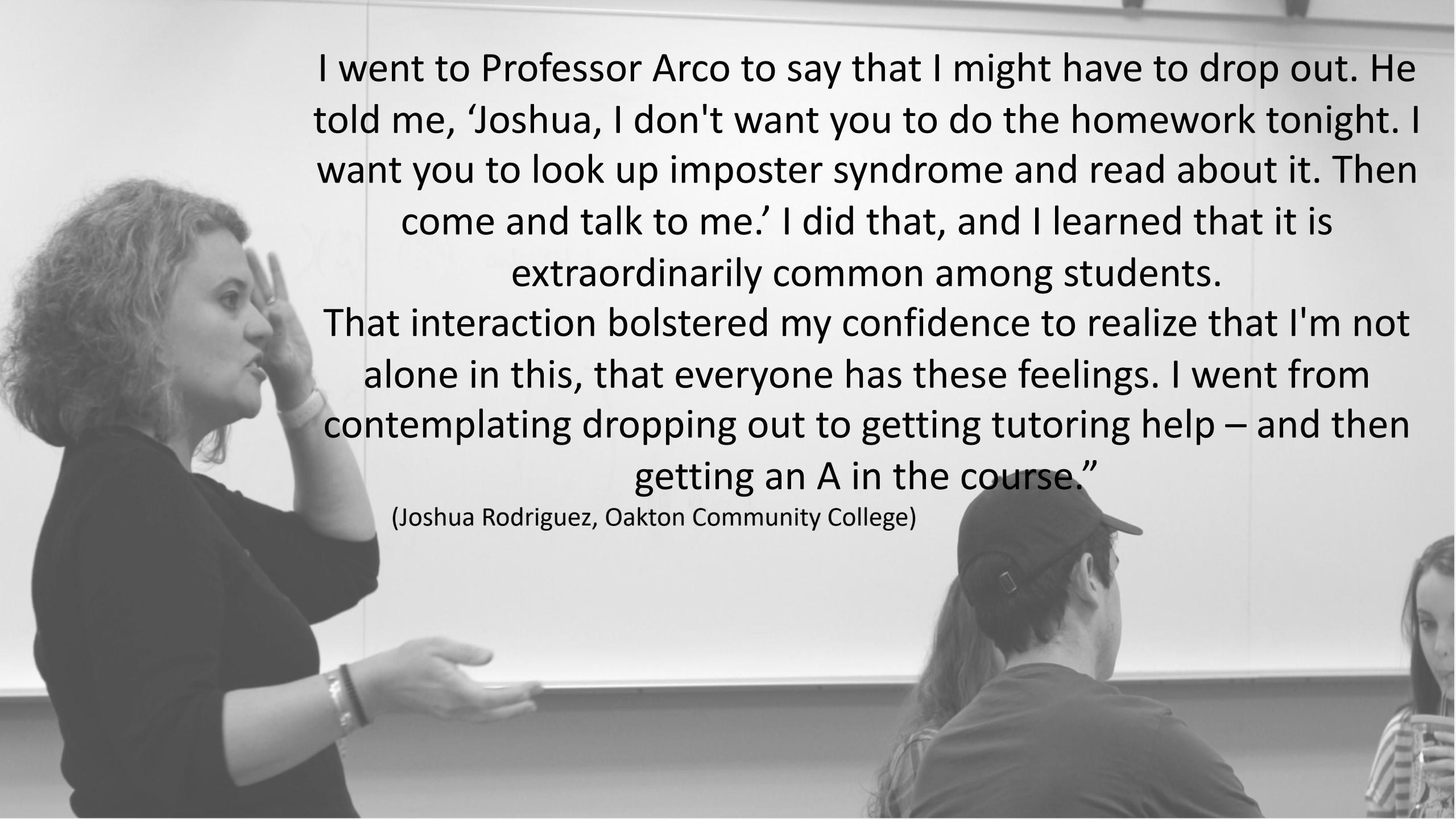
“Coming to college was a difficult experience for me. There was the just being away from home part. And then there was race. I never felt like I was a student first. I was always Black first, and then a student. For example, during my junior year, I remember walking into class on the day after Tamir 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)



“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)

A black and white photograph of a woman with curly hair, wearing a dark top, standing and speaking to a group of students. She is gesturing with her hands. In the foreground, the backs of two students' heads are visible: a man wearing a baseball cap and a woman with long hair. The background is a plain wall.

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)

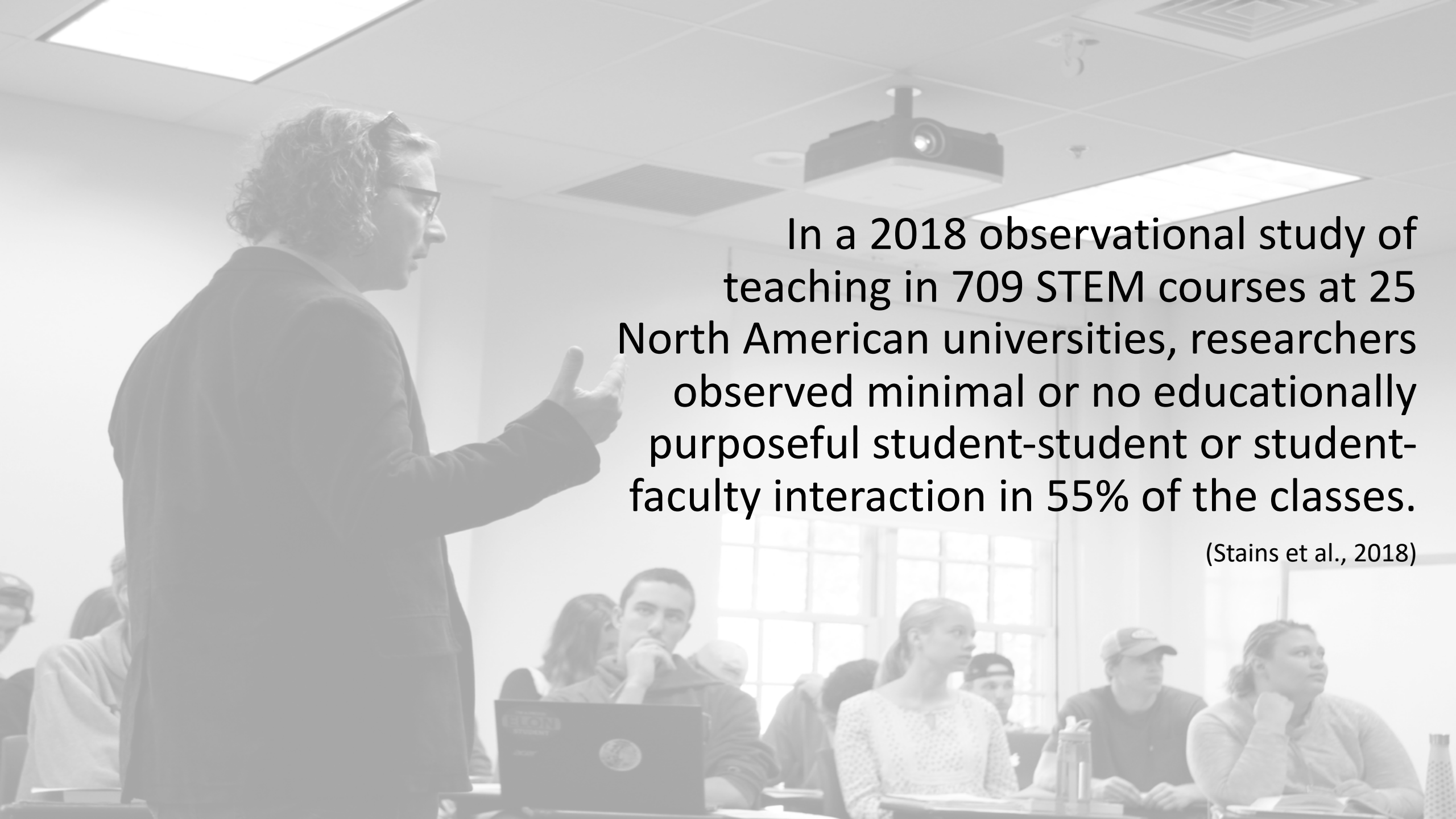




“The college classroom lies at the center of the educational activity structure of institutions. The classroom may be the only place where students and faculty meet, where education in the formal sense is experienced.”

(Tinto, 1997, p. 599)





In a 2018 observational study of teaching in 709 STEM courses at 25 North American universities, researchers observed minimal or no educationally purposeful student-student or student-faculty interaction in 55% of the classes.

(Stains et al., 2018)

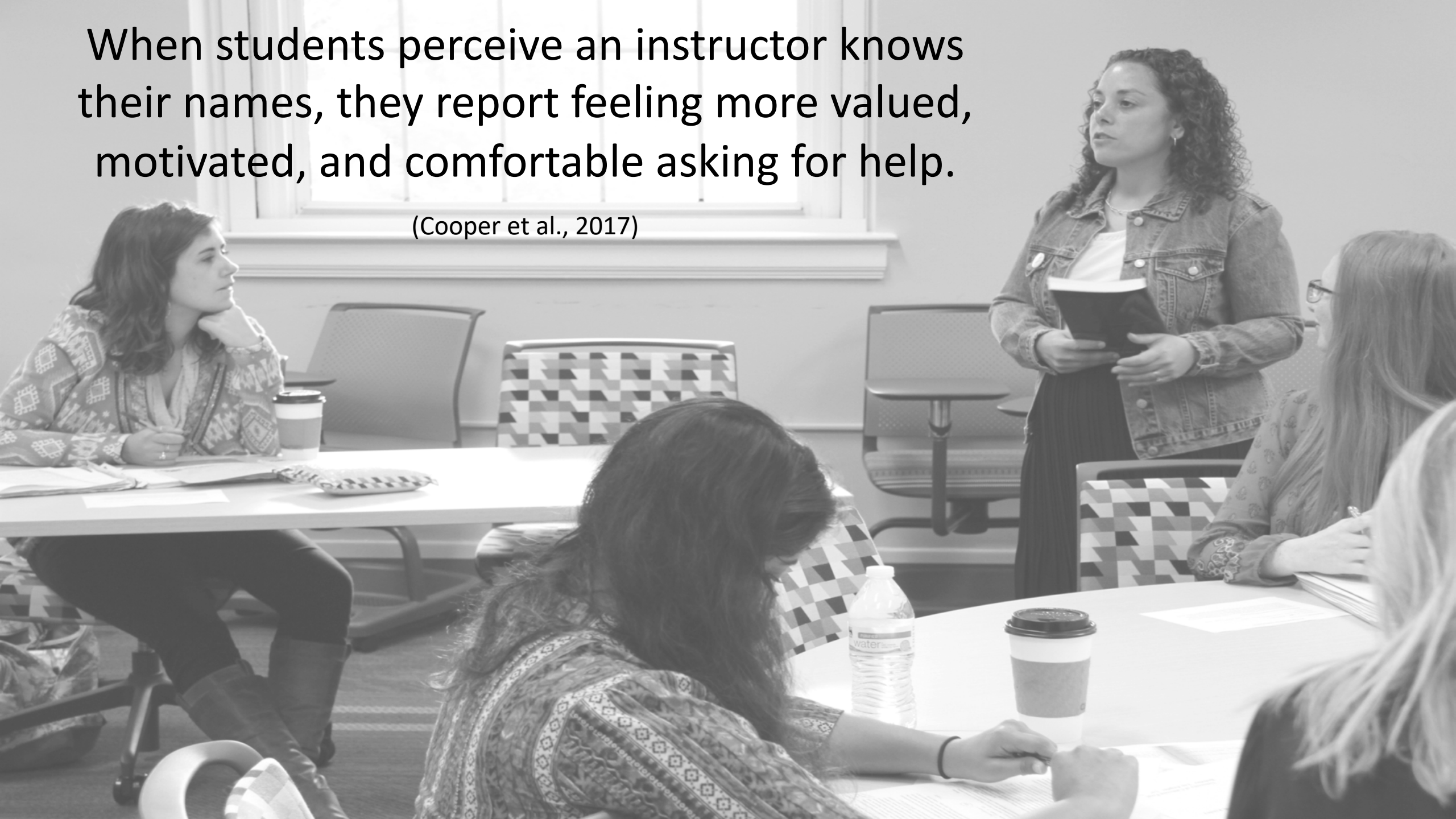
Adopting the qualities of 'good teaching' widely identified in educational research will reduce the stressors that students experience in the learning environment.... Regular interactions with peers and academic teachers also have positive results for student wellbeing. Again, academic teachers do not need to go beyond their professional role – rather, they need to give attention to the social dimensions of learning that are within their role.

(Baik, Larcombe, & Brooker 2019, p. 10)



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

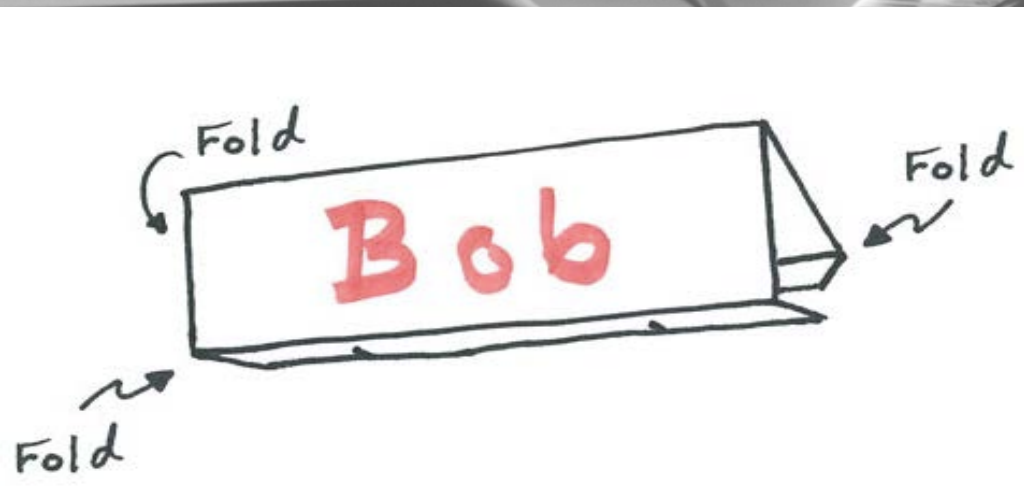
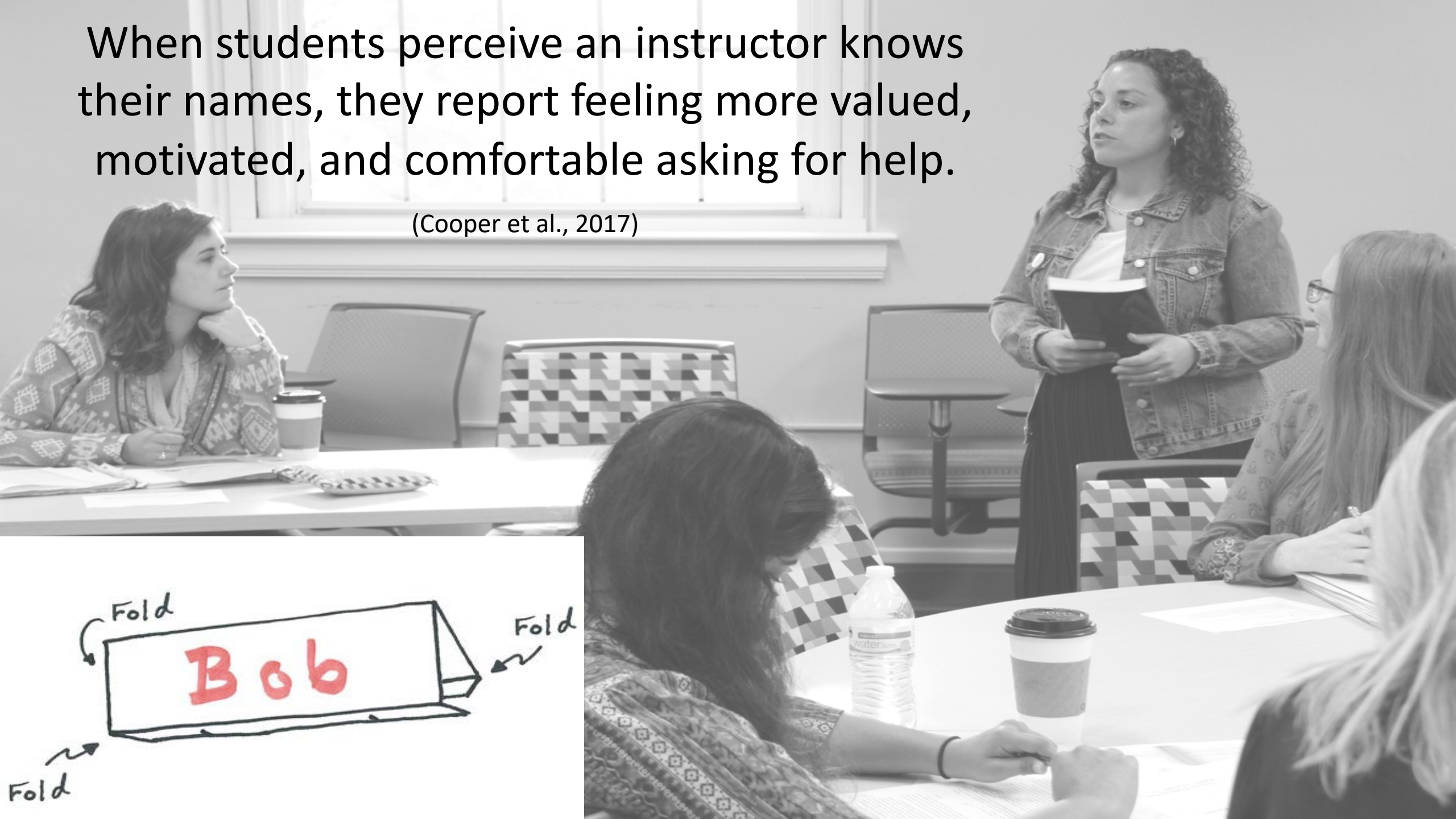
(Cooper et al., 2017)





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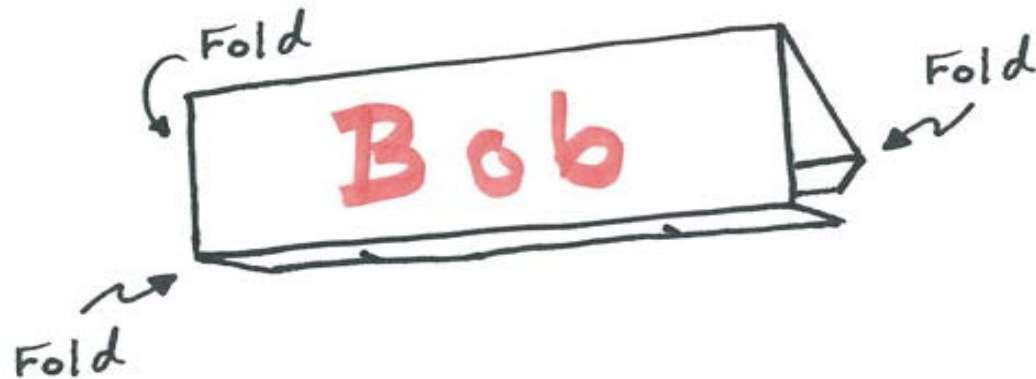
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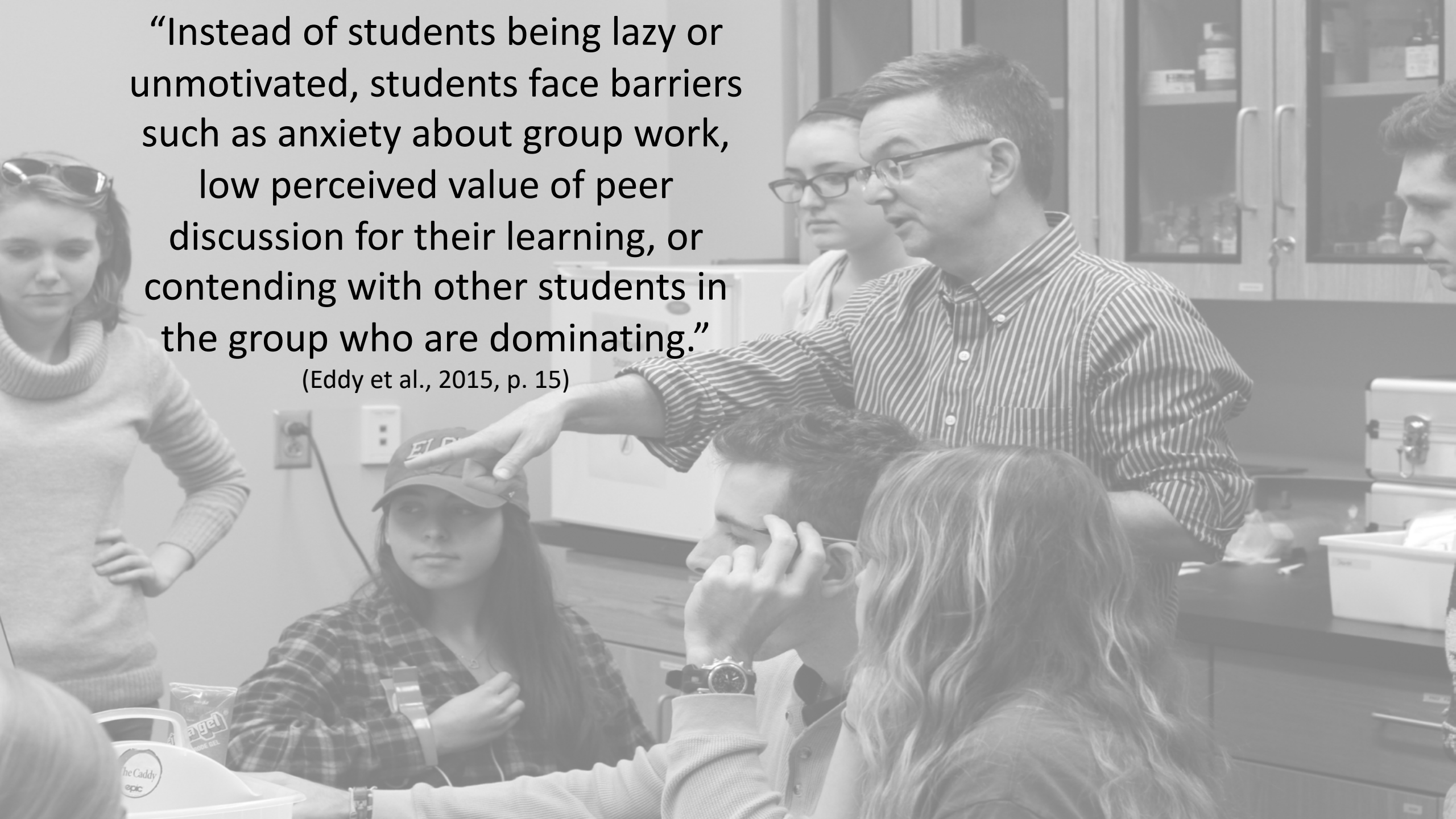
“I didn’t understand why the instructors asked us to use name tents. There are always big lectures, and no one really cares what your name is. At first I thought it was pointless, but now I know it’s important. Just knowing someone else’s name will help you talk to them. Calling people by name is better than, ‘Hey, want to study later?’”

(Erika, p. 10)



“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.”

(Eddy et al., 2015, p. 15)







“Learning and talking together, we break the notion that our experience of gaining knowledge is private, individualistic, and competitive. By choosing and fostering dialogue, we engage mutually in a learning partnership.”

(hooks, 2009, p. 43)

What will you do to further cultivate educational relationships?



# Evidencing the value of relationships

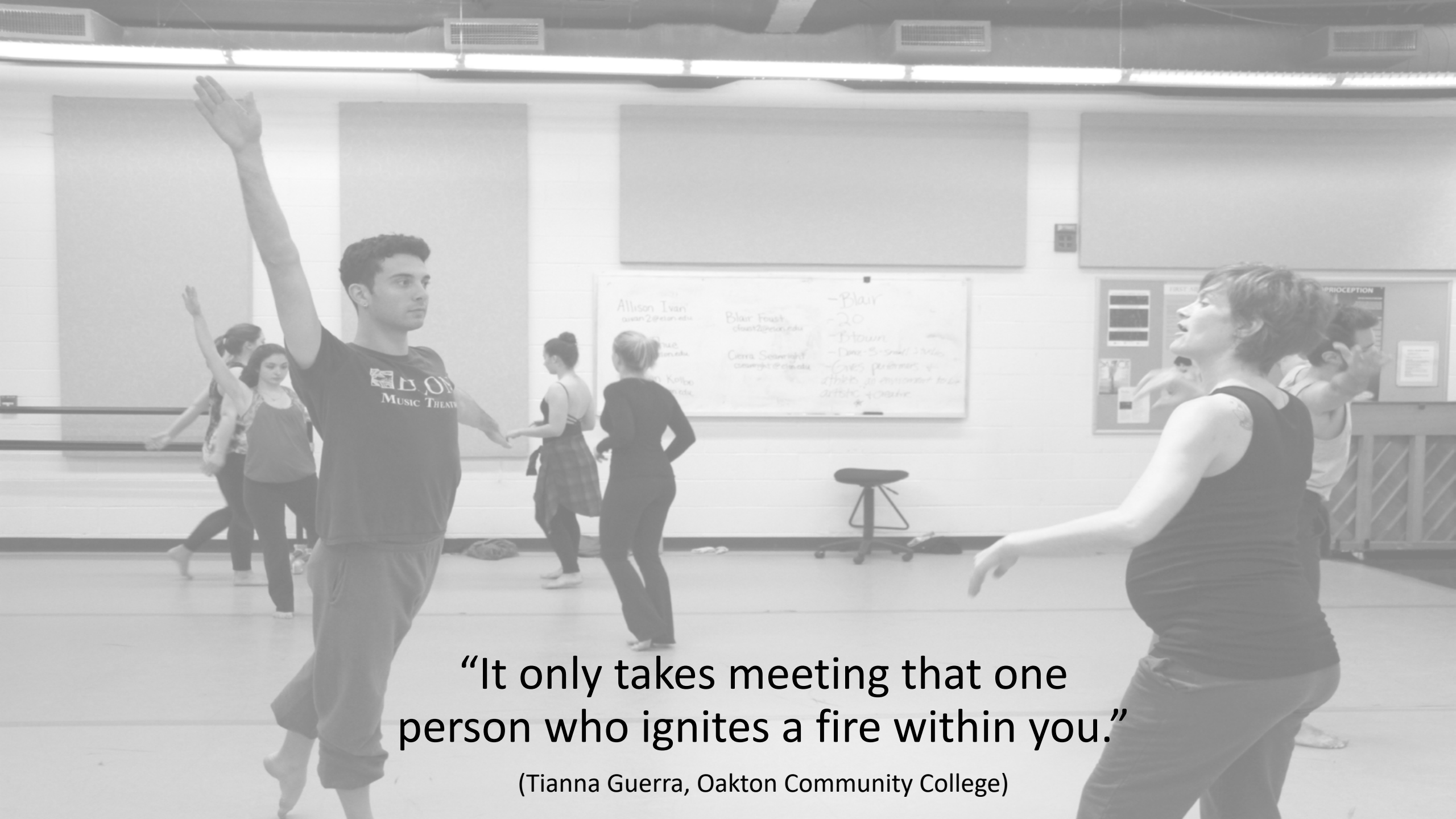
Affect  
Context  
Variation  
Equity





“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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