

How to Promote Interracial and Inter-Social Class Friendships Among College Students

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Since I began teaching at Xavier University, I noted that students tend to mostly associate with those that belong to the same socioeconomic status as their own. I wondered if this could make some students feel left out from college life. My suspicions were confirmed when in more than one occasion, students confided in me that they did not feel as though as they belonged on campus. This was the case with students of color, and Caucasian students who came from lower economic background.

I view this perception (regardless of whether it is based on reality or not) as problematic for a variety of reasons. As an educator, I believe that such assumptions are likely to be detrimental to student retention. As a sociologist, I view this as a troubling trend that could harm social integration and solidarity. Finally, as a teacher in an institution based on Jesuit principles, I believe that this is conflict with *Cura Personalis*.

Roughly translated as caring for the whole person, *Cura Personalis* focuses on cultivating mind, body, and spirit. This goes beyond the mere conveying of the material from the curriculum. Part of caring for the whole person requires enabling them to find themselves as a respected part of their college community. This also aligns with *Cura Personalis*' emphasis on respecting the dignity of each individual while valuing diversity and difference.

To address this issue, I devised a few strategies that could facilitate communication, collaboration, and hopefully the fostering of friendships among students from diverse walks of life. I implemented these strategies in the two SOCI 101 (Introductory Sociology) courses that I

taught in the Spring semester of 2024. Given that many students who took this course are first-year students, they are even more likely to feel uncomfortable with reaching across the social divide and forging relationships with those from different backgrounds. My strategy focused on creating groups for doing different homework as well as in-class assignments. Below I will provide more details about these strategies and my assessment of their overall effectiveness.

In-class assignments:

As an introduction to sociology course, SOCI 101 often includes in-class discussions where we apply what we learn from the textbook to examples from the real world. These discussions often begin by questions posed by me, which the students need to discuss, and answer in their groups. Given the frequency of such discussions, they provide an excellent opportunity for students to meet with, and learn about other students. I decided to take advantage of this opportunity by sometimes assigning students to random groups. I should note that I was cognizant of not overindulging in this practice as I did not want to deprive the students of the feeling of safety that comes from being part of a familiar group for a large portion of the semester. Nevertheless, once every five or six class meetings, I assigned random numbers to students, and then reshuffled them into different groups based on those numbers. During the first few times, I instructed them to introduce themselves to the people in their group if they did not know them. The prompt included information such as name, hometown, and their major. The first few of such discussions began with relatively long silences and some nervousness apparent in some students. Soon, however, the classroom was transformed into a space where almost everyone had talked to one another at least once, and maybe could remember their names with a little bit of thinking.

Apart from such routine activities, I sometimes took advantage of a web-based version of the game Jeopardy created for classrooms named Factile. I used this game when teaching detailed

information such as names of classic sociologists, their backgrounds, and their major contributions to the field. Rather than lecturing about such information for long stretches of time, I created questions, copied them into the Jeopardy game, and made the students compete with one another for getting the highest score in the game. I would divide the students into four groups. Given the number of students in each table (~5), and in the class (~30), those from different tables often had to merge their groups. This created an opportunity for students to initiate conversations, and collaborate with those from other tables. Also, since this created an atmosphere of fun, competitive teamwork, it allowed students to bond over a group activity without being confined by social boundaries.

Homework assignments: As part of their homework, all students had to visit the local branch of the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Cincinnati, which is located in the Avondale Neighborhood. As a free non-profit after school program, Boys and Girls Club's services are mostly utilized by low-income parents. Students could pick from a number of dates to visit the club. Whatever date they chose, however, major parts of their activities at the club were as a part of a large group of Xavier Students. Upon arriving at the club, the students would receive an introductory tour of the facility by one of its directors. They would then spend about an hour sitting around large desks, helping students (mostly from elementary school) with their homework. Given the large number of days they could choose from (and that all days were open to students from both of the SOCI 101 courses that I taught), students were likely to spend time volunteering alongside others from different social backgrounds. As such, this activity was another opportunity for Xavier students – who would otherwise not normally interact with one another – to get to know each other while collaborating on a class project.

While not the focus of this project, it should also be noted that this activity is in line with the Ignatian value of being *Contemplative in Action*. After visiting the Boys and Girls Club, students have to write a short reflection note, where they apply a number of sociological concepts to their observation. As such, they would have to contemplate on what they experienced at the club by placing it in the greater context of social inequalities in modern life.

The Final Project: For their final project, the students have to conduct a mini sociology project. This entails creating an online survey, conducting a literature review, analyzing their data, and presenting their findings to the class. Although they can choose to work on their own, students are strongly encouraged to work in groups of two. I place them in groups based on their research interests. Additionally, given what I have learned about their backgrounds, I try my best to find them a partner that could broaden their social network. The research partners would have to work together for approximately three weeks. As such, this is another activity that could facilitate friendships between students from vastly different niches of society.

Results:

To use one of the varieties of the experimental method, I would have to ask students questions about how they feel about associating with those from a different social background twice throughout the semester; once at the beginning and a second time at the end of the semester after they have participated in all the activities mentioned above. However, this could be detrimental. Given the sensitive nature of the subject, many are likely to provide “desirable” rather than realistic responses, thus making it appear that the activities did not have much effect (As they would have indicated that they had no issues whatsoever with finding friends from vastly different walks of life in both surveys.). Also, this could reveal that this was one of the goals of such activities, thus creating conscious, or subconscious resistance against it. As a result, I

decided against this and opted instead to rely on my own observations.

I firmly believe that these activities went a long way in making the students feel comfortable and welcome at Xavier University regardless of their ethno/racial and/or social class backgrounds.

Perhaps where this was most evident was during class discussions. Given the nature of the SOCI 101 course, it often involves discussions around topics that could range from sensitive to uncomfortable to talk about. These includes subjects such as inequality, affirmative action, religion, race relations, and immigration. During the first few weeks of the class, almost every question that I asked about such topics was met with a long, awkward silence. The students were so unlikely to raise their hands and participate in class discussions that I often resorted to alternative methods such as asking them to write their opinions on the whiteboard, or even an anonymous, online discussion board.

As weeks passed and they got to know an increasingly large number of their classmates through different activities, however, more and more students seemed to gain the confidence to speak up and voice their opinions in class. This was the case even about extremely sensitive topics such as a lecture that analyzed and criticized the foundations of modern “scientific” racism. I view this notable shift in students’ ease and comfort in participating in class discussion as at least partially due to the activities that I added to my courses this semester.

Another indicator of the project’s success was the fact that in contrast to previous semesters, no students reached out to me this semester to let me know that that they do not feel like they belong, or that they are having a hard time finding a friendship community at Xavier University. This was indeed a pleasant change. During the previous three semesters, I was often approached by a small but significant number of students (often students of color or those from lower economic backgrounds) who shared such concerns with me. Although I was honored that they

confided in me, I was also deeply saddened that this was the impression they had of an institution that was based on values such as *Cura Personalis*. My main solution was to try to convince them that this was likely a misunderstanding and to refer them to the office of diversity and inclusion. Given that Spring 2024 was the first semester that no students shared such concerns with me, I am inclined to conclude that such activities as described in this project were at least partially responsible for helping a large number of students feel at home here at Xavier University. Given the increasing diversity of the student body at Xavier, I hope that such strategies will continue to help us provide an inclusive pedagogical environment for students regardless of their social backgrounds.