



Building Community Through an Asynchronous Online Course

The Learning Ideas Conference, June 10, 2026

Our assertion:

A **thoughtfully designed** fully online, asynchronous course of over 1000 students can successfully engender a sense of community in incoming first year and transfer students.

How we define community in our course: See yourself and others as valuable, contributing and cared-for members of the NC State family. Identify where and how you can connect with experiences and with other people to develop your own sense of belonging. *Note: Our course focused on institutional community; other courses or programs may target program-level community or professional community.*

Why community is one of our course goals:

- We want our students to thrive, not just survive (Schreiner, 2010)
- A sense of community is key to thriving (Sarason, 1974; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Nelson & Vetter, 2012)

Our goal for this presentation:

To share what we believe have been the key transferable course design features that have fostered a sense of community in the students who take our course, in hopes that others can apply these same principles in their contexts and have similar success. *If you'd like to learn more about why we believe we were successful, please watch the video of our presentation on The Learning Ideas Conference 2026 program website, or contact us (our contact information is at the end of this document).*

Key design decision 1: Strategic selection of topics and experts

We considered representation in the selection of our presenters

- **What this looked like:** We included [presenters in our course](#) (scroll to the bottom of link for a collage of our 2025-26 presenters) whose demographics span multiple genders, ages, ethnicities and more. We included graduate students as well, and we invited the student voice when encouraging participation in high impact experiences through videos from our [university's YouTube channel](#).
- **Selected student's quote:** "I also liked that many different majors, races and gender identities were involved in this. That made me feel included."
- **The literature says:**
 - Membership, "The feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness" is a key element of a psychological sense of belonging (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

- Ensuring representation can support a sense of belonging (Tinto, 1975).

We included clear messages about interdisciplinarity and collaboration.

- **What this looked like:** We asked speakers to explicitly discuss the interdisciplinary nature of their work on the “wicked problem” at hand and highlight the importance of collaboration with other disciplines.

Example quotes from speakers:

- “PFAS are a great example of how complex and important environmental issues are, and how important it is to have so many different people with different perspectives and expertise at the table.” - Carolyn Mattingly, Ph.D.
- “...and it took me a long time of learning outside, just...not just ecology, but from other disciplines and talking to people from other disciplines to understand how complex these systems are.” - Madhusudan Katti, Ph.D.
- “Ours needs to be a story of writers working with engineers, working with biologists, working with artists, working with architects. Our success or failure - and there will be both - will be as a function of our ability to link our ideas together across disciplines in order to achieve what we couldn’t do individually. And so it’s with this context that we begin the Wicked Problems course.”
- Rob Dunn, Ph.D.

- **Selected student quotes:**

- “It was not only cool to see myself represented...but it also helped drive home the point about how ... we all have to work together to create innovative solutions.”
- “It was really impactful in showing the necessity of diverse thought, especially for those problems who do not get their stories shared enough.”

- **The literature says:** “Acculturation” & strengthening of connection happens through communicating institutional values; a shared purpose creates an emotional connection between students and faculty. (Shepherd and Bollinger, 2023)

How can you...

- ...increase representation?
- ...model program or institutional values relevant to community?
- ...develop a sense of shared purpose?

Key design decision 2: Intentional use of tone and style in delivery and communication

We worked closely with presenters to write conversational, inviting and relatable scripts.

- We asked them to talk directly to the students in a conversational tone...and to really try to connect with them on a human level, almost as if speaking with that student during office hours.

- We asked them to be vulnerable with the students - to show that failure often leads to success.
- We asked them to be authentic. We know from our research that our students place high value on authenticity. These aren't just high-minded elite scholars, they're real people with real ideas, and students can approach them.
- We asked them to offer hope and encouragement. Even though the course deals with complex global problems, we know that today's college students have heard enough doom and gloom about the world and their future. Offer some degree of hope. We showcased people working together to solve these issues, and they're stronger for the collaboration.
- Our presentations were more of a documentary than a lecture, more showing than telling and more story-based than simply expository. We showed photos and B roll video whenever possible.
- Quotes from presentations
 - "When I first left my hometown and went to study veterinary medicine at the University of Sydney, which at the time was the largest university in the country, in the middle of the largest city in the country, I felt completely uncomfortable. In fact, I hated it and I dropped out and spent the better part of the next year working as a ranch hand in rural Australia, with animals. And while I completely enjoyed that, I also recognized that I really wanted to be a veterinarian." - Warwick Arden, Ph.D.
 - "I always wanted to be a meteorologist from a very young age. And I knew I was going to school to be a meteorologist. And then I got to school and I realized I wasn't very good at weather forecasting, which is a big component of being a meteorologist..." - Kathie Dello, Ph.D.
 - "I remember driving back to college after a break at home, thinking about my plan to become an English teacher in this town. I was driving through the beautiful foothills of Northern California. But when picking courses my first year, I was told to explore broadly and I ended up, somehow, in a biology class. And when I heard my very first lecture on how neurons work, everything changed." - Jane Lubischer, Ph.D.
- **Selected student quotes:**
 - "The speakers all did it from their own lens, and their own voice. It felt like they were genuinely talking to the viewer. I felt inspired."
 - "Personalized stories of some professors and students at NC State really helped me get an individualised view on the challenges I will face during my undergraduate years and how I may battle them."
 - "I enjoyed the personal aspect, reading the blurbs about professors, how the course treated everyone the same whether they feel prepared for the Fall or not."

- “When I first heard from NC State from other students, I didn’t feel that...I guess like the professors ‘cared’ about their students... But after like seeing like the videos and actually engaging with them on those live sessions, I think it really like changed my perspective. Like, oh, they’re really here to help us learn and really like also get to know us to make it more enjoyable for us and them.”
- **The literature says:**
 - Storytelling and sharing a narrative arc, an experience, a purpose are keys to community and belonging (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Shepherd & Bolliger, 2023).
 - Emphasizing meaning, values, and purpose (deep life interactions) leads to a sense of community (Sriram et al., 2020).
 - Warm, personalized communication means less psychological distance and a greater sense of being a valued community member (Rovai, 2002; Schreiner, 2012)

How can you...

- ...include content designed to help students feel that they will fit in and be accepted?
- ...normalize failure and fear?
- ...up your authenticity game?

Key design decision 3: Selection of activities for students to complete

We wanted to focus on helping students reflect and to use our questions to show them that their thoughts and opinions matter.

We asked them to see themselves as contributors.

- **We asked**, “Which type(s) of scholarly engagement opportunities sound the most interesting to you? “How should we approach AI policy?” “Can you imagine yourself as an innovator? What kinds of technological innovative ideas are you excited about?” Would you pay more to cool your home, charge your phone... to help finance game-changing technologies?”
- **We required** students to participate in a citizen science project. In 2025-26 the project was [Sound Around Town](#). [NC State is a Citizen Science campus](#), and we got then involved in this endeavor right away.
- **Selected student quotes:**
 - “Wicked Problems inspired me to find my place at NC State. Rather than just thinking of myself as another student in a sea of many, this course helped me envision my future, [my] individual contributions...”

- “The most valuable part ...was learning more about my opportunities ...contextualized with discussions of relevant, real-world issues. ...I have a greater understanding of my place in NC State and in the world after completing this course.”

- **The literature says:**

- Shared experiences can lead to emotional connection and feelings of belonging (Tinto, 1975 and Shepherd and Bollinger, 2023)
- Contributing is important for feeling like part of a community (Schreiner, 2012)

We asked more “what do you think?” and “how do you feel?” than “what do you know?” We asked many of these questions using a survey tool that allowed students to see real-time aggregate responses of their peers after they submitted their own answer.

- **We asked** “Is climate change making you anxious?” “How do you feel about the prevalence of AI?” “What kind of transportation do you wish you could use more?” “What matters to you in a space to live and gather?” “When you make an important decision, how far ahead do you think?” “What was most surprising to you?” “What do you want to think about more?”
- **Selected student quote:** “...these surveys helped me feel less alone about my feelings towards a particular area. ... These surveys definitely helped me realize that there are other people that feel the same; this really reassured me.”
- **The literature says:**
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How can you...

- provide opportunities for students to make contributions to their community?
- ...help them share a meaningful experience?
- ...ask more “what do you think?” and “how do you feel?” questions?

Learn more about our award-winning online course

- [Wolfpack Solutions Website](#): more information about the course and team behind it.
- [Course open resources](#): View/listen and share course videos and podcasts
- [Sound Around Town](#): Most recent citizen science research project

Course Awards

- [Gertrude Cox Award for Innovative Excellence in Teaching and Learning with Technology](#), 2023-24, NC State University Office for Faculty Excellence.

- [Award of Excellence in Digital Learning Innovation](#), Online Learning Consortium, 2025
- [Interdisciplinary Teaching Excellence Award](#), NC State's Vice Chancellor and Provost, 2025

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