

Building community in a virtual world

There is a common misconception that it's harder for students to feel connected when they can't meet in person, or that distance-based learning is inherently less impactful for students. Although this may apply in some cases, it's up to the instructor or facilitator to set the tone for their students. Just like with any learning opportunity, the tone set by the instructor can either invite students to open up and connect with one another, or to shut down and keep their distance. One excellent way to establish a sense of inclusivity and safety among students is to partner with any of the amazing and dedicated [UAF Student Affairs](#) programs and staff at UAF to lead discussions and other activities with your students.

This past August, the staff at the [UAF Nanook Diversity and Action Center](#) led a virtual activity for students in the Emerging Scholars Academy, a cohort-based summer bridge program for first-year students in [Student Support Services](#). The activity they led was called an Identity Walk, and it addressed aspects of individual identity and intersectionality that are fundamental to respectful and inclusive community building. In the days leading up to this activity, students were primed for the Identity Walk through asynchronous online discussions about topics and assigned readings in their Building Academic Skills for STEM course on Blackboard. These topics included "real talk" subjects like imposter syndrome, pluralistic ignorance and math anxiety. In one specific example, students were asked to watch TED-Ed videos from [Elizabeth Cox](#) and [Orly Rubinsten](#) and respond to the discussion prompt: "Have you ever experienced anything like math test anxiety or impostor syndrome? If so, what was the context, what did it feel like for you, and what are some of the ways you dealt with/deal with it? Do you have any advice to offer others?"

To earn a full grade, students were required to post at least one response to the prompt and respond to at least one other student's post. Even though students were scattered across the state and had never been in a synchronous meeting with each other, the vulnerability and support they demonstrated to each other in their discussion posts was incredible. Their discussion posts were then incorporated into three-minute mini-lecture videos posted on Blackboard, and the real talk continued to flourish in subsequent discussions and other assignments. When an instructor appropriately demonstrates



how to discuss their own experiences with topics like math anxiety, this can signal to students that it's safe for them, too.

By the time students met each other synchronously for the first time to participate in the Identity Walk activity led by the UAF Nanook Diversity and Action Center staff, they already felt like they knew each other. The activity itself was a resounding success, and there were genuine expressions of emotion and support coming from everyone involved. One student shared this statement during the activity that sums it up best: "It felt like for a moment we were in an ideal world." Another student shared afterward in an asynchronous discussion post: "It was so special to feel like one big family." This is how you build community in a virtual world!

The UAF Nanook Diversity and Action Center can work with instructors to offer special training or guest lectures. [View their list of trainings and contact information.](#)