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**KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI:** Welcome to a special retrospective episode of *What We're Learning About Learning*, a podcast about higher ed teaching and learning created and produced by the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship, also known as CNDLS, at Georgetown University. I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski.

**JOE KING:** And I'm Joe King. We're wrapping up our second season with a closer look at a theme that has come up repeatedly in our podcast-- belonging. Our interviews with faculty have focused on a wide range of topics, including anti-racist pedagogy, accessibility, experiential learning, well-being, and religious diversity. But in conversation after conversation, the faculty, staff, and students we talked with emphasized the importance of the feeling of belonging in the learning experience.

**KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI:** We've heard again and again, that learning depends on feeling like a welcome and engaged member of a community. Our interviews have touched on the ways that existing dynamics in higher education make it easier for some people to feel that belonging than others. And so in this episode, we have pulled together these conversations to highlight patterns, insights, and key takeaways.

**JOE KING:** First and foremost, belonging is a fundamental human need. Belonging helps us feel connected, accepted, included, valued, supported, and understood. It's essential and universal. Georgetown University's President John DeGioia has said that, quote, "Fostering a culture of belonging is an ongoing imperative. The task for us within our Georgetown community is to build and sustain a culture that encourages respect, inclusion, equity, and understanding, that responds to and rejects all forms of discrimination," end quote.

**KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI:** Findings from Georgetown University's campus climate survey and our conversations with students, faculty, and staff highlight the myriad ways that belonging can impact learning. Our conversations about ableism, racism, and religious and spiritual discrimination indicate that some students on our campus continue to report feeling marginalized, unseen, or discriminated against.

In our episode on religious and spiritual diversity in the classroom, we heard from Imam Yahya Hendi.

**YAHYA HENDI:** If I were to classify the things I have heard, much of it has, or is done, in forms of jokes, where the professor jokes about a specific culture, a specific tradition, a specific practice within Islam-- making jokes about hijab and the head cover, making jokes about how Arabs eat, how Pakistanis eat, how Muslims eat. So jokes is one thing that have pushed so many of my Muslim students to come to my office. Rachel and I have couches-- we call them the crying couches-- where students come and cry.

**JOE KING:** Exclusion is a barrier to learning, as Rabbi Rachel Gardner and then Professor of Philosophy Alisa Carse explain.

**RACHEL GARDNER:** Not only is it a wound, they can't learn. You become less effective in the classroom, even just the name of your educational goals.

**ALISA CARSE:** But when students aren't thriving, they can't learn. So part of my job as a teacher is also to say, what's getting in the way of my students' learning? If you bring in discussions around things like obstacles to flourishing, all sorts of issues come onto the table, things like struggles around sexual orientation, feeling invisible on campus, depression, substance abuse, troubles at home. And getting them to think about that, in conjunction with rigorous philosophical materials, brings the materials to life. It also brings the philosophy back out into their lives.

**KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI:** In order to foster an environment where belonging is possible for all of our students, it might be helpful to start with some key principles. Georgetown's mission of *cura personalis*, for example, which is a profound care and responsibility for one another, offers a framework for being attentive to students' humanity and fostering a culture of care and belonging. Here's Donna Cameron, professor in the Department of Family Medicine, in the Medical Center.

**DONNA CAMERON:** I made my own personal goal to treat students the way we want the culture to be and do it quickly. So by that, I mean our institutional mission is *cura personalis*. So the cultural part has to do with the culture of inclusion and treating the whole person. The responsive part has to do with honoring the culture that we say we want to have, even in our treatment of students.

I like to remind them whenever I can that they're whole people, and they're not just here to learn information and skills. And so I like to start each class with some type of check-in. It's always about life or pick of the week or their biggest fear or something they're most proud of. I also like to let the students choose the next speaker, popcorn style. It's a way to share the power that a teacher might have.

Saying their names often-- so I'm always about trying to remind them that they're whole people. I want to remind them of our humanity, basically. One other thing that has worked really well-- emails between classes about current events, about I know you guys are having an exam, I wish you well-- just, again, a way to connect and remind them that they're human and that we can have a relationship that's not just teacher-student, but human to human.

**JOE KING:** Faculty showing vulnerability and their own humanity can go a long way in fostering a culture of belonging in the classroom, according to anthropology professor Amrita Ibrahim.

**AMRITA IBRAHIM:** One thing that I've definitely learned is that the more you humanize yourself as a professor and share of yourself, the students feel more comfortable. It may not be for every student, but I think that for those of us who find it easy to do-- I do find it easy to be quite relaxed and open with my students-- I think it's something that, definitely, we should embrace.

Those professors who might find it awkward to do so should still find a way to do it. Because it definitely makes for a more relaxed classroom atmosphere. So one, I think, is just being a little bit more yourself in a classroom setting and also recognizing that our students are people, that they have lives, that they're not just a body sitting in a classroom, and then you see them again next week.

They have lives. They do other things. They have other classes. They have other stresses. So recognizing that, I think, is really important. And letting them see that you recognize that is really important. Because then they see you as seeing them as a person. And that's important.

**KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI:** Durriya Meer, director of Georgetown's counseling and psychiatric services, agrees.

**DURRIYA MEER:** It's the little human touches that just opens up doors, or something like if they notice a student particularly struggling, especially when you see drastic changes or dramatic changes in the student's presentation, just saying that, you know, I've noticed this. And I don't want to pry, but I want to let you know that you're welcome to come talk to me. Or if not, we can figure out where you can get the help that you need.

**JOE KING:** And here's Carol Day, director of Health and Education Services.

**CAROL DAY:** The more you can be human, the more you can see them as co-creators of their learning environment.

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**KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI:** While it is common for students and professors to begin the student-teacher relationship on the first day of class, some of the faculty we talked with emphasized the opportunity to create a feeling of welcome for students before the first class meeting. Professor of Disability Studies Mimi Khúc and Professor Libbie Rifkin in the English department share their techniques for getting an early start on belonging.

**MIMI KHUC:** I actually do a pre-semester check-in. I send out a Google form-- I call it an access form-- where I ask students about their needs so that I can figure out if my syllabus can actually meet those needs. And so I do this at the beginning of semester. And I get students emailing me, grateful just for the form before classes even start.

And I haven't done anything yet. I haven't done anything to meet their needs yet. But just the fact of me asking, what are your needs, I recognize you have them, and I recognize everybody has needs, not just students who identify as disabled, not just students who are able to get accommodations through paperwork, but that everybody has access needs.

**LIBBIE RIFKIN:** I also, personally, individually met for 10 minutes apiece with all 70 of my students at the beginning of the semester for an access needs/learning styles check-in. And I'm hesitant to suggest that all faculty should or must do this. But I find it really useful in building a sense of trust with my students and just a sense of a kind of desire to know them that they experience. And then, also, I develop a document where I take notes and I at least have everything they identify as an access need down.

**JOE KING:** As Imam Yahya Hendi reminds us, sometimes this relationship can get off to a good start with something very simple.

**YAHYA HENDI:** The most simple, but it's important for students, butchering names. If you don't know how to say a specific name-- Ya-hi-ya, Ya-ya-- OK, just ask the students, how would you like me to say your name? Would you like me to refer you by your last name or your first name? And if it's the first name, how can I say it right?

And learn from it, and be ready to change and educate yourself on how to say it. It's worth it, for your sake as an instructor or staff or professor, and the sake of the student and the kind of relationship we want to build with our students.

**KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI:** In addition to learning how to pronounce students' names correctly, respecting a person's pronouns is an important aspect of caring for the whole person. This creates a culture of inclusion and belonging in learning spaces that has benefits for all learners. Here's Amena Johnson, the associate director of the LGBTQ Resource Center at Georgetown, with some tips on how to cultivate pronoun practices that support a gender-inclusive classroom without expecting yourself to approach things perfectly.

**AMENA JOHNSON:** Don't overthink it. I think a lot of times, people think this is-- they don't want to offend anybody. They don't want to hurt anybody's feelings. Most people have really good intentions, and so they overthink what they have to do. They think they need to know everything about this situation.

And you don't. We start doing things that we don't understand all the time. Driving, for example, when you start to learn how to drive a car, you don't how to drive a car. And I drive a car now, and I don't know everything about how that car works, right? But I still drive it.

And so you can learn as you go. Super simple stuff can really help here. So putting your pronouns in your email block, your email signature block-- simple, easy. Small things send signals to students and the rest of the community, as well, that you're welcoming and open.

When you introduce yourself, model how you would like students to say their pronouns. So for example, my name is Dr. Amena Johnson. My pronouns are she/her. And then you say to the students, I'd like you to introduce yourself, your name, as well as the pronouns that you would like me to use, if you wish.

And I say if you wish because some students won't feel comfortable doing that. Because they may feel that if they give a pronoun that they feel like doesn't align with the way they look, they may be outing themselves. If you do a pre-course survey, you can ask for their pronouns. And make sure you keep the confidentiality. You can ask, and it is OK to ask, is it OK if I use those pronouns in other settings?

**JOE KING:** Being thoughtful in these kinds of ways creates its own momentum, helping to build relationships that can keep growing. If you make it a really inclusive environment, students will come to you. They will say, hey, just wanted to let you know this because they feel comfortable doing that.

**KIM HUISMAN** Once the semester is underway, you can cultivate belonging by creating space for all students' voices. Here's  
**LUBRESKI:** Donna Cameron again, followed by Bob Bies, professor of management in the McDonough School of Business, sharing their approaches to participation.

**DONNA** I try to give every student who wants to a chance to speak. So I'll leave a lot of open spaces. I'll ask a question,  
**CAMERON:** and then I'll just wait until somebody starts talking. And if nobody starts talking, I'll say, I've learned a lot about waiting, and I'm happy to wait as long as you like.

**BOB BIES:** People who might not normally talk, that sense of belonging is really important. Once they're seen, they're heard. I try to create an environment where I try to allow them, as I like to say, unleash the greatness of who they are. Because they are somebody. And so I'm always trying to search for people that I haven't heard their voice. Because they do belong at Georgetown, and they need to have their voice heard.

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**JOE KING:** Faculty have shared with us ways they build student voices into their course design by creating assignments that place students' lived experiences and autonomy at the center of their learning. In addition, many faculty create assignments for which they provide a list of texts that students can then choose from.

**KIM HUISMAN** Providing students with an opportunity to speak as an authority on a subject of their choosing also demands deep  
**LUBRESKI:** listening. This helps build connections and community. Establishing a climate of trust and deep listening also goes a long way when conversations become difficult or personal. Professor and CNDLS staff member David Ebenbach mediated a live version of our religious and spiritual diversity conversation and offered this helpful reminder about the importance of setting up a safe classroom climate.

**DAVID EBENBACH:** If you have guidelines for how you're supposed to talk to each other, you can get ahead of problems. And when you have those guidelines, when a micro-aggression comes up, you can refer back to those guidelines and values. You can say, remember, we want to be the class that treats everybody with openness, curiosity, respect, enthusiasm. We're rooting for each other.

**JOE KING:** This doesn't have to be a moment of disconnection.

**DAVID EBENBACH:** Instead of calling people out, it could be helpful to call people in. Instead of, like, that's-- of course, sometimes things go very far, and maybe you have to be a little more extreme, but in most cases, you don't have to say, that's unacceptable, you're no longer a member of this class, get out of here, but instead, hey, you and everybody else, we all remember that there are some things that we've agreed to as a group about how we want to be with each other. So let's do that. Let's do that together. Let's honor our principles.

**KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI:** In addition to guidelines for class norms, we have heard a great deal about the power of clear expectations. As we try to make room for all students, we may feel pulled to be impossibly flexible, an increasingly hot topic among faculty as they seek to support students. In our conversations, faculty and staff have advocated both firmness and flexibility in the service of academic excellence. Here's Durriya Meer, followed by Carol Day.

**DURRIYA MEER:** I think it's not an or, it's more an and. It's important to be flexible. And, at the same time, it's important to be firm. As a faculty, you have responsibilities. But as a student, you have responsibilities, also. So I think setting some rules, setting some boundaries, from the very beginning that I'm happy to accommodate. At the same time, though, you have to understand your student responsibilities, also.

**CAROL DAY:** I think faculty need to set appropriate expectations and then not change much from those expectations and standards. Because continuity and structure is going to help. I think that consistency is really important.

And using students as partners in the classroom, asking them what they think, what kinds of learning-- now, they're very experienced. They'll tell you this particular class had this particular way of learning, and I learned well there, or this professor had this technique. So you can learn so much from them, even when your class is set, but using the class and their wisdom as you set the expectations for your class. And then try not to vary too much from that, except you need to be flexible and adaptable.

The more you can help understand them understand your learning process and what your expectations are and not shift things around too much. And tell them you're flexible. If you have a situation, personally, that you feel is really stressful or you can't meet a deadline, please let me know. And I think using that flexible but structured style, I think, probably works the best.

**JOE KING:** The ideal, then, is to strike a balance. When you hear the word flexibility, don't think of a contortionist from Cirque du Soleil who can twist into any shape. Instead, think of a person who's bendable enough that they don't pull a muscle reaching to tie their shoes-- someone, in other words, who provides structure and expectations but who can approach the complexity and demands of student life with realism about what makes the most sense for a student's circumstances, and your own, too. Assistant Dean of Georgetown College Javier Jiménez Westerman advises--

**JAVIER JIMENEZ** It's this balancing act of trying to figure out what that student needs, how to be flexible with them, how to really focus on what their individual needs are, but also what is appropriate and fair to the community. And what do I mean by that? A student who wants an extension of three months on an assignment, maybe there is something about their case that warrants that extension. But maybe there isn't. Maybe they have had challenges all along, and an extension isn't actually going to lead them to success.

Also, I have to think about the rest of the people in that class. There have to be guardrails put into place. And there are responsibilities that they are beholden to as students and there are responsibilities that we are beholden to as teachers and educators and professionals. Sometimes we have to stay no to students.

**KIM HUISMAN** Whatever expectations you set, it's important that your students know what they are. Feeling clear on course obligations and responsibilities helps the student feel like they belong there. Here's Allyson Even, a history teacher at the KIPP University Prep High School in San Antonio, Texas, who we interviewed for our episode on what students needed as we returned to in-person learning in fall of 2021.

**ALLYSON EVEN:** You need to have really clear expectations. What you are expecting from kids in the classroom, on campus, needs to be direct, and it needs to be clear. And that is what is respectful. Whatever you want students to do, please be clear with them. Because clear is kind.

**JOE KING:** As we said at the start of this episode, belonging matters. And we hope the strategies we've shared help you create that welcoming atmosphere in your classrooms. Of course, inclusive pedagogy isn't something you check off and complete. It's something you keep working on and developing. Here's Amrita Ibrahim.

**AMRITA IBRAHIM:** I mean, that's life, isn't it? [LAUGHS] As teachers, as mentors, if there's anything that I've learned from being a teacher, it's that you're just never done. You're always learning. And so you have to keep thinking of, how can I make this better? It's a process. It's a journey that you undertake differently each time you teach that course. And actually, that's what I love about teaching. It's just never the same. So I think of it as an opportunity. It's exciting. It's a challenge I really love to embrace. So bring it.

**KIM HUISMAN** We saw an opportunity to highlight a theme that just keeps resurfacing, regardless of what teaching and learning topic we tackle-- belonging. From setting up class norms and clear expectations to facilitating difficult discussions, we hope these tips have been helpful.

**JOE KING:** We hope you've enjoyed this episode of *What We're Learning about Learning*. This episode was made possible by many people at CNDLS, including Molly Chehak, Eddie Maloney, David Ebenbach, Sophie Grabiec, Eleri Syverson, and Stefanie Chae And a big thanks to the many contributors to this season finale episode. Thanks also to Milo Stout for creating life-changing music for the podcast.

For more information about our podcast series and our guests, check out our show notes, where you'll find links to previous episodes, information about how to share your thoughts and ideas with us, our website and blog, and other resources. Again, I'm Joe King.

**KIM HUISMAN** And I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski. Thanks for listening.  
**LUBRESKI:**

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