

ONLY ONE IN THE ROOM: HOW TO SUPPORT BLACK STUDENTS AS AN EDUCATOR

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Imagine you walk into a classroom, no one acknowledges you. You look around and realize that no one looks like you. You sit down, already nervous, and then your professor hands out a review sheet of information that you should already know. You look down at the paper and realize you do not know the answers to any of the questions, NOT ONE. As you look around, you see your classmates vigorously writing down answers with smiles on their faces, beaming with pride. Your head drops to the table, and you realize this is going to be a long semester.

Imagine the insecurity, loneliness, and fear you would feel. This is the reality for many Black students majoring in STEM who come from [underserved communities](#). As of 2015, Black graduates made up less than 5% of science and engineering [occupations](#). Black students in STEM are often met with many barriers to success such as [lack of preparation](#), [a sense of belonging](#), and [support from faculty](#).

Many Black students have fought hard to break through [generational hardships](#) to access education. By the time they make it to college, they are often [lacking the resources](#) needed to be successful. Students from underrepresented communities have come from school districts with [less funding and opportunities](#) than their peers. Additionally, many Black students have a [difficult time](#) balancing their school life and life back [home](#).

[First-generation students](#) may also be bearing the pressure of being the “[success story](#)” of the family, which can heavily weigh on them. It is important to recognize that Black first-generation students are carrying an [invisible identifier](#) of “first-generation student” that may lower their chance of success.

A [sense of belonging](#) is the key to both success and perseverance within higher education. If one does not feel seen, respected, or validated, why would they want to continue to try? Many students of color have a lower sense of belonging than their White counterparts, and it may be the reason for their [lower retention rates](#). Barriers such as microaggressions may lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation for Black students in higher education. Creating an environment that seeks to increase a sense of belonging does not have to be daunting.

[Creating this environment](#) begins on the first day of class. As an educator, introduce yourself, your passions, and your own personal successes and struggles, which you have endured on the path to your career. As an educator, use [language](#) that all students can understand. Remember, you are teaching a wide variety of students from diverse backgrounds. Fostering a positive learning environment can be as easy as asking your students if they need to hear a concept explained another way.

Black students need [YOU](#). They need you to see them as students and more importantly, as people. What you do, matters. How you say what you say matters. Students need support from their professors. As a professor, you must get to know your students. [Culturally responsive teaching](#) will allow you to teach to every student, not just teach to some. The key to culturally responsive teaching is to value traditional teaching methods while also incorporating some aspect of [culture](#) in which students can see themselves.

When you get to know your students and you incorporate information or things that they value, you will give students a better opportunity to connect with the material. Although it may seem taxing, you must create opportunity and access through your teaching instead of repeating oppressive behavior. [Black faculty](#) at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) tend to struggle with retention just as much as Black students, but connections between Black faculty and students have been found to help mediate both issues. [Mentorship](#), whether between same race or non-same race relationships, helps Black students succeed.

As an educator, it is up to YOU to make a change. You must break away from the status quo and stop being a part of a system that is ultimately [blocking](#) the success of Black students. As an educator, you must recognize the uphill battle that many of your students have gone through to have a seat in your science class. Provide resources, be supportive, listen more than you speak, and open the door for the opportunity that your students.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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