

Building Belonging in Your CS Classroom

A Guide for Faculty · BYU Computer Science

Every faculty member shapes whether students feel they belong in computer science. You don't need a new curriculum or special training — small, intentional choices add up to a classroom where everyone can thrive. Here is a practical starting point; deeper resources live on the CS Belonging site.

Start with Your Syllabus

- Not sure where to start? You're welcome to use the belonging statement below and adapt it to fit your course — so students know from day one that they belong.
- Review your syllabus language to be welcoming; state policies in positive terms that support student success.
- Explain the purpose of office hours; not every student knows what they are for or that they are welcome.

Syllabus Statement — a starting point to adapt

A Covenant Community of Belonging in Computer Science. *The BYU Computer Science Department is committed to building a covenant community of belonging where every student can learn, contribute, and thrive. We believe that the variety of backgrounds, experiences, talents, and perspectives each person brings enriches our learning and strengthens us as a whole — and we value every individual for what they uniquely contribute. Grounded in unity, mutual respect, and charity toward all, and consistent with the BYU Statement on Belonging, we strive to make this a place where everyone feels welcome. We heed the prophetic call to abandon attitudes and actions of prejudice toward any of God's children, and to treat one another with the dignity and respect each person deserves. Whether you're facing a challenge in this class, in the department, or in your life outside of it — anything affecting your ability to learn and succeed — please don't hesitate to reach out to your instructor or to the CS Director of Belonging and Advising, Jen Bonnett (jen@cs.byu.edu). You're not alone; we're here to listen and help connect you with the right support. You belong here, and we're glad you're part of this community.*

The First Days of Class

- Introduce yourself as a person — share a bit about your own path into CS, including a struggle. It helps students see that difficulty is normal.
- Learn students' names and how to pronounce them; ask when you're unsure.
- Set a welcoming tone: make clear that questions and mistakes are an expected part of learning.

Throughout the Course

- Normalize struggle out loud — remind students that this material is hard for everyone at first.
- Make expectations explicit; don't assume students already know the tools, workflows, or conventions.

- Praise effort and strategy rather than “natural” ability, and avoid language that signals who does or doesn’t belong in CS.
- Use varied examples and, where you can, highlight the diverse people who do computing.
- Give students time to think before calling on anyone, so quieter voices can participate.
- Invite feedback on the classroom climate partway through the term, and adjust.

Supporting a Struggling Student

- Notice the signs — a drop in performance, disengagement, or absence — and reach out with care.
- You don’t have to have the answer; listen, take them seriously, and help connect them to support (advising, or the resources on the CS Belonging site).
- For any concern about a student’s safety or wellbeing, connect them to BYU Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) and let the CS Director of Belonging and Advising know — don’t carry it alone.

Start Here — Five Small Habits

- 1 Add a belonging statement to your syllabus — adapt the one provided.
- 2 Learn and use students’ names.
- 3 Share a bit of your own story — including a struggle.
- 4 Say explicitly that questions and mistakes are part of learning.
- 5 Check in with students who seem to be pulling back.

Want to go deeper? The CS Belonging site gathers practical inclusive-teaching guides (including Duke, Carnegie Mellon, and Stanford), research on belonging in computing, and support from the BYU Center for Teaching & Learning.

Questions, or want to talk through a situation? Reach out to the CS Director of Belonging and Advising, Jen Bonnett — jen@cs.byu.edu.