

Resources for CAT Talk: Tips & Tricks for the First Week and Beyond

Curated scholarship and practical tools to accompany the August 18, 2026 CAT Talk

1. The First Five Minutes / First Day of Class

Lane, A. K., Meaders, C. L., Shuman, J. K., Stetzer, M. R., Vinson, E. L., Couch, B. A., Smith, M. K., & Stains, M. (2021). Making a first impression: Exploring what instructors do and say on the first day of introductory STEM courses. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 20(1), ar7.

<https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.20-05-0098>

An observational study of 23 introductory STEM courses. Instructors devote most of day-one time to relationship-building and classroom culture rather than content, and the “Instructor Talk” they use — positive or negative — appears to shape lasting impressions that influence student satisfaction and persistence.

Mowreader, A. (2024, June 26). Teaching tip: A more strategic syllabus day. *Inside Higher Ed*.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/academic-life/2024/06/26/how-professors-can-make-first-day-course-engaging>

A practitioner-facing piece (drawing on current faculty-development practice) proposing five ways to move beyond reading the syllabus aloud: personal introductions, get-to-know-you activities, syllabus-based tasks rather than lecture, collaboratively set expectations, and starting real content on day one.

2. First Impressions, Rapport, and Student Belonging

Walton, G. M., Yeager, D. S., et al. (2023). Where and with whom does a brief social-belonging intervention promote progress in college? *Science*, 380(6644), 499–505.

<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.ade4420>

A large, multi-site randomized study (the National Study of Learning Mindsets) testing a short belonging intervention early in the semester. Effects on GPA and persistence were strongest where campus structures and instructor practices actually supported the belonging message — a useful reminder that first-week messaging needs to be backed up by ongoing practice.

Flanigan, A. E., Akcaoglu, M., & Ray, E. (2022). Initiating and maintaining student-instructor rapport in online classes. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 53, 100844.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2021.100844>

Examines the specific instructor behaviors that build rapport in the crucial early weeks of a course, with direct relevance for the first online sessions of a semester.

Dost, G., & Mazzoli Smith, L. (2023). Understanding higher education students' sense of belonging: A qualitative meta-ethnographic analysis. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 47(6), 822–849.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2191176>

Synthesizes qualitative studies on what belonging feels like from the student's perspective, useful for framing why early relationship-building matters pedagogically, not just anecdotally.

Gilani, D., & Thomas, L. (2025). Understanding the factors and consequences of student belonging in higher education: A critical literature review. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 34. <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi34.1385>

A review of 118 studies connecting belonging to engagement, wellbeing, and retention; identifies experiential learning and individualized staff support as effective levers, and staff stereotyping as a factor that erodes belonging.

Souther, S. S. (2025). The power of belonging: Enhancing student success through inclusive teaching strategies. *The Scholarly Teacher*.

<https://www.scholarlyteacher.com/post/the-power-of-belonging-enhancing-student-success-through-inclusive-teaching-strategies>

Practical, early-semester-focused strategies: a “motivational syllabus,” student-created ground rules, name tents/welcome surveys/icebreakers, and small environmental touches (music, greeting students at the door) that signal belonging from day one.

Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP). (2024, August). How student experience and belonging interventions can support strong postsecondary outcomes.

<https://www.ihep.org/publication/student-experience-and-belonging-strong-outcomes/>

A policy-oriented synthesis reporting that belonging-focused interventions (growth-mindset framing, redesigned communication) have been associated with GPA gains of up to 12% and retention gains of up to 10%. Useful for making the institutional case for investing time in first-week practices.

3. Additional Beginning-of-Semester Strategies

Practitioner hubs, updated regularly, good for quick-reference handouts:

- Faculty Focus, *Five-Minute Starts: Fifteen Ideas to Ignite Your Class* — [facultyfocus.com](https://www.facultyfocus.com)
 - University of Iowa Center for Teaching, *Seven Ideas for Setting Up Your First Week for Success* (2024) — teaching.center.uiowa.edu
 - Northern Illinois University CITL, *How to Teach a Good First Day of Class* — niu.edu/citl
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