

## MAGNA CHARTA OBSERVATORY

# 2024 Student's Essay Competition

"What would you change about your higher education experience or environment to make it more inclusive for all who have the ability to benefit from it?"

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**Participation and relationship between students and educators as a means of inclusion in the higher education environment**

In general, when we think about inclusion, our first thought is about providing access, allowing marginalized groups in society to have access to certain spaces, such as the university. However, my main concern lies in ensuring that people not only gain entry but also remain and actively participate in the higher education environment.

In Brazil, there is a law that reserves 50% of spots in federal universities (quotas) for students from public schools. Within this allocation, priority is given to students from low-income families, black, brown ('pardos'), indigenous people or disabled individuals (BRASIL, 2012). Although this represents significant progress in affirmative action for admitting new students to higher education *space*, there is a lack of policies aimed at supporting inclusion throughout the academic process in terms of *participation*. There is an urgent need for assistance and encouragement so that university-enrolled students can **participate** with all their desire to learn.

Throughout my academic journey, I have met many professors and students deeply committed to being present in class. However, others lacked interest in being there, believing they would not be heard and respected in their specific conditions or because they would not learn in the proposed format. I wish this scenario were different; I would like to join any class and find people who desire, as much as I do, to be there, in pursuit of innovation and progress for our country, and improving living conditions for people whose education has the power to transform an entire future, as in my case. Achieving this requires that our diverse voices and perspectives are heard, fostering an environment where everyone feels secure to immerse themselves deeply in the learning process.

In considering participation as an essential part of inclusion and social justice, I embrace Nancy Fraser's two-dimensional concept of justice (2002), which posits that social justice entails fair **distribution** (such as access to university spots) and mutual **recognition** (respecting each other's voices and participation rights). Accordingly, to change my environment and make it more inclusive for all who can benefit from it, I propose enhancing **relationships** between students and professors, emphasizing mutual recognition. We might think that this is a small idea for a big problem, but this approach aims to include all marginalized groups in the higher education structure by empowering every person in the classroom to communicate openly, express their needs, challenge concepts, generate new ideas, and collectively produce knowledge, creating an open learning community (bell hooks, 2017) without superiority or indifference, characterized instead by kindness and affection, as Paulo Freire preached with his notion of 'boniteza' (1996).

Additionally, I would increase **dialogue and propositions** in classes so they become a moment of action, joint activity. According to research, students demonstrate better understanding and interest in content when they see its everyday applications. Moreover, when challenged to create, reflect upon, and interact with their peers, students' engagement and participation increase significantly (Tuleski et al., 2005).

The lack of intimacy and connection between the students and educators can hinder the learning process. For example, a newly arrived professor at my university proposed a dialogic class, different from the usual, but did not get student engagement. In this case, the lack of closeness may have prevented the class from stepping out of their comfort zone. To address situations like this, it would be beneficial to implement more **group dynamics** to generate trust and intimacy among peers. I remember a professor who brought a cotton string to class and asked each student to hold a piece while sharing a comment about the day's text, and then pass the string to another classmate. In the end, many participated and asked to speak. The professor concluded by saying, *"Did you realize how we became interconnected, forming this network of connections?"* For me, inclusion through participation in the learning process is about this: building a space for speaking and a "network" of connections collectively, from each one's uniqueness.

It would also be important to create **specific forums** for professors and student representatives to analyze participation in the university. Engagement could be measured through semester evaluation forms filled out by educators and students, as well as case reports exemplifying participation or its absence in the forums. Such discussions should result in **action plans** aimed at increasing engagement in the educational environment.

These changes can motivate professors, who are currently not encouraged to think about their importance day to day, through interaction built with the classes. I believe that motivated educators will develop increasingly **innovative pedagogical initiatives**. Consequently, establishing a prior bond will open space for greater acceptance of these methodologies by

students. Thus, we can expect more movement in the classroom and more diverse voices contributing to education in this space that is, above all, collective – created by everyone, not just professors and not just students.

I know that such proposals require professors to be open, as well as calling for responsibility and flexibility from the students to participate. However, I believe that by building **bonds of trust**, students who, for the most part, do not have a voice in the classroom – whether due to adverse economic conditions, race, gender, sexual orientation, or any other factor – will open up and be increasingly present if the environment is inviting to their plural voices. For this purpose, it is essential to actively seek out these profiles and bring them into the learning moment. Conversely, educators who were previously unmotivated or barely present at work will be able to creatively return to the classroom due to the invitation extended by the presence of their students.

I conclude this essay with a phrase I appreciate very much, which represents my passionate faith in education, my country, and the possibilities we have when we open ourselves to learn from one another: “The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (bell hooks, 2017).

## References

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