

# “CREATING A safespace” FOR LEARNING

“They learn that it’s a place they can reflect without judgment. It helps build trust and a solid foundation for learning.”

Dean Gage  
– Early College  
Social Science Instructor

Pictured, from left, are Mathematics Instructor Tricia Yonker, Science Instructor Jennifer Train, Early College Director Shannon Tripp, English Instructor Melissa Ausua and Social Science Instructor Dean Gage.

## Early College instructors focus on teaching, mentoring to support student success

Instructors in the Early College at Montcalm Community College program are more than teachers.

“They’re mentors, too,” said Early College Director Shannon Tripp.

“Everyone in education knows the best way to connect with your students and really get them to learn is to build a relationship with them, so they know that the people who are trying to teach them also care about them,” she said.

In its sixth year, the Early College program is a partnership between MCC and the Montcalm Area Intermediate School District, which allows high school students to earn up to two years of college or an associate degree or certificate as part of their high school learning experience. Students enter the program in their junior year. Twenty-eight Early College students are expected to graduate in May 2019, while 25 are in the 2020 class and 39 are in the 2021 class.

Four instructors deliver coursework in social studies, English, mathematics and science on the college’s Sidney campus.

“Our instructors each do things in their classrooms to get to know their students and get their students to understand that their classroom is a safe space,” Tripp said. “Students learn they can talk and answer questions, even incorrectly, and nobody is going to laugh at them or make fun of them. They realize that the classroom is a learning place.”

A 20 things that matter journal entry is one of the activities Social Science Instructor

Dean Gage uses to build relationships with his students.

“We do it 20 times throughout one semester and it’s 20 things that are important in life over and above all other things, like being respectful, being honest, that life isn’t all about money and others,” Gage said.

“Once we get going, they all jump into it. They get out their planners. They don’t complain that they have to do another journal entry. It’s important to them, and it is an activity they all enjoy doing,” he said. “They learn that it’s place they can reflect without judgment. It helps build trust and a solid foundation for learning.”

Mathematics Instructor Tricia Yonker engages students in number talks, which are informal conversations about math-related questions that are used to build mathematical concepts, dialogue and strategies to promote interaction in her classroom.

“I usually format the questions with a purpose to build a strategy for discussion. They like the fact that they can do it in a variety of ways and everybody can participate,” she said.

She also incorporates restorative circle exercises in her discussion.

“Typically, I’ll use the exercise at the beginning of the week, to get a feel for how their weekend was. It encourages them to share,” Yonker said. “I also use this exercise in mentoring groups – I’ve asked them really impersonal questions such as what’s your favorite flavor of ice cream – just to build culture.”

Creating an atmosphere of cooperation and teamwork while engaging the notion that reading and writing are life skills that are necessary in order to lead a full life are focal points in English Instructor Melissa Ausua’s classroom.

“I tell my students that writing is an art, not a science,” Ausua said. “There are rules, of course, and they must be learned before they can be bent, but that they can be bent to create beautiful sentences, essays or poems.”

“There is a lot of group and partner work in my classes,” she said, which helps build comradery among the students.

Through these classroom and mentoring activities, the instructors find that the students – who come from a variety of backgrounds and school districts – quickly become a unified group.

“It’s amazing how quickly the school district lines disappear, and they become just Early College students,” said Science Instructor Jennifer Train.

“It doesn’t take long for friendships to form between students from different school districts,” Tripp added.

Another tactic used throughout the program is to identify barriers student may have using the ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) quiz, which is a tally of different types of abuse, neglect and other hallmarks of a rough childhood.