



## Teaching with Brightspace: Building Classroom Community

Our series “Teaching with Brightspace” showcases the university’s new learning management system, which will officially replace Blackboard in Summer 2026 and is [available now](#). Each essay will highlight instructional applications and practice-based strategies for bridging students’ in-and out-of-class learning and offer examples that demonstrate how Brightspace tools can provide a venue for preparation, engagement, and transparency of assessment. We will start with one concept that is central to how we approach teaching and learning at Villanova: *unitas*, building community.

### What is the role of building community in creating and supporting a productive learning environment?

A substantial body of research underscores the critical role that a sense of community plays in promoting student engagement and academic success (Barkley & Major, 2022). Grounded in the Augustinian ideal of *unitas*, we recognize the inherent benefits of a robust classroom community—students support one another, engage with the course material, and experience increased satisfaction with the course. However, fostering a welcoming and inclusive learning space is also central to promoting student participation, motivation, and academic achievement (Hogan & Sathy, 2022).



With Brightspace, you have access to tools that can extend the community-building work you already do. The examples below highlight features that foster connection and dialogue beyond the physical classroom, supporting your efforts to cultivate a continuous, inclusive, and pedagogically grounded learning community.

### Community Building Activities

The activities below illustrate how Brightspace tools can be used to foster connection in different ways. From light touch activities—introductions with audio recordings and profile widgets—to the more defining practice of building a community agreement through surveys, each approach supports student-centered and meaningful engagement.

### Inclusive Name Pronunciation with Brightspace Audio Recording

Angela Hanson, Assistant Teaching Professor, Mathematics & Statistics, uses Brightspace’s native audio recording feature to build community:

On the first day of class, I always ask my students to share some information with me on an index card so that I can make flash cards to learn their names and important information about them. I've been able to ask about names and pronouns and fun ice

breakers too, but I've always struggled to find an effective way to capture name pronunciation. In Brightspace, I am now able to make an easy, quick assignment for students that allows them to record how to pronounce their name directly in Brightspace without use of another app, and I can listen to them on repeat as many times as I need to practice saying their names correctly. It has been a fun feature for students and a great opportunity for me to connect with them.

With this activity, Dr. Hanson affirms her students' identities and backgrounds, models respectful engagement among peers, and strengthens the classroom community.

***In practice:*** Dr. Hanson uses the following assignment, posted in Brightspace, to supplement an in-person introduction activity:

Please submit an audio recording with the following information:

- What you would like me to call you
- Last name(s)
- Optional: pronouns

Make sure you speak slowly and annunciate clearly. Also try to record your audio in a quiet place. There is an example recording attached to this assignment for you to listen to. To add your audio file, click on "Record Audio" at the bottom of the assignment submission window.

### Faculty Homepage Personalization with the Profile Widget



Javier Cabezas Zapata, Assistant Teaching Professor, Spanish, leverages the Instructor Single Profile Widget to create an approachable and personalized introduction for his students. This "About Me" allows faculty to share a brief biography and photo, displayed on the course homepage. Dr. Cabezas Zapata uses this space to also include his office hours along with a direct link for students to schedule meetings. He also shares a Spotify playlist featuring Spanish music, offering students an informal cultural touchpoint. Through this thoughtful use of the Single Profile Widget, Dr. Cabezas Zapata personalizes his course, fostering connection and accessibility, and extending his presence beyond the classroom while also encouraging face-to-face engagement.

***In practice:*** The Single Profile Widget is included in the default homepage of every course. Beyond listing contact information, you might consider sharing something personal or course-specific—a brief story, a cultural reference, or an interest—to begin to build connection with the students.

### Collaborative Community Agreement

Community agreements are shared guidelines developed collectively by students and faculty to support respectful and productive classroom interactions. Establishing these agreements early in the semester helps cultivate a learning environment that affirms learning as a shared and social process to which all members contribute. By inviting students to contribute to the norms that shape their experience, faculty foster a sense of ownership and belonging.

This collaborative process lays the groundwork for trust, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to the course community from the beginning.

We may use [Brightspace surveys](#) to co-create community guidelines using a three-step process: (1) Collect ideas. Launch an open-ended Brightspace survey where students share the values,



behaviors, and expectations they believe will support a positive learning environment; (2) Build consensus. Create a follow-up survey where students review and vote on the statements generated in the first survey. This anonymous process allows every student to contribute equally and highlights the values most widely shared; (3) In-class discussion. Bring the results into class for discussion, refinement, and agreement. In this step, you and your students finalize the community agreement, post it in Brightspace. You may revisit the document periodically to reaffirm

commitments or make appropriate adjustments. This blended approach extends the work of community-building across both online and classroom spaces, giving students multiple avenues to contribute while modeling how collective dialogue can strengthen a learning community.

**In Practice:** Brightspace surveys are located within the Course Admin tab of your course navigation bar. Learn more about [establishing community agreements](#) or see an [example](#).

As you begin to apply Brightspace tools to your respective course(s), we invite you to [share with us](#) how you have used Brightspace tools to build community. Your examples, featured in future issues, will help spark ideas for teaching with Brightspace.

### Prompts to Get You Started

How do you currently build community in your courses, both in our current LMS and in person, and how might Brightspace help you extend those practices? What teaching activities might you want to keep, and what might you do differently?

**Brightspace Support and Training:** VITAL's *Teaching with Brightspace* is an easy-to-use faculty guide to Brightspace course design, engagement, and assessment. [Enroll now](#). UTS-Instructional Technologies offers a range of workshops on Brightspace architecture and tools. You can see workshop descriptions and register on the [university calendar](#).

Authored by Hetal Thaker, Assistant Director for Instructional Technologies Integration, October 2025. We thank Drs. Angela Hanson and Javier Cabezas Zapata for their contributions.

#### References:

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