

# Finding Joy and Building a Future of Constructive Collaboration

With Nathan Carpenter

[Oberlin College](#)

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It might seem like a no-brainer to ensure students have the best experience in college. Still, bringing people from different backgrounds, time zones, and experiences to transition smoothly into life in higher education could be challenging. However, constructive collaboration from people who have passed through that phase can ensure students have a better transitioning experience.

Constructive collaboration, whether on or outside the campus, sparks creative problem-solving and encourages value creation. But even with the noblest intentions, it's not enough to bring a group of people or students together and expect a great team to form on its own. This is where specially designed programs and educational tools such as ePortfolios serve as a missing link to help you feel more connected and collaborate more effectively.

In this two-part interactive Digication Scholars Conversations podcast, Nathan Carpenter, the Director of Academic Peer Advising and Coordinator for Strategic Initiatives in the College of Arts and Sciences at Oberlin College, will discuss the importance of peer advising and how students benefit from constructive collaboration inside and outside the campus.

## The Need for Collaborative Learning with Peers

Collaborative learning can occur in large groups or peer-to-peer settings. It is an encompassing term for diverse educational approaches comprising peer learning or students and teachers collaborating.

Peer learning involves collaborative intellectual effort where students work in groups of two or more, mutually discussing concepts and seeking solutions to problems. Through peer instruction, Oberlin has built a culture of allowing more experienced students to help newer students through transitioning to college and navigating course registration and academic advising. It's a system that helps new students feel like they have the tools they need right from their first semester. It guides them to make intentional choices around their academic pathway and the areas they want to explore. Of course, their academic advisor is their primary guide in that respect. Still, the older students are essential and effective in helping new students know how to make the most of their newbie experience, what questions to ask, and how to navigate resources.

Nathan mentioned that there are many reasons why peer mentorship can be helpful as a supplement to the excellent advising that students receive from faculty and staff at Oberlin.

First, students find it more reassuring to see someone who was in their shoes not long ago helping out. Besides raising their confidence bar, these new students will begin to look forward to when they can help juniors transition and settle into the school system in the future.

Furthermore, it also is a form of experiential learning. The students will gain real-life experiences, such as leadership and self-management skills, better concept retention, improved critical thinking, establishing connections and building relationships, gaining wider knowledge and skills, and fostering team collaboration.

## Building a Future of Constructive Collaboration

Oberlin has set a standard for constructive collaboration through programs like the Sophomore Opportunities and Academic Resources (SOAR) and Peer Advising Leaders (PAL) programs. Both are designed to help students transition into Oberlin, improve collaborative learning, and achieve better education outcomes.

The PAL program aims to help and support all new students in community building. First-year students are guided through a seamless transition to make the most of their first-year experience.

SOAR is fundamentally about helping students navigate those key moments of sophomore year that all students encounter. Both programs aim to help students make important educational decisions inside and outside the classroom. Because of the beneficial effects of early planning, it is believed that students will find it much easier to make the most of the opportunities that come their way.

Speaking on future plans for the programs, Nathan said they would continue to evaluate how these programs can be best positioned to support students. Also, Oberlin's partnership with Digication has enriched these programs in many ways, since students can use ePortfolios to build and share their academic goals and interests. According to Nathan, the portfolios students build help draw connections between theory and practice. Students can identify and articulate problems, clearly define why they are passionate about an issue, and record their experiences addressing it. Furthermore, the ePortfolio provides students with an enabling digital space to build, share, reflect, archive, and continue to improve themselves. And as a tool that aids reflection and planning, the ePortfolio's versatility aids constructive collaboration at different levels.

## The Effects of a Collaborative Classroom

Collaborative classroom effects are seen through improved communication between peers, teachers, and students. Also, it saves time, improves working relationships, reduces repetition and duplication of effort, and improves shared experiences between people.

The collaborative classroom has been shown to equally develop thinking skills among peers, boost their self-esteem, and prepare students for leadership positions through experiential learning. In addition, group interactions and programs can amplify deductive reasoning while improving social and interpersonal skills.

Finally, collaborative learning requires the participation of all parties. It is generally based on group interaction and learning principles, peer feedback, and cooperation. In addition, technology such as laptops, ePortfolios, tablets, and smartphones are employed to improve class participation, discussions, and knowledge sharing. All of these make constructive collaboration a valuable tool that prepares students for the future and improves their employability.

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