

You're on Mute

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“What’s that? You *prefer* a Zoom lecture? To teach *optics*?” A few years ago, the word “Zoom” was unfamiliar. Today, Zoom is part of our common vernacular, and we use it as both a noun and verb. In the world of academia, discussing the benefits and disadvantages of virtual learning remains one of the most common debates. While many people share concern that virtual learning is impersonal, my experience as an educator has shown inclusive classrooms can be created even over Zoom. In my Monroe Community College *Introduction to Optics* class, which meets over Zoom on Mondays and Wednesdays, my virtual classroom is made up of students in Rochester, a precision optics apprentice in Maryland, an optics company executive in New Jersey, an optics enthusiast from California, and students from Washington State and Bahrain. Zoom has provided unprecedented access to students all over the world.

A virtual classroom provides for more diversity. Within our class we have artists, musicians, gamers, chefs, mechanics, and athletes with different genders, races, socio-economic backgrounds, veteran status, and age. What is important to every student’s success is a sense of community. In our Monroe Community College Optical Systems Technology program, we not only train world-class optics technicians, but we also establish an inclusive community.

With the curriculum stored on our Monroe Community College learning management system, I can afford the time to start each class by greeting every student. Learning about each student—as a means to both take attendance and check in—takes times, but our 100% retention rate demonstrates that the time is well-spent. And end-of-semester surveys reveal that students greatly value the time devoted to learning about their classmates. In addition to learning about Snell’s law, polarization, how optical fiber works, and other fundamentals of optics, we celebrate lacrosse and soccer games won, successful car

brake changes, movie recommendations, Monday night pool league wins, 50th birthdays, meals cooked, and Ramadan observances.

An inclusive community combined with the triad of knowledge, ownership, and experiential learning is what enables students, and all people, to excel. And the evidence shows that an inclusive community *can* be established over Zoom.