

Teaching Institute March 2026: Teacher's Bookshelf

Teaching Men of Color & Fight Club

"In 2022, 57% of male high school graduates enrolled in college, compared to 66% of their female counterparts. While the percent of women immediately in college has seen a steady increase, only recently stabilizing, the percent of men enrolling in college has been more stagnant. The rate of immediate college enrollment for men is the same in 2022 as it was in 1964. Rates also fell sharply in 2021, resulting in the widest gender gap in immediate enrollment since 1968—favoring women rather than men—at 14.6 percentage points" (AIBM).

I teach *Fight Club* because it gives students, particularly young men, a space to examine the toxic ideals of masculinity that have been sold to them as normal. Palahniuk's novel dramatizes what happens when men are denied authentic emotional expression, mental health care, meaningful community, and a sense of purpose outside of consumerism. For many of my students, this text hits differently than traditional literary works because it names something they've felt but haven't had language for.

Luke Wood's *Teaching Men of Color* has fundamentally shaped how I approach teaching. Writing with Frank Harris III and Khalid White, Wood argues that student success — particularly for men of color — requires four key elements: challenge, support, high expectations, and authentic care. The last two are what Wood calls "preconditions" that must be established before challenge and support can even take hold. High expectations disrupt the socially ingrained messages of inferiority that many men of color have already internalized, communicating clearly that faculty believe in their capacity to succeed. Authentic care goes hand in hand with this: Wood argues that even when support is available and useful, students won't access it if they don't trust that faculty genuinely care about them as whole people, which means personally, not just academically. For men of color especially, that apprehension to seek help is real, and authentic care is what builds the trust to lower that barrier.

Fight Club is one example of a vehicle for putting these principles into practice. When I bring this text into the classroom, I'm signaling high expectations. I trust my students to engage seriously with a challenging, morally complex work. And when students, especially young men of color, analyze Tyler Durden's philosophy and ask why it's so seductive, they're doing exactly the kind of critical self-reflection that requires a classroom environment built on trust. That's where authentic care matters: students need to know they can be vulnerable and honest in their analysis — about masculinity, about their own experiences — without judgment. The novel invites students to examine the gap between performed toughness and genuine strength, and that conversation only happens when Wood's preconditions are already in place.

Teaching this novel isn't about the violence or the spectacle or Brad Pitt (though they do help, I'll admit). It's about giving students a mirror and a critical framework at the same time. Wood's model reminds me that for many of my male students, the classroom can feel like a space that doesn't belong to them, even

a feminine space. Choosing texts that speak to their experiences of alienation, identity, and belonging and coupling that with genuine belief in their ability and authentic investment in their success is how I try to close that gap.

Teaching Men of Color

<https://coralearning.org/product/teaching-men-of-color-in-the-community-college/>

- This is a month-long training available for teachers
- The main take away that sits with me in everything I do (in the classroom and building the class - policies etc.) is their training around positive messaging and authentic care.
 - **Positive Messaging**
 - Create an environment that welcomes engagement
 - Criticize privately, praise publicly
 - Increase validation and sense of belonging
 - Avoid micromessaging/microaggressions
 - **Authentic Care:** “a blend of high expectations, personal validation, and genuine care that fosters trust and academic success.”
 - What this looks like in my classroom:
 - Noticing and checking in on students
 - Arriving a few minutes early and leaving a few minutes late
 - Connecting with students as individuals
 - Being willing to engage with men outside of class (wave/say hello)
 - Intrusive interventions
 - Step in if you see students struggling - “26% of Black and Latino men reported uncomfortability with seeking help” (43).
 - Avoid “approach me first/prove yourself” stances
 - Check in frequently - “you okay?”
 - Bring students to supports rather than just tell them about them

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I teach *Fight Club* because it gives students — particularly young men — a space to examine the toxic ideals of masculinity that have been sold to them as normal. Palahniuk's novel dramatizes what happens when men are denied authentic emotional expression, mental health care, meaningful community, and a sense of purpose outside of consumerism. For many of my students, this text hits differently than traditional literary works because it names something they've felt but haven't had language for.

Luke Wood's *Teaching Men of Color* has fundamentally shaped how I approach this work. Writing with Frank Harris III and Khalid White, Wood builds on Sanford's classic model of student success — which holds that students need both academic challenge and adequate support — and argues that for men of color, two preconditions must come first. Before students can rise to a challenge, they need to know their instructor holds high expectations for them, actively countering the internalized messages of inferiority many men of color have already received. And before students will actually use available support, they need to trust that faculty genuinely care about them as whole people — personally, not just academically. Wood calls this authentic care, and without it, support goes unused. For men of color especially, the apprehension to seek help is real; authentic care is what builds the trust to lower that barrier.

Fight Club puts these principles into practice. Assigning a morally complex, challenging (an unexpected) text signals high expectations. It shows I trust my students to do serious work. And when students, especially young men of color, analyze why Tyler Durden's philosophy is so seductive, they're doing critical self-reflection that only happens in an environment built on trust. Students need to know they can be honest about masculinity and their own experiences without judgment. That conversation requires Wood's preconditions to already be in place.

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A month-long training available for teachers

The core takeaway that shapes everything I do — in the classroom and in building course policies — is Wood's framework around **positive messaging** and **authentic care**.

Positive Messaging

- Create an environment that welcomes engagement
- Criticize privately, praise publicly
- Increase validation and sense of belonging
- Avoid micromessaging and microaggressions

Authentic Care: "a blend of high expectations, personal validation, and genuine care that fosters trust and academic success."

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- Noticing and checking in on students
- Arriving a few minutes early and leaving a few minutes late
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Intrusive interventions:

- Step in when students are struggling — "26% of Black and Latino men reported uncomfortability with seeking help" (43).
- Avoid "prove yourself first" stances
- Check in frequently: "You okay?"
- Bring students to support services rather than just pointing them toward them

