



BACK TO SCHOOL WITH BELONGING

FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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VIRGINIA
College Personnel Association

This resource was inspired by the work of Tally Botzer, Karen Kochel, and students enrolled in Child Development (PSYC 311) at the University of Richmond in Spring 2021 and 2022.

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INTRODUCTION

Ample research shows that students who feel a sense of belonging are more likely to succeed academically and socially. Belonging is therefore a critical priority for colleges and universities, as direct links can be made between feelings of belonging and academic performance, retention, school culture, on-time graduation, and sustained engagement. While the word belonging is being increasingly embraced, understanding of the concept and implementation of practices to foster belonging vary within and across institutions. This guide is designed to highlight evidence-based practices for colleges and universities working to foster an institution-wide commitment to belonging.

Here are four core principles for colleges and universities to effectively foster belonging:

1

Your institution should have a shared definition of belonging that all stakeholders know and understand.

2

Cultivating belonging is the responsibility of all institutional stakeholders, including faculty, staff, students, administration, alumni, and community partners.

3

Cultivating belonging requires more than an event or program. Instead, belonging should be embedded into the culture of an institution as a sustained priority and practice.

4

Efforts to foster belonging must be regularly measured, with attentiveness to the needs of and responses from diverse populations within an institution.

In alignment with these principles, this guide provides an overview of belonging, learning, and the brain, followed by recommendations related to Identities, Interactions, Infrastructure, and Institutional Context.

BELONGING, LEARNING, AND THE BRAIN

FOSTERING A SENSE OF BELONGING AT SCHOOL IS GOOD FOR STUDENTS—AND THEIR BRAINS.

By Terrell L. Strayhorn Ph.D.

The importance of fostering a sense of belonging in educational learning spaces cannot be overstated. Research has shown that students who feel a strong sense of belonging in these environments are more likely to be cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally engaged, confident, and successful in their academic pursuits. In this article, we will explore the benefits of fostering a sense of belonging in K-12 and college classrooms and laboratories, and how feelings of belonging positively affect the brain through the neurotransmitters serotonin, dopamine, and oxytocin.

What Is Sense of Belonging?

Let's start with a definition of sense of belonging. It refers to the feeling of being accepted, valued, respected, and included in a particular group or community, just as you are (Strayhorn, 2019).

In educational contexts, it means feeling like a part of the class, sports team, living-learning community, or lab group. It is a shared faith that one's needs will be met by the organization and other members of the group through a mutually beneficial commitment to being together.

When students feel like they belong, they are more likely to participate in discussions and activities, attend class regularly, collaborate on projects, stay in school, and seek out help when they need it. Figure 1 presents data from an exploratory analysis conducted for my address, showing a significant

correlation between students' sense of belonging and academic grades. As the figure shows, students who lack a sense of belonging (i.e., alienation) are much more likely to be placed on "academic warning," compared to peers with a strong sense of belonging who are well-positioned to earn academic awards and scholarships.

Fostering students' sense of belonging in educational environments yields numerous benefits. Previous research, some of which is [my own](#), has shown that students who feel like they belong are more likely to be engaged academically, involved socially, and motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically, among other positive outcomes.

They are more likely to show up on time, participate actively in discussions and group activities, and less likely to

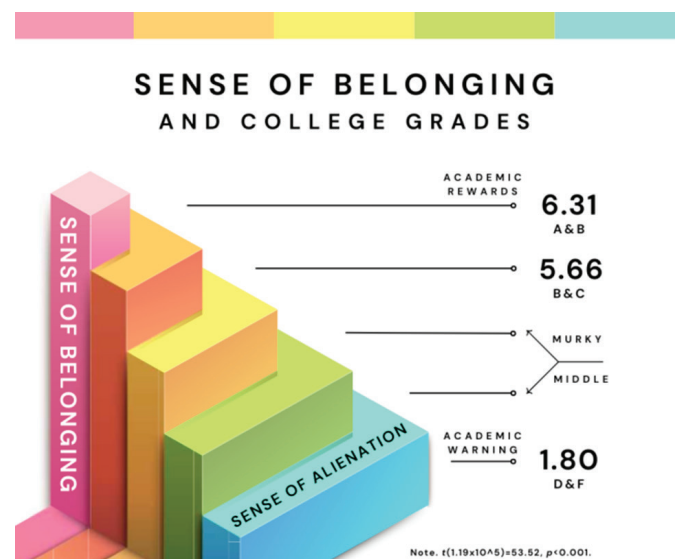


Figure 1. Source: Terrell Strayhorn/Created by author

worry about being prejudged or treated like a stereotype. Students who feel a sense of belonging are also more likely to have a positive attitude toward their academic pursuits, which leads to better performance, higher retention, and greater success—and, yes, they are more likely to go on to be engaged and generous alumni.

Sense of Belonging and the Brain

Another important benefit of fostering a sense of belonging in educational settings is the impact it has on the brain. Studies shed light on the neural correlates of social participation and belonging.

For example, [one study](#) analyzed magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) data from 40,000 people in the United Kingdom. Researchers found that regular attendance and engagement in social clubs and related activities produced wide-ranging deviations in intranet work connectivity, as well as within-network function connections. Specifically, results showed that volume variations in the default mode network and limbic network were associated with participation in social activities such as religious groups, sports teams, and social clubs.

Applied to education, when students establish trusting relationships with teachers, make friends with accepting peers, [cooperate in purposeful learning](#) exercises, and join registered student organizations, they activate regions of the brain associated with stress reduction, openness, and happiness. The same is true for Black students who enjoy experiencing “a home away from home” in campus cultural centers and LGBTQIA+ students in gay-straight alliances in high

schools or resource centers in college. All of this can serve as a buffer against sickness, depression, and disease.

Feeling like one belongs through strong, supportive social connections activates reward-related regions of the brain (e.g., ventromedial prefrontal cortex) and triggers the release of “feel good” neuropeptides (or transmitters) such as serotonin, dopamine, and oxytocin. Oxytocin is generally defined as a natural hormone produced by the hypothalamus that has a range of positive effects on one’s mental, physical, and emotional health. Not only is it released when certain regions of the brain are activated, but it is also stimulated by trusting touches, hugs, spoken affirmations, and close bonds.

And not only does it enable or strengthen neuron connectivity—a core element of neural health that powers lightning-fast communication among different brain functions—but it also promotes feelings of bonding, trust, and connection with others. Studies have shown that increased levels of oxytocin in the brain are linked to enhanced feelings of social connection and belonging. It is activated when students form and enjoy strong, positive relationships with faculty mentors, play safely with peer teammates, share space in living-learning communities, or learn from culturally responsive educators who care about them and their academic success.

Sense of Belonging, Learning, and the Brain

The release of these neurotransmitters in response to a sense of belonging has been shown to have numerous positive effects on the brain and body. For example, it can reduce stress and act as

a buffer against anxiety and depressive symptoms. Medical research shows that having a friend present during a serious procedure lowers physiological measures of stress, worry, and fatal thoughts. It also increases executive functions and decision-making.

Positive support from others stimulates neuropeptide release that reduces stressful neural responses associated with bandwidth exhaustion and burnout among physicians, nurses, and frontline workers, according to scientific data. Cognitive science and mental health studies have shown that elevated levels of stress-reducing neurotransmitters like

oxytocin can significantly improve mood, enhance learning and boost memory retention, which, in turn, promotes overall well-being. Figure 2 (below) presents a graphical illustration of these positive outcomes, along with promising practices for achieving them in education.

Conclusion

Fostering a sense of belonging in educational learning spaces is vital for creating a positive and engaging environment that promotes student success. Not only does it improve academic outcomes, but it also has numerous positive effects on mental



Figure 2. Source: Terrell Strayhorn/Created by author

and emotional well-being through the activation of reward-related regions of the brain and the release of positive neurotransmitters like oxytocin, which enables neural connectivity, brain function, and overall well-being.

Creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment where students feel valued, accepted, and superbly supported will set them up for success both academically and personally. It also benefits their brain and that, dear friends, is the bright line of connection between sense of belonging, learning... and the brain.

Insights for this blog were drawn from my recent keynote address at the [2023 Learning & The Brain \(L&B\) Conference](#) held in New York City. Special thanks to the conveners and planning committee for the opportunity to share my voice on these issues using examples drawn from my current and ongoing funded research. For more, check out [The Belonging Lab](#).

References

Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

This article was originally published in Psychology Today. It is reprinted with permission from the author.



About Terrell L. Strayhorn, Ph.D.

Professor. Public Speaker. Provocateur. Dr. Terrell Strayhorn is an internationally-recognized authority on sense of belonging and using scientific evidence to (re)engineer or (co)create conditions where diverse people can live, learn, work, and thrive. He has published over 200 academic publications including peer-reviewed journal articles, data-based book chapters, and nationally-circulated policy reports. His award-winning book, *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students*, breaks new ground on the topic and has been highly cited in shaping other studies.

Dr. Strayhorn is Professor of Education and Psychology at Virginia Union University, where he also directs research in the Center for the Study of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). He is a Fellow of the American Governing Board's Institute for Leadership & Governance, member of the American Psychological Association, and Diversity Scholar-in-Residence at Harrisburg Area Community College. He is President/CEO at Do Good Work Consulting Group and serves on the board of Psychologists of Color, Inc., MEN Inc., Rainbow Labs, and the MCT Education Foundation, to name a few.

A highly sought public speaker, gifted orator, and academipreneur, Professor Strayhorn has delivered thousands of keynotes and invited lectures at institutions and Fortune 500 companies across the globe. His research and scholarship have been featured in many influential media outlets, including the Washington Post, Huffington Post, Entrepreneur, and runs the "Belonging Matters" blog at Psychology Today. He's host of Do Good Work podcast, a team-builder, and a proud member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated.

IDENTITIES

Positive identity representation and development in higher education are important for fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment. When students see their identities reflected in the curriculum, faculty, and campus culture, it can validate their experiences and enhance their sense of belonging. Diverse representation can encourage critical thinking, allowing students, faculty, and staff to engage with different perspectives and challenge beliefs and biases.

To support higher education professionals in addressing and preventing any barriers to inclusion, we recommend:

- Consider identity in decision making processes and ensure that programs and offerings are inclusive of the diversity of the campus and reflective of the student population
- Design curriculum and courses that reflect the identities of the students you serve.
- Build identity exercises into curriculum to encourage students to explore their own identities and the identities of those around them
- Offer affinity spaces, which have been [proven to improve morale, boost creative thinking, reduce stress, and increase cultural awareness.](#)
- Be mindful of [potential challenges when implementing affinity groups](#) on campus
- Pronounce names correctly, and understand [the consequences of not doing so](#)
- Ask about and respect students' names and pronouns, and [work to establish an LGBTQ+ inclusive classroom](#)
- Widely distribute a [calendar of holidays and festivals](#) to ensure that major events do not conflict with religious and cultural observances.



DO

LEARN

By taking the time to understand the relationship between identity and student development, faculty and staff will see more positive interactions with and among students, the creation of inclusive learning environments, and an increased likelihood of student engagement. ([source: Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning](#)).

Explore the following racial identity development resources:

- [How Racial Identity Shapes Academic and Personal Success](#)
- [Let's Talk About Race – Racial Identity Development](#)
- [Uncomfortable but Necessary: White Faculty Identity Development & Race Conversations](#)

Learn about [\(Mis\)Understanding Students: Approaches to Affirming Student Identities](#)

Explore the [A.F.F.I.R.M. framework](#) to consider research-based ways to affirm student identity

ACTIVITIES

The [Social Identity Wheel Activity](#) can be applied across disciplines to encourage identity reflection among students

Explore inclusive teaching practices through the [Center for Advancement of Teaching Excellence](#)

These [bite sized inclusive teaching strategies](#) include quick, time-friendly approaches to create a more inclusive classroom environment

Create an [Affirmation Station](#) with prompts that affirm student identities

INTERACTIONS

As colleges and universities not only influence their learning communities but also impact larger society, meaningful interactions around campus present a key opportunity to deepen a collective sense of belonging. Yet, given the range of backgrounds, contexts, and encounters present at high education institutions, finding techniques that foster belonging for all may prove challenging.

To overcome potential barriers to belonging, whether in academic courses or campus events, virtual learning or residence halls, during tense climates or in-between them, we recommend:

- 
- Design curricula with content that encourages students to [share personal narratives around the subject matter](#)
 - Create campus life events and activities centered on sharing stories relevant to personal life and academic encounters
 - Prioritize [outreach to first-year students](#) to support belonging
 - Provide opportunities for community engagement events hosted on campus and virtually that are relevant to students and the broader geographical area
 - Collect information from students who do not live on campus to determine the most supportive modes of participation and follow-up by individual need
 - Co-create and reinforce norms as a tool for [fostering dialogue, navigating conflict, and promoting restorative practices](#)
 - Embed [language justice principles](#) into institutional events, including traditions, classes, and social gatherings
 - Coordinate opportunities for multiple student groups to collaborate on campus activities and special learning events
 - Begin [traditions such as “Values Day”](#) that foster deliberative dialogue

LEARN

The Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities' [Guide to Constructive and Inclusive Dialogue](#) provides tips and guidance for how to design and facilitate dialogues

Explore [ways to build belonging in a virtual environment](#)

Consider practices that can [foster intercultural competence in the classroom](#)

Learn about ways to design [reciprocal service learning experiences](#)

Discover [ways to foster dialogue and understanding on campus](#)

Identify practices that [support dialogue skill-building](#)

ACTIVITIES

[Create a Belonging Story](#) as a way to promote self-reflection and connectedness with others

Use [check-ins to build community in classrooms](#)

Icebreakers can be a particularly valuable tool to [foster joy and connection in online classrooms](#)

Select [activities to foster dialogue, discussion, and empathy](#)

INFRASTRUCTURE

Belonging should be embedded within all departments of a college or university. Students need to not only know what support services are available at their institution, but also need experience engaging with the services individually. And, these services must work together effectively in order to maximize belonging for both students and employees.

Below and on the next page are some suggested techniques and ideas that can be used both across departments and within specific contexts.

- Consider how various departments on campus (including those beyond ones traditionally considered as student-serving) can contribute to belonging. For example:
 - Advancement and Alumni Relations should [identify ways for individuals to be included and celebrated](#) for contributions to the institution beyond financial donations
 - Campus Safety should have practices in place for [communication with students during a time of collective crisis](#). Additionally, they should consider experiences with and perceptions of law enforcement and try to proactively build relationships.
 - Communications and Marketing should consider text and photos on the institutions' website and in publications
 - Financial Aid should be aware of the financial stressors students may experience and the [impact of perceived ability to pay on overall feelings of belonging](#)
- Make the case as a [strategic imperative, with transparent communication and progress tracking](#)
- Focus on belonging in new employee onboarding so that all employees are aware of the institution's commitment and practices



DO



- Develop signage and messaging that communicates the institution's commitment to belonging
- Offer regular professional development and workshops that reinforce the institution's definition of belonging and how all stakeholders can advance that commitment
- Ensure that belonging efforts also include a [focus on employee belonging to support morale and retention](#)
- Have clear protocols for [responding to incidents of bias](#)

SPOTLIGHT

1

A private university matches current students with alumni through a structured mentorship program to support participation in opportunities such as internships, study away, and/or research projects.

2

When an institution saw a significant increase in the number of international students, they organized structured conversations between those students and Dining Services leaders to ensure that there were culturally and religiously inclusive options being served in the Dining Hall.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Feeling a sense of belonging is highly individualized. While there are structures and practices that may work across contexts, leaders should be mindful of the unique dynamics of their institution and student population when co-creating initiatives. For example, the needs of a first-generation part-time community college student who is working full time and commuting are different from a residential student who is in the third generation in their family to attend a private 4-year institution.

In thinking about different institutional contexts, we recommend:

- 
- Prioritize connecting with students at multiple intervals (not [just during orientation](#) and commencement)
 - Have multiple entry points for participation and engagement (including different times of day, virtual and in-person, and different locations)
 - [Meet students at times and locations that are convenient to them](#)
 - Rely on traditions, such as [special events, ceremonies, and rituals](#)
 - Intentionally facilitate the creation of peer networks through structured networking, [communities of practice](#), organizations, and social events
 - Assess institutional services (such as counseling, career, etc.) for accessibility and relevance for students from varying backgrounds
 - Use an intersectional lens to [consider overlapping marginalized identities students may hold and tailor efforts accordingly](#)

SPOTLIGHT

1

A public university created a free on-campus food pantry that provides students and employees with access to food and toiletries. This effort is linked with the institution's community engagement department, so that individuals accessing the food pantry are offered wrap-around services from local nonprofit organizations.

2

Several community colleges in Virginia launched a program called [CAPS \(College Attainment for Parent Students\)](#) to provide “coaching, comprehensive wrap-around services, and targeted financial assistance”

3

A religiously-affiliated private university convened dialogues over meals for Jewish and Muslim student leaders where they explored texts together to build relationships and enhance trust.

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The Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities works with schools, businesses, and communities to achieve success by addressing prejudices, in all forms, in order to improve academic achievement, increase workplace productivity, and enhance local trust. Through workshops, retreats, and customized programs that raise knowledge, motivation, and skills, VCIC develops leaders who work together to achieve success throughout the Commonwealth.

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