



CHEPP

The Center for
Higher Education Policy
and Practice

**ONLINE BY DESIGN: CULTIVATING A CULTURE
OF CARE AND BELONGING IS CRITICAL TO
LEARNER PERSISTENCE AND SUCCESS**

OCTOBER 2024

Executive Summary

- Evidence shows that when learners feel like they belong, they are more likely to engage with people in their learning environments, with their peers, with their instructors, and with social clubs and activities. The sense of connection with people in these environments leads to downstream positive impacts related to grades and student outcomes.
- In educational contexts, studies in the field of psychology and neuroscience have shown a clear correlation between trusting relationships with teachers, making friends with peers, purposeful learning activities, and participation in social/student organizations with stimulation in areas of the brain that are responsible for happiness, reduced stress, and more open-minded thinking.
- High levels of engagement and learning occur when a sense of belonging is in place within classroom environments. And these findings appear to be true across populations historically underrepresented in higher education.
- In a 2011 published study, the equity gap between the grade point averages among a group of African American learners who received a social belonging intervention, and a randomized control group of European Americans was closed by 79% by their senior year (Walton & Cohen, 2011).
- When the results of a 2023 study were generalized for a sample of 749 institutions, the researchers found data implications that, when social belonging interventions are paired with learning environments that create opportunities for learners to belong, this could have potentially increased full-time first-year college completion for an additional 12,136 students, the majority of whom would likely be among groups historically underrepresented in higher education (Walton et al., 2023).
- Belonging is intrinsically tied to diversity, equity, and inclusion work, and both relate to college students' persistence and success. In terms of the sense of belonging among learners from different groups, National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data as reported in "Engagement Insights," for 2023, showed that 91% of White students reported being comfortable being themselves at their institution, compared with 89% of Hispanic, Latina/o, Latine, or Latinx and Asian students, 86% of Black or African American students, 85% of Indigenous or American Indian students, 87% of Middle Eastern or North African students, and 85% of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students (NSSE, 2023). Belonging interventions have proven to be successful at closing equity gaps and improving outcomes, particularly for those populations historically underrepresented in higher education across students, faculty and staff. Colleges and universities can improve persistence among these and other diverse groups of learners by leveraging NSSE data to measure belonging over time.
- There is much room for growing the research and evidence of interventions for social belonging in online environments. There are unique opportunities and challenges for online learning related to belonging and the question of which proven practices can be replicated in online contexts, as well as which practices would be uniquely effective in helping online learners persist and succeed in meeting their goals.

Introduction

Today's learners in the United States face significant challenges in finishing college with a four-year degree. Even though bachelor's credentialed workers earn about \$1.2 million more during their careers than workers who have less than a bachelor's (Carnevale et al., 2021), undergraduate enrollments dropped by 15% between fall 2010 and fall 2021 (NCES, 2023). Although 42% of this decline occurred during the pandemic (NCES, 2023), declining demographics among 18-22-year-olds, college closures, and increasing public skepticism about the value of a college degree are other factors contributing to the decline. For those who enroll, persistence through graduation has also been difficult, since nearly 40 million working-aged Americans today have some college but no credential (NSCRC, 2024). Despite these broader trends of enrollment decline, enrollments in online courses have been increasing, from about 25% of students enrolling in at least one online course in 2012 to about 53% in 2022 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The growth in online enrollment highlights the need for more flexible higher education models that make a college degree attainable for learners who work, serve as caregivers, have a disability, serve in the military, or have other life circumstances that make it more difficult—or sometimes impossible for them to attend college courses in person. Learners need flexibility in their schedules, so the option to attend college online is becoming more important for the future world of work, since a bachelor's degree will increasingly offer the majority share of good jobs through 2031 (Strohl et al., 2024).

According to the Census Bureau's educational attainment data in 2021, 14.9% of Americans had completed some college but had no degree, 27.9% had a high school diploma, and 8.9% had less than a high school diploma (Census Bureau, 2022). This equates to 51.7% of the total U.S. population, or about 171.6 million Americans over age 25 who are missing out on the college wage premium. While the overall number of college graduates has been increasing, rising from 47.2 million with a bachelor's or higher in 2001 to 85 million in 2021 (Census Bureau, 2022), overall college completion rates continue to hover around 60%, with groups historically underrepresented in higher education more likely to stop out.

The 2024 Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education Study asked a sample of 6,015 currently enrolled students if they were considering stopping out in the fall of 2023, 42% of Hispanic students, 40% of Black students, and 31% of White students said they had thought about doing so in the past six months (Marken, 2024). When asked about the reasons for considering stopping out, "don't feel like I belong" was among the top four—with two of the other top contributing factors being emotional stress and personal mental health, which could potentially be eased by a greater sense of belonging (Marken, 2024).

When asked about the reasons for considering stopping out, students stated 'don't feel like I belong' was among the top four reasons - with two of the other top contributing factors being emotional stress and personal mental health.

— 2024 Lumina-Gallup State of Higher Education Survey

While multiple factors influence a learner’s ability to access, persist, and complete college, a sense of belonging is fundamental to [learner-centered design](#)¹, [accessibility](#)², and an institutional responsibility to provide this across modalities, including in-person and online.

This paper is the third in a series about the importance of learner-centered design in higher education. The [first](#) and [second papers](#) presented a framework for learner-centered design (see Figure 1 on page 5) and introduced the importance of accessibility and universal design across modalities. In this third paper in the series, the elements of belonging and the practice of creating environments where learners can belong, as well as the policies that support belonging, are demonstrated as critical underpinnings of learner-centered design.

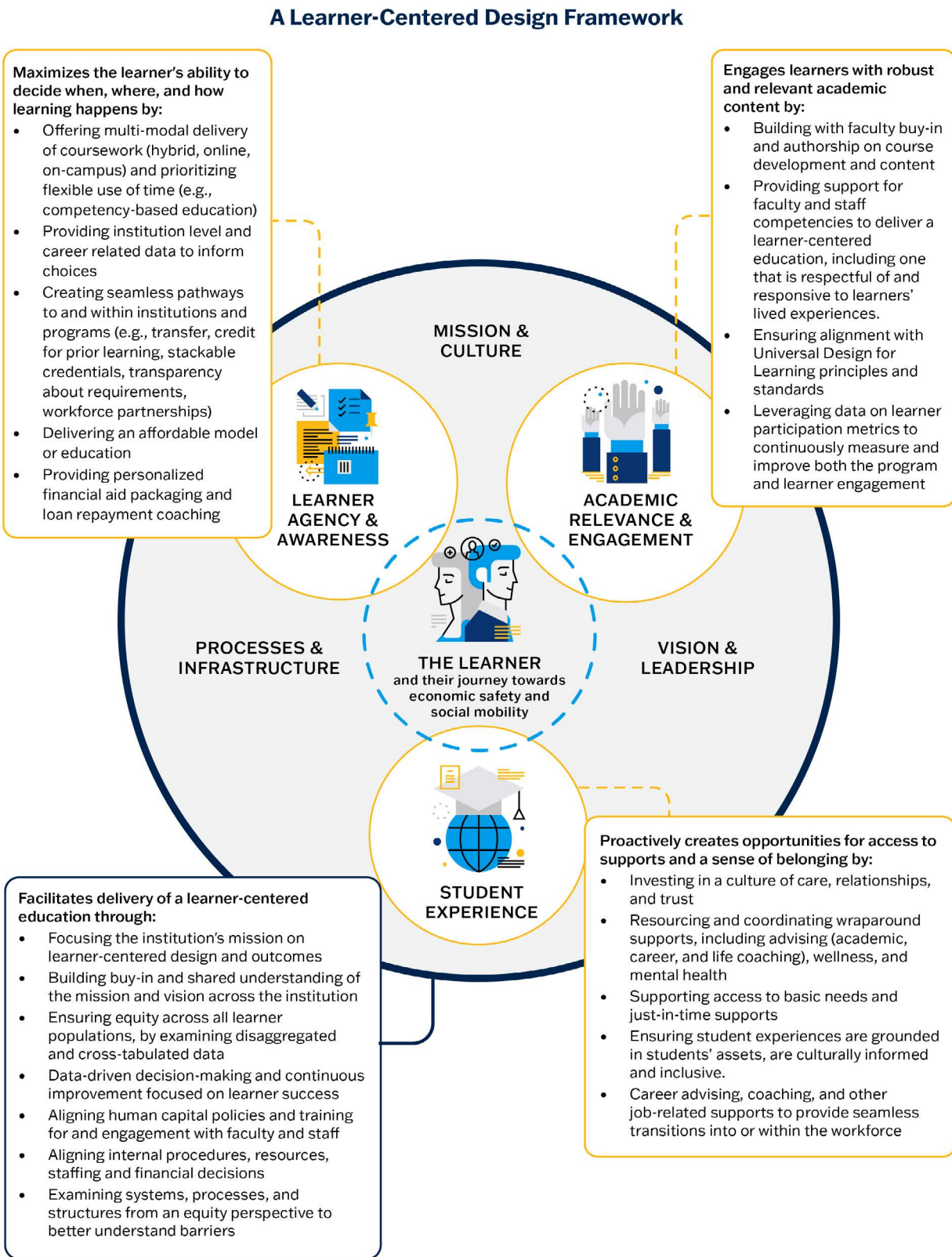
“There are so many reasons why technology is great and connects students, but it also creates barriers to organic relationship-building because students are often engaging with devices during unstructured time whether they are on-campus or online. Belonging is a relatively new concept, and it’s something young people are struggling with. We have to be intentional in creating conversations and relationships both on-campus and online. To do this well, we host collaborative work groups that include practitioners from both on-campus and online teams to build and iterate on best practices.”

— Lynn Zlotkowski,
Senior Director of Campus Student Retention and Success,
Southern New Hampshire University

¹ For more information on learner-centered design, please read CHEPP’s first report in its online by design series released in January 2024, *Online by Design: How Learner-Centered Higher Education Design and Delivery Accelerates Equitable Access and Outcomes* which can be accessed at chepp.org.

² For more information on accessibility in higher education, please read CHEPP’s second report in its online by design series released in July 2024, *Online by Design: How Accessibility is Fundamental to Learner-Centered Design* which can be accessed at chepp.org.

Figure 1.A Learner-Centered Framework*



***Note:** More details on the framework can be found in CHEPP's paper: *Online by Design: How Learner-Centered Higher Education Design and Delivery Accelerates Equitable Access and Outcomes* (CHEPP, 2024).

How Belonging Impacts Student Success

Research has shown that finding a sense of belonging is a fundamental need for human beings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In educational contexts, studies in the field of psychology and neuroscience have shown a clear correlation between trusting relationships with teachers, making friends with peers, purposeful learning activities, and participation in social and student organizations with stimulation in areas of the brain that are responsible for happiness, reduced stress, and more open-minded thinking. Educational psychologists have also shown that students' perceptions of whether they are a fit for their academic environments can affect their perceptions about whether they can succeed (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). A sense of belonging has also been shown to positively affect learner persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007). According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data, the likelihood of first-year students returning to their institution correlates with a higher sense of belonging (NSSE, 2024). In short, higher levels of engagement and learning occur when a sense of belonging is in place within classroom environments. These findings appear to be true across populations historically underrepresented in higher education, with studies showing similar positive outcomes for Black and LGBTQIA+ student groups.

Sidebox 1: A Working Definition of Belonging and What It Looks Like in Online Environments

What is belonging?

Belonging is a fundamental human need for all people, and it comes into play in new contexts where belonging uncertainty kicks in—do I belong here? When we have questions about whether we belong, we look to cues in our environments or classrooms to begin to answer them. There is strong evidence that, when learners feel like they belong, they are more likely to engage with people in their learning environments, with their peers, with their instructors, and with social clubs and activities. The sense of connection of people in these environments leads to downstream positive impacts related to things like grades and student outcomes. Not surprisingly, these questions are particularly relevant for marginalized or stigmatized groups. In society at large, more frequent cues make marginalized groups feel like they don't belong, which can often cause questions of belonging to be more prominent for members of these groups when they enter higher education. The question is often “whether people like me can belong.”

What does belonging look like in an online learning environment?

When learners feel valued, respected, and connected, they are more likely to engage in learning in the environment around them. In an online context, practitioners have to work harder to make students feel like they belong because they are not physically sitting in the same environment. When taking a learner-centered approach to designing for belonging online, practitioners and institutions should identify the moments that can create connection and intentionally use social cues that can signal to students that they belong and are connected. Belonging can be cultivated in online contexts through practices such as proactive, consistent, and personalized academic advising, life coaching, and relationship-building through various communication channels that meet learners' needs and preferences.

Sources: CHEPP's analysis of interviews with belonging practitioners at Equity Accelerator, The Student Experience Research Network, PERTS, and SNHU.

In one study, researchers provided students with messaging and tools about belonging to learn whether a brief intervention could reduce equity gaps in academic performance. Over time, the equity gaps in performance were reduced, and the way students dealt with social adversity on a day-to-day basis shifted. Over a three-year period, the researchers ran a randomized controlled trial of 95 college freshmen who were given messaging and framing tools that interpreted social adversity on-campus as normal and temporary (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Over this time period, data showed that the intervention set both the African American and European American groups of learners who received the intervention on an upward trajectory of their grade point average, which was consistent from their Freshman to Senior years, when compared with African American and European American randomized control groups. By their senior year, the equity gap between the group of African American learners who received the intervention, and the randomized control group of European Americans, was closed by 79% (Walton & Cohen, 2011). This study is one piece of evidence indicating that how we make sense of adversity can be an effective tool in buffering obstacles—the key appears to be framing adversity so that we feel like we belong. Numerous studies have replicated similar effects of belonging interventions for over a decade.

Additionally, it appears that when learning environments provide opportunities for learners to engage and belong, early interventions related to messaging and framing are more effective. In a recent project, an extensive team of belonging experts explored the impact of a social belonging intervention on the experiences of nearly 27,000 newly matriculating students at 22 diverse colleges and universities across the U.S. (Walton et al., 2023). The study included a social belonging intervention that messaged students. The messaging hinged on normalizing concerns about belonging, particularly for freshmen and marginalized groups, and helping them understand that they could come to feel like they belong with time and by taking deliberate actions to connect with others in the learning community. Although other studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of early intervention messaging on belonging, this study tested a new question: the extent to which learning environments play a role in how learners receive this intervention. The experts found that students were more likely to do better in school (defined as completing a full-time course load at the end of their first year) when they received this intervention in environments built around a culture of belonging (i.e., ones that provide opportunities to come to belong). When the researchers generalized the results for a sample of 749 institutions, they found that the data implied that this intervention could potentially have increased full-time first-year college completion for an additional 12,136 students, the majority of whom would likely be among groups historically underrepresented in higher education. (Walton et al., 2023). It appears that messaging about belonging is impactful particularly when instructors and administrators validate the efforts through the creation of more welcoming and inclusive environments and experiences for students.

The Intrinsic Ties Between Belonging, Learner-Centered Design, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Among the factors that influence college access, persistence, and success, belonging has become an increasingly important focal point for college leaders and administrators over the last decade. This trend appears to parallel an increased focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as an increase in the diversity of U.S. college enrollments. Data detailed by the Hechinger Report and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center shows that, even while overall enrollments declined over recent years, they also became increasingly diverse. In 2011, U.S. college enrollments totaled 20.6 million and fell to 17.8 million in 2020 (Barshay, 2023). In 2011, nearly 60% of all college students were White; however, by 2020, the total share of White students had dropped to about 52% (Barshay, 2023). Over the academic years of 2021–2023, the population of White students continued to fall by -6.5%, -3.1%, and -2.0% each year, respectively (NSCRC, 2023). Increases in diversity appeared during these same periods, with the population of Hispanic students growing from 14% in 2011 to 21% of overall enrollments in 2020, Asian students growing from 5% in 2011 to 7% in 2020, and Black students remaining constant at just shy of 14% (Barshay, 2023). While Black, Asian, and Hispanic student groups saw small enrollment declines in 2021 (by -5.1%, -3.6%, -3.1%, respectively), they saw flat or increased growth in subsequent years (2022 and 2023: +2.8% and +3.6% Hispanic students, -0.2% and +0.7% Black students, +2.1% and +3.7% Asian students, respectively) (NSCRC, 2023).

Given the knowledge about the gap in persistence between different racial and ethnic student groups, the increase in diversity among enrollments is promising, and yet there is more work to do in terms of ensuring members of groups historically underrepresented in higher education feel that they belong. According to NSCRC 2022 cohort data that is reflective of previous cohort years, there is a wide percentage point persistence gap between learners who identified as Black, Hispanic, and Native American (56.6%, 63.6%, and 52.8%, respectively) and the national average (68.2%) (NSCRC, 2024). In terms of the sense of belonging among learners from different groups, NSSE data as reported in “Engagement Insights,” for 2023, showed that 91% of White students reported being comfortable being themselves at their institution, compared with 89% of Hispanic, Latina/o, Latine, or Latinx and Asian students, 86% of Black or African American students, 85% of Indigenous or American Indian students, 87% of Middle Eastern or North African students, and 85% of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students (NSSE, 2023). Since belonging interventions have proven to be successful at closing equity gaps and improving outcomes, colleges and universities can improve persistence among these and other diverse groups of learners by leveraging NSSE data to measure belonging over time. In summary, belonging is intrinsically tied to diversity, equity, and inclusion work and both contribute to college students’ persistence and success.

Beyond reporting for the racial and ethnic groups above, NSSE survey data captures belonging insights for students who self-identify as being part of more than one racial or ethnic group, having a disability, and/or being a member of non-binary gender groups. According to the most recently available survey data from 2023, students who reported being members of more than one racial or ethnic group reported disproportionately less belonging, specifically those who self-identified as Black + Latine, White + another, or Black + another (NSSE, 2023). The 2023 data also found that students with chronic medical conditions, physical disabilities, or sensory disabilities feel a greater sense of belonging (NSSE, 2023).

However, students with other disabilities, such as mental health, developmental disabilities, or multiple disabilities, feel a lower sense of belonging (NSSE, 2023). For students who self-identify as Black + Latine, White + another, or Black + another and also report having a mental health or developmental disability, their sense of belonging is even lower than their peers (NSSE, 2023). Disaggregating data to look at different sub-groups of students and how their sense of belonging compares to their peers is an important practice that makes it possible for institutions to see continuous improvement when seeking to increase the sense of belonging across multiple identities. Leveraging these insights to design and implement targeted belonging interventions can be a powerful method for ensuring higher education is learner-centered, uses universal design principles and practices, and is accessible to learners from all backgrounds.

Sidebox 2: Black Learner Excellence and LEVEL UP Initiative

The Black Learner Excellence and LEVEL UP Initiative, led by HCM Strategists, consists of a national network of 26 executive, academic, and community leaders who are taking action to close the equity gap in higher education for Black learners. According to its [recent report](#), 600,000 Black learners have disappeared from higher education over the last 20 years. The LEVEL UP initiative is a coalition of partners who are committed to four core principles for improving higher education for Black learners. Recognizing that belonging is critical to their future success, the third principle hinges on practices that create belonging for Black learners. The four principles are: real transparency and true affordability, ensured success through shared ownership, academic and social supports that create a sense of belonging, and learner-centered teaching practices for Black learners.

Source: HCM Strategists, 2023.

Fully Accessible and Inclusive Systems Create Environments of Belonging

Despite an estimated one in four Americans having a disability, an increasing number of learners with disabilities pursuing higher education, and 30 years passing since the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became law, colleges have consistently fallen short in meeting the needs of disabled learners. Learner-centered design embraces the principle that everyone learns differently and should have access to options that work best for them, such as the choice between online, in-person, or hybrid programs, synchronous and asynchronous formats, and programs that use alternative ways to measure learning, such as competency-based education (CBE). Fully accessible and learner-centered higher education programs move beyond compliance with disability rights law to embrace true inclusion and meet the needs of every student.

When systems are built to serve all learners, they serve everyone better. Look no further than the curb-cut effect, a phenomenon in architecture that has shown that, when more accessible curb-cuts, ramps, and elevators are present, other populations benefit as well. For example, older individuals and parents with strollers can more easily access public places. Higher education can do this as well, which will create environments where all learners find belonging alongside their peers with and without disabilities. CHEPP explores the importance of accessibility in learner-centered design in higher education in the second paper in the Online by Design series.

Key Elements of Higher Education Environments That Foster Belonging

Through interviews with subject matter experts, social scientists, and educators engaged in belonging interventions, as well as a review of the available literature on the topic of belonging in higher education, we identified key elements of practice that are foundational to creating an environment that promotes belonging in higher education:

- Institution-wide messaging and campus culture efforts to promote belonging and inclusion
- Faculty and staff diversity and training on belonging interventions
- Robust advising resources that promote relationship-building and personalized student support
- Peer-to-peer relationship-building activities
- The use of data to inform a continuous improvement process and mindset
- Cross-section working groups that measure, assess, and drive the implementation of belonging practices



EMILY'S STORY

Emily graduated from SNHU in 2024 with her BA in Psychology. Emily was born without arms and has confronted many obstacles in accessing education, including the heavy doors often used on physical campuses. She shares of her online college experience, “I just want to come to school and not have to worry if someone is going to leave the door shut. To do my degree online using the talk-to-text was very helpful when doing papers, or any assignments or even the discussion posts... I was able to think off the top of my head, speak to it and from there use my feet to do minor adjustments that the computer might not have picked up on to correct it and have it ready to go for submission. And absolutely love doing the online schooling and I can’t wait to continue with SNHU.”

For a deep dive into how belonging practices can improve the student experience and what institutions can do, the Student Experience Project has published a report, [Increasing Equity in College Student Experience: Findings from a National Collaborative](#) (Student Experience Project, 2024). For more information on the Student Experience Project and how it fosters collaborative practice in building belonging, please see Sidebox 3.

Sidebox 3: The Practice of Creating Belonging in Higher Education Learning Environments: The Student Experience Project

The Student Experience Project (SEP) is a collaborative of scholars, organizations, and leaders whose vision is to use research to test, implement, and scale practices that transform the college experience into one in which every learner has the support and resources they need to succeed. SEP has worked with many institutions of higher education in the U.S., including Colorado State University, University of North Carolina Charlotte, The University of Toledo, The University of New Mexico, Portland State University, and Colorado University Denver. It is a wonderful example of how the higher education sector is seeing sustained examples of positive impact from helping faculty and other leaders create cultures of belonging and growth around students. In the initial phase of the SEP, about 10.5% more learners had positive experiences in their learning environments across all indicators of identity, safety, and belonging. The premise of this work is that people require safety as a primary condition of belonging. With the SEP, when faculty are provided accessible support across all initial terms of implementation to effectively communicate their belief in students' ability to learn and grow, a number of metrics improve, with student safety and their ability to grow seeing significant improvements. Anecdotal evidence from one university that examined its data on the relationship between faculty who took part in the SEP review module of their syllabi to center students' belonging showed better course retention and lower drop-out rates. The SEP provides a [resource hub](#) with tools for institutions, faculty, and staff to improve the student experience.

Sources: Interviews with leaders at Student Experience Project and their website: studentexperienceproject.org.

Institution-Wide Messaging and Campus Culture Efforts to Promote Belonging and Inclusion

Building belonging begins when students enroll. First impressions matter, and institutions should carefully consider how they introduce their community and available student supports to prospective students, new enrollees, current students, and alumni. This should include strategies across communication channels, including from the first initial outreach through enrollment, during registration, and throughout learners' educational and alumni experiences. It also includes thinking through available student activities, clubs, and the overall campus and/or online culture and the veins that influence it to ensure a climate of belonging is cultivated across the student experience. Indiana University's Equity Accelerator offers institutions [resources](#) to support their work to ensure that building belonging is part of their messaging (Indiana University Equity Accelerator, 2024). Creating a culture of belonging also requires institutions to include belonging as central elements to their vision and mission, as well as how they message their institutional values to learners. Creating environments of belonging may seem more challenging in online college programs. In recent years, online programs have tried adopting traditionally in-person practices to help support belonging among their learners. For example, institutions like WGU and National University, both of which are primarily online institutions without physical campuses, have adopted mascots (Alonso, 2023). A shared mascot can make everyone in the college or university community feel like they are on the same team, even if they don't have traditional on-campus athletic program experiences.

Faculty and Staff Diversity and Training on Belonging Interventions

Faculty and staff should understand how to create and support connections with and between students. Institutions should prioritize hiring faculty and staff that reflect their student populations and the diversity of student populations, as a whole. Institutions should train faculty, advisors, and other student-facing staff to interact with students in a personable and inclusive way that embodies safety and respect, and makes students feel like they are a part of the college's community. Institutions should also provide faculty and staff with examples of best practices, such as how to develop curricula that incorporates the diversity of their classrooms, introduce themselves, draft statements of belonging for syllabi, and assignments that lend themselves to authentic connections between peers.

Other examples of building belonging in the higher education classroom, both in-person and online, include instructors adding personal narratives about who they are in their classroom syllabi, ensuring curricula are relevant to learners and their experiences, assigning projects that require group collaboration, and learning the names of all members in the class. The Student Experience Project has created a [“First Day Toolkit”](#) that provides resources to help instructors revise their syllabi and other communications on the first day of class to promote belonging (Student Experience Project, First Day Toolkit, 2024). Approximately 300 instructors across 16 public research universities piloted the online module and syllabus review guide for instructors in the First Day Toolkit, with 93% saying they would recommend it to a colleague.

Robust Advising Resources that Promote Relationship-Building and Personalized Student Support

Robust advising models that are proactive, consistent, and personalized help strengthen student belonging. Advisors can proactively reach out to students who are struggling and identify ways to reengage them in their program and offer them additional support. Case management can help students connect to wraparound supports, and career coaching can help learners connect their academic programs to their future career path. Institutions should implement systems to identify learners who may be off track and provide targeted reengagement strategies to help them persist. This includes connecting to non-academic programming to help students find community and increase their likelihood of staying enrolled.

SNHU employs full-time academic advisors singularly focused on supporting the success of its over 170,000 online learners. Advisors regularly and proactively monitor learner engagement levels in online courses and serve learners at a 1:250 ratio by examining things such as class assignment turn-in rates and class attendance (CHEPP, 2022). Advisors also take into account individual student preferences for outreach, relationship-building, and communication channels, and proactively engage learners based on their needs. At graduation, learners regularly talk about their supportive relationship with their academic advisor as a critical support on their path to graduation and often cite advisor coaching, encouragement, and resource assistance during busy or challenging times as essential to their persistence and success.

Peer-to-Peer Relationship-Building Activities

Institutions, as well as faculty, must intentionally cultivate belonging by providing opportunities for students to build connections with their peers across the higher education community. There are small and big ways to do this. Online students regularly engage with discussion boards in their synchronous and asynchronous courses—presenting a great opportunity to drive connection through facilitation. To increase student engagement in these forums, Grayson College implemented student-led discussion boards that support more authentic student discussion and connectedness (iDesign, 2024). When University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC) found that online students were not engaging with cocurricular activities outside their academic programs, they launched a virtual organizational fair (Connolly-Bauman, 2024). Faculty can also facilitate community-building activities throughout their courses so students can learn more about their peers, such as facilitating peer-to-peer discussions and icebreakers about favorite movies, cuisines, and hobbies.

The Use of Data to Inform a Continuous Improvement Process and Mindset

Institutions must have a continuous improvement mindset in implementing belonging practices. Belonging is still relatively new in practice, making it essential for institutions to regularly assess and seek feedback about belonging practices. Institutions should establish a student feedback mechanism, which could be done through regular surveys or readily available private forums, to raise concerns and capture data regarding efficacy and impact. PERTS has created a [data-driven learning program](#) that empowers higher education instructors and administrators to learn how their students are experiencing coursework and how they can increase student engagement, equity, and success (PERTS, Ascend, 2024).

Sidebox 4: ASCEND Offered by PERTS: Raising Academic Achievement

PERTS works with around 400 schools and colleges, including 150 colleges. Between 40 and 60 institutions use their interventions for social belonging for college students.

PERTS developed the professional learning model called ASCEND to systematically improve learning conditions. It consists of a set of practical measures for students' experiences, as well as practical resource guides to give faculty and administrators actual strategies they can use to promote belonging. ASCEND uses a cyclical process to survey students and get feedback, redesign, and retest to ensure that they are implementing helpful practices that are effective. This gives faculty a way to measure their excellence in belonging, such as making a certain number of fellowships available per year, receiving recognition in the tenure process, and more.

Sources: Interviews with leaders at PERTS and their website: perts.net.

Cross-Section Working Groups That Measure, Assess, and Drive Implementation of Belonging Practices

To help drive effective belonging practices, institutions should establish a belonging advisory council with representation from multiple teams, or a similar mechanism, to assess and implement belonging practices. One example of this is at SNHU, where a collaborative workgroup that includes on-campus and online practitioners iterates on existing practices and puts forward new belonging practices.



MINDA'S STORY

Minda graduated from SNHU with her BS in Public Health in 2023. As a traumatic brain injury (TBI) and brain surgery survivor, she received support from the Online Accessibility Center at SNHU to identify tools to help her study and stay focused. She shares, “my biology and epidemiology professors taught me a lot about diseases and equity issues in healthcare treatment. This allows me to push for the care I need as a minority.” She is currently pursuing her MS in Organizational Leadership and expects to graduate in 2025.

Case Study: Cultivating Belonging in Higher Education: Current Practice and Continuous Improvement at SNHU

SNHU practitioners know that when learners feel valued, respected, and connected they are more likely to feel that they belong and, therefore, more likely to engage in learning and their environment. Lynn Zlotkowski, Senior Director of Campus Student Retention and Success, is dedicated to creating an environment that promotes a sense of belonging for SNHU students. In a recent interview, she noted that creating opportunities for students to build relationships must be intentional in both on-campus and online environments. “There are so many reasons why technology is great and connects students, but it also creates barriers to organic relationship-building because students are often engaging with devices during unstructured time whether they are on-campus or online. Belonging is a relatively new concept, and it’s something young people are struggling with. We have to be intentional in creating conversations and relationships both on-campus and online. To do this well, we host collaborative work groups that include practitioners from both on-campus and online teams to build and iterate on best practices (Zlotkowski, 2024).”

According to leading practitioners at the Equity Accelerator,³ who conduct interventions that improve belonging at institutions, practitioners must ask questions such as, “What are the moments that we can use for connection in online contexts?” and “What cues can signal whether people are connected?” This is why proactive relationship-building and academic advising can support belonging in online and on-campus contexts.

Successful and Burgeoning Belonging Interventions at SNHU—For Both Online and On-Campus Students

At SNHU, practitioners are implementing interventions that promote a sense of belonging for students in both online and on-campus environments. These interventions are low cost, and institutions can implement them in real time. SNHU hosts working groups of leaders that implement these practices across online and on-campus modalities to iterate and continuously improve their efficacy. Examples of successful and burgeoning interventions include:

Online

By keeping belonging as a focus through advising communications, syllabi creation, discussion board engagement, and online curricular rubrics, faculty and advisors help create a sense of respect and safety for students. This means that faculty are trained to respond in the discussion boards with a personable and inclusive approach, and advisors and admissions counselors are responding on the phone and by email in ways that embody safety and respect, and that strive to make each student feel a part of the SNHU community. Specific examples include:

- Faculty are provided with examples of how to include belonging statements in their syllabi that introduce themselves and their professional backgrounds alongside the curriculum.
- Faculty are trained to have a 100% response rate to discussion board posts and to ask students who they are and about their background and experiences.
- Faculty are encouraged to think about opportunities for synchronous connection where students have to meet and talk with people in their class to complete projects.
- Faculty and advisors are trained on how to appropriately engage with students by authentically being themselves. Teams are trained on how to implement the [appreciative advising framework](#) by Jennifer Bloom (Bloom, 2024).



DARRYL'S STORY

Darryl graduated from SNHU with his MBA in 2024. He shares that having such a caring academic advisor made his experience more engaging than expected from an online program, saying, “she makes it her mission to check in with me, make sure I'm keeping up with my assignments, makes sure that I'm doing my part and reaching out to my instructors in case I have any questions or concerns, and always encourages me to keep going throughout my graduate school journey.”

³ The Equity Accelerator is on a mission to create more equitable learning and working environments by working with colleges and universities to help them create and sustain Cultures of Growth. Learn more by visiting accelerateequity.org.

Using Technology to Create a Sense of Community

“Penny,” a chatbot implemented to drive persistence through instantaneous support, was leveraged to create community and foster a sense of belonging among students. Students made a playlist through Penny of their favorite curated songs throughout the year. The university also conducted a student quiz with SNHU trivia through Penny that resulted in the highest engagement among students for a single activity in the academic year.

On-Campus

Campus piloted and is continuing “the belonging project” because student surveys revealed they weren’t making enough friends. Student feedback indicated that they loved faculty and staff and were building relationships with them, but not enough with peers. Due to digital media, many peer relationships are happening electronically, and students need help with making friends and building in-person relationships. Faculty were asked to:

- Bring name cards to class and help students learn each other’s names through games.
- Conduct a community-builder activity (an opportunity for students to get to know each other) in class once a week.
- Require students to do a group project together, such as a peer review or another type of assignment, with the objective of creating an opportunity for students to communicate outside of class.

Sidebox 5: Quotes from SNHU Faculty Who Participated in the Belonging Project On-Campus

“It feels great to connect with my students like a real human. As an example, today I was at the HUM festival and chatting with a student in one of my classes, and I had a cupcake. I ripped the bottom off and put it on top, whoopie pie style (as is the only way to eat a cupcake), and he said, ‘I forgot that you did that!’ It was something so small and a random personal detail, but it made me feel like we had forged a connection that meant more than just being the person who enters his grades in Brightspace.”

“I did a few assignments in class where students were placed in groups and given time to complete a presentation IN CLASS with each other, and they really came together and knocked it out of the park! These were some of the best presentations in the class, and there was a genuine sense of camaraderie and cooperation.”

“It was fun to see my students make connections and ‘find’ each other, especially when they were placed in groups created based off common interests, involvement, etc. For example, the President of AMA recruited new members who had interests in marketing, but they had never met prior to our class.”

The Practice of Continuous Improvement Through Data to Create Belonging in Online Learning Environments at SNHU

At SNHU, collaborations between data, academic, advising, student financial support, the registrar’s office, and career teams continuously examine data for online learners and look for ways to improve the online student experience, including removing barriers and finding cues to improve the learner experience. Two examples of recent efforts to improve online learners’ sense of belonging and help them succeed are detailed below.

Factors Influencing the Early Online Student Experience

SNHU staff regularly examine data that highlight student feedback about their first week at SNHU, which utilizes surveys embedded in Brightspace, SNHU's online learning platform. Week one response rates typically range between 40 and 50%, or about 29,000 students sharing real-time feedback in week one of their first term. In the survey, students rate how confident they feel, indicate whether they know what is expected of them in their course, and provide comments about their experience. This feedback is aggregated to look at themes across the student experience and disaggregated down to the individual student level to enable outreach and interventions. This work aims to support SNHU's goal of creating an optimal student and staff experience. The initiatives being explored include improving interdepartmental communication, optimizing the visibility of technology requirements, and updating student-facing language and documentation requirements for clarity.

Another example of efforts to use data to continuously improve belonging includes the barriers students face when they are accepted, but their evaluation is pending. SNHU staff examined data for first-year online students that looked at success and persistence rates of students who were currently enrolled as accepted evaluation pending (AEP), meaning they do not have their transcripts available when they're applying. The data showed that current AEP students have lower success and persistence rates than their non-AEP peers, which is seen as early as their first term. Teams will work together in early 2024 to explore strategies to better support AEP students, using data and feedback from admission counselors, advisors, and other staff.

Closing Equity Gaps and Supporting Learners Who Face Adversity

At SNHU, overall graduation rates are lower for populations historically underrepresented in higher education, particularly for Black learners. To engage in continuous improvement, the institution has undertaken an equity audit of its systems in partnership with the Gates Foundation and is continuously tweaking and improving its current model with the help of a specially commissioned operations team, the ReMap team. The ReMap team's mission is to identify gaps in learner support and mitigate them with specific interventions. SNHU also has a CARES team that works with learners to ensure their success when facing adversity, as well as a student experience leadership team that regularly conducts surveys of learner experiences throughout their academic program and works across teams to implement interventions and outreach tailored to learner feedback.

Conclusion

Cultivating a sense of belonging will continue to be a priority for practitioners and policymakers in higher education. Belonging has intrinsic ties to academic persistence and success, and it is key to closing equity gaps. Challenges inherent to relationship- and community-building for students both online and on-campus due to the pervasiveness of technology are likely to continue. Belonging interventions have been proven to improve the chances of success for students, can be done in real time, are low cost, and can be improved upon through iteration and examination of data among practitioners. Intentionally creating opportunities for students to build relationships with peers, faculty, advisors, and other staff, as well as formalizing belonging interventions as a key strategy and an institutional responsibility, is an important step toward sustaining and prioritizing student persistence and success. Finally, support from policymakers to fund research initiatives that measure the efficacy of belonging interventions and scale their implementation across institutions is essential to ensuring they become more widely available to learners nationally.

There is much room for growing the research and evidence of interventions for social belonging in online environments. There are unique opportunities and challenges for online learning related to belonging and the question of which proven practices can be replicated in online contexts, as well as which practices would be uniquely effective and help online learners persist and succeed in meeting their goals.

One such initiative is already in progress. The “We All Count” initiative kicked off in 2023 to measure belonging for online learners at SNHU, ASU, and WGU. The Gates Foundation funded this project, which includes a third-party partnership with measurement and evaluation specialists, as well as other experts in the field. The next step for this work is to create a working group for measuring a sense of belonging. The aim will be first to identify what exists now in terms of belonging interventions and outcomes and then to design a way to measure belonging in online environments moving forward. The goal of the project is to collaborate across SNHU, WGU, and ASU to have shared definitions and measures.

Policy Recommendations

Institutional and Practitioner Policy Recommendations

- Create institutional policies that formalize belonging interventions as an institutional responsibility and direct resource allocation to the practice of belonging intervention.
- Evaluate internal hiring, training, and education for faculty and staff to ensure that belonging is embedded in core instructional practice and that hiring practices support a diverse faculty and staff population.
- Formalize data collection related to metrics that measure the efficacy of belonging interventions, as well as the use of data, to drive discussions for continuous improvement of scaled belonging intervention strategies.
- Form a working group to share best practices across departments, teams, and divisions, including across online and on-campus modalities.
- Create a community of practice that includes a centralized hub of resources for practitioners for planning and implementing belonging interventions.

Federal Policy Recommendations

- Support research funding that measures the efficacy of belonging interventions in higher education, as well as programs that scale effective practices across institutions.
- The Department of Education, through the Institute of Education Sciences, should develop a clearinghouse for best practices to cultivate belonging in higher education, research the impact of belonging practices on learner success, and host activities to highlight institutions that excel at implementation.

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