Enhancing Sense of Belonging for Equitable Student Success: New Findings from NSSE

Alex McCormick, Jillian Kinzie, and Bob Gonyea

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Indiana University Bloomington

Presented at the 2022 AAC&U Annual Meeting - Washington DC
Our Topic Today: Sense of Belonging

The psychological feeling of belonging or connectedness to a social, spatial, cultural, professional, or other type of group or a community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Whether or not students feel respected, valued, accepted, cared for, included, and that they matter, in the classroom, at college, or in their chosen career path (Strayhorn, 2012)
Sense of Belonging

Belonging is influenced by students’ feelings, thoughts, and actions

Teaching practices can help students feel a sense of belonging (Student Experience Project)
Why Sense of Belonging?

• Sense of belonging influences student persistence
• Factor in equitable student success
• Interventions can improve students’ sense of belonging
Why Sense of Belonging?

The Pandemic and Racial Turmoil Are Changing Curricula. Here’s How.

By Alexander C. Kafka  |  OCTOBER 19, 2020  

Colleges are offering new classes on racial history and social justice...creating equity-and-justice centers, and hiring ethnic-minority specialists in neglected topics to deepen students’ understanding. Also, in concert with co-curricular and extracurricular study groups & clubs, offering students in underrepresented minority groups a deeper sense of belonging.
Sense of Belonging & Equitable Student Success

- Sense of belonging matters to all students' success
- However, because historically underrepresented students, particularly *racially minoritized students at PWIs* - may feel more prone to alienation, rejection, or stereotype threat, belonging can be a key factor in their success
Frames to Examine Sense of Belonging Results

**Traditional "Fix the Student" Frame**

**Asks:** Why aren’t these students prepared for college? What’s missing from these students’ pre-college experiences? How can we orient these students more effectively? What interventions are needed?

**Equity-Centered Frame**

**Asks:** Why isn’t the institution ready to support under-represented student success? Where are gaps in support and services? Who on campus can help us understand these results? How does the institution create obstacles to belonging? What can the college do to eliminate barriers?
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Response options: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree

a. I feel comfortable being myself at this institution.
b. I feel valued by this institution.
c. I feel like part of the community at this institution.
Institutional Uses of Belonging Results
Learning from Institution Stories

**Affirming the Importance of Belonging**

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, DOMINGUEZ HILLS

California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH) is using its NSSE 2020 sense of belonging results in a variety of ways, including as part of their integrated assessment of their First Year Experience, in their routine sharing of results, and in an analysis of retention.

**Complementary Efforts to Study and Act on Belonging**

GEORGIA SOUTHWESTERN STATE UNIVERSITY

In Georgia’s statewide effort to increase graduation rates, universities are designing interventions to develop productive academic mindsets such as learning from setbacks, having a sense of purpose, and finding a place in the institutional environment.

**Sense of Belonging as Validation of the Power of Community**

TAYLOR UNIVERSITY

Taylor University, a faith-based liberal arts institution in Upland, Indiana, teaches that community extends beyond the physical campus. They challenge students to live authentically, while also supporting others in their community—promoting belongingness via campus culture.
Pairing SB with Data on Productive Mindsets

- NSSE sense of belonging results provide GSW a complementary measure to examine alongside belonging data from the institution’s results on the University System of Georgia’s Mindset Survey.
- Results help identify topics for institutional action, with a focus on how aspects of student life such as contact among students from different backgrounds, being involved socially, and attending campus events, could be redesigned to focus more intentionally on their contribution to productive academic mindsets.
To Assess FYE Program & Retention Analysis

- SB results included as part of integrated assessment of First Year Experience
- Results shared with Associate Vice Presidents and Vice Presidents, General Education curriculum committee, advising council; and in analysis of retention
- FY belonging averages looked good, affirmation that CSUDH is inclusive
- Results informed Faculty Development Center emphasis on faculty’s role in helping students feel valued and part of the community
Validating a Core Component of Mission

• Taylor challenges students to live authentically, while also supporting others in their community. In essence, they promote sense of belonging through their campus culture, and their NSSE results validate this notion.

• Data show strong belonging scores overall, and specifically in comparison to peer institutions.
Sense of Belonging at Your Institution

What do you know about students' sense of belonging at your institution?

How do you examine it?

What influence does the concept or results have at your institution?
The Big Picture: Aggregate NSSE Results
Most students feel they belong, but *differences exist among subgroups*

**NSSE Annual Results 2020**

Building a Sense of Community for All

[https://nsse.indiana.edu/research/annual-results/belonging-story/index.html](https://nsse.indiana.edu/research/annual-results/belonging-story/index.html)
What do you expect to see in first-year students' belonging results in spring 2021?

Feeling a part of the community at this institution: 74%

COVID makes [UNIVERSITY] a terribly not fun school. I am disassociated from everyone...students and faculty. It affects my mental health and negatively affects my school work.
What Does NSSE Tell Us About Sense of Belonging?

How does it relate to NSSE's measures of...

- Quality of Interactions
- Supportive Environment
- Intent to Return
Engagement Indicator Scores by SB Responses

**Relationship with Quality of Interactions**
- Quality of Interaction Score:
  - Agree: 45
  - Disagree: 30
- I feel comfortable being myself at this institution.
  - Agree: 45
  - Disagree: 30
- I feel valued by this institution.
  - Agree: 40
  - Disagree: 30
- I feel like part of the community at this institution.
  - Agree: 40
  - Disagree: 30

**Relationship with Supportive Environment**
- Supportive Environment Score:
  - Agree: 45
  - Disagree: 30
- I feel comfortable being myself at this institution.
  - Agree: 35
  - Disagree: 20
- I feel valued by this institution.
  - Agree: 30
  - Disagree: 20
- I feel like part of the community at this institution.
  - Agree: 30
  - Disagree: 20
Does Sense of Belonging Relate to Persistence?

| 97%  | Sense of belonging has very strong, statistically significant relationships with first-year students' intent to return to their institution. |
| 89%  | OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS WHO FELT VALUED BY THEIR INSTITUTION INTENDED TO RETURN THE FOLLOWING YEAR |
|      | WHO DID NOT FEEL VALUED INTENDED TO RETURN |
Does Sense of Belonging Relate to Persistence?

- Belonging is particularly important for first-year retention
- The major also plays an important role in belonging
  - First-year students with a declared major felt greater belonging than those who were undecided
  - Seniors majoring in Health Professions, Education, and Business feeling the greatest belonging

First-year students' Sense of Belonging score by intent to return
Lower sense of belonging may reflect students' perception that certain colleges, career paths, programs of study, or courses are "not for me."
Recall, most students feel they belong, 90% feel comfortable being themselves, 80% feel valued... but *differences exist among subgroups*

Critical to disaggregate data by social identities
Students identifying with nonbinary gender identities consistently express a lower sense of belonging than their cisgender peers. Similarly, students with a diagnosed disability or impairment feel less comfortable being themselves, less valued by their institution, and less like part of their institution’s community.
Sense of Belonging: First-Year Students by Race-Ethnicity

- White: 42.8
- Hispanic or Latina/o: 41.8
- Multiracial: 41.2
- Black or African American: 41.1
- Middle Eastern or North African: 40.7
- Asian: 40.6
- American Indian or Alaska Native: 40.4
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: 40.3
- Another race or ethnicity: 40.2
- Prefer not to respond: 36.8
Sense of Belonging: First-Year Students by Race-Ethnicity

Feel like part of the community, % SD or D

- Prefer not to respond
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Another race or ethnicity
- Black or African American
- Multiracial
- Middle Eastern or North African
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Hispanic or Latina/o
- Asian
- White

% Strongly Disagree + Disagree
Sense of Belonging: First-Year Students by Ability Status

Feel like part of the community, % SD or D

- Prefer not to respond
- Disability or impairment identified
- No disability or impairment

% Strongly Disagree + Disagree
Black or African American Students, Levels of Sense of Belonging, and Other Experiences

- Black or African American first-year students' sense of belonging scores divided into Lowest, Middle & Highest groups.
- Examining how other NSSE items relate to SB group membership helps to identify ways to improve belonging.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of Engagement</th>
<th>Lowest SB</th>
<th>Middle SB</th>
<th>Highest SB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequently (very often or often) included diverse perspectives</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(political, religious, racial/ethnic, gender, etc.) in course discussions or assignments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent (six or seven on a seven-point scale) interactions with faculty</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantial (very much or quite a bit) institutional emphasis on</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds (social, racial/ethnic, religious, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantial (very much or quite a bit) institutional emphasis on attending</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>events that address important social, economic, or political issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Values in the table represent the proportion of all Black or African American students in the group who responded favorably (frequent, excellent, or substantial) to the item.
Do Students of Different Backgrounds Feel They Belong?

- For some types of students, such as those with nonbinary gender identities, differences are reflected in all three belonging measures. These students consistently express a lower sense of belonging than their cisgender peers.

- To see findings and comparisons for other subgroups of students see our Tableau dashboard.

Dashboard is accessible from our NSSE 2020 Annual Results story.
A Quick Dashboard Demonstration

Bob Gonyea
NSSE ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, RESEARCH & DATA ANALYSIS

Showing results for FY, First-Gen students at BacLA private and Seniors by major at Doc-granting
https://iu.mediaspace.kaltura.com/media/t/1_y5v3o8wd

• Go to NSSE dashboard on Sense of Belonging
• https://iu.mediaspace.kaltura.com/media/t/1_y5v3o8wd
What populations or groups of students are you most interested in looking at, specifically for sense of belonging?
Implications of Sense of Belonging Results

Knowing what relates to high sense of belonging in general, can suggest ways institutions can foster belonging.

NSSE results suggest a focus on:

- Positive relationships with faculty, staff, and peers
- Effective teaching practices
- Support for student success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect Size Relationship with Sense of Belonging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher-Order Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective &amp; Integrative Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Teaching Practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-Faculty Interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Perceived Gains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with College Experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ ++d > .2, +++ d > .3, ++++ d > .4, +++++ d > .5, ++++++ d > .6 \]
Knowing what relates to high sense of belonging for underrepresented student groups or other populations of interest suggest more specific ways institutions can foster belonging.

NSSE results suggest a focus on:
- Positive relationships with faculty, staff, and peers
- Effective teaching practices
- Support for student success
- Reflective activities in courses
- Institutional support for diversity (encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds, emphasizing events that address important social, economic and political issues)

![Table 1. Proportions of First-Year Black or African American Students within Sense of Belonging (SB) Groups by Aspects of Engagement](image-url)
Opportunities for Sense of Belonging Results

• Bring Student and Academic Affairs together to discuss results and identify strategies to enhance engagement practices associated with high levels of belonging

• Explore sense of belonging among students by level of academic performance, work with learning support services & faculty teaching first year courses to devise early indicators of belonging
What do these findings suggest for equitable student success?
What resources have you found useful in exploring student sense of belonging on your campus?
Thanks so much for joining us!

Find our slides on the NSSE website nsse.indiana.edu/research/publications-presentations/index.html

Blog: nsse.indiana.edu/research/blog/index.html

@NSSEsurvey