

Sense of Belonging in the College Classroom

College students' sense of belonging matters because it is related to their academic success and emotional wellbeing. Although there is more research and emphasis on sense of belonging in K-12 educational environments, increasingly, higher education leaders have begun to emphasize sense of belonging in college student populations. The success of college students is related in part to whether or not they feel welcomed in specific college environments, such as classrooms. Sense of belonging is related to a number of things, including college students' engagement and persistence, course grades, and academic motivation. The bottom line is this: college students who feel that they belong in your classroom are more likely to succeed.

What *is* Sense of Belonging?

Sense of belonging is, at the most basic level, 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 is related to college students' cognition, affect, and behaviors (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). In other words, students can think, feel, and act like they belong. For example, a student who thinks (*cognition*) and feels (*affect*) that they belong in class is more likely to show up to class (*behavior*) than a student who does not think and feel that they belong. Sense of belonging is a basic human need and motivation (Strayhorn, 2012). That is, *everyone* needs to belong.

What Does it Look Like When Students Don't Feel Like They Belong in Your Classroom?

When students don't feel like belong in your classroom, they will likely be less engaged (i.e. not participating in class discussions, group activities, and not paying attention during lecture). A student who lacks belonging may even skip your class more often than students who do feel a sense of belonging there or be prone to show up to class late. Students who lack belonging may choose to sit in the back of the classroom or away from other students. Regarding language, students who don't feel like they belong may use "other" terminology when describing other students in their class. For example, "students in this class seem to really like the subject we are studying," versus, "students in *our* class...". If you hear one of your students talking as if they are not a part of your class, that is a pretty strong indicator that they don't feel as if they belong.

How is Classroom Sense of Belonging Fostered?

Students report feeling greater sense of belonging in supportive classroom environments (Zubrunn et al., 2014). In one study by Freeman et al. (2007), student perceptions of belonging in a college classroom were related to three areas of instructor behavior: (a) Warmth and Openness; (b) Encouragement of Student Participation; and (c) Organization. Other lines of research suggest that messages about student success influence college students' sense of belonging and academic outcomes (Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011). Repeated messages that all college students struggle with sense of belonging and that sense of belonging improves over time can also help students overcome viewing failure as evidence they do not belong.

Tips for Supporting Your Students' Sense of Belonging in Your Classroom

The following tips have been created for instructors who wish to support

their students' sense of belonging in the classroom. For more information about the research behind these tips, check out the references and additional resources pages below.

Warmth and Openness

- Greet students when they enter the classroom. Arriving to class early and staying a few minutes late demonstrates your availability and concern for students.
- Be excited about the content you are teaching. This enthusiasm can engage students with the topics and motivate them to learn more.
- Let students know when and how you are available to meet with them (e.g., office hours, email) and that you encourage them to communicate with you.
- Share relevant personal experiences with your students. This "humanizes" you and makes you more approachable. The first day of class is a great day to implement this strategy (e.g., "Besides teaching English, I also love dogs and spending time at home with my 3 children.").
- Be willing to go over topics students are confused about. You can also remind them that if they are confused, chances are that there are other students who are confused about the same thing. By asking for clarification, they are not just helping themselves, but may be helping others understand, too!

Encouragement of Student Participation

- Call students by name. This can help them feel that their presence in class and their contributions are valuable.
- Encourage students to discuss their ideas about the content with each other.
- Let students know that it is okay for them to disagree with you verbally (this may be especially important for international students who come from cultures that discourage disagreeing with authority figures).

However, make sure that the whole class knows how to respectfully disagree and discuss different perspectives.

- Try to call only on students who are volunteering to participate; fear of being called on inhibits student motivation and may cause students who doubt their own belonging to start skipping class rather than being called on when they don't think they know the answer.
- Acknowledge students when they provide excellent responses to encourage future participation.

Instructor Organization

- Take time to review the syllabus in detail early in the semester so that the students understand your expectations of them and also what they can expect from you as the instructor.
- Tell your students what you will cover at the beginning of class of each class.
- Grade and return assignments in a timely manner. It is important for students to know if there are areas where they need to improve.
- Inform students of their progress in your class regularly.
- Spend time planning class activities in detail before implementing them during class.
- Remind students of course assignments and deadlines.

Messages about Student Success

- Avoid statements such as, "Only 1 in 4 of you will pass this class." This type of message explicitly states that not all students belong in your class and not everyone is capable of achieving success.
- Throughout the semester, tell your students that you believe in them and all of them are capable of learning in your classroom.
- Normalize struggle in college by making statements such as, "This is a topic all students struggle with initially, but with hard work, all of you will be able to master this content."
- If you are comfortable, share your own stories of academic struggle to

show students even professors have to work hard to succeed(e.g., “I failed my first Chemistry class in college, but when I retook it I learned the strategies I needed to be successful. If you are struggling, that is okay! I have been in your shoes and am here to help you.”).

Works Cited

Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on Latino college students' sense of belonging. *Sociology of Education*, 70(4), 324-345.

Hoops, L. D., Green, M., Baker, A., & Hensley, L. C. (2016, February). Success in terms of belonging: An exploration of college student success stories. Paper presented at The Ohio State University Hayes Research Forum, Columbus, OH.

Johnson, D. R., Soldner, M., Leonard, J. B., Alvarez, P., Inkelas, K. K., Rowan-Kenyon, H. T., & Longerbeam, S. D. (2007). Examining sense of belonging among first-year undergraduates from different racial/ethnic groups. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(5), 525-542.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2008a). Fittin' in: Do diverse interactions affect sense of belonging for black men at predominately white institutions? *NASPA Journal*, 45(4), 501-527.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2008b). Sentido de pertencia: A hierarchical analysis predicting sense of belonging among Latino college students. *Journal of Hispanic Education*, 7(4), 301-320.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. New York: Routledge.

Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2007). A question of belonging: Race, social fit, and achievement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(1),

Zubrunn, S., McKim, C., Buhs, E., & Hawley, L. R. (2014). Support, belonging, motivation, and engagement in the college classroom: A mixed method study. *Instructional Science*, 42, 661-684.

More Resources

UCAT Consultations

Our Consultants work with faculty and TAs at The Ohio State University to take a scholarly approach to teaching, informed by research and based on the process of asking questions, gathering data, and planning responses. If you would like to discuss specific strategies for how to support students' sense of belonging in your own classroom, contact our office to setup a consultation appointment with one of our professional Consultants at 614-292-3644 or ucat@osu.edu. Visit our Consultation Webpage to learn more: <http://ucat.osu.edu/consultations/>

Encouraging a Sense of Belonging

In this video, Stanford psychologist Gregory Walton explains how a relatively small psychological intervention can help improve student achievement and workplace environments.

"Everyone feels like they're the only one." – Gregory Walton, PhD