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Dear College of Marin Faculty:

This week I'm sharing two articles. The first is a fascinating (if a bit long) article on 'belonging' on a college campus and the impact feeling like they belong at college has on students' success. The second (and shorter) article discusses quality in online vs. in-person learning and links to a 'quality teaching framework' that can be applied to any course, regardless of modality. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on ideas and strategies proposed in both articles.

Next week is the last week of instruction (May 15-19), followed by Finals Week. As a reminder, final exams are to be held as noted in the course schedule. Any possible exception must first be discussed with your dean/director, as any changes can have significant ripple effects for students.

Thank you for all you do.

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Everyone Is Talking About ‘Belonging’

What does it really mean?

By [Adrienne Lu](#)

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It’s everywhere. College T-shirts, notepads, and posters proclaim “You Belong!” Higher-ed associations offer training on how to increase students’ sense of belonging, and philanthropies are encouraging colleges’ efforts with grants. Belmont University, in Nashville, is hiring a vice president for hope, unity, and belonging, and soon you won’t be able to look through a college directory without finding a high-level position devoted to the mission: Last year, 60 jobs posted in *The Chronicle* had “belonging” in their title, up from 23 the year before. Sometimes, it seems redundant: Fairfield and Syracuse Universities are just two institutions that have recently created high-level positions in charge of inclusion *and* belonging.

So is “belonging” just the latest buzzword in higher ed?

Yes, and no.

In many ways, the growing infrastructure to support belonging is just an extension of efforts to be more welcoming of students — and faculty and staff members — whom the founders of most colleges did not have in mind. At a time when diversity and equity are under fire in many quarters, belonging — a universal human need — may be less controversial, less political.

But the focus on belonging also represents an important shift: In the past, higher education has often blamed retention problems on students’ deficits. Now, as pressure grows to keep enrollments up, more administrators are asking what colleges are doing wrong when large numbers of students don’t make it to graduation. Some are latching onto a “sense of belonging” as a potential lever of change, both for student success and to improve retention of faculty and staff members. Creating that sense is not just nice to do, says Marjorie Hass, president of the Council of Independent Colleges. It’s “a strategic question” central to institutional survival.

The literature on belonging has also evolved. When Terrell L. Strayhorn published the first edition of his book, *College Students’ Sense of Belonging*, in 2012, there was relatively little research on the topic. “We have missed for decades the important role that relationships and feeling supported and valued, safe, and secure to be oneself at school and college played in the formula for success,” Strayhorn says. “That’s what belonging is.”

The stakes are high: Research shows that college students who feel that they belong at their institutions get better grades and fare better on [persistence, engagement, and mental health](#). Conversely, Strayhorn writes in his book, “Students who do not feel like they belong rarely stay in college.”

It's one thing to admit more diverse students and another to make sure they feel welcome and valued, especially as events of the past several years have increased racial tensions.

While the need to belong transcends categories such as race, sexual orientation, social class, and ability status, students in underrepresented or marginalized identity groups are more likely to arrive on campus already wondering if they belong there. Gregory M. Walton, a professor of psychology at Stanford University who co-wrote an influential [study](#) on a belonging intervention, says that for those students, negative experiences that others might easily brush off, such as receiving criticism or feeling lonely, can have a more lasting impact on motivation. Those kinds of experiences can even make it more difficult "to do the hard work of learning new material," he says.

Administrators are asking what colleges are doing wrong when large numbers of students don't make it to graduation.

Jillian Kinzie, interim co-director of the National Survey of Student Engagement, which added questions about belonging to its annual survey in 2020, says the key is to help students connect with a group that supports what they feel is a salient part of their identity. Those could be groups based on race, religion, or sexual orientation, but also an academic interest or a sports team, for example.

To Monica Nixon, vice president for justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion at NaspA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, the emphasis on belonging represents a continuation of efforts that have been underway for years, rather than a hard pivot. But sometimes, she says, adding a fresh label can help more people to connect with an idea. "Maybe if we frame it as belonging, it will engage more people, and people will be able to grasp it a little bit differently," Nixon says. "And if belonging is it, then let's do that."

The Covid-19 pandemic also elevated the urgency of tackling belonging by reinforcing the idea that students don't go to college simply to gain knowledge but also to connect with others. Strayhorn believes some colleges are turning to the message of belonging as we come out of the pandemic — and the enrollment declines that came with it — to appeal to the growing number of students and families who are questioning whether to attend college at all. "This push for belonging is part of the persuasive apparatus of higher education to convince its customer that higher education is still a good choice," Strayhorn says.

Everyone feels the pain, at times, of not belonging. "It is inherently human," says DeLeon Gray, an associate professor of educational psychology and equity at North Carolina State University.

Traditional-age college students — who may be leaving behind friends and family members to build lifelong relationships, intellectual interests, and perhaps even a new sense of themselves — often wonder about their place in a particular community, or in the world.

A person's sense of belonging can also change in different contexts, or over time. One student might feel at home in a psychology lab but out of place at a sorority party, for example, or may feel alone at the start of the first year in college but later come to feel at home there. Surveys typically capture only a snapshot in time. Colleges pouring resources into student belonging are aiming at a moving target.

If the feeling of not belonging is an inescapable part of life, and a context-specific and ephemeral one at that, what should colleges be aiming for?

They are still figuring it out. When Gray, who teaches a graduate course on school belonging, had his students look for the term "belonging" on university websites, they found it in many strategic plans. But they had a harder time finding measurable goals or achievements. "It's not clear or apparent how a definition of belonging gets aligned with their indicators of success," Gray says.

According to one critic, that lack of clarity is par for the course. Musa al-Gharbi, a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at Columbia University and a research fellow at the Heterodox Academy, says the diversity, equity, and inclusion administrators in higher education already do "too many things and none of them well enough." He worries that expanding the mission of an already "ill-defined administrative apparatus" to include belonging will waste more money.

Still, some colleges are forging ahead by building on what they do know. Syracuse University decided to hire a director of inclusion and belonging after the theme of belonging appeared repeatedly in conversations with students, faculty, and staff, says Mary Grace Almandrez, vice president for diversity and inclusion. Students, for example, asked administrators for more resources to help create a sense of community on campus, while faculty members talked about the need to change the organizational culture to be more inclusive and welcoming in order to complement efforts to not just recruit but retain diverse workers.

"Oftentimes when we recruit diverse employees or diverse students, we rely on the richness of their diverse perspectives to educate us," Almandrez says. "But we, as an institution, have to also transform and change and think about our structures and our policies and procedures."

The first step is trying to ensure that no one feels actively excluded. That can mean, for example, encouraging instructors to learn how to pronounce students' names correctly. Ensuring that transgender or nonbinary students' chosen names are the ones used in the college's systems and by professors. Making sure students' basic needs are met so they can focus on learning. Accommodating disabilities and uncovering the hidden curriculum — those unspoken expectations that students whose parents have degrees don't need to learn — for those who don't know to ask.

"When a student who's living with a disability can't access a room or a building or attend an event with the guest speaker because the room's not fitted for those who live with a wheelchair or there's no sound system in mind for those with auditory disabilities [or] there's no interpreter — that's how you say to people, 'You don't belong here because we're not even thinking of you,'" Strayhorn says.

Improving belonging might also look like strengthening discrimination and harassment policies, investigating tenure and promotion policies for faculty members, or examining merit raises for women or people of color.

Experts suggest mining data to determine potential areas for improvement and talking to students to learn more about their experiences. One place to start, says Kinzie, from the National Survey of Student Engagement, is to drill down into the social-identity groups on campus to see which have a low sense of belonging and talk to students — whether they are students of particular races, students in certain majors, part-time students, or students caring for dependents, for example — to understand the stories behind the numbers.

Another strategy is to look at engagement activities that are associated with a high sense of belonging — such as helping students develop relationships with people whom they can go to when they feel disconnected, activities that encourage interactions among students from different backgrounds, and events about important social, economic, or political issues — and strive to ensure that more students can have those kinds of experiences.

While student activities are important for belonging, so, too, are classroom experiences and relationships, which means that colleges can't simply look to their offices of student affairs. Students need to feel as if they can talk to their professors if they are struggling.

Kinzie says improving students' sense of belonging is "totally within the power of institutions to influence." Higher-quality relationships with faculty members, administrators, and their peers are positively associated with a sense of belonging, which means colleges should focus on helping students find people they can relate to.

Joanna Perez, an associate professor of sociology at California State University-Dominguez Hills, strives to create a sense of belonging in the seminar she teaches for first-year students, titled "Undocumented and Unafraid." Professors at the university apply to teach first-year seminars on topics they're passionate about, which have included science fiction, the music industry, and social justice by the numbers.

The seminars, which meet twice a week, are intended to help students find their footing at the university. Together, students explore the resources available to them, start building relationships, and generally learn how to be college students together.

Perez's class tends to draw students who are undocumented or have family members who are. Many grew up feeling ashamed of their status and feeling afraid to talk about information that might be used against them or their family members.

Perez tries to create a safe environment for students to explore and embrace their identities, and to empower them to fight for their rights. Teaching the class, Perez says, has made her realize that, much

of the time, higher education can be very transactional. It's not enough, she says, for professors to care about students' academic success; they need to be more in tune with and sensitive to students' needs and their lives outside of class. "It's so important to humanize the student experience in order for that sense of belonging to be cultivated," Perez says.

Estefania Campos, who took Perez's class in 2018, says it helped give her the space to think about her identity as a beneficiary of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, an Obama-era initiative that has helped prevent thousands of undocumented students and other young people from being deported. She knew many students who went to class and then went home, eventually receiving their degrees but never really finding their place or a direction. Campos says her class with Perez — and their continuing relationship — changed the course of her career and the way she thinks about the world.

"It starts with having those tough conversations, sharing what your purpose is and who your identity is," Campos says. "I think that's the best way to find your community."

When a student with a disability can't "attend an event with the guest speaker because the room's not fitted for those who live with a wheelchair — that's how you say to people, 'You don't belong here.'"

When administrators at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville learned that Black students, who make up about 14 percent of its undergraduates, graduated at lower rates than did other demographic groups, they resolved to tackle the problem. Last year a longitudinal study uncovered a bright spot and possible strategy: About 42 percent of Black students who took a course in African American literature aimed at first-year students later graduated, compared with about 29 percent of Black students who didn't take the class. (While any first-year student can enroll in the class, most students who take the class are Black.)

So the university expanded the course, now known as "The Black Scholar Experience," from 50 students in 2021 to about 310 students last fall. The class covers Black writers and artists but also topics such as why Black students struggle to graduate, how to manage stress and time in college, and barriers faced by Black women at the university. "We're really trying to support not just their transition to the institution, but very clearly from the very beginning, say you belong here, you have a community here," says Jessica C. Harris, vice chancellor for antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Howard Ramsby, a professor of literature, has taught the class since 2004. He says students often tell him that they feel a sense of connectedness there, that they feel seen. "They felt like they were in a space in this class where they ... didn't have to overexplain certain kinds of things," Ramsby says.

Strayhorn is excited about the investment higher education is making in belonging. But he's also wary of the sector's tendency to marginalize values such as diversity, equity, and justice, and turn them into meaningless buzzwords, or, in his words, "nothing more than a cultural celebration or a bake sale."

And opportunities for students to interact with one another as peers *across* cultures are important, says Paulette Granberry Russell, president of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education. Research shows that those types of opportunities can buffer against discrimination and bias. "There's a greater sense of well-being that can be created as a result of those students' understanding those differences, engaging across differences," Russell says.

Many experts say it's important to both build bridges and provide affirmation of students' identities. But al-Gharbi, of Columbia, says college administrators often make incorrect assumptions about why underrepresented students don't feel a sense of belonging. He says colleges often focus on "niche, idiosyncratic values," identity, and pursuing social justice in ways that are "actually alien and alienating to a number of people from less-traditional backgrounds."

While there's no such thing as a magic bullet for belonging, Walton's 2011 study may come close. It found that Black students who reflected on the idea that students of all backgrounds can struggle initially with the transition to college improved their academic performance over the next three years, cutting the achievement gap in half. An intervention based on the research is available to colleges through the [College Transition Collaborative](#) and the [Project for Education Research That Scales](#).

Based on his research, Walton says that, rather than telling students that they belong, colleges should send the message that it's normal for all students to struggle with the transition to college, and that things can get better with time. That message can be conveyed by top-level administrators, by professors in classes, and even in residential activities.

But while that initial message can help, it can go only so far, Walton says. If specific groups of students who receive that message later feel alienated on campus, colleges need to do the hard work necessary to resolve the underlying issues, by listening to students to learn where the trouble is. "If you're in a space where, for whatever reason, people in your group don't come to belong," Walton says, no amount of messaging is going to make a difference: You need to create spaces of belonging.

Walton cites the living-learning communities at [Michigan State University](#), which allow students who share interests in academic areas or multicultural living experiences to live together and attend some of the same classes, as an example of the structural changes some institutions are making.

Maybe there's no guarantee. "We can't make you feel a sense of belonging," Strayhorn says. "But we can create the conditions where the likelihood that you will feel a sense of belonging are greatest."

Adrienne Lu writes about politics in higher education and students — with a focus on underrepresented students.

As Colleges Focus on Quality in Online Learning, Advocates Ask: What About In-Person Courses?

By [Taylor Swaak](#)

MARCH 2, 2023

As colleges' online catalogs grow, so too has the push to develop standards of quality for those courses. But are in-person classes getting the same attention?

If you ask many online-education advocates, the answer is “no.” And the solution, many say, is for colleges to adopt standards and policies that set consistent expectations for quality across all courses, whether they're remote or in a classroom.

While decades of research and the pandemic-spurred expansion of online learning have helped demystify it, and build confidence in its efficacy, these advocates say the misconception lingers that remote education is inherently lower in quality than instruction in the classroom. And that stigma, they say, puts a magnifying glass to online ed, while largely leaving in-person classes to business as usual.

“To think through all of our college experiences, we have all been in large lecture classes” with minimal to no contact with a professor, said Julie Uranis, senior vice president for online and strategic initiatives at the University Professional and Continuing Education Association. In other words, an in-person class doesn't necessarily guarantee more student engagement and instructor support. “But for some reason, that bar is higher for online.”

Some college administrators can attest to this. When accreditors ask institutions to prove that all of their courses are equally rigorous, colleges' interpretation of that instruction has often been to “show that online courses are up to the standard of” in-person courses, “not the other way around,” wrote Beth Ingram, executive vice president and provost of Northern Illinois University, in an email.

The discrepancy seems to be borne out in the data, too. A reported 38 percent of in-person courses have no quality-assurance standards to meet, according to a [survey](#) of more than 300 chief online officers by Quality Matters, an organization that helps ensure quality in online education. That compares with 17 percent of online synchronous courses and 5 percent of online asynchronous courses.

To be sure, online and in-person aren't wholly interchangeable — there are nuances to account for. Distance education, for example, is governed by [federal regulations](#) that require courses to include “regular and substantive” interactions; that necessitates course design that intentionally creates opportunities for students to engage with one another and their professor. Online incorporates more technology, too, which means additional checks for security measures, proper integration — *are the links and embeds all working?* — and accessibility features.

Caveats aside, though, online-education advocates like Bethany Simunich, vice president for innovation and research at Quality Matters, say higher ed needs to stop “othering” and setting different bars for different modes of learning. Especially as the lines between them blur together. (A lot of in-person courses, for example, are now “web enhanced,” with faculty members using the campus learning-management system. And many colleges now offer hybrid courses with both in-person and online components.)

The focus instead, Simunich said, should be on a big-picture question: Is this a high-quality learning experience for students?

Numerous institutions are working to keep that question front and center. Oregon State University crafted a universal quality framework. North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University adopted a common syllabus template. Montgomery College, in Maryland, requires learning-management-system training for all new faculty members teaching credit-bearing courses. Harford Community College, also in Maryland, has revamped its faculty-observation forms.

“Online and face-to-face are very different things. But it doesn’t mean systems have to be separate,” said Jeff Ball, director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Harford. “We’re learning that we need to talk about them together in very conscious ways.”

Setting a Standard

It’s not uncommon for faculty members to teach an array of courses: some online, some in-person, some a hybrid blend. Oregon State University is no exception.

That’s why it made sense to develop an “umbrella” [quality-teaching framework](#) that outlines standards the institution expects from *any* of its courses, said Karen Watté, director of course-development and training at Oregon State’s Ecampus. It would, in her words, “elevate teaching across the board.”

That framework, completed in 2021, includes expectations like:

- Providing materials in formats that are accessible by all learners, including curricular materials designed with recommended fonts and colors.
- Fostering community outside of the classroom.
- Measuring, documenting, and using achievement data to inform instruction.

Around that same time, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University adopted another tool: A universal template for course syllabi to create a cohesive student experience across classes, said Tonya Amankwatia, assistant vice provost for distance education and extended learning.

This newer template has introduced standards that weren't previously required in faculty syllabi. For example, it includes a communications policy stating that faculty "must notify students of the approximate time and method they can expect to receive an answer to all communications," with the expected window being 48 hours, apart from holidays. The syllabus template also links to a "common policies" document that directs students to resources such as [minimum technology requirements](#).

What was particularly exciting, Amankwatia said, was that the template wasn't the result of a top-down mandate. Faculty members teaching both online and in-person courses had, in fact, led the charge. "It was one big visible move that no senior administrator had to say" or ask for, she said.

Prioritizing Professional Development

The success of any course, experts say, also comes down to investing in professional development.

For Montgomery College, in Rockville, Md., that has meant doubling down on its "Digital Fundamentals for Teaching and Learning" training, which teaches faculty members how to take advantage of the campus's learning-management system. (All credit-bearing classes at Montgomery are required to have a course page in the LMS).

The training, which takes about 20 hours to complete, starts with foundational skills — how to post files and upload a syllabus — and builds from there: How to create and manage discussion boards. How to embed videos, and caption them to support accessibility. How to set up an online gradebook for students to track their performance.

The college first rolled out this training in the early days of the pandemic to ease the pivot to fully remote learning. About 70 percent of full- and part-time faculty members teaching credit-bearing courses completed it in 2020. It was so useful that the college has since required each new faculty member who teaches for credit to take the training, whether they're teaching online, in-person, or both, said Michael Mills, vice president of the Office of E-Learning, Innovation, and Teaching Excellence.

Montgomery also offers a voluntary quality-assurance microcredential — a series of three badges a faculty member can earn outside of work hours that, among other things, indicates knowledge of ["inclusive quality course design and delivery."](#)

Mills acknowledged that the college doesn't offer a pay incentive to complete that microcredential. "The incentive is a better course design," he said. "For some faculty, that's important to them." He noted that it may help part-time faculty secure additional teaching opportunities at other institutions.

Revisiting Observations

Setting standards is one thing. Evaluating courses based on those standards is another; policies can be tricky to put in place and enforce broadly. (It's an area where [online education still struggles, too.](#))

That also goes for faculty evaluations. That process is often codified in collective-bargaining agreements, and grants faculty members a high degree of autonomy in teaching.

At Harford Community College, in Bel Air, Md., "observing" a faculty member's course is one part of the larger annual evaluation process. And a goal for that piece, at least, is consistency where it makes sense.

The college's refreshed faculty-observation forms for both online and in-person teaching — the online one is still in draft mode — are similarly formatted. Both have done away with numeric values and rating scales. Both set parameters around what the observer is seeing, and when they're seeing it (for in-person, it's a single class. For online, it's access to an agreed-upon portion of the course for an agreed-upon time frame). Both check to see if the instructor has fostered "an engaging learning environment."

But there are differences. In the online-course observation form, for example, the reviewer is asked to check to see that links and "technical aspects of the course are in working order," and whether navigation is "user friendly." In the in-person observation, the reviewer is asked about the pace: Was the instructor teaching at a speed that allowed students to process the content?

"It's like a Venn diagram," said Elizabeth Mosser Knight, associate dean for academic operations at Harford. "There's the overlap, but then there's the nuance, because they're unique in some ways."

It's these types of conversations that get online advocates like Simunich excited about the potential for progress.

"As these conversations are all starting to merge and come to a head, institutions are going to have to make a choice," she said, "about whether they're going to publicly address and talk about quality."

Taylor Swaak is a staff reporter at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, covering how innovations in technology are changing the student experience. She aims to hold institutions accountable for technology that is misused or contributes to inequity, as well as uplift success stories that could inspire other ideas.