

SUPPORTING BELONGING IN THE CLASSROOM

The purposes of this handout are to **describe belonging** and **present strategies** and **further reading** meant to help you support your students' academic success and wellbeing through belonging.

According to **2018 SERU* data**, University of Iowa students face common obstacles to their academic success. Approximately 1 in 4 students do not feel comfortable asking for help with coursework, face difficulty speaking up in class, and/or are concerned about being judged negatively by other students. These challenges connect to aspects of belonging and have likely **worsened over the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic**.

What is Belonging?

Belonging is a psychological construct describing an individual's sense of inclusion and mattering. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it occupies the middle rank between physical needs (e.g., food, health, and shelter) and higher-level needs (e.g., self-esteem and creativity). Empirical studies of belonging in higher education (e.g., Gopalan et al., 2021; Hoffman et al., 2002) have identified several key contributing factors, including:

- Perceived peer support
- Perceived faculty support
- Perceived classroom comfort
- Empathetic faculty understanding
- Encouragement of diversity and difference

When met, these factors contribute to positive outcomes in the classroom such as persistence, growth, reduced anxiety, and engagement.

When belonging is not met, students may feel isolated, lonely, and marginalized and experience several negative outcomes, including low motivation, anxiety, frustration, and lack of persistence and retention.

In the context of coursework, you can picture belonging as addressing these student questions:

- Do I fit in with my peers? Can I find friends or partners in this class who will help me succeed?
- Do I matter in this classroom? Are my ideas valued? Does my wellbeing matter?
- Do I belong in college? In this class? In this field of study?
- Are my questions welcome? Will I be treated with compassion if I ask for help? Are there resources available to help me?

*SERU stands for "Student Experience in the Research University," which is a campus-wide project using survey data from students to assess their overall experience at the University of Iowa. See more at: <https://seru.uiowa.edu/>

What matters for belonging?

Recognizing the diversity of students and their various needs. Different background experiences (e.g., first in their family to attend college, transfer, variation in academic preparation), social identities (e.g., race, gender, age, socioeconomic status, international student), and situational factors (e.g., caretaking responsibilities, pandemic, job responsibilities) affect students' sense of belonging. *These demographic factors are especially important if students feel isolated and underrepresented in their experiences and identities.*

Belonging is an ongoing concern. Students' feelings of belonging will likely change throughout the course of a semester. Aspects that could affect belonging may include:

- **Course milestones**, such as the first day, major assignment due dates, or grade release dates.
- **Social circumstances**, including major sociopolitical events and local or institutional issues.
- **Individual circumstances**, such as relationship issues, personal health and responsibilities, or pressing obligations in other courses.
- **Interpersonal circumstances**, such as conflict in group discussion or assignments, or in a course-related group chat

Peers play an integral role in belonging. Several studies show the importance of in-class friendships in fostering belonging. Students are particularly helped by friendships that are functional, that directly support their ability to meet the challenges of the course (Hoffman et al., 2002). Having friends who can provide help and feedback about course issues helps students' coping abilities, resilience, and comfort in academic settings.

Suggested strategies to support belonging through course design

Transparent design. Students want to understand the rationale behind assignments and other coursework and see examples of excellent work. Transparent design helps students understand the purpose of their work, the skills they will develop, the knowledge they will gain, and how these skills and knowledge connect to their future work and life outside of college (Winkelman et al., 2016).

Group or partner discussions that make time for conversation about course success and campus involvement. You could use the following prompts for peer discussions at important moments, such as the first day of class or when forming new groups:

- How is this class going for you so far? Do you have any tips or challenges you'd like to share?
- What's your favorite place on campus? Why?
- Do you belong to any student associations or clubs? If not, what kinds of clubs would you join if they existed?
- What is the best class you've taken so far? What did you like about it?
- What has been your hardest class that you've passed? How did you make it through?

Suggested strategies to support belonging through course facilitation

Sharing your experiences. Students can sometimes assume that instructors have always succeeded in school. Sharing your experiences, including any struggles and supports or mentors, can help foster trust and prompt students' reflection on their own educational paths.

Normalizing and fostering help-seeking strategies. A recent study demonstrated that first-generation college students underutilize campus services due to concerns of burdening others or being negatively judged (Chang et al., 2020). Beyond including information and links to campus services for academic support and holistic wellbeing in your syllabus or ICON site, you can facilitate, reward, and normalize reaching out for assistance. For example, you can talk about various supports in class, arrange a classroom visit from a representative, help students set course goals and plan actions for success or recovery after a setback, and integrate help-seeking actions in your course assignments.

Sharing campus resources. The University has staff and programs to support student success.

- You can encourage students to visit the [Writing Center](#) for assistance with writing projects and provide a link to the various resources available through [Tutor Iowa](#).
- If you feel that students need help beyond what you can offer as an instructor, you can contact the [Early Intervention Team](#) or use the [Excelling at Iowa](#) referral system, which helps faculty and staff connect students with resources when concerns arise. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) also has an [online reporting form](#) that instructors are encouraged to use to report concerns about students in their classes. Information about appropriate uses of the form can be found on the CLAS [Helping Undergraduate Students in Distress](#) page.
- The UI Office of [Academic Support and Retention](#) can refer students to an array of helpful services. They also have an [online form](#) where you can submit concerns about students to connect them to appropriate support.

How one faculty member worked to support belonging in a large course

An Iowa faculty member noticed that his students were challenged in their capacity to learn in a college setting and to bounce back after a poor exam grade. **How could he provide personalized feedback in a large course (700–1000 students)?** How could he acknowledge individual success, support students through course challenges, and encourage meaningful learning? Together with the [Center for Teaching and Research and Analytics](#) office, he leveraged real-time learning data and mail merge to provide personalized feedback at scale. These emails included study tips, offers for assistance, and acknowledgement of students' hard work. **Students were positively impacted by these messages,** noting that they felt cared for, that their hard work and success mattered to the instructor, and that the messages motivated them to improve their grades and continue despite setbacks (Brummett et al., 2021).

Student reactions:

"Just having my successes and my progress be recognized by a professor especially in such a big class was really motivating because it made me feel like I was actually being seen and that my effort to improve was being noticed."

"It showed that he cared about me as an individual for how I do in the class which really pushed me to want to do better next time."

A statement to support belonging

Here is a message for students that you could add to your syllabus, send as an announcement, or use as a starting point for a discussion. You may also want to include links to resources and a description of supportive course characteristics. The example includes suggestions that you can keep or edit to align with your specific course:

During the ongoing pandemic, you may have experienced a loss of motivation, less ability to focus, and less interest in the academic topics that you previously cared about. Unfortunately, these conditions are commonly reported among students. Please know that you are not alone in these feelings and experiences. People, including me, and services are available at Iowa to help you navigate these challenges. Below, you will find some information on seeking support and strategies to increase your academic motivation and success.

In This Class:

- Office hours are meant for you! This time is dedicated to supporting your success in the course.
- Early and frequent feedback on your grades. This helps you to be informed and proactive so you can take any necessary action for improvement in a timely manner.
- Group work will give you the opportunity to find helpful peers. I recommend that you find at least one or two peers who you can study with or reach out to with questions.

Academic Support Services:

- This course has **Supplemental Instruction** (SI). This is a free resource to support your success.
- Need more support? **Here's a list of resources at Iowa**, including links to find a tutor, academic tips, and interactive workshops.

Holistic Wellness Support Services:

- **Student Wellness** at Iowa provides appointments and programs on nutrition, fitness, stress management, alcohol and drugs, sexual health, and sleep. You can make an appointment or attend a program.
- **Student Health** offers various services and information, including COVID testing. A **Nurseline** is available if you have questions or need to make an appointment: 319-335-9704.
- **UI's Counseling Service** has several options for appointments and offers other information and services, including trans-inclusive services and an eating disorders network.
- **UI's Basic Needs** site provides listings for campus and community resources that help support basic needs. Examples of resources you'll find in the directory include food insecurity, childcare, health and wellness, and mental health.

References

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