Sense of Belonging and Higher Education

Belonging is a construct that has long been a focus within higher education.

Every year since 1975 dozens of peer-reviewed articles are published about students’ sense of belonging during college, to better understand its connections to students’ success during college. Sense of belonging (i.e., sense of school belonging) is “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment”. Following this it can be argued that sense of belonging taps into feelings or perceptions of association or group membership.

Beside the sustained interest in empirically exploring sense of belonging during college by scholars, large-scale surveys of students attending post-secondary institutions also focus on measuring this construct, for the past 20 years or longer. Information gleaned from these multi-campus surveys are used by hundreds of decision-makers (e.g., associate deans, deans, directors, vice provosts) across thousands of campuses to develop, increase, or sustain interventions that relate to sense of belonging and, therefore, influence students’ success during college.

Sense of Belonging and Student Success

Belonging is associated with success for all students—not just certain subgroups.

Students’ success during college is influenced by sociological and psychological considerations, augmented by economic factors. Typical student success outcomes with an empirical connection to sense of belonging are retention from semester to semester or from year to year, persistence to graduation or time-to-degree, and academic outcomes such as grade point average.

There are also several other outcome variables that have been explored in the past five years, which fall outside of the typical student success outcomes, such as: learning achievement(s) or gain(s); employment, first destination, or starting salary; mental health; academic efficacy; self-efficacy; identity development; habits of mind; social agency; civic engagement; and much more.

Campus Belonging at Purdue

Belonging is a construct that has long been a focus for many units across Purdue’s campuses—this interest is not new.

Parallel to and aligned with the national foci on belonging, stakeholders at Purdue have long considered Campus Belonging as a critical factor to be measured, considered and understood.

Campus leaders look at data on Campus Belonging to inform their understanding and make changes or improvements to programming. For one example, we look to our colleagues in Student Success Programs at PWL, specifically Orientations, who have found that developing Campus Belonging in the first year is critical to whether students will be retained—as over half of all college student departures occur sometime during or shortly after the first year. Therefore, not only does Orientations’ programming focus on this construct, but so too does their surveying or measurement practices.
Campus Goal Regarding Belonging

All students agree that they have a sense of belonging to Purdue University.

Our goal is for all students to report gains in Campus Belonging—with the understanding that we will need a range of approaches for all subgroups of students to reach that universal goal. With leadership from the Office of the Provost and buy in from our campus-community we will strategically and longitudinally collect valid data on Campus Belonging from all currently enrolled undergraduate students. Longitudinal data on sense of belonging will allow decision-makers the ability to:

- Explore changes in Campus Belonging over time;
- Design interventions to improve students’ Campus Belonging;
- Identify if or how a certain intervention relates to self-reported changes Campus Belonging;
- Describe how Campus Belonging relates to academic success at Purdue University.

Purdue’s Definition of Campus Belonging

Campus Belonging is the extent to which students agree that they are a member or part of and are valued and supported by the campus community, plus that our students are respected and can be themselves at Purdue University.

Purdue’s Items to Measure Campus Belonging

Decision-makers and scholars within Purdue University include the following set of questions and response options (i.e., Likert scale) when measuring this construct via a survey. With continued support from IDA+A, we will revisit this measure to test its validity and reliability over time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Answer options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am a member of the campus community.</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am valued by the campus community.</td>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am accepted by the campus community.</td>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a part of the campus community.</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can be myself in the campus community.</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am respected by the campus community.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you have any questions about this endeavor, please reach out to IDATA at idata@purdue.edu.


3 To review the most highly cited studies on these topics please see: