

Campus Belonging and Higher Education

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

Every year since 1975, dozens of higher education scholars publish peer-reviewed articles regarding students' perception of sense of belonging, which Purdue is calling Campus Belonging, in order to better understand its connections to students' success during college (e.g., persistence, retention, emotional functioning, and academic motivation/efficacy and performance). 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".ⁱ Following this, it can be argued that sense of belonging taps into feelings or perceptions of association or group membership.ⁱⁱ

Beside the sustained interest in empirically exploring Campus Belonging during college by scholars, large-scale surveys of students attending post-secondary institutions also focus on measuring this element, 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 Campus Belonging and, therefore, influence students' success during college. Here is some basic information about and links to the major (i.e., long-standing, large-scale and well-respected) surveys that contain questions about Campus Belonging:

- HERI-CIRP: The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) has been administering the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) since 1973. Their longitudinal research consists of a set of six surveys, three of which focus on students to self-report Campus Belonging: since 2000 the [Your First College Year Survey \(YFCYS\)](#), since 1995 the [Continuing Student Survey \(CSS\)](#), and since 2011 the [Diverse Learning Environments Survey \(DLES\)](#)
- HEDS: The [Higher Education Data Sharing \(HEDS\) consortium](#) was formed in 1983. HEDS administers eight surveys and in half of them, students self-report Campus Belonging: the [HEDS Sexual Assault Campus Climate Survey](#), the [HEDS Diversity and Equity on Campus Climate Survey](#), the [HEDS Undergraduate Alumni Survey](#), and the [HEDS Student Satisfaction Survey](#).
- SERU: A survey on [Student Experiences in the Research University \(SERU\)](#) provides actionable information about academic programs and institutional effectiveness. Since 2009, this survey has asked students to self-report their belonging to the campus. Purdue has participated in the SERU since 2013.
- NSSE: While not historically focused on Campus Belonging, the [National Survey on Student Experiences \(NSSE\)](#) included a trio of items to assess students on this construct in 2020.

Campus 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 Campus 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.ⁱⁱⁱ

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 or self-efficacy; identity development; habits of mind; social agency; and civic engagement.

Campus Belonging at Purdue

Belonging is a construct that has long been a focus for many units on Purdue's campus—this interest is not new.

Parallel to and aligned with the national focus on belongingness, stakeholders at Purdue have long considered Campus Belonging a critical factor to be measured, considered and informative.

Synopsis of measuring Campus Belonging among undergraduate students at Purdue University West Lafayette (as of October 2021)

Study	When
Orientations: <i>Student Success Programs</i>	Every entering student is measured before and after orientation [(V)STAR] and after Boiler Gold Rush (BGR).
First Year Engineering: <i>Dr. Kerri Douglas (ENGR)</i>	Beginning of every term, FYE students are surveyed on Campus Belonging and other constructs.
Student Experiences at Research Universities (SERU): <i>IDA+A</i>	A census activity; in the even numbered spring terms, undergraduates are surveyed, and in the odd numbered spring terms, graduate students are surveyed.
Organizational Leadership: <i>Dr. Stephen Elliot (PPI)</i>	Once per academic year, typically in the fall term, all students enrolled in this program of study are surveyed.
Student Life: <i>Kevin Maurer</i>	Approximately six weeks after the start of each term, first year and second year students are measured on this construct.
Steps to Leaps (S2L): <i>Dr. Louis Tay</i>	Students that attend S2L programming are surveyed on this topic.

Campus leaders look at data on Campus Belonging to inform their understanding and make changes or improvements to programming. For example, our colleagues in Student Success Programs, specifically Orientations, know that developing a 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 Goals Regarding Campus Belonging

All students agree that they have a Campus Belonging to Purdue University.

Our goal is for all students to report gains in their 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 Campus Belonging will allow decision-makers, across the entire campus, the ability to:

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

Purdue's Definition of Belonging

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

Purdue's Items to Measure 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.

From your experiences, in the past 12 months, to what extent do you agree with the following statements:	
<i>Statements</i>	<i>Answer options</i>
I am valued by the campus community.	Strongly Agree
I am accepted by the campus community.	Agree
I am a part of the campus community.	Neither agree nor disagree
I can be myself in the campus community.	Disagree
I am respected by the campus community.	Strongly Disagree

Endnotes

ⁱ Goodenow, C. (1993). The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools, 30*, 70-90. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6807\(199301\)30:1<79::AID-PITS2310300113>3.0.CO;2-X](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6807(199301)30:1<79::AID-PITS2310300113>3.0.CO;2-X) Page 90.

ⁱⁱ Maestas, R., Vaquera, G. S., & Munoz Zehr, L. (2007). Factors impacting sense of belonging at a Hispanic-serving institution. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 6*, 237-256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192707302801>

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

Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research, 70*, 323-367. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543070003323>

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How college affects students*. Jossey-Bass.

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research, 45*(1), 89-125. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089>