INCREASING STUDENT SUCCESS THROUGH INCREASED STUDENT BELONGING

Over a decade of social psychology research has demonstrated how students' sense of belonging impacts their success in the classroom. The findings are clear: learning environments where students feel like they belong and are supported to succeed lead to better academic outcomes.

Creating supportive learning environments is particularly important for structurally disadvantaged students, such as Black, Latino, first-generation, transfer students, and Pell grant recipients, who are more likely to experience greater obstacles in pursuing their education, compounding long-standing societal inequities.

Leveraging this research, the Student Experience Project (SEP) is partnering with faculty and administrators at six public research universities to implement evidence-based changes to learning environments that contribute to an institutional culture where all students feel like they belong and are supported to succeed. Data gathering on the impact of these changes is still underway, but preliminary results already show marked improvements in student perceptions of their learning environments.

The Problem

The transition to college is a major life milestone that can test any student's sense of belonging. For students from structurally disadvantaged groups, however, the learning environment can have an even greater impact on academic performance. In STEM courses, for example, one study found that when instructors self-idenitfied as having a fixed mindset about students' abilities, the racial outcome gap is more than twice as large as in courses where faculty report having a growth mindset. Students' experiences in such gateway courses often don't just impact their performance in that course. This can shape their perception of themselves as learners and ultimately determine whether they complete not just the course, but an entire college education.

The Solution

Research shows faculty and institutions can create the conditions to improve student experience, leading to gains in academic performance while diminishing disparities in persistence and graduation rates between different groups. The SEP is working to build on and scale research-based practices and tools to improve students' sense of belonging, advance equity, and improve academic achievement.

FIRST DAY TOOLKIT

Improving the messages and signals students receive on the first day of class to foster growth mindset, belonging, and equitable student experience

Student-Centered Learning Environment Changes

A course syllabus is many students' first window into what their course experience will be like. It sets the tone for the learning environment students can expect and can help students seek out support to persist through challenges and complete the course. Equipped with evidence-based practices for creating a supportive and welcoming environment, nearly 300 instructors revised their course syllabi to communicate a growth mindset about student potential and promote a sense of belonging. Asked to rank syllabi for how supportive and clear they are, students reported revised syllabi were 25 percent more supportive and 8 percent clearer than unrevised syllabi.

Instructors reported strongly favorable experiences with training in evidence-based practices, too. Over 90 percent of instructors said they would recommend such training to a colleague and 90 percent reported the training helped them incorporate a growth mindset into their syllabus.

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SEP is now collecting data on the impact of other classroom practices aimed at boosting students' sense of belonging and perception of their instructor's growth mindset. Examples include:

- Reviewing course policies to promote equity;
- Delivering feedback in ways that promote trust and increase academic engagement;
- Increasing efforts to create a collaborative peer learning community; and
- Highlighting the work of diverse scholars

Institutions are also extending changes to the campus environment and student services. Several institutions have revised messaging and policies for early alerts to encourage use of campus resources, integrating student-centered language that normalizes academic difficulty and promotes a sense of belonging. One institution renovated its pre-calculus lab to foster greater collaborative learning among students while emphasizing that setbacks are a normal part of the college experience. The participating institutions also undertook student-led social media campaigns engaging students of diverse backgrounds to share how they came to believe that they can belong and succeed in college.

Participating Institutions

The university partners in this project are: Colorado State University; University of Colorado Denver, University of New Mexico; University of North Carolina at Charlotte; Portland State University; and University of Toledo.

The SEP is also working with other institutions of higher education as part of a Peer Learning Network focused on the first week of class. They are: Florida International University; Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis; Morgan State University; North Carolina A&T State University; Rutgers University – Newark; University of Illinois at Chicago; University of North Texas; The University of Texas at San Antonio; Wayne State University; and West Virginia State University.

Learning Partners

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COLLEGE TRANSITION COLLABORATIVE

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