



## CULTIVATING BELONGING IN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

A sense of belonging is students' perception of social support on campus, connectedness, and experience of feeling accepted, respected, mattering, and valued by the community or people on campus, such as faculty, staff, and peers ([Strayhorn, 2012](#)). Based on four domains of sense of belonging that [Ahn and Davis \(2020\)](#) suggest (academic engagement, social engagement, surroundings, and personal space), this resource provides practical guidance for cultivating a sense of belonging in learning environments.

### **Social Engagement**

Social engagement primarily refers to social relationships and positive social interactions between students and instructor and among students.

1. Create opportunities for regular interaction with peers
  - a. Give students opportunities to share constructive peer feedback
  - b. Engage students in collaborative projects and group discussions
2. Promote student voice engagement
  - b. Ask for students' feedback on their learning experience throughout the course
  - c. Prompt students to share the challenges they face in your course (and normalize the experience)
3. Make intentional efforts to connect with students in a respectful way
  - a. Learn and use students' names and pronouns
  - b. Use gender neutral terms, such as 'folks' instead of "guys".
4. Create an explicitly inclusive course climate
  - a. Plan to include a variety of perspectives/experiences in course materials and activities
  - b. Pay attention to your social presence by facilitating meaningful human interactions through nonverbal (e.g., eye contact, smiling, or nodding) and verbal behaviors (e.g., informal conversations with students before and after class)

### **Academic Engagement**

Academic engagement refers to interactions and behaviors that relate specifically to the academic setting. The most significant aspect is supporting students' sense of belonging in a discipline or a course.

1. Invite students to make active connections between the material and their own lives.
  - a. Prompt students to bring examples from their own experience or share prior knowledge
  - b. Encourage collaborative and peer learning experiences to foster communication among students with different backgrounds and experiences.
2. Explicitly communicate to students what they need to do to achieve the course learning goals.
  - a. Increase transparency by connecting tasks to learning outcomes and sharing skills that students develop through assignments.
  - b. Provide details about how their work will be evaluated (Rubric and/or criteria)
3. Ensure that course materials and resources represent diverse voices and experiences.
  - a. Include textbooks, articles, or books written by authors from various backgrounds and include multiple perspectives when providing examples, e.g., gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic status, ability/disability, or linguistic backgrounds.
  - b. Use diverse course resources, including written materials, audio and visual contents to enhance students' learning experiences



4. Invite students to office hours/student hours to discuss a draft assignment, or to check-in with their learning progress.
  - a. Provide students with chances to develop/improve their work through feedback
  - b. Check in with students regularly about challenges related to learning

### Surroundings: Institution and Community

Surroundings include the natural, environmental, physical, cultural, and local environment ([Ahn & Davis, 2020](#), p. 626). To support students' sense of belonging, we can support exploration of the geographical, environmental, and cultural contexts of the university and beyond.

1. [Acknowledge the land](#) and honor the longer history of these lands
  - a. Include a land acknowledgement in the syllabus and discuss its relevance in class
  - b. Provide students opportunities to reflect on their experiences with the land
2. Connect students to resources at the institution
  - a. Use your syllabus to connect students with resources such as [food support and basic resources](#), [CAPS Counseling & Psychological services](#), [health and wellness concerns](#), [student affairs](#) (e.g., peer mentoring programs, intercultural community, LGBTQ+ Community, first-gen advocate)
  - b. Announce events/speakers on campus or in the community in class.
3. Help students navigate higher education
  - a. Unpack the hidden curriculum in your own courses (unarticulated beliefs or expectations).
  - b. Be aware of traditions/cultural practices at the institution and keep in mind that not all students may feel included in these activities or spaces.
4. Connect students with local opportunities
  - a. Share opportunities to volunteer that are related to your field of study
  - b. Build civic engagement into your course when appropriate

### Personal Spaces

Personal spaces refer to life attitudes, identity, personal interests, sense of self-efficacy, growth mindset, as well as emotional well-being.

1. Provide opportunities to learn from their mistakes
  - a. Discuss with students how to approach mistakes or difficult situations (e.g., group work)
2. Cultivate a [Growth Mindset](#)
  - a. Reframe challenges as opportunities
  - b. Value the process over outcome
3. Get to know students as individuals
  - a. Design Inclusive Learning using the ["Who's in class?" Survey](#)
  - b. Encourage students to visit office hours/student hours early in the semester
4. Support the transition into higher education
  - a. Make time for explicit conversations about the role of belonging (and challenges)
  - b. Normalize challenges students might experience in their learning experience
5. Refer to the [Red Folder](#), which is a guide to help instructors recognize and interact with students in distress.