HOW STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND BELONGING INTERVENTIONS CAN SUPPORT STRONG POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES

What is Student Experience and Belonging?

Student experience and belonging is a primary driver of postsecondary learning, persistence, and completion. *Student experience* encompasses day-to-day realities in the postsecondary setting, including interactions and communications with instructors, administrators, staff, and fellow students. *Sense of belonging* refers to students' connectedness to the college community, both academically and socially.

Policies and practices shape these aspects of students' higher education journeys, which means that policymakers and leaders at all levels can help cultivate positive student experiences and foster students' sense of belonging. For example, institutional leaders can:

- Encourage faculty to use teaching strategies that promote a growth mindset, which normalizes challenges and emphasizes the belief that knowledge is not innate but can be developed through effort and learning.

- Reduce bureaucratic hassles, such as confusing course requirements and complicated financial aid forms.

- Revise communications, such as academic probation letters, to acknowledge that academic setbacks are part of the learning process and do not reflect a student's potential for success.

Strategies like these can positively influence leading indicators of student success, such as strong academic performance, retention, and good mental health. There is robust evidence that attending to student experience and sense of belonging inside and outside of the classroom helps all students, particularly students from historically marginalized backgrounds, persist through challenges, achieve academic success, and complete degrees.[1]

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What Do Studies Show About Student Experience and Belonging and Postsecondary Success?

ATTENDING TO STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND BELONGING CAN...

Improve academic performance

- The rate of students earning As or Bs increased by 12% and the rate of students earning Ds, Fs, or withdrawing decreased by 26% in fall 2020 when nearly 300 faculty members used research-based practices to foster sense of belonging in their courses.[2]

- Students who received academic probation letters designed to reduce feelings of shame or stigma were 17 percentage points more likely to be off probation and 31 percentage points more likely to still be enrolled after one year, compared with students who received standard letters.[3]

- First-year Latinx students at a large public university significantly improved their GPAs after participating in an online growth mindset intervention. This intervention reduced the GPA gap between White and Latinx students by teaching students about neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to change—and encouraging reflection on intellectual growth.[4]

Increase retention

- Students who scored highly on belonging measures had among the highest retention rates in a study of 1,400 first-years at a diverse research university.[5]

- First-year students from historically marginalized populations who participated in a reading-and-writing exercise designed to address barriers to cultivating a sense of belonging and model available and effective coping strategies as part of the required first-year writing course saw a 10% and 9% increase in retention rates over one and two years respectively, compared with control groups at a broad-access, Hispanic-serving institution.[6]

- Students, especially first-generation students, who encounter bureaucratic hassles like confusing financial aid or course selection forms are less likely to remain enrolled compared with peers who feel a stronger sense of belonging.[7]
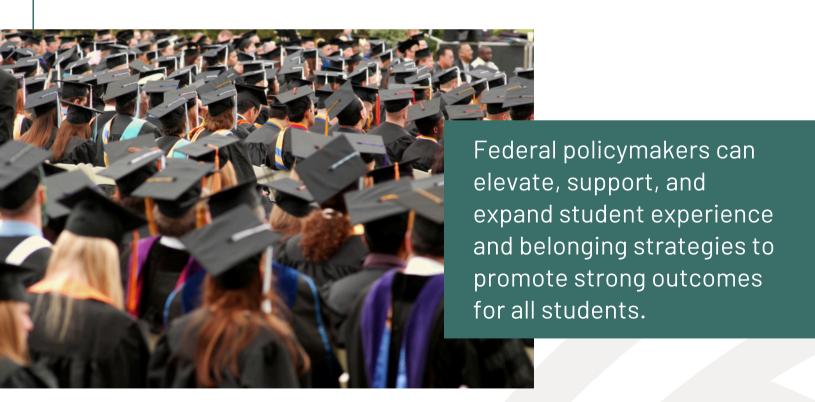
Support mental health and wellness

- Belonging was associated with positive mental health outcomes at four-year colleges in first-time, first-year U.S. college students.[8]

- Black students saw significant academic and health benefits over three years after participating in an intervention designed to improve first-year students' sense of belonging in college by framing social adversity as a common and temporary experience.[9]

How Can Policymakers Use Student Experience and Belonging to Promote Postsecondary Success?

Federal policymakers in Congress and at the U.S. Department of Education (ED) can and should view interventions that attend to positive student experience and foster a sense of belonging as effective tools for bolstering student success. While such interventions are most frequently implemented at the institutional level, federal policymakers can elevate, support, and expand these strategies to promote strong outcomes for all students, and especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds. For example:

- Congress should codify and further invest in the **Postsecondary Student Success Grant** (PSSG) program, which aims to improve student outcomes by providing institutions with resources to implement, expand, and evaluate bold, research-backed initiatives. ED should prioritize PSSG proposals that attend to student experience and sense of belonging.

- ED should recognize student experience and belonging as evidence of an institution's commitment to student success through the **Postsecondary Student Success Recognition Program** and explicitly allow institutions to submit measures of student experience and belonging that have been validated as early indicators of student success as evidence of their efforts to promote student success.[10]

These recommendations serve as a starting point—not an exhaustive list—of how federal policymakers can draw on evidence-based student experience and belonging interventions to help students complete their degrees. This will increase the number of well-educated, skilled, and resilient individuals entering the workforce. We look forward to partnering with policymakers and other stakeholders to help cultivate postsecondary environments where every student feels valued, supported, and empowered to succeed.

Federal policymakers can elevate, support, and expand student experience and belonging strategies to promote strong outcomes for all students.

ENDNOTES

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