BEST PRACTICES ANALYSIS

Creating a Sense of Belonging for All Students

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on an analysis of strategies for creating a sense of belonging among students, Hanover recommends that institutions:

FOCUS ON INCLUSION AND BELONGING IN THE CLASSROOM.

The first step to making students feel comfortable on-campus is to make them feel comfortable in the classroom. This requires faculty to engage all students and create a safe space for students to share their beliefs and ask questions. If students feel comfortable and confident, it can lead them to further academic success. From there, institutions can focus on expanding into non-academic settings.

PROVIDE CAMPUS RESOURCES RELATED TO DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION ON CAMPUS.

Diversity and inclusion centers are important for giving students a chance to be heard and accepted. Furthermore, these centers can help minority students, international students, and students with disabilities share their experiences with others on campus. These student support centers provide resources for students, but also signify the institution is invested in making all students feel comfortable and welcome on campus.

ENHANCE FEELINGS OF INCLUSION AND BELONGING BY PROVIDING STUDENTS SUPPORT TO CREATE NEW ORGANIZATIONS ON CAMPUS.

Clubs and other student organizations are important in making students active on-campus and feeling like a part of the community. It also creates a sense of community between students who share similar interests. If students feel a part of a larger group, they will be more involved and feel a greater sense of belonging.

KEY FINDINGS

Students perform significantly better academically if they feel comfortable not only in the classroom but also when they leave the classroom. Research shows that students who feel as though they "belong" on-campus are much more comfortable in academic settings and thus more successful. It is much easier for students to focus on schoolwork if they are not feeling lonely or out of place at their institution.

The first few weeks of college are a crucial time for fostering a senses of belonging for new students. First-year students are in a transition phase and many are leaving their homes to go to school. This process can be even more difficult for students who are not outgoing or proactive in finding groups to join. Institutions must focus on helping first-year students of all backgrounds be exposed to the many organizations on campus and have the chance to join one that fits their interests, beliefs, or background.

Students with disabilities are at a much higher risk of feeling left out or feeling as though they do not fit in on-campus. Academic life for students with disabilities is in some cases more difficult and the added pressure of "fitting in" can only make those situations harder for students. It is important that institutions focus on initiatives to provide these students with as much opportunity as possible to join campus organizations, but also that institutions foster and develop an inclusive student body.

First-generation college students and minority students are also much more susceptible to feeling as though they do not belong on college campuses. Unlike students whose parents went to college, first-generation students may not have context or familiarity with college settings. This issue can be true for minority students as well, who may feel uncomfortable on campus.

OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

BACKGROUND

Developing a sense of belonging for students has become a greater priority for colleges and universities. Secondary research suggests that a large portion of students in American colleges and universities feel, to some extent, that they do not belong. As defined in a study conducted by Ohio State University (OSU), a sense of belonging among students on-campus is, "whether or not students feel respected, valued, accepted, cared for, included, and that they matter, in the classroom, at college, or in their chosen career path." A lack of belonging can lead students to perform less effectively in the classroom, not feel comfortable speaking in class and lose focus during lectures or exams (OSU). In creating an overall sense of belonging for all students, the most important factor is making sure students feel comfortable in the classroom to achieve their goals.

Increased diversity on college campuses also means adapting to the needs of the entire student body. Higher education students come from different backgrounds with their own set of experiences. This sense of belonging is especially important for underrepresented communities on-campus. All students deserve to feel as though they are welcome and celebrated by their institution.

Solutions include funding student-led or institution-sponsored diversity groups. Another way to cultivate this sense of belonging is to encourage and facilitate conversations among various groups on-campus. Other potential solutions include student affairs funding for student-led organizations and the encouragement of new student organizations as well.

DIFFERENT TYPES "BELONGING"

Academic Sense of Belonging

Students generally perform better academically if they feel comfortable in their learning environment. It is therefore important for institutions and faculty members to "encourage student participation" by greeting students by name, facilitating constructive discussion, and encouraging the asking of questions throughout the course (OSU).

Community Sense of Belonging

Fellow students are as important as professors and administrators in creating a sense of belonging for all students on-campus. For example, peer mentoring programs, campus discussions, and opening avenues of communication are vital to making students feel comfortable, especially for minority groups on campus (Chronicle).

Diversity and Inclusion Centers

Full belonging for all students includes, "eliminating the barriers for students with disabilities" (NASPA). Students with disabilities are often marginalized or feel left out of what is going on. The same can be said for minority students, LGBTQ students, and international students (NASPA).

Sense of Belonging for International Students

International students who have left their homes and are in many cases dealing with a completely new atmosphere and living situations can be more susceptible to feelings of isolation on college campuses (Garcia).

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING A SENSE OF BELONGING

HELPING STUDENTS WHO FEEL LEFT OUT

1 Provide students access to voice their issues and concerns regarding feelings of loneliness or isolation.

2 Spread awareness of resources available to students through on-campus or online communication.

3 Facilitate discussion groups and conversations among students of different backgrounds and experiences.

4 Provide resources via student affairs for new organizations to be created on-campus.

5 Equip faculty with training and resources to make students feel comfortable within the classroom.

6 Focus on providing a platform to hear the voices of marginalized groups such as those with disabilities, international students, and minority students.

Colleges and universities are increasingly creating on-campus organizations to ensure students feel a greater sense of belonging. Creating a sense of belonging among first-year students is vital as it is critically important in their higher education transition. According to one study, this sense of belonging "predicts better persistence, engagement, and mental health" among students (Gopalan and Brady). Engagement is especially important among first-generation college students who have less of a sense of what to expect from the college experience. It is important for college counselors, academic advisors, and administrators to work with students to create a degree and extracurricular plan for students. This sense of belonging remains particularly important among minority students at four-year institutions. According to the aforementioned study, "minority and first-generation college students have a higher sense of belonging at two-year colleges than their counterparts at four-year institutions."

A sense of belonging on-campus facilitates student success academically and otherwise. According to secondary research, "students who feel they belong tend to seek out and use campus resources to a greater extent, which furthers their success. A sense of belonging also buffers students from stress and thus improves their mental health" (Study International). Creating a sense of belonging among all students can encourage students to apply themselves as well.

Institutions need to have the sometimes uncomfortable conversations about inequality among their students. Specifically, some student affairs administrators are "leaning into uncomfortable dialogue around issues of racial, gender, and sexual inequity on campuses" (Diverse Education). These types of conversations are important in ensuring every student feels as though they belong and have the ability to voice or express their experiences. Moreover, they need to know that their voices will be heard.

APPROACHES TO FOSTERING A SENSE OF BELONGING

When examining various approaches to creating a greater sense of belonging among students, some common approaches are described in the table below.

SAMPLE APPROACHES TO ENHANCING STUDENT BELONGING

Approach	Challenge	Strategy	Outcomes
Facilitated Discussions	Encouraging students of different backgrounds or beliefs to have difficult conversations about inclusion. This may occur in the classroom or outside the classroom.	Educate faculty to first proctor these types of discussions in the classroom. Faculty can facilitate activities such as student journaling or using online resources to understand issues such as cultural differences. Once students feel comfortable, provide platforms for these conversations outside the classroom.	Students are provided with a safe learning space where they feel their opinions and beliefs are valued. If students feel comfortable speaking in the classroom, they are likely to feel comfortable having these conversations outside the classroom as well.
Student-Led Organizations	Funding a variety of student clubs and organizations and encouraging students of all backgrounds to join.	Institutions must allow students to have a voice in the creation of these organizations, otherwise it will be more difficult to encourage them to join. To encourage students to join clubs, host club fairs at the beginning of each term to allow students to get exposure to different organizations.	Students are active in on-campus organizations and have the opportunity to lead those around them, further developing their sense of belonging to the campus community.
On-Campus Support Centers	Funding and administering student support groups such as diversity and inclusion centers. Additionally, ensuring the centers are meeting the expressed needs of students.	Focus primarily on diversity and inclusion centers. Partner with professional organizations to fund these centers and host lecture series.	Students at-risk of feeling neglected feel supported by their institution and thus feel a greater sense of belonging. Demonstrated institutional support is perhaps the most impactful way to generate a feeling of belonging for all students on-campus.