How can we capture that feeling of connectedness while still celebrating our diversity? What makes communities feel inclusive? As society aims to work across divides, a sense of belonging may help our efforts. The Center to Advance Racial Equity Policy at the RAND Corporation and Wabash Democracy and Public Discourse at Wabash College seek to address the issue of creating belonging through a deliberative conversation titled “Belonging: Fostering Inclusion and Bridging Divides.”

This deliberative conversation builds on a November 2021 deliberative conversation entitled “How should we foster safe and brave spaces for connecting across divides?” Researchers from the RAND Corporation and Wabash Democracy & Public Discourse sponsored an event exploring the ways safe and brave spaces for conversation to contribute to diversity, equity, inclusion by connecting across divisions in our society. A central question that emerged from the conversation is, can a sense of belonging foster inclusion and bridge divides?

Deliberative conversations are an effort to increase cultural awareness, interaction, and discussion among participants. This format brings together individuals who represent diverse perspectives around a topic, sometimes tricky or controversial, to advocate for tangible, joint solutions that give a voice to all stakeholders. Deliberative conversations frame an issue for discussion by exploring it from multiple perspectives, bringing in relevant information. Then, small groups engage questions designed to deepen understanding, provoke new consideration, and weigh potential tensions in the issue. In the end, each group should emerge with a greater understanding of the issue and decide what should be done (Buffalo Project, 2020).
What is belonging?

The word “belonging” connects to our identities as social, interconnected beings who share places, communities, and experiences. We belong when we are able to be our authentic selves and connect with others. We foster belonging when we create spaces for togetherness, spaces that encourage recognizing and building upon that which is shared rather than that which divides.

“Belonging” can have a range of definitions, but common elements include acceptance, support, and security. Cornell University defines belonging as “the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group” (Cornell University, Diversity, and Inclusion, 2022). Researcher Brene Brown (2017) calls belonging “the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us,” and cautions that true belonging “only happens when we present our imperfect, authentic selves to the world.” In the book Our Search for Belonging: How Our Need to Connect is Tearing Us Apart, Howard J. Ross (2018) writes that a critical factor in belonging is “an ability for people to feel fully able to be themselves” while staying in connection with others; it is this acceptance of our unique and diverse selves that encourages a robust sense of feeling “included, accepted, and related” to one another (pp. 27-28).

References to belonging draw on Abraham Maslow’s “Theory of Human Motivation,” first posed in 1943. Maslow theorized that there is a hierarchy of needs compromising of a five-tier model of human needs, with the most physical needs on the bottom and the top tier representing “self-actualization” (Ross & Tartaglione, 2018). The middle tier of the model is “belonging.” While criticized for being overly focused on individualism, we might think of Maslow’s theory as emphasizing belonging as building upon the physiological and safety needs and then fostering the importance of community and acceptance for our well-being (Cherry, 2021).

The Othering and Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley positions belonging and othering as oppositional forces in our society. An inclusive approach to belonging necessitates “values and practices where no person is left out,” creating communities where everyone has “a meaningful voice and the opportunity to participate in the design of political, social, and cultural structures” (Othering & Belonging Institute, 2021).
Belonging is an increasingly powerful concept for our society, whether positioned in institutions, workplaces, or communities. To promote inclusive belonging and minimize othering, The Lumen Learning Circles has adapted research to highlight four evidence-based factors of belonging: representation, engaging intersectionality, mitigating bias, and pedagogical partnerships and collaboration (Cook-Sather et al., 2018; Jackson-Sanchez, 2022).

**Representation and Intersectionality**

An understanding of representation and intersectionality can aid belonging. Representation can be defined as the portrayal of different identities of an individual. Individuals are more likely to feel like they belong when they see people with common identity traits (e.g., race, ethnicity) in a group or community (Healey & Stroman, 2021, p. 8). Community with diverse representation can become a means of support. Research shows that when individuals from a similar group are together, they are more likely to "address bias and discrimination" (p. 15).

These simple acts allow individuals to feel like they matter and belong in their space. Also, in our past research in Safe and Brave Spaces, participants share a common theme: to create a sense of belonging in a safe space, people must be from a similar background. Remember that representation has many different characteristics such as class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, etc. It is vital to have representation and understand what these characteristics mean.

To experience belonging, one must experience a sense of acceptance. To fully accept individuals into a community, other community members must understand individuals' overlapping identities, or intersectionality. Intersectionality is a term coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Crenshaw uses the analogy of a traffic intersection to concretize the concept of intersectionality:

"Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination... But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes, the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm (p. 149)."
There are two categories of identities: visible and invisible. As the label suggests, visible identities are things one can see with their eyes, such as race and gender (Alcoff, 2006). Invisible identities are those one cannot see, such as sexual orientation, religion, mental illness, etc. (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). For example, in the case of a gay Black man, both visible and invisible identities are present. While space may foster a sense of belonging for the individual as a Black man if it does not do the same for him as a gay man, the individual may still feel they do not belong. If a community fails to engage intersectionality, they may recognize a member’s visible identities but not their invisible identities. This can have divisive implications on the sense of community. Individuals may feel like they are not respected and represented by their community, and the community may not understand why the individual feels alone.

Engaging intersectionality will allow community members to understand each of these identities and create the opportunity for acceptance. By embracing how the community is diverse and seeking to represent all, the community can foster a sense of belonging for all community members.

**Mitigating Bias by Creating Inclusive Social Connections**

A community may also need to consider the potential for inequities as barriers to inclusion and acceptance. Last semester, regarding the deliberation on what is brave and safe spaces, when groups were asked, "What roles do inequity (e.g., cancel culture, implicit bias, and structural inequities) play in people’s decision to enter safe or brave spaces?" some groups expressed the need to address inequity as a way to foster moves from safe to brave spaces.
Additionally, research shows the importance of equitable partnerships (see Gordon, 2021, for equity in pedagogical partnerships). Naming and addressing implicit and explicit biases in our classrooms and our communities is essential for creating a shared sense of social connections—or social contracts.

In political philosophy, the social contract refers to “an agreement—consensual or tactic—reflecting the mutual rights and obligations of states and society, or individuals and groups within society, and the necessary trade-offs that such agreements entail” (McCandless, 2021, p. 5). One can imagine that given the difficulties in the COVID-19 pandemic, social connections and belonging have frayed. McCandless, however, contends that the pandemic offers opportunities to “freshly engage” our connections, “cultivat[ing] greater social cohesion in and across societies to strengthen the inclusiveness and redistributionary social contracts” (McCandless, p. 5). McCandless provides three key pathways towards creating such connections:

“- Fostering national visions with conducive development frameworks that target vulnerabilities and transform structural legacies;
- Building and strengthening inclusive coalitions and governance platforms to drive transformative change; and
- Placing trust and solidarity considerations at the center of COVID responses and wider structural policy efforts to tackle exclusion and inequality” (McCandless, 2021 p. 4).

How can we use these sorts of practices to foster inclusive, equitable belonging?
Finally, a sense of belonging is important because it is essential for success, both in a group setting and on a deeply personal and psychological level. To feel belonged is a desire for people of any identity (race, ethnicity, class, gender, faith, or sexuality), and it is directly tied to their academic success and mental health. Belonging, success, and health relate across all levels of education, from K-12 to higher education. A sense of belonging will contribute to our ability to create a collaborative, inclusive civic future community.

The relationship between belonging and academic success is dual-sided: belonging leads to engagement, and engagement creates belonging. But the reverse is also true; lack of belonging can create lower engagement in the K-12 classroom (Stickl Haugen et al., 2019), and at the collegiate level, students who do not feel as if they belong often drop out after the first year (Johnson et al., 2020). Feeling a lack of belonging can be connected to a wide variety of issues, both systemic and interpersonal. Immigrant students in secondary education are often negatively affected by school policies and courses centered around and benefit Eurocentric norms and values (DeNicolo, Crowley & Gabel 2017). Cultural differences for Native American or international students can also mitigate their sense of belonging (Tachine, A. R. et al., 2017 & Gao, F. et al., 2021).

On an interpersonal level, microaggressions can negatively harm students, making them feel unaccepted in their campus community. Students and institutions can address these challenges through relationship building. Examples of this in higher education can be “learning communities” where students are placed in similar classes, spending much of their academic time together (Johnson, M. D. et al., 2020), or in K-12 environments, encouraging relationships through school-based activities and social time (DeNicolo, Crowley, & Gabel 2017).

If school policies and curricula can be more inclusive and mindful of different cultures, if students can learn to combat their own biases and avoid causing microaggressions, and if there can be active relationships and engagements between students of all identities and backgrounds, a sense of belonging has a greater chance of succeeding. Though it can be a challenging and time-consuming process to make these changes happen, it is essential to the mental health and academic success of those who feel unwanted in their own community and campus.
Creating and Defining Belonging in Community

The task is up to us all. How do we create communities of belonging, fostering a sense of inclusion because of, not despite of, differences? How do we reforge pathways back to one another, despite deep societal divisions? What does this look like in our schools and campuses, in our workplaces, in our government institutions, and our communities?

Questions for Deliberation

• What does it mean to belong? When have you experienced belonging?

• What are ways that people discourage a sense of belonging for others?

• How has the COVID-19 pandemic, cancel culture, and anti-racism changed our understanding of belonging?

• Are all members in your community invited to belong?

• Who should have the ability to say who belongs?

• How can we bridge divides while still fostering an appreciation of diverse identities?

• How can we offer experiences and places that help others feel included?

Don't Limit Yourself!

While these questions are used to guide our deliberative conversation, they are a starting point for your discussions of what can be done to foster greater belonging.
References


Jackson-Sanchez, D. (2022, February 17). Interview with research team.


Questions? Comments?
Continue the discussion

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