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 will provide some practical guidance to cultivating a sense of belonging in our courses.

Academic Engagement

Support students to see themselves as part of a discipline or a course. Ensure that course materials and resources represent diverse voices and experiences.

1. Encourage students to contribute their own knowledge and experiences.
2. Allow students to make active connections between the material and their own lives.
3. Explicitly communicate to students what they need to do to achieve the course learning goals.
4. Learn about Red Folder, which is a guide to help faculty, staff, student leaders and others to recognize, and interact with students in distress.
5. Invite students to office hours to discuss a draft assignment, or to check-in with their learning progress.

Social Engagement

Social engagement primarily refers to social relationships with friends and peers through university societies, clubs, and other social spaces (Thomas, 2012). In the context of a course, instructors can support belonging by considering the significance of social presence in learning environments.

1. Regular interaction with peers and perceived support from them.
    a. Give students opportunities to share constructive peer feedback
    b. Engage students in collaborative projects and group discussions
2. Promoting student voice engagement.
    a. Invite students to communicate with their peers and the instructor
    b. Ask for students' feedback on the course throughout the course
    c. Ask students to share the challenges they face in your course
3. Intentional effort to connect with students and to respect students
    a. Learn and use students' names and pronouns
    b. Use gender neutral terms, pronoun such as 'they' or saying 'folks' instead of guys
4. Create an explicitly inclusive course climate
    a. Plan to include a variety of perspectives in course materials and activities
    b. Facilitate meaningful human interactions through nonverbal (eye contact, smiling, and nodding) and verbal behaviors (asking students to share their opinions, informal conversations with students before and after class)

Surroundings: Institution and Community Engagement

"Surroundings consists of wide range of meanings such as natural, environmental, physical, cultural, and local surroundings" (Ahn & Davis, 2020, p. 626). What can we do to provide students with support for them to get to know about the geographical, environmental, and cultural contexts of the university?

1. Connect students to institutions
    6. Use your syllabus to connect students with resources such as food support and basic resources, CAPS Counseling & Phycological services, health and wellness concerns, student affairs (e.g., peer mentoring programs, intercultural community, LGBTQ+ Community, first-gen advocate)
    7. Utilize the University-wide Equity and Belonging Resources at Penn State in teaching
2. Connect with local opportunities to volunteer (e.g., Volunteer Centre County)
3. Support the transition into higher education
    a. Explicit conversations about the role of belonging
    b. Normalize challenges students might experience in their learning experience
4. Acknowledge the land and honor the longer history of these lands
    a. Include the details of the land in the syllabus to share with students
    b. Provide students opportunities to reflect on their experiences with the land

Personal Engagement

Personal engagement refers 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. As mentors, and supervisors, give students detailed feedback on how to approach mistakes or difficult situations
2. Cultivating Growth Mindset
    a. Reframe challenges as opportunities
    b. Value the process over outcome
3. Get to know students as individuals
    a. Designing Inclusive Learning with "Who's in class?" Survey
    b. Encourage students to visit office hours early in the semester and help students understand when and where they can find the instructor to talk to

References

Ahn, M. Y., & Davis, H. H. (2020). Four domains of students' sense of belonging to university. *Studies in Higher Education (Dorchester-on-Thames), 45*(3), 622-634. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1564902

Strayhorn, T. L., & Ebooks Corporation. (2012). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203118924