

BELONGING BRIEF

“In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty and peers)” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 29).

Key Takeaways:

- **It is the responsibility of the institution to create pathways to belonging and offer belonging to students**
- **Belonging is key to academic success, retention and graduation**
- **Belonging is linked to well-being and health**
- **Belonging can be separated into three categories: Academic, Social, and Institutional Belonging**
- **Belonging is fluid**
- **Belonging is directly impacted by identity.**
- **Cultivating and assessing Sense of Belonging must be intentional, strategic and structured**

Overview

Belonging is not a new topic within higher education, but as more focus has been placed on student success, retention and graduation, more focus has also been placed on belonging. Sense of belonging is a basic human need, and discussing, evaluating and encouraging sense of belonging is vital in all discussions surrounding student success and well-being (Bentrim & Henning, 2023; Gummadam et al., 2015; Lu, 2023; Supiano, 2018). It is the responsibility of the institution to create pathways to belonging and offer belonging to students, as groups and communities must offer or provide belonging to students, individuals cannot create belonging alone (Nunn, 2021; Walton, 2021). Campus culture is not just a reflection of the students at the institution, the cultural of the campus also frames and impacts student’s expectations. Campus culture is the responsibility of the institution and the institution must make changes to improve belonging (Nunn, 2021).

Research has shown that a lack of belongingness can have a negative impact of mental-health, general well-being, and academic performance (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Mowreader, 2023). After important physiological and safety needs have been met, individuals look for and need belonging. Conversely, it is difficult for students to experience belonging if their basic needs are not met and they do not feel safe (Beauchamp et al., 2021; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Within an institution, students who are admitted to an institution, who then do not have the financial resources, or academic support to succeed do not feel as though they belong at the institution (Nunn, 2021).

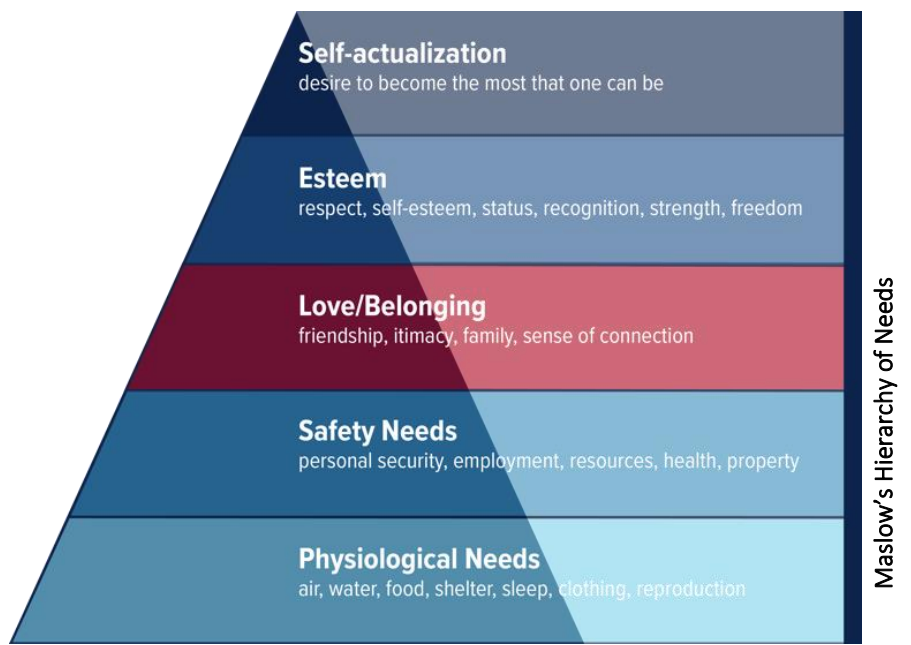


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Belonging is fluid, contextual and for students can be categorized as academic, social or campus/institutional belonging. Academic belonging is primarily linked to academic competency, feeling respected within a classroom, and understanding or believing they can meet expectations. Social belonging includes creating relationships, joining organizations, and being involved on campus. The third category, campus or institutional belongingness is belonging to the larger community. Students can feel as though they belong in none, any or all of the categories simultaneously and can move in and out of feelings of belonging at any time (Bentrim & Henning, 2023; Lu, 2023; Sense of Belonging, n.d.; Nunn, 2021).



Belonging is directly linked to identities that students hold, in how they seek belonging and how they feel they are offered belonging (Brady et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2020; Walton & Crum, 2020). For student with disabilities, there is a symbiotic relationship between academic and social belonging, as students feel a stronger social sense of belonging they are more likely to be self-advocates within their academic identity and experience higher academic success (Vaccaro et al., 2015). Academic belonging was increased when students felt staff and faculty offered support and encouragement. For minoritized students, the development of authentic relationships and safety feature highly in their ability to find social and community/institutional belonging (Gummadam et al., 2015; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Additionally, First-Generation students are more likely to experience belonging slower or later than continuing-generation students. First-Generation students are less likely to assume opportunities and resources on campus are for them, and the burden to find belonging is most often placed on first-generation students rather than on the institution (Nunn, 2021).



POSITIVE IMPACTS ON BELONGING		
Positive connections with encouraging faculty and staff.	Academic, Institutional	Vaccaro et al., 2015; Nunn, 2021
Peer mentoring	Academic, Social	Beauchamp et al., 2021
Welcoming messaging that does not place the burden on students to find community but on the institution to help them.	Academic, Social, Institutional	Nunn, 2021; Walton, 2021
Participation in and use of study groups, particularly for First-Generation College Students.	Academic, Social	Nunn, 2021
When students feel respected by faculty they are more likely to succeed.	Academic, Institutional	Vaccaro & Newman, 2016; Vaccaro et al., 2015
Basic needs like safety and respect being met.	Institutional	Vaccaro & Newman, 2016
Providing First-generation and minoritized students with spaces and opportunities to be their authentic selves.	Social, Institutional	Vaccaro & Newman, 2016; Nunn, 2021
Create affirming opportunities, experiences and spaces for students with multiple identities.	Social, Institutional	Gummadam et al., 2015; Nunn, 2021
Avoiding “find your place” messaging, particularly with First-Generation students to circumvent placing the burden on students to find or create their own community rather than community and belonging being offered to them.	Social, Institutional	Nunn, 2021; Walton, 2021
Offer financial aid and other resources that allows students to feel supported.	Institutional	Nunn, 2021
Provide student with opportunities to share their experiences and needs, and be given resources.	Institutional	Nunn, 2021
Creating a welcoming community should be encouraged at all level including, food sold in markets or restaurants, music played in campus buildings, campus art and murals.	Institutional	Nunn, 2021
Student Support resources should easily accessible on campus, well-staffed and resourced and easy to find for students.	Academic, Institutional	Nunn, 2021
Regularly assess affordability of campus resources and programs.	Institutional	Nunn, 2021
Make strides or substantial changes in terms of diversity and diversity efforts.	Institutional	Gummadam et al., 2015; Nunn, 2021



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THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA'S STRATEGIC EFFORTS TO INCREASE SENSE OF BELONGING

Data and Assessment Around Belonging

National perspective

As noted above, research has shown that sense of belonging among college students differs across student characteristics and identities as well as across institutional context. Most research on sense of belonging has been focused on one institution or small populations within an institution. There are, however, a few nationally representative surveys of college students that measure belonging. In 2020 the [National Survey of Student Engagement \(NSSE\)](#) added a three-question module measuring belonging and connectedness, giving us a new large-scale source of data on the topic, and the ability to compare our own results to national peers.

The NSSE results (Sense of belonging, 2020) show that most first-year students report high levels of sense of belonging. Across all participating institutions:

- 90% feel comfortable being themselves
- 80% feel valued by their institution
- 80% feel like part of the community at their institution

However, differences in these responses for subpopulations of students. For example, international students feel less comfortable being themselves and LGBTQ+ identified students feel less valued and less part of the community.

Belonging at Arizona

Students' sense of belonging at the University of Arizona has been measured in a variety of ways, both through internal and national institutional surveys; smaller assessments at the program or department level; and qualitative focus groups. For example, questions related to belonging have been included on the Campus Climate survey; the most recent administration of the Campus Climate survey (2016) found that 65% of undergraduate students felt as they belong.

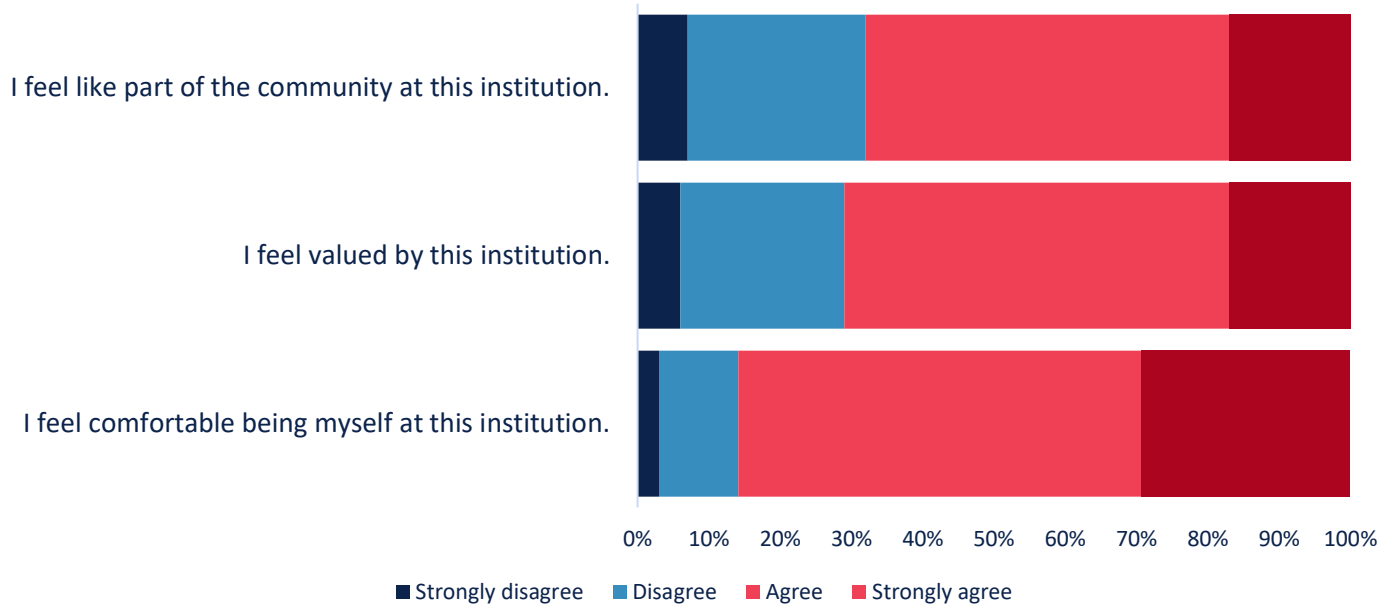
Arizona participated in NSSE in 2021, benefiting from the addition of the new belonging module. The survey found that most first-year students did report agreement with the belonging indicators, as seen in the figure below. However, it is still important to note the sizable population of students who did not feel like part of the community at Arizona (32%) or feel valued by the institution (29%).

NSSE Results

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel comfortable being myself at this institution.	3	11	56	29
I feel valued by this institution.	6	23	54	17
I feel like part of the community at this institution.	7	25	51	17



Figure 1: NSSE 2021 Results for Arizona



Sense of Belonging for Incoming Students

Starting in 2022, we added a short belonging module to the New Student Interest Form (NSIF), which is administered to incoming first-year and transfer students prior to starting their undergraduate career at Arizona. These questions measure students’ expectations around belonging and finding community on campus. Looking at the NSIF responses for incoming first-year students who enrolled in the fall 2022 semester (N=6691), we see that while the majority do expect to fit in and find community, there is quite a bit of uncertainty. When asked about expectations of fitting in, about 21% were unsure, and an additional 3% did not believe that they would.

Sense of Belonging Results from 2022 NSIF

% Agreement with following statements:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
I believe I will find a sense of community at the University of Arizona.	1.0	0.3	11.7	47.6	39.3
I am excited to be a student at the University of Arizona.	1.1	0.2	3.7	29.2	65.8
I expect that staff and faculty will help me to be successful as an Arizona student.	1.1	0.5	9.1	45.0	44.4
I expect that other students will assist me if I need help.	1.0	2.1	27.3	44.8	24.8
I feel like I will fit in when I begin at the University of Arizona	1.1	1.6	20.8	42.9	33.6



These data highlight the need to measure and understand belonging and related factors that may support students' well-being and success at Arizona. Further analysis that will dig deeper into what we have learned about belonging is forthcoming, including a deeper analysis of the NSSE data around belonging which will disaggregate the results and examine correlations with other student engagement and institutional factors. Additionally, we will share data on belonging that has been collected from other efforts on campus, to widen our understanding of belonging in different contexts and populations.

Questions related to belonging have been asked through the following avenues, among others:

- New Student Information Form
- Campus Climate Survey (internal)
- CatPulse
- Housing & Residential Life
- Student Engagement & Career Development
- National Study for Student Engagement (NSSE)
- SSRI Student Advisory Board
- VETS Center
- Ruffalo Noel Levitz (RNL) surveys
- Arizona Online
- AAU Campus Climate Survey
- THINK TANK
- Cultural Resource Centers

Belonging Brief Works Cited



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DEDICATED BELONGING EFFORTS

Student Success & Retention Innovation Efforts

The Thrive Center coordinates the Peer Mentoring Collaborative, a way to share a more holistic view of campus peer mentoring opportunities with students. Partners work together to:

- Learn more about peer mentoring programs that exist on campus.
- Determine ways in which we can all work together to connect students to these programs when they enter or as they progress through college.
- Share best practices, recruitment strategies, and training materials.

Student Advisory Board (Institutional)- The SSRI Student Advisor Board brings together students and provides them with the opportunity to Participate in discussions with other UA students and openly share ideas and feedback and have a voice in shaping resources for current and future students.

Trellis Progress (Academic) - Trellis Progress is an early reporting system for instructors to provide feedback to students enrolled in their courses. An instructor can provide both positive and constructive feedback on course performance and attendance. Upon sending a progress report, students will receive an email that provides them with the course feedback. The email has a growth mindset framework, and encourages student-faculty communication.

Wildcat Welcome & Support Events (Academic, Social & Institutional)

Wildcat Welcome, a combination of multiple university-wide events, houses its operations [in Student Success & Retention Innovation \(SSRI\)](#). Wildcat Welcome hosts and markets events and resources to students within the first few weeks of each semester. Wildcat Welcome is one function of SSRI outreach initiatives, all new students are referred to the Wildcat Welcome website after they complete the New Student Interest Form. Additionally, each year thousands of new Wildcats and their supporters sign up to receive information regarding welcome events. Wildcat Welcome also hosts information on many peer mentoring and peer led programs, brought together by the campus peer mentoring collective. Efforts to connect students are then continued throughout the year by Wildcat Connections, also housed within SSRI. Wildcat Welcome brings together departments from across campus to leverage different audiences to reach the largest number of students and their supporters. Our goal is to assist students in making the right connections so they have a sense of belonging on campus.

Student Support Events (Institutional)

Collaborative events through the year will support students, promote belonging efforts and encourage student success and persistence. Many events already exist, but coordinating a unified communications and outreach plan will potentially increase impact. Events may be logistically housed within Student Success & Retention Innovation, but are collaborative in nature to positively impact student success.

Events are supplemented by regular events and communications from departments, colleges, SSRI and Campus Brand Engagement. Incorporating these events into the existing Wildcat Welcome/Belonging Committee throughout the year will encourage cohesion and communication.

Events



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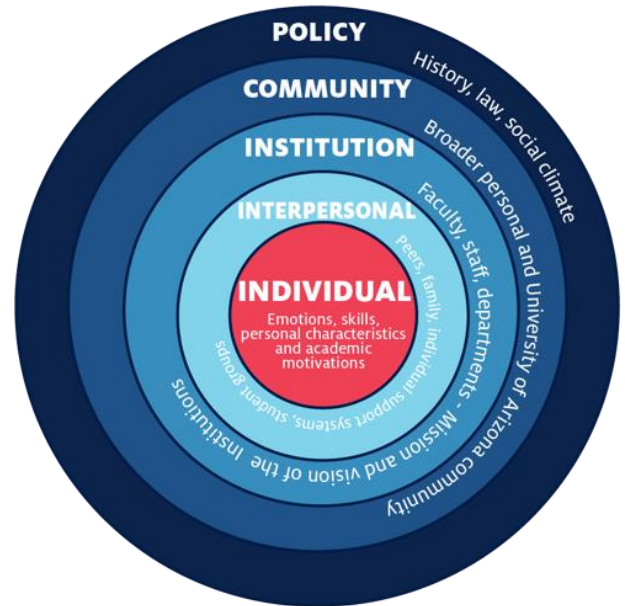
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- Fall & Spring Wildcat Welcome
- Fall & Spring Mid-semester Event (Fall and Spring Pause)
- Fall & Spring Finals Week

BELONGING MESSAGING & CAMPAIGN

Through belonging messaging and the belonging campaign, we hope to:

- Normalize that there is no one path to being a Wildcat
- Encourage departments, staff, student groups and students to think about their impact on students, and the campus environment
- Help students understand that failure is okay, and it is a path to success (growth mindset)
- Increase impactful conversations and communications with students
- Encourage students to persist, succeed and thrive at the University of Arizona.
- Impact sense of belonging and campus culture on multiple levels



Campaign Approach and Focus

The Socio-Ecological framework is often used in prevention work; however, the framework is also helpful in understanding how we create change at multiple levels, and there is a role for everyone in the institution or community.

Individual- Focus on a growth mindset, helps students understand that everyone has challenges. It is important to message in a way that encourages students.

Interpersonal – How other students, family members, student groups and clubs can encourage an inclusive and welcoming environment. What do you do as an individual and within any groups to help others feel a sense of belonging?

Institution- What message is your department or office sending. What actual messaging is received by students, or staff? Research shows that sending some top-down messaging about priorities creates change and understanding of buy-in.

Community – What messaging is seen by the University as a whole, or the Tucson community.

Policy – What institutional, state, or federal laws are impacting students. This is harder to have influence over, but we can think about the influence on students and the university campus.

[Learn more about the Belonging Campaign](#)



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Additional Resources

[Sense of Belonging & Growth Mindset Materials](#) (Virtual)

[The Gratitude Project](#) – Students, staff, and faculty can thank another community member for their contributions to campus. Gratitude increases belonging and connectedness.

[Wildcat Welcome](#) – Wildcat Welcome encourages welcome and sense of belonging year -round. A calendar of events happening on campus for students is updated regularly.

External Resources

[College Transitions Collaborative – Classroom Practices Library](#) - External resource providing information on improving the student experience in the classroom.



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