Is 'mattering' a more helpful way to think about student belonging at university?

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engage

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A student's "**sense of belonging**" is linked to

- Successful transition into higher education
- Persistence and graduation rates
- Academic performance
- Mental health and well-being

(e.g., Strayhorn, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Meehan & Howells, 2019)

Essential components of belonging:

"(i) a **sense of valued involvement** (the feeling of being valued, needed, and accepted in the system or environment); and

(ii) a **sense of fit** (the person's perception that his or her characteristics are shared with or complementary to those present in the system or environment."

(Asher & Weeks, 2014, p. 287)

"Most studies have found that students of color, in particular, report a lower sense of belonging in comparison with their White counterparts due to negative or challenging cultural and social experiences."

(Cole, Newman, & Hypolite, 2020, p. 278)

There's a need for "rethinking" belonging in "consideration of the experiences of those students who may not wish to, or who cannot, belong, as well as a questioning of the very boundaries of belonging"

(Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021, p. 1)

"The existing wisdom about sense of belonging on college campuses tends to neglect an important dynamic...*belonging is something that communities provide for individuals; it is not something that individuals can garner for themselves*"

(Nunn, 2021, p. 6, emphasis in original)

Mattering

"...the perception that, to some degree and in any of a variety of ways, we are a significant part of the world around us."

(Elliot, Kao, & Grant, 2004, p. 339)

"Mattering is the feeling of being significant and important to other people."

(Flett, Khan, & Su, 2019, p. 667).

"Mattering refers to our belief, whether right or wrong, that we matter to someone else."

(Schlossberg, 1989, p. 3)

Our study

Contexts: Two quite different institutional contexts:
- Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr College and Haverford College—a student-faculty, pedagogical partnership program for educational development
- Black Male Empowerment Cooperative (BMEC), Peer Advisory Academy, and College Readiness, Achievement, and Retention (CREAR) Futuros, all at LaGuardia Community College—student-student, peer mentoring programs

Data: Drawn from interviews with "new majority" undergraduates at LaGuardia Community College conducted for the book *Relationship-Rich Education* (Felten & Lambert, 2020), and also from interviews with SaLT student consultants at Bryn Mawr & Haverford.

Students describe mattering, not belonging

- "I never felt like I was a student first. I was always Black on this campus and then a student. When I would step into the [SaLT] meetings or when I would be with my faculty partner, it was like the first time I felt heard all week."

- CREAR Futuros "...not focused on finding people who are just acceptable. It is about integrating people who by normal societal standards are not necessarily acceptable, and introducing them to everyone else and having them be open to that person"

What makes students feel that they matter?

<u>Someone takes me seriously</u>

A Haverford student partner described how their "input and ideas are taken seriously" by the faculty partner, and a Bryn Mawr student partner explained: "my advice was taken seriously."

<u>I have a voice</u>

A former SaLT student partner stated how "being a [partner] literally gave me a voice."

<u>Someone is invested in me</u>

A student in the Peer Advisor Academy said that their mentor "…gave me the resources I needed to be part of the community...motivated me to graduate and in ways I did not get from anybody else."

Mattering and 'agentic engagement'

Engagement typically conceived as teacher-initiated and teacher-guided

"agentic engagement focuses on proactive, intentional, collaborative, constructive, student-initiated contributions to learning, which have been shown to improve students' classroom functioning and learning."

(Cook-Sather, Allard, Marcovici, & Reynolds, 2021; also Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Shin, 2020; Reeve & Tseng, 2011).

"The agency that I cultivated through my partnership...extended far beyond what I felt I could do for students I was advocating for in my partnership—and even beyond my own classes—to how I could make the [university] a more inclusive and equitable place."

(Marcovici quoted in Cook-Sather, Allard, Marcovici, & Reynolds, 2021)

What does mattering enable?

Advocate for self: A SaLT student partner talked about their "right to feel comfortable and engaged in class" and how, "if the professor is not making that happen," the student asserts, "we can talk about that, and we can figure out why."

Advocate for others: In LaGuardia's mentoring program, one student technology mentor learned of a learning difference experienced by a mentee, which prompted the student mentor to advocate for the student's learning needs.

Durability/transferability: One participant in the Student Success Mentoring program at LaGuardia described how "every time I go in front of students, and I second guess myself, I remember [my Student Success Mentor] told me I am awesome."

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