

Inclusive Newcastle
Knowledge Centre

SENSE OF BELONGING AND COMMUNITY: KEY INSIGHTS FROM LITERATURE REVIEW

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Summary of key insights from Sense of Belonging and Community literature review

The INKC has conducted an initial literature review investigating the concepts of sense of belonging and community in higher education, with a focus on how these concepts impact non-traditional students and their experience. Whilst the work is evolving, we can share some of our key insights gathered thus far.

- Sense of belonging in the higher education world comprises of 'social fit' and 'academic/ability fit' (Lewis and Hodges, 2014). Students gauge their own sense of belonging in terms of 'social fit' based on how well they fit in socially by considering social integration, engagement with peers, staff and campus activities, ability to build social networks and positive relationships with others at the university. 'Academic fit' goes beyond social interaction and considers how a student feels they fit into the academic environment in terms of their academic abilities, success and comparison to the perceived intellect, ability and behaviour of their peers. It is important that students feel they fit in both socially and academically, and both types of 'fit' should be regarded to be of equal importance to fostering a greater sense of belonging in the university.
- The search for a singular definition of 'sense of belonging' found multiple interpretations, but we outline the following components as key to the concept of a sense of belonging:
 - 'Social fit'
 - A feeling of **fitting in** and being **part of an academic community**
 - **Feeling accepted** and **valued socially**, as part of a cohort or identity group
 - Connection with **peers**
 - Connection with **staff and mentors**
 - **Positive experience of engagement** with the community, campus and university
 - **Low levels of concern about negative stereotypes** and biases about their ability to fit in socially
 - 'Academic/ability fit'
 - A feeling of **fitting in** and being **part of an academic community**
 - **Feeling accepted** and **valued academically**, as part of their course cohort
 - Positive experience of **engagement** with **academia** (the community, facilities and university)
 - **Feeling capable** and comparable in their abilities to their peers
 - **Low levels of concern about negative stereotypes** and biases about their academic abilities
- The concept of community is closely linked to belonging, and the academic community is viewed as a **group with shared interests and attitudes within the university environment** (Good, 2012). Feeling a lack of belonging to an academic community can cause students to "opt out" and change disciplines to a community that feels more welcoming.
- There are multiple studies that use belonging interventions – usually academic activities with messages about difficulties in the transition to university being normal and transient, rather than a deficit or problem due to their personal characteristics – to improve belonging with a

range of promising findings. There are clear links between sense of belonging and academic outcomes (retention/continuation, grade performance and attainment). Some key findings are highlighted here (further detail available in the full literature review).

- Walton and Cohen's belonging intervention "raised African Americans' grade-point average (GPA) relative to multiple control groups and **halved the minority achievement gap**". By the students' senior year, the attainment gap in grade point average (GPA) between European American and African American students "**was cut by 79%**" (ibid: 1448); this result suggests the intervention is highly effective in improving grades for under-represented students.
- Yeager et al's belonging intervention "increased students' social and academic integration on campus". The interventions also impacted continuation in full-time enrolment, which found a **9% increase in continuation for students who received the interventions**. In terms of academic achievement, the experiments "showed improvement in disadvantaged students' achievement in the first year of college" and "**the treatments reduced raw achievement gaps by 31-40%**" between students from disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged backgrounds. (The study defined "negatively stereotyped racial/ethnic minority students and first-generation students" as disadvantaged for this study).
- Murphy's belonging intervention, aimed at improving first-year students' sense of belonging, "**increased the likelihood that racial-ethnic minority and first-generation students maintained continuous enrolment**" and promoted "**greater feelings of social and academic fit** one-year post-intervention".
- Thomas' report evaluated 7 projects about belonging, student retention and engagement, and concluded that "**belonging is critical to student retention and success**". Thomas notes that belonging interventions should be **mainstream and delivered in the academic sphere to entire cohorts of students** to be effective, with a focus on 'opt-out' methods so less confident students are still able to participate without having to nominate themselves.
- Whilst belonging interventions are shown in the literature to be beneficial for entire cohorts, it is key to note how nontraditional/underrepresented students may particularly benefit.
 - Lewis and Hodges note that "**sense of belonging is a significant predictor of positive academic outcomes, and perhaps even more so for historically marginalized and stereotyped groups**". They and others suggest that students from groups who have been historically excluded from educational spaces, or who are subject to negative stereotypes about their intellect and ability, are more likely to feel lack of belonging and to perceive it as being due to their identity and something that cannot be fixed. They argue it is particularly important to buffer these feelings through belonging interventions to avoid more vulnerable students disengaging from the university or dropping out.