

Improving student success through social belonging

May 4 2023



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

A massive, Stanford-led study has found that a brief exercise addressing common concerns about belonging in college increased first-year completion rates on students' local campus, especially for students in

racial-ethnic and social-class groups that were less likely historically to complete the first year at that school.

In the new paper published in *Science*, Stanford psychologist Gregory Walton—joined by 36 collaborators from 24 other institutions—sheds light on the relationship between the psychological mindsets [students](#) use to navigate [college](#) and the opportunities students have in higher education settings.

"If colleges don't offer students adequate opportunities to belong, then just working with students psychologically won't move the needle—and we need to create better settings," said Walton, a professor of psychology in the School of Humanities and Sciences. "At the same time, many students have reasonable concerns about whether 'people like me' can belong in my college but do have opportunities. That's where the intervention helps."

Acknowledging uncertainties about social belonging

Coming to college is hard. Many students feel homesick at one time or another, or struggle sometimes to make friends, to find an academic direction, or to talk with professors. Some students, particularly those from groups that have historically been excluded in higher education, may see these experiences as confirming that "people like me" don't belong. As Walton's previous research has found, this uncertainty about belonging can undermine academic performance and achievement, which left unaddressed can perpetuate inequalities into adult life.

For over two decades, Walton has developed a range of interventions to help students surface and address belonging worries. This project was conducted by the College Transition Collaborative (CTC), a group founded in 2014 at Stanford by Walton together with former Stanford post-doctoral scholar Christine Logel (now at the University of

Waterloo), and former Stanford graduate students Mary Murphy (Indiana University) and David Yeager (University of Texas at Austin). CTC recently spun out of Stanford and became the Equity Accelerator, led by Murphy.

Here, the social-belonging intervention is put to its largest test. With some 22 colleges and universities across the country and a diverse sample of 26,911 students participating, Walton and his collaborators were able to examine the conditions that made the intervention more or less effective.

The researchers took a unique approach in their analyses. Rather than compare students by single, broad categories—such as Black or first-generation college students—the scholars broke the sample into what they called "local-identity groups"—students of a given race-ethnicity, with a given first-generation status, at a given college, in a given cohort. That allowed them to study the nuances of identity and belonging in different college settings.

"Past research has focused on canonical groups, like African American students or first-generation college students," said Walton. "It's as if being, say, African American is the same thing everywhere. But we know that's not true. One of the innovations here is to understand that any given group has different vulnerabilities and different opportunities in different settings. We map that."

Offering students adaptive ideas about belonging at college

The intervention was administered online to students before matriculation.

First, students saw results of a survey of older students about how worries about belonging were normal and improved over time. Then, they read personal narratives from diverse students about their worries about belonging and what helped lessen them.

For example, one narrative read: "I found a [comfort zone](#) by exploring my interests and taking the leap into an active life on campus. But this took time and before I found my niche here there were times when I felt quite lonely."

Last, students were asked to reflect on these stories and write an essay for future students about belonging concerns, and how they are normal and improve with time.

"What we're doing here is offering students the idea that it's normal to worry at first about whether you belong, and it can get better with time," said Walton. "Then students can try out that idea in their world and see if it holds and if they can use it to grow their belonging."

Overall, the scholars found that when the intervention was administered in a supportive environment, first-year full-time completion rates for students in groups that had been persisting at lower rates rose by two percentage points, an impressive impact for an online exercise that took less than 30 minutes to complete (the average time students spent on a key aspect of the exercise—sharing their story—was just 7½ minutes).

The intervention is not enough on its own

Walton uses a "seed and soil" metaphor to understand the relationship between psychological messages and school contexts.

In this analogy, sharing a hopeful way to think about belonging (planting a "high-quality seed") will make a difference only in contexts in which

that way of thinking is true and useful (in "fertile soil").

But if the soil is inhospitable for a given group—for example, if racial, gender, or social class biases or other barriers make it prohibitive for students to build friendships, find mentors, develop an academic direction, or see their group valued and respected on campus—the seed will wither. Students will drop the idea, and it won't help them succeed.

The findings generalize to 749 four-year institutions in the United States, which together welcome over a million new students to college each year. If every institution offered incoming students the belonging exercise, an estimated 12,136 students would complete the first year of college full time each year. And the results point to the possibility of larger gains if colleges expand opportunities for belonging.

"What's key is for institutions to look at the student groups they are trying to serve, and ask how well they're doing with the expectation that they will be doing well with some groups but not as well with others," said Walton. "How can you expand opportunities for belonging for all groups? And how can you convey the truth of the belonging message in compelling and authentic ways for everyone?"

The belonging module is freely available to all colleges and universities in the United States and Canada at perts.net/orientation/cb.

More information: Gregory M. Walton, Where and with whom does a brief social-belonging intervention promote progress in college?, *Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1126/science.ade4420](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.ade4420).
www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.ade4420

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Improving student success through social belonging (2023, May 4) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-05-student-success-social.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.