



An Exploration of Belonging at University of Phoenix

By Alisa Fleming, Ph.D., and Jelisa Dallas, MEd.

This is part 1 of a 3-part series on belonging where we address belonging from the perspective of our students, staff and faculty, and community.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are terms that are often mentioned together when referencing welcoming and inclusive classrooms, workplaces, and communities. The concepts are closely connected as they build upon one another, but did you know they are not the same? Diversity refers to representation, recognizing ways that people are unique, while equity acknowledges that individuals have different needs and may need access to different resources and opportunities to reach intended outcomes. Inclusion occurs within environments where all individuals are welcomed, invited to share their perspective, and contribute. Inclusion is critical as it focuses on taking action – creating experiences where people’s voices can be heard.

To foster DEI, whether it is in higher education or the workplace, people need to feel like they belong. An environment of belonging is created when individuals experience deep connection, they feel their ideas, thoughts, and contributions matter, and they can show up authentically.

An environment of belonging offers psychological safety – feeling free to accept challenges, speak up if they have questions, and admit mistakes – having an absence of interpersonal fears. People thrive in environments that value their voice, presence, and perspective.

Students who experience belongingness are more likely to feel valued and included, regardless of their background or identity. From a community perspective, they are more likely to form social networks, which may lead them to discover support and resources inside and outside of the classroom (Russell & Jarvis, 2019). From an academic perspective, they also are more likely to experience increased motivation (Lawson & Lawson, 2013), engagement (Gillen-O’Neel, 2019), and a sense of purpose, and as a result more likely to succeed academically (Slaten et al., 2016).

Recognizing that a sense of belonging is critical for student success and well-being in higher education, University of Phoenix is committed to creating environments that foster belonging and support *all* students in achieving their academic and professional goals.

One example of how University of Phoenix fosters belonging in our students, is through our recent launch of the Bravely Belong Student Café, which serves as a safe space for students to gather, share experiences, and receive support on how to navigate their journey in the classroom and the workplace. Students and alumni are encouraged to practice self-advocacy with the guidance of subject matter experts (SMEs).

Collaboratively, students, alumni and SMEs explore topics on mindfulness, belonging, gratitude and boundaries with the intention of productive discussion pertaining to their academic and career success.

Through their participation in the Bravely Belong Café, students will have the opportunity to connect with their peers and build their social capital; navigate challenging conversations in their journey to belong and positively contribute to an inclusive workplace or classroom environment.

In our first session, students shared how the collective support they received empowered them to speak on topics they otherwise would not. With the resources offered and referred to within the sessions, students and alumni grow equipped to transform conversations of bewilderment to bravery. “As an alum, former faculty, and University of Phoenix employee of 20+ years, providing a space for our students and alumni to gather in community while also gaining insightful direction on ways to succeed in the classroom and workplace was extremely fulfilling,” says Tondra Richardson, Director of Student Diversity & Inclusion at University of Phoenix. “As adult learners, we struggle to find a sense of belonging in the classroom, workplace and for some of us, in a society that was not created for our success. This program provides a safe space for students to gather, share experiences and leave with tools and resources to address some of those unique challenges that are experienced by adult learners and those of us who identify as members of underrepresented communities.”

Our goal is to collect student feedback through surveys to better assess students’ perceptions of their experience, identify needs, as their input will have the potential to influence decisions the University makes to develop or enhance student programming and support services.

References

- Gillen-O’Neel, C. 2019. “Sense of Belonging and Student Engagement: A Daily Study of First- and Continuing-generation College Students.” *Research in Higher Education*. DOI:10.1007/s11162-019-09570-y.
- Lawson, M. A., and A. A. Lawson. 2013. “New Conceptual Frameworks for Student Engagement Research, Policy, and Practice.” *Review of Educational Research* 83 (3): 432–479. DOI:10.3102/0034654313480891
- Russell, L. & Jarvis, C. (2019). “Student withdrawal, retention and their sense of belonging; their experience in their words.” *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership*, 4(3), 494-525. DOI:10.30828/real/2019.3.3
- Slaten, C. D., J. K. Ferguson, K. Allen, D. Brodrick, and L. Waters. 2016. “School Belonging: A Review of the History, Current Trends, and Future Directions.” *Australian Psychological Society*. DOI:10.1017/edp.2016.6.

About the Authors

Alisa Fleming, Ph.D., is an academic leader with experience in higher education administration, business, consulting, and teaching. Dr. Fleming serves as Director of Assessment for Assessment & Institutional Research at University of Phoenix. She has served on boards for the Kyrene Foundation and the Association for Talent Development, Valley of the Sun Chapter. Dr. Fleming is the 2022 recipient of the Phoenix500 faculty award and is a 2019 recipient of the Achieving My Purpose Celebration of Women Award. She received a Ph.D. in Business with a specialization in Organizational Leadership from Northcentral University. She holds a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the workplace certificate from the University of South Florida. Her research interests include leadership, ethics, employee behaviors that contribute to healthy workplace culture. Dr. Fleming's passion for developing and inspiring others to action has led to service roles in her organization and outreach within nonprofits and youth-based organizations in her local community.

Jelisa Dallas, MEd., is the Program Manager for Recognized Student Organizations for the Office of Educational Equity at the University of Phoenix. With over twelve years of experience working in education, Jelisa has designed and implemented innovative resources and programming for student development and engagement in private, non-profit, and public institutions. Jelisa is DEI Workplace Certified through the USF Muma College of Business. She currently sits on of the board of the University of Phoenix African American Council for Excellence (employee resource group) and Warren/Youngstown Urban League Young Professionals.