

Why Student Belonging Matters, Especially Online

Cultivating belonging in online education should be an institutional imperative; higher education leaders have found that the payoffs are significant.

This is the first article in a three-part series on cultivating a sense of belonging among online students. In this installment, Part 1, we explain the benefits and research motivating the specific activities that we will share in the forthcoming Parts 2 and 3. By sharing experiences and insights from a variety of institutions, this series will help academic leaders, program directors, and faculty advance their own approaches to cultivating belonging among their students.

Key Takeaways

- Online learners benefit from targeted efforts to foster belonging.
- Institutions must invest in structured interactions designed for online students to forge connections and supportive relationships.
- Following best practices can improve student retention and completion, support program economics, and foster diversity and inclusion.

The Challenge of Belonging Online

Online education was [popular](#) long before the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a shift to online teaching. In 2019, 36% of all postsecondary students took at least one online class, according to [National Center for Education Statistics data](#). This number shot up to 75%—14 million students—in 2020 as universities responded to the pandemic by rapidly moving programs online. The speed of this transition meant that most institutions focused on helping faculty adapt to new platforms. An unintended consequence is that the online student experience rarely addressed the full needs of online learners.

One of the most important and hardest of needs to support is a sense of belonging. Belonging occurs when students feel accepted, supported, and connected to their fellow students and the institution. The concept has gained traction, and institutions now seek to reap the benefits of fostering belonging among their students. A recent Chronicle of Higher Education [article](#) spells out these benefits: “Research shows that college students

who feel that they belong at their institutions get better grades and fare better on [persistence, engagement and mental health](#).”

Creating belonging is difficult in any modality as student population demographics have diversified significantly and demand for academic, behavioral, and mental health support services has soared. Online education presents particular challenges around belonging. As the [WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies](#) has observed, “The significance of student belonging in the online learning experience can’t be understated. The lack of physical presence often limits opportunities for organic relationship building that are inherent in traditional higher education settings.”

The Welcome Email

One solution that is often employed at the start of a semester is the “welcome email” that individual instructors send to their classes. The goal here, says iDesign SVP Krista Galyen, PhD, is “to make a connection with students that can immediately increase their sense of comfort with me and with the course, itself.” Here is how Dr. Galyen approaches this type of email:

Make a connection with students that can immediately increase their sense of comfort with you and with the course itself. Use a first-week email assignment with quick points!

Ask students to send you an email answering a series of questions about themselves: pronunciation of their names, pronouns, their major, what they are proud of, what they appreciate in an instructor, what they dislike about an instructor, any barriers they have to technology, time management issues, etc. You can also ask students to do something in these emails, such as confirm that they’ve set up notifications in the LMS or that they’ve read a crucial document. The last question should be if the student has any concerns or questions about the course for which they’d like you to schedule a meeting with them or follow up on.

Set up a 5-point assignment in your LMS. Students will write one line saying that they sent you the e-mail and the date of the e-mail. They will not paste the email here. This is just the area where you will log their points. When you receive the student’s e-mail, write back to each student individually.

The connection created by something as simple as an exchange of welcome emails can increase students' confidence and reduce anxiety in the more “stressful” aspects of a course that lead to student withdrawal or failure (i.e., feeling too nervous to ask for help, worrying about status in the course, or reticence to confront a grade matter).

Developing Structured Interactions Online

Cultivating belonging requires more than being welcoming of online students. Institutions must invest in developing curriculum, materials, and structured interactions designed to enable online students to build connections and find common ground. The colleges and universities featured in this three-part series have done just that while partnering with [iDesign](#), a higher education service provider.

In the upcoming installments of this series, we will look at case studies from two institutions:

- In Part 2, we look at how Grayson College—a rural community college in north Texas—reinvigorated online discussion boards and increased student interaction and engagement with course material by implementing student-led discussion board activity called “You Take the Lead.”
- In Part 3, we look at how The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Fielding School of Public Health’s online Master of Healthcare Administration (MHA) developed an innovative online engagement strategy dubbed “The Synapse Café”; this initiative created a close-knit academic community where students forged strong ties to their program and UCLA despite being physically distant.

From these and other experiences, a set of best practices has emerged, which are captured in the iDesign [IDEA book](#) and the new [Creative Discussion Forums guidebook](#), which include many activities and assignments designed to increase engagement and foster belonging among online students.

The Payoffs of Online Student Belonging

The payoffs for investing in online student belonging are considerable. An emerging [body of research](#) demonstrates the relationships between belonging and better learning outcomes and retention for all students. These benefits for online students have been confirmed by multiple studies, including an Online Learning Consortium [report](#) that

found belonging is “firmly linked with improved student attainment, increased learner satisfaction, and reduced attrition rates.”

Cultivating belonging in online education should be an institutional imperative because online programs are a growth engine for many colleges and universities. A [recent survey](#) of chief online learning officers found, in contrast to in-person courses, enrollment in online programs continues to grow and demand has yet to peak. These survey findings highlighted a growing financial dependence on online offerings. As [Inside Higher Ed reported](#):

“For many institutions struggling with enrollment and revenue levels, success in building online capacity may spell the difference between viability and crisis in the next decade.”

Against this backdrop, colleges and universities must intentionally nurture a sense of belonging so students can connect with each other, engage with the curriculum and instructors, and forge supportive relationships that motivate them to persist and graduate. Employing best practices can create an online learner experience that fosters belonging.

Institutions that embed “student belonging” within their programs have an opportunity to distinguish their offerings through a student-centric strategy. This must include helping online learners forge connections and supportive relationships—a feeling of belonging to a community.

Join us for each of the two upcoming installments in this series to learn more. Part 2 will share how Grayson College reinvigorated online discussion boards, and Part 3 will share how UCLA cultivated a sense of community and belonging among students who are also full-time working professionals.