President's Message
10 Ways You Can Build a Culture of Belonging and Connection

This year's National Summit for Building Healthy Academic Communities is focused on the concepts of belonging and connection. With a wide array of national speakers, the intent is for everyone to feel connected at the Summit itself, as well as bring back ideas and strategies to better support our students, faculty, staff, and college campus visitors in feeling a sense of belonging and connection with one another and the broader academic community.

Promoting a sense of belonging and connection is crucial to build strong, supportive communities, whether in the workplace, educational settings, or in personal relationships. When people feel they belong, they're more likely to contribute meaningfully, engage with others, and maintain personal well-being. What are some ways to build a culture of belonging and connection? I am glad you asked!

1. **Encourage open communication.** Foster dialogue and create spaces where people feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment. This could be through regular check-ins, team and group meetings, or informal gatherings. Active listening goes a long way. Show that everyone's voice matters by listening, validating feelings, and responding with empathy, ensuring people feel heard and valued.

2. **Celebrate diversity and inclusion**. Acknowledge differences, recognize and celebrate unique backgrounds, perspectives, and identities of individuals. Use language that is respectful of identities and ensure that practices and policies are accessible to everyone.

3. **Create shared experiences.** Examples include team-building activities and collaborative workspaces. Organize events that help people bond outside of their usual environment, like team outings, social events, or collaborative projects. Encourage teamwork and collaboration through activities or physical spaces that promote shared experiences and interactions.

4. **Foster empathy and compassion.** Teach people how to recognize and understand the emotions and experiences of others, and create an environment where people support each other, whether through formal mentorship programs or informal networking.

5. **Recognize and validate contributions.** For example, use positive reinforcement and regularly acknowledge people's efforts and accomplishments. Recognition can come in many forms: a simple thank you, a public acknowledgment, or a more formal reward system. And celebrating milestones, such as a personal achievement or a team accomplishment. Taking the time to celebrate milestones helps create a sense of collective achievement.

6. **Offer opportunities for personal and professional growth.** Provide opportunities for people to learn new skills and grow in their personal or professional lives. This demonstrates a commitment to their development and encourages a sense of belonging within the group. Give individuals the freedom to pursue their interests or passions within the organization or community. When people can express themselves authentically, it fosters a deeper connection.

7. **Promote psychological safety.** Ensure that everyone feels safe to express themselves, take risks, and make mistakes without fear of being criticized or ostracized. When giving feedback, focus on growth and learning. Create a culture where mistakes are seen as opportunities for development rather than failures.

8. **Build trust and transparency.** Be transparent about decisions and policies, including the reasons behind them. Trust is a key component of belonging; transparency helps build that trust. Act consistently in how you treat people and enforce policies. Inconsistencies or favoritism can erode feelings of connection and trust.

9. **Provide support during difficult times.** Offer emotional or practical support to those facing challenges. Whether it's through offering time off, providing resources, or simply lending a listening ear, showing care in tough times strengthens bonds. Allow people to express challenges or setbacks without fear of judgment. Vulnerability can lead to deeper connections and a sense of shared humanity.

10. **Lead by example.** Leaders, managers, and champions within any group can model inclusive behavior, open communication, and supportive interactions. When leadership demonstrates a commitment to belonging, others are more likely to follow suit.

By creating an environment where people feel seen, heard, and valued, you foster deeper connections and a strong sense of belonging. This is not only beneficial for individuals but also for the collective success of any group or community. I hope these ideas foster a culture of connection on your campus.

Be sure to check out the Journal's latest publications on programs, resources, and services that enhance connection and physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

We hope you are able to join us in beautiful Charlottesville at the University of Virginia this April 10–11. Learn, discuss and apply these very important topics (and more) to help make our institutions places of better health, greater happiness, and a deeper sense of connection.

Sincerely,
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