

13

REVIVING THE CONSTRUCT OF “MATTERING” IN PURSUIT OF EQUITY AND JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Illustrations from mentoring and partnership
programs

*Alison Cook-Sather, Peter Felten, Kaylyn (Kayo) Piper
Stewart and Heidi Weston*

The construct of *mattering* was not one we set out to research. Instead, mattering is what we heard “new majority” (Black, Indigenous, or Latinx) undergraduates who participated in student–student mentoring programs at LaGuardia Community College talk about in interviews conducted for the book *Relationship-Rich Education* (Felten & Lambert, 2020). It is also what we heard students from historically underrepresented groups (HUGs) describe in the 15 years’ worth of feedback and interviews regarding their experiences in student–faculty pedagogical partnerships in the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges (Cook-Sather, 2020) and programs inspired by SaLT. While we concurred with aspects of “belonging” that scholars argue for in relation to student learning and experiences in higher education (Strayhorn, 2012; Thomas, 2012) and have used the construct to analyze students’ experiences (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017b; Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021; Felten & Lambert, 2020), listening carefully to what the LaGuardia, Bryn Mawr, and Haverford students were saying led us to revisit the less commonly evoked construct of mattering – which is related to but distinct from belonging.

What we heard most often from historically underrepresented students who participated in student–student mentoring and student–faculty partnerships was that their experiences, perspectives, contributions, and beings are important and significant. In one SaLT student’s words: being a student partner “made me feel like who I am is more than enough – that my identity, my thoughts, my ideas are significant and valuable” (quoted in Cook-Sather, 2015). This is what scholars have defined as mattering (Flett et al., 2019; Schlossberg, 1989). The students we listened to felt that they matter

not because of what they have in common with others in the institution, although sometimes they do have experiences and identities in common and sometimes those shared experiences and identities promote a sense of belonging. Rather, they emphasized that what they bring to and get from the mentoring and the partnership work is affirmation of themselves as they are.

In this chapter, co-authored by two faculty members (Alison and Peter) and two students (Kayo and Heidi), we explore the overlaps and distinctions between belonging and mattering. We define mentoring and partnership as those are enacted in the programs we focus on, and we draw on the perspectives of current and former students as those are represented in data from institutional review board–approved studies and interviews with students from HUGs at several U.S. colleges and in published scholarship. For both student–student mentoring and student–faculty partnership, we provide a description of one or more college-wide programs and share outcomes of the mentoring or partnership work in relation to sense of belonging and mattering within and beyond the classroom for students from HUGs who participate in the programs. We then offer implications and recommendations for what faculty and staff can do to foster and support academic belonging and mattering for students.

Reviving mattering and reimagining belonging

The construct of *belonging* has been widely used to understand and explain college student experiences (Strayhorn, 2012; Thomas, 2012). It is typically framed as having two essential parts: fit and value. *Fit* relates to a student’s sense that they share identities or other salient characteristics with others in the institution (Asher & Weeks, 2014); students sense that they fit when they feel they are similar to and connected with others at the institution. *Value* signals “students’ perception of feeling valued and respected by other students” and staff at the institution (van Gijn-Grosvernor & Huisman, 2020, p. 377); students sense that they are valued when they believe that peers and others at the institution take them seriously and care about them. Belonging has been linked to a range of positive student experiences and outcomes, including transition into higher education (Meehan & Howells, 2019), academic performance (Ahn & Davis, 2020), mental health and well-being (Bye et al., 2020; Larcombe et al., 2021), and persistence and graduation rates (Gopalan & Brady, 2019; Lewis et al., 2017), including for students from historically excluded groups (Hausmann et al., 2009).

Despite its utility, the framework of belonging may contain an inherent flaw that should give higher education leaders and scholars pause. Emerging research consistently documents that students from HUGs report a lower sense of belonging (Cole et al., 2020; Eboka, 2019; Gopalan & Brady, 2019) and greater “belonging uncertainty” (Cohen & Garcia, 2008, p. 365;

Walton & Cohen, 2007) than their White counterparts. These findings are concerning because belonging is at the conceptual heart of many programs that seek to address the concerns and needs of HUGs. Can an inclusive program and institution be rooted in a construct (belonging) that often fails to account for the experiences and perspectives of students from groups that have historically been excluded from and marginalized in higher education (D. R. Johnson et al., 2007; Museus & Maramba, 2011)?

In this chapter, we invite readers to consider disentangling the two parts of belonging by separating “fit” from “value.” By focusing on fit in particular, faculty and staff might misinterpret feelings of marginalization among certain groups of students and miss opportunities to understand what leads these students to learn and thrive (Cole et al., 2020). And while some students might find a social sense of connection and fit in college, that does not always translate into academic experiences. Porter and Byrd’s (2021) literature review reported that Black women college students are confident they belong “within their families and friend groups” but many feel “isolated and marginal in the larger campus community” (p. 813). Former student partner Khadijah Seay concurs: “It’s one thing to find your people in social spaces; it’s another to feel a sense of belonging in academic spaces” (Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021, p. 742).

Additional critiques of belonging focus on the way it limits student agency, since “belonging is something that communities provide for individuals; it is not something individuals can garner for themselves” (Nunn, 2021, p. 6). Writing in the UK and Australia, Gravett and Ajjawi (2022) pointed to the necessity of “rethinking” (Thomas, 2018) belonging, particularly in “consideration of the experiences of those students who may not wish to, or who cannot, belong, as well as a questioning of the very boundaries of belonging” (p. 1386). Drawing on the experiences of students with dyslexia studying mathematics at university in Finland, Nieminen and Pesonen (2022) asked, “Might it be more desirable for disabled students *not* to belong in [certain] learning environments?” (p. 2021). Belonging can put an assimilative pressure on students to change themselves to fit the expectations and culture of the existing community.

In our research, we have observed particular struggles with both aspects of belonging as it is generally defined. The first relates to fit, especially regarding historically underrepresented college students because, by and large, these institutions were not made for them. In keeping with Gravett and Ajjawi’s (2022) and Nieminen and Pesonen’s (2022) points above, might encouragement to belong – for instance, for Black students at institutions built on the exploitation and destruction of Black bodies (Dancy & Edwards, 2020) – be undesirable, and indeed harmful, to those students?

The second aspect of belonging we have documented is context dependence – that one belongs in specific spaces or with certain people, as

opposed to mattering in and of oneself. Even when definitions of belonging emphasize mattering – “a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9) – belonging relies on relationships and commitments within a given group. Context dependence is a particular limitation for belonging because if students experience belonging uncertainty in some settings (e.g., classrooms), then their sense of confidence and agency will be restricted in those settings. In contrast, if a sense of mattering can be carried across contexts (Cook-Sather, 2020; Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021; Weston et al., 2021), students will have greater confidence and agency regardless of whether they feel they fit in a specific context.

We are encouraged by Raaper’s (2021) call to recognize “belonging as a dynamic, relational and nonlinear process, intersecting with pre-existing social inequalities as well as market dynamics that forcefully continue to reshape the sector and university practices” (p. 539). Complicating the focus on fit and context that many definitions of belonging reference, we re-evoked mattering as a concept related to but distinct from belonging. *Mattering* is commonly defined as “the feeling of being significant and important to other people” in a shared context (Flett et al., 2019, p. 667; see also Schlossberg, 1989), but we argue for understanding the experience of mattering not only within but also beyond any given context. In their original conception of mattering, Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) identified “three core elements: (a) the sense that other people depend on us; (b) the perception that other people regard us as important; and (c) the realization that other people are actively paying attention to us” (cited in Pychyl et al., 2022, p. 143). Feeling relied upon, important, and attended to is different from feeling one fits.

When students do not feel they matter, they may experience “a destructive state of marginalization” (Flett et al., 2019, p. 669). Yet unlike the construct of belonging, which emphasizes fit and integration as essential, mattering makes space for people to be recognized and valued as individuals with distinct identities and contributions to make to the community (Schlossberg, 1989). The inherent value and the unique set of contributions individuals bring can function as what Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014) called “funds of identity,” which they defined as “the historically accumulated, culturally developed, and socially distributed resources that are essential for a person’s self-definition, self-expression, and self-understanding” (p. 31). These resources are an extension of the concept of “funds of knowledge” (González et al., 2005) – “bodies of knowledge and skills that are essential for the well-being of an entire household” – which become funds of identity “when people actively use them to define themselves” (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014, p. 31). When students, particularly those from

HUGs, feel relied upon, important, and attended to for the identities and contributions they bring, not because they fit in, they feel that they matter. Mattering does not require assimilation.

Like belonging, mattering contributes to undergraduate students' psychological well-being (Flett et al., 2019), which is especially important for students from HUGs, such as Latino male undergraduates in the United States, for whom "mentoring and a sense of mattering provided opportunities ... to access various forms of social and cultural capital" (Huerta & Fishman, 2014, p. 95). Based on interviews with 12 award-winning academic teachers about their views on and practices related to mattering, Pynchyl and colleagues (2022) argued for "the centrality of mattering to effective teaching" (p. 154) and "that professors have a key role to play in promoting a sense of mattering in their students and that this sense of mattering is an important, if not essential, component of a safe and effective learning environment" (p. 154).

Our discussion builds on findings that positive student–student and student–faculty relationships contribute to a student's sense of belonging (Miller et al., 2019) and research that mattering influences student achievement and eagerness to excel, both in courses where they felt they mattered and in other courses (Vetro, 2021). As one student partner asserted: "Students want to feel like they matter and feeling like they matter in one class may be the catalyst to them making themselves matter in other classes" (Adams, 2023, p. 5). We focus on mentoring and partnerships as forms of what Gravett and Ajjawi (2022) called "inclusive spaces in the higher education system" (p. 1393), and we strive to attend to "the nuanced, situated and contextualised accounts of students' belonging in the learning time-spaces of the university" (p. 1393) and to the potential of mattering to relocate value within students and make it transferable.

Defining mentoring and partnership

There are many forms that mentoring and partnership can take in higher education contexts, but we offer here basic definitions of each as those inform the kinds of programs we highlight.

Mentoring

Higher education institutions often use the word *mentor* or *mentoring* to describe an array of activities, from trained students who help peers navigate their first days in college to faculty supervising a multi-semester research project (Crisp et al., 2017; W. B. Johnson, 2016). This goes far beyond the classical understanding of a long-term relationship between a mentor and a protégé. In practice, mentoring in college typically refers to a relationship

that offers some combination of support and challenge to a student; mentoring might focus on academic success, social connectedness, identity development, personal well-being, or other factors – or it might integrate more than one of these into a holistic experience.

Research demonstrates that mentoring contributes to a range of positive outcomes for students and that student peer mentoring “has a double impact, helping both mentors and mentees learn new skills and develop new ... competencies” (Wu-Winiarski et al., 2020, p. 18). These gains are particularly significant for new majority students (Maramba & Fong, 2020), underscoring the significance of attention to “critical mentoring” rooted in “understanding the complexities and nuances of marginalization [experienced by students] and then explicitly moving forward to address and change them” through mentoring (Weiston-Serdan, 2017, p. 15).

Partnership

Pedagogical partnership, still relatively uncommon in higher education, refers to “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6–7). The basic premises of partnership – respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) – require and enact the understanding that diverse individuals – “individuals from literally different places but also more metaphorically from different ‘places’ or positions” (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017a, p. 182) – form relationships; negotiate across differences of power, position, and perspective; and strive *together* for deeper understanding, empathy, and informed action. Key to our understanding of partnership is that it is precisely the differences that participants bring to the partnership work – their “funds of identity” (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014) – that make that work generative. Importantly, it is the affirmation of those differences – the embrace of them as resources for learning and growth – that holds such promise for realizing the potential of both belonging and mattering.

The form of student–faculty partnership we reference in this chapter unfolds outside of academic classes but informs students’ experiences of those spaces. The student partners in the programs we focus on are not enrolled in the faculty partners’ courses; they work in semester-long pedagogical partnerships to consider how to make the faculty partners’ classrooms places of equity and inclusion (Cook-Sather, 2022). The spaces in which the faculty and student partners work are liminal or “as-if” spaces – spaces within which the typical roles and power dynamics that structure relationships and responsibilities are suspended or shifted. But they affect the

academic spaces in which sense of academic belonging, as well as mattering, either gets developed or does not. Because these “as-if” spaces support students and faculty engaging with one another as partners – through affirming the value of the different positions and perspectives they bring to the partnership work – students (and faculty) can become partners beyond the liminal spaces (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017a): they can transfer the sense of mattering through partnership work beyond any given context.

Previous research has indicated that partnership fosters a sense of belonging for faculty and students (Colón García, 2017; Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017b; Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021; Perez-Putnam, 2016). Our goal in exploring the student–faculty partnership programs we present here is to build on those findings to illustrate how partnership also fosters mattering.

Student–student mentoring

For more than 2 decades, LaGuardia Community College has centered student–student peer mentoring in its educational model and institutional priorities (Arcario et al., 2011). Located in Queens, New York, LaGuardia’s students have been described by a long-time leader at the college as “first generation times two. They are not only the first in their families coming to college, they are also overwhelmingly immigrants and second language learners” (Eynon, cited in Felten & Lambert, 2020, p. 36).

To meet the distinct and varied needs of these students, LaGuardia Community College (n.d.) has developed a diverse set of peer mentoring programs that connect trained, and paid, students with others to offer support and challenge, including:

- Student success mentors, who help first-year students navigate the transition into higher education
- Peer health educators, who focus on specialized issues such sexual assault and substance abuse prevention
- *Crear Futuros* mentors, who empower fellow Latinx students to be successful academically, to build professional skills, and to establish community at the college
- Black male empowerment cooperative mentors, who engage Black men in tutoring, advising, and networking

These programs – and others like them – create an overlapping web of opportunities that enable students to have multiple chances to connect academically, personally, or professionally with peers who will contribute to their learning, persistence, identity development, well-being, and future prospects.

In our interviews with students at LaGuardia, we heard not only about the benefits and joys of individual programs but also about the importance of

the college’s overall commitment to peer mentoring. One student, a Black woman who had recently immigrated to the United States from a Caribbean island, explained that

all you need sometimes, outside of math problems and psychology terminology [to study], is just to know that the college you are at cares about you. The community around you promotes success and wants to see you do great. That makes a world of difference.

Like many of her peers, she expressed the feeling that the existence of these peer programs demonstrated that she matters, even if she chooses not to join – or feel that she belongs in – any of them.

Another student, a male immigrant from South Asia, told us he never felt that he fit at LaGuardia but that the Student Success Mentors program still had been essential to him: “I told my student success mentor, ‘I’m not comfortable here at LaGuardia.’” Although his student success mentor and his other experiences at the college never allowed him to overcome his belonging uncertainty, he started to feel that he mattered when that peer patiently guided him in ways that met his academic goals and personal needs, allowing him to succeed academically.

A Latino New York City native reported a similar experience. He struggled through high school and never felt comfortable or a sense of belonging in college classrooms. But the *Crear Futuros* Mentors program helped him feel that he mattered and that he was more capable than his teachers and classmates – or he – ever knew: “I guess in many ways, I do feel I have many talents that were unrecognized. But I think right now, after participating in *Crear Futuros*, I’m shining in ways that I never did before.” The source of this student transformation is his sense of mattering, not belonging or fit. He also describes his “shining” as something that is part of him, rather than a context-dependent experience.

This is perhaps the most salient theme from our interviews with LaGuardia students; when asked what contributed to their academic and personal success in college, they almost never described the importance of feeling part of the college community – assimilation was *not* important to them. Instead, they emphasized feeling valued as students and people, which echoes the mattering component of belonging. This was illustrated by a student who moved with her family from Egypt to New York City in her teens. When she enrolled at LaGuardia, she participated in a year-long intensive English language program that included extensive peer mentoring focused on academic and personal goals. This student told her peers and faculty about her goals, and their positive reaction motivated her and helped her feel that she mattered.

I did not think that any of that was possible, especially for someone from my background and culture. But they told me that those are great ideas and we can see you achieving them. They said I'm a "shining star." When they first said that to me, I thought, "No one has ever told me that." So when they told me that, I decided, "Okay, I'm going to work for it and I'm going to work hard."

This sense of capacity and of mattering – of being "a shining star" – helped this student through her year in this program, and she carried it with her into the future: "They see that in me, and I keep that in mind whenever I'm stressed out or think that I will not make it."

Student–faculty pedagogical partnership

While the number of student–faculty pedagogical partnership programs around the world is growing rapidly, we focus here on three programs in different kinds of 4-year higher education institutions in the United States. Each took belonging as a premise of its founding; however, student comments illuminate how the construct of mattering might better describe their experiences. These programs include Students as Learners and Teachers at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, two selective, liberal arts colleges in Pennsylvania; the Student–Faculty Partnership Program at Florida Gulf Coast University, a public, state, Hispanic-serving institution in Florida; and the Student–Faculty Partnership Program at Berea College, a small, private liberal arts college in Kentucky that is one of the eight federally funded work colleges.

The SaLT program was piloted in 2007 premised on the belief that "productive reflection, dialogue, and partnership" (Cook-Sather, 2018, p. 1) between students and faculty (and between students and staff; see Lesnick & Cook-Sather, 2010) could "contribute to the creation of campuses as places of belonging" (Cook-Sather, 2018, p. 1). Developed with external grant funding as a free-standing program, SaLT supports semester-long pedagogy- or curriculum-focused partnerships between faculty members and paid student partners. One-on-one student–faculty partnerships include classroom observations, weekly meetings of student and faculty partners, and weekly meetings of student partners with Alison as the facilitator of the program. SaLT has evolved to include multiple options: new faculty orientation and pedagogy seminars (Cook-Sather, 2016; Cook-Sather et al., 2021); partnerships between individuals, pairs, and groups of student consultants and individual faculty and departments (Ameyaa et al., 2021); and pedagogy circles for diversity, equity, and inclusion (Cook-Sather et al., 2023). The explicit focus of this work is the creation of equitable and inclusive learning spaces and teaching practices. While student partners note that the

partnership work “made me feel a sense of belonging,” that sense is “founded in the acceptance and celebration of my identity and what it could contribute to the transformation of our classroom culture” (Colón García, 2017, p. 4).

The Student–Faculty Partnership Program at Florida Gulf Coast University (SFPP-FGCU) is “a joint faculty development and student success initiative” (Reynolds, in Gennocro & Straussberger, 2020, p. 29). It launched in the Fall-2018 semester as a collaboration between the staff and faculty of the Lucas Center for Faculty Development and the FGCU Dean of Students office. The program also receives funding from the Division of Academic Affairs. Based on the SaLT program model, the SFPP-FGCU pairs faculty members with undergraduate students, who assume the role of paid pedagogical consultant. These pairs collaborate for an entire semester to enrich teaching and learning in a particular course, and both student and faculty partners have regular meetings with the program facilitator. Faculty and student partners in the SFPP-FGCU conceptualize their work as “peer exchange” (Gennocro & Straussberger, 2020, p. 30); faculty focus as much on creating meaningful opportunities for student partners to build a sense of belonging as they do on working to make their classrooms places of belonging for enrolled students.

The Student–Faculty Partnership Program at Berea College (SFPP-BC) was launched in 2017. One of its fundamental commitments is to invite faculty members to engage in difficult conversations about identity, inclusion, educational equity, and belonging. Like SaLT and SFPP-FGCU, the SFPP-BC supports semester-long partnerships between individual faculty and student partners, but instead of earning hourly pay as in SaLT and SFPP-FGCU, student partners in the SFPP-BC enroll in a credit-bearing course. Additionally, two postbaccalaureate fellows partnered with a faculty member and teaching and learning center director to launch the SFPP-BC and to facilitate the course. In co-facilitating the course, the first postbac fellow, Khadijah Seay, drew on her commitment “to help students feel a sense of belonging on campus so they could negotiate differences of power” as they seek positive educational experiences (quoted in Ortquist-Ahrens, 2021, p. 193). The second post-bac fellow, Mia Rybeck, further enhanced the course “with an explicit emphasis on belonging through an extended unit she developed, grounded in bell hooks’s 2008 book” (Ortquist-Ahrens, 2021, p. 194).

The outcomes of this student–faculty partnership work are remarkably similar across these very different institutions (and, indeed, across almost all institutions that embrace student–faculty pedagogical partnership). In relation to academic belonging in particular, student partners describe developing “the belonging of a voice” that transfers into academic contexts: “Through this partnership, I have learned how to feel a sense of belonging

in my other classrooms” (Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021, p. 741). Another student said that through partnership she could “become a stakeholder in the community”; another argued: “As a Participant, I felt like I was involved as an equal member of the community, specifically when it comes to academics” (Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021, p. 742). However, another student highlighted the limits of belonging, particularly in relation to its transferability: she asserted that she “felt belonging within partnership but did not experience a ‘sense of belonging on a campus-wide scale’” (Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021, p. 742).

Some student partners highlight the generative overlap between belonging and mattering, specifically in terms of confidence and agency. One student explained that partnership “helped me overcome my fear of professors therefore allowing me to be more proactive,” and another wrote: “In engaging in partnership with a faculty member, I began to feel like I had more agency in my own school ... [and felt] more comfortable in navigating academic spaces as a whole” (Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021, p. 742). Yet another student partner asserted: “My partnerships gave me a seat at the table and allowed me to gain confidence, knowing my ideas and perspective held weight and had value” (Allard, 2021, p. 1).

We see in these statements evidence of mattering. These are not statements about fit and integration; rather, they are about students feeling recognized and valued as individuals with distinct identities and contributions to make to the community (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Schlossberg, 1989). We noted in our definition of partnership that it is the differences that participants bring to the work that make it generative – differences of identity, position, and perspective – and, further, that it is the affirmation of those differences as resources for learning and growth that contribute to partnership’s potential to foster belonging and mattering. When students feel that they matter, they make choices in their education that reflect a “re-prioritization of learning within education rather than a choice to continue to merely do school well” (Marcovici, 2021, p. 2). Such choices are clear illustrations that students know that they matter, not necessarily that they belong.

Implications and recommendations

In evoking the construct of mattering to analyze the experiences underrepresented students have in academic spaces, we are not suggesting that belonging in these spaces is irrelevant. Rather, we are suggesting that perhaps belonging is not the only or the most generative construct to use in analyzing students’ experiences and in informing institutional practices. Mattering allows us to refocus on students’ sense of capacity and agency that does not depend on – but can certainly be informed and affirmed by – fit

and context. Knowing that someone at your college cares about you enough to thoughtfully guide you, to feel you can shine or, indeed, be a shining star – these are some of the ways in which peer mentoring can foster a sense of mattering without students feeling that they need or want to fit within a specific cultural or institutional context. Feeling like a stakeholder in the community, experiencing the sense of capacity transfer across academic contexts, feeling the confidence that one can contribute, and focusing on one’s own learning needs and priorities – these are some of the ways in which student–faculty partnership can foster a sense of mattering without students feeling that they need or want to belong.

As an experienced student partner, Kayo notes that students who work in student–faculty partnerships feel empowered in their positions, are more likely to build connections with faculty and community members, and, if they are students from HUGs, can heal from negative social experiences in traditional gender-specific dominated departments and with non-people of color. After developing a sense that they matter through partnership, students are able to return to those situations with the language to critique pedagogical practices through a holistic and equitable lens. Kayo captures what almost all student partners express: that through partnership work, they learn how to advocate for themselves and others despite existing (and inequitable) power dynamics. Students learn through partnership how to adapt to various academic settings, to recognize when there is an issue that needs a new approach, or to find a collective solution that meets the needs and goals of all involved.

Given our findings that both build on and extend the potential of belonging in academic spaces, we recommend widening the conceptual frames used to analyze the experiences of students from HUGs to not force “fit” and to value differences that can help change the structures and practices of many higher education institutions. Student perspectives on their experiences in the peer mentoring programs developed at LaGuardia Community College and the student–faculty pedagogical partnership programs at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, Florida Gulf Coast University, and Berea College challenge us to attend to what is salient to students – to mattering. These perspectives encourage us to reconsider what we strive to support and how we conceptualize belonging. Such reconceptualization opens up possibilities because fit and context are no longer essential components of our work with students.

Conclusion

This collection includes discussions of pedagogies of belonging and promoting academic belonging in the curriculum, and it also addresses how academic belonging might be supported beyond the classroom. Mentoring

and partnership programs can support these forms of attention to belonging. In our research, though, students from HUGs who participate in these programs have shown us how their experiences and feelings of mattering, rather than belonging, might be even more affirming and empowering. The “how” of supporting academic belonging, then, might include how we conceptualize what is most fundamental to student thriving. Affirming who students are – in all their diversity – and the contributions that diversity of identities constitutes, rather than striving to promote and facilitate fit in a particular context, might give individual students and the educational institutions in which they live, learn, and work greater confidence and sense of agency while they are in those institutions and after they move on from them and to develop the sense that they are worthy and that their experiences, voices, and ways of being matter consistently translates, in our research, to agency within higher education and also in the wider world beyond. We invite faculty and staff to learn from what students gain from peer mentoring and student–faculty partnership and to get involved in conversations and networks to reassert that students from HUGs matter, too, even in systems of power in higher education that can make them feel otherwise.

References

- Adams, J. (2023). The F@#\$-Up’s guide to reclaiming and reimagining my student identity through pedagogical partnerships. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 38, 1–5. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss38/2/>
- Ahn, M. Y., & Davis, H. H. (2020). Students’ sense of belonging and their socio-economic status in higher education: A quantitative approach. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 28(1), 136–149. doi:10.1080/13562517.2020.1778664
- Allard, S. (2021). Finding identity and agency through partnership and collaboration. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 34, 1–3. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss34/2>
- Ameyaa, R. A., Cook-Sather, A., Ramo, K., & Tohfa, H. (2021). Undergraduate students partnering with faculty to develop trauma-informed, anti-racist pedagogical approaches: Intersecting experiences of three student partners. *Journal of Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 7(1). <https://journals.studentengagement.org.uk/index.php/studentchangeagents/article/view/1020>
- Arcario, P., Eynon, B., & Lucca, L. (2011). The power of peers: New ways for students to support students. In J. Summerfield & C. C. Smith (Eds.), *Making teaching and learning matter (Explorations of educational purpose 11)* (pp. 195–215). Springer.
- Asher, S. R., & Weeks, M. S. (2014). Loneliness and belongingness in the college years. In R. J. Coplan & J. C. Bowker (Eds.), *The handbook of solitude: Psychological perspectives on social isolation, social withdrawal, and being alone* (pp. 283–301). John Wiley.
- Bye, L., Muller, F., & Oprescu, F. (2020). The impact of social capital on student wellbeing and university life satisfaction. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(5), 898–912.

- Cohen, G. L., & Garcia, J. (2008). Identity, belonging, and achievement: A model, interventions, implications. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 17(6), 365–369.
- Cole, D., Newman, C. B., & Hypolite, L. I. (2020). Sense of belonging and mattering among two cohorts of first-year students participating in a comprehensive college transition program. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 64(3), 276–297.
- Colón García, A. (2017). Building a sense of belonging through pedagogical partnership. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 22, 1–5. <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss22/2>
- Cook-Sather, A. (2015). Dialogue across differences of position, perspective, and identity: Reflective practice in/on a student-faculty pedagogical partnership program. *Teachers College Record*, 117(2).
- Cook-Sather, A. (2016). Undergraduate students as partners in new faculty orientation and academic development. *International Journal of Academic Development*, 21(2), 151–162. doi:10.1080/1360144X.2016.1156543
- Cook-Sather, A. (2018). Developing “students as learners and teachers”: Lessons from ten years of pedagogical partnership that strives to foster inclusive and responsive practice. *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 4(1). <https://journals.studentengagement.org.uk/index.php/studentchangeagents/article/view/746/pdf>
- Cook-Sather, A. (2020). Respecting voices: How the co-creation of teaching and learning can support academic staff, underrepresented students, and equitable practices. *Higher Education*, 79(5), 885–901. <https://rdcu.be/bQfu5>
- Cook-Sather, A. (2022). *Co-creating equitable teaching and learning: Structuring student voice into higher education*. Harvard Education Press.
- Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning & teaching: A guide for faculty*. Jossey-Bass.
- Cook-Sather, A., & Felten, P. (2017a). Ethics of academic leadership: Guiding learning and teaching. In F. Wu & M. Wood (Eds.), *Cosmopolitan perspectives on academic leadership in higher education* (pp. 175–191). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Cook-Sather, A., & Felten, P. (2017b). Where student engagement meets faculty development: How student–faculty pedagogical partnership fosters a sense of belonging. *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, 1(2), 3–11. <http://sehej.raise-network.com/raise/article/view/cook>
- Cook-Sather, A., Hong, E., Moss, T., & Williamson, A. (2021). Developing new faculty voice and agency through trustful, overlapping, faculty–faculty and student–faculty conversations. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 26(3), 347–359. doi:10.1080/1360144X.2021.1947296
- Cook-Sather, A., & Seay, K. (2021). “I was involved as an equal member of the community”: How pedagogical partnership can foster a sense of belonging in Black, female students. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 51(6), 733–750. doi:10.1080/0305764X.2021.1926926
- Cook-Sather, A., Stewart, K., Ameyaa, R. A., & Jones, L. A. (2023). Co-creating spaces for full selves: Student-facilitated pedagogy circles for BIPOC faculty. *Journal of Faculty Development*, 37(1), 69–71.
- Crisp, G., Baker, V. L., Griffin, K. A., Lunsford, L. G., & Pifer, M. J. (2017). Mentoring undergraduate students. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 43(1), 1–114.

- Dancy, T. E., & Edwards, K. T. (2020). Labor and property: Historically White colleges, Black bodies, and constructions of (anti) humanity. In C. A. Grant, A. N. Woodson, & M. J. Dumas (Eds.), *The future is Black: Afropessimism, fugitivity, and radical hope in education* (pp. 31–46). Routledge.
- Eboka, T. (2019, April). Fostering student engagement with diverse cohorts: A case study of BAME undergraduate students. doi:10.2139/ssrn.3436976
- Esteban-Guitart, M., & Moll, L. C. (2014). Funds of identity: A new concept based on the funds of knowledge approach. *Culture & Psychology*, 20(1), 31–48. doi:10.1177/1354067X13515934
- Felten, P., & Lambert, L. M. (2020). *Relationship-rich education: How human connections drive student success*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Flett, G., Khan, A., & Su, C. (2019). Mattering and psychological well-being in college and university students. *International Journal Mental Health Addiction*, 17, 667–680.
- Gennocro, A., & Straussberger, J. (2020). Peers and colleagues: Collaborative class design through student–faculty partnerships. In A. Cook-Sather & C. Wilson (Eds.), *Building courage, confidence, and capacity in learning and teaching through student-faculty partnership: Stories from across contexts and arenas of practice* (pp. 29–37). Lexington Books.
- González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Routledge.
- Gopalan, M., & Brady, S. T. (2019). College students' sense of belonging: A national perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 49(2). doi:10.3102/0013189X19897622
- Gravett, K., & Ajjawi, R. (2022). Belonging as situated practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 47(7), 1386–1396. doi:10.1080/03075079.2021.1894118
- Hausmann, L. R. M., Ye, F., Schofield, J. W., & Woods, R. L. (2009). Sense of belonging and persistence in White and African American first-year students. *Research in Higher Education*, 50, 649–669. doi:10.1007/s11162-009-9137-8
- Huerta, S. M., & Fishman, S. M. (2014). Marginality and mattering: Urban Latino male undergraduates in higher education. *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 26(1), 85–100.
- Johnson, D. R., Soldner, M., Leonard, J. B., Alvarez, P., Inkelas, K. K., Rowan-Kenyon, H., & Longerbeam, S. (2007). Examining sense of belonging among first-year undergraduates from different racial/ethnic groups. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(5), 525–542. doi:10.1353/csd.2007.0054
- Johnson, W. B. (2016). *On being a mentor: A guide for higher education faculty*. Routledge.
- LaGuardia Community College. (n.d.). *Peer programs*. <https://www.laguardia.edu/peerprograms/>
- Larcombe, W., Baik, C., & Finch, S. (2021). Exploring course experiences that predict psychological distress and mental wellbeing in Australian undergraduate and graduate coursework students. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41(2), 420–435. doi:10.1080/07294360.2020.1865284
- Lesnick, A., & Cook-Sather, A. (2010). Building civic capacity on campus through a radically inclusive teaching and learning initiative. *Innovative Higher Education*, 35(1), 3–17.
- Lewis, K. L., Stout, J. G., Finkelstein, N. D., Pollock, S. J., Miyake, A., Cohen, G. L., & Ito, T. A. (2017). Fitting in to move forward: Belonging, gender, and

- persistence in the physical sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics (pSTEM). *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 41(4), 420–436. doi:10.1177/0361684317720186
- Maramba, D., & Fong, T. (Eds.). (2020). *Transformative practices for minority student success: Accomplishments of Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institutions*. Stylus.
- Marcovici, E. (2021). Taking ownership of my learning and pushing for change. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 34, 1–3. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss34/3/>
- McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14, 6–23.
- Meehan, C., & Howells, K. (2019). In search of the feeling of “belonging” in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(10), 1376–1390.
- Miller, A. L., Williams, L. M., & Silberstein, S. M. (2019). Found my place. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38(3), 594–608.
- Museum, S. D., & Maramba, D. C. (2011). The impact of culture on Filipino American students’ sense of belonging. *Review of Higher Education*, 34(2), 231–258. doi:10.1353/rhe.2010.0022
- Nieminen, J. H., & Pesonen, H. V. (2022). Politicising inclusive learning environments: How to foster belonging and challenge ableism? *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41(6), 2020–2033. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07294360.2021.1945547>
- Nunn, L. M. (2021). *College belonging: How first-year and first-generation students navigate campus life*. Rutgers University Press.
- Ortquist-Ahrens, L. (2021). Building partnership through partnership: Reflections on the role of post-baccalaureate fellows in program development. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 5(2), 191–197. doi:10.15173/ijsap.v5i2.4618
- Perez-Putnam, M. (2016). Belonging and brave space as hope for personal and institutional inclusion. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 18, 1–3. <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss18/2>
- Porter, C., & Byrd, J. (2021). Understanding influences of development on Black women’s success in U.S. colleges: A synthesis of literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 91, 803–830. doi:10.3102/00346543211027929
- Pychyl, T. A., Flett, G. L., Long, M., Carreiro, E., & Azil, R. (2022). Faculty perceptions of mattering in teaching and learning: A qualitative examination of the views, values, and teaching practices of award-winning professors. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 40(1), 142–158. doi:10.1177/07342829211057648
- Raaper, R. (2021). Contemporary dynamics of student experience and belonging in higher education. *Critical Studies in Education*, 62(5), 537–542. doi:10.1080/17508487.2021.1983852
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1989). Marginality and mattering. *New Directions for Student Services*, 48, 5–15.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students’ sense of belonging*. Routledge.
- Thomas, L. (2012, March). *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change*. Higher Education Academy. <https://www.phf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/What-Works-report-final.pdf>
- Thomas, L. (2018). *Rethinking student belonging in higher education: From Bourdieu to borderlands*. Routledge.

- van Gijn-Grosvenor, E. L., & Huisman, P. (2020). A sense of belonging among Australian university students. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(2), 376–389. doi:10.1080/07294360.2019.1666256
- Vetro, V. (2021). College during a pandemic: A qualitative exploration of community college first-generation students' mattering and persistence experiences. *Journal of Higher Education Management*, 36, 93–103. https://issuu.com/aaual0/docs/twin_pandemics/s/11997057
- Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2007). A question of belonging: Race, social fit, and achievement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(1), 82–96. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.92.1.82
- Weiston-Serdan, T. (2017). *Critical mentoring: A practical guide*. Stylus.
- Weston, H., Felten, P., & Cook-Sather, A. (2021, October 27). *Reviving the construct of "mattering" in pursuit of equity and justice in higher education* [Conference session]. Conference of the International Society for the Study of Teaching and Learning [virtual].
- Wu-Winiarski, M. H., Geron, K., Geron, S. M., & Hoang, A. (2020). The Student Service Operation for Success Program for Asian American and American Pacific Islander students. In D. C. Maramba & T. P. Fong (Eds.), *Transformative practices for minority student success* (pp. 13–30). Stylus.