

A Sense of Belonging

Terrell Strayhorn brings blueprints and hardhats to the table

The principle is straightforward enough: folks need to feel they belong in order to engage fully, give their best effort, and benefit the most. Simplicity is part of its universal attraction. Unfortunately, it's also so matter of fact that some don't put in the elbow grease to unleash its latent power.

Fortunately, Terrell Strayhorn has spent the better part of his career unveiling and unpacking the science behind this fundamental human need, the implications for application in schools, and what we can be doing to foster it.

“A sense of belonging is radical,” he says, “in that people look for a school or workplace where they can fit in, that feels like home, where they are respected. But it doesn't work that way. Belonging isn't what you discover or find; it's what you create after you get there.”

So how do teachers foster an environment of belonging? Strayhorn would begin with another basic fact: students come from all different walks of life. Each individual brings his own values to the classroom, her own ways of doing things. While it's tempting to assume that since everyone is now in the same class, they'll all get to know each other, operate in teams, and be equally successful – it doesn't work that way, either.

“When we honor individual backgrounds and experiences, we're actually helping our students create shared values and language among them,” he says. “Out of this comes a sense of camaraderie, vulnerability and trust, and these lead to a sense of belonging and yes, academic success.”

Above all else, remember that education is about people, after all. The emphasis mustn't be on metrics or data points, but rather a person-centered approach. We mustn't focus on what students do only, but rather on who they are. Classrooms mustn't be devoid of human interests and personal stories, but rather a place where humanity is restored.

Social and emotional learning can help provide direction because SEL brings the learner, not the learning, back to the center. It includes the learner's families, culture, folktales, and much more. It helps teachers keep their commitment to be student-focused. It places students at the heart of all activities, pedagogy, and curriculum. And just as important, Strayhorn argues, SEL can restore joy to the process.

Scaling Up

In smaller spaces, where the teacher controls the movement and noise, strategies to build belonging can be highly effective. But replicating its adoption in multiple classrooms and across school districts? That's a different matter. Or is it? Strayhorn challenges the mindset that teachers cannot influence the culture.

“Understand the importance of a plan,” he says. “Belonging doesn't flow from things we throw on the wall and hope something sticks. It's not easy, but it can be fostered through intentional focus. What we do to build trust and shorten the distance between teacher and student, we can do the same between teachers and with administrators. Simple things like, ‘I care about you, I'm in your corner, I'm interested in your success.’ Every time you discuss a textbook, attend a lecture, partner up for a field trip, reach out to parents, offer positive feedback, you can cultivate a feeling that he matters and she belongs.”

To individual teachers, he adds, “even in the face of a school system where belonging is not a priority, you can share best practices and create a teacher community. I've tried it and it worked. The teachers built a sense of belonging among them, and it encouraged them to do the same in their classrooms.”

To educational leaders, he adds, “As an administrator, I have rewarded the behaviors I want repeated, as well as made those teachers’ playbooks part of staff development. I’ve made sure teachers are offered the supportive experiences we are talking about at hiring, at review, promotions, etc. When we do those things, we help every student and teacher feel safe, secure, supported, and part of the learning community. We are doing the work of belonging. After all, teachers’ work conditions are students’ learning conditions.”

Belonging in an Age of Distance

The post-pandemic makeup of the 21 million U.S. college students may surprise you. The popular perception of Joe College hasn’t changed, but according to the research, yesterday’s non-traditional learner – student and full-time worker, student and mom, student and caretaker of an elderly parent, student with an arrest record – is the majority today.

So they come to college with many competing priorities in mind, and they demand an experience that works for them. They’re looking for stackable credentials and badges to get a better job. It doesn’t mean they’re anti-academic. In fact, only 25 percent of students who drop out have academic or unreadiness issues. The rest get caught up in family, work and life, or leave feeling like they never mattered or belonged in the first place.

What everyone seems to agree upon is that no one wants to go back to a pandemic environment. Ironically, despite the demand for individualized learning and a personalized experience, students miss their friends and their teachers. Yet, they prefer to work alone and do assignments by themselves, even though employers prize the ability to collaborate on team projects.

“If we don’t recognize the new face of the college student, we’ll miss opportunities to optimize education,” says Strayhorn. “Some things went well with Covid. Students like going to the restroom whenever they wish, they don’t want to give up the freedom of expression. Our challenge is to keep it personal, continue to remove barriers, and create opportunities that are humanizing and radically supportive in the post-Covid reality.”

He adds, “In Latin, ‘education’ means to draw out the light within. We have new opportunities to help students develop their sense of identity, show empathy, and make responsible decisions. Even more exciting, we can produce happy humans who have empathy, are curious, can abide by rules, and be kind to their neighbors. We just need to let them know we’re proud of them. We believe in their ability to succeed and they matter.”