

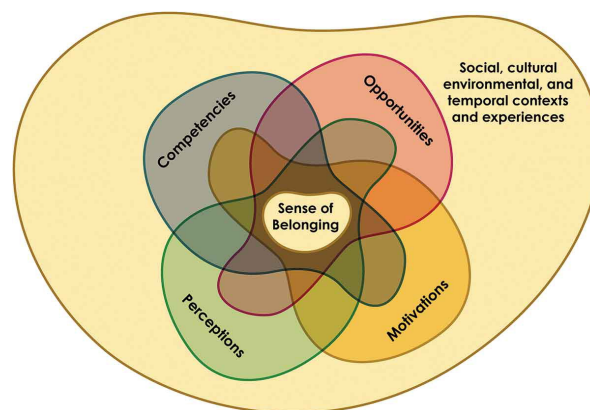
Advancing Student Belonging Through Broader Definition and Methods

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Student belonging matters when we're discussing the student experience. This is critical for student success in higher education, particularly as federal policies shape funding priorities and institutional accountability. However, we have two recommendations to continue to expand on this work at the federal policy level: (1) expand the definition of belonging as a concept that's multi-dimensional, contextual, and dynamic (2) incorporate and uplift mixed-methods and qualitative approaches in the discussion of student belonging.

Recommendation 1: Expand the definition of belonging as a concept that's multidimensional, contextual, and dynamic

Some policymakers define belonging as "students' connectedness to the college community, both academically and socially." While this definition captures key elements of student engagement, it doesn't fully encompass the complexity of belonging. Belonging is multi-dimensional and includes different aspects like competencies, opportunities to belong, motivations to belong, and perceptions. It is contextual—shaped both by what's happening within the institution (e.g. culture, policies), as well as what's happening socially, culturally, temporally (see [Allen et al., 2021](#)'s model below).



For example, research on residence halls at historically white institutions has shown that students of color often experience them as racialized spaces where white students feel a greater entitlement to comfort and belonging ([Foste & Irwin, 2023](#)). Similarly, LGBTQ students may struggle with campus climate if faculty and curricula fail to acknowledge their identities ([Duran, 2019](#)).

Belonging is also relational. Some students may feel greater belonging when they encounter faculty and peers who reflect their own racial, ethnic, or first-generation backgrounds. For instance, minoritized students in STEM fields have reported that identity-affirming student organizations play a crucial role in fostering a sense of community and persistence ([Palmer et al., 2011](#)). In fact, studies have shown that merely highlighting a

shared identity among faculty and students (like first-generation status) can improve belonging ([Laiduc et al., 2021](#)). Family, particularly siblings, play a critical role in fostering support and well-being for Latinx first-generation students ([Takimoto et al., 2021](#)). While quantitative findings highlight the predictive power of university belonging and ethnic-racial identity (ERI) in academic and mental health outcomes, qualitative data reveal that siblings often serve as key sources of support, influencing students' motivation, resilience, and career aspirations.

Finally, belonging is also dynamic ([Covarrubias, 2024](#)), shifting as students move from space to space and interact with different people throughout their days. These daily shifts in belonging influence students' engagement, with stronger feelings of belonging on a given day leading to increased emotional and behavioral participation, especially for first-generation college students ([Gillen-O'Neel, 2021](#)).

Comprehensive and reflective definitions are crucial because they drive the development of initiatives, funding priorities, and accountability structures. If belonging is defined more broadly at both the federal and institutional levels, it would help shape more inclusive and targeted initiatives. With this expanded framework, federal policy could promote a more comprehensive approach to student success, particularly for minoritized and first-generation students, ensuring that programs and funding structures are better aligned with their unique needs and experiences.

Recommendation 2: Incorporate and uplift mixed-methods and qualitative approaches to complement quantitative findings

Interventions and traditional methods like survey measures can be useful tools for identifying who does or doesn't belong, and what are the overall student patterns of belonging. For example, surveys can capture broad trends about student belonging across demographic groups, highlighting disparities in experiences at scale. However, they just provide one piece of the story, and on their own can sometimes be misinterpreted (see [Walton et al., 2023](#)). For example, survey data might indicate that low-income students experience lower belonging than their higher-income peers, but qualitative insights uncover how part of this stems from how campus life assumes financial privilege; students may feel pressured to spend money to socially fit in with their peers ([Nguyen & Herron, 2021](#)).

Qualitative insights into student belonging can paint a fuller picture of the contextual, relational, and dynamic aspects of student belonging. This can offer policymakers and institutions more information about key areas to focus on to create better opportunities for student belonging. For instance, interview-based studies revealed that first-generation students often struggle with belonging because of feelings of cultural mismatch ([Stephens et al., 2012](#)), whereas low-income students struggle with belonging because of financial strain, ([Gillen-O'Neel, 2021](#)).

Thus, incorporating qualitative methods—such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic research—into existing institutional assessments can provide richer, more actionable insights. A mixed-methods approach ensures that universities identify disparities in belonging and understand the underlying causes and pathways to meaningful change.