

Fostering Student Belonging and Connectedness in College: A Scoping Review

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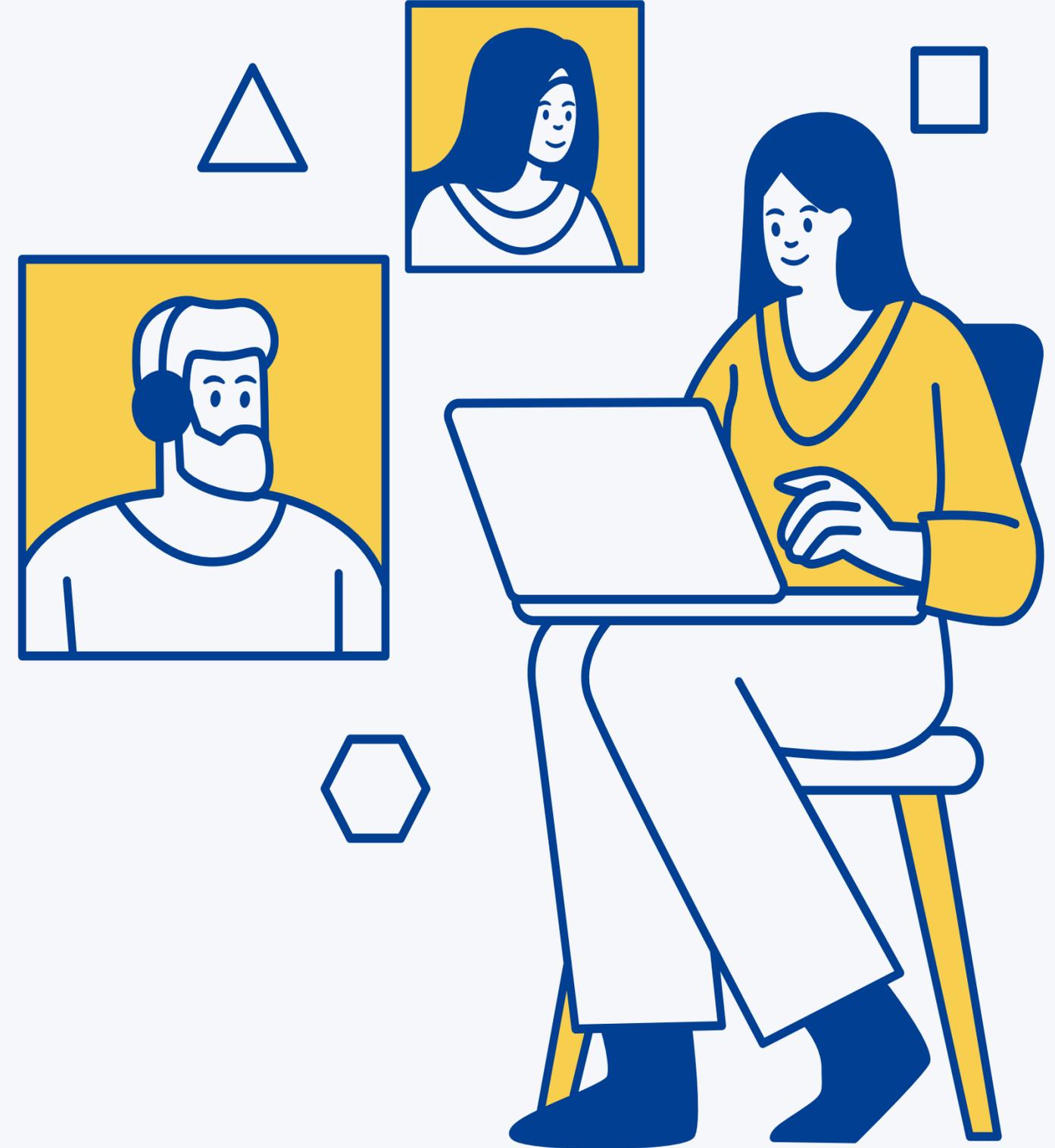
SREE 2024 Summer Fellow



How do postsecondary-focused colleges, nonprofits, or programs in the US foster student belonging and connection?

Identify ways in which “belonging” has been defined and measured in postsecondary contexts.

Review research studies examining the impact of belonging interventions on academic and non-academic outcomes.



Belonging, or the sense of belongingness, has been conceptualized as a fundamental human need or motivation that promotes a variety of positive outcomes (Allen et al., 2021; Gopalan & Brady, 2020). In educational settings, belonging is commonly understood as students feeling accepted, respected, and valued (Allen et al., 2021). For college students specifically, “sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers” (Strayhorn, 2008).



Defining Belonging: Core Concepts

Social support

Refers to students' perceptions of receiving consistent care, assistance, and engagement from others within their community. This support includes both emotional encouragement and practical help, fostering an environment in which students feel valued and understood (Duran et al., 2020; Slaten et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2008).

Connectedness

Defined as the feeling of being part of a community, where individuals experience a sense of inclusion, attachment, closeness with others on campus. Connectedness involves meaningful interactions and relationships that help students integrate into the college community (Duran et al., 2020; Museus & Maramba, 2011; Strayhorn, 2008).

Sense of mattering and acceptance

Highlights the importance of feeling valued and respected by others within the campus community. Students who experience this sense of mattering believe their presence and contributions are recognized and appreciated by peers, faculty, and the institution (Duran et al., 2020).

Integration and identity

These concepts refer to the process by which students incorporate their social identities into the broader campus community. This often involves adopting specific roles, contributing to collective goals, and developing a sense of purpose and belonging (DiGiacomo et al., 2023; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Strayhorn, 2008).

Sense of cohesion

Refers to students' perceptions of unity and solidarity within the campus environment. When students feel a collective sense of togetherness and mutual support, it fosters a strong community spirit, enhancing their overall sense of belonging (Museus & Maramba, 2011).

Personal contribution and role

Essential for understanding how students relate to their campus communities. By recognizing and fulfilling specific roles and responsibilities, students can actively participate in academic, social, and extracurricular activities.

Experiential & Group-Based

- Builds peer networks and community through in-person engagement
 - "Live" engagement and interactive experiences with peers
 - Small groups/learning communities
 - Facilitated activities

Narrative-based

- Uses storytelling to create shared understanding and reduce isolation
 - Stories from peers to illustrate similar struggles
 - Provides opportunities to reflect on experiences
 - Attempts to reduce feelings of isolation

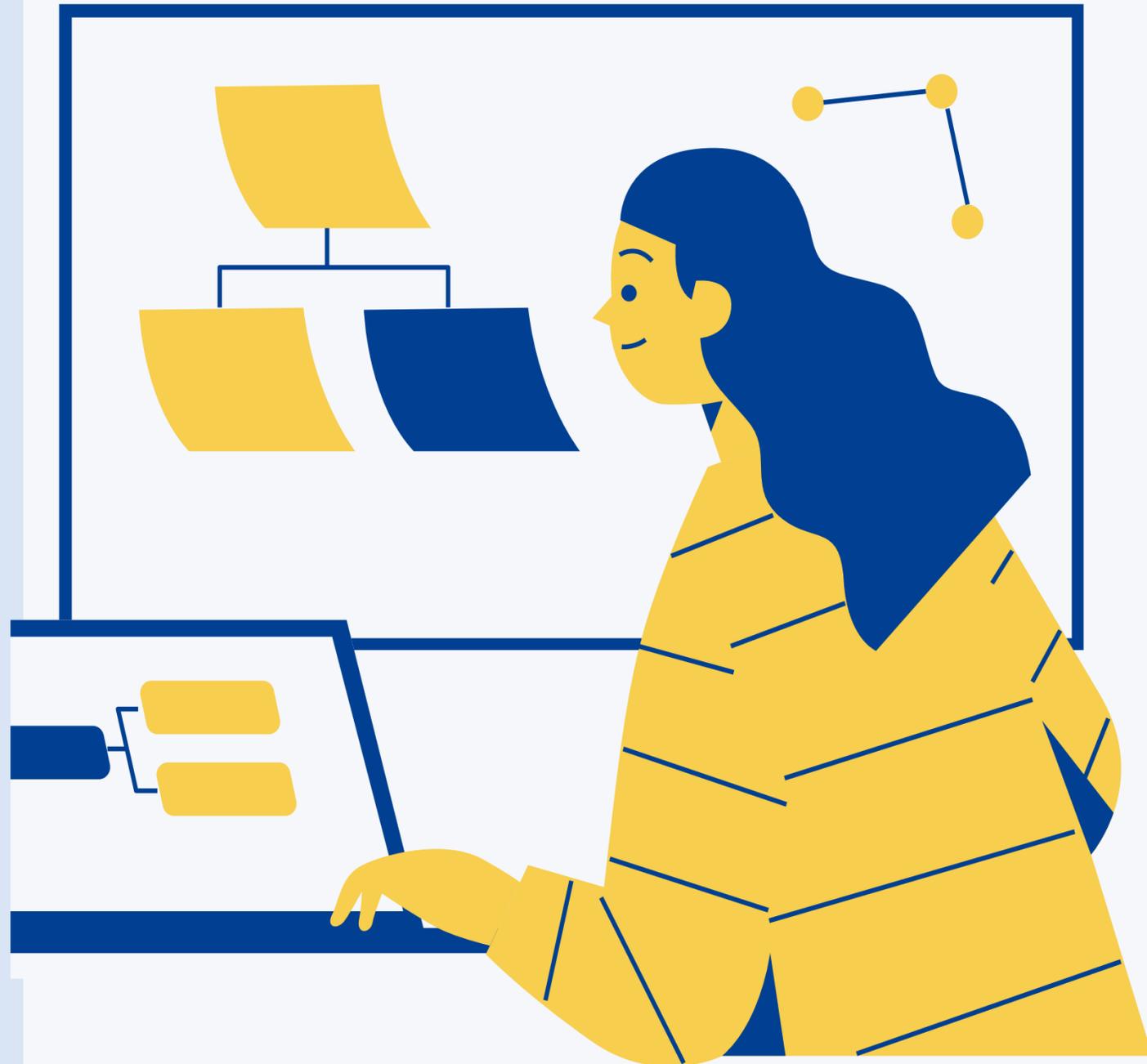
Technology-Based

- Provides scalable, culturally affirming support via digital resources
 - Video-based content reassuring students about their place in college
 - Group discussions with emphasis on culturally affirming messages for diverse student groups

Growth Mindset

- Promotes resilience and a sense of academic competence
 - Educates students about the malleability of intelligence
 - Promotes growth-oriented perspective on challenges
 - Encourages perseverance through academic challenges





Positive impact on belonging:

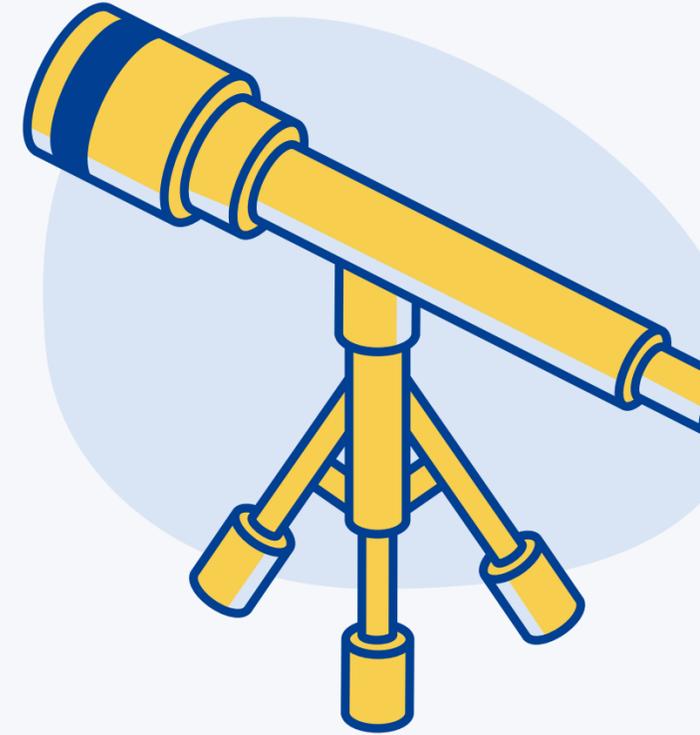
Belonging interventions were found to improve students' sense of connection to their institutions.

Academic outcomes:

While some interventions led to notable academic benefits, such as increased GPA and persistence, others had limited effects on academic performance.

Equity Focus

Several studies demonstrated that belonging interventions were particularly effective in closing gaps between underrepresented students and their peers.



- Social and political context of the interventions.
- The role of institutional policies in enhancing belonging.
- Light-touch interventions with inconsistent results.

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