

Social-Belonging Intervention: *Getting the Message Right*

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This is a semi-refined set of notes for people interested in incorporating lessons of the social-belonging intervention (Walton & Cohen, 2011) in programming and messaging for students, such as new college students.

The goal of this intervention is to send two broad messages: (1) that if you feel like you don't belong in a new school, you (and other people like you) are not alone; and (2) that if you feel this way, your experience will improve over time. This message is designed to help students understand adversities they experience early in school—like difficulty making friends, feeling intimidated by instructors, etc.—as normal and temporary, not proof that they don't belong, and to emphasize opportunities for growth and improvement. The primary message is a message of growth—that over time, everyone comes to feel at home.

Conveying this message effectively involves many nuances. Here are some hard-won lessons about how to do it best.

The overall message

- ***Represent difficulties as both normal and temporary***
 - This is not a “rah-rah-rah”/school pride/self-esteem-boost message. Don't sweep difficulties under the rug but make them normal and therefore not of concern when a student experiences them. You want to pop the “pluralistic ignorance bubble”—where everyone thinks they are the only one having difficulties. Help students understand that difficulties are normal—that everyone is in the same boat—even when everyone thinks they are the only one going through difficulties. You can do this by creating environments in which students openly share stories about difficulties they have experienced in the transition to college.

Talk about difficulties in ways that are helpful, not unhelpful, for students

- ***Encourage students to attribute the causes of difficulties in college to universal and temporary factors***
 - Wherever possible, attribute difficulties to the difficulties of the transition to college all students face (e.g., being new on campus), not to some enduring quality of the college (“It's very stressful here. There's a lot of pressure”) or the student (“You have to be outgoing”).
 - When students face real difficulties that don't change, acknowledge them, and then put them aside as not a barrier to ultimately succeeding and having a positive experience in the setting (e.g., “Sure, there aren't many women in engineering/Sure it's cold and isolated here/Sure the classes are huge. But I've learned to deal with that and I've had a positive experience...”). The message is that that factor exists but it's not necessarily a barrier to success.
- ***Balance positive and negative***

- Validate the pride students feel in their school and enthusiasm about coming to college even as you acknowledge that difficulties are normal. Stories about difficulties risk representing the school negatively—the school is terrible, that’s why people have trouble. You can balance the message that difficulties are normal with exemplars who say things like, “Don’t get me wrong. I love [school name]. But it was hard at first...” The overall message should be one of growth, not just of struggle. It shouldn’t be overly negative (e.g., “I got bald my first year” “I went into therapy”)
- Don’t allow students to think that there is a point at which one has “arrived” – that is, when belonging concerns disappear. For instance, a senior student might say, “Sometimes I still feel lonely from time to time, but now I know that it’s just a normal feeling everyone goes through from time to time”)
- **Use counter-stereotypical exemplars – don’t play to stereotypes**
 - Use the social-identity characteristics of exemplar students to challenge stereotypes. For instance, a member of the majority group on campus (e.g., a White man) might be the one who talks about feeling that his high school had left him unprepared for college and he found professors in college intimidating.
 - Use counter-stereotypical exemplars to offer alternative explanations for instances that could otherwise seem to reflect bias (e.g., a man, not a woman, feels like a male TA disrespects his abilities in engineering)
- **Watch for easy mistakes**
 - Don’t make fixed ability references (“okay to realize everyone has some limitations”; “if something doesn’t work, just means it wasn’t for you”).
 - Don’t set bad norms, like everyone is miserable, everyone drinks too much, or there is lots of prejudice
 - Don’t raise negative content without resolving it, e.g., with growth and improvement (“the idea of failure was terrifying” and then not resolving that)

Emphasize growth

- **Tell stories**
 - Don’t just tell short quips; give at least some sustained narratives about students’ experiences over time—initial difficulties, later come to feel at home. The stories need not be long but they should convey how a student who had serious struggles overcame them to flourish. Be sure to include memorable details and examples; they should be stories, not general-level advice.
- **Tell stories that emphasize growth**
 - Emphasize ways students can grow and improve, including through struggle, not just getting through struggle (not “I failed a class and lived through it” but “I really struggled in that class but, looking back, I’m glad I was challenged. It’s made me a better engineer”).
 - Solution to difficulties can’t imply you have to change your personality, which might seem fixed (“you have to be outgoing”).
- **Tell diverse stories that revolve around the common theme**

- Have students experience worries about belonging in diverse ways – worries about making friends, feeling lonely, feeling unprepared coming to college, making lots of causal friends but not close friends, finding professors intimidating, etc.
- Have each exemplar tell how they came to handle the challenges they faced and grew from it, for instance by getting to know other students, joining a student group, getting to know professors, finding a problem that inspired them, etc. You don't want convey that everyone is the same; but that everyone finds a niche.
- ***Represent the timeline of growth carefully***
 - To students early on (e.g., pre-enrollment), don't make difficulties seem predominantly negative, or negative for specific periods of time that might seem interminable to a new student (a year and a half). That risks the inference that the school itself is to blame, not that the transition is difficult.
 - To slightly older students (e.g., second-semester freshman), make sure the timeline of improvement is vague – so no one thinks they have “missed the boat” and their feelings of non-belonging are just due to them (“After some time, I started to feel more comfortable...”).

Treat students as strong, not weak, not as in need of help or remediation.

- Assume positives (that people will grow and succeed) not negatives (that people will crack under the “pressure)
- Represent students as helpers, not as recipients of help. Don't focus on ways students can receive help from others or formal resources available to help students. Instead focus on how students can help each other, for instance in informal ways (conversation with upperclassmen, RAs, TAs, etc.), or by communicating to younger students more about what coming to college is like (“saying-is-believing”)