



# Creating Belonging and Building a Community in College

## What is belonging?

Belongingness means ***feeling genuinely accepted, valued, and connected within a community***—where you can express your authentic self instead of trying to fit in.

This sense of connection fosters well-being, resilience, and both academic and personal growth.



**Self:** Belonging begins with knowing and ***accepting yourself*** – your identities, values, and experiences, and how they shape your unique journey.

**Intra-communities** are the connections you build within groups that share your identities or experiences.

## What contributes to belonging?



**Inter-communities** are about building meaningful connections across different groups—finding common ground while respecting and embracing differences.

**Systems:** These are the ***institutional structures, policies, and resources*** that can either support or create barriers to belonging.



## Creating Belonging and Building a Community in College

### Reflecting on Belonging & Identity

Reflect on these questions to map personal experiences of belonging and identify the key ingredients that create meaningful connections in your life.

Question 1

-

Can you recall a situation, space, place, or time when you felt completely accepted and at ease with your sense of self? Describe the aspects that helped you feel like you belonged. What does belonging feel like?



Question 2

-

Think of times when you felt like an outsider. Notice how your body responds when you don't feel like you belong. What made you feel this way? Where do you feel tension or discomfort?





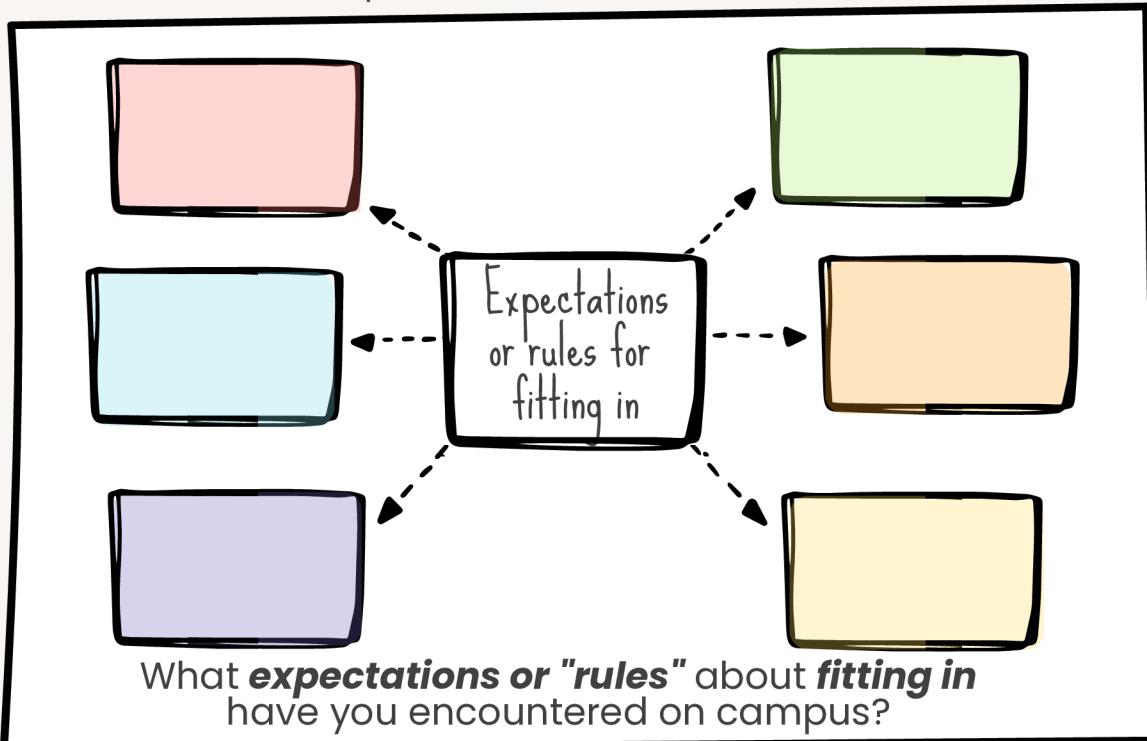
## Creating Belonging and Building a Community in College

### Practice

Now that you know what belonging means to you, the next activities will help you put it into practice.

#### Activity 1: Your Authentic Stories

Examine the “fitting in” stories you’ve absorbed and compare them to moments of true authenticity. What expectations or rules about fitting in have you encountered on campus?



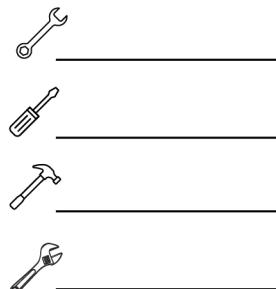
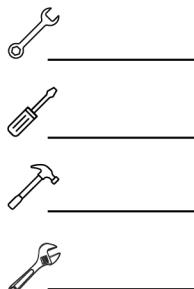


## Creating Belonging and Building a Community in College

### Activity 2: Your Connection Toolbox

This is where reflection becomes action. With a clear sense of belonging and self, you'll create strategies to build meaningful connections.

1. Make a list of people with whom you'd like to **strengthen or deepen** your connections.



2. What small steps could you take this week to feel more connected?

- Academic Path:

#### Suggestions

- **Academic path:** Seek guidance from mentors, advisors, staff, and professors. Join academic clubs or study groups.



- Personal Ground:

- **Personal ground:** Embrace spaces celebrating your heritage and story. Express yourself through cultural communities, spiritual circles, or creative outlets.

- Mission Aligned:

- **Mission aligned:** Connect with organizations and people who share your values and vision for change.



## Creating Belonging and Building a Community in College

### Activity 3: Finding Your Place

When you feel you don't quite fit in, reevaluate and recenter your belongingness.

#### Look at <sup>the</sup> **BIG** PICTURE

Take a step back and check in:

- What did you hope to find here?
- What do you actually need?



Remember: You can step away from spaces that drain you.

Choose connections that energize and align with your values.

#### Reach OUT

You don't have to figure it out alone!

Reach out to trusted friends, community members, or counselors who can support you.



## Creating Belonging and Building a Community in College

### References

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2018). College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students. Routledge.

Thompson, M. N., Sanchez, M., Williams, K., & Her, P. (2023). Tune in to Strive Out Career Wellness Program Manual. Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions. University of Wisconsin-Madison. <https://ccwt.wisc.edu/tuned-in-labs/>

Thompson, M., Her, P., Sanchez, M., Keita, N., Williams, K. (2025, July). Facilitating College Student Career Wellness: Program Development & Evaluation of the Tune in to Strive Out Career Wellness Program for Underrepresented College Students. Symposium presented at the Society for Vocational Psychology Biennial Conference, University of Lausanne, Switzerland.

Authors: Chi Pham, M.S., Nasitta Keita, M.S., & Pa Her, Ph.D.