

[MUSIC PLAYING] KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Welcome to season four of What We're Learning About Learning, a podcast about higher ed teaching and learning, produced by the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship, also known as CNDLS, at Georgetown University. I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski.

JOE KING: And I'm Joe King. In August 2022, we published an episode on belonging featuring 13 faculty and staff who shared their pedagogical practices for welcoming students and cultivating belonging in their classrooms. That episode is our second most listened to episode, underscoring the significant interest in the topic of belonging.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Belonging is a concept that's getting a lot of attention across college campuses these days.

JOE KING: So we decided to kick off season four by taking a close look at the current research on belonging and academic success. But before diving into the research, we wondered how belonging is being talked about within the broader landscape of higher education. In early 2023, the Chronicle of Higher Education published an article titled "Everyone is Talking About Belonging," in which they pointed out that the number of jobs posted in the Chronicle with "belonging" in their title jumped from 23 in 2021 to 60 in 2022. Our own search resulted in 22 new positions with "belonging" in the title posted in the past month alone at places including Princeton, Dartmouth, Harvard, and Vanderbilt.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: However, despite considerable interest in this topic, it's not immune to skepticism. Even scholars in the field have raised questions about its validity. A case in point is Kristen Renn, who, in the foreword to Benjamin Henning's recently published anthology on belonging, candidly describes herself as a once cautious skeptic, questioning whether belonging was merely another well-intentioned, trendy concept promising to be the silver bullet for resolving issues in student success.

It wasn't until she delved into the expanding body of compelling and theory-informed research on belonging that she transitioned from skepticism to becoming a cautious proponent of its value. Other skeptics have pointed out how varying definitions of belonging have resulted in inconsistent and unclear measurement approaches and research instruments.

JOE KING: So in this first of two episodes on belonging, we explore several key questions. What is the relationship between belonging and academic success? Why does it matter? How can it be measured? And what threatens it?

In the second episode of this two-part series, we'll dig into how thoughtful interventions, both in and out of the classroom, can be used to foster belonging. You'll hear from three Georgetown staff and faculty who share their knowledge, research, and insights about belonging and academic success. We'll intersperse these conversations with research findings from relevant academic literature to add more depth and context.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: The three faculty featured in these episodes are Susan Chang who is the senior associate dean for DEI in the School of Medicine, and associate professor of family medicine, and a deputy Title IX coordinator; Stephon Hamell, advising dean in Georgetown's College of Arts and Sciences; and Yulia Chentsova Dutton, associate professor in the department of psychology.

JOE KING: We begin with the faculty. Here is Susan and Yulia sharing their thoughts about what belonging means and its relationship with academic success.

SUSAN CHANG: Folks have said is this the new diversity, equity, inclusion buzzword that is going to be added on? Belonging is more than just fitting in and getting along to get along in the school environment, but ways in which the ceiling that you can thrive and find a sense of purpose at the school fuels academic connection and mastery and motivation. It can also feel a sense of learning and wanting to learn, and expose yourself to being vulnerable to learning more when you feel like, oh, I have a sense of connectivity.

Yeah, we're really interested in this concept because it has such a direct connection to not only academic performance, but just thriving and staying the course of medicine for the four years of school. The belonging concept really looks at structures, ways that schools and university campuses can be doing more to structure supports around students.

YULIA CHENTSOVA DUTTON: I am a big believer in data. I am a researcher working with data, so I feel that we need to keep on doing the work to actually show that looking prospectively, belongingness, accounts for some variability in those outcomes that we care about. And we can think of them broadly. We can think about how well someone does academically, what skills they learned, but also their sense of wellness while a student and beyond. And we can keep on showing that belongingness matters and that belongingness is functional for those outcomes.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Everyone we spoke with talked about how belonging and mattering are interconnected. Here's Yulia drawing from her own research findings, differentiating between belonging and mattering, followed by Susan referencing Brené Brown's research on the relationship between belonging and vulnerability, and then Stephon making reference to Terrell Strayhorn's work on belonging.

YULIA CHENTSOVA DUTTON: Far as mattering and belonging, I think of them as distinct. Belonging stems from a very basic human need to have a sense that you are in the group, and that the group is accepting of you. We are social animals, and evolutionarily, being part of the group was without a doubt one of the best predictors of survival for us humans. And so at a very basic level, that sense of I'm accepted doesn't require a whole lot of cognitive work. It's probably an intuition that even young children have of being part of the group or not.

And then, of course, we elaborate on it as we grow and develop, and it becomes much more

sophisticated and nuanced. But it's very basic. It's that sense of others are there watching out for me.

Mattering is a sense that we develop over time. It's much more cultural in nature. You don't have it in young children, for example. You develop it over time.

And it develops in line with your values and beliefs because we have a sense that we matter along the axis of what our goals are, what our values are, and what are the goals and values of our community. And has to do with the work on who are we as humans, and what is our purpose, and whether or not what we are doing is in line with that purpose and the purpose of our community.

And so, to me, they're very different. And it is my sense that both of them matter for well-being but in distinct ways.

SUSAN CHANG: I think mattering is an element of belonging. I think when you feel like you belong, a true, authentic belonging, a la Brené Brown and her vulnerability research, what she's uncovered, it's really connecting with a sense of your identity, your connection with others, matters. And the mattering part, this is where it comes in. People see you and can acknowledge your worth, and you don't have to try hard because they can see it in you.

I think mattering is indicator of belonging. Like, authentic belonging, not just like getting along to get along.

STEPHON HAMELL: When I think of belonging, I think of I think it's Terrell Strayhorn and others. There's belonging, and then mattering is a bit deeper into that space. So I think there is a deep connection.

I think mattering, to me, symbolizes not only do I see you and you feel that this space is welcoming and open to you, it [? says ?] access to you, but mattering also means that I know your position is important and your perspective is important. I want to include that here. And so some students will say they feel Georgetown-- they feel like belong at Georgetown, but they don't feel like they matter in every space at Georgetown.

JOE KING: We use the word "belonging" for the rest of the episode. We mean to include "mattering," too, both of which are about connection to peers, faculty, space, and place. In a meta analysis of 24 peer-reviewed journal articles on student-to-student connectedness, Jason McLeod and his team found that providing opportunities for students to connect with each other fosters an environment of belonging, cohesiveness, and mutual support among students.

Here's Yulia elaborating on the importance of trust and social connections in facilitating a sense of belonging.

YULIA CHENTSOVA DUTTON: We know from basic research that social connection has a certain kind of magic. Things that are harder for us to do on our own-- for example, regulate our emotions at the time of stress-- are easier if we are in the immediate presence close to someone that we know and trust and have a relationship with. Learning is sometimes stressful. Students worry about their grades. They worry about whether or not they are meant to be here and meant to be a student. The imposter syndrome.

They have their ideas that they came with challenged and are doing the hard work of rebuilding their understanding of a particular domain. All of those are stressful. And having a sense of I'm not in it alone, there are others around me, is going to be helpful because it's the best way to regulate emotions, is through social connection.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: The research supports what Yulia is saying in a number of ways. One study by Edwards and others in 2022 found that students social belonging in a general chemistry course predicted academic performance in that course. At the beginning of the course, the sense of belonging varied among students influenced by factors like gender. This feeling of belonging is made up of two parts-- a strong sense of fitting in, and a bit of uncertainty about fitting in.

The study found that students' sense of belonging can change based on how they're doing in the course. This change can then affect their performance, creating a kind of loop where one influences the other. They concluded that it's important to continually promote inclusivity and belonging throughout the course, especially after important assessments, like exams, to support students' sense of belonging, and, as a result, their academic success.

JOE KING: A related 2020 study by Susie Chen and her colleagues sought to understand why identifying as a science person is predictive of science success. Their hunch-- it's all about the science identity fostering a sense of belonging in the science classroom. They put their hypothesis to the test with two students in college introductory biology classes. The results supported their hypothesis. Having a strong science identity was linked to higher grades, especially for minority students.

The study also uncovered a pivotal role for the sense of belonging in college, as reported by the students themselves. This feeling of belonging was a mediator, explaining how science identity and academic performance are interconnected. In other words, when students feel a strong sense of belonging in their academic community, it works like a secret sauce, enhancing how their science person identity translates into academic success.

But there's even more to the story. When they introduced a social belonging manipulation, it disrupted the link between science identity and performance among minority students, suggesting that strategic interventions targeting social belonging could be a game-changer for boosting the academic success of minority students in the scientific realm, a topic we will revisit in our next episode.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Stephon's insights from advising STEM students align with this research and shed light on how these findings may pertain to students at Georgetown.

STEPHON HAMELL: I work with students in computer science and math and physics, and those majors tend to-- the slant tends to usually be males-- white and Asian males, to be specific. So students who don't identify in those particular social identities always find themselves as one of a very small number, right?

And when we talk about belonging and mattering, a lot of them will say, Georgetown is a great space, and they may be part of community scholars, and they may be part of GSP, where they have a community, people who really believe in them. But then, they won't say or they don't feel they have that in their home department, like their faculty advisor, or a relationship with the professor. And they need to ask for a letter to do an internship or apply to grad school, and they don't feel they can ask a letter from a faculty member they've taken a class with.

And that's where, I think, mattering becomes really important then because it's not that we know the student isn't in the major. It's often times cultivating a relationship hasn't provided its space because that student didn't feel like they mattered to the faculty they've interacted with. And it really impacts their sense of belonging in that academic space, and their academic identity or their scholar identity is really what's struggling.

And we can talk about how we can work to minimize some of those challenges when that happens, but also how we can help coach faculty to build up scholar identity for students to increase mattering so that they don't get to the end and feel that way.

JOE KING: Some scholars, like Gopalan and Brady, caution against relying solely on convenience samples, highlighting the importance of nationally representative surveys that are more generalizable than quantitative studies. They note that while most nationally represented surveys of college students do not include measures on belonging, one exception is the National Center for Education Statistics' longitudinal study of first-time beginning college students.

Gopalan and Brady analyzed this data set and found that while first-year US college students generally expressed a moderate sense of belonging, this feeling varied based on institutional and student characteristics. Racial and ethnic minority and first-generation students at four-year schools report lower belonging, whereas the opposite is true for those at two-year schools. At four-year schools, belonging predicts improved persistence, engagement, and mental health, even after accounting for various factors.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: These findings align with other research that has found that college students who experience a sense of belonging not only excel academically but also demonstrate positive outcomes in various realms, such as mental health, engagement,

motivation, retention, and persistence in their academic journey. When students feel like they belong, they are more inclined to have positive relationships that transcend class and race boundaries. A 2006 qualitative study by Hoopes and others found that the students who felt a sense of belonging and achieved academic success had several common themes, including finding a sense of purpose on campus, having supportive relationships with peers and faculty, engaging in extracurricular activities that aligned with their interests, and feeling a sense of cultural and social acceptance. They also found that one sense of belonging evolved over time and was not static.

JOE KING: Recognizing that a sense of belonging isn't static or universal is vital. Students of color, first-generation students, first-year students, women, LGBTQ students, and those with disabilities often encounter additional challenges to belonging, depending on the context. Christine Lancaster's 2020 study found that intersectionality can compound a lack of belonging in that students who identified as members of multiple groups that were marginalized experienced lower levels of belonging than those who were members of a single marginalized group.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Others have reported that one's experience of belonging is impacted by many variables within the institution. In her 2021 book on college belonging, Lisa Nunn argues that institutional context shapes the most salient forms of belonging. Drawing on sociological theories, she critiques conventional approaches to fostering belonging and emphasizes that belonging is a reciprocal act within a community, not something that can be demanded. It requires members to extend a sense of welcome and importance to one another, making individuals feel valued and integral to the group, and that they would be missed if they were gone.

JOE KING: The research compels us to understand how students' sense of belonging, that feeling students get when they feel like they are safe and valued for who they are, varies across many dimensions. Here's Yulia again, sharing insights from her own research on the subject.

YULIA CHENTSOVA DUTTON: I'm interested in a cultural shaping of ideas about emotion, ideas about distress. And college students are a particular culture. So in recent years, I have done a number of projects where I'm attempting to understand how students think about their stress levels, their anxiety, their feelings of depression.

As other studies do, I am also finding that the sense of belonging is lower for students who come from underrepresented backgrounds, however conceived. I am looking at students who are racial or ethnic minorities, students who come from lower income backgrounds into Georgetown community, and those students report their belonging as lower. And I also know from studies that we've done using a technique called momentary sampling where we repeatedly beep students and ask them a variety of questions about their emotional functioning is that the sense of belonging isn't stable, that students feel like they belong more in some contexts and less in others.

And so one big finding for us there is that, unfortunately, the very environments where we deliver knowledge, interactions with faculty members, and classroom environments is where students report a dip in their belonging. And that dip is, once again, particularly pronounced for students from underrepresented backgrounds, minoritized backgrounds.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Yulia's research also helps us understand why these dips might be happening.

YULIA CHENTSOVA DUTTON: And in my recent study, I find that one predictor of belonging is a sense that the students have that their emotions match the emotions of others, that they imagine others to have. That sense like, I fit emotionally. And it probably isn't limited to emotions. I was interested in them and was measuring them, but I think it probably is a reflection of a more generalized sense of things that distinguish me as a person.

It might be my motives. It might be my values. It might be my emotions are similar to what I perceive others to be like.

Now, those perceptions of how others are are actually not accurate, particularly. Because we don't have very good sense of where others are, we construct some sort of sense that is inflated. And in Georgetown community, I know it's inflated because how students describe other students isn't matching to the average. But that perception of how other students are matters because if you feel that you are distinct from the perception, that seems to be driving a sense of belonging.

JOE KING: Recognizing the crucial role that fostering belonging plays for both students and institutions, we delved into the flip side of the literature-- how not belonging impacts students. In a thought-provoking 2020 article, Mary Healy navigates what she terms "The Other Side of Belonging," exploring the repercussions of failure to belong, which can encompass not belonging and unbelonging, or the removal of membership. Healy argues that these experiences can inflict substantial harm on students.

We asked our faculty what they think causes students to feel invisible, isolated, unsupported, unvalued, and like they don't belong or matter.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Here's Susan talking about microaggressions, followed by Yulia, who talks about technology and loneliness.

SUSAN CHANG: One of the things that can threaten belonging is microaggressions. And we have had, for the last four years, this pretty incredible campaign called Microaggressions in Medicine, like the everyday slights, insults, statements that make you feel othered and like you don't belong, actually. And it could be anything from a joke or tease to something that's a statement or well-intentioned advice that has an impact of making you feel othered.

We've been exploring how these microaggressions can make you feel like you don't belong in the environment. And recently, we refreshed our walls this year to include something in medicine called specialty disrespect, which was new to me because I'm not an MD. But it was these jokes and teasing statements where different specialties tease another specialty for, oh, you're not really a doctor if you're this specialty. Fill in the blank. Or you didn't really do really well on your exams, and now you're this kind of doctor. Fill in the blank.

And I think for us, that idea of space and these visual campaigns, these posters, that really address this is not a joke. Own your impact. We're really focusing on belonging and a sense of community. And really think about the impact you're having when you think you're just giving good advice, or just a joke, or a hazing joke.

We've been conscientiously building up these campaigns over the years to raise student awareness and faculty and staff awareness about these issues of othering and what it means to not belong.

YULIA CHENTSOVA DUTTON: Without a doubt, we have so many factors contributing to isolation. Technology is one factor because it encourages to spend so much time interacting with our devices and not with in-person humans. And then, the second factor that is also important to this crisis is that there have been massive changes in the amount of supervision of children that are normative in American culture so that our children spend very little time in unsupervised time connecting with their peers, and spend much more time in structured activities where an adult is present and an adult is regulating the interaction.

We have a cohort of students coming to us who have spent very few years in between the moment where their parent lets go of their hand when they're crossing an intersection to the moment where they're flying across the country, for many of them, to be on their own as college students, with relatively little experience in how you handle social tensions without someone else mediating for you. And the phone is there for you to turn to, potentially. And I think, jointly, those two factors are helping contribute to distress and helping contribute to loneliness in that generation.

JOE KING: So how do we find out where our own students fit into this picture? One way to assess students' sense of belonging is to ask them. This can be done in a variety of ways, from administering large-scale climate surveys, to getting an understanding of the broader institutional landscape, to gathering information within departments, to one-on-one conversations and mentoring relationships. Check out the articles in our show notes by Ella Kahu and others to learn more. Now, let's hear from Susan, followed by Stephon and Yulia.

SUSAN CHANG: I think assessment is going to be really key. So in terms of assessing, I think having an opportunity to hear directly from students and how they're operationalizing defining these terms in their everyday experience of higher ed is really important. So to just gauge. I

would also say that we conducted a belonging study at our own school, a social belonging intervention of how do students receive messages of belonging, and we measured it like a survey tool that we developed to be like, do you feel more like you belong or not? How supportive do you feel this environment is? So you can certainly assess with those type of survey questions.

One thing I wanted to plug at the Medical School is we have this event every year-- a social, cultural event-- called I, Too, Am Georgetown Medicine. And it's this day of reflection where students come and talk about issues of identity, belonging, empathy, and plugging current events. And we always have an assessment at the end, which is how connected do you feel to your peers? Do you have a sense of community? Do you feel a sense that you could be yourself here and feel like you can contribute in a way that feels authentic to you?

So we measure those kinds of sentiments, as well, in this belonging survey at the end of each of these I, Too, Am Georgetown Medicine events.

YULIA CHENTSOVA DUTTON: Assessing belonging is relatively easy. There are ways to assess it with very few questions to get a general sense of how connected do you feel in the classroom. So if someone wanted to just do regular check-ins on how students are doing, they can very easily bring them in as part of their mid-semester. Or just we're starting the class, let's do a quick item that you'll respond to, to get a sense of where their class is.

And then, we know that the sense of belonging is built through many paths. And then, I think we need to keep on having testimonies, both from students and from faculty, on how it works in their classrooms, how they're setting it up in very concrete ways. I know that I have a number of elements of my teaching that I have adopted after I was in the classroom with other faculty and they were saying, I do this thing. And I learned a lot of techniques for how to make my classroom better from other teachers.

STEPHON HAMELL: Every summer, I send out a survey and allow them to tell me what updates have changed, who they feel our community is. Do they feel like they have people at Georgetown that they could ask for a letter or go see if they're having a challenge? And part of that is to get a sense of where students are individually. And it can certainly vary, but it gives me a good impression of what my students are feeling right now, and do they feel connected.

And then, I can follow up when I meet with students. I enjoy the fact for me I have 350 total student advisees. For me, it's getting to see every one of them one time, getting 30 to 40 minutes to talk to them, and to ask those nuanced questions of have you been to office hours? Have you been to coffee with a faculty member? And those small, qualitative conversations helped me get a sense of do they feel like they're engaging in a productive way and feel like they belong.

For me, there's this other space. I allow my students to anonymously drop different things into

what I would call my-- almost like your customer service comment card. You can praise. You can give a comment. You can tell me a concern. And what that allows me to do is just see where the challenges might be.

So I'll get things in that box. Oh, it's been really hard in the introductory physics class. I don't feel like we've been doing a lot. I don't feel like people support each other.

That allows me to have a conversation with the department of, have you seen this in all classes? Or is it just this class? Is it this one particular student's experience? We don't know, but we can figure out how we can better support the group.

So that's been really helpful for me, on my end. I think I probably go a little extra, in that regard. So I really want students to feel like they have safe spaces, not only on campus but within their departments.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: As you just heard, the faculty we spoke with all used assessment tools to help them gauge the sense of belonging among their students. This in turn enabled them to develop targeted interventions aimed at fostering belonging and enhancing students' academic success. We will explore this topic further in our next episode. We'll hear more from Yulia, Stephon, and Susan, who will share concrete ways that unbelonging can be disrupted through small and mighty acts of intervention, both in and out of the classroom.

In that episode, we'll also draw from the research on interventions and examine their effectiveness in promoting a sense of belonging and improving academic success.

JOE KING: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of What We're Learning About Learning. To gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of belonging, check out our show notes, where you can explore numerous articles by authors like Mary Murphy and Sabrina Zirkel, Elaine [? Johnson-Lee, ?] Francine Juarez, and Ella Kahu, [? Nicole ?] Ashley and Katherine [? Picton, ?] among others. This episode was made possible by many people at CNDLS, including Molly Chehak, Eddie Maloney, David Ebenbach, Sophie Grabiec, Eleri Syverson, Nikisha Kotwal, and Aysu Jabrayilova.

And a big thanks to the faculty who contributed to this episode, Susan Chang, Stephon Hamell, and Yulia Chentsova Dutton. Thanks also to Milo Stout for creating music that matters and belongs in this episode. Again, I'm Joe King.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: And I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski. Thanks for listening.

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