Structures for Belonging: A Synthesis of Research on Belonging–Supportive Learning Environments
BY KALEEN HEALEY AND CHLOE STROMAN

KEY TAKEAWAYS | FEBRUARY 2021

- **Belonging is a vital ingredient for learning.** In every learning environment, students pick up on cues and signals about their belonging. When these messages support students' belonging, they can learn freely. When these messages render the environment physically or emotionally unsafe, or cause students to question their belonging, their cognitive resources are diverted away from learning and towards the environmental threats.

- In addition to having access to better resourced learning environments, **advantaged students experience policies, practices, and norms throughout our education system that systematically support their belonging.** These students are repeatedly sent messages confirming their value and capacity as thinkers—for example, through educators who share their community and cultural backgrounds; curriculum that reflects the contributions, language, practices, and experiences of people like them; and class activities and assessments that prioritize the stereotypically masculine and Western values of individual achievement and competition.

- **There are no culturally neutral learning environments.** Learning environments often replicate and perpetuate the *dominant culture* of the U.S., which privileges students from certain groups, including white students, students from middle- and upper-class families, boys and men, cisgender and straight students, native English speakers, students without disabilities, and Christian students. Such learning environment support these students' belonging while undermining belonging for students who do not share this cultural background.

- **Students from marginalized groups are often expected to learn in exclusionary environments that are both materially inferior to those afforded their more advantaged peers and steeped in racist, sexist, and classist narratives and beliefs about intelligence and merit.** It may be impossible for students to belong in a learning environment where they are not valued or authentically included.

- **An environment that is welcoming and affirming to one student does not necessarily support belonging for every student.** Individual students experience the same environment differently—and come to different, well-informed conclusions about whether they belong in that environment—both because we each have unique prior experiences and because groups are situated differently in society due to historical power dynamics.

- It follows that **students' perspectives must be centered in the creation of belonging-supportive learning environments**, so that we can understand how they are experiencing a space and make changes to support their belonging.

- Creating learning environments that support belonging for every student, requires **social, historical, and political awareness** and a commitment to countering the negative messages that students from marginalized groups often repeatedly receive about their belonging from pervasive practices, policies, and norms in education and society

- Transforming our current education system to support belonging, and therefore learning and well-being, for every student requires both **challenging exclusion and promoting inclusion.** For example, creating equitable access to advanced coursework and also re-shaping the culture of those classes; attending to inequitable patterns of class participation and also building educators' critical consciousness; elevating counter-stereotypical role models and also utilizing culturally responsive teaching practices and instructional materials; eliminating racist mascots and sexist or homophobic policies and also engaging students in system-level decision-making.

- **Stakeholders and decision makers at every level of our education system – not just educators and peers – have opportunities to shape student belonging through the environments they create.**

Read the full synthesis here.