A Sense of Belonging

Belonging – or finding the place and people where you fit – is a potent force in many students’ lives. It’s what can help them feel comfortable on campus, as they learn to belong to a community larger than themselves.

There are multiple places where students can start to build on their sense of belonging once they get to school. These may include…

- An intramurals team
- Their residence hall floor
- With fellow commuters in the commuter lounge
- Study groups
- Various student clubs and organizations
- Community service outings
- Music and performing arts groups
- The interfaith center or campus ministry
- On- or off-campus jobs

- Connecting with a faculty or staff member
- Their orientation group
- At campus programs and events

Promoting a sense of belonging often starts by talking with students so they can see the possibilities – and picture themselves in the midst of them! So, consider bringing up the concept now as you discuss campus involvement and engagement with your student. As a result, he’ll be ready to explore options and find his place of belonging.

Negative Belonging

Students seeking a sense of belonging sometimes turn to negative groups – those who go out drinking a lot, groups involved in hazing, students who bully others, etc. Consider making this part of your discussion so your student can be more aware and ready to embrace positive belonging opportunities!
Making the Most of Move-in Day

During residence hall move-in, emotions and stress can run high. However, by planning ahead and preparing yourselves for the day, it can be an enjoyable, smooth process!

Here are a few things to consider…

- **Expect a Range of Emotions.** While heightened emotions aren’t ever an excuse for rudeness or disrespectful interactions, they can be at the root of a verbal or non-verbal exchange. For first-time students, they are probably feeling excitement, anxiety and even a little bit of fear. Returning students may be feeling a “too cool” attitude or a “let’s just get this over with” kind of mentality. And family members may be dealing with a whole host of adjustment issues of their own.

- **Follow Provided Directions.** Our process is well thought-out based on years of experience, designed to make move-in go as smoothly as possible. So, be sure to show up at your assigned time and designated location. Follow all campus directional signs and listen to the staff members on hand. The results will be worth it!

- **Allow More Time Than You Think You’ll Need.** You’ll want to have enough time to help your student unpack and arrange some things. Leave the final decorating and organization to your student and her roommate, though! Figuring this out from the get-go is part of what college is all about. You may want to take time to get to know your student’s roommate and her family, too. Planning to grab a bite to eat after both students are settled could serve as a good transition for everyone.

- **Be Patient.** Lots of people will be trying to do the same thing all at once. A friendly hello, door held or patient pause will go a long way!

- **Plan for the Weather.** Be sure you know what to expect. If it’s supposed to be hot, bring lots of water so you stay hydrated. If it’s supposed to rain, bring along the plastic ponchos, load everything up in plastic garbage bags, and grin and bear it.

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Exploring Values and Decision-Making

When students head to college, their values will be tested. Decisions about a variety of things, from alcohol to intimacy to how to spend their time, will come up daily. That’s why talking about values now – and throughout the term – can help them feel more comfortable with their decision-making.

To get the conversation going, you can ask them to consider their views on the following topics:

- Studying
- Academic integrity
- How to treat others
- Ways to spend time
- Family connections
- Financial matters
- Spirituality
- Attending religious services
- Health and wellness
- Intimacy
- Friendships
- Alcohol and other drugs

You may have other items to add to the list, too. Students won’t always share their values about everything with you, yet if you can help them start thinking about what they might face at college through a values filter, they’ll be better prepared to make healthy, smart decisions.
Handling the First Month Effectively

The first month of school often sets the tone for the year ahead. Knowing some short cuts and tricks can help your student succeed in getting acclimated to campus.

For instance…

If your student is struggling with class material, encourage him to talk with his professor during office hours, make a meeting with a teaching assistant, attend a study skills workshop and visit the learning center for tutoring assistance.

If your student is feeling lonely or homesick, encourage her to talk with a residence hall staff member, someone in campus ministry, a peer educator or a caring counselor in the counseling center.

If your student is unsure how to get involved, encourage him to check out organizational meetings, talk with returning students, seek the counsel of trusted professionals on campus, participate in a service project and just try something new.

If your student is hoping to make new friends, encourage him to reach out through simple efforts like inviting others to dinner, joining an intramurals team, saying hello to people in class and on campus, and being his genuine self instead of who he thinks he “should” be.

If your student is wanting to become the best version of herself, encourage her to pursue interests, stretch beyond her comfort zone, reach out to others, learn new things, listen well, meet campus faculty and staff, seek out a mentor, engage in giving and receive feedback willingly.

These efforts and more can help your student dig right into campus life in positive, productive ways!

Other Tips

- Take a tour of the library to get familiar with resources
- Walk around campus to get the lay of the land
- Attend an organization fair to see what’s available
- Go out for coffee with an orientation leader, RA or other peer leader to pick his/her brain
- Find a campus job to engage with others and make some money, too!

Using Inclusive Language

A sure way for students to alienate people is to use language that might exclude them in some way. So, here are a few things for them to keep in mind as they embrace the diversity of people they’ll be interacting with on campus…

- Don’t assume that everyone comes from two parent households. And not everyone has both a mother and a father.
- Don’t comment on people’s bodies directly or indirectly. Someone may be struggling with body image issues.
- Ask about preferred pronouns rather than assuming.
- Don’t assume that an averted gaze is a sign of disinterest or disrespect. Direct eye contact is considered disrespectful by some cultures.
- Don’t rely on “people-harming humor” to get an easy laugh.
- Make sure that when you talk about siblings you also include only children.
- Don’t assume that all romantic relationships are heterosexual. Figure out comfortable language that includes all relationships.
- Don’t just use student culture references that apply to those 18-20 years old, as that can exclude adult student learners.
- Use examples from a variety of religions and don’t assume that everyone believes in a higher being.
- Use names from different cultural backgrounds when providing examples.
- Ask how to pronounce people’s names if you’re unsure.

Using inclusive language isn’t about “political correctness” or pursuing some specific agenda. Instead, it’s simply about including others – often who have different life experiences than your student – and getting to know them in the process.
Addressing Student Fears

Some students may get overwhelmed at the prospect of meeting new people, getting involved and finding their place on campus in the year ahead. Certain fears may kick in, and whether you think they are “rational” or not, they are part of your student’s reality.

What are They Concerned About?

Some of the fears students may express include…

■ Will people accept me?
■ What if I can’t find anyone to connect with?
■ I’m afraid I’ll look stupid.
■ What if no one agrees with what I say?
■ This is my chance to make a good first impression – I don’t want people thinking I’m weird.
■ What if my voice shakes when I talk or I don’t make any sense?
■ What if I’m so different from the others that we have nothing in common?
■ Will I self-disclose too much, making others uncomfortable?
■ Will I seem smart enough to be in college if I open my mouth?

How Can You Help?

Some students let their fears get the better of them by imagining all sorts of “what if” scenarios. You can help by…

■ Listening without judgment
■ Not just offering “You can do it!” encouragement, but going the next step to help them figure out how they can do it
■ Reminding them that college is full of all sorts of people to connect with, not necessarily the cliques they may have experienced other places

■ Encouraging them to talk with a support person on campus about their fears, whether it’s a residence hall director, an advisor, a coach or a counselor – there are lots of folks ready and willing to listen and problem-solve with your student!
■ Letting your student know that you support her, no matter what, and reminding her of times when she has attacked her fears successfully. That’ll help build her confidence mightily.

It’s natural to have some fear of the unknown – and college life holds its share. Yet, with your support and that of other good folks on campus, we can all set your student up for success!

Seasonal Student Issues

It’s likely hitting your student now… he or she is heading to college in a few weeks. With that revelation will likely come some excitement – and some anxiety – regarding topics such as…

■ Will people like me?
■ Will I find friends as good as the ones I have now?
■ How can I reinvent myself?
■ Will I be able to handle college academics?
■ How will I find my way around campus?
■ Who will I turn to if I’m struggling?
■ Will I still be as connected to my family/friends?
■ What if I don’t get along with my roommate?
■ Will people make fun of how I talk/dress/act?
■ How will I get involved?
■ Will I find a place to belong here?