Challenging simplistic and deficit perceptions of belonging amongst historically underrepresented students: four self-reflective questions for policy makers and practitioners

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Abstract

As the topic of student belonging amongst minoritised student demographics becomes increasingly researched and theorised within higher education, there is a risk that practitioners and policy makers adopt approaches summarised from top-level findings, thus missing important nuance. This article poses four self-reflective questions to ensure that efforts to address belonging gaps for minoritised students are appropriate and successful. These questions prompt readers to: recognise the value of asset – over deficit – approaches; reflect on how definitions of minoritised students do not account for the difference between historical and current underrepresentation; question whether demographic binaries are useful and relevant; and consider how not all students want to belong and whether it is appropriate to challenge this position. Overall, this article provides a protocol so that practitioners and policy makers can have more confidence in embedding findings from belonging research into their local contexts.

Introduction

The topic of student belonging has become an increasing focus of research and practice within higher education. Building upon the broader concept of belonging as a universal human need (Maslow, 1943), student belonging has been conceptualised as a “sense of connectedness” (Strayhorn, 2018), where students feel accepted, valued and included (Goodenow, 1993) as one’s true, authentic self (Picton et al., 2017).

A well-developed body of research around this topic has looked specifically at belonging amongst minoritised or historically underrepresented groups of students; with many of these studies documenting how minority students have lower levels of belonging than their majority counterparts (Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008; Kane et al., 2014; Barnes et al., 2021; Shaheed and Kiang, 2021; Gopalan et al., 2022). Perhaps this is unsurprising, given that interacting with peers like oneself (Kahu et al., 2022) and connecting with the wider institutional culture (Thomas, 2002) have been shown to support positive building of belonging and, in both cases, this may be more difficult for minoritised or historically underrepresented students.

Existing research has also highlighted how minoritised students are disproportionately likely to experience microaggressions (Lewis et al., 2021), stereotyping (Froehlich et al., 2022) and sexual harassment (Fernández et al., 2023). These negative experiences can lead to students adopting social concealment strategies as an attempt to hide their ‘othered’ identity, which in itself can result in a lower sense of belonging (Harrel-Hallmark et al., 2022; Veldman et al., 2022).

As the studies referenced above show, this pattern of lower sense of belonging amongst historically underrepresented students is well-documented. However, it is far from an absolute rule. As the quantity of academic research on this topic increases, there is a risk that policy makers and practitioners reach for generalised findings and miss the nuances explored within each study. This article summarises the complexities within existing student belonging research on minoritised students and consolidates them into four key questions for policy makers and practitioners to reflect on. These questions shed light on the complexities that underlie the experiences of belonging, emphasising that a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing belonging disparities is insufficient.

Four self-reflective questions to support nuanced approaches

1. *Where are the opportunities to take asset, rather than deficit, approaches?*

Deficit-based approaches focus on the weaknesses within individuals or groups and how interventions may be able to correct for these weaknesses. This is contrasted with asset or strengths-based approaches, which focus more on helping individuals to recognise and best utilise their strengths. One risk of deficit approaches is that, by focusing on the individual's weaknesses, they enable perpetuation of stereotypes, alienation of students and disregard for wider systemic issues (Smit, 2012; Zhao, 2016). Such approaches frame these students solely in terms of how it may be more challenging for them to build a strong sense of belonging because of obstacles that they may have faced. As provocatively written by author Isabel Wilkerson in her book *Caste*, "individuality is the first distinction lost to the stigmatised" (Wilkerson, 2020).

There is a close connection between students' self-efficacy and their sense of belonging (Freeman et al., 2010; Zumbrunn et al., 2014; Kahu et al., 2022). Greater acknowledgement of the strengths and advantages possessed by students from marginalised backgrounds may support positive building of belonging, if they can be supported to recognise and utilise these strengths. For instance, autistic students may perceive themselves as having advantages over their peers in certain aspects, such as when working on detail-oriented projects (Pesonen et al., 2020). LGBTQ+ students may find university to be a space where they can finally be their authentic selves (Fernández et al., 2023). Similarly, refugee students have noted experiencing university as a place of relative diversity and feeling welcomed compared to their refugee experience up to that point in time (Dereli, 2022).

2. *How are you recognising the difference between historically and currently underrepresented student demographics?*

From a theoretical perspective, students from backgrounds that are either historically or currently underrepresented in higher education are both likely to face challenges in building belonging, but perhaps different challenges; thus, requiring different solutions. For example, most studies that have measured students' sense of belonging and gender find that women – a group historically underrepresented in higher education –

do not have significantly lower levels of belonging; however, this is not the case in subject areas such as STEM where women are still currently underrepresented (Rainey et al., 2018; Cwik and Singh, 2022). The same study by Rainey et al. (2018) also found that Black women students, who were often in the minority based on both their gender and ethnicity, had the lowest levels of belonging; highlighting the importance of considering intersectional identities.

Students from demographic groups that are currently underrepresented are inherently less likely to be able to find other students like themselves, which means that they may struggle to build meaningful peer connections (Kahu et al., 2022) and face stereotyping by other students and staff (Froehlich et al., 2022). Meanwhile, students from demographic groups that were historically underrepresented may experience institutional cultures that were developed and cemented without their needs in mind (Thomas, 2022), resulting in a campus climate that could be, or at least be perceived to be, less welcoming (Maramba, 2013). In both cases, students may need to exert extra effort to develop their sense of belonging, but for different reasons and therefore needing different support.

3. *Are demographic binaries helping you target who needs most support?*

Whilst targeting support or belonging interventions based on students' demographic categories can be helpful, there is often as much variation in student belonging within demographic groups as there is across them. There is context that sits behind demographic categorisations, which may better explain our belonging inequities and allow more sophisticated targeting of support. For instance, first-generation students are generally defined as students who had neither of their parents attend universities and research argues that they have lower levels of belonging than their non-first-generation counterparts (O'Shea, 2020). However, recent research has suggested that belonging is only significantly different for students who had *both* of their parents attend university (Pedler et al., 2022) and another study found that first-generation students had a *higher* sense of belonging than their counterparts when measured in their final-year of undergraduate study (Hunt et al., 2018).

Furthermore, interventions based on demographic binaries may end up alienating students that do not feel that they fit within such constraints – such as mixed-ethnicity students struggling to navigate whether they are welcome in spaces designed for Black students (Renn, 2000). We must be mindful that academic or regulatory definitions of demographic groups may differ from how students choose to define themselves.

4. *Do your students want what you're selling?*

Whilst belonging overall is widely recognised as a fundamental human need (Maslow, 1943), there are many different environments, relationships and communities to which our students will be able to belong. Some students, especially when seeing belonging positioned as tangential to successful degree outcomes, will be content with merely

‘getting on’ (Brodie and Osowska, 2021). When belonging is narrowly defined as socially fitting in, some students may reject this, instead taking a sense of pride in being self-sufficient (Pesonen et al., 2020).

Students may not want to belong within our universities if they have to make unreasonable sacrifices to do so, such as for commuter students (Carruthers Thomas, 2018) or religious students (Islam et al., 2018) who have to balance competing time commitments and the potential for conflicts in their identities and values. For such students, interventions to build belonging may be perceived as trying to get students to change who they are to fit within a university system that is not designed for them. A well-established body of literature has critiqued this, suggesting that instead of prioritising the development of ‘college-ready students’, focus should be given to building ‘student-ready colleges’ (Burke et al., 2005; McNair et al., 2022). Whilst authentic belonging must be encouraged, students may not be fully aware of their own belonging needs (Strayhorn, 2018) and thus benefit from exposure to new experiences and opportunities to build belonging that sit at the boundaries of their comfort zone. Developing such opportunities in partnership with students can allow safe exploration of these comfort zone boundaries (Cook-Sather and Felten, 2017).

Concluding thoughts

Belonging is a multifaceted construct that defies one-dimensional categorisations. Each student brings an individual set of social networks, needs, and preferences that shape their sense of belonging. Authentic belonging extends beyond merely fitting in; in fact, fitting in may be antithetical to belonging if it means concealing our true selves (Brown, 2010). The purpose of this article is not to dissuade practitioners and policy makers from supporting minoritised students’ sense of belonging. Across various demographics and categorisations, there is a significant body of evidence to suggest that students’ backgrounds can have a material difference on how they develop a sense of belonging at university (Johnson et al., 2007; T. Strayhorn, 2018; Gopalan et al., 2022). This does need to be addressed.

Instead, the goal of this paper is to give practitioners a protocol that they can follow to have more confidence that their approach is nuanced and appropriate for the needs of their students. These self-reflective questions are essential to challenging simplistic and deficit approaches to supporting historically underrepresented students, but it is hard to claim that they will be sufficient. Future authors may recognise additional reflections that can be added to the practitioner’s toolkit in this area.

As educators and institutions seek to support student belonging, they must balance encouraging student autonomy with addressing systemic issues. Striking this balance is essential, as it ensures that students receive the support they need without imposing unnecessary limitations. It ensures that students are not dehumanised, whilst also not being gaslighted into believing that they individually can undo systemic barriers. Only through reaching this equilibrium can universities ensure that students are not burdened with the responsibility of fitting in where they do not fit, nor that they are deprived of the institutional support necessary for their success.

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