

Belonging by Design: A Framework to Create Courses Where Belonging Thrives

Jennifer Smist, Ph.D.

Teaching Assistant Professor
Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
905 S. Goodwin Avenue, 174 Bevier Hall, MC-180, Urbana, IL 61801
217-244-9701
jsmist@illinois.edu

Chelsea Redger-Marquardt, Ed.D.

Assistant Dean, The Dorothy and Bill Cohen Honors College
Assistant Professor, Department of Sport & Leadership Studies
Wichita State University
1845 Fairmount Campus Box 102, Wichita, KS 67260
316-978-5709
chelsea.redger@wichita.edu

Anna Whitehall

Scholarly Professor, Department of Human Development
Leadership Minor Coordinator
Washington State University
Johnson Tower 618, PO Box 644852, Pullman, WA 99164
509-335-8678
awhitehall@wsu.edu

Belonging by Design: A Framework to Create Courses Where Belonging Thrives

Introduction & Need for Strategy

Through their words, course designs, and program structures, educators shape who feels they belong in leadership and who does not. Yet many instructors lack a concrete, transferable framework for translating the value of belonging into deliberate design choices in their classrooms and co-curricular programs. This presentation introduces Susie Wise's (2022) Levers of Design, from *Design for Belonging*, as a practical strategy that educators can use to intentionally design environments where belonging thrives. The strategy responds to a clear need: educators are often well-versed in *why* belonging matters but have fewer tools for diagnosing *how* their existing design choices invite students in or inadvertently leave them out.

Connection to Literature

Sense of belonging is the perceived feeling of being an indispensable, valued member of an academic community (Strayhorn, 2019; 2023). Within higher education, belonging is a multidimensional construct shaped by students' interactions with peers, faculty, and the broader campus community (Allen et al., 2024). Faculty who engage students through collaborative learning, meaningful interaction, and cognitively challenging practice significantly enhance students' motivation, engagement, academic success, well-being, and belonging (Allen et al., 2024; Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005; Walton & Wilson, 2018), and students who feel academic belonging are more open to feedback and more willing to participate (Strayhorn, 2023).

High-impact teaching practices, such as caring instructor behaviors, clear communication, and personalized instruction, strengthen classroom belonging (Kirby & Thomas, 2022; Freeman et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2019). Even minimal cues of social connection can enhance motivation and shared goals (Walton et al., 2012). Signature pedagogies in leadership education emphasize discussion, reflection, collaboration, and applied learning (Jenkins, 2012), all of which naturally cultivate the interpersonal connection and identity affirmation associated with belonging. While this literature establishes why belonging matters, Wise's (2022) nine "levers of design" address the comparatively underexplored question of how educators can purposefully design for it.

How it Works & Implementation of Strategy

Belonging requires intentional choices about how we structure our classrooms, frame our curriculum, and shape our interactions. By designing for belonging, educators can build rhythms and signal who is welcomed (our students), what is expected (their learning and success), and who matters (the humans in our intellectual community, the students, partners, and educators that constitute our classes). Wise (2022) offers a powerful and practical framework to help educators design courses that foster belonging through nine levers of design, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Levers of Design

Lever of Design	Definition (Wise, 2022)
Space	Physical/virtual cues of who is “in” or “out” of a community.
Roles	Assigned or assumed roles that shift group dynamics toward belonging.
Events	Intentionally crafted experiences, large or small, that invite people in.
Rituals	Recurring practices that create personal, interpersonal, or communal meaning.
Grouping	Intentional clustering of people to foster connection and bonding.
Communications	Explicit/implicit messaging about who belongs and is supported.
Clothing	A visible indicator of identity and community membership.
Food	A catalyst for connection that signals a person is worth nourishing.
Schedules and Rhythms	Intentional use of time that keeps people, not the calendar, at the center.

Results to Date/Implications/Impact

Drawing on the literature linking intentional, high-impact teaching practices to student motivation, engagement, and belonging (Allen et al., 2024; Strayhorn, 2019; 2023; Walton et al., 2012), we incorporated these nine levers into our respective teaching practices in many ways. Examples of the space lever in a classroom included pre-setting class materials, moving furniture to accommodate the day’s activity, and writing welcome messages before each class. The communications lever was employed through name tents, allowing students to tell their unique story on an assignment, and recording our feedback on an assignment in a video or audio format. Lastly, the schedule and rhythms lever was demonstrated through conversation starters and a consistent structure each week. These are only a few examples we have used to facilitate belonging. Students respond positively to these design interventions, sharing that they feel more comfortable participating in class and more connected to their instructor and peers in the class.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

As educators adopt this shared vocabulary, we anticipate broader implications for the field, including a more consistent, intentional approach to building belonging across leadership courses and programs, and a stronger bridge between the research on why belonging matters and the instructional choices that determine whether students experience it. For educators interested in adapting the levers of design into their own teaching, we recommend starting with a few levers, involving students in identifying belonging gaps, and revising the course design as needed.

References

- Allen, K., Slaten, C., Hong, S., Lan, M., Craig, H. May, F., & Counted, V. (2024). Belonging in higher education: A twenty-year systematic review. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 21(5). <https://doi.org/10.53761/s2he6n66>
- Cook-Sather, A., & Felten, P. (2017). Where student engagement meets faculty development: How student-faculty pedagogical partnership fosters a sense of belonging. *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, 1(2), 3-11. Retrieved from <https://sehej.raise-network.com/raise/article/view/cook>
- Freeman, T. M., Anderman, L. H., & Jensen, J. M. (2007). Sense of belonging in college freshmen at the classroom and campus levels. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 75(3), 203-220. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JEXE.75.3.203-220>
- Jenkins, D. M. (2012). Exploring signature pedagogies in undergraduate leadership education. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 11(1), 1-27. <https://doi.org/10.12806/V11/I1/RF1>
- Kirby, L. A. J., & Thomas, C. L. (2022). High-impact teaching practices foster a greater sense of belonging in the college classroom. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(3), 368–381. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1950659>
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2023). Unraveling the relationship among engagement, involvement, and sense of belonging. In *The impact of a sense of belonging in college* (pp. 21-34). Routledge.
- Umbach, P. D., & Wawrzynski, M. R. (2005). Faculty do matter: The role of college faculty in student learning and engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 46(2), 153–184. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-004-1598-1>
- Walton, G. M., Cohen, G. L., Cwir, D., & Spencer, S. J. (2012). Mere belonging: the power of social connections. Download Mere belonging: the power of social connections. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(3), 513. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025731>
- Walton, G. M., & Wilson, T. D. (2018). Wise interventions: Psychological remedies for social and personal problems Download Wise interventions: Psychological remedies for social and personal problems. *Psychological Review*, 125(5), 617. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rev0000115>
- Wise, S. (2022). *Design for belonging: How to build inclusion and collaboration in your communities*. Ten Speed Press.