

## **Sense of Belonging**

### **What is it?**

A desire to belong and be a part of something greater than ourselves is an inherent human emotional need. If people experience belonging uncertainty, their ability to self-regulate suffers. In academic and professional settings, members of socially stigmatized groups are likely to be more uncertain of the quality of their social bonds, which can affect not only their subjective well-being, but also intellectual achievement. For example, Walton and Cohen (2007) found that when students were exposed to subtle information indicating that they might have few friends in a field of study, Black (but not White) students questioned their belonging and potential in the field, and even discouraged a same-race peer from pursuing it. This detrimental effect of lack of belonging can feed into the pervasive achievement gaps observed in many fields of study, particularly, STEM disciplines.

### **Who is affected?**

1. Underrepresented minorities
2. First-gen college students
3. Students transitioning to college from high school
4. Women in STEM fields

Although the groups mentioned above are more likely to be affected, most students will experience a lack of belonging at some point in their academic career.

### **How is it measured?**

The 17-item “Sense of Social and Academic Fit” measure developed by Greg Walton and colleagues asks students to respond on a 1-7 Likert scale to questions such as:

- People at [school name] accept me.
- I get along well with people at [school name].
- I belong at [school name].

Higher scores on this scale reflect a greater sense of belonging.

### **How can we improve students’ sense of belonging?**

Brief interventions can go a long way in improving students’ sense of belonging. For example:

1. WISE feedback (elaborate)
2. Normalizing of adversity
3. Values affirmation

### **References**

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- Yeager, D., Romero, C., Paunesku, et.al (2016). Using design thinking to make psychological interventions ready for scaling: The case of the growth mindset during the transition to high school. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 108, 374-391.