

The Social-Belonging Intervention: Getting the Message Right

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March 2014

These notes are designed mostly for people interested in incorporating lessons of the social-belonging intervention (Walton & Cohen, 2011) in programming and messaging for students, such for new college students. I thank Shannon Brady, Geoff Cohen, Omid Fotuhi, and David Yeager for feedback and suggestions.

Overview

The goal of the social-belonging intervention is to send two broad messages:

1. that if you feel like you don't belong in a new school, you (and other people like you) are not alone; and
2. that if you feel this way, your experience will improve over time.

This message is designed to help students understand adversities they experience early in school—like difficulty making friends, feeling intimidated by instructors, etc.—as normal and temporary, not as proof they don't belong, and to emphasize opportunities for growth and improvement. The primary message is a message of growth—that over time, everyone comes to feel at home.

Conveying this message effectively involves many nuances. Below are some hard-won lessons about how to do it best.

The overall message

- ***Represent difficulties as both normal and temporary***
 - This is not a “rah-rah-rah”/school pride/self-esteem-boost message. Don't sweep difficulties under the rug but make them normal and therefore not of concern when a student experiences them.
 - You want to pop the “pluralistic ignorance bubble”—where everyone thinks they are the only one having difficulties. Help students understand that difficulties are normal—that everyone is in the same boat—even when everyone thinks they are the only one going through difficulties. You can do this by giving students opportunities to read about or openly share stories about difficulties they have experienced in the transition to college.

Talk about difficulties in ways that are helpful, not unhelpful, for students

- ***Encourage students to attribute the causes of difficulties in college to universal and temporary factors***
 - Wherever possible, attribute difficulties to the difficulties of the academic transition all students face (e.g., being new on campus), not to some enduring quality of the school (“It's very stressful here. There's a lot of pressure”) or the student (“You have to be outgoing”).

- When students face real difficulties that don't change, acknowledge them, and then put them aside as not a barrier to ultimately succeeding and having a positive experience in the setting (e.g., "Sure, there aren't many women in engineering/Sure it's cold and isolated here/Sure the classes are huge. But I've learned to deal with that and I've had a positive experience..."). The message is that that factor exists but it's not necessarily a barrier to success.
- Don't raise negative content without resolving it—that is, giving students a way to think about the difficulty that will be helpful such as in terms of growth and improvement ("the idea of failure was terrifying" and then not resolving that)
- ***Balance positive and negative***
 - Validate the pride students feel in their school and enthusiasm about coming to college even as you acknowledge that difficulties are normal. Stories about difficulties risk representing the school negatively—the school is terrible, that's why people have trouble. You can balance the message that difficulties are normal with exemplars who say things like, "Don't get me wrong. I love [school name]. But it was hard at first..." The overall message should be one of growth, not just of struggle. It shouldn't be overly negative (e.g., "I got bald my first year" "I went into therapy")
 - Don't allow students to think that there is a point at which one has "arrived" – that is, when belonging concerns disappear. For instance, a senior student might say, "Sometimes I still feel lonely from time to time, but now I know that it's just a normal feeling everyone goes through from time to time")
- ***Use counter-stereotypical exemplars – don't play to stereotypes***
 - Use the social-identity characteristics of exemplar students to challenge stereotypes. For instance, a member of the majority group on campus (e.g., a White man) might be the one who talks about feeling that his high school had left him unprepared for college and he found professors in college intimidating.
 - Use counter-stereotypical exemplars to offer alternative explanations for events that could otherwise seem to reflect bias (e.g., a man, not a woman, feels like a male TA disrespects his abilities in engineering)
- ***Watch for easy mistakes***
 - Don't make fixed ability references ("It's okay to realize everyone has some limitations"; "if something doesn't work, just means it wasn't for you").
 - Don't set bad norms, like everyone is miserable, everyone drinks too much, or there is lots of prejudice

Emphasize growth

- ***Tell stories***
 - Don't just tell short quips; give at least some sustained narratives about students' experiences over time—initial difficulties, later come to feel at home. The stories need not be long but they should convey how a student who had serious struggles overcame them to flourish. Be sure to include

memorable details and examples; they should be stories, not general-level advice.

- ***Tell stories that emphasize growth***
 - Emphasize ways students can grow and improve, including through struggle, not just getting through struggle (not “I failed a class and lived through it” but “I really struggled in that class but, looking back, I’m glad I was challenged. It’s made me a better engineer”).
 - The solution to difficulties can’t imply that you have to change your personality, which might seem fixed (“you have to be outgoing”).
- ***Tell diverse stories that revolve around the common theme***
 - Have students experience worries about belonging in diverse ways – worries about making friends, feeling lonely, feeling unprepared coming to college, making lots of causal friends but not close friends, finding professors intimidating, etc.
 - Have each exemplar tell how they came to handle the challenges they faced and grew from it, for instance by getting to know other students, joining a student group, getting to know professors, finding a problem that inspired them, etc. You don’t want convey that everyone’s experience is the same; instead, convey that everyone has difficulties in some form and everyone finds their niche.
- ***Represent the timeline of growth carefully***
 - To students early on (e.g., pre-enrollment), don’t make difficulties seem predominantly negative, or negative for specific periods of time that might seem interminable to a new student (e.g., a year and a half). That risks the inference that the school itself is to blame, not that the transition is difficult.
 - To slightly older students (e.g., second-semester freshman), make sure the timeline of improvement is vague – so no one thinks they have “missed the boat” and their feelings of non-belonging are just due to them (e.g., “After some time, I started to feel more comfortable...”).

Treat students as strong, not weak, not as in need of help or remediation.

- Assume positives (that people will grow and succeed) not negatives (that people will crack under the “pressure)
- Represent students as helpers, not as recipients of help. Don’t focus on ways students can receive help from others or formal resources available to help students. Instead focus on how students can help each other, for instance in informal ways (conversation with upperclassmen, RAs, TAs, etc.), or by communicating to younger students more about what coming to college is like (“saying-is-believing”)

Customize intervention materials

To be effective, the social-belonging intervention has to speak to students’ actual experiences in their local school context: how they think about belonging, and how their experiences change over time. Even as there are general themes in students’ feelings of belonging across contexts (e.g., worrying at first, ultimately coming to feel at home), how this plays out differs in different settings.

Thus the intervention may need to be customized for new settings. That means that intervention materials effective in one context may be ineffective in another context, e.g., if they fail to speak to students' experiences in the new context. The intervention is no "magic bullet" (Yeager & Walton, 2011).

However, in customizing materials, it can be helpful to review materials from past contexts. You can find one example here: <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/redesign/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/BelongingIntervention.pdf>.

To customize intervention materials, you may want to learn more about how students think in a given setting, for instance by conducting focus groups and surveys. You can ask students about their experiences. You can also have students read draft intervention materials and complete draft "saying-is-believing" exercises (see next) and then discuss.

Represent the experience carefully to students and incorporate "saying-is-believing" exercises

The social-belonging intervention is typically not presented as an "intervention"; nor is it a passive exposure to an idea. Instead, it is an active reading and writing experience.

Students are told that researchers have learned some about the academic transition but that they, as students going through the transition, are expert in it. Students are then given survey results and quotations from older students describing their transition—how they worried at first about issues of belonging but ultimately came to feel at home. They are then asked to write about why they think students' experience in the transition changes in the way described and how this process has been reflected in their own experience. Students are told that their writings may be shared with future students to improve their transition. They are also often invited to write a letter to a future student describing how students' experience changes over time in the academic transition.

This process encourages students to view themselves as benefactors, not beneficiaries: They are helping to create an intervention for future students. It also invites students to advocate for the key intervention idea. This is a powerful but non-stigmatizing and non-controlling persuasive technique. And it allows students to personalize the intervention message, to put the key process in their own words, and to view their experience as an example of this process.

For more, see here: <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/redesign/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/BelongingIntervention.pdf>.

Related interventions

The social-belonging intervention has two close cousins: **value-affirmation interventions** and **growth-mindset of intelligence interventions**, both of which can raise achievement among both adolescents and college students, especially among at-risk (e.g., negatively stereotyped) students.

- Value-affirmation interventions give students a structured opportunity to reflect on personally important values in school settings (e.g., <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/redesign/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/ValuesAffirmation.pdf>); this can raise achievement especially among students who face negative stereotypes in school (e.g., Cohen et al., 2009; Miyake et al., 2010)
- Growth-mindset of intelligence interventions use neuroscientific evidence and testimonials from older students to convey to students that the brain can grow and get smarter as students work hard on challenging materials, try effective strategies, and seek help from others (see Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Yeager, Paunesku, Walton, & Dweck, 2013)

Like the social-belonging intervention, these interventions must also speak to students' experiences in a given setting to be effective interventions. They thus also involve a number of nuances. For a more comprehensive review, see Yeager and Walton (2011).

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