



# Advancing Equity Through Guided Pathways Series Discussion Guide #2:

## *Creating Student Connection and Belonging upon Entry*



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### SERIES OVERVIEW



*The Advancing Equity through Guided Pathways series aims to foster critical campus conversations about how to close persistent gaps for historically marginalized students. Developed by the National Center for Inquiry & Improvement for the California Guided Pathways Project, the series was generously supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, and the Foundation for California Community Colleges.*



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# Creating Student Connection and Belonging upon Entry

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By Amelia Parnell, NASPA & Kay McClenney, American Association of Community Colleges

## Introduction

An institutional commitment to help each student build a strong sense of connection and belonging upon college entry is fundamental to student success in college, particularly for students of color who have long been marginalized. Building a culture of connection—that is, connecting students with one another, with faculty and advisors, and with the subject matter they are studying—must be intentional and ongoing, with every person on campus taking responsibility for and contributing to students’ sense of belonging.

There is ample research confirming the positive influence of such a culture on students’ success in college.<sup>i</sup> <sup>ii</sup> Much of the existing scholarship on the importance of connection emphasizes the value of a welcoming and affirming environment across the college, right from the very beginning of the student journey. For example, Young and Keup assert that students’ first-year success cannot be easily ascribed to one functional area of a campus.<sup>iii</sup> Further, Jorgenson et al. state that any interaction between a student and any campus employee plays a role in connectedness, which is especially relevant for students who are new to the institution, as their first impressions can influence their level of trust in professionals’ ability to address their needs and provide support.<sup>iv</sup> Therefore, positive and useful personal interactions with faculty, staff, and administrators across the institution are essential to students’ sense of connection.

## Strategies for Boosting Student Connection and Belonging

There are many ways to build student connection and belonging on campus, throughout a student’s journey. Colleges that strive to build such an environment might consider three important areas of opportunity: effective use of direct communications with students; visible celebration of

## How to Use this Guide...

The *Advancing Equity through Guided Pathways* series aims to foster critical campus conversations about increasing student equity under a Guided Pathways umbrella. Institutional redesign teams can...

- Read the introductory framing on creating student connection and belonging upon college entry
- Use the discussion questions to facilitate conversations related to planning and action
- Conduct the research tasks to help better understand your students’ experience of this topic

Some guides, including this resource, address issues in the student experience aligned to the stages of the [Completion by Design Loss/Momentum Framework](#), while others address issues of culture and leadership. Across all guides, authors bring their own unique perspectives on and approach to the issue. No guide is intended as the definitive word on its topic.

For related content, discussion questions, and research tasks, review *Supporting Students from Application to First Day of Classes* (Guide 1) and *Taking an Asset-Based Approach to Student Onboarding* (Guide 3).

For all guides and additional information on the series, visit <http://www.ncii-improve.com/>.

students' identities, knowledge, and contributions; and ongoing investment in professional development for all employees.

**Direct Communications to Students.** As students embark on their college journeys, they typically receive an abundance of information, which can range from course-related deadlines to instructions for using campus resources. In addition to using communication channels to push information to students, institutions can leverage various media strategically to establish and maintain personal connections with students. For example, administrators could send a celebratory message to students who complete their first week of classes. Staff could record interesting interviews, fun facts, and historical accounts about the campus and share as a podcast, which could help many community college students learn more about the institution during their commute to and from campus.

**Validation.** Students who are entering college for the first time should receive as many visible validations of their presence and identity as possible. One strategy is to intentionally connect students' backgrounds to their experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Faculty and administrators can partner to decorate learning spaces with pictures that celebrate the neighborhoods and communities from which students come, while faculty can also incorporate early assignments that encourage students to express their identity and connect to course content. Staff and other professionals can help with intentional storytelling; by sharing accounts of students who have successfully attended the institution, they can reinforce positive language and make students feel welcome.

Colleges engaged in Guided Pathways work can create intentional learning communities within their metamajors, seeking to ensure that students engage with faculty, advisors, and peers who share their background experiences. Campus leaders can further help by prioritizing resources that connect to students' additional commitments, such as family and work. For example, Marva Craig, Vice President for Student Affairs at Borough of Manhattan Community College, created a community partnership that enabled students to learn about financial literacy and responsibility from certified financial planners. By providing resources that acknowledge students' life experiences and responsibilities while strengthening their connections to campus resources, institutions can deliver more proactive and holistic support.

**Professional Development.** As the college student population becomes increasingly diverse, now is an optimal time for institutions to invest in opportunities for professionals across the institution to acquire and further develop essential competencies—*cultural competence* being one of the most necessary and important. The Center for Community College Student Engagement stated that for community colleges, acting with cultural competence means honoring the cultures of the students the college serves.<sup>v</sup> The Center added that this includes incorporating understanding of cultural difference into one's own attitudes and behaviors. This can be difficult for some professionals, especially as their roles and responsibilities evolve. Therefore, institutions should invest in ongoing professional development to help all employees address competency gaps, helping them identify and avoid furthering inherent biases, stigmas, and other environmental threats to students' sense of belonging.

Attending college can be a life-changing experience for a student, especially one who intends to leverage the knowledge gained to increase their social and financial mobility. As the cost of a college experience continues to increase and the requirements to earn a credential remain complex, it is more important than ever that students feel confident they can thrive. Institutions have a critical responsibility to affirm the value that students bring to the campus, validate the unique knowledge students possess and will gain, and facilitate a smooth and seamless navigation of resources.

Professionals who collaborate to do these things with effective communication, celebrations, and commitment to learning will be in a good position to help students reach their full potential and have the positive college experience they deserve.

## How to Get Started...

Use the following Discussion Questions and Research Tasks to advance planning and action to boost student connection and belonging upon entry through Guided Pathways implementation.

### Discussion Questions

1. What data and information (focus group and/or survey results) do we have about how students experience the college onboarding process (inclusive of the first few weeks of class)? What barriers do they encounter? How many times do they have to visit campus before they successfully complete the intake process? How and when (if at all) do they get intentionally connected to a person (e.g., advisor, success coach, navigator) who can help them through the onboarding process and their first academic term?
2. Within the Guided Pathways framework for our college, what are the ways that we can intentionally build connections and belonging within the metamajor experience?
3. How might faculty within programs and metamajors work together to create discipline-appropriate assignments that serve to validate students' diverse identities, knowledge, and contributions?
4. What are some options for group-level professional development to assist employees (i.e., faculty, staff, administrators) who have varying levels of cultural competence? How do we use such professional development to emphasize that all personnel have a role to play in student belonging, connection, and success?

### Research Tasks

1. Ascertain how many email messages students receive in the first two weeks of the academic term. What is the substance of those communications? What is the open rate for those messages, and how does it vary by student demographic categories?
2. Analyze enrollment by program and disaggregate to examine where there are disproportionately high or low enrollments by race/ethnicity and/or underrepresented gender identities. How do we understand these differences? What kind of professional development could ensure that students of color, low-income students, and underrepresented gender identities have increased access to programs leading to high-remuneration jobs and careers?
3. Conduct focus groups with different populations of entering students to gain understanding of their experiences and how to improve connection and belonging, particularly through communication and validation (see the [Center for Community College Student Engagement's focus group toolkit](#)).<sup>vi</sup>

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Tinto, V. (1994). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>ii</sup> Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25(4), 297-308.

<sup>iii</sup> Young, D. G., & Keup, J. R. (2019). *Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) first-year experience cross-functional framework*. Fort Collins, CO: Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education.

<sup>iv</sup> Jorgenson, D. A., Farrell, L. C., Fudge, J. L., & Pritchard, A. (2018). College connectedness: The student perspective. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 18(1), 75-95.

<sup>v</sup> Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2014). *Aspirations to achievement: Men of color and community colleges (A special report from the Center for Community College Student Engagement)*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Program in Higher Education Leadership.

<sup>vi</sup> Center for Community College Student Engagement's Focus Group Toolkit:  
<https://www.ccsse.org/focusgrouptoolkit/>