Strategic Plan to Increase Belonging

Vision Statement

We envision an Amherst where community members are valued and respected for who they are, and that celebrates the unique culture, history and experiences that shape each of us. This Amherst affirms students as whole beings, accepting and supporting students through struggle as well as celebrating their amazing accomplishments. This Amherst encourages students to learn and grow in all aspects of their lives, so that they may thrive at Amherst and beyond.

We envision an Amherst that not only names diversity and inclusion as a value, but is also committed to doing what is needed in practice to fully realize this value. This Amherst undertakes honest self-reflection, and works to change individual attitudes and behaviors, cultural norms, and the policies and practices necessary to promote belonging. This Amherst is dedicated to moving beyond representational diversity to create an environment where all students feel seen and valued, and have the opportunity to actively contribute to the community.

We envision an Amherst that welcomes the diverse perspectives, strengths, and knowledge of students, staff, and faculty. This Amherst invites the participation of multiple voices and campus communities to the table in all important campus processes and decisions. In this Amherst, all constituents feel a sense of joint ownership and responsibility for tackling the challenges that face our community, a sense of stewardship to help shape the ongoing evolution of Amherst to make it the best it can be, and a sense of shared pride in, and celebration of, our progress and accomplishments.

We envision an Amherst where community members are able to be fully themselves (without submerging or promoting specific aspects of their identities or experiences), and are inspired to continually develop and grow into even better versions of themselves.

Definition and Understanding of Belonging

Sense of belonging refers to the experience of feeling supported, connected, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to, Amherst College, and to individual members of the Amherst community (students, staff, and faculty).

Our understanding is that we are more likely to experience belonging when we are valued for who we are as a whole. Belonging is undermined when specific aspects of our identity, qualities or behaviors are lauded, while other aspects of ourselves are devalued, ignored or attacked.

We see the experience of belonging as taking place in four distinct, but overlapping spheres: Intellectual/Academic, Emotional, Social, and Identity (see figure 1). In the center, or space of overlap, the spheres interconnect and influence each other. For example, if a professor makes a racial slur in class, this is likely to undermine belonging in all 4 spheres. In the outer areas of the sphere, with no overlap, students may experience a lack of belonging in one area that does not impact the others. For
example, a student may worry that they are not articulate or smart enough to contribute to the class discussion, while feeling confident in the other spheres.

Our understanding is that sense of belonging is fluid, and may change in different contexts and at different times. It is influenced by external circumstances and events as well as internal beliefs.

Why Focus on Belonging?
Improving students’ experience of belonging will positively influence a number of areas that the College is deeply committed to.

- **Academic Success**: Sense of belonging has been shown to have a positive impact on academic achievement, retention, and persistence, which are crucial to Amherst’s continued vitality.\(^1,2\)

- **Commitment to Diversity**: Amherst has identified diversity and inclusion as one of its core values. Our mission statement espouses the ideal of “promoting diversity of experience and ideas within a purposefully small residential community.” We have successfully achieved diverse representation in the student body, and must now commit ourselves to creating an inclusive environment and experience for students.

- **Student Satisfaction and Alumni Giving**: Strong social connections and sense of community predict general satisfaction with college and are the largest factors in alumni giving.\(^3,4\) According to research by the Alumni Factor, “Schools that rank highest in alumni giving are able to create
campus environments where students are academically challenged while developing deep bonds with each other and ties to their college community.”

Amherst is fortunate to have a high percentage of alumni who currently give to the College—however, the majority of donations come from previous generations of students who had a very different experience of Amherst. We need to promote a strong sense of belonging and community in our current student body in order to continue to benefit from high levels of alumni engagement.

* Capacity to Thrive: Fostering belonging is core to our mission of helping students develop the capacity to learn, grow and thrive at Amherst and beyond. A growing body of research emphasizes that sense of belonging and positive social connection are crucial to physical and mental health and are more strongly correlated with happiness than any other single factor.

Social support also acts as a powerful protective factor, buffering the negative effects of stress, and reducing the risk of depression, suicidality and physical illness.

**Problem Statement**

Students who attend elite institutions may have more difficulty achieving a sense of belonging, as intense academic pressure may contribute to fears that they are not smart or accomplished enough to be “worthy” of their place. This surfaced as a consistent theme in the focus groups on belonging and social connection. Students reported that the powerful ongoing narrative of Amherst students’ amazing achievements and brilliance serves to invite negative social comparisons, a sense of inadequacy, and questions of, “Do I belong here?” “Did Admissions make a mistake on me?” “Am I smart enough?” and “Why can’t I do that?” (See Appendix B for the report on focus group themes).

The high value placed on achievement contributes to impostor syndrome, perfectionism, and the need to “perform” success. When students carefully curate how they present themselves to others, it prevents the formation of deep and supportive relationships, which require us to share ourselves more fully. Achievement culture has the side effect of inhibiting vulnerability, leaving students to deal with doubts and problems alone (or with a confidential professional) rather than in community. Because very few are courageous enough to break this norm, students who are having difficulty believe they are “the only one who...,” further contributing to isolation. Achievement culture also promotes risk-aversion, which stunts students’ potential, because it feels intolerable to make mistakes, fail, or be bad at something. Creating an environment of “psychological safety,” where people feel able to speak openly, and bring diverse perspectives to the table, has been identified as the single most important factor in productive, innovative and successful teams.

The results of the 2016 American College Health Association National College Health Assessment show that 30% of Amherst students report feeling “very lonely” within the last 2 weeks, compared to 27% of national college reference group. This gap widens to 72% (at Amherst) versus 61% (nationally) within the last year. When results are broken down by demographic, it is clear that students who hold oppressed identities or come from disadvantaged backgrounds struggle more with all mental health concerns, including loneliness, isolation and social disconnection. For example, 43% of First-Generation students reported being lonely within the last 2 weeks, compared to 27% of non-First Generation students. Students of color also reported higher rates of loneliness within the last 2 weeks at 34% compared to White students at 27% (See Appendix C for the demographic breakdown of the National College Health
Assessment and Appendix D for the Loneliness Survey).\textsuperscript{13, 14} Connection and belonging shape students’ immediate social experience, but also have far-reaching implications for their future. According to the Harvard Study of Adult Development, loneliness is more detrimental to health and longevity than smoking or high cholesterol.\textsuperscript{10}

Amherst Uprising highlighted the painful reality that students of color and White students do not have the same “Amherst experience.” Many students of color come to Amherst excited about the advertised diversity, only to be disappointed by the reality of the campus climate. Some come to feel that they were brought to Amherst to satisfy the ideal of diversity, rather than for the deeper value that they bring to the community as individuals. Students of color are often pushed or pulled into roles of educating White students (and staff and faculty), and advocating for institutional change—undertakings that consume time and take a considerable emotional toll.

The inequities, injustices and aggressions that were raised during Amherst Uprising are corroborated again and again by the stories students share at the Counseling Center and Resource Centers—stories of being made to feel uncomfortable, sometimes unsafe, or that they are “other.” If belonging is characterized by feeling “at home” (in a place, with other people, and in one’s own skin), White students are more likely than students of color to experience this level of ease.

The additional burden that disadvantaged students carry undoubtedly contributes to the difference in 4-year graduation rates. (The Curriculum Committee reports that the 4-year graduation rate for White students is 92%, while the rate for Black/non-Hispanic, first-generation, low-income, and Pell recipients ranges from 78 to 81%). These data, and students’ stories, highlight the need to continue to do the work necessary to provide an equitable learning experience and create an environment that encourages all students to thrive.

**Existing Campus Resources and Strengths**

As we identify where we hope to go, it is important to recognize how far we have already come. We are not starting at the beginning, but rather picking up in the middle and continuing to work toward our goals. Amherst has a number of strengths, resources, and initiatives that are working well, and that we can learn from and expand upon.

**Experiences of Community**

Lack of belonging is not a universal experience for Amherst students: many students feel they belong, establish healthy friendships and support networks, and find a sense of community. Differences in sense of belonging may be partially due to demographics (this environment is safer and more comfortable for some students than others), partially due to individual factors (this environment is easier to navigate for students who possess certain knowledge, skills or personal qualities), and partially due to the resources and experiences students are exposed to. The following experiences can (but do not always) contribute to sense of belonging and community:

- Athletics: many students benefit from the ongoing structured social interaction, instant community, and support of their teams.
- The Resource Centers: many students describe the Centers (MRC, QRC & WGC) as safe spaces, where they find respite, support, and community and are able to be themselves.
• Student Groups, Clubs and Roles: many students find friendship and belonging in student groups and clubs, or within student positions such as Residential Counselors (RCs), Student Health Educators (SHEs), Peer Advocates (PAs) or the Wellness Team. These roles provide the experience of being part of a small, close knit group over a long period of time, and give students an avenue to contribute to the good of the larger community. This strengthens their personal investment in Amherst, and develops students’ identity as a valuable member of the community.

These experiences promote belonging for students who have access to them and are within the micro-community (e.g. athletes), but can feel socially constraining, and can simultaneously undermine belonging of those outside the micro-community by highlighting inequities in resources and privileges. Some students have also expressed heightened lack of belonging if they don’t experience a good “fit” within the communities they might expect to affiliate with (e.g. an Asian-American student who finds the Amherst Asian community is not a good match for them, or a hockey player who does not fit with the team culture).

Shared experiences
Shared experiences and traditions contribute to sense of belonging by offering common ground for conversation and opportunities to connect. Choosing a mascot that the campus can rally around is an important step in this direction – whatever differences we may have, we are all Mammoths! Furthermore, the process of involving the entire community in the selection of a new mascot was essential to the community’s investment in it. We can truly say the mascot is “ours,” rather than imposed upon us. The proposal by the curriculum committee to create a shared curriculum for a portion of the First Year Seminar course would also create a common experience for students.

All-community events, such as fall festival, midnight breakfast and the Wellness Fair, help create fun shared experiences and memories. These efforts could have even greater impact if we make them more welcoming for students to attend alone, and if we find ways to sustain the connections made during one-time events.

Academics
A number of developments within the academic realm show promise for promoting student belonging. These include:
• The Being Human in STEM course
• The Intergroup Dialogue on Race course
• The Center for Teaching and Learning, and the opportunities it provides for faculty to engage in professional development, including in inclusive teaching practices
• First Year Seminar Teams

There is also a new willingness to examine and engage in dialogue about academic practices that impact student well-being and belonging, including grappling with topics such as workload, what we mean by “rigor,” and how to respond to different learning styles, disabilities and needs. These are complex topics, and the challenge will be to identify ways to translate these discussions into tangible actions that will have a positive impact on students.

Physical Spaces
The physical environment can either deter or encourage interaction and socialization. It is promising that these considerations were taken into account in the design of the Greenway dorms and the
redesign of Val. These projects and future projects could be even more effective with greater input and involvement from the community, particularly students.

**Belonging Initiatives**
Student Affairs and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion have new and ongoing initiatives to increase belonging:

- Mental Health Promotion offers:
  - The “belonging intervention,” (in collaboration with orientation) which is a reading and written reflection that has been given to the entire incoming class for the past 3 years. The reading is a compilation of a series of letters from returning students, describing social and academic challenges, and how they dealt with them. It has been shown to improve belonging and academic performance by shifting students’ beliefs about social and academic challenges, from “there’s something wrong with me,” or “I’m not _____ enough” to the recognition that difficulties are temporary, a normal part of the transition process, and that help is available.
  - Belonging videos: a video contest resulted in 7 student-created videos that focus on promoting sense of belonging.
  - Community-Building Challenge: a 3-week challenge with daily activities that promote community.
  - Life Stories Series: a biweekly program where speakers share stories of challenge and meaning to foster empathy and connection.
- OD&I has created an “I Belong” poster campaign and dialogue series, and has started a weekly community hour in the Keefe Campus Center.
- First Year Experience is offering programming for first years throughout the year, which may help sustain social connections established during orientation.
- Student organizations such an Amherst Connects are also focused on creating greater student belonging.

**Goals and Objectives**
There are a number of additional steps we can take to foster greater belonging on campus. We have chosen to highlight several goals that are immediately actionable, as well as to identify a few longer-term stretch goals.

**Campus Culture**
Campus culture refers to formal and informal policies and practices, common narratives, ideals and social norms. Campus culture can be slow to change due to its amorphous nature (who’s responsible?) and the entrenched attitudes and practices that often come with a long history. Yet, we believe culture change is both possible, and worth the effort, as it influences every student, staff, and faculty member. We have identified several goals to help us begin to shift toward a culture of belonging.

1a. **Identify Shared Values:**
We recommend that Amherst undertake a values clarification process to identity what we stand for and care about as a community. What does it mean to be a Mammoth? Our mission statement outlines institutional values, but not the individual behaviors needed to uphold them. Our Honor Code and community standards clarify behavioral expectations of students, but primarily focus on students’ rights, and the behaviors we do not want students to engage in.
Identifying 3-6 *inspirational and aspirational* values, would set a much higher bar, clarifying what we do want and expect from community members. We believe this process would:

- Engage community members in conversations about what is most important to them about Amherst.
- Improve mental health and social connectedness. Research has shown that reflecting on values, as well as engaging in purpose development have a multitude of social and emotional benefits.
- Involve community members in an opportunity to be part of the College’s history and shape its future direction. Active participation in important College functions increases emotional investment, sense of pride and belonging.
- Develop a shared set of values that transcend personal positions and identities, helping to unify the community.

We recommend forming a Values Clarification Committee that would oversee this process and include many opportunities for community conversation and input. Ideally, the committee would include a minimum of 4 students, 2-4 faculty, and representatives from Communications, Student Affairs (Mental Health Promotion), OD&I, Athletics, and Admissions. The values clarification process could include an exploration of the following questions, and more:

- What kind of community do we want? What is important to this community?
- What are our hopes and dreams for students during their time at Amherst?
- What are our hopes and dreams for students after they graduate?
- What values would lay the foundation for an inclusive community?
- How do we want students, staff and faculty to engage around difference? Conflict? Challenge?
- How do we define academic rigor, excellence and success? How can we define these in ways that promote learning, growth and the pursuit of excellence while avoiding the harmful effects of achievement culture?

1b. Promote Shared Values
Once shared values have been identified, they can be widely disseminated and displayed around campus. We recommend using clear, accessible and relatable language in defining our values.

1c. Value the Values!
For shared values to be truly meaningful, they must carry weight or importance, be visible and known, celebrated, and integrated into the fabric of the campus. Some ideas include:

- Celebrate students who promote or exemplify campus values. For example:
  - Create a spotlight section in The Student that highlights a student for specific behaviors or qualities (*rather than achievements*), such as fostering inclusion, persisting through adversity, or being an active bystander.
  - Hold an annual award ceremony to recognize students’ contributions to the Amherst community, their leadership, or their promotion of campus values.
- Include the campus values in the staff and faculty evaluation process.
- Identify areas for training or capacity-building to support community members in living up to core values.
- Have processes in place to address violations of values. This may include going through a restorative justice, conduct, Title IX, or bias response process.
2. Humanize Amherst

Students point to certain aspects of the Amherst culture that are dehumanizing and erode belonging. Specifically, students often feel valued for their intellect and achievement rather than for who they are as human beings. Many have the impression that the College cares more about its “gross academic product” than its human capital. If we are to create an atmosphere of belonging, it is essential to communicate that we care about who our students, staff and faculty are, and how they are doing, as well as what they are doing. Some ideas for making improvements in this area include:

- Work to strengthen communications with students by focusing on:
  - Relating to students as humans first, and as students, employees, residents, etc. second
  - Conveying respect, empathy and high expectations
  - Creating opportunities to listen to students’ experiences
  - Explaining the rationale behind specific policies, practices and decisions
  - Demystifying resources and services, e.g. office hours, the Counseling Center, and financial aid

- Create the expectation that students, staff and faculty will take care of themselves and others when they are sick by not coming to class or work—value health above attendance.

- Develop and distribute a set of best practices for creating an inclusive classroom environment, that includes giving students and professors permission to: not know, ask “stupid” questions, be a beginner, and have different perspectives and learning styles.

- Include student, staff, and faculty stories of challenge and difficulty in orientation, campus programs, and the classroom, to normalize that setbacks are part of the learning process and the human experience.

- Create opportunities for students, staff, and faculty to get to know each other as people. This can be as simple making time for introductions, sharing personal stories, or developing ongoing programs that allow relationships to develop over time.

- Promote a culture of friendliness. Small interpersonal gestures such as smiling and acknowledging people, and making people feel welcome in campus spaces, go a long way toward fostering a sense of belonging.

3. Create Shared Experiences

Shared experiences provide students with common ground to talk about, and bring them closer together. In lieu of positive shared experiences, students are likely to bond over their stress level, workload, or campus parties, which can reinforce negative aspects of the culture. Possibilities for healthy shared experiences include:

- Common academic experiences. The Curriculum Committee has proposed that a portion of first year seminar be dedicated to a shared curriculum which would provide all students with the same educational foundation. Another possibility would be to select a common theme each semester that professors could incorporate into their courses, and that could be integrated into student life outside the classroom as well (e.g. art displays, speakers).

- Developing campus traditions, rituals or rites of passage. The Mascot Committee has just begun to look at how to develop campus traditions.

- Identifying core elements of “the Amherst experience” that students would be motivated to complete before they graduate — e.g. a tour of the Amherst Bunker, a community service project, eating a specific Val food combination, etc.
4. Increase Community Engagement and Shared Ownership
As Sebastian Junger emphasized in his keynote, the experience of being *needed* is essential to belonging and well-being, and the more that people sacrifice for something, the more they value it. While students may sacrifice a great deal for their education, we do not expect them to contribute (other than financially) to the running of Amherst. In fact, as in most of higher education, the role of students outside the classroom could be conceptualized as that of consumer. Amherst houses them, cooks for them, cleans up after them, provides activities and determines policies. In the role of consumer, students may evaluate and critique the product they are receiving, but have no sense of shared ownership or responsibility. If we are able to successfully shift students into the role of active co-creators of the Amherst experience, they will share ownership of (and pride or shame about) the positive and negative aspects of the culture. We anticipate that the recommendations below will increase students’ belonging, engagement, and emotional investment in Amherst. Framing problems and successes as collectively “ours” may also help alleviate the false dichotomy that can arise between students and administration.

4a. Community Involvement in Problem-Solving and Decision-Making
There are many decisions that do not lend themselves to community input—however, a number of issues that have a significant impact on student life could benefit from multiple perspectives and the involvement of students. Actively seeking input does not mean that it will necessarily be acted upon, nor that all parties will be satisfied, but it does increase the likelihood that students will respect the process and accept the outcome. The work of the mascot committee is an excellent example of this, and there are numerous other creative possibilities. The process of working with other community members to tackle challenges would develop connections and promote belonging, generate potential solutions, and provide an important avenue to contribute and add value. Examples include:

- Choosing a current campus concern to focus on during a theme semester (described above in #3).
- Charging an office or task force to address a particular issue, with the expectation that they will involve students.
- Instituting a freshman civic engagement project to tackle a campus problem (e.g. how can we repair the athlete/non-athlete divide? How can we become a more sustainable campus? How can we make the workload more manageable while maintaining rigor?) Freshmen could be assigned to work within a small, diverse group throughout the fall semester, and:
  - participate in relevant training on problem-solving (e.g. design-thinking), coalition-building, successful advocacy, etc.
  - research the history of the problem and best practices
  - create a short pitch or video with potential action steps or solutions
  - compete in a pitch contest, presentation, or viewing, with voting for most innovative and effective solution

4b. Accountability
Violations of our values and community standards has a negative impact on individuals, groups, and the community as a whole. Therefore, holding students, staff and faculty accountable to our values helps to create safety and build trust, which are essential to belonging. In addition to our existing processes, we support the development of a bias response protocol, and the development of restorative justice practices, which can help repair damage to relationships and community.
4c. Community Engagement
We recommend forming a group to identify ways to increase student engagement in, and contribution to, the Amherst community. This group could explore these questions, and more:

- What specific expectations and structures are necessary to promote student engagement in the Amherst community?
- What is the potential value of creating a community service, or community contribution, requirement? For example, what would happen if all students were to work with custodians for a morning, especially after a snowstorm or a large party? What are the potential drawbacks to mandating student engagement?
- Could students receive partial credit, or some other type of recognition, for serving on committees, in student governance, or in other unpaid roles that give back to the community? Could these types of experiences become part of a leadership certificate?
- How could community engagement be incorporated into the classroom in meaningful ways?

The Physical Environment
We have identified 6 goals to make physical spaces on campus more safe, comfortable and welcoming to improve belonging.

1. Create inviting student hang-out spaces, including a Wellness Center. Keefe Campus Center is almost entirely filled with offices, centers, and program and event rooms leaving very few options on campus for students to take a break, relax, hang out, or interact informally, particularly when the weather is bad. Creating recreational spaces, quiet and cozy study (or nap) rooms, and a designated Wellness Center would go a long way toward improving social connection and well-being.

2. Help orient and welcome students, staff, faculty and visitors to campus. Knowing where things are how to get around contributes to belonging.
   - Have at least one map of campus on the campus grounds, and virtual and paper maps that are clear, inclusive of the entirety of campus, and easy to use.
   - Have clear signs on buildings with building names.
   - Strengthen Amherst identity by including the Mammoth on signs, or using Mammoth footprints to guide foot traffic from one place to another.

3. Make communal spaces welcoming and inviting. Spaces can be designed to help students relax, gather and interact, have fun, or study.
   - When staffing is available, welcome and orient people to spaces. For example, train frontline staff and students (e.g. the Keefe Campus Center booth) in interpersonal skills to welcome and engage with people.
   - Display rotating collections of student artwork in Val, Frost, or other public areas. This gives students a sense of ownership of the space, interest in each other’s work, and College pride.
   - Create murals in public areas. This can foster sense of belonging by highlighting an aspect of the College’s history or values, and engage members of the community in the act of creating a mural that will live beyond their tenure at Amherst College. It would also personalize and add beauty to the environment.
   - Put up artwork that is:
     - Representative of the student body.
     - Includes symbols of safety and inclusion, e.g. safe zone sticker.
o Bright and colorful and creates a homey environment.

4. Explore ways to foster community and strengthen social connection within the residences, particularly on halls.
   - Form a working group with high student involvement to evaluate ideas for building community in residential areas. This group is currently being formed under the direction of Jess Caldwell-O'Keefe, Senior Advisor to Student Affairs.
   - Continue to protect the designation of specific residences as quiet and/or sub-free, so students can opt to live in spaces that meet their needs.
   - Gather information from students on their residential experience and elicit ideas for how to improve it, e.g. focus groups, or a residential climate survey. This will require the support of the incoming Chief Student Affairs Officer, and may yield more useful information after the more progress has been made implementing changes to residential policies and practices.
   - Research how Living Learning Communities work on other campuses, and how they might be adapted to fit our campus. Develop a plan to implement Learning Living Communities, or other structures to build residential community, within the next 5 years.

5. Create and disseminate a handout for staff and faculty who oversee physical spaces with suggestions on how to create inclusive, welcoming spaces.

6. Establish a practice of eliciting student and professional input on new building projects and significant remodeling projects. This may be time-consuming up front, but can prevent future problems and ensure that the space meets the needs of those using it. Looking ahead, the future remodeling and repurposing of The Merrill Science Center is a perfect opportunity to involve the community. This will minimize speculation and rumor, and will increase community buy-in and investment in the success of the project. While it is impossible to accommodate and satisfy all constituents, having a thoughtful, transparent and inclusive process for making important decisions helps build a stronger, more unified community.
   - Specifically solicit feedback from on-campus experts, if available, and off-campus experts if not, about how to create spaces that foster well-being and social interaction. These considerations include: features that reduce suicide risk, lighting and sound options that promote quality sleep, and areas that promote interaction.

7. Commit to making all buildings accessible within the next 10 years.

**Resources**

Inequities in the distribution of, and access to, campus resources arose as a core theme that undermines sense of belonging. Below are several ideas for improving this area:

1. Develop a consistent process for determining space and budget allocations, and be transparent about what this process is.
2. Develop a policy and process for filling student employment positions, so that students have equal access to available jobs, e.g. posting all jobs rather than filling positions through word of mouth.
3. Create an expectation that all campus resources, services and disciplines will gather data about the utilization of their services by demographic. If it becomes clear that usage is not representative of the student body, the office/department will be expected to:
• Justify the inequity (e.g. it may be justifiable that more women than men use the Counseling Center, as women experience higher rates of depression and anxiety and therefore have a higher need for this resource), or
• Develop a plan to identify the obstacles to access and how to overcome them. This may include seeking more information to understand the inequities, engaging in targeted outreach, diversifying staff, or other efforts.

The Belonging Strategic Planning Committee sees this document, like belonging itself, as a work in progress that will continue to develop and evolve over time. We are excited by the goals and possibilities outlined in the plan, and hope that they will spark conversation, generate new ideas, and help the campus progress in our work toward creating a stronger, more inclusive community.

Respectfully submitted by the Belonging Strategic Planning Committee,

Chair: Jessica Gifford, Associate Director of Health Education/Mental Health Promotion
Bulaong Ramiz, Director MRC
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Shirley Moe, Registered Nurse
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Emily Hong 20
Marvin Bell 19E
Nathan Sacks 18
Katherine Pedersen 19
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11. Summary of Results from Focus Groups On Loneliness, Belonging and Social Connection


13. National College Health Assessment

14. UCLA Loneliness Survey

THE VISION
(End Goal)

Identity
- Representation
- Comfort expressing identity
- Identity is valued
- Safe & welcoming spaces
- Access to, and comfort using resources/support
- Sustained shared experiences (Orientation, Community Building)
- Flexibility and openness

Empowered
- Authenticity – able to be whole self
- Safety
- Inclusion
- Sense of community
- Comfort expressing values/Shared values
- Support network
- Openness

Equitable distribution of resources
- Experiences are validated
- Comfortable, accepted
- Support and resources
- Access to and comfort in physical spaces
- Trust, love
- Friendships, social connections
- Accountability

Intellectual
- Values process of learning and multiple ways of knowing
- Ideas are valued
- Access to, and comfort using, academic resources (TAs, Office Hours)
- Attributes difficulty to environment
- It’s okay to ask questions
- Broaden definition of success & accomplishment
- Affirmation that it is OK to make mistakes
- Confidence in skills & abilities
- Confidence speaking up in class
- Comfort expressing experiences/challenges

Amherst cares about how you are doing, not just what you’re doing.

Relational
- Group membership
- Shared values
- Openness
- Friendliness, warmth
- Transparency, open communication
- Accountability

Emotional
- Awkward
- Tolerance
- Have fun, decompress
- Personality is valued
- Social connections, friendship

Amherst cares about how you are doing, not just what you’re doing.
APPENDIX B

Summary of Results from Focus Groups On Loneliness, Belonging and Social Connection

Background
In the fall of 2014, the Mental Health and Wellness Committee (MHAWC) conducted a series of 8 focus groups with 6-15 students in each, to discuss the issues of loneliness, belonging and social connection on campus. MHAWC was concerned by the high level of loneliness Amherst students reported on the National College Health Assessment, conducted in March 2014. Three out of four Amherst students indicated they were very lonely within the last year, a full 20% higher than the national average. One out of three Amherst students reported feeling very lonely within the last 2 weeks.

MHAWC also chose to focus on loneliness and social connection because improvement in these areas has the potential to create a ripple effect that would positively impact other areas of mental health, physical health and academic performance. Sense of belonging is strongly correlated to academic performance and having positive social connections is the strongest single determinant of flourishing and well-being and is a protective factor for depression, suicide risk, and physical illness.

The purpose of the focus groups was to gather more information on student experiences and to solicit ideas to address loneliness and improve social connection on campus. In addition, we believed that the very act of holding conversations about students’ experiences of social connection would be beneficial.

Themes
Where Community is Found
There was a strong consensus that there isn’t an overarching sense of community at Amherst, but that community exists within smaller groups. There are very few shared experiences to bring students together and give them common ground to talk about or “bond over,” e.g. core curriculum, campus traditions, all-community events. Students felt the social options were limited and there weren’t many opportunities to meet people and socialize outside of parties. A number of students mentioned they missed AC After Dark programming. Students also noted that there are not many physical spaces on campus that are conducive to mingling and being social. Each space has a dedicated purpose: the library is for studying, the Power House is for parties, and Val can be uncomfortable to navigate socially and is subject to strict unspoken seating arrangements.

Social Stratification and Rigidity
Students emphasized that social life is characterized by stratification, cliquishness, and rigidity. While a sense of community can be found within smaller groups (e.g. teams, identity groups, clubs), this often comes at the cost of exclusivity. Groups can be experienced as confining/stifling as there is often the sense that it is mandatory to socialize within your group and socializing outside the group is passively or actively discouraged. Some students described the experience of belonging to a group that was not a good fit for them, and feeling trapped because they were afraid they would lose all social connection, no matter how unsatisfying, if they left the group. Several students mentioned that their primary motivation to join a sports team was for social connection, but they chose to leave the team because it
wasn’t a good fit. They characterized their experience on and off the team as “dramatically different,”
like being in “two different worlds.” Students acknowledged that while belonging to a group has its
challenges, not belonging is even worse, and mentioned “shadow Amherst,” described as students who
aren’t visible or connected.

Most students agreed it was very difficult to socialize across group lines, through there were a couple of
exceptions who consciously chose to “ignore the rules” and be friendly with students with a range of
social affiliations. A few students noted that in high school they’d socialized freely across group lines,
but quickly realized it wasn’t acceptable to do that here. One student noted that attempts to address
the problem of disconnection often take the form of creating another group, which is usually
homogenous, therefore reinforcing the problem.

Success Vs. Vulnerability and Authenticity
This theme emerged consistently throughout the focus groups and seemed to have the strongest
negative impact on students. Students described Amherst as a culture that expects smartness,
achievement, success and invulnerability from its students, and constantly validates these qualities.
Students experience pressure to live up to these standards, and perceive that there is no room for
failure, flaws or difficulties. Students reported feeling that they couldn’t share vulnerability with others,
and therefore dealt with their problems alone. This effectively cut off support when they needed it
most. Because difficulty and struggle are not aired publicly, students feel they “are the only one
who____,” thus increasing their isolation. The vulnerability taboo prevents students from being
authentic when they are struggling, which inhibits them from forming the genuine connections that are
made by allowing others to see who we are. Several students mentioned imposter syndrome, and the
need to put on a façade of invulnerability and it was noted that not acknowledging loneliness magnifies
loneliness.

Workload
A few students mentioned that the heavy workload precludes time for self-care, developing friendships
and maintaining good mental health. Students expressed frustration that they often feel they are
neglecting the friendships they do have because they simply have too much to do. However, students
acknowledged that academic stress is the one (and only) difficulty that is acceptable to talk about
publicly.

Harmful Narratives
Students identified several narratives that exacerbate social pressure and loneliness. Foremost among
these is the achievement/success narrative that excludes vulnerability, e.g. “Our students are brilliant,
climbed Mt. Everest, won a Nobel Peace prize, etc.” invites a sense of inadequacy, negative comparisons
and questions of, “Do I belong here,” “How did I get in/did Admissions make a mistake on me?” “Am I
smart enough?” and “Why can’t I do that?”

A number of students thought that the “Amherst Awkward” narrative may be a self-fulfilling prophecy.
It has become so normalized that students feel that it’s okay to not bother making an effort to be
friendly. A couple of students mentioned that being told that “college is the best 4 years of your life,”
and “you meet your best for life friends in college” contributed to a sense of inadequacy and social
pressure.

Things that Work
A few students mentioned that when they had the opportunity to connect with other students one-on-one, the conversations they had were often “amazing,” but that these encounters happened by chance. There was a sense that the student body is a phenomenal untapped resource; we have amazing students and the potential for great friendships between them, but these connections simply aren’t happening. A few students mentioned “breaking the social rules,” e.g. pushing through the Amherst Awkward and saying “Hi,” sitting with the athletes, etc.

Students identified several programs that effectively created a structure for meeting and interacting with diverse groups of students and building community. These included: Pindar dinners, AC After Dark, CEOT trips, and orientation. However, students felt there was a lack of follow-up, and connections that had been made subsequently dwindled away.

Several students also noted that having a sense of purpose or a role in which they contributed to the community made them feel more invested and connected. Examples included being an RC, SHE, PA or member of the Student Wellness Team.

Ideas/Suggestions
Students liked the idea of having more shared experiences to bring them together, including traditions and community events. It was noted that the fall festival and winter carnival are enjoyable events, but that students go with their friends don’t tend to meet new people. A regularly scheduled “community hour” with a planned activity was suggested. Students also liked the idea of structured interaction, e.g. Pindar dinners, coaches mandating teams to mingle in Val, hosting events that bring two different groups together. Similarly, students expressed the desire for faculty to facilitate greater interaction through encouraging discussion and group study sessions, making introductions and using students’ names, and by ensuring that classroom conversations are inclusive and culturally sensitive. In addition to creating structured opportunities for students to interact, students noted the importance of creating physical spaces that encourage students to mingle, meet each other and socialize.

Positive Messaging
Students felt strongly that they need to hear messages that counterbalance the “success narrative,” including stories of struggle, and failure. Students want to be told that, “It’s not always going to be easy or perfect, but you can make it!” Students also wanted to know that they could, “make friends anytime,” to address the anxiety that if they didn’t make friends during orientation, or by the end of first year, the window of opportunity closed.

There was discussion in several focus groups about the benefit of developing a higher “awkward tolerance,” and recognizing that it’s important to be friendly even though it isn’t always socially comfortable or easy. The perfectionistic culture created by the “success narrative” may make students feel that they should be skilled at any endeavor they engage in, thereby discouraging the risk-taking that is integral to building new relationships. In a similar vein, students thought that it was important to de-stigmatize aloneness, and convey that spending time alone, in public or private, is a valid and healthy choice. Several students mentioned the idea of being an active bystander socially, by actively reaching out, inviting others to events, being inclusive, and checking in with a student if they appeared to be upset. A few students shared that another student acting in this role had made a huge difference in helping them integrate into Amherst social life.

Next Steps

Language
The focus groups emphasized that the way we talk to and about students has an enormous impact. In particular, we need to change the way we portray the “Amherst student,” and “success.” Students would benefit greatly from a college-wide shift from what researcher Carol Dweck, Ph.D. has labeled a “fixed mindset” to a “growth mindset.” A fixed mindset focuses on accomplishments that are the result of inherent qualities, talents and accomplishments, and are therefore unchangeable, whereas a growth mindset focuses on lifelong learning, growth, improvement and change that are the result of a person’s behavior. We need to highlight the hard work, struggle and mistakes that go into accomplishment, and encourage students to take risks. We ought to highlight the process of learning, not only the end result. This means granting students permission to be beginners and “bad” at a new skill or area of knowledge before they become good at it. It will be important to share the concerns surfaced by the focus groups with key offices, such as Admissions, Public Affairs, and the orientation committee, to strategize how to feature success and accomplishment in a way that does not erode students’ sense of self.

**Programming**

Several programs that facilitate social connection were cited in the focus groups, and it was suggested that they include a follow-up component, e.g. Pindar dinners, CEOT trips, orientation. Results also suggest that mentoring programs may help facilitate students’ adjustment and build social connections between years. There are a couple of new mentor programs underway, including one at the MRC and one pairing Student Support Network training graduates with incoming transfer students and returning students.

A few students mentioned that meaningful involvement contributed to a sense of belonging. There may be opportunities to incorporate a community service component into Residential Life, first year seminar, or other areas of student life.

There is also likely benefit to programs targeted at shifting harmful aspects of the campus culture and creating healthy dialogue. Examples include the Day of Dialogue, the programs Life Stories and Stories of Amherst which provide a forum for the community to share strengths, vulnerabilities and challenges, the “I’m perfect campaign,” and the Facebook pages “Humans of Amherst” and “Show and Tell.”

**Belonging and Mindset Interventions**

Research out of Stanford and U of T is showing that short, online belonging and/or mindset interventions can have a long-term impact on disadvantaged students’ academic performance and mental health. The interventions are usually administered online to the incoming class prior to their arrival on campus and involve reading an essay targeting specific areas of concern and completing a writing assignment, taking less than 45 minutes to complete.

Students receiving the “belonging” intervention read messages from upperclassmen explaining that they felt alone and excluded when they arrived on campus, but then realized that everyone felt that way and eventually began to feel at home. Students receiving the “mind-set” intervention read an article about the malleability of the brain and how practice makes it grow new connections, and then read messages from upperclassmen stating that when they arrived on campus they worried about not being smart enough, but then learned that when they studied they grew smarter. Students were then asked to write their own reflections on what they’d read in order to help future students.

The results showed that these interventions had no apparent impact on advantaged students, but that it significantly improved the academic performance of disadvantaged students, cutting the performance gap between themselves and the advantaged students in half compared to the control group. The
researchers speculate that the interventions work with “students facing the particular fears and anxieties and experiences of exclusion that come with being a minority — whether by race or by class — who are susceptible to this problem [self-doubt]. Those students often misinterpret temporary setbacks as a permanent indication that they can’t succeed or don’t belong. For those students, the intervention can work as a kind of inoculation. And when, six months or two years later, the germs of self-doubt try to infect them, the lingering effect of the intervention allows them to shrug off those doubts exactly the way the advantaged students do.”

Mindset interventions have also been shown to “inoculate” high school students from developing depression at a time that is particularly high risk. These interventions are low-cost with huge potential impact and can be tailored to address the specific concerns raised in the focus groups.