## **Belonging at BGSU Executive Summary**

This project was a student-led assessment of Bowling Green State University (BGSU) undergraduate students. It was conducted by a team of undergraduate students identified as Student Learning Analysts (SLAs) from the Office of Academic Assessment. The SLAs designed a focus group protocol to gain an understanding of students' perspectives on their sense of belonging and the how it affects their academic experience. There were 4 focus groups facilitated by the SLAs, with a total of 30 participants from varying class standings and different majors from five colleges. Out of the 30 participants, 70.00% of the participants identified as female (n=21), 26.67% identified as male (n=8), and 3.33% identified as nonbinary (n=1).

From the race/ethnicity information students provided, 80.00% of participants self-reported their race/ethnicity as White (n=24), 6.67% as African American/Black (n=2), 3.33% as Asian (n=1), 3.33% Hispanic-White (n=1), and 3.33% as multiracial (n=1). One participant chose not to identify their race/ethnicity (3.33%, n=1). Audio recorders were used to ensure that all information was properly documented. These recordings were transcribed and analyzed. The SLAs used a three-step coding process, which involved open coding, focus coding, and theme identification. Throughout these discussions, five themes and subthemes emerged and are highlighted below.

## **Comfort**: Students talked about how feeling confident and secure aided their sense of belonging throughout their time at BGSU and in the surrounding community.

1. Surroundings: Students mentioned feeling acclimated and comfortable in Bowling Green or the space around them helped with feeling a sense of belonging.
2. Timeframe: Students discussed how their sense of belonging changed over time spent at BGSU.
3. Individual: Students felt that a sense of security and confidence in themselves contributed to their sense of belonging.

One student expressed key aspects of belonging in relation to their surroundings: *I feel like it’s a sort of a vibey thing... If you walk outside in Bowling Green, like do you feel…almost a nostalgic type of feel? Do you enjoy your surroundings? Do you enjoy the people that you are around? Do you feel comfortable?... it’s just sort of like a feeling that you get rather than like, something you can put into words. (T4, L15-18)*

## **Support**: Students spoke about the people who made them feel like they belonged and were there for them emotionally and academically.

* 1. Inclusion: Students felt supported by the University when they saw their identities represented.
	2. Advisors: Students identified that advisors supported them when they provide advice and offer resources.
	3. Mentors: Participants felt that when students helped other students by providing guidance in classes and organizations it helped with their sense of belonging.
	4. Peers: Participants discussed that fellow students and friends in classes that provide support contribute their sense of belonging.

A participant explained that connecting with their advisor about personal experiences made them feel supported and that they belonged: *I would say... having like an advisor that you can go to, and know throughout your college process, [is helpful]...[they have] written me letters of recommendation … and [we have] had similar experiences... so [they are] like ‘If you ever need somebody to talk to, I’m there and if you are ever having a nervous breakdown and just need to come cry in my office, you can come do that, you know. Cause I do it too.’ So I think that’s a really good thing to have. (T1, L298-303)*

## **Connections**: Students spoke about how the different relationships formed through shared experiences and bonding influenced their sense of belonging.

* 1. Shared Experiences: Students spoke about collectively going through the college experience and feeling connected.
	2. Forming Relationships: Students shared that the process of making connections and building friendships contributes to their belonging.
	3. Similar Interests: Students talked about feeling a sense of belonging when they can connect with people over shared passions.
	4. Student Employment: Participants shared how the connections made from working on campus help them feel like they belong.

One student talked about forming friendships and how it influenced their sense of belonging at BGSU and beyond: *The friends I make here keep me here. It would be hard to go somewhere else knowing that I have people here who I was interacting with and I got to know...but like, these friends here are the first ones I made as an adult...these are the people I want to try and stay in contact with when I am done with my 4+ years. They are people that I want to...occasionally go and see sometime and just catch up... (T4, L157-162)*

## **Involvement**: Students felt that actively participating in organizations, extracurricular activities, and events helped them feel like they belong.

* 1. Volunteering: Students helping others make them feel like they belong to something larger than themselves.
	2. Community within Campus Organizations: Students believe that being part of something makes them feel like they belong.
	3. Campus Events: Students expressed that different BGSU hosted events and activities encourage involvement and engagement within the University and makes them feel like they belong.

This student talked about how helping others makes them feel like they belong: *…the feeling of actually helping somebody out can really have an impact on how you feel about yourself. Impacting somebody’s day, somebody’s life with people that you go to school with can really help you... bond and create a feeling of community. (T1, L139-143)*

## **Learning Environment**: Students spoke about aspects of their classes that help them learn and feel like they belong at BGSU.

* 1. Class Format: Students mentioned that the layout and structure (e.g., size, organization, etc.), academic content, and focus of the class gives them a sense of belonging.
	2. Professor Engagement: Participants felt like they belonged in their classes when professors made an extra effort to get to know their students, adapted their teaching style to help the class, and provided additional resources.

This participant stated that they felt like they belonged when professors show that they care about you as a student: *When... [professors]… are interested in and like want to support you beyond the scope of their role... when they care about more than just like the work that you’re turning in and what grade they’re going to give you, like those are the opportunities and like times I feel like I belong. (T2, L437- 441)*

For more information on this Belonging Assessment, please contact Dr. Jessica M. Turos at the BGSU office of Academic Assessment at jmturos@bgsu.edu.

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