



Cultivating Belonging in Higher Education: A Focus on Staff and Faculty

By Alisa Fleming, Ph.D., and Jelisa Dallas, MEd.

This is the second in a three-part series of white papers focused on belonging. where we address belonging from the perspective of our students, staff and faculty, and community. Each white paper focuses on the belonging from the perspective of multiple stakeholders. The [first white paper](#) focused on students and this white paper focuses on belonging from the perspective of staff and faculty in higher education institutions.

Higher education institutions contribute to the growth and educational development of individuals by providing them with information, educational resources, services, and programs and by equipping them with skills and knowledge to thrive personally, professionally, and in their communities.

While students are the central focus, the role of faculty and staff cannot be understated as they provide the foundation for learning and innovation. Moreover, the importance of belonging is paramount particularly as it relates to diversity, equity, and inclusion, not only in creating an inclusive educational environment where all individuals can learn and contribute, but also for employees who work at higher education institutions.

Belonging in the workplace is essential to employee commitment and engagement (Kennedy, 2021). An environment of belonging is created when individuals experience deep connection, they feel their ideas, thoughts, and contributions matter, and they can show up authentically. This social need for inclusion is enriched by opportunities that promote comfort, connection, and contribution.

To foster a culture of belonging, University of Phoenix offers programming for both staff and faculty including but not limited to the Inclusive Café, Educational Equity Webinars and Employee Resource

Groups (ERGs).

The Inclusive Café is a virtual meeting place for faculty and staff. As a community, they tackle tough conversations necessary for organizational and personal growth. This space serves to connect, educate, and build community during a time that calls for compassion, gratitude, patience, and flexibility. As situations and world events continue to dramatically shift, University of Phoenix creates opportunities for faculty and staff to have candid conversations about emotional intelligence, racial equity, accessibility, inclusive language, resilience, mental health and more.

Educational Equity Webinars create a space for thought-provoking conversations about equity and inclusion in the classroom, workplace, and community. Their purpose is to encourage inclusive leadership and promote greater unity. Hosted on the third Thursday of every month and open to the public, this webinar series gives way to crucial conversations, promotes cultural understanding and enables thought leadership. The subject matter experts have included national DEIB leaders and speakers, healthcare practitioners, and mindful compassion facilitators. The highest attended, registered and viewed sessions have included the following titles:

- [Leveraging AI to Promote DEIB in Workplaces in Higher Education](#)
- [Healing Racism: Beyond the Dialogue](#)
- [Building Bridges Among Generational Differences in the Workplace](#)

All session recordings can be found via [Educational Equity Webinar Series YouTube Channel](#).

Another way that University of Phoenix facilitates connection and conversation is through ERGs, which are employee-led, voluntary groups that foster a diverse and inclusive workplace, increase employee engagement, and support professional and personal growth. The ERG offerings include:

- African American Council for Excellence – Enhances and advocates for the personal and professional development of African American and African ancestry talent through programming.
- Allies of Pride – Aims to dissolve stereotypes and myths about the LGBT community and promote equality in the workplace through community outreach and awareness events.
- La Fuerza – Promotes the strength, force, and power of the Hispanic community through creativity, innovation, and maximization of the individual potential.
- Phoenix Women Rising – Supports career development and the advancement of women into leadership roles.
- Veterans Employee Resource Group – Honors and recognizes the sacrifices of military men and women and their families.

Regardless of how one identifies, all University employees can participate in any ERG of their choosing with the intention of universal inclusion. The ERGs partner with one another for greater influence and to promote the intersection of identities.

Institutions contribute to a sense of belonging in many ways (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017), the most common is through academic and professional development. University of Phoenix strives to create a culture of belonging for faculty and invests in the development of its faculty through its innovative programs and initiatives. Two noteworthy examples of these efforts include the Pathways to

Instructional Excellence live webinar series with its focus on creating an inclusive classroom and the five-day Intercultural Competence workshop.

Through the webinar series, faculty receive real-world classroom strategies focused on fostering student and faculty success. Examples of topics covered include:

- Academic Integrity
- Accessibility Review
- A Path Toward Fair and Equitable Grading: Recognizing and Minimizing Bias in Grading
- College to Career Awareness in the Classroom
- Culturally Responsive Resolutions for Classroom Harmony
- Dissecting the Language We Use
- Diversity Starts with Personal Awareness
- Effectively Managing Microaggressions in the Online Classroom
- Imposter Syndrome
- Inclusive Teaching
- Incorporating Diversity into the Classroom – What’s the Story?
- Intercultural Competence
- Mental Health Awareness in the Classroom
- Race, Power, & Privilege
- Understanding Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

Each initiative from the Pathways to Instructional Excellence Series to the ERGs offers a measure of inclusion that lends itself to gaining perspective from others, mentoring those in a similar condition and thinking of strategies for improving situations.

References

Cook-Sather, A., & Felten, P. (2017). Where student engagement meets faculty development: How student-faculty pedagogical partnership fosters a sense of belonging. *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, 1(2), 3-3.

Kennedy, J. T. (2021). Belonging: The secret to building engagement for employees of all backgrounds. *Leader to Leader*, 2021(99), 45-51.

About the Authors

Alisa Fleming, Ph.D., is an academic leader with experience in higher education administration, business, consulting, and teaching. Dr. Fleming serves as Director of Assessment for Assessment & Institutional Research at University of Phoenix. She has served on boards for the Kyrene Foundation and the Association for Talent Development, Valley of the Sun Chapter. Dr. Fleming is the 2022 recipient of the Phoenix500 faculty award and is a 2019 recipient of the Achieving My Purpose Celebration of Women

Award. She received a Ph.D. in Business with a specialization in Organizational Leadership from Northcentral University. She holds a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the workplace certificate from the University of South Florida. Her research interests include leadership, ethics, employee behaviors that contribute to healthy workplace culture. Dr. Fleming's passion for developing and inspiring others to action has led to service roles in her organization and outreach within nonprofits and youth-based organizations in her local community.

Jelisa Dallas, MEd., is the Program Manager for Recognized Student Organizations for the Office of Educational Equity at the University of Phoenix. With over twelve years of experience working in education, Jelisa has designed and implemented innovative resources and programming for student development and engagement in private, non-profit, and public institutions. Jelisa holds a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the workplace certificate from the University of South Florida. She currently serves on the board of the University of Phoenix African American Council for Excellence (employee resource group) and on Warren/Youngstown Urban League Young Professionals.