Building Belonging Through Community

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

This is the third and final in a three-part series of white papers focused on belonging in higher education. Each article focused on a different perspective – students, staff and faculty with the final installment examining belonging nurtured through community efforts.

In this edition focused on fostering a sense of belonging, we aim to highlight the diverse strategies employed by the University of Phoenix in collaborating and connecting with our local, regional, and national communities to cultivate a sense of belonging and provide stakeholders opportunities to connect through a supportive network.

Sense of belonging has been cited by researchers as a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 2017; Gillen-O'Neel, 2021) that motivates and has the potential to shape behavior (Strayhorn, 2019). Studies have found sense of belonging to be predictors of outcomes related to academic success, social emotional, (Slaten, et al., 2016) physical, and comportment (Allen, 2021). When an environment of belonging is created, individuals experience improved wellbeing, feel valued, included, and connected with a group or place (Maher et al., 2014).

Within higher education, there are many opportunities to cultivate a sense of belonging, not only for students, but for alumni and the community. This white paper will explore the following ways in which University of Phoenix cultivates community connectedness: (1) Employee Resource Groups that engage with the local community; (2) Partnerships with leading diversity education organizations; and (3) University of Phoenix premier virtual summit that equips leaders with inclusive practices for an equitable workforce. Additionally, this white paper highlights research initiatives that empower marginalized communities in the workforce.

Employee Resource Groups

One way connectedness is promoted is internally through employee resource groups (ERGs). The voluntary groups function within an organization and its formation may be based on demographics,

lifestyle, or a business strategy. The ERGs promote inclusivity and provide an environment where employees can connect, learn, and grow. University of Phoenix has five ERGs. In addition to supporting employee development, each of the ERGs has a community outreach component and through volunteerism efforts have partnered with veteran's organizations, nonprofits that support marginalized communities, and youth-focused organizations.

Partnerships with Diversity Education Organizations

The Diversity Leadership Alliance (DLA) is a prominent and esteemed organization for diversity education in Arizona. Through the University's Office of Educational Equity, we collaborate with DLA to deliver thought-provoking diversity programming, leadership guidance, and ongoing support to nurture an inclusive community where everyone is valued and respected. Our collaboration with DLA has enabled our employees to enhance their DEIB skills while contributing valuable insights to community initiatives.

"I take pride in being a member of the DLA Board," said Tondra Richardson, Director of Student Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Phoenix. "Through volunteering for their annual conference for the past four years and leading the Education Committee as their chair, I have witnessed the profound impact the organization has on both the community and local businesses. I look forward to collaborating with the esteemed members of the Board as we continue this important work."

Virtual Summit

The University's Office of Educational Equity will host its free, online annual Inclusive Leadership Summit, themed "Transparency as the Catalyst for Belonging." The summit, to be held June 11-13, 2024, invites participants to explore the critical role of transparency in fostering diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.

A lineup of thought leaders and changemakers will share valuable insights and practical strategies for fostering a culture of trust and openness. In this forum, the University of Phoenix serves the community through engaging discussions, interactive workshops, and inspiring keynote presentations, all aimed at demonstrating how transparency drives cultural shifts, breaks down barriers, and creates environments where every voice is heard, valued, and respected.

University Research Centers

The University also supports belonging in the higher education community through its Research Center Enterprise under the College of Doctoral Studies. Within the research hub are the following four centers that support a community of researchers who are committed to academic excellence and research innovation:

- [Center for Leadership Studies & Organizational Research](#) (CLSOR)
- [Center for Workplace Diversity and Inclusion Research](#) (CWDIR)
- [Center for Educational and Instructional Technology Research](#) (CEITR)
- [University of Phoenix Career Institute](#)®

Notable partnerships under the CWDIR and Career Institute include Jobs for the Future, where a [Professional Social Capital framework](#) was designed for enhancing social capital to empower students and workers in underrepresented backgrounds. Additionally, the CWDIR has undertaken collaborative research initiatives with organizations based in Arizona.

According to Kimberly Underwood, Ph.D., Research Chair for CWDIR, "every research project is framed to look at a community of practice through the lens of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging."

Providing opportunities for individuals to interact and collaborate exposes members to a variety of perspectives which has the potential to enhance learning and increase understanding, while fostering a sense of belonging and building community.

For additional insights and resources, please explore

- [Education equity webinar series](#)
- [Inclusive leadership summit 2024](#)
- [Thought leadership content](#)

This is the final installment of a series of white papers focused on the importance of fostering a sense of belonging within and outside of the University community. From the perspective of students, staff, and faculty, we have explored how belonging evolves and offers opportunities for individuals to connect, share experiences, learn, with a goal of providing leadership and service to their communities. In this white paper, belonging has been explored through the university's broader engagement with the concept of belonging through community efforts which include but are not limited to employee resource groups, partnerships with diversity education organizations, virtual summits and research initiatives.

These collective endeavors not only enrich the academic, professional, and community experiences, they also demonstrate the University's commitment to fostering a sense of belonging.

References

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About the Authors

Alisa Fleming, Ph.D., is an academic leader with experience in higher education administration, business, teaching, and consulting. As Director of Institutional Assessment at University of Phoenix, she sets the direction for institutional assessment efforts and those that extend beyond academics, including the administration of major surveys, gathering, reporting, and dissemination of data. She received a Ph.D. in Business with a specialization in Organizational Leadership from Northcentral University. Her research interests include leadership, ethics, employee behaviors that contribute to healthy workplace culture. She holds a Certified Diversity Professional® credential from the Institute for Diversity Certification and a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the workplace certificate from the University of South Florida. Dr. Fleming has a passion for inspiring others to action which has led to service roles in her organization and outreach within nonprofits and youth-based organizations in her local community.

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