

# Chapter 2

## Fostering a Sense of Belonging: Teaching Tips to Utilize UDL Online

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### **ABSTRACT**

*An escalated number of university students report feeling disconnected from universities. There is also an increase in students who prefer to attend a university online as opposed to face-to-face. Online learning has the potential to increase a sense of disconnection and loneliness. This chapter provides teaching strategies to guide any faculty member towards implementation of UDL in an online setting while fostering a sense of belonging. The checkpoints were carefully selected from CAST UDL guidelines and provide practical suggestions for implementation that encourage faculty to try one new strategy today.*

### **FOSTERING A SENSE OF BELONGING: TEACHING TIPS TO UTILIZE UDL ONLINE**

Institutes of Higher Education are facing the challenge that more students feel disconnected from their universities and lack a sense of community (Walton, et al., 2023). The missing sense of belonging has the potential to be escalated in online

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learning (Chen, Kaczmarek & Ohyama, 2021). With the increase of students choosing online modalities over face-to-face, F2F, (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023) the IHE's identified "crisis of connection" (Cohan, 2017, p.1), can no longer only address in-person settings, but must consider how to best instruct all students, regardless of modality. While "belonging" may not be specifically stated within the UDL Guidelines (CAST, 2018), Addy and colleagues (2021) noted that faculty often describe and define inclusive teaching with terms that align with fostering a sense of belonging.

Belonging is an essential component of our being. Maslow (1954) identified belongingness as a basic need. Artze-Vega and colleagues (2023) defined belonging as "the sense of feeling and support that comes with knowing that one is part of a group" (p. 117). Stayhorn (2019) elaborated on this definition to include "a student's perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or being about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus" (p. 3).

While fostering a sense of belonging is a psychological construct, student engagement and academics are also impacted by a students' sense of belonging. In courses that address students' sense of belonging, students are more likely to achieve better academically and demonstrate higher levels of engagement (Peacock et al., 2020; Spencer et al., 2020). The risks of not fostering a sense of belonging impact a student's mental health, but also their academics and retention within the course and program.

Belonging is essential to college success; yet most definitions focus entirely on experiences that require a student to be on a physical campus. Research pertaining to online settings is limited (Peacock, et al., 2020), however, in recent years since the COVID pandemic, the issue of belonging during online learning is receiving more attention (Mendoza & Venables, 2023). One challenge to fostering a sense of belonging in an online setting is designing inclusive curriculum while utilizing the advantages of online and F2F teaching (Law, et al., 2019).

In one example, Mendoza and Venables (2023) examined the impact of belongingness during online learning. This study identified that the implementation of UDL guidelines in an online setting may contribute to students' increase in sense of belonging. Educators are reminded that "a sense of belonging needs to be orchestrated for students participating online" (p. 138). With the right digital tools and instructional strategies, UDL can be utilized online to build and support student belonging.

Identifying and utilizing the right digital tools and online framework can be an overwhelming task. Online learning is not a new concept, (Sherry, 1995) but the demand for this platform has increased since the pandemic. Students rely on online learning as an opportunity to further their postsecondary experience as a

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