

Communication Centers as Uniquely Positioned Sites to Strategize “Belonging”

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To belong matters to me. Merriam -Webster states that belongingness entails “close or intimate relationships, and a sense of belonging.” Humans have an emotional need to be an accepted member of a group. This desire is so universal that the need to belong is found across all cultures. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs lists (love and) belonging in level 3 of the 6 levels of the hierarchy of need, meaning that belonging is one of the basic needs of human existence.

In terms of a university setting, Gleiman (2015), states “Ultimately, engagement through the sense of belonging can be one of the most powerful tools institutions of higher education can employ to ensure student success.” Likewise, communication centers are one of the few spaces on a university campus wherein people and relationships are valued over all else (Cuny, 2018). Additionally, Vizzier (2006) points out that communication centers’ organizational culture fosters a community of practice, and I would argue belonging is an active practice that communication centers need to embrace in order to utilize their unique character within the university to encourage student success.

For the purposes of this article, I will focus on how communication center consultants can foster belongingness with one another inside and outside of the center, thus strengthening the efficacy of the center as a whole. I will detail below the elements of Haidt’s “vital engagement” (acceptance, assistance, and

encouragement), ways to achieve active group cohesion, and the importance of forming strong social identities among consultants.

“Vital Engagement” as Active Belonging in the Center

Strategic moments of practicing belonging are what Johnathan Haidt (2006) calls in *The Happy Hypothesis* “vital engagement.” An initial key aspect of vital engagement is acceptance. In the spring of 2021, I was recruited to take my university’s communication center theory and practice course. I was the only male student, the only non-traditional adult student, and the oldest. From the start, I was hoping that the class would accept me, and they did so with open arms while also practicing another facet of vital engagement: assistance.

Everyone always volunteered to help me with the technical issues that I had during our online synchronous class meetings. These displays of care always made me feel very comfortable. I was shown compassion when I didn't have the right answers, and the empathy that was shared with me let me know that I belonged. Also, according to Rendon et. al (2000) “non-traditional students do not perceive involvement as them taking the initiative. They perceive it when someone takes an active role in assisting them” (pp. 127–156). I can attest to this assertion personally. When we are consulting with students, the technical aspects can be challenging for me; however, when another member of our team assists

me, I can focus on what I need to do in the moment (feedback). We bond as a unit and accomplish our center's goal.

Lastly, encouragement is crucial for a strong center. For example, when we do a consultation and I'm giving feedback, my fellow consultants tell me how good my feedback was. These instances of others going out of their way to encourage me helps me feel important and contributes to my self-esteem, which in turn helps me add to the success of the entire group or organization.

Purposeful Group Cohesion for Consultant Success

I also believe another role communication centers can play toward belonging is for consultants to have times when everyone focuses on connectedness with our groups or communities outside of the center. Our communication center has committees we are assigned and can volunteer for that help support our local community, such as clothing or food drives and sustainability initiatives.

We also get to know one another as individuals outside of the communication center setting since there is always something to do when in the center and socializing with one another is lower on the priority list. We get together for dinner, go bowling, and attend sporting events. Building our belongingness outside of the center makes our relationships (and our effectiveness when supporting students) all the stronger when inside of it since we have purposefully spent time building trust and history with one another

Forming Strong Social Identities Inside and Outside of the Center

A sense of belonging also has ties to social identity. When we have a sense of social identity with a group, we

not only get a sense of belonging but we also feel connected to and active with our group and can use our specific strengths to strengthen the group as a whole. I have a broader perspective, being an adult student, so when I am giving feedback during the consultation. I can use my unique perspective as an adult student to help broaden the perspectives of the people we consult as well as my fellow consultants in the center, which they have noted to me is a nice strength of mine.

Also, our center has a sustainability committee where we complete different projects on campus. We got together and built birdhouses for the committee. I was able to use some gardening and birdhouse building experience from my past. Next semester we will also have a garden plot at the university to grow food to donate to the campus food bank, and I have experience with gardening. Sharing these aspects of myself with the group helped to cement my identity into our social group, giving me an even greater sense of belonging. I become more creative and productive and take a strong sense of pride when I feel a sense of social identity among my group members. When I am allowed to tap into what makes me unique to the group (my life experience as an adult student) my own sense of identity within the group surfaces.

Conclusion

Ultimately, by participating in "vital engagement," taking group cohesion seriously, and fostering ours and others' social identities, communication centers construct a thriving environment where we are willing to invest in ourselves, in our fellow consultants, and in those who come seeking our help.

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