UNIVERSITY of WISCONSIN GREEN BAY

FOSTERING INTERSECTIONAL BELONGING
Assessing Community in an Online WGSS Course

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What Is Belonging?

The concept of student "belonging" has been studied in higher education since the 1990s. More recently, however, the work of Strayhorn (2012), Tinto (2017), and others have linked belonging to important markers of academic success, including students' persistence, achievement, and sense of well-being. Belonging has particular relevance for intersectional, equity-minded teaching in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) classes. Minoritized, non-traditional, queer, and first-generation students comprise a so-called "new majority" of college students, but they enter a higher education system that was structured for cis, white, middle-class men and women. Students can feel like outsiders as they struggle to understand the unwritten rules and norms of college courses and university life. So-called "relationship-rich education," which emphasizes genuine welcome and deep care, helps students feel that they are valued and belong on campus, which enables their intellectual growth and persistence (Lambert & Felton, 2020).

Belonging in the Online Asynchronous Classroom

If belonging matters, it is important to understand how to manifest students' sense of community and connectedness across modalities. Relationship-building through genuine welcome and deep care can happen more organically in a face-to-face classroom setting. But it must be intentionally planned in online environments. Particularly in online asynchronous classes, it can be challenging to facilitate instructor-student or student-student relationships. Indeed, some students view online asynchronous classes in more transactional terms, and they resist efforts at virtual community-building. But the research on belonging tells us that those students would nonetheless benefit (in ways they might not anticipate) from feeling valued in their online classes.

Belonging is also at the heart of feminist pedagogy, and therefore matters in all WGSS courses, regardless of modality. Feminist pedagogy prioritizes active, collaborative learning and empowers students to draw on their experiences and positionality to collectively build knowledge. This is easier to achieve in in-person classes. However, in their 2009 article, Nancy Chick and Holly Hassel argue that online classes "take us a step closer to a feminist class environment because of the familiar benefit of inclusion" for non-traditional students whose only access to higher education is online. Moreover, students with anxiety, shyness, or other challenges can find the anonymity of online education to be freeing.
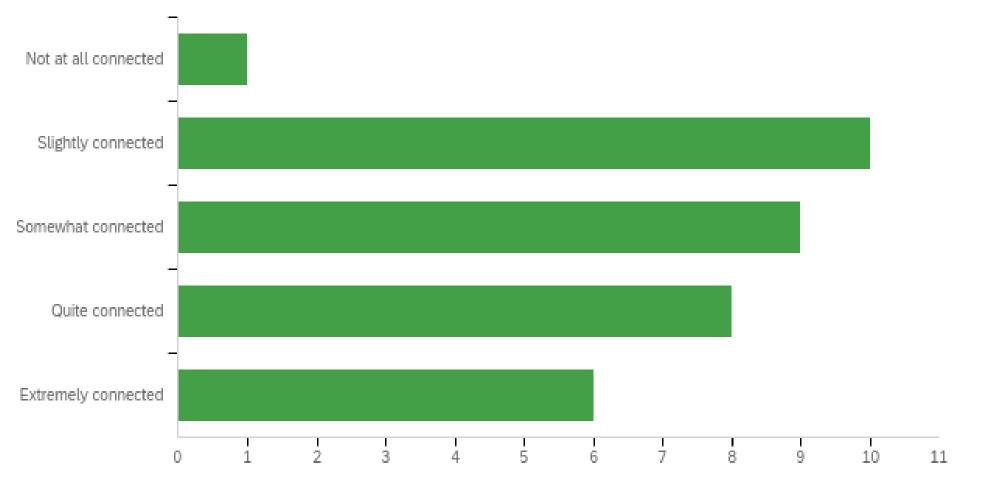
Methods

The project anonymously surveyed 34 students at the end of the semester on their sense of connectedness and belonging in the course WOST 241: Introduction to Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Results included quantitative and qualitative data.

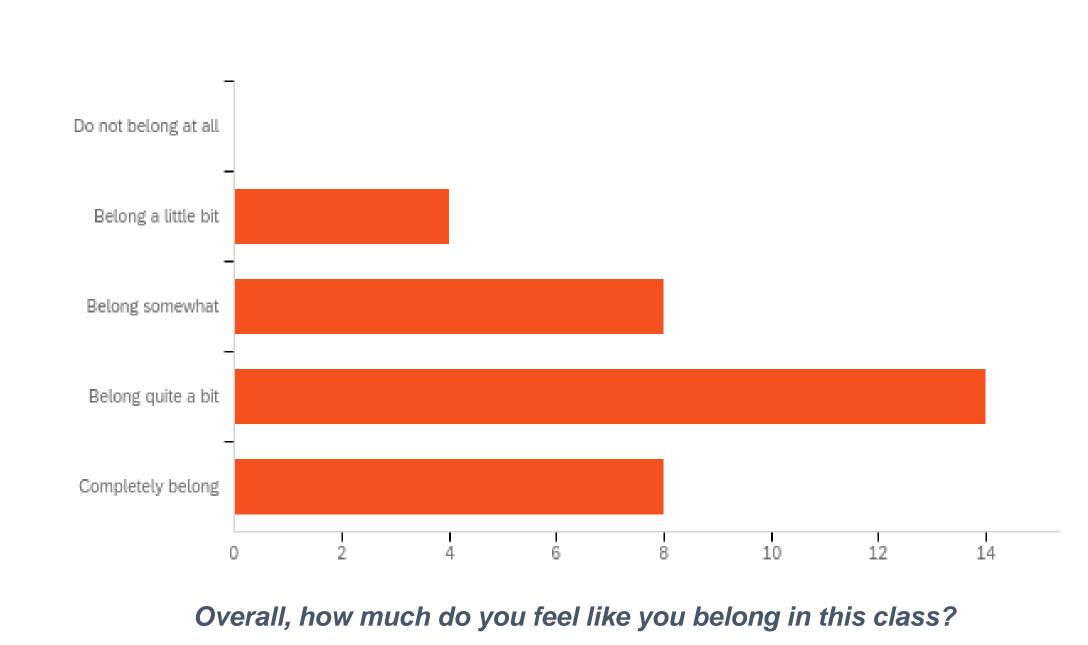## What Made Students Feel More Connected to the Instructor?

Individualized Feedback on Assignments
Students repeatedly emphasized that getting individual, personalized feedback on their assignments made them feel more connected to the instructor:
- "She gives very personal comments to assignments and discussion questions."
- "The professor often leaves comments on my work that is specific to me and my work."
- "She always gives me motivation feedback and always tells me when I'm doing good which I appreciate and feel welcomed."
- "Our professor tries to respond to each individual post and I really like that!"

Ability to Express Opinions and Identities
Students felt comfortable expressing their opinions and personal aspect of their lives through course assignments. A few said that being asked to write and record an "I Am
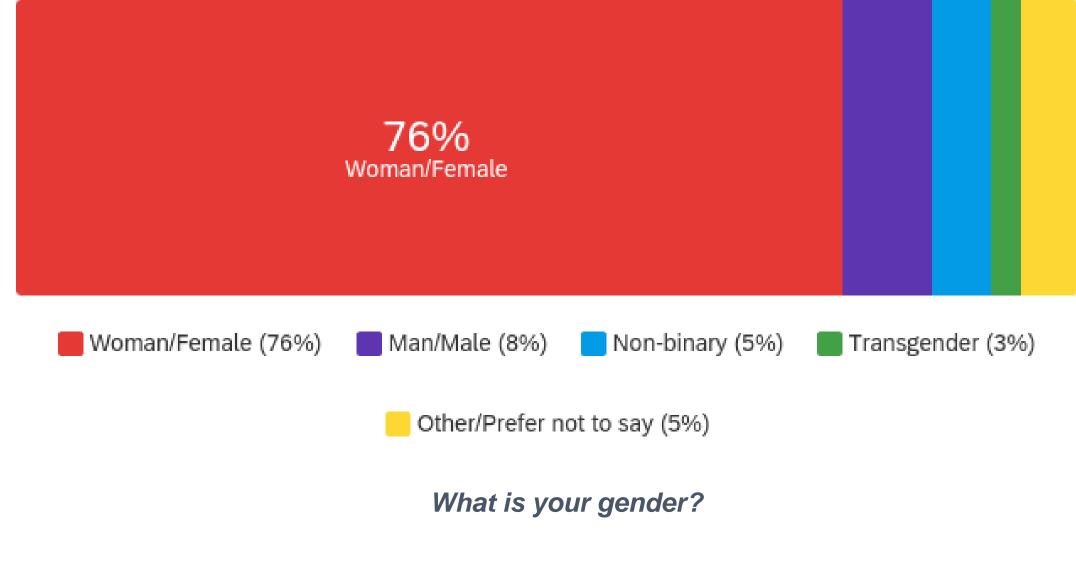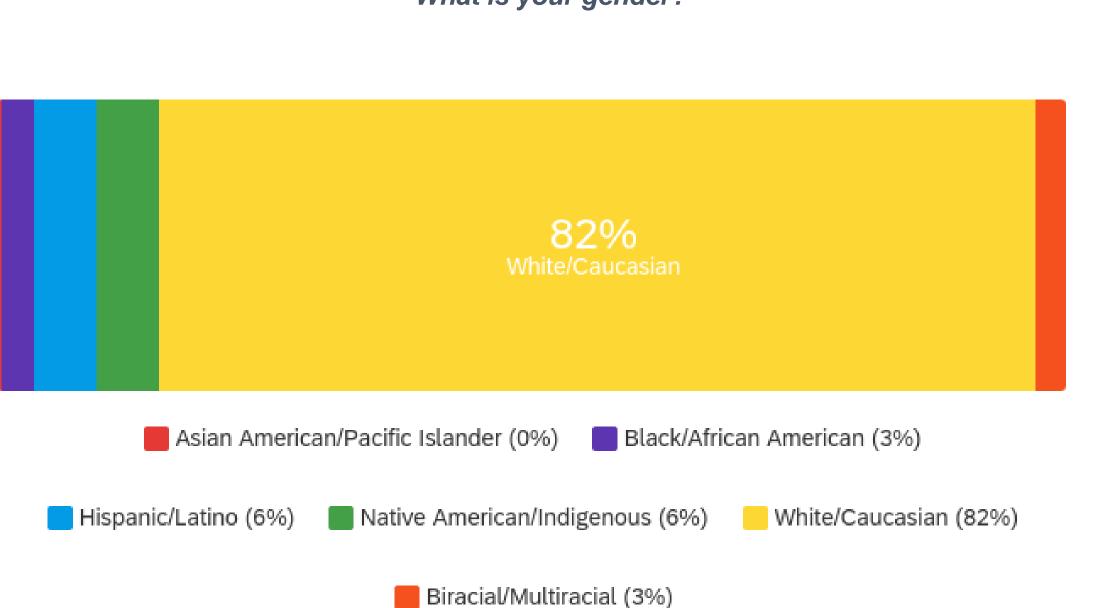
From…" poem for the class helped them to feel more connected to the instructor and their classmates (https://iamfromproject.com/):
- "I feel free to express my own opinion in the class without losing points on assignments because it may not fully align with my professor."
- "I feel this connection because of the nature of the course and the assignments. My favorite assignment, the 'I Am' poem, allowed me to express myself and share my background with the class. The professor shared her feedback and connected with every one of us. It was special."

Which Course Elements Gave Students a Sense of Belonging?

Students most often cited **discussions** as the element that helped them feel connected to other students in the class because they were able to share their opinions and gain new perspectives. Others pointed toward particular **course content** that affirmed their identities, such as Gender in Sports or LGBTQ Studies. Finally, another element mentioned by several students was the ability to **express themselves creatively** in assignments. One student explained, "this class prompted a different way of interacting with course materials, which helped me feel more creative and passionate while completing these assignments."

Conclusions

Belonging Involves Authenticity and Diffusion
When I embarked on this equity-minded project to determine how to develop a deeper sense of intersectional belonging in online asynchronous classes, I was not sure which aspects of the class would help students to feel connected—or, indeed, whether they would feel connected at all! Moreover, as much as I strive to be a caring professor, I also feel the need to assert boundaries in order limit my emotional labor. I worried that students would require a level of attentiveness from me that would feel exhausting and inauthentic. Surprisingly, however, students connected to the "real" me, and that connection in turn allowed them to be more authentically themselves in the course and as they engaged their classmates. One measure of this can be seen in students' comments, which stressed that they appreciated the freedom to express their thoughts and opinions in discussions and on assignments. They also deeply valued individualized feedback. The quantitative data potentially reflects this dynamic as well. While only 67.6% of student expressed a medium to high level of connection with the course instructor ("somewhat," "quite," or "extremely" connected), 88.2% of them felt a medium to high level of belonging in the class. This suggests that making students feel valued may allow them to connect with their classmates and the course content even more than it produces a feeling of connection with the instructor.

Acknowledgments

How connected do you feel to the professor in WOST 241?

What is your gender?

Overall, how much do you feel like you belong in this class?

What is your racial/ethnic group?

What Makes You Feel a Sense of Belonging?

Write your answer on a post-it note and place it around this poster!

Thanks for reading ☺