HEALTHY CAMPUS ALBERTA

Canadian Mental Health Association
Alberta
Mental health for all

Student Engagement & Mental Health Toolkit

Strengthening Belonging and Well-being in Post-Secondary Institutions

A resource for staff, educators, and student leaders developed through Healthy Campus Alberta.

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Executive Summary

Post-secondary institutions play an important role in shaping students' academic experiences, personal development, and overall well-being. While mental health services are an essential component of campus support systems, increasing attention has been placed on the role that student engagement and belonging play in promoting student well- being and success.

Research consistently demonstrates that students who feel connected to their campus communities are more likely to experience positive academic outcomes, stronger social networks, and improved mental health (Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 2012). Conversely, students who feel isolated or disconnected from their institutions may experience increased stress, loneliness, and challenges in navigating academic environments.

In recent years, the importance of fostering belonging has become even more pronounced. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many of the social structures that support engagement on campus, highlighting the central role that peer relationships, community spaces, and supportive learning environments play in student well-being.

This toolkit was developed to support the Healthy Campus Alberta Community of Practice and campus staff including student affairs professionals, faculty, administrators, and student leaders in strengthening student engagement and belonging within post-secondary environments. Drawing on:

- Peer-reviewed Research
- Community of Practice insights
- Student Engagement Discussions
- Campus Well-Being Initiatives

The toolkit provides both conceptual foundations and practical tools for supporting engagement across campus communities. The toolkit includes:

- An overview of student engagement and belonging research
- Discussion of diverse student experiences and intersectional barriers to engagement
- Strategies for strengthening peer connection and campus community
- Reflection tools for staff
- A curated resource library for further exploration

Importantly, this toolkit recognizes that many campuses are already doing meaningful work to support engagement and student well-being. Rather than proposing a single model, the toolkit encourages institutions to reflect on existing practices, build on current strengths, and explore new opportunities for collaboration and innovation.

Ultimately, fostering belonging is a collective effort that involves students, faculty, staff, and campus leadership. By prioritizing connection and inclusive engagement opportunities, post-secondary institutions can create environments where students feel supported to thrive both academically and personally.

Purpose of this Toolkit

Post-secondary institutions across Canada are increasingly recognizing the importance of student mental health and well-being. While significant attention has been given to expanding mental health services, there is growing recognition that student well-being is also deeply connected to broader experiences of belonging, connection, and engagement within campus communities.

Research consistently demonstrates that students who feel connected to their peers, faculty, and institutions are more likely to experience positive mental health outcomes and persist in their academic journeys. Conversely, students who feel isolated or disconnected may face increased barriers to well-being and success.

This toolkit was developed through a combination of academic research, practitioner conversations, and student engagement activities facilitated through Healthy Campus Alberta. The goal of the toolkit is to translate research on student engagement and mental health into practical insights and strategies that can support post-secondary institutions in strengthening belonging and community across their campuses.

Rather than presenting engagement as a single program or initiative, this toolkit approaches engagement as a shared responsibility across institutions, involving faculty, staff, and students working together to create environments where all students can feel connected and supported.

How the Toolkit Was Developed

This toolkit was developed through a knowledge mobilization process that brought together multiple sources of knowledge related to student engagement and student well- being. The development process included:

- Literature review
- A review of peer-reviewed research examining student engagement, belonging, campus mental health, and help-seeking behaviours in post-secondary education.

This review included both international and Canadian scholarship in order to identify evidence-informed practices that support student well-being. Student engagement activities Insights were gathered through student-focused engagement opportunities, including Healthy Campus Alberta Student Lunch & Learn events. These sessions provided space for students to share experiences related to transitions into post-secondary education, belonging on campus, and challenges navigating university environments. Informal conversations with other Community of Practice (CoP) members and participation in HCA regional gatherings helped identify emerging priorities and challenges related to student engagement and well-being within post-secondary institutions.

By bringing together research evidence, staff insights, and student perspectives, this toolkit aims to reflect both academic knowledge and lived experiences within campus environments.

What this Toolkit Is (and Is Not)

This toolkit is designed to:

- Provide evidence-informed insights about student engagement and mental health
- Highlight promising practices from post-secondary instituions
- Offer practical reflection tools for campus staff and key interest holders
- Support conversations about belonging and community on campus

This toolkit is not intended to be:

- A comprehensive mental health strategy
- A replacement for clinical health services
- A prescriptive checklist that applies equally to all institutions.

Key Concepts

Student engagement

Student engagement refers to the ways students participate in and connect with academic, social, and institutional life within post-secondary environments. Engagement can include interactions with peers, relationships with faculty and staff, participation in campus activities, and involvement in learning communities.

Belonging

Belonging refers to the experience of feeling accepted, valued, and connected within a community. In post-secondary settings, belonging can influence students' motivation, well-being, and persistence.

Student well-being

Student well-being includes emotional, psychological, social, and academic dimensions of health that influence students' ability to learn and thrive in post-secondary environments.

Relational Approaches to Engagement

Relational approaches to engagement emphasize the importance of connection, trust, and reciprocity in fostering supportive campus communities. Rather than focusing solely on participation in activities, relational engagement highlights the quality of interactions and the ways in which students feel recognized and valued within their communities.

Intersectionality and Diverse Student Experiences

Student experiences of engagement and belonging are shaped by intersecting identities such as race, gender, culture, and ability. These identities influence how students access and experience campus environments. An intersectional approach recognizes that initiatives may not be experienced equally by all students, even when they appear broadly accessible.

Student Engagement, Belonging and Mental Health

Understanding Student Engagement

Student engagement has long been recognized as a central component of student success in post-secondary education. Engagement refers broadly to the ways in which students participate in and connect with the academic and social environments of their institutions. These connections can take many forms, including relationships with peers, interactions with faculty and staff, involvement in campus activities, and participation in learning communities.

Early scholarship on student engagement emphasized the importance of students' active participation in educational environments. Researchers argued that students learn and persist not only through academic instruction, but also through the quality of their interactions within the broader institutional environment. In other words, student success is shaped not only by what happens in the classroom, but also by the social and relational contexts in which learning occurs.

Engagement therefore reflects both student participation and institutional conditions. While students bring their own motivations, identities, and experiences into post-secondary education, institutions play a critical role in shaping environments that either foster or inhibit meaningful connection.

When institutions create opportunities for students to interact with peers, faculty, and campus communities, they contribute to the development of supportive learning environments where students can thrive.

Engagement and Belonging

A key outcome of student engagement is the development of belonging. Belonging refers to the experience of feeling accepted, valued, and connected within a community.
In post-secondary contexts, belonging can emerge through a variety of experiences, such as:

- Forming friendships with peers
- Developing relationships with faculty or staff
- Feeling recognized and supported within academic environments

Students who experience belonging often describe feeling that they are “part of the campus community.” This sense of connection can support motivation, academic persistence, and personal well-being. Conversely, students who feel disconnected from their institutions may experience greater difficulty navigating academic demands, seeking support, or maintaining motivation.

Belonging is therefore not simply an emotional experience but a critical component of student success and well-being.

Engagement and Student Mental Health

While engagement has traditionally been studied in relation to academic persistence and learning outcomes, there is growing recognition that engagement also plays an important role in student mental health. Post-secondary students face a wide range ofpressures, including academic demands, financial stress, transitions away from home,and uncertainty about the future. These challenges can contribute to increased stress,anxiety, and other mental health concerns.

Experiences of connection and belonging can help buffer these pressures. When students feel supported within their campus communities, they may be more likely to share challenges with peers, access support services, and develop coping strategies.

In contrast, students who experience isolation or disconnection may face increased risks for mental health difficulties. Feelings of loneliness and lack of belonging have been linked to higher levels of psychological distress and lower levels of well-being among university students.

For this reason, many scholars and practitioners now recognize that student engagement is an important upstream factor influencing student mental health.
Rather than viewing mental health solely as an individual concern, this perspective highlights the role that institutional environments play in shaping student well-being.

Engagement as a Shared Institutional Responsibility

It is important to recognize that engagement does not occur in isolation. While individual students make choices about how they participate in campus life, institutions play a critical role in shaping the conditions that enable engagement to occur.
Engagement-friendly environments often include:

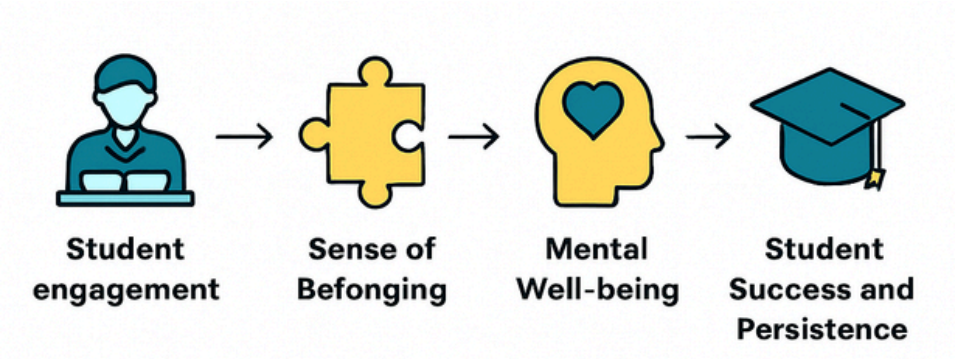
- Opportunities for peer connection
- Accesbile Faculty and Staff
- Welcoming Campus Spaces
- Inclusive Programming and Student Organizations
- Supportive Academic Practices

While these elements are present, students are more likely to develop meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging within their institutions. At the same time, engagement opportunitiesare not experienced equally by all students. Barriers related to identity, culture, accessibility, or financial constraints may limit students' ability to participate fully in campuslife.

Recognizing these structural factors is essential for developing engagement initiatives that support diverse student populations.

From Engagement to Well-Being

The relationship between engagement, belonging, and mental health can beunderstood as a continuum. Students who are able to participate meaningfully in their campus communities are more likely to develop a sense of belonging. In turn, this sense of belonging can contribute to improved mental health and increased persistence in post-secondary education. This relationship can be summarized as follows:



This framework highlights that student well-being is not shaped solely by counseling services or individual coping strategies. Instead, well-being is influenced by the broader environments in which students learn and interact. For institutions seeking to support student mental health, strengthening opportunities for engagement and belonging represents an important and often under recognized strategy.

Why Engagement Matters for Campus Well-Being

In recent years, many post-secondary institutions have expanded mental health services in response to rising demand. While these services remain essential, they represent only one component of a comprehensive approach to student well-being.

Promoting student engagement and belonging can help address some of the underlying conditions that influence mental health. Initiatives that foster connection, community, and participation may contribute to healthier campus environments where students feel supported and valued. For this reason, engagement initiatives should be understood as part of a broader ecosystem of student well-being.

The upcoming sections of this toolkit explore how engagement experiences differ across student populations, highlight promising practices already occurring across campuses, and provide practical tools that institutions can use to strengthen connection and belonging within their communities.

While student engagement plays an important role in shaping belonging and well-being, it is important to recognize that engagement opportunities are not experienced equally by all students. Students enter post-secondary environments with diverse identities, backgrounds, and life experiences that shape how they interact with campus communities. Structural barriers, cultural expectations, financial pressures, and accessibility challenges can influence whether students are able to participate fully in academic and social life. Understanding these differences is essential for institutions seeking to create inclusive environments where all students can experience belonging and connection (Strayhorn, 2012).

The following section explores how engagement experiences may differ across student populations and highlights considerations that institutions can consider when developing engagement initiatives.

Diverse Student Experiences and Engagement

Why Student Experiences Differ

Post-secondary institutions are increasingly diverse, with students representing a wide range of cultural backgrounds, identities, and life circumstances. While this diversity enriches campus communities, it also means that students may experience engagement opportunities in different ways.

Research suggests that students' sense of belonging and engagement can be shaped by a variety of factors, including identity, cultural background, financial resources, and prior educational experiences (Tinto, 2012). When campus environments fail to recognize these differences, some students may encounter barriers that limit their ability to participate in

academic or social life. For example, students who are navigating unfamiliar educational systems, managing caregiving responsibilities, or balancing employment alongside their studies may find it more difficult to participate in traditional engagement opportunities such as campus events or student organizations.

Recognizing these differences does not mean that institutions must create entirely separate engagement initiatives for each student group. Rather, it highlights the importance of designing engagement opportunities that are flexible, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse realities of student life.
The following subsections highlight considerations related to several student populations commonly discussed in research on student engagement and well-being.

Indigenous Students

For many Indigenous students, post-secondary education occurs within institutional environments shaped by colonial histories and structures. These contexts can influence students' experiences of belonging and participation on campus.

Research suggests that culturally grounded spaces and community connections play an important role in supporting Indigenous student success. Access to Indigenous student centres, Elders, cultural programming, and community networks can help foster a sense of belonging and identity affirmation within academic environments (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

When these supports are present, they can contribute to stronger engagement and well- being among Indigenous students. Conversely, when institutions overlook Indigenous perspectives or fail to create culturally responsive environments, students may experience feelings of marginalization or disconnection.

Promising practices may include:

- Supporting Indigenous student spaces
- Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge and perspectives into programming
- Building relationships with Indigenous communities and Elders.

International Students

International students often navigate significant transitions when entering post-secondary education, including adjusting to new academic expectations, cultural environments, and social networks.

Research indicates that international students may face barriers related to language, cultural differences, and unfamiliarity with campus systems, which can influence their engagement experiences (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). These challenges may also contribute to feelings of isolation, particularly during the early stages of transition.

At the same time, many international students actively seek opportunities to connect with peers and participate in campus communities. Programs that facilitate social integration such as peer mentorship, cultural exchange initiatives, and international student communities can help foster belonging and support student well-being.

Practices may include:

- Peer mentorship programs for international students
- Community-building events that bring together domestic and international students
- Clear information about campus resources and support systems

Male-Identifying Students

Research suggests that male-identifying students may engage differently with mental health resources and campus support services compared to other student populations. Social norms related to masculinity can sometimes discourage help-seeking behaviours or open discussions about mental health (Addis & Mahalik, 2003).

As a result, male-identifying students may be less likely to access formal support services even when experiencing distress. However, engagement initiatives that emphasize community, shared activities, or peer connection may provide alternative pathways for building support networks.

For example, initiatives that focus on:

- Mentorship

- Community-based activities
- Peer-led discussions

may create spaces where male-identifying students feel more comfortable participating and building relationships.

Recognizing these dynamics can help institutions develop engagement initiatives that support student well-being in ways that feel accessible and relevant.

LGBTQ2S+ Students

LGBTQ2S+ students may encounter unique challenges related to campus climate, identity visibility, and experiences of discrimination. Research indicates that supportive campus environments and inclusive policies can play an important role in promoting belonging and well-being among LGBTQ2S+ students (Garveyet al., 2017).

Identity-affirming spaces, such as LGBTQ2S+resource centres or student organizations, can provide important opportunities for connection and community. These spaces often serve as hubs for peer support, advocacy, andsocial engagement. Institutions can support LGBTQ2S+ student engagement by:

- Creating inclusive campus policies
- Supporting LGBTQ2S+ student organizations
- Promoting inclusive programming and training opportunities

Students with Disabilities and Neurodivergent Students

Students with disabilities or neurodivergent learning profiles may encounter barriers that influence their engagement experiences. These barriers can include physical accessibility challenges, limited awareness of accommodation services, or learning environments that are not designed with diverse cognitive needs in mind.

Research highlights that students with invisible disabilities may face difficulties navigating disclosure and accessing appropriate support (Mullins & Preyde, 2013). When institutions adopt inclusive practices that consider diverse learning needs, students may be better

able to participate fully in academic and social life. This can look like:

- Promoting awareness of accessibility resources
- Incorporating universal design principles into programming
- Creating flexible engagement opportunities

Moving Toward Inclusive Engagement

Understanding the diverse experiences of students is essential for developing engagement initiatives that support belonging and well-being across campus communities. Rather than assuming that a single model of engagement will work for all students, institutions can benefit from adopting approaches that are responsive to different identities, experiences, and needs. Inclusive engagement strategies recognize that belonging is shaped by both individual relationships and institutional environments. When campuses create spaces where students feel seen, valued, and supported, they contribute not only to academic success but also to healthier and more inclusive campus communities.

Student Engagement in a Post-Pandemic Context

A Changing Campus Landscape

In recent years, post-secondary institutions have experienced significant shifts in how students learn, connect, and participate in campus life. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many of the social and academic structures that traditionally support student engagement, including in-person learning environments, campus activities, and informal peer interactions.

While institutions rapidly adapted to remote learning and new forms of student support, the long-term effects of these disruptions continue to shape student experiences. Many students entered post-secondary education during a period marked by isolation, uncertainty, and reduced opportunities for social interaction. As campuses reopened, students often returned to environments where rebuilding connection and community required intentional effort.

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Research conducted during the pandemic found substantial increases in stress, anxiety, and feelings of isolation among university students (Son et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). These findings highlighted the extent to which student well-being is closely linked to opportunities for social connection and engagement within campus communities. As institutions move forward, many are now exploring how to rebuild and strengthen engagement in ways that support both academic success and student well-being.

Loneliness and Social Disconnection

One of the most reported challenges among students during and after the pandemic has been loneliness. Campus environments that previously supported spontaneous interaction such as shared study spaces, residence communities, and student gathering areas were temporarily unavailable or significantly altered.

Even as campuses reopened, some students reported difficulty rebuilding social networks or establishing new friendships. Students who began their post-secondary education during remote learning periods may have had limited opportunities to develop relationships with peers or faculty.

Research examining student social networks during the pandemic found that reduced interaction with peers was associated with increased levels of loneliness, stress, and depressive symptoms (Elmer et al., 2020). These findings reinforce the importance of peer relationships as a protective factor for student well-being. For institutions seeking to support student mental health, rebuilding opportunities for peer connection remains an important priority.

Hybrid Learning and New Engagement Challenges

Another lasting change in post-secondary education is the increased presence of hybrid and online learning environments. While these formats offer flexibility and accessibility for many students, they can also alter how students interact with peers and instructors.

Students in hybrid learningenvironments may have fewer opportunities for informal conversation before or afterclass, which can influence their ability to form relationships with classmates. In somecases, students may feel less connected to their academic communities when interactions occur primarily through digital platforms.

Research examining students' experiences with remote learning during the pandemic found that clear communication from instructors, interactive learning activities, and opportunities for collaboration helped support student engagement in online environments (Means & Neisler, 2021). These findings suggest that while learning environments may evolve, intentional practices that support interaction and community remain essential for fostering engagement.

Rebuilding Campus Community

As institutions continue to navigate the post-pandemic landscape, many are exploring ways to rebuild and strengthen campus community. This includes not only restoring pre- pandemic engagement initiatives but also adapting programs to reflect new student needs and expectations. Some campuses have expanded initiatives that promote peer connection, such as:

- Peer Mentorship Programs
- Student Leadership Opportunities
- Small-Group Discussion Spaces
- Community Building Events

These initiatives recognize that engagement is not limited to large-scale programming but can also occur through smaller, relationship-focused interactions that foster meaningful connection. In addition, many institutions are increasingly recognizing the importance of creating inclusive engagement opportunities that reflect the diversity of student experiences and identities.

Supporting Student Well-Being Through Engagement

While counseling and mental health services remain essential components of campus well-being strategies, many institutions are also recognizing the importance of upstream approaches that address the social determinants of student mental health. Engagement initiatives can play an important role in this broader ecosystem by creating environments where students feel connected,valued, and supported.

When students have opportunities to build relationships with peers, interact with supportive faculty and staff, and participate in campus life, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging that supports both well-being and academic persistence. For this reason, strengthening engagement opportunities should be understood as an important component of campus mental health promotion.

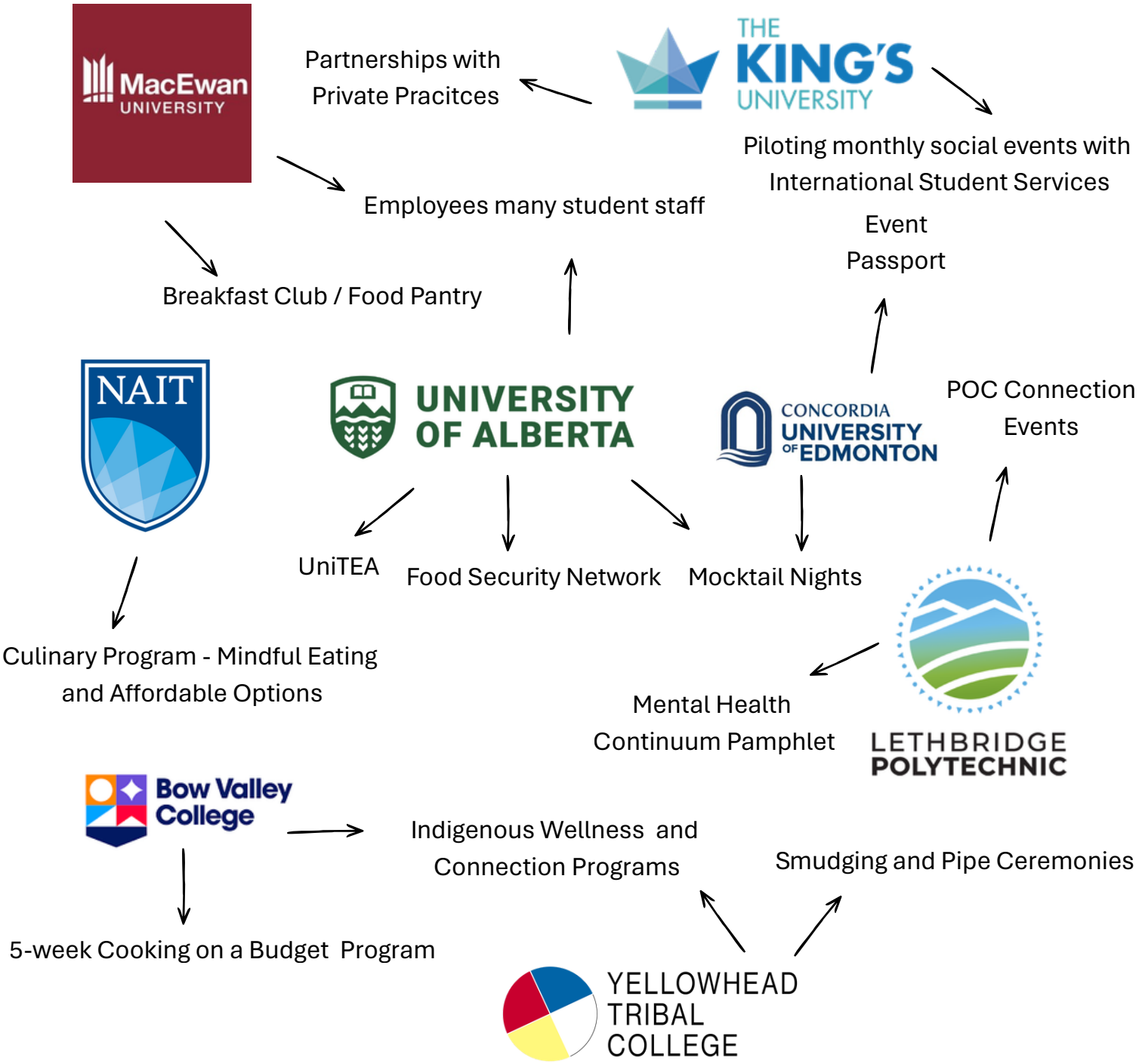
The next section of this toolkit highlights examples of promising practices already occurring across post-secondary institutions, demonstrating how campuses are supporting student engagement and well-being through innovative initiatives.

What's Already Working: Promising Practices Across Campuses

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Engagement Strategies for Campus Staff & Interest Holders

Student engagement can take many forms across post-secondary institutions. While each campus context is unique, research and practitioner experience suggest that certain types of initiatives consistently support students' sense of connection and belonging. The strategies outlined in this section are intended to provide examples and starting points for institutions seeking to strengthen engagement and well-being within their campus communities. Rather than offering a single model that applies to all institutions, these strategies are designed to encourage reflection, adaptation, and collaboration.

Peer Connection and Student Relationships

Peer relationships play a central role in shaping students' sense of belonging in post-secondary environments. Many students report that friendships and peer networks are among the most important factors influencing whether they feel connected to their campus communities.

Peer-based initiatives can provide important opportunities for students to build supportive relationships, share experiences, and navigate academic and personal challenges together. Peer mentorship programs, in particular, can help students navigate transitions into post-secondary education by connecting incoming students with upper-year peers who can offer guidance and support. These initiatives can be especially valuable for students who may be unfamiliar with campus systems or who are seeking opportunities to connect with others who share similar experiences.

Reflection Questions

- **What opportunities currently exist for students to connect with peers on your campus?**
- **Are these opportunities accesible to a wide range of students?**

Faculty and Staff Relationships

Relationships with faculty and staff can also play a meaningful role in students' experiences of belonging and engagement. When students feel recognized and supported by instructors or advisors, they may be more likely to participate actively in their learning environments and seek support when needed.

Small interactions such as learning students' names, encouraging questions, or creating space for discussion can contribute to more inclusive classroom environments. Institutions can support these relationships by encouraging practices such as:

- Relational Teaching Approaches
- Inclusive Classroom Discussions
- Clear and Trasparent Course Expectations
- Opportunities for Student Feedback

In some cases, faculty engagement initiatives may also include structured opportunities for mentorship or collaboration between students and instructors outside of formal classroom settings. These efforts can help strengthen students' connection to their academic communities and reinforce the idea that learning is a collaborative process.

Reflection Questions:

- **How do faculty and staff interact with students beyond formal instructions?**
- **What opportunities exist for students to build relationships with instructors or advisors?**

Community Building and Campus Spaces

Physical and social spaces on campus can play an important role in shaping students' experiences of engagement. Shared spaces such as student centres, lounges, libraries, and cultural centres often serve as hubs where students gather, study and connect with peers. These environments can support informal interactions that contribute to a sense of community.

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Community-building initiatives may include:

- Student Gathertings, Social Events and Mixers
- Cultural Celebrations and Community Programming
- Student Club Fairs
- Collaborative Study Spaces
- Wellness-focused Campus Events

While large events can generate excitement and visibility, smaller gatherings and recurring programs often provide more sustained opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships. Creating welcoming and accessible spaces can therefore be an important component of fostering engagement across campus communities.

Reflection Questions:

- **What spaces on your campus encourage students to gather and interact?**
- **Are there barriers that may limit access to these spaces for some students?**

Supporting Transitions into Post-Secondary Education

The transition into post-secondary education is a critical period for student engagement and belonging. Students entering university or college may be navigating new academic expectations, unfamiliar environments, and changes in their social networks.
Institutions often support these transitions through initiatives such as:

- Orientation programs
- First-Year Experience Courses
- Transition Workshops
- Community-building Events for New Students

These programs can help students develop early connections with peers and campus resources, which may influence their long-term engagement and persistence.

In addition to supporting first-year students, institutions are also encouraged to consider the transition experiences of:

- Transfer Students
- Graduate Students
- Mature Students
- Students returning after time away from their studies.

Recognizing these varied transition pathways can help campuses create more inclusive engagement initiatives.

Reflection Questions:

- **What supports are available for students transitioning to your campus?**
- **How are different student pathways considered in these programs?**

Student-Led Engagement and Leadership

Students themselves are often key drivers ofengagement initiatives. Student organizations, clubs, and leadership programsprovide opportunities for students to shape campus culture and create communities around shared interests and identities.
Student-led initiatives can typically include:

- Student Associations and Clubs
- Peer-led Wellness Programs
- Cultural Clubs and Organizations
- Advocacy Groups
- Student-led Events and Workshops
- Leadership Opportunities

When institutions support student leadership, they create opportunities for students to contribute to the development of their campus communities. These initiatives can also foster important skills such as collaboration, leadership, and civic engagement.

Reflection Questions:

- **How are students currently involved in shaping engagement initiatives on campus?**
- **What supports exist for student-led programming?**

While engagement strategies can help strengthen connection and belonging on campus, institutions may also benefit from practical tools that support reflection, planning, and evaluation. In many cases, campuses are already implementing a wide range of initiatives related to student engagement and well-being. However, these initiatives may exist across different departments or programs without always being connected to a broader understanding of belonging and student mental health.

Practical reflection tools can help institutions better understand how engagement opportunities are currently structured and identify areas where additional support or collaboration may be beneficial.

Practical Tools for Institutions

The following tools are designed to support campus practitioners in reflecting on student engagement within their institutional contexts. These tools are not intended to function as prescriptive checklists but rather as starting points for discussion, collaboration, and planning. Campus teams may choose to adapt these tools to suit their own structures, priorities, and student populations.

Tool 1

Belonging Reflection Tool

A sense of belonging plays an important role in shaping students' engagement and well-being within post-secondary environments. This reflection tool is designed to help campus teams consider how belonging is currently experienced by students across their institution.

Institutions may wish to explore these questions as part of team meetings, program planning discussions, or broader campus well-being initiatives.

Reflection Questions:

- **In what ways do students currently experience belonging on our campus?**
- **What spaces or programs appear to foster strong connections among students?**
- **How do students build relationships with peers, faculty, and staff?**
- **Are there groups of students whose experiences of belonging may be overlooked?**

These questions can help institutions identify both existing strengths and potential gaps in engagement opportunities.

Tool 2

Student Engagement Mapping Exercise

Many engagement initiatives exist across campuses, but they may not always be visible across departments or units. Mapping engagement activities can help institutions better understand where engagement opportunities are currently taking place and how they contribute to student well-being. This exercise invites campus teams to identify different types of engagement opportunities available to students.

Step 1: Identify Existing Engagement

Opportunities Consider the following areas:

- Academic engagement - examples may include:
  - Study Groups
  - Faculty Mentorship Programs
  - Collaborative Learning Opportunities

- Social engagement - examples may include:
  - Student clubs and organizations
  - Residence Programming
  - Campus Events

- Cultural and identity based engagement – examples may include:
  - Cultural student organizations
  - Indigenous student spaces
  - LGBTQ2S+ resource centres

- Wellness engagement - examples may include:
  - Peer wellness programs
  - Mindfulness or wellness events
  - Recreation programs

Step 2: Reflection, Acess and Participation

Once initiativeshave been mapped, institutions may consider:

- Which students are most likely to participate in these opportunities?
- Are some students less likely to access these initiatives?
- Are there barriers that may prevent participation?

This exercise canhelp institutions identify areas where engagement opportunities are strong, as wellasareas where additional supports may be beneficial.

Tool 3

Engagement Program Planning Template

When developing new engagement initiatives, it can be helpful to consider how programs support belonging and student well-being. The following prompts can support planning discussions.

Program Purpose

- What is the goal of this initiative?
- Is the initiative intended to support:
  - Peer Connection
  - Transition into Post-Secondary Education
  - Community Building
  - Cultural Connection
  - Student Leadership

Target Student Population

- Who is this initiative intended to support? Examples may include:
  - First-Year Students
  - Graduate Students
  - International Students
  - Students with shared interests or identities

Connection to Belonging

- How does this initiative support connection among students?
- Does it provide opporunities for:
  - Peer Interaction
  - Mentorship
  - Shared Experiences
  - Collaborative Learning

Evaluation and Feedback

- How will the impact of this initiative be assessed? Possible approaches may include:
  - Student Feedback Surveys
  - Focus Groups or Discussions
  - Participation Data
  - Informal Reflections from facilitators

Collecting feedback can help institutions understand how engagement initiatives are experienced by students and identify opportunities for improvement.

Tool 4

Student Feedback Prompts

Students themselves are often the most valuable source of insight into campus engagement experiences. Creating opportunities for students to share feedback can help institutions better understand how engagement initiatives are perceived and where improvements may be needed. The following prompts may be used during discussions, focus groups, or engagement sessions.

Student Discussion Prompts

- What helped you feel connected to campus during your first year?
- What makes it easier or harder to meet other students?
- Are there spaces on campus where you feel particularly welcome?
- What kinds of activities or programs help you build connections with others?

These questions and more can help instituitons gather insights that may not always emerge through traditional surveys or evaluation methods.

Resource Library

Across Canada and internationally, many organizations, research groups, and post-secondary institutions have developed tools, frameworks, and resources aimed at strengthening student engagement and promoting student mental health and well-being. While this toolkit provides an overview of key concepts and strategies, the resources below offer additional guidance for institutions seeking to deepen their work in this area.

The following resources were selected and shared by our Community of Practice because they provide practical guidance that can support in designing engagement initiatives, fostering belonging, and strengthening student well-being.

Student Engagement and Belonging

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) provides one of the most widely used frameworks for understanding student engagement in post-secondary education. The survey examines the extent to which students participate in educational practices associated with learning, development, and persistence. Institutions can use NSSE data to better understand how students engage with their academic environments and to identify opportunities to strengthen engagement practices.

https://nsse.indiana.edu

Student Experience in the Research University (SERU)

The SERU Consortium conducts large-scale surveys examining the experiences of undergraduate students across research-intensive universities. These surveys explore topics such as student belonging, academic engagement, and campus climate. Institutions participating in SERU can use findings to inform strategies aimed at improving student engagement and campus environments.

https://cshe.berkeley.edu/seru

Apathy is Boring

A national Canadian organization focused on youth civic engagement and democratic participation. Their work centers on supporting young people to become active contributors within their communities through leadership development, programming, and accessible resources.

https://www.apathyisboring.com/

Mental Health, Resilience and Student Well-Being

Canadian Campus Wellbeing Survey (CCWS)

The Canadian Campus Wellbeing Survey provides a comprehensive assessment of student well-being across Canadian post-secondary institutions. The survey includes indicators related to mental health, belonging, social connection, and campus supports. Findings from the survey can help institutions identify emerging trends and develop targeted initiatives that support student well-being.

ttps://ccws-becc.ca

Okanagan Charter: An International Charter for Health Promoting Universities and Colleges

The Okanagan Charter calls on post-secondary institutions to embed health and well-being into all aspects of campus culture, administration, and academic practice. The charter emphasizes the importance of creating campus environments that support the holistic well-being of students, staff, and faculty. Many Canadian institutions have adopted the charter as a guiding framework for campus well-being initiatives.

ttps://www.okanagancharter.ca

Ecological Grief Support Toolkit

This toolkit explores the emotional impacts of climate change and environmental loss, providing reflective exercises and support strategies for individuals experiencing ecological grief.

Ecological Grief Support Toolkit - Google Drive

Remaining Resilient While Making a Difference (Student Activism Resource)

This resource focuses on supporting students engaged in activism, highlighting the importance of balancing advocacy work with personal well-being and sustainability.

Remaining Resilient While Making a Difference - Google Drive

Mental Health Services - University of Calgary

This video resource highlights campus-based mental health programming and initiatives, offering insight into how institutions can communicate and deliver mental health supports in accessible and engaging ways.

Click here to watch the video

Physical Well-Being and Holistic Health

Prescription to Get Active

A Canadian initiative that supports healthcare providers and communities in promoting physical activity as part of overall health and well-being.

https://www.prescriptiontogetactive.com/

Communities Choosewell

An Alberta-based initiative focused on supporting community-level wellness through programs related to physical activity, nutrition, and healthy environments.

https://communitieschoosewell.ca/

Peer Support and Student-Led Initiatives

Centre for Innovationin Campus Mental Health (CICMH)

The Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health provides a wide range of resources related to student mental health, including toolkits, program guides, and research summaries. The organization works with colleges and universities across Canada to strengthen campus mental health initiatives.

https://campusmentalhealth.ca

Communities Choosewell

An Alberta-based initiative focused on supporting community-level wellness through programs related to physical activity, nutrition, and healthy environments.

https://communitieschoosewell.ca/

Peer Support Canada

Peer Support Canada offers training and resources related to peer support practices in a variety of settings, including post-secondary institutions. Their resources highlight the role of lived experience and peer relationships in supporting mental health and well-being.

https://peersupportcanada.ca

Supporting Diverse Student Communities

Indigenous Student Success Frameworks

Many Canadian post-secondary institutions have developed Indigenous student success strategies aimed at supporting Indigenous students through culturally grounded programming, mentorship initiatives, and community partnerships.

These frameworks emphasize the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems, relational approaches to learning, and culturally relevant support services.

https://univcan.ca/

International Student Support Resources

International students may encounter unique challenges related to cultural adjustment, language barriers, and unfamiliar academic systems. Several organizations have developed resources aimed at supporting institutions in strengthening engagement and support for international students.

https://cbie.ca

Student Mental Health and Help-Seeking

Jack.org

Jack.org is a Canadian organization focused on youth mental health advocacy and peer leadership. The organization supports student-led mental health initiatives on campuses across Canada and provides training programs for student leaders.

https://jack.org

Mental Health Commission of Canada

The Mental Health Commission of Canada provides research, reports, and resources related to mental health promotion, stigma reduction, and system change. Many institutions use their resources when developing campus mental health strategies.

https://mentalhealthcommission.ca

Using These Resources

The resources included intended to serve as starting points for further exploration. Institutions may choose to draw on these tools in different ways depending on their priorities, available resources, and student populations.

In many cases, the most effective engagement initiatives emerge through collaboration between students, faculty, staff, and community partners. By combining insights from research with lived experiences and local knowledge, campuses can develop approaches that meaningfully support student engagement and well-being.

Implementing the Toolkit on Your Campus

While every post-secondary institution has its own structures, priorities, and student populations, many campuses share common goals related to student engagement, belonging, and well-being. This toolkit is intended to support campus staff and key interest holders in reflecting on how engagement initiatives currently operate within their institutions and exploring opportunities to strengthen these efforts.

Rather than prescribing a single model, the toolkit offers a series of strategies and reflection tools that can be adapted to different institutional contexts.

Step 1: Start with Conversation

One of the most effective ways to begin using this toolkit is through conversation and reflection with colleagues across campus. Engagement initiatives often occur across multiple departments including student affairs, academic units, residence life, student associations, and wellness programs; yet these initiatives may not always be connected through a shared understanding of belonging and student well-being.

Institutions may wish to bring together small groups of staff, faculty, and student leaders to explore questions such as:

- How do students currently experience engagement on our campus?

- Where do strong connections and communities already exist?
- Which students may be less connected to existing opportunities?

These conversations can help identify both existing strengths and potential gaps in engagement initiatives.

Step 2: Map Existing Initiatives

As discussed earlier, many campuses already host a wide range of initiatives aimed at supporting engagement and well-being. Mapping these initiatives can help institutions better understand where engagement opportunities currently exist and how they contribute to student belonging.

Institutions can identify engagement initiatives across areas such as:

- Student Leadership Programs
- Peer Mentorship Initiatives
- Cultural and Identity-based Student Organziations
- Residence Life
- Academic Engagement Programs
- Campus Wellness Initiatives

Step 3: Identify Opportunities for Growth

Once existing initiatives have been mapped, campus staff may consider where additional opportunities for engagement may be beneficial. For example, they can explore:

- Creating new opportunities for Peer Connection
- Strengthening Mentorship Programs
- Supporting Student-Led Initiatives
- Expanding Spaces for Cultural and Identity-based Community Building
- Developing Programs that support Student Transitions into Post-Secondary Education

Importantly, these initiatives do not always need to be large-scale programs. In many cases, small, relational initiatives such as peer discussion groups or mentorship programs can have meaningful impacts on student belonging.

Step 4: Engage Students as Partners

Students themselves are essential partners in strengthening campus engagement initiatives. Their perspectives can provide valuable insights into how engagement opportunities are experienced and what types of initiatives may be most meaningful.

Engagement areas can include:

- Student Advisory Groups
- Peer Mentorship Initiatives
- Student Government
- Focus Groups

By involving students in the development andevaluation of engagement initiatives, institutions can create programs that are moreresponsive to student experiences and needs.

Step 5: Reflect and Adapt

Engagement initiatives are most effective when they evolve over time in response to student feedback and changing campus contexts. Institutions are encouraged to periodically reflect on questions such as:

- How are students experiencing engagement opportunities on our campus?
- Which initiatives appear to be fostering meaningful connections among students?
- What new challenges or opportunities have emerged?

Ongoing reflection and adaptation can help institutions ensure that engagement initiatives continue to support student belonging and well-being.

Conclusion

Student engagement plays a vitalrole in shaping students' experiences within post- secondary institutions. When students have opportunities to build relationships with peers, connect with faculty and staff, and participate in campus life, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging that supports both academic success and personal well- being.

Research consistently highlights the importance of social connection and belonging within post-secondary environments. Students who feel connected to their campus communities are more likely to persist in their studies, engage in learning, and seek support when needed (Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 2012). These findings underscore the importance of fostering campus environments that encourage meaningful relationships and inclusive engagement opportunities.

At the same time, the experiences of students are diverse and shaped by a range of social, cultural, and institutional factors. Students may encounter different opportunities and

barriers related to engagement depending on their identities, backgrounds, and life circumstances. Recognizing this diversity is essential for developing engagement initiatives that are inclusive and responsive to the needs of all students.

Across Canadian post-secondary institutions,many promising initiatives are already underway. From peer mentorship programs and student-led wellness initiatives to cultural and identity-based communities, campuses continue to explore innovative approaches to fostering connection and belonging.

The purpose of this toolkit is not to prescribe a single model for engagement but rather to support reflection, dialogue, and collaborationamong campus practitioners. By bringing together insights from research, practitioner experience, and student perspectives, institutions can continue to strengthen engagement initiatives that contribute to healthy and supportive campus environments.

Ultimately, fostering engagement and belonging is a collective effort that involves students, faculty, staff, and community partners. When institutions prioritize connection, collaboration, and inclusion, they create environments where students can thrive both academically and personally.