

SENSE OF BELONGING FOR MEN OF COLOR

Brief No. 2 | November 2021



As an increasing number of campuses take on the critical work of designing and implementing supports for undergraduate men of color, defining and articulating a theory of action promotes clarity and consistency among practitioners within and across campuses. This brief is one of nine dedicated to various facets of the theory of action driving implementation of the UW Brotherhood Initiative. In this brief, we describe the BI definition of *Sense of Belonging*, and an overview of the research on this concept as it pertains to undergraduate men of color. We also provide some examples of the ways in which the BI promotes a sense of belonging.

DEFINING SENSE OF BELONGING

The BI defines *sense of belonging* as a phenomenon that “captures the individual’s view of whether he or she feels included in the college community” (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 327) as well as the “degree to which an individual feels respected, valued, accepted, and needed by a defined group” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 87).

THE IMPORTANCE OF SENSE OF BELONGING FOR MEN OF COLOR

Sense of belonging was popularized in higher education research through Spady’s (1971) early work on perceived social integration and Tinto’s (1975) contributions to understanding college retention and dropout through the theory of departure. Later work by Rendón (1994) on validation theory surfaced how students from underrepresented backgrounds often experienced both isolation and a lack of a sense

of belonging in college contexts. Hurtado & Carter (1997) were able to distinguish sense of belonging from academic and social integration as a psychological factor dependent on a students’ subjective feelings of connectedness to the institution. Recent work by Strayhorn (2018) on sense of belonging for historically marginalized students has continued to shed light on how perceptions of campus membership, rather than integration, offer a clearer picture of the way experiences of belonging develop for racially and culturally diverse student groups.

For students of color - and particularly men of color - understanding students’ sense of belonging is important to understanding how particular forms of social and academic experiences may affect them (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Previous studies on sense of belonging for racially marginalized groups - particularly at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) - suggest that institutional climate plays an instrumental

role in the increase or decrease of sense of belonging (Chen, Ingram & Davis, 2014). For men of color attending PWIs, experiences of feeling alienated, isolated, unsupported, and unwelcomed by peers, staff, and faculty members have been well-documented (Lee & Ransom, 2012). To improve campus climate and increase sense of belonging for students of color, research points to strategies that promote and sustain meaningful interactions with diverse peers and faculty/staff (Hurtado et al., 2007; Locks et al., 2008, Strayhorn, 2008). Additionally, rather than expecting marginalized students to “bear the sole responsibility for success through their integration into existing institutional structures” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 526), institutions should develop structures and experiences that meet the needs of a growing number of students of color. (Bensimon, 2007).

CREATING A SENSE OF BELONGING IN PRACTICE

Within the Brotherhood Initiative, a sense of belonging is about a sense of connectedness. At a large, urban, predominantly White institution, men of color at the University of Washington can be challenged to find places and spaces where they feel like they can be themselves. Strategies to cultivate and expand a sense of belonging for men of color are central to the design and operations of the BI.

Developing a Supportive Learning Community

Sense of belonging is first and foremost fostered through the cohort-based model of the BI. Scholars participate in the credit-bearing BI seminar throughout their first and second

year and develop strong peer and professional relationships rooted in a mutual respect for cultural wealth, community values, and diverse academic strengths. Through these relationships, the BI classroom serves as an important space where social, academic, and institutional belonging converge.

The concept of sense of belonging is also a core curricular component of the first-year seminar. Scholars spend an entire quarter reflecting on how belonging relates to personal, academic, and professional success and well-being. For example, some assignments have asked Scholars to reflect on what sense of belonging has looked like to them in the past, as a way for them to better understand what they want it to be for them at UW and beyond. Through these independent and group assignments, Scholars are encouraged to find and/or envision UW communities that affirm their interests and intersecting identities.

The BI instructional team, which is comprised of faculty, staff, and graduate students of color, also plays a critical role in fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom. Not only does the team teaching approach maximize the varied expertise and strengths of each instructor, but it also offers the opportunity for students to develop relationships with a consistent group of UW staff who value and respect them, and who they know will serve as supports throughout their college journey.

Building Community Beyond the Classroom

Promoting a sense of belonging among the broader University of Washington community is also a key objective of the BI. For many men of color who may find themselves the only man of

color, or even person of color, in their classroom or major at a predominantly white institution, the BI serves as an affirming space that assures BI Scholars that “this is your institution.”

Co-curricular opportunities, professional development activities, and cross-cohort social engagements are designed to promote and foster a sense of belonging that extends beyond the classroom. For example, academic and social belonging are developed through multiple activities including an orientation for each incoming cohort, an annual retreat, study halls, monthly lunch gatherings, intramural sports teams, and a peer mentoring program.

Once Scholars choose a major, they are also encouraged and given ways to actively engage with and find community within their academic

departments in order to build networks with people in their field of study and promote socialization into their major. In addition, the BI coordinates an annual study abroad trip to Italy through which Scholars are able to explore race, masculinity, identity and education through an international lens. This collective experience supports Scholars in reflecting on belonging outside of the campus and U.S. environment.

Through these varied strategies, the BI builds academic, social, and institutional sense of belonging for students, which are critical components of the conditions for success in the BI Theory of Action. These conditions for success serve as guiding principles and a critical starting point for advancing equitable student outcomes.

Sources

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The nine briefs exploring the BI Theory of Action include:

- Introduction to BI Theory of Action
- Sense of Belonging for Men of Color
- Culturally Relevant Pedagogy for Men of Color
- Culturally Responsive Guidance for Men of Color
- Continuity of Support for Men of Color
- Academic Guidance and Support for Men of Color
- Psychosocial and Identity Development for Men of Color
- Career Development and Professionalization for Men of Color
- Community-Based Learning and Leadership Development for Men of Color

These briefs are available at <https://brotherhoodinitiative.org/research>

Suggested Citation

Bauman, K, Yeh, T. L., & Lott, J.L. (2021, November). *Sense of Belonging for Men of Color* (BI Theory of Action Series: Brief No.2). Seattle, WA: The Brotherhood Initiative, University of Washington.



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Acknowledgements: We thank Paul Metellus and Siamak Vossoughi for feedback on the draft of this brief. We also thank Dustin Mara for the document layout and design.