

Overview of Community Input from Spring 2026:

What Creates a Sense of
Belonging for Students in College
and Training Programs?



INTRODUCTION

Since the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Committee (HECC) adopted their 2024-2029 Strategic Plan, HECC staff members have been advancing implementation of the plan’s Goal 4, Belonging. In order to better understand what helps create a sense of belonging for students, HECC began working with Oregon’s Kitchen Table (OKT) and partner Izora Arts & Sciences (Izora) in early 2026 to conduct a statewide engagement process and systems analysis designed to:

- learn the perspectives, values, and ideas of Oregon learners; and
- identify the highest-impact opportunities for improving belonging in postsecondary education statewide.

Throughout spring 2026, in a variety of settings, approximately 1,100 people shared their experiences, perspectives and ideas related to students’ sense of belonging. We provide this summary of the first round of engagement so that HECC and Oregon’s post-secondary institutions may benefit from those experiences and ideas even as the engagement process continues. This is also intended to provide some background and a preliminary overview of community input as we invite people to participate in the next phase of engagement, to make connections between factors that influence belonging. A more detailed analysis will be included in a final, full report to be released in early 2027.

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Goal 4. Belonging: Elevate learner voices and support inclusivity and belonging in all postsecondary learning settings

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Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2024-2029 Strategic Plan

INTRODUCTION

As we listened to people’s stories about what creates a sense of belonging, though the specifics of what individual students need to feel a sense of belonging varies, some common themes emerged that crossed a range of identities, backgrounds, ideologies and interests.

In particular, many people talked about the quality of their interactions with others—particularly faculty, staff, and other students—and about how an institutional culture rooted in respect and dignity helps nurture a sense of belonging for students from a wide range of backgrounds. How individuals act and behave towards one another matters deeply when it comes to students feeling like they did, or could belong. And, along with individual actions and behaviors, the policies, practices and administrative processes at institutions all contribute to a culture that can create an environment where students feel more or less belonging.

Just as no single action will lead to a sense of belonging for all Oregon students and learners, no single decision maker can improve student sense of belonging statewide. HECC, post-secondary institutions, individuals, and community partners each play roles at different points for students. And, as several people noted during this process, a sense of belonging in postsecondary learning settings begins long before a student sets foot in a classroom, laboratory, studio, salon, or workshop. It begins with the sense that postsecondary learning is even a possibility, that “someone like me” could imagine themselves taking the necessary steps to lead them towards postsecondary learning.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Goals

- To hear from a variety of people in different parts of the state and from a variety of communities;
- To hear from current, recent, and prospective students who attend or have attended a variety of types of postsecondary learning institutions;
- To understand what people believe helps create a sense of belonging for students in places for learning;
- To hear what individuals and institutions could do to support student belonging; and
- To learn what actions people think HECC might take to support student belonging statewide.

Activities (Feb - June 2026)

- Individual and small group interviews
- Online and paper survey
- Community conversations
- Conversation tables at community events
- Culturally specific organizing and outreach
- Other formats and settings

Content

We asked people about:

- A time when they felt belonging at places for learning
- What made them feel that sense of belonging
- Series of questions around broad categories of factors we heard in initial interviews
- Series of questions about what could help support students' sense of belonging

PARTICIPATION

1,100 Oregonians

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- Over half of participants were prospective, current, and recent students
 - Preferred languages: English, Spanish, Russian, Ukrainian, Mandarin, Vietnamese and American Sign Language.
 - 27 Oregon counties and people who live elsewhere but attend a college or training program based in Oregon.

Including people from many backgrounds and students who are:

- English language learners
- immigrants or refugees
- LGBTQ2SIA+
- migrant workers or students
- Tribal members or citizens or identify as Native or Indigenous
- veterans
- international students
- online learners
- returning students
- dual credit or dual enrolled in high school and college
- transfer students
- students with a disability
- from rural communities
- first in their family to attend a postsecondary institution
- students who are parents

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

High-level patterns in the ways that people participated, as well as in the input itself

- Turmoil and uncertainty within institutions this spring
 - “Crisis moment” for higher education institutions in Oregon and beyond
 - People in “survival mode” and trying to meet basic needs, along with immense pressures affecting students’ ability to attend postsecondary learning institutions and complete courses and degrees
 - General lack of trust in higher education and a decreasing belief in the value of post-secondary learning
 - Changes to federal student loan eligibility and decreases in other funding streams
 - Recent increase in immigration enforcement activities across the state (and the country) contributes to a heightened sense of fear, a reluctance to publicly gather, and a feeling that some students don’t belong at all
- Belonging is multifaceted, contextual, and dynamic
- Eagerness to have this conversation
- Because they were glad to be asked, people talked about a range of experiences related to all kinds of postsecondary issues and contexts, not just about belonging.

BROAD, CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

Relationships & Community

Related to factors 1-11, 19, 27, 30, 33, 38, 43, 54

- Important for students to have opportunities to connect both with people with similar identities and life experiences and people from different backgrounds
- Faculty, staff, and peers have significant influence on creating a sense of belonging
- When people, institutions, and the broader system all recognize and support students for having a lot to contribute
- How people treat one another in a postsecondary community - kindness, respect, care

Student-Centered Culture

Related to factors 1-4, 25, 27, 32, 33, 37, 39, 43-48, 60, 69, 72, 74

- Students are seen as “whole people”
- Everything from campus design to coursework considers the realities of students’ lives
- Administrative aspects can make a student feel like they do *not* belong
- But access to programs or individuals specifically assigned to helping students navigate systems strengthens belonging
- Students with very particular interests – a line of study or an activity – feel a sense of belonging when that particular interest could be nurtured or fulfilled
- Cuts to the departments and programs that students care about most suggest that they no longer belong at their institution

Human & Navigable Systems

Related to factors 1, 37, 39, 43-48, 60, 69, 72

- The systems students interact with are designed for ease and have “real people” staffing them and supporting students.
- Importance of **trusted** individuals, institutional policies, and communications
- Desire for more help understanding and then navigating the “unwritten rules” in how post-secondary institutions and the system as a whole work

BROAD, CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

Respect & Agency

Related to factors 1, 2, 4, 7, 12-18

- Institutions, teachers, and the broader system recognize that students have a lot to contribute
- Students' ideas and initiatives are respected and supported
- Opportunities to create something or to demonstrate or show their work in some way.
- Being able to serve, volunteer, or help others
- Some about institutional "ownership" of those efforts: students want support but also autonomy and independence.

Quality & Relevant Education

Related to factors 21-42, 67, 68, 71

- Coursework that is rigorous and challenges students
- Courses and materials that are relevant to students' lives and aspirations
- *How* courses are delivered matters, including teachers that present material in a variety of engaging ways and can teach to different learning styles and paces.
- Hands-on learning, discussion settings, group projects, and interactive modalities

Multiple Perspectives, Experiences, Backgrounds, Cultures, and Languages

Related to factors 5, 6, 7, 10, 11,17, 21, 27-29, 34-36, 38, 40-42, 46, 53-55, 57, 70, 73

- Frequently heard the word "diversity."
- Dedicated spaces where students' identities and experiences are recognized and celebrated
- Feeling like students' perspectives - even if not widely shared - are welcome from peers, instructors, or staff - and students can then engage respectfully with differing viewpoints
- Planning for students' food, religious, and cultural needs - including more information and communication in students' and their families' preferred languages

BROAD, CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

Accommodations

Related to factors 11, 21-23, 31, 32, 41, 46, 48, 49-55, 60-62, 70, 73, 74

- Students would like to see institutions do better about accommodating people with disabilities or speak languages other than English or are parents or are full-time workers.
- More understanding about and pro-actively planning for accommodations.
- More consistency and clarity across institutions in how institutions provide accommodations.

A Variety of Physical Spaces

Related to factors 49, 50, 54, 55, 61-66

- A variety of well-supported spaces designed for a broad range of uses.
- Furniture – particularly chairs and tables – that is flexible enough to allow for gatherings of different sizes and types
- Well-kept, clean, and comfortable physical spaces with natural lighting

Community Specific Needs

Related to factors 5, 9-11, 72, 29, 32, 39, 38, 42, 46, 49-55, 60, 69, 70, 73, 74

- Students want to see faculty, staff, and other students that look like them and have similar backgrounds and experiences.
- Students see their identities and lives reflected in art, food, curriculum, learning materials, etc.
- Affinity centers play an important role for many students as spaces to “be myself” and receive community-specific support, recognition, and celebration

BROAD, CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

Basic Needs & Educational Funding

Related to factors 20, 56-60

- Students can get their needs (educational, personal, etc.) met in a streamlined fashion so they can focus on completing their education.
- Financial support - either to afford pursuing education or to help meet emergency needs - is of high concern for many people and an indication of whether they could potentially belong.
- Overall sense that students are cared for in different aspects of their lives

Well-Supported, Coordinated Institutions Statewide

Related to factors 35-37, 39, 41-43, 45-48, 56, 57, 67-69

- Need for integration and equity among institutions
- Connection to K-12 system
- Relationships with employers & community partners
- Students see budget cuts to their programs as signaling that they don't belong.
- Help with understanding cross-system issues (financial aid, etc.)

NEXT STEPS

Some of the ideas we heard about what HECC and postsecondary learning institutions could take are reflected in the set of factors attached below. As we move into the next phase of this project and invite people to participate in mapping out how factors can influence other factors, potential actions will come into sharper focus. Our final report will further explore what actions people suggest HECC and post-secondary institutions ought to consider.

This fall, OKT and Izora Arts & Sciences will invite learners and partners to participate in mapping relationships among a set of 74 factors derived from the input we received this spring. From that, OKT and Izora will conduct an analysis to identify the highest-impact opportunities – or “keystone factors” – for improving belonging in postsecondary education statewide. In early 2027, we will share a final report that provides more details about what Oregonians have shared and what the keystone factor analysis points to.

Together, community input and the keystone factor analysis will help inform future HECC policy, priorities, partnerships, and other actions to strengthen belonging across Oregon's postsecondary education and training institutions.



TIMELINE



FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING

This set of factors draws upon the input that people shared throughout the statewide community engagement process. In August 2026, OKT and Izora Arts & Sciences hosted conversations with institutional and community partners to further refine our initial set of factors. These factors as the basis of a factor relationship exercise that will help identify the factors with the highest potential to foster students' sense of belonging statewide.

#	FACTOR
1	All students and other people are treated with dignity, respect, fairness, kindness, and care rather than as numbers.
2	All students feel supported, accepted, and that they can succeed.
3	Institutions and leaders build trust through transparency, follow-through, and honest communication
4	Campuses are lively, creative, and multicultural places where people come together in shared purpose.
5	Students have ways to connect and build relationships and community with people they share something in common.
6	Students have ways to build relationships and community with people who are different than them.
7	Institutions organize events or activities for students to meet and interact with each other.
8	Students have ways to get to know teachers or staff outside of class.
9	Online students have ways to take part in student and campus life outside of classes.
10	Events and spaces account for dietary, cultural, recovery, transportation, and scheduling needs as well as people with disabilities
11	Students see and interact with people who are like them serving in a variety of roles.
12	Students have choices for classes or programs so they fit students' lives, goals and ways of learning.
13	Students' questions, ideas, and life experiences help shape classes and programs.

#	FACTOR
14	Students have many ways to be part of making decisions and being leaders at their institution.
15	Students can start or lead their own groups or projects and get support when they want it.
16	All students' feedback is valued and helps make decisions.
17	Students have respectful conversations with people with different beliefs, perspectives, or values.
18	Students who want to can showcase or publish their work in a variety of ways and places.
19	Teachers build strong connections with students to tailor their teaching to students' needs.
20	All students trust that teachers will support their well-being while helping them succeed academically.
21	All students know their teachers believe in their ability to do difficult work and succeed.
22	Students can ask questions, check their understanding, and actively participate in classes.
23	Teachers support different learning styles and paces.
24	Classes use a balance of discussion, collaboration, independent work, and hands-on learning, as well as breaks and movement.
25	Students get timely and clear expectations, instructions, and feedback.
26	Classes are fun, creative, and make students think.
27	Students can connect what they learn to their lives, interests, and futures.
28	Teachers encourage students to think critically and express and consider a range of opinions.
29	Course work draws from a wide range of cultures and points of view.
30	Students have the opportunity to be part of an academic cohort.
31	Students can get tutoring and academic help.
32	Flexible schedules account for students' jobs, transportation, and family needs.
33	Online classes have ways for students to connect live and build community.
34	Students can explore diverse subjects and ways of understanding the world in their programs.

#	FACTOR
35	Students can study and experience languages, the arts, and humanities.
36	Students can train for vocational, trades, and technical careers.
37	Well-run programs consistently offer the classes students need to complete their learning.
38	Students can earn credit for real-world, cultural, and community learning.
39	There are clear and welcoming ways for students to move between disciplines, institutions, and educational levels.
40	Students have opportunities for internships, practical training, field trips, professional experiences, and connections to alumni.
41	Early connections with K–12 to help students see how they can continue learning after high school.
42	Students can attend relevant programs close to home.
43	All students have a clear, trusted and friendly point of contact to help them navigate admissions, financial aid, and enrollment.
44	Advisors provide receive clear, accurate, and consistent information.
45	All students can easily complete enrollment, financial aid, and transfer steps with help from real people.
46	All students get help understanding the “unwritten rules” of college and training programs.
47	All students receive a warm welcome and guidance as they start, change, or continue their learning path.
48	Institutions have fewer, simpler administrative steps and give students more help with those steps.
49	Institutions proactively design for all abilities so students can meaningfully participate.
50	Grounds, classrooms, and restrooms are accessible for people of all abilities and identities
51	Services, technology, and other supports are easily available for students with disabilities.
52	Faculty, staff, and student leaders understand and practice disability inclusion and justice
53	Students can learn and get help in their preferred language as well as help with learning English if needed.
54	Students have access to resources that are specific to their culture, identity, or experience.

#	FACTOR
55	Students see their cultures and identities represented and celebrated in campus art, music, food, events, and communications.
56	There are no or fewer financial barriers to education and participation in activities.
57	All students can easily access coordinated help with emergencies and basic needs.
58	Students can get mental health support or care when they need it.
59	Students can get campus jobs and paid learning opportunities.
60	Students who are parents have access to a range of options to meet their child care needs.
61	Physical spaces feel safe, clean, well-lit, and open to all students.
62	Students have access to quiet, calm spaces to focus, work on their own, or take a break.
63	Students have places where they can meet, talk, play, and spend time with others.
64	Students have access to campus spaces that can be used in multiple ways.
65	Students can access fully equipped spaces for hands-on learning, labs, trades, and creative projects.
66	Students can easily walk around campus and find where they need to go.
67	Institutions have stable funding for good programs, faculty, staff, facilities, and services.
68	State, institutional, and community leaders advocate for the value of higher education and meeting student needs.
69	Students can easily move between schools and programs without losing credits, getting behind, or repeating classes.
70	Families and communities can support students throughout their education after high school.
71	Institutions and programs build strong relationships with employers, community groups, and K-12 schools.
72	Institutions are careful with students' data and personal information.
73	There are visible institutional commitments to DEI and protecting students, no matter their identities or immigration status.
74	Institutions take discrimination and harm seriously and actively address them when they occur.