

Featured Sessions

General Interest Sessions:

#iBelong: Interdisciplinary Strategies for Cultivating Inclusive Campus Environments Through Explored Social Media Use and Its Impact on Sense of Belonging (Dr. Carlton R. Smith, University of North Carolina, Wilmington)

The presenter will share findings from their dissertation study that will provide tangible strategies on how practitioners from a variety of disciplines can leverage social media and other avenues to build inclusive communities and foster a culturally responsive sense of belonging. The presenter will showcase how belonging is generated through social media in historically marginalized communities at Predominantly White Institutions. #iBelong also discusses concepts that impact belonging and how we can continue to grow in our understanding of belonging on collegiate campuses.

Beyond Academic Success: Cultivating Identity, Belonging, and Purpose for First Gen Students (Megan Elsen and Andrica Wilcoxon, University of Missouri, Kansas City)

The First Gen Roo Scholars (FGR Scholars) program at UMKC exemplifies an interdisciplinary, asset-based approach to supporting first-generation college students as they develop a strong sense of belonging, identity, and purpose. Rooted in social integration, learning, involvement, and change leadership theories, FGR Scholars provides professional development, peer-led mentorship, and community connections that help students leverage their unique strengths. Designed and led by first-generation peer mentors, the program incorporates feedback loops to ensure it evolves with the changing needs of students. This session explores FGR Scholars' interdisciplinary framework and its impact on retention, engagement, and success, offering practical insights for values-centered programming.

Building a Foundation for Interdisciplinary Learning in a First-year Seminar (Dr. Kari Taylor & Dr. Lisa Bromberg, Springfield College)

This session will focus on how to introduce interdisciplinary teaching and learning through a required first-year seminar course at a small private four-year institution. Presenters will engage participants in activities and assignments designed to foster interdisciplinary thinking among first-year college students pursuing a wide range of majors. Participants also will explore the benefits and challenges associated with introducing interdisciplinary teaching and learning to students as they enter college.

Decoding Ethics: Graduate Students' Personal and Professional Ethical Codes (Dr. Jonathan O'Brien & Arantxa Beltran, California State University, Long Beach)

This session is based on research in progress that examines higher education graduate students' personal codes of ethics, specifically the intersection of individual values and professional standards. We will discuss student-created codes and compare them to existing professional association standards. Participants will reflect on their own ethical code and discuss the influence of authenticity, boundaries, and leadership in equity-minded and ethical practice.

Exploring Identity and Belonging: Career Development Challenges for Autistic College Graduates (Dr. MaryEllen T. Stephens, West Chester University)

This presentation examines how identity and belonging affect autistic college graduates' careers. Based on qualitative research on autistic alumni's lived experiences, the session investigates how their identification affects their college-to-work transition. Narrative-based interviews will highlight their problems and accomplishments, as well as the importance of mentorship and personalized autism support programs in building confidence and belonging. By focusing on the intersection of identity, belonging, and career readiness, the presentation will provide insights into how educational institutions can better support neurodiverse students in achieving post-graduation success.

Flourishing Amid Hardship: Exploring Resilience Through Theological and Interdisciplinary Lenses (Dr. Olga Dietlin & Dr. Henrique Alvim, Wheaton College)

In this presentation, we explore flourishing through an interdisciplinary lens and propose that true flourishing includes resilience amid hardship. Drawing on perspectives from philosophy, education, psychology, and theological anthropology, we examine how adversity relates to personal growth and purpose. We examine institutional messages to students, including marketing materials and website content, and suggest that institutions can do more to help students navigate suffering as part of the human experience, reframing student success and support to foster holistic development. We seek a more comprehensive view of flourishing in higher education based on the integration of these perspectives and personal journeys.

Fostering a Guild Ethos: Interdisciplinary and Interrelational Learning in STEAM and Humanities (Dr. Christopher Dignam & Assma Daifallah, Governors State University)

This session presents the concept of a "Guild Ethos" to cultivate interdisciplinary and interrelational learning environments that foster values, identity, belonging, and purpose for learners. Inspired by the communal practices of Renaissance guilds, it emphasizes collaboration, mentorship, and the blending of STEAM and humanities curricula to support holistic academic, cognitive, social, and emotional development. Central to this approach is the creation of digital Communities of Practice (dCoPs), which act as modern guilds, facilitating interconnected learning and personal growth. Guild environments equip students with essential skills for academic achievement, personal growth, and lifelong learning in a rapidly evolving world.

Missing Pieces of Belonging (Abhishek Juneja, University of Kansas)

We all want to belong. Belonging is crucial to promote success, engagement, and well-being in college. However, our understanding of how belonging is experienced within institutions and student identities and how it relates to important outcomes is sparse, especially for students, from different cultures. Being mindful of so much work that has happened and is currently happening, this session presents a study conducted with an aim to revisit the conceptualization of belonging and identify the missing pieces of Belonging. The three missing pieces in Belonging are People, Processes and Place (3P).

Thriving in Interdisciplinary Teams: Designing a Values-Based Co-Curricular Program (Dr.

Dustin Evatt, Tiffany McLean, & Annaka Sikkink, North Carolina State University)

This session will explore interdisciplinarity in higher education, particularly as it relates to developing students' capacities to lead interdisciplinary teams. Presenters will discuss a recently launched co-curricular workshop series at NC State University, designed to help students identify personal and collective values and understand how these values enhance interdisciplinary collaboration. The session will provide an in-depth look at the interdisciplinary development and implementation of this program, from initial planning to execution. Participants will gain practical strategies for creating similar programs at their own institutions, aimed at fostering students' leadership in interdisciplinary teams and enhancing the inclusivity of academic environments.

Transborder Scholars Thriving Institute: Reimagining Hispanic-Serving Institutions at the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands (Dr. Vannessa Falcón Orta & Carlos Fitch, San Diego State, Imperial Valley)

As we continue through the Trump Era, we are called to reimagine Hispanic Serving Institutions at the U.S.-Mexico borderlands (Border-HSIs) as safe spaces of socio-cultural inclusion for all students. At the Transborder Scholars Thriving Institute, we are dedicated to the social justice of Transfronterizx (Transborder) students through initiatives that empower our community to thrive despite geopolitical unrest at the borderlands. As this hostility is amplified during the Trump Era, we must transform Border-HSIs now. This paper shares insights from our Transborder Thriving Initiatives, aiming to inspire educators to support the holistic development of Transfronterizx students in their Border-HSIs.

Roundtable Sessions:

Inclusion for Whom? Rethinking Belonging in the Neoliberal University (Anthony Cruz, Tufts University)

This facilitated dialogue seeks to examine the ways neoliberal discourses of diversity and belonging in higher education avert a necessary ethic of discomfort and hermeneutics of suspicion to protect white colonial subjectivities. I argue the disavowal to contend with the historical, political, and material complexities of difference reifies sentimentalism and empathy devoid of structural analysis and perpetuates an ethos of "unbelonging." Through autoethnographic vignettes, this roundtable is guided by the questions: (1) What do commitments of inclusive excellence in the university invoke? (2) How can programs facilitate conditions and practices that critically apprehend difference, belonging, and mutual recognition?

News Media Impact on Teacher Identity in the Commonwealth of Virginia During Times of Education Crisis (April Weber Hewko, Virginia Commonwealth University)

The media-driven construction of truth and reality has significant implications for teacher identity, which is influenced by how educators are represented in public discourse. Like other states, Virginia's political landscape has been marked by school disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and Governor Youngkin's education platform, which pitted parents against schools. In this session, I report preliminary findings from my dissertation, exploring how negative media framing affects the post-2020 identity of Virginia's public school teachers,

including their morale, job satisfaction, and retention. These findings highlight deeper, often overlooked factors contributing to the teacher exodus.

Women in Systemic Leadership: Creating Sustainable Practices for Identity and Belonging (Dr. Aubrey Holt & Dr. Dana Tribble, Arkansas Tech University)

This presentation explores how women in leadership positions foster inclusive and diverse environments across educational and social institutions. Through the lens of formal and informal gatherings, we examine how these spaces cultivate leadership development, interdisciplinary collaboration, and a sense of community. By connecting personal identity with collective purpose, these gatherings drive long-term systemic change, promoting belonging and equity. The session highlights strategies for leveraging networks to support innovative programs and leadership initiatives in both academic and community settings.