

# Bonus! Episode 5: Extended Interview with Tony Chambers

Season 1, Episode 5  
The L&S Exchange Podcast

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**Erika Schock:** Welcome to a special bonus episode of the L&S Exchange, a podcast about teaching and learning within the College of Letters & Science at UW-Madison. We are excited to share with you our conversation with Tony Chambers, the Director of Equity, Innovation and Inclusion at the Center for Healthy Minds.

During this episode, Tony Chambers sits down with Exchange producer, Molly Harris, to discuss challenges and opportunities for instructors looking to foster a sense of belonging in their classrooms. We were thrilled to gather so much insightful information on this subject, and we're excited to share it with our listeners.

**Molly Harris:** So I know that belonging has been a big emphasis for you and if we're thinking of the teaching and learning spaces, in the classroom setting, what role does belonging play inside the classroom?

**Tony Chambers:** First of all, thanks for having me. I'm looking forward to this conversation and hopefully it makes sense as we go along.

So, belonging. Well, first of all, I think it's important to define what we mean when we talk about belonging and it's fairly simple. It's people who feel like there's somebody who has their best interest in mind, particularly somebody that's of value to them. If we're talking about students, it's an adult or a person that they hold in high esteem caring about them and demonstrating that care.

It's also providing spaces and opportunities for students to see themselves and hear their thoughts reflected back to them, in all kind of spaces, whether it's curricular or co-curricular. And at some level it's about a critical mass because if you don't see yourself daily in very organic spaces and you don't have to work too hard to see somebody that sort of reflects you, reflects back to you yourself, it's hard to believe that you are in the right place.

Right? So the critical mass. The reflecting back, the creating opportunities and experiences for students to share their voice and see themselves, right? It's the

demonstration of care by folks who you hold in fairly high esteem. In most cases, for students, it would mean faculty and or people in the student services or student affairs arena, as well as peers. So that's when we think about belonging, that's how one constructs a sense of belonging.

On this campus, like many college campuses, this lack of a sense of belonging has led to or contributed to some pretty difficult outcomes for students, particularly in the mental health arenas. And it's also manifested in terms of student performance. Students who don't have a high sense of belonging don't perform well, typically, at places like this. They don't persist. In other words, they don't stick around very long. And that's not just true for students. It's true for faculty, staff, and others as well. Students have a higher degree of depression and anxiety. We know that to be true from much of the work that's been done in the mental health fields and health areas.

I think one of the missing ingredients, often missing ingredients, when we talk about belonging, particularly on college campuses, is we pay little attention to the role of the surrounding community. And we in Madison, fortunately, are trying to pay some attention, some intentional attention to crafting spaces where people who come to this campus, if they don't find their sense of belonging immediately in the campus environment, that there are outlets surrounding the campus where they could feel at home. And they could feel taken care of. And they could feel seen, and they feel like they have opportunities to be with and express who they are.

**Molly Harris:** I'm wondering if you have particular strategies that you've used in your classroom to promote a sense of belonging among students.

**Tony Chambers:** At the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and other places I've taught, one of the things we do intentionally, and we do this in the Art and Science of Human Flourishing quite intentionally with our teaching team, is we make sure that the material that's used in class, the things that are read, the kind of discussion prompts we have students discuss, reflect the kind of diversity that's represented, not only in the classroom, but reflected across the country, and hopefully will soon be reflected in the city of Madison.

So we use material that comes from various sources. We don't use the standard forms of documents, research papers that only reflect one standard of valid knowledge. We try to avoid using only white men as the standard, which has been the typical, and the class started that way. It was mostly, and it's still heavily on that side, but mostly, knowledge that was generated by white men. And that sends a signal to students that, okay, people that look like me didn't generate any valid knowledge, or there's nothing that we can contribute, so I'm gonna have to learn their way of thinking and not have our way of thinking represented. So that disconnects students from the learning experience, but we try to intentionally address those kind of issues. For every class, we

think about the material that's being presented and how it contributes to the theme or to the learning objectives that we're trying to achieve in the course through a lens that reflects the students' lived experiences and history and background.

The teaching team—who does the teaching matters a whole lot. So in that course, like in many courses, I would imagine, the team—we were intentional about making sure the team reflected the kind of student body that we wanted in the classroom. So the TAs, the Instructional team, the core instructional team are made up of people from experiences. Right? And we try to encourage people to bring themselves, not only the course content and the themes we want to cover, but themselves as human beings with different lived experiences into that learning experience and share with students.

We have dedicated sections for some underrepresented students. There are dedicated sections for students who identify or been classified as honor students. And hopefully in the future we'll have dedicated sections for other populations, students, subpopulations. And it matters. They've told us in our evaluations that it matters who the instructor is, who the lead facilitator is in those sections, as well as in the larger course.

What's also critical about that, and I think it's been really pretty cool, is that students who don't fit into those subpopulations, for example, if it's underrepresented students, if we have overrepresented students in the class, they feel like they're getting a better learning experience if they're exposed to the diversity of instructors as well as material, as well as question prompts and opportunities to share their perspectives and engage other students who may be quite different than them.

One of the things that I would encourage people to do, if possible, sometimes we aren't very open to this, but sitting in on other folks' classes. You know, I would be quite open, I don't know where my colleagues stand on this, but I would be quite open to having instructors who are concerned about these kind of issues—creating a community, belonging, creating a space where students, diverse students, could learn the best in their optimal ways—but visit the class, sit in and watch how we make mistakes, how we create spaces, the challenges we have of ourselves. Sit in on our weekly team meetings, sit in on the conversations between TAs and lead instructors. I mean, it's extremely high touch course and high tech in many ways because we use quite a bit of technology in the course, and there are multiple personalities, and I think it would be instructive to see that you don't have to agree on everything in order to create an optimal space.

**Molly Harris:** So one of the things that we've been hearing a lot about and thinking about in the IDC is social media and contentious current issues and the abundance of those in students' lives through social media. How have you seen your students

experiencing that in the classroom and with each other?

**Tony Chambers:** That is quite interesting. One of the interesting observations about big classes, and again, I don't think we're the only group that's teaching large classes that have recognized this, is that on any given day, with the large 250 students, most of the students are on multiple forms of technology at the same time. They could have a phone looking at whatever they do on a phone. They could be on a computer, right? They could have their headphones in, listening to something else. At the same time, they're taking notes on the lecture. Now, I don't know how the brain works like that, to be honest, but what I do know is that many of these students are very good students in terms of how they perform on the measures that we provide them.

The other thing I notice is that very rarely do they initiate communication, large group communication. Like if we ask a question, it's rare that many of the students will raise their hand and offer comment or offer observations. Some do.

But the students who are juggling multiple forms of technology, I think they're just over—I don't know if they're overwhelmed. I'm overwhelmed looking at 'em, to be honest with you, that they're juggling all of this stuff.

So what we suggested in one of our team meetings was that the teaching team, the large teaching team, sit in different places of the large room. Every session, I mean every plenary session, and observe the students and what they're doing and how they're doing what they're doing. The common observation is that students are actually tuned into the course.

What we provide them are some of our slides and other types of material online through Canvas, so they could look at the course, the slides that are being presented, the kind of material that's being provided. At the same time, we are talking a little bit about them and trying to make sense of the material, so they're getting this double hit of knowledge.

And if there is something that we reference in class that's not a part of the slides or something like that, it's a research study or something like that, they actually go and search the study out and they start reading the study while they're getting all this other information. And the odd part—well, not odd, I guess—what's shocking to me is that they can shop on Amazon at the same time. It's amazing. And I so want to ask them, you know, is this an artifact of college life or has this been part of your learning trajectory? Did this happen in high school, middle school? My hunch is that it didn't just start when they came to college.

This is a form of learning that most of us who teach aren't used to, and we misunderstand it and think it's a distraction. We think it's multitasking, which some people think is a negative way of learning. We don't look at it as an organic way of

learning for a different generation. So we have that disconnect as well. And one of the ways that we need to be better at addressing this disconnect is actually ask students upfront, what's your best way of learning? Walk me through how you learn. I mean, it sounds like an odd question, particularly for people whose way of doing this is organic and natural for them to think about, okay, so I look at what you're teaching, I make sense out of it. I scope out the material that you're saying to see if it has any validity for me. I process it from my own learned experiences all at the same time and rapid time. And when there's five minutes of me all caught up, I shop on Amazon or I look at, listen to some music. It's not an oddity, I don't believe, but we need to do a better job at trying to understand how students learn, because I think that'll help us reconstruct the learning experience so they could attend to the optimal learning for our students.

I taught a FIG and the title of the FIG was Flourishing in Contentious Times. And the thing we tried to do in this thing was to figure out of all the contentious issues that people are facing now, much of it reflected through social media or what other forms of media. And it was during debates around Roe versus Wade or if there was mass shootings or if there was racial reckoning during the time. We tried to get some of the kernel of those issues and we would take one of the dimensions of flourishing that we talk about in class and try to make sense of those issues through that particular lens. And can I tell you, it was mind bending for me to see how students thought about the issues that all of us are overloaded with on a daily basis, some of these huge issues, through the lens of courage or community, through the lens of interdependence or something like that.

And they would—And we'd have readings that would touch on not only the contentious issue, but on the theme du jour or the component du jour. Students think quite deeply. They think quite deeply, and they process a lot of information all the time, right? Sometimes in real time, and sometimes they've had prior thoughts that need to be added to complement and supplement by other information. So that's one of the things that gave me a clear sense that students, you know, they live in these issues and I think it's reflected sometimes in their level of mental health, the level of anxiety, the level of depression, some of their wonderment they have, but people like me would not have had to think about to the degree that they do right now, and it's—they're at 'em 24 hours a day. This information is nonstop and sometimes it's conflicting and they have to process all of this stuff. It's a weird world they live in and it surprises me every day that they are able to navigate that and still learn.

**David Macasaet:** Hey everybody. This is Exchange producer David Macasaet. I asked a couple questions of Tony off camera, so I'll restate them now. The first one being with instructors facing some of the same challenges as students, how do instructors keep themselves healthy?

**Tony Chambers:** The last dissertation that I supervised at the University of Toronto

was focused on mental health issues for faculty, and it was such an odd research project. Because what she found out up front, and she had to work really hard at this, is getting faculty to talk about some of the ways in which they're affected by the environment. They're affected by this expectation that they know everything and that knowledge is currency and in order to advance in the field, you gotta build up your currency like money. And it led to all kind of mental health challenges for faculty, many of which reflected the kind of mental health challenges that we talk about when we talk about student mental health challenges. But we don't pay as much attention to those. The sense is that there's this expectation that we have all of our stuff together and we can't demonstrate any kind of wobble or anything to students, mental health or otherwise.

So your question about how do we deal with students when we have similar issues? I mean, how do we walk in the world when all those dynamics that challenge them challenge us because we're humans? How do we still keep our stuff together to support their learning?

I don't think there's one answer to that. Unfortunately, we don't take care of ourselves well enough. And I think it's manifested in some of our behaviors. We can be—we, some faculty, can create hostile environments for students unintentionally. And sometimes intentionally. We lay on people different levels of expectations. Some toward students, some toward our colleagues, some toward colleagues that think different and perform differently than we do. So we can be quite intolerant of certain individuals and sometimes we're intolerant of students in the ways in which they learn and perform.

Mindfulness. We did talk a little bit about that, but trying to center oneself in the moment without judgment and pay attention to what's going on, to sort of be quite attuned, sort of this metasense of how I'm thinking, what's going on in my head. It's almost like you're thinking, you're talking to yourself, kinda like that solo faculty person in the room. What is going on? How am I responding? How am I feelings driving my behavior? How does my thinking become reality when in reality it's only thinking, right? It's only my thoughts. These are the kind of things that I think would be helpful for faculty to learn in order to better support optimal learning for students.

I think reevaluating, which many, many institutions are doing right now, but reevaluating what it means to be a productive scholar, to be a productive faculty member. That's part on the instructors, on the faculty members. It's also part on the institution and just on the culture of education or higher education as a whole that those discussions need to happen. And the value of what it is that we produce for other people, right? In other words, if what we produce in our scholarship does not lead to or directly or tangentially to the betterment of somebody else's life, then what's the purpose of doing it? Knowledge in and of itself is important. I'll grant you that. Basic research is a cool thing, just to generate knowledge. But at some level what

we understand is that to serve other people serves us physically and mentally. If we do well by others, if we do for others, it helps us. And if we think of our profession and the research and the teaching like that, then I think we'd ask different questions in our scholarship. We'd interpret received results and data very differently. I think we would engage different populations differently, earnestly, not just to generate knowledge, but to create better spaces in lives for people. Again and in return, it would help improve our own lives.

I think we would engage students both inside and outside of the classroom to understand them not as just vessels to dump knowledge into, but as people who actually bring their stories to the classroom that are just as valid as the knowledge that we're trying to impart or share or have them exchange in the classroom environment.

If we could meet them in spaces where they consider important spaces and not just in spaces where we consider important spaces, I think we'd have a different dynamic. And I think we have different outcomes and results. And I think, connected to the belonging thing, I think we'd create a different environment where many people would have this deeper sense of connection and belonging because they would feel respected and seen and heard and valued in very, very different ways.

**David Macasaet:** The final question that I interjected was our One Cool Thing question, seeing if Tony had anything that he's really interested in right now that he'd like to share with our audience.

**Tony Chambers:** The thing that's got me super jazzed these days is I'm working with this nascent community-based operation and town here, unique around the country, and it's run or developed and now being run by Reverend Dr. Alex G, who is a prominent leader in the Madison community, and he's created and raised a whack of money for this thing that's called the Center for Black Excellence and Culture, and many of the leaders in the Madison community have committed time and resources to the development of this thing.

Again, it's unique to any kind of place that I've been, and it's multi-dimensional. He has asked me to give special attention to the development of the wellbeing and health for black folks segment or focus of this very large operation, and I've been working with some really cool people in the community as well as beyond to help construct this comprehensive sort of approach to health and wellbeing for members of the black community here in Madison.

And we've been on this journey to find people around the country and in some cases around the world who can help us develop this project, this initiative. The concept and the need is so great and the level of commitment across backgrounds in Madison has just been overwhelming. Being a part of that has probably helped me think differently

about life as an African American person in Madison, in Wisconsin, bar none. There has been nothing to compare. So that bit of work has been rejuvenating. I think it's been one of the healthiest things I've done since I've been here.

**Erika Schock:** Thanks once again for listening to the special bonus episode. We hope you found the additional information helpful, and we'd love to hear your thoughts. Let us know how we're doing by leaving a review on Apple Podcasts or add to the conversation by leaving us a voicemail. Check out conversation starters and resources on our website.

Until next time, On Wisconsin.