

Belonging at College of IT (COIT): The Discovery Phase

Susie Chen, PhD; Manager of Solutions Lab, WGU Labs
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This research was produced out of the Solutions Lab, a structured research sandbox that aims to improve WGU's Key Results by pilot testing interventions at targeted moments of challenge or inequity within the WGU student experience.

GENERAL PROJECT GOALS

The current research draws from the large body of literature on the role of belonging in shaping learning outcomes of underserved student groups (see Walton & Brady, 2017 for a review). Sense of belonging is a critical predictor of downstream academic success, and everyday challenges or frustrations can reduce perceptions of belonging for underserved students, ultimately undermining their success (Walton & Brady, 2017; Walton & Cohen, 2011). These disparities may be heightened in an online learning environment, where students have more asynchronous course engagement and fewer, if any, face-to-face interactions with their peers (Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Absent in-person interactions and opportunities, the online learning environment may seem lonely or disengaging for students, especially those who may already be contending with societal expectations that their group is not meant to belong in higher education. This project involves customization and implementation of a social belonging intervention for WGU students, with a focus on students who come from historically underserved groups.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED

This report focuses on insights from the first Discovery phase of research, which focused on:

- Understanding the first-time, first-term WGU student experience
- Uncovering potential points of challenge or success during the transition into WGU and the first term

We recruited first- and second-term students enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Cloud Computing (BSCC) or Information Technology (BSIT) programs. Roughly 800 students were sent emails inviting them to attend focus groups. Four students ended up attending focus groups; due to this low sample, we then sent emails with a link to an open-ended survey. Eight students completed the survey, leading to a total of 12 student participants. All focus group and interview responses were transcribed, and notes were coded and used to generate qualitative findings.

Who were the student participants?

- Five BSIT students and seven BSCC students
- Seven first-generation college students
- Seven students identified as white, three students identified as Black and/or African-American, one identified as Hispanic/Latinx, and one identified as Asian/Asian-American
- Seven students were employed and working full-time, two of the students were employed part-time, two were unemployed, and one student was retired

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: FINDINGS

FINDING 1: INITIAL WORRIES CENTER AROUND FIGURING OUT HOW TO SELF-PACE THROUGH COURSES

The majority of students expressed excitement about their time at WGU and spoke about many moments of growth that they have experienced at the institution. When asked about initial worries when coming into WGU, students' responses mostly centered around worries about managing their own time, given the self-paced nature of WGU courses. One student said that as he was applying to WGU, he thought that he would be able to complete his degree within the first term. After enrolling, he realized that he had to pace himself and "tell myself that I couldn't finish my education in 6 months. I had to be realistic and slow down a bit." Three of the students explicitly noted that they had never taken any type of IT certification before, so they were nervous about how to prepare for this kind of assessment.

For students who work while completing their WGU studies, finding the time to study is also another obstacle they encounter. One student remarked that if she could go back and give advice to her first-term self, she would "definitely tell myself to have better time management. If you can't study for a few hours a day, 1-2 hours a day adds up."

FINDING 2: MOST BELONGING DERIVES FROM PROGRAM MENTOR AND COURSE INSTRUCTOR INTERACTIONS

When asked about how they define belonging, students largely said that belonging meant "community." As one student commented, "[Belonging] means a lot- feeling that you are a part of the community of people who are here for the same reason you are. Belonging means I am not alone on my learning journey." For many of the students, belonging at WGU means that they are surrounded by students pursuing the same program or degree, sharing the same experiences, and/or coming together with other students.

Despite this, however, when we asked students what helps them feel like they belong, eight of the students pointed to their relationships with program mentors (PMs) or course instructors (CIs). For example, one student said, "My mentor makes me feel like I belong, and that she and WGU care about my success and progress." In particular, one student noted an interaction with

their CI that made him feel especially like he belonged. “I received an ‘Excellence’ on one of my assessments in English. My course instructor called me to talk about it. This made me feel like I belonged, that someone was reaching out. It made me feel like I was not one of many students, getting that personal attention.” At a large, online university like WGU, moments where the student felt like they were being recognized or personally attended to helped promote the sense that they belonged to the WGU community.

FINDING 3: STUDENTS SEEK CONNECTION WITH THEIR PEERS, MOSTLY FOR ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND NETWORKING…

Though students were interested in connecting with their peers as means for building belonging, it was not for purely social reasons. Rather, students commented that they wanted to connect with other students mostly for networking and course support purposes. Three of the students specifically noted that they were interested in building out their network, and that connecting with other WGU students could “lead to employment opportunities in the future.”

Seven of the students commented specifically on wanting to connect with their peers to form study groups or go over course content. A student noted that he would appreciate having more opportunities to “pick fellow students’ brains” as he felt it would give him multiple perspectives to look at things. This sentiment was voiced by other students as well, who said that having more opportunities to create study groups or even live discussions with their classmates and peers would help them feel more connected and more supported throughout their learning experience. “I think that shared experience and exchange of ideas helps to grow as a person and helps the learning process,” said one student.

However, not all were interested in connecting with their WGU classmates. One student remarked that WGU did not feel like a “student-connected type of environment”, noting the online nature of the institution. In a similar vein, another student said that learning at WGU is a bit lonely: “I do have times when I feel like I am on an island with studying, that there is a lack of community that I did find at traditional university. I guess that is the drawback of such a self-paced program.”

FINDING 4: ..BUT STUDENTS DO NOT ALWAYS KNOW HOW TO CONNECT WITH PEERS

Despite students wanting to connect with their peers, they oftentimes did not know how to go about the process. One student noted that although “I am very interested in making peer connections at WGU, I am not sure what steps to take to accomplish this.”

Students suggested a variety of different potential solutions for creating these connections. One student said that “it would be great to find out if there are any WGU students in the area where I live, so we could have in-person meet-ups.” Other students commented that potential opportunities for connection could happen within the course –perhaps creating live chat sessions with other students, the CI facilitating study groups and grouping students together, or even something as simple as students consenting to have their emails listed within a class roster

so that their peers could reach out. Currently, one student said “it is hard to know who exactly is taking the course with you, which leads to a feeling of disconnection.”

This is not to say that means for connection do not already exist. One student did say that he used Course Chatter, but wished that something similar could be created for students more generally, not just within their course. Another student said that he is able to create connections using online communities, such as through Reddit, Discord, and Facebook groups. It is clear, however, that more transparency and communication is needed to make these avenues for connection more visible for students.

NEXT STEPS

These findings helped shed light on the incoming student experience into BSCC and BSIT and illuminated some initial challenges that students might face when coming into WGU. We will use these insights to customize quotes to be used in the belonging intervention. These quotes feature the following narrative arc, where a student...

1. Faces a challenge in their transition to university,
2. Wonders if this challenge signifies their lack of belonging,
3. Finds a solution/realizes this challenge occurs for all students, and subsequently
4. Develops a sense of community and belonging in their academic and social environment.

Using the findings from the Discovery work, we will create quotes that highlight the following student challenges and related solutions:

- Worrying about the self-paced nature of WGU *but then* learning how to manage their time
- Nervousness at juggling school work with a full-time job *but then* connecting with their PM about strategies for scheduling their schoolwork
- Feeling lost within the large, online environment at WGU *but then* receiving personalized support/attention from their PM or CI
- Not knowing how to connect with peers *but then* participating in an online study group organized by their CI and finding like-minded peers who had the same struggles
- Feeling like they won’t be able to handle a tough IT certification *but then* reading tips on online community groups that made them feel more prepared and less alone

The next phase of research (Design/Test) will focus on crafting and refining these quotes. We plan for the quotes to be embedded within the BSCC and BSIT orientation modules for the February 1st, 2024 cohort.

The next research brief will come out in March 2024, containing examples of the customized quotes and some preliminary insights from the pre-intervention surveys that students complete.