

Culture of Belonging

SUMMARY

Initial Charge

As an exemplary university, the University of Miami seeks to model the values of respect and belonging central to a vibrant learning community. The Culture of Belonging working group will explore strategies for enhancing an environment of inclusion on campus. Going beyond the metrics of diversity, the group will recommend actions that can create a campus where all members of the University community feel valued and have the opportunity to add value.

Guiding Principles

- A Culture of Belonging (CoB) is defined as an environment where all constituents have the freedom to be themselves and connect with others while contributing to our common future. A Culture of Belonging values each individual and their contributions to the greater goals of the University.
- A Culture of Belonging is essential to UM's future as an exemplary institution of knowledge creation.
- To build a Culture of Belonging, a variety of campus stakeholders must drive the process and a multiplicity of perspectives and sentiments must be embraced.
- Significant activity related to a Culture of Belonging is already happening at UM. Any new proposals must complement and build from this existing context.
- To create a Culture of Belonging that can be sustained over time we need both specific, targeted actions and institutionalized structures.

Proposals

The proposals in this paper cut across the following areas:

- Coordination: Organize and align complementary activities across campuses.
- Measurement: Gather, measure, analyze, share and discuss related data.
- Scholarship: An applied research center to generate analysis and best practices.
- Communication: Ensure stakeholders remain informed about related activities.
- Discrete Projects: Specific actions to elevate and enhance a Culture of Belonging in the near term.

Measuring Progress

The primary measure of progress for this initiative will be enhanced sentiments of belonging among stakeholders across all campuses. However, the set of projects proposed in this paper encompass systems development, research, data collection and convening activities that, while mutually reinforcing, will be measured by quantitative and qualitative metrics for each project.

Culture of Belonging

Introduction

Universities are grounded in a commitment to intellectual diversity and the examination of complex questions from multiple perspectives. While this emphasis has over time led to changes in who attends, teaches at and is represented by universities, alienation and a sense of disconnection continue to surface among students, staff and faculty on campuses nationwide. This is a serious challenge as disassociation and alienation can negatively impact a university's central mission to produce knowledge. There is a need to move beyond numerical metrics for diversity and inclusion and foster a **Culture of Belonging (CoB)** on campuses, where all students, faculty, staff and alumni have a sense of connection to their university, where they have the opportunity to contribute and where their contributions are valued.

The University of Miami (UM) is positioned to further its reputation and standing by building a Culture of Belonging in which diverse campus constituencies can more deeply connect in the creation of knowledge. Building this culture is no easy task. This endeavor will require resources, time and serious commitment. For three months the Culture of Belonging Quad worked to formulate a set of proposals to further a Culture of Belonging on UM's campuses.

The principles that guided the Quad's work include:

- A Culture of Belonging is defined as an environment where all constituents have the freedom to be themselves and connect with others while contributing to our common future. A Culture of Belonging values each individual and their contributions to the greater goals of the University.
- A Culture of Belonging is essential to UM's future as an exemplary institution of knowledge creation.
- To build a Culture of Belonging, a variety of campus stakeholders must drive the process and a multiplicity of perspectives and sentiments must be embraced.
- Significant activity related to a Culture of Belonging is already happening at UM. Any new proposals must complement and build from this existing context.
- To create a Culture of Belonging that can be sustained over time we need both specific, targeted actions and institutionalized structures.

In developing the proposals in this document, the Quad emphasized two complementary and simultaneous streams of work, considering how to have an impact at both *structural* and *tactical* levels. Proposals are grouped in two broad areas:

- (1) Building Infrastructure for a Culture of Belonging
- (2) Opportunities to Promote a Culture of Belonging

Culture of Belonging

1. Building infrastructure for a Culture of Belonging

Proposal 1: Culture of Belonging coordination

There is a significant level of activity on UM's campuses related to building a culture of belonging. From the appointment of the Vice Provost for Institutional Culture, the Culture Transformation Initiative and ongoing efforts within UM's Human Resources Department aimed at reforming policies and procedures, to the creation of the Standing Committee on Diversity and Inclusion, to the work of many student and staff organizations, it is clear that issues of connection and community are vitally important across UM's campuses. Yet this work's breadth across departments and constituencies could serve to create silos rather than build bridges toward an integrated university fabric. Work at other universities demonstrates a growing trend toward creating structures explicitly focused on addressing and coordinating efforts to further campus diversity and belonging.

To address the disparate and often isolated work that is directly related to the culture on UM's campuses we propose the creation of a *CoB Coordination Platform (CCP)* to identify and help align all culture transformation, diversity and inclusion efforts to ensure specific initiatives contribute to a shared, broader university-wide Culture of Belonging.

This work should fall under the Vice Provost of Institutional Culture and be informed by existing groups, in addition to, UM's Culture Leadership Team and the Standing Committee on Diversity and Inclusion. The CCP will be convened on a quarterly basis and will include representation from:

- student organizations;
- employee resource groups;
- faculty; and
- alumni and community partners.

Proposal 2: Culture of Belonging Barometer

The Quad undertook an assessment of activities related to a Culture of Belonging at the University of Miami and other universities. This analysis revealed that Culture of Belonging is conceived differently by constituent groups (faculty, staff, student, alumni). For example, for some students belonging included involvement in campus decision making processes, and for others their individual ability to develop meaningful relationships across socioeconomic and cultural boundaries. Meanwhile, some faculty and staff perceived belonging as it relates to livelihoods, while others considered belonging in terms of their ability to contribute to the University's mission. The conceptual ambiguity surrounding Culture of Belonging is further complicated by a lack of baseline data to measure where UM stands in terms of building a Culture of Belonging. The Quad identified a need to develop a shared definition of a Culture of Belonging across constituencies at UM, and then develop ways to regularly measure progress in a manner that can both enhance belonging and identify threats to belonging. Creating this foundation of a shared vision and common measures of success are critical to developing a Culture of Belonging at UM or any institution.

The *Culture of Belonging Barometer* will be an ongoing, campus-wide, multi-method data collection practice aimed at measuring perceptions and sentiments surrounding UM's Culture of Belonging. The mechanism should be created with the following criteria:

- Measurement will be based on a clear definition of Culture of Belonging that is informed by and shared across constituents and across UM campuses.

Culture of Belonging

- Data collection will include many methods (i.e., surveys, forums, “critical conversations,” town halls, focus groups, etc.) and engage multiple stakeholders beyond campus leadership. Opportunities that enable constituents (faculty, staff, students and others) to speak with one another could assist in building and sustaining a common vision.
- Data will be used to inform programming such as how to improve individual sense of belonging; how to identify and respond to threats to belonging; and others topics that emerge.
- Data will include perspectives from constituent groups to enhance UM’s on- and off-campus community engagement and also signal the value of these inputs.

Proposal 3: Institute for Belonging

Strategically building on the existing activity related to a Culture of Belonging at UM can enable the University to further distinguish itself as a leader amongst peer institutions. By promoting scholarship, applied research and the development and dissemination of best practices around Culture of Belonging, UM could become a model for other universities and other organizations for how to build environments where all are valued and have the opportunity to provide value toward collective goals. Such an institute would be a unique contribution to the broader field of practice. Many universities have dedicated offices and centers focused on diversity and inclusion, yet few seek to build the body of scholarship on belonging while also delivering applicable solutions.¹

An *Institute for Belonging* (IB) at UM could apply both an academic and an advocacy lens to Culture of Belonging issues on UM campuses. The Institute for Belonging should:

- Be supervised by the Vice Provost for Institutional Culture.
- Serve as a hub for data collected through UM’s Culture of Belonging activities, including the Barometer and other initiatives.
- Provide space for research, analysis and scholarship on Culture of Belonging.
- Provide substantive, research-based guidance for the UM community and external actors engaged in building a Culture of Belonging.
- Create an environment where researchers and practitioners can develop, test and assess the impact of Culture of Belonging activities.
- Host visiting doctoral and post-doctoral researchers pursuing related scholarship. There is an opportunity for one of the 100 Talents chairs to be located at the IB.

The Quad considered several options for the structure and placement of the Institute within the institution including a School Model, in which the institute is housed at one school, with resources tied to the school; and a University Model, in which the institute is an independent entity, with a university-wide focus and independent finances overseen by the Vice Provost for Institutional Culture. The Quad recommends that the Institute for Belonging be established using the University Model to maximize its ability to work nimbly across schools, departments and disciplines. General oversight should fall under the Vice Provost, with the institute annually hosting two to three research scholars and a requisite number of administrative staff, requiring a small office space.

¹ See Sources for a listing of select examples of inclusion/diversity/belonging work at other US universities.

Culture of Belonging

Proposal 4: Communication

So much about shared understanding and culture change centers on strong communication. To build a Culture of Belonging and related infrastructure at UM, a robust communications strategy is proposed. The working groups' research has indicated that strong communication on the content and progress of UM's Culture of Belonging will be critical to maintaining momentum and demonstrating tangible results. Without regular communication, the initiative risks misperception, disengagement and being viewed cynically as neither transparent nor productive. A strategic, ongoing communications plan should fall under the purview of the Vice Provost and staff and will meet criteria including:

- Be creative and multi-channel, sharing information via all available outlets including digital, print and interpersonal strategies, and emphasizing engagement and listening as much as one-way dissemination.
- Be consistent and frequent, tied less to milestones, and more on providing consistent reports of progress, details of processes and offering frequent opportunities for participation.
- Be led by a range of representatives including a variety of faculty, staff, student and alumni, not only University leadership.

2. Opportunities to Promote a Culture of Belonging

Proposal 5: Discrete near term Culture of Belonging projects

Many of the proposed initiatives are directed to advancing a Culture of Belonging institutionally, and many will take time to yield results. Yet for individuals who do not feel a sense of belonging and engagement at UM, there remains an urgent need for action. While working on structural change, we recommend that UM also launch a set of projects in the near-term to:

- immediately promote and support UM's Culture of Belonging
- provide evidence of progress toward building a Culture of Belonging on all campuses
- connect constituents across the UM community
- be one-time or ongoing, but be of a scale that enables quick implementation

By scaling up practical, cost-effective actions in the near term, campus groups can have flexible opportunities to respond to constituent and community interest and experiment with new ideas. We propose that the Vice Provost for Institutional Culture be provided with resources to fund projects that meet the above criteria and develop a process for approving proposals advanced by members of the UM community.

Potential options for projects promoting Culture of Belonging include:

- A program pairing incoming students with volunteer faculty or staff who act as a resource to ease their introduction into a new environment. By ensuring that every new student has the opportunity to connect individually with an employee of UM, the project could build community across constituencies, strengthen a shared sense of learning and creating knowledge together, and provide a channel for individuals to get to know and value one another.
- Enhanced programs for recognition and acknowledgement of staff, faculty and students.
- Incorporate Culture of Belonging issues into existing campus speaker series such as 'Cane Talks' to encourage varied constituencies to engage in dialogue about related issues. This is particularly important to staff at UM.

Culture of Belonging

- Create an annual Common Reading Program, where a text is made available to all incoming students, faculty and staff as well as the larger University community. The entire campus would be invited to share in reading and responding to a text related to the Culture of Belonging. Responses and reactions could be shared in a variety of forms including roundtable discussions, public events with the author and department level working lunches.
- Develop projects that build community at the team level in departments. A focus on teams or other smaller units could encourage building “circles of belonging” that could grow over time. “Play day” as example of community development/building within small teams.

Measuring Progress and Timeline

The proposals in this paper reflect a combination of structure-building, research, data collection and convening strategies that will unfold concurrently and reinforce a shared, developing understanding of belonging at UM. Culture is never built or finished or perfected. UM’s work toward a Culture of Belonging will require constant monitoring and adjustments to remain in step with stakeholder priorities and activities on every part of UM’s campuses. Specific projects will require ongoing feedback from staff, student, faculty and alumni communities. Frequent engagement and consultation with key constituencies will help UM meet expectations, learn from mistakes and develop a public, shared vocabulary about our relationships to one another and our work together to learn, invent and grow. Quantitative and qualitative metrics will be developed to chart progress on the Culture of Belonging initiative in the areas outlined below.

| Proposal | Timing | Areas of Measurement |
|--|--|--|
| Culture of Belonging Coordination Platform | Launch January 2017 Quarterly meetings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of engagement from UM community • Level of coordination of Culture of Belonging activities on campuses |
| Culture of Belonging Barometer | Launch January 2017 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of survey participation • Quality of data collected • Nature of responses over time as Culture of Belonging becomes mainstreamed |
| Institute for Belonging | In January 2017 begin planning Launch operations January 2018 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of a strategic plan and university approval of institutional structure • Number of researchers hired • Media mentions • Requests for substantive support (internal and external) |
| Communications strategy and implementation | Launch June 2016 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of mainstreaming Culture of Belonging as a university wide concept • Number of Communications disseminated • Metrics of digital engagement |
| Projects promoting Culture of Belonging | Launch June 2016 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of projects launched • Community engagement metrics • Survey data |

Culture of Belonging

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Sources

The group reviewed a number of examples related to diversity and belonging at other universities, including:

University-wide Initiatives

- University of Maryland: 2010 [strategic plan for diversity](#) as supplement to university's overall strategic plan
- Princeton and Yale: In 2016 in response to increasing challenges to diversity and inclusion, [both campuses appointed leadership at the Dean level](#) to focus on these issues.
- Multiple Universities: Have created centers to address issues of diversity and inclusion. Some examples include: [American University](#), [Ohio State University](#), [Rochester Institute of Technology](#), [George Washington University](#), and [Washington University](#) in St. Louis.

Student Inclusion and Diversity

- Harvard University: [Office for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion](#)
 - "Fosters understanding, community and belonging, but more importantly, is committed to living out our values as an inclusive community through a broad array of programs and initiatives that permanently embed equity, diversity, and inclusion in the fabric of the University"
 - Offers a portal for reporting bias issues
 - Provides a campus wide resource for diversity and inclusion resources
- Ohio State University: In 2011 [OSU introduced a program](#) where STEM units coordinated diversity recruitment and used scholarship and summer-bridge programs to this end.

Faculty Recruitment/Retention

- Stanford University: [Guide to Recruiting and Retaining Diverse Faculty](#)
- University of Michigan: [ADVANCE Program](#) aims to improve the campus environment for faculty through:
 - Recruitment: development and use of equitable faculty recruiting practices
 - Retention: preemptive strategies to prevent the loss of valued faculty
 - Climate: improvement of departmental climate for faculty, staff and students
 - Leadership: development of leadership skills that allow academic leaders to encourage positive departmental climates

Staff Belonging/Inclusion

- Notre Dame: In 2014 named a Director of [Staff Diversity and Inclusion](#)