

A Vision of Belonging at Northeastern

Richard O'Bryant, PhD
Chief Belonging Officer

2025



Belonging Begins with US

Belonging is the shared experience of feeling valued, respected, and authentically connected to the Northeastern community.

Inclusion is not just about diversity; it is about creating a sense of belonging for all.

John A Powell



Belonging Begins with US

The Evolution

- Belonging conversation began in 2023
- Provost/Chancellor extensive listening & Data Gathering (summer 2024)
- Appointment Chief Belonging Officer (Fall 2024)
- Shift from centralized compliance to co-creation, academic plan Experience Unleashed
- Focus on consulting, support and engaging skilled colleagues across the network
- Belonging Leads, ~40 throughout NU Network; Associate Deans, Professors, Directors, Administrators, Etc.

Belonging Begins with US

Vision of Belonging at Northeastern Conference, April 2025

- 103 university community members
- 74% staff, 15% faculty, 11% leadership, 3% Student Leaders
- 10 campuses represented
- Shared understanding of belonging across global system

Belonging Begins with US

Vision of Belonging at Northeastern Conference, April 2025

Key Findings

- Belonging defined as both a process and aspirational goal
- "the ability to see and be seen"
- "mattering"
- "when a community is invested in you and when you are invested in the community."
- Panel emphasized faculty and staff belonging themselves better positioned to foster for students
- Fostering belonging collective responsibility rather than single office

Belonging Begins with US

Vision of Belonging at Northeastern Conference, April 2025

Key Findings

- Strong majority (~80%) enjoyed conference experience
- “Ideally a universal framework of belonging”
- “Rubrics for measuring belonging initiative’s impact”
- “Belonging pedagogy in the classroom”

Belonging Begins with US

Vision of Belonging at Northeastern Conference, April 2025

Key Findings

- “Office of Belonging support continued work across locations, recognizing the distinctive cultural and regulatory contexts of network campuses”
- “Workshops on best practices addressing various campus constituents”
- “Continue to support connections between campuses and colleges”

Belonging Begins with US

Vision of Belonging at Northeastern Conference, April 2025

Challenges

- Perceived hierarchies where staff feel undervalued compared to faculty
- "Regional campuses do not feel connected to Northeastern other than in name"
- Boston-centric policies and procedures
- Students' fundamental needs (food, housing, socioeconomic security) create barriers to belonging
- Notably, "Students just want to be 'believed'" when facing problems and seeking support

Belonging Begins with US

Vision of Belonging at Northeastern Conference, April 2025

Collaboration Opportunities

- Enhance affinity group visibility and support through leadership training and intersectional collaboration
- Develop better mentorship programs for staff and students
- Improve cross-campus relationships through intentional structures
- Elevate staff voices through governance, potentially reviving the Staff Council
- Establish transparent processes for student support to reduce the "Northeastern shuffle"
- Create more opportunities for cross-campus engagement through dedicated contacts and digital platforms
- Follow-up Conference, October 27th, 28th

Belonging Begins with US

Theoretical Foundation

- Research indicates that belonging is essential for institutional health and effectiveness across all populations.
- Literature frames belonging through several theoretical lenses, for understanding how marginalized populations navigate institutions not designed with them in mind
 - Maslow's hierarchy of needs
 - Tinto's retention model and
 - Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth framework
- Drawing on scholarship from John A. Powell (structural inclusion), Geoffrey Cohen (psychological interventions), bell hooks (pedagogical transformation), and the conference, a comprehensive belonging framework was developed.
- Belonging and community offer a sense of security, support, and identity and they both help us understand who we are by showing us where we fit in the world.

Belonging Begins with US

Conclusion

- The Vision of Belonging at Northeastern conference has begun the process of illuminating a critical path forward for our global university network.
- Belonging emerges not merely as an aspirational ideal but an expansion not retraction and is an essential foundation for institutional effectiveness and community wellbeing.
- Through diverse perspectives shared across our global network, roles, and experiences, we have begun to develop a nuanced understanding of what belonging means at Northeastern and the challenges we must address to realize this vision.

Belonging Begins with US

Conclusion

- Consistent with the first pillar of Northeastern's Academic Plan, this summary reflects the university community's commitment to creating inclusive spaces where everyone can thrive while recognizing real challenges that require ongoing attention and structural change.
- Together, we can build a Northeastern where belonging is not just experienced but actively co-created—a place where every member can say, "I belong, you belong, and we belong is an essential part of our community."

Belonging Begins with US

- **Students**, belonging means feeling supported academically, socially, and emotionally, with access to resources, opportunities, and relationships that foster personal growth and success.
- **Staff**, belonging involves being appreciated for their essential roles in the campus ecosystem, with equitable opportunities for professional development and meaningful engagement in shaping the campus culture.
- **Faculty**, belonging signifies a sense of academic freedom, respect for their expertise, and inclusion in collaborative efforts to advance knowledge, mentorship, and the institution's mission.
- **Alumni**, belonging extends beyond graduation, as alumni remain engaged through mentorship, events, and institutional traditions that affirm their lifelong connection to Northeastern.
- **Surrounding Community**, Belonging is strengthened for the surrounding community when the Northeastern actively collaborates with other colleges, local organizations, values community voices, and fosters partnerships that contribute to mutual growth and success.

Questions/Discussion

A Vision of Belonging at Northeastern

Richard O'Bryant, PhD
Chief Belonging Officer

2025

