Northeastern University
Faculty Senate

TO: Senate Agenda Committee
FROM: Belonging Committee
DATE: 2/10/2026
SUBJECT: Final report for the 2025-2026 Belonging Committee

The Belonging committee had 15 meetings during the academic year. The committee carried out the specific charges assigned by SAC. The charges were addressed as follows with recommendations and/or resolutions:

1. **Meet with University Ombuds Diane J. Levin, J.D., to understand the scope of her work and available data, subject to her professional duty of confidentiality. Review faculty concerns from the University Ombuds Office (2017-present) and identify the most persistent and unresolved issues**.

An online meeting with Diane Levin was held on Wednesday, 10/8/25. Diane explained that due to the confidential nature of her work, she could only share general trends and themes, rather than specifics. Based on the discussion and further notes provided by Ms. Levin, the following recurring themes were identified:

1. **Faculty Concerns about Belonging**. These concerns were primarily interpersonal and focused on colleagues in FY2021, but since then, belonging has increasingly been viewed as a systemic, mission-critical issue.
2. **Interactions with Unit Heads and Department Climate.** Between FY2021-FY2025, 42% of the faculty visitors to the Ombuds office reported conflict with unit heads. Communication, transparency, decision making, equity, and evaluation processes were major contributing factors.
3. **Leadership and Organizational Climate.** Every year, faculty reported two recurring priorities: leadership evaluation and accountability, and organizational climate and culture.

The results from the Ombuds were combined with results from the charges 2 and 3 to provide overall results, as shown in the discussion for charge 4.

2. **Meet with the co-chairs of the Presidential Council on Belonging (Dean James Hackney, SOL, and Dean Kellee Tsai, CSSH) and with Richard O'Bryant, Chief Inclusion and Belonging Officer, to identify and document the specific actions the university is taking to improve faculty belonging at Northeastern**.

The committee met with Dean Kellee Tsai and Richard O'Bryant on December 15, 2025. It is important to recognize that many of the Belonging issues are multifaceted and difficult to solve. There is also a great deal of unevenness between colleges in terms of how they address belonging.

The Presidential Council on Belonging has planned several events to continue the conversation on Belonging. A Conference on Belonging occurred in Fall 2025 and was well received. Upcoming events include:

- Belonging as Innovation: Building the future from the inside out
- Women of Color in the Academy: Supporting collective career advancement and community
- Beyond Barriers: Fostering Belonging for international students through authentic connection and collaborative support.
- Creating a Culture of Belonging: Inclusive and participatory strategies for the college classroom
- Leveraging Community Cultural Wealth: Foster belonging in clinical graduate training

At the university level, "belonging" is treated as a moving target, with ongoing attempts to define what belonging means specifically for Northeastern's global campus system. CSSH has adopted a working definition of belonging as inclusivity, empowerment, collaboration, process, and community, using this as an organizing principle to bring people together.

The council highlighted transparency as a potential source of tension. Although survey responses call for greater transparency, leaders worry about the risks of sharing sensitive information, especially around salaries, and silence can sometimes be perceived as inaction. On pay and job security, they noted current regular salary benchmarking is meant to address some of these concerns. However, market forces shape pay across fields and campus locations. Also, the precarious nature of adjunct positions is a known problem throughout academia.

Climate and belonging surveys have good faculty and staff participation but low student participation, which they see as a major gap given the importance that Northeastern places on the student experience. This means that the data has limited use for building comprehensive strategies, especially since student experience is framed as paramount. Plans include a targeted spring survey for students and more intentional use of survey results, but there is recognition that translating climate data into visible policy changes is challenging, and communication about this work often lags.

3. **Working with the office of University Decision support, use data from the faculty surveys administered through the HERI survey and the One Northeastern Survey to identify patterns, concerns, and strengths in our community with attention to issues of feeling accepted, recognized, valued, and integrated within the NU community. Develop findings report from these surveys that highlight key findings and recommendations for areas that need improvement**.

Data was drawn from the 2017, 2020, and 2023 HERI survey and the HEDS DEI survey (Many Voices, One Northeastern) Survey which was conducted in 2021 and 2023. Additional information was included from the Fall 2025 Faculty Survey.

Belonging Data Analysis Summary

Across the survey datasets, the strongest faculty belonging themes are:
1. Leadership trust and accountability (primary influence)
2. Structural inequities (TT/NTT, workload, pay)
3. Fear of retaliation and low psychological safety
4. Discrimination, bias, and exclusion experiences
5. Large variability between departments

6. Polarized views about DEI and belonging
7. Low trust in reporting systems
8. Burnout and declining morale
9. Impacts of institutional instability and external pressures
10. Localized strengths and inclusive environments

HERI strengthens this analysis by providing **longitudinal quantitative evidence** of declining satisfaction, weakened trust, and rising retention risk. The tables below include the key conclusions from the analysis as well as the source of the supporting evidence.

Theme 1. Leadership, Trust, Transparency, and Accountability

Source	Evidence
Climate Survey	Only ~60% agree senior leadership is committed to DEI; ~50% feel institutional DEI priorities are clear.
Open Responses	Recurrent distrust of chairs/deans, concerns about honesty, unresolved conflicts, harmful leadership styles, communication avoidance.
HERI	Low confidence that administrators consider faculty concerns; weak faculty participation in governance; increasing intention to leave NU.
Integrated Conclusion	Leadership culture is the dominant institutional factor shaping belonging, morale, and DEIB climate.

Theme 2. TT/NTT Two-Tier System & Structural Inequity

Source	Evidence
Climate Survey	Belonging varies significantly by category (TT vs NTT vs staff).
Open Responses	"Caste system"; NTT faculty excluded from leadership, paid less, undervalued; inequitable service burdens.
HERI	Lower satisfaction in items involving fairness, voice, and institutional priorities, combined with higher intent to leave academia or Northeastern, points to systemic strain.
Integrated Conclusion	Structural inequities undermine belonging for large faculty groups and produce persistent morale and retention challenges.

Theme 3. Fear of Retaliation & Psychological Safety

Source	Evidence
Climate Survey	Only ~45–56% feel reporting or investigatory processes are clear; lack of trust in systems.
Open Responses	Major theme: fear of reporting; explicit past retaliation; HR distrust; faculty refuse to share details.
HERI	Increases in "considered leaving NU" and "considered leaving academe" correlate with fear, burnout, and lack of safety.
Integrated Conclusion	Fear of negative consequences for speaking up directly undermines inclusion, trust, and faculty engagement.

Theme 4. Experiences of Discrimination, Bias, and Exclusion

Source	Evidence

Source	Evidence
Climate Survey	23–26% experienced discrimination; disparities by age, race/ethnicity, disability, gender.
Open Responses	Rich evidence of racism, sexism, ableism, anti-international bias, microaggressions; concerns unresolved.
HERI	Flat or declining trends in "faculty respect each other," "faculty of color treated fairly," and DEI fairness items.
Integrated Conclusion	Discrimination remains a significant and unresolved barrier to belonging.

Theme 5. Department-Level Climate Variability

Source	Evidence
Climate Survey	Gap between "my belonging" (mid-60s%) vs "others' belonging" (mid-40s%); indicates unevenness.
Open Responses	Some departments extremely supportive; others described as toxic or bullying.
HERI	Faculty satisfaction items differ significantly across departments (visible in Tableau filters).
Integrated Conclusion	Belonging is highly localized; disparities across units are substantial and consequential.

Theme 6. Confusion, Conflict & Division Around DEI/Belonging

Source	Evidence
Open Responses	Requests to "stop identity politics"; others demand stronger DEI; unclear definitions of belonging.
Climate Survey	Varied comfort discussing DEI issues; political division visible in comment trends.
HERI	Mixed agreement that DEI is an institutional priority; inconsistent perceptions across years.
Integrated Conclusion	DEI/belonging efforts operate in a polarized environment; faculty hold diverse and incompatible expectations.

Theme 7. Low Trust in Reporting/Grievance Systems

Source	Evidence
Climate Survey	Only ~54% find reporting processes clear; confidence in investigations is even lower (~45%).
Open Responses	Multiple accounts of HR ineffectiveness, reprisal after reporting, faculty refusing to report at all.
HERI	Weakening satisfaction with governance and accountability indicators across time.
Integrated Conclusion	Low trust in accountability mechanisms is widespread and persistent; it amplifies fear of retaliation.

Theme 8. Burnout, Well-Being, Workload & Lack of Support

Source	Evidence
Open Responses	Faculty emotionally exhausted; women doing disproportionate service; caregivers struggling.

Climate Survey	Satisfaction with overall climate, diversity climate, and belonging ~60–75%—moderate at best.
HERI	Sharp increases in faculty considering leaving academe or NU — classic burnout indicators.
Integrated Conclusion	Faculty well-being and morale are declining; burnout is strongly tied to belonging and institutional support.

Theme 9. Institutional Change, Instability & External Pressures

Source	Evidence
Open Responses	Frustration about DEI office dismantling, lack of communication, political neutrality.
HERI	Many DEI- and institution-related metrics stagnate or decline from 2017 to 2023.
Climate Survey	Institutional commitments to DEI appear uncertain or inconsistently implemented.
Integrated Conclusion	Institutional fluctuations undermine confidence, stability, and long-term belonging.

Theme 10. Strengths: Inclusive Departments, Diversity as Value, Collegiality

Source	Evidence
Climate Survey	Faculty extremely comfortable interacting across differences (>4.8/5).
Open Responses	Several describe supportive chairs, mentoring cultures, and inclusive units.
HERI	Positive dimensions (e.g., engagement, collegiality) remain stable in certain units.
Integrated Conclusion	Significant strengths exist, though they are uneven; what works well is highly localized and leadership-dependent.

4. **Present survey results to the Faculty Senate, the OUEC, and the Presidential Council on Belonging, and recommend specific improvements to address identified concerns.**

CONSOLIDATED THEMES FROM DATA ANALYSIS

Summary of Key Findings

The Belonging Committee reviewed multiple years of institutional data to understand patterns related to faculty experiences of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging at Northeastern University. This analysis integrates four independent data sources: (1) Ombuds Office reports (FY2021–FY2025), (2) the One Northeastern Campus Climate Survey, (3) HERI Faculty Survey trends and "Opportunities for Improvement," and (4) qualitative open-response data from the Fall 2025 faculty survey. When considered together, these datasets reveal consistent, multi-year concerns as well as localized areas of strength across colleges and departments. Six overarching themes emerged from the synthesis of these four data sources.

1. **Leadership, Trust, Transparency, and Accountability**
Leadership is the most significant factor shaping faculty belonging. Across all datasets, faculty express concerns about transparency, decision-making processes, responsiveness, conflict management, and

fairness. Transparency has been a significant theme for the past two years in the Faculty Senate survey. Ombuds reports consistently show that a large proportion of visitors seek support for issues involving chairs, deans, or administrators, and HERI data confirms that faculty have low confidence that administrators meaningfully consider faculty input. Qualitative comments reinforce the idea that leadership behavior directly influences whether faculty feel valued, included, and respected.

2. Structural and Identity-Based Inequities

Faculty experiences of inequity arise from both structural conditions and identity-based dynamics. The TT/NTT divide remains a major source of dissatisfaction, with NTT faculty citing lack of respect, exclusion from governance, inequitable pay, and contract uncertainty. Identity-based concerns such as racism, sexism, ableism, and cultural bias appear across survey comments, Ombuds cases, and climate surveys. HERI items related to fairness and treatment of marginalized faculty show stagnant or declining satisfaction over time. Taken together, these findings indicate that both structural barriers and interpersonal inequities undermine faculty belonging.

3. Psychological Safety, Fear of Retaliation, and Low Trust in Reporting Systems

A pervasive concern across all datasets is the fear of retaliation for raising concerns, reporting discrimination, or disagreeing with leadership. Faculty report past experiences of retaliation, unclear reporting systems, and little confidence that complaints will be handled fairly. Climate survey results show low trust in investigatory processes, and many faculty acknowledged withholding details due to fear of identification. HERI data further confirms elevated levels of faculty considering leaving the institution, which is an indicator of compromised psychological safety. This theme represents a significant barrier to faculty engagement and institutional trust.

4. Department Level Climate: Variability, Strengths, and Local Culture

The feeling of belonging is very uneven across departments. Some units have strong, inclusive climates with supportive leadership and a sense of collegiality, while other units reported hostile, hierarchical, or conflict-prone workspaces. Ombuds reports, climate surveys, and qualitative feedback all emphasize that faculty experiences depend heavily on local dynamics, including communication norms, workload equity, peer interactions, and the behavior of unit heads. HERI data also shows department-level variation in collegiality and fairness indicators. Strong climates exist and can serve as models, but they are not consistent across the university.

5. Institutional Strain, Burnout, and External Pressures

Faculty morale has been significantly impacted by increased workload, caregiving responsibilities, and institutional transitions (e.g., new campuses opening, DEI office restructuring). These internal pressures coincide with national political tensions and evolving federal rules about DEI. Faculty describe emotional exhaustion, overwork, and lack of support, especially among women, caregivers, and NTT faculty. HERI trends reveal increased consideration of leaving both academia and the institution, suggesting that strain has intensified over time. These conditions directly affect faculty well-being and a sense of institutional commitment.

6. Confusion, Conflict, and Division Around DEI and Belonging

Faculty hold divergent and sometimes conflicting interpretations of DEI and belonging. Some faculty members call for stronger institutional action and more visible commitments, while others express discomfort with DEI frameworks or perceive them as overly political. Many faculty explicitly stated that belonging is undefined or unclear. Climate survey data reveal varied comfort levels with expressing views on diversity and equity, and qualitative comments illustrate ideological divisions that complicate

institutional belonging initiatives. This theme underscores the need for shared definitions, clearer communication, and inclusive dialogue across perspectives. Supporting evidence for the themes is provided in Table 1 located in Appendix A.

Recommendations

Charge 1:
- Establish a regular consultation loop between the Ombuds Office and a joint working group that includes the Presidential Council on Belonging and Faculty Senate Belonging Committee to review emerging patterns, clarify recurring issues, and track whether previously noted themes are improving, stable, or worsening.
- In addition to the existing 3- and 5-year review cycles for administrators, develop mechanisms for providing faculty feedback to administrators not presently evaluated under the current process, such as associate deans. This should be part of the duties of the Administrator Evaluation Oversight Committee (AEOC).

Charge 2:
- Adopt a consistent definition of Belonging across the university network. For instance, Belonging could be defined as *"*Everyone is treated and feels like a full member of the larger community and can thrive," as proposed by the 2024-2025 Inclusion and Diversity Committee or "inclusivity, empowerment, collaboration, and community" as suggested by Dean Kellee Tsai and the College of Social Sciences and Humanities.
- Identify, document, and replicate successful practices to promote belonging by charging a small joint working group that includes the Presidential Council on Belonging and the Faculty Senate Belonging Committee to do the following:
  - Conduct a "Belonging Best Practices Scan" of departments and colleges with positive climate survey scores, focusing on concrete practices such as micro-communities, staff or faculty advisory councils, local communication routines, and mentorship models.
  - Develop an annual "Belonging in Action in Departments" document or mini-toolkit that distills 5–10 replicable practices, with guidance on how departments across the global network can implement them.

Resolution:
Be it resolved that the university adopts the following definition of belonging:
"Belonging means that everyone is treated and feels like a full member of the larger community and is able to thrive through a culture of inclusivity, empowerment, and collaboration."

Charge 3:
- Administration shall share an annual "Closing the Loop on Belonging Data" update with faculty that highlights major actions taken in response to survey findings, to strengthen trust that faculty input informs decisions.
  - Administration should communicate what information they can provide and explain more clearly why some things must remain confidential.
  - Describe average salary differences based on demographics. The committee understands not being able to publish individual salaries, but it would be helpful to explore aggregating salary data by demographic categories (e.g., race, gender, etc.) and faculty role, without identifying individuals, to assess and address potential pay inequities.
- To address Belonging issues, clarify what resources are available for faculty and staff.

- Increase the visibility of mental health resources by adding links to a health-related website in addition to the Provost's website.
- Clarify what support is available for individuals who have experienced retaliation, noting that while the Ombuds Office is confidential, it cannot intervene directly, and additional avenues are needed to address the underlying core issues.

Respectfully submitted,
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Jennifer Cassano, Co-Chair
Tarik Gouhier
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Appendix A: Additional supporting evidence for themes

Table 1. Consolidated Themes and Key Evidence Across All Data Sources

Theme	Supporting Evidence Across Data Sources
1. Leadership, Trust, Transparency, and Accountability	**Ombuds:** 40–60% of faculty visitors report concerns involving chairs/deans; conflict often linked to communication, fairness, and accountability. **Climate Survey:** Moderate trust in institutional DEI commitment; unclear decision-making; leadership transitions impact belonging. **Qualitative:** Distrust in leadership, inconsistent communication, unaddressed conflicts, and nontransparent decision making. **HERI:** Low confidence that administrators consider faculty concerns; declining governance satisfaction; elevated intentions to leave NU. **Representative comments:** 1. "Protect freedoms of all kinds at all costs. Anonymous, secure, and publicly available evaluations of admins. Not just top-ranking admins but also lower-level admins. Faculty and students are evaluated at Northeastern, but nobody else seems to be." 2. Offices don't DO anything, don't have any REAL power. So it is worse to have one and mislead people into thinking they can do anything more than "listen, lend a shoulder" and try to help them communicate, blah blah, blah. You cant (*sic*) change NU culture without real leadership buy in (*sic*). Leadership talks a good game, but is so self-involved they could care less."
2. Structural and Identity-Based Inequities (TT/NTT, discrimination, workload)	**Ombuds:** Inequities in workload distribution, evaluation, and support tied to rank and identity. **Climate Survey:** 23–26% faculty experience discrimination; gaps across gender, race, age, and disability. **Qualitative:** TT/NTT "caste system," discrimination (racism, sexism, ableism), under-recognition of international faculty, inequitable pay, and service burdens. **HERI:** Stagnant or declining fairness/respect ratings; low agreement that marginalized groups are treated equitably; increased faculty considering leaving academia. **Representative comments:** 1. "There is a two tier (*sic*) system of faculty here: tenure track and non-tenure track. NTT are not respected and not included in many activities by the TT group. This makes me sad." 2. "I am an international hire and during my hiring process as a NTTF, I tried to negotiate by bringing my 10+ years of experience in teaching. I was specifically told by the dean

	that "international experience does not count." And later I realized that I was paid as low as a recent graduate. I then took it up to the dean, but she talked to me, said she would get back to me but shut any inquiry down."
3. Psychological Safety, Fear of Retaliation, and Low Trust in Reporting Systems	**Ombuds:** Faculty fear reporting concerns; unresolved cases damage trust. **Climate Survey:** Only ~45–56% find reporting processes clear; low confidence in investigations. **Qualitative:** Multiple claims of retaliation; faculty withhold details due to fear; distrust of HR. **HERI:** Increases in "considered leaving NU" and "considered leaving academe"; governance confidence remains low. **Representative comments:** 1. "Please, even when reported NU completely buried it, lead (*sic*) by the Provost's office. Even with inflammatory, discriminatory email evidence. There is no point. Regarding this. I have been completely retaliated against for reporting... in salary, in promotion, in annual review, in raises. No question about it. Even my lawyer said so, but I dont (*sic*) have the money to sue and NU would win anyway, so what the point." 2. "Subjective leadership strategies breed the risk of retaliation regardless of context." 3. "People are worried about retaliation for saying anything about anything."
4. Department-Level Climate: Variability, Strengths, and Local Culture	**Ombuds:** Unit head quality strongly affects climate; highly variable experiences. **Climate Survey:** Belonging for "me" (mid-60s%) vs. "others" (mid-40s%) suggests an uneven climate. **Qualitative:** Some departments are highly inclusive; others are described as toxic or bullying. **HERI:** Department-level differences in collegiality, fairness, and satisfaction are visible across views. **Representative comments:** 1. "I often feel disrespected and bullied at my college. By administrators, as well as by some of my faculty colleagues. These colleagues are "important" and therefore feared by others, as well as by me. Northeastern is a culture of power and fear, not of belonging, justice, and reason." 2. "My department is incredibly inclusive and supportive."
5. Institutional Strain, Burnout, and External Pressures	**Ombuds:** Workload pressure, and instability shape belonging concerns. **Climate Survey:** Flat/moderate satisfaction with belonging and climate.

	Qualitative: Increased levels of burnout, emotional exhaustion, caregiving strain, dissatisfaction with institutional change and DEI office restructuring. **HERI:** Steady rise in faculty considering leaving academia or NU; burnout indicators trending upward from 2017–2023. **Representative comments:** 1. "Invest in faculty through fair compensation and stop buying property and other colleges for a time." 2. "One of the most meaningful ways the university can promote a sense of belonging is through salary transparency and by eliminating short-term faculty contracts. It is difficult to feel a true sense of belonging or stability when employment is renewed on a year-to-year basis. Receiving only a one-year contract creates a sense of uncertainty and insecurity, rather than inclusion and commitment."
6. Confusion, Conflict, and Division Around DEI and Belonging	**Ombuds:** Conflicts related to values misalignment and institutional identity. **Climate Survey:** Mixed comfort expressing views on diversity/equity. **Qualitative:** Some faculty question the meaning of belonging; ideological polarization around DEI; desire for clearer definitions and purpose. **HERI:** Inconsistent agreement that DEI is an institutional priority; divided perceptions across schools and ranks. **Representative comments:** 1. "Please stop focusing on identity politics. We should teach students how to think, not what to think. Stop cancel culture. Adopt the Chicago principles for academic freedom. Allow faculty to discuss controversial topics. Remove save spaces." 2. "I am not really sure what "belonging" means in this context." 3. "It's about culture. DEI actually creates more divisiveness with ingroups and outgroups. We need to improve morale and put more focus on the people who actually do research and teach. Too much power has gone to administrators who do little for education. We need to get back to our mission and create pride. Ten years ago, things were much better. Faculty no longer feel appreciated and everything seems to be about the money (the university making it, not us). Morale among students is also low. Go look at social media - our reviews and complaints are awful! The problem is widespread!"