



WILLIAM & MARY

OFFICE OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Inclusive Leader Insights

A Sense of Belonging at William & Mary

Every year at campuses all over the country, the fall brings new beginnings. It is a time when new classes of students arrive eager to start a new chapter in their lives. It is also a time when new employees join colleges and universities to begin or continue their careers. In most cases, those newcomers are looking for some connection – whether that be with fellow students, faculty, staff or the surrounding community.

We have seen in countless movies and television programs where a character goes into a new environment, looks around, and exclaims, “I don’t belong here” or “This is where I belong”. While these immediate reactions might not always be accurate, it is something that is desired by many. Belonging is a described a feeling where individuals perceive that they are accepted within a community where the authenticity of their layered identities can be expressed. Essentially, a feeling that they are able to be their true selves within a particular environment or space thereby allowing them to contribute to the greater good of the community.

There is research that shows that engagement is greater when individuals feel that they have a sense of belonging within the community. Although it cannot stop an employee or student from leaving, a strong connection and sense of belonging would make the decision to leave much more difficult.

What are the actionable steps that you can take to increase a sense of belonging?

- Step back and look closely at the overall culture within your area of responsibility. Is your division or department one that faculty and staff feel that they can come to work as their authentic selves? If not, take steps to create that culture.
- Make certain that all voices are acknowledged and heard when making decisions in order to assure that there is representation and diversity. If a department has little to no diversity, whenever possible bring in outside voices in order to broaden perspectives.
- Create opportunities for meaningful and intentional connections. Through these connections, the desired outcome would be to have a greater understanding of the “whole person” – their stories, intersectional identities, and experiences that make them who they are.
- Additionally, consider the composition and structure of teams within the organization. Take steps to build trust. There is a better chance of a person coming to work or class as their authentic selves if they have trust in within that space.
- Lead by example. Support events, causes and activities that have a focus on marginalized identities. Encourage others within the organization to participate with the caveat that their desire to attend be genuine.

For more information, please contact wmdiversity@wm.edu.