

A SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSION ABOUT COMING TO COLLEGE

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This exercise is inspired by the social-belonging intervention reported in Walton & Cohen (2011). It is suitable as either a residential dorm activity for college freshmen led by dorm staff (RAs) or as an in-class activity and discussion led by a professor.

Reference

Walton, G. M. & Cohen, G. L. (2011). [A brief social-belonging intervention improves academic and health outcomes of minority students](#). *Science*, 331, 1447-1451.

Video Interviews with Greg Walton on the Social-Belonging Intervention

A [2-minute interview](#) with Stanford News (March 17, 2011)

A [6-minute interview](#) with the Stanford Graduate School of Business (March 30, 2012)

On Stereotype Threat

A [1-page guide](#) to empirically validated strategies to reduce stereotype threat

A talk by Claude Steele, Geoff Cohen, and Greg Walton: "[Stereotype Threat: A Close Encounter - See it, Feel it, Fix it](#)" (May 10, 2012)

They're Not Magic

Keep in mind that brief psychological interventions are not magic. They may need to be adapted for specific contexts to speak to students' experiences effectively. In addition, they are effective only when they remove barriers that otherwise prevent students from learning. That means that if a given barrier isn't relevant in a setting, a psychological intervention that removes it won't be effective. It also means that if students don't have opportunities to learn more effectively in a setting, removing a psychological barrier to learning won't be sufficient. For more:

Yeager, D. S. & Walton, G. M. (2011). [Social-psychological interventions in education: They're not magic](#). *Review of Educational Research*, 81, 267-301.

[Additional Online Resources](#)

Contact

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Overview

Key Messages

- Many students wonder at first if they belong in their college - whether they'll fit in socially, whether they'll find their way academically, whether they'll be accepted by professors and other students.
 - Most students at some time, in some way question whether they really fit in and belong in college.
- But over time, almost all students come to feel at home in college.

Materials

- Time-keeper (phone, watch – for the person facilitating the beginning/end)
- Notebooks
- Pens

Tips

- Practice ahead of time, so that you know the flow of the activity and what you're going to say.
- Allow students to take the lead in the discussion.
- Be careful not to suggest that students **SHOULD** feel like they don't belong.
- Throughout the activity, use collective, inclusive, and validating language, so as to emphasize the normativity of challenges in the transition to college.
- Validate students' responses when they say things that resonate with the key messages.

Program

Opening 3-5 minutes Full group

- Make sure students have notebooks
- Facilitator welcomes everyone, quickly handles any necessary business.

Introduction 5 minutes Sitting in small groups; listening full group

- Sit with your group.
- Facilitator introduces activity.

We all know that [college name] is a special place. Still, the transition to college, even to a special place like [college name] can be tough. For many of us

- *This is the first time living on our own, away from our families and high school friends.*
- *We are constantly meeting new people and wondering if they will become our new friends.*
- *Life isn't as structured as it was in high school: how do we manage our free time?*
- *There are tons of opportunities and groups; we have to figure out where we fit in.*
- *We have to figure out how to navigate college classes, how get to know professors, and sometimes how to handle disappointing grades.*

It can be easy to feel overwhelmed or to sometimes wonder to yourself, "Do I really belong here?"

These kinds of experiences are normal in the transition to college. Everyone goes through them, and they get better with time as you adjust to college. Today, we'd like each of you to reflect on some of the experiences you have had so far in coming to college. So, please take about ten minutes to write in your notebook about the experiences and challenges you have experienced. What has been difficult or challenging for you? You can think about your experiences meeting other students, making friends, taking classes, adjusting to dorm life: look, coming to college is a big transition. Please write about some of the difficulties you have experienced in the transition to college and, as well, how some of these difficulties and challenges have begun to improve with time as you have spent more time in college.

Really try to express your story -- what it's been like for you, the challenges you've experienced so far and how you've begun to address these. Be as specific as you can tell about the particular events or experiences you've had that have been surprising or difficult for you and how these have changed over time.

Please don't include your name or other identifying information in what you write. When the ten minutes are up, we will collect what you've written and the papers will be mixed up.

Please write on your own, individually. We'll talk about this later.

Writing 10 minutes Sitting in small groups; writing individually

Prompt

What has coming to [College Name] been like for you?

Many students experience difficulties and worries coming to college, from living in a new place, to trying to make new friends, to finding their way in a new academic environment.

Take a few minutes to write about the challenges you have experienced in the transition to college, and how these experiences have begun to change over time.

Please, don't include your name or other identifying information

- Write your own response in your notebook for the first 7 minutes.
- Monitor and encourage all students to write.
- At 7 minutes: give time-check.
- At time-check, wrap up your own writing and begin to pick up papers.
- Shuffle papers within your stack and with other staff.
- Check papers for legibility and personally identifying information.
- At 10 minutes: asks everyone to finish up and explain that the staff member at each group will now lead the discussion.

****Notes:**

- As you collect each paper, quickly skim it. Shuffle any off-topic, inappropriate, or identifying ones to the bottom of the pile.
- You don't need to read students' entire papers, just enough to get a gist.

****What if...**

...A student isn't writing?

Try first asking (or nonverbally signing) to see if they are okay and understand the directions. If they are okay, do understand, and aren't being disruptive, let them work at their own pace.

...A student or group of students is being disruptive?

First, try nonverbally signing to get them back on track. If that doesn't work, "Hey, we want everyone to be able to think and write, so it'd be helpful if you were [describe appropriate behavior]?"

...A student asks, "Why are you looking at the papers?"

Respond, "We are making sure that the handwriting is legible and that no one included personally identifying information."

Reading 5-7 minutes In small groups

- Explain that the group is going to listen to a few of the papers. Emphasize that the goal is to hear the experiences of others.
- Hand one paper to one student in the group and ask him/her to read it.
- Repeat until the group has heard several letters – no need to read them all.

****Notes:**

- Students don't necessarily need to read the entire paper. Feel free to stop a student when/if you think it's appropriate.

Discussion 10 minutes In small groups

☐ Begin an open discussion about what students heard in the papers.

☐ Possible questions:

- What experiences, feelings, or themes are common across several of the papers we read?
- It seems like a lot of people are writing about how they _____. I know that for me, I felt that way but thought that everyone else had everything under control. Why do you think that sometimes students don't realize that other people are [also struggling]?
- Think all the way back to the beginning of the year. How have your experiences or the experiences we heard about changed over time?
- Looking forward to the future, how do you expect it will be different to be an upperclassman than it is to be a freshman?
- One of the things I'm hearing is _____. What do people think about this?

****Notes:**

- The goal is to be Socratic but leading.
- Include everyone: go around the circle if necessary.
- Be careful not to suggest that students SHOULD feel like they don't belong.
- Validate students' responses. Validate even if the response doesn't resonate with the key messages. **Don't contradict.** "That's great [that you haven't ____]. Some people do. Some people don't. It often happens at different times and in different ways for different people."

****What if...**

...A student says something that is off-topic or inappropriate?

Blink and continue. Don't contradict, but breeze past it. Consider reframing or drawing on personal experience.

...People aren't talking or we are starting to run out of things to say.

Ask students "why" and "how":

- *Why do you think people wonder at first if they belong?*
- *Why do you think people often think they're the only one who worries about whether they fit in in college?*
- *Why and how does people's experience change over time? What do people do that helps them improve their experience with time?*

Ask students to share additional experiences that resonate with what the group has been discussing.

Share your own experience that resonates with what the group has been discussing.

Closing 7 minutes Sitting in small groups; listening full group

☐ Facilitator brings the group back together and asks for reflections. Two staff members move toward door.

All right, let's come back together. [Wait.] We were having a great conversation in our group up here and I'd love to hear what other groups were talking about. Our hope for this house meeting was that we would share our experiences and perhaps understand them in a new or deeper way. Who wants to share one takeaway or interesting part of the discussion from their group?"