

Practice Brief

Seven Practices for Building Community and Student Belonging Virtually

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Introduction

Most colleges and universities have traditionally provided in-person programming and supports to strengthen bonds between students and build a sense of community. These activities, such as campus-wide events, one-on-one advising appointments, career development workshops, and mentorship programs, help students develop a sense of belonging at the institution, improve their academic experience, and boost their chances of graduating.^{1,2,3} These programs and supports are especially important for students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, whose experiences of exclusion on campus can impede their progress to graduation.^{4,5}

Yet, in spring 2020, many colleges and universities abruptly closed their campuses in response to the spread of COVID-19, preventing them from hosting any in-person activities, including classes, athletics, and student-centered events.⁶ During this period, many institutions were primarily focused on shifting their academic courses from in-person to distance learning formats. Efforts to recreate out-of-classroom experiences and student supports in a virtual environment were important, but lower-priority, and many institutions had little experience to draw from to do so. As a result, many students, especially lower-income students and students of color, felt disconnected from their institutions and their peers, and voiced a need for additional communication and support, especially from financial aid and academic advising staff.⁷

Restrictions on in-person interactions between students, staff, and faculty are likely to persist through the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters. As such, colleges and universities across the country need to ensure the presence of a comprehensive strategy to support students remotely and offering virtual activities that promote a sense of belonging. This practice brief outlines seven (7) practices that can be part of a comprehensive strategy, drawing from both the research literature on this topic and the insights and experiences from spring 2020 of the administrative staff at six colleges and universities, all members of the American Talent Initiative (ATI).⁸ In utilizing these practices, an institution can address the holistic needs of students—from their financial and academic needs to their social-emotional

¹ Astin, A. (1999). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40(5), 518.

² Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

³ Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (2006). *What matters to student success: A review of the literature*. National Postsecondary Education Cooperative. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/npec/pdf/Kuh_Team_Report.pdf

⁴ Duran, A., Dahl, L., Stipeck, C., & Mayhew, M. (2020). A critical quantitative analysis of students' sense of belonging: Perspectives on race, generation status, and collegiate environments. *Journal of College Student Development*, 61(2), 133–153. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2020.0014>

⁵ Patton, L. (2016). Disrupting postsecondary prose: Toward a critical race theory of higher education. *Urban Education*, 51(3), 315–342. doi:10.1177/0042085915602542

⁶ The Chronicle of Higher Education. (2020). *Coronavirus hits campus*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/package/coronavirus-hits-campus/>

⁷ Blankstein, M., Frederick, J. K., & Wolff-Eisenberg, C. (2020, June 25). *Student experiences during the pandemic pivot*. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.313461>

⁸ The American Talent Initiative (ATI) is a Bloomberg Philanthropies-supported collaboration between the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program, Ithaka S+R, and a growing alliance of colleges and universities dedicated to substantially expanding opportunity and access for low- and moderate-income students. ATI members—all graduating at least 70 percent of their students within six years—have joined together to address this challenge.

needs—and center the student perspective and experience in their decision-making processes. These tactics are valuable practices under normal circumstances but will be even more essential in the weeks and months to come.

How We Sourced Practices for Cultivating Belonging

Decades of research has demonstrated that students who have a strong sense of belonging at their institutions are more likely to persist and graduate, especially true for students from lower-income and first-generation backgrounds and communities of color.^{9,10,11} A “sense of belonging” for college students can be broadly interpreted as a subjective perception of inclusion, connectedness, and integration in three primary dimensions: social, academic, and institutional.¹² Students are more likely to feel a sense of belonging when they perceive support from peers and faculty, receive classroom comfort, and benefit from empathetic understanding; they are less likely to feel connected in the absence of these factors or when they feel isolated from the community.¹³ Cultivating a sense of belonging on college campuses is difficult at the best of times, but doing so in the midst of a global pandemic, economic recession, and a national reckoning with systemic racism is even more challenging, especially when colleges and universities cannot convene students in person to build community and foster dialogue.

The challenges of the past few months have negatively impacted inclusion and belonging for many college students. Student stories and survey data from spring and summer 2020 offer a consistent theme: college students are feeling disconnected from their college experience.^{14,15} This disconnectedness can have serious implications for students’ long-term postsecondary outcomes. For example, one recent survey of over 15,000 college students found that fewer than 40 percent reported feeling connected to other students from their institution, an essential factor in their sense of belonging. Students who reported that they were unlikely to re-enroll in the fall semester were nearly half as likely to report feeling connected to other students than students who were likely to re-enroll.¹⁶

To respond to the urgent need to cultivate student belonging, we sought out best practices from six ATI member institutions that have articulated specific strengths related to building community amongst

⁹ Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

¹⁰ Harper, S. R., & Quaye, S. J. (2015). *Student engagement in higher education: Theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse populations (2nd Ed.)*. New York: Routledge.

¹¹ Tinto, V. (1988). Stages of student departure: Reflections on the longitudinal character of student leaving. *Journal of Higher Education*, 59(4), 438-455. doi:10.2307/1981920

¹² Ingram, D. (2012). *College students' sense of belonging: Dimensions and correlates*. Stanford University. Retrieved from <http://purl.stanford.edu/rd771tq2209>

¹³ Hoffman, M., Richmond, J., Morrow, J., & Salomone, K. (2003). Investigating ‘sense of belonging’ in first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 4(3), 227-256.

¹⁴ Inside Higher Education. (2020). *Personal stories from the pandemic: How the crisis is affecting eight learners and their education and work plans*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/08/04/pandemics-impact-eight-learners-and-their-education-and-work-plans>

¹⁵ Kelly, K. (2020). *Making sense of the many college student COVID-19 surveys*. Retrieved from <https://philonedtech.com/making-sense-of-the-many-college-student-covid-19-surveys/>

¹⁶ Blankstein, M., Frederick, J. K., & Wolff-Eisenberg, C. (2020, June 25). *Student experiences during the pandemic pivot*. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.313461>

students from lower-income backgrounds, either through institution-wide efforts or through the practices of specific cohort-based scholarship programs.¹⁷ We interviewed administrators (e.g., vice provosts, program coordinators) from Indiana University, Johns Hopkins University, Lehigh University, Texas A&M University, University of Central Florida, and University of Wisconsin-Madison about strategies they used in spring 2020 to keep students engaged as campuses closed and instruction shifted online, as well as practices they plan to use moving forward. We augment the insights from these conversations with information from other sources, including a review of research literature related to the approaches to and benefits of building community and student belonging. Though we recognize the importance of building community and fostering belonging within the classroom, this brief focuses on those opportunities and activities that build community and foster belonging outside of the classroom.

These six institutions are not representative of the broader sector of four-year, public and private colleges and universities, let alone community colleges. ATI members, generally, have far greater resources and enroll far fewer lower-income students than other colleges and universities. Yet, these six institutions and the programs they offer are diverse: four are public and two are private, not-for-profit, with enrollment diversity, size, and resources varying widely. The programs offered to foster belonging serve anywhere from 10 to a few thousand students, providing a range of services and support across all aspects of the student experience—from academic advising, to financial aid, to social programming, and more. The programs' variation in size and scope means that institutions can scale—up or down, depending on the context—their foundational elements, and can tailor those elements to the needs of their specific community. As such, these recommendations can be adapted to any institution that, prior to COVID-19, offered primarily in-person instruction and on-campus student experiences.

Recommended Practices for Institutions to Build Community and Student Belonging Virtually

Practice 1: Meet students' basic needs.

Students cannot fully participate in college activities—virtual or otherwise—or feel a sense of belonging if their basic needs are unmet.¹⁸ The ripple effects of COVID-19 have exacerbated students' existing financial and other personal hardships and surfaced new challenges, making a focus on meeting students' basic needs even more important.¹⁹ The pandemic has also magnified existing societal

¹⁷ Cohort-based scholarship programs are broadly defined in this publication as those which serve a dedicated group of students, packaging a wide array of services together. Programs range from state-funded financial aid packages, to cohort programs for student veterans, to federal TRIO programs or other similar state or institutional-based programs.

¹⁸ Baker-Smith, C., Coca, V., Goldrick-Rab, S., Looker, E., Richardson, B., & Williams, T. (2020). *#RealCollege 2020: Five years of evidence on campus basic needs insecurity*. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. Retrieved from https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019_RealCollege_Survey_Report.pdf

¹⁹ Goldrick-Rab, S. (2020). *Beyond the food pantry: Supporting #RealCollege students during COVID19*. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. Retrieved from https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/BTFP_SupportingStudentsDuringCOVID19_v2_Final.pdf

inequalities in access to healthcare and technology, which, now more than ever, can impede students' access to and participation in college classes and other activities.²⁰

In spring 2020, many institutions provided emergency aid to students, using institutional resources, new philanthropic funds, and CARES Act allocations. In many cases, these students needed additional financial support due to housing or food insecurity, and other personal expenses, such as healthcare or transportation, expenses that are likely to persist as the pandemic-related recession deepens.²¹ As such, institutions should revisit their financial aid practices to maximize the need-based aid available to students, both at the start of the semester and as urgent needs arise along the way. Students who feel secure in their financial position are more likely to feel secure in their academic endeavors.²²

Disparities in access to broadband and digital devices doubly disadvantage lower-income students and students of color who need high-speed internet and capable laptops to access their college courses and academic resources.²³ In spring 2020, many institutions scrambled to provide laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots to students in need, support they should maintain into the fall and beyond. Another important strategy is to fold the expenses associated with all required tools and resources (e.g., books, laptops, broadband access, etc.) into the full cost of attendance so that financial aid packages will cover these essentials.

Finally, institutions should creatively use on-campus resources to safely meet students' basic needs, even if they plan to offer only remote classes or invite only certain cohorts of students back to campus. Many institutions, for example, are offering campus housing for those students whose home environment or financial situation is incompatible with effective learning.²⁴

Practice 2 - Keep students informed using various communication platforms.

Under normal circumstances, institutions typically rely on a combination of digital communication and in-person engagement (e.g., posters and digital signage, tabling and info booths, word of mouth, etc.) in order to keep students connected to the institution and to one another. Use of any of these channels is with a core objective in mind: the development of deep relationships with students. When in-person engagement is impossible, especially at a time when many campuses will conduct their semester virtually, institutions will need to use their existing communications tools—social media, email, learning management systems (LMS), and websites—more intentionally. Tailoring messages to specific students

²⁰ Abelson, J., Dungca, N., Kornfield, M., & Ba Tran, A. (2020). *At college health centers, students battle misdiagnoses and inaccessible care*. The Washington Post. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2020/07/13/college-health-centers-problems/?arc404=true>

²¹ Blankstein, M., Frederick, J. K., & Wolff-Eisenberg, C. (2020, June 25). *Student experiences during the pandemic pivot*. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.313461>

²² Price, D., & Lincoln, C. (2018). *Improving the Financial Security of Low-income Students to Improve College Completion*. *Proceedings from the Financial Security Field Convening*. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED591922.pdf>

²³ Rossman, D., & Schwartz, E. (2020). *Online learning during COVID-19: Digital and educational divides have similar boundaries*. Ithaka S+R. Retrieved from <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/online-learning-during-covid-19/>

²⁴ Banes, E., & Davidson Pisacreta, E. (2020). *Overarching findings from 57 fall 2020 college reopening plans*. Ithaka S+R. Retrieved from <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/overarching-findings-from-57-fall-2020-college-reopening-plans/>

and finding the right frequency of communication are important to strengthening connections with students and building a shared sense of community across the institution.

The effectiveness of a communication method (e.g., individual, group, or mass outreach) or platform may vary by topic and by student, and institutions should use evidence to determine how students respond to different types of messages and which students may benefit most from targeted outreach and engagement. For instance, at some of the institutions we interviewed, leaders generally find that email and Facebook work best when communicating with students' families, but text messages and Instagram work best for students. Texas A&M and Lehigh, among others, also had success with old-fashioned phone campaigns to connect with new students or gather information from current students about their circumstances. The University of Central Florida (UCF) knew that 99 percent of students had downloaded the university's mobile app, which permitted push notifications. In addition, the university's learning management system (LMS) enabled campus-wide announcements. UCF leveraged both tools to send major announcements, even though they are not primarily communications platforms.

To effectively build community, staff, faculty, and administrators will need to reach all students, especially those who are most vulnerable of becoming disconnected. Students who initiate contact with faculty and staff are likely to be those who are already engaged or who have the social capital to know who to reach out to—and what to ask of them. In many cases, institutions have to meet students where they are, which may mean using multiple platforms for a single communication in order to reach as many students as possible. On the other hand, too frequent communication can cause information overload or turn students off to channels where they would receive information essential to their success.²⁵ In the case of UCF, for example, administrators worried that students may turn off the notifications or delete the mobile app entirely, so were judicious in the use of push notifications.

Practice 3 - Use peer mentors and student leaders to cultivate a sense of community.

As institutions move forward with distance learning, virtual orientation programs, and other forms of online engagement in the wake of COVID-19, the roles of student leaders have changed considerably.^{26,27} Colleges and universities can no longer rely as heavily on the energy, passion, and care that these student leaders exude in-person, yet all of these qualities must be harnessed and utilized in remote environments. Not only are peer mentors and other student leaders uniquely positioned to connect with and build community among groups of students, but their influence also helps new and transfer students transition into the institution and improves students' satisfaction with, and persistence

²⁵ Blankstein, M., & Frederick, J. (2020). *Communicating COVID-19 in higher ed: Student edition*. Ithaka S+R. Retrieved from <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/communicating-covid-19-in-higher-ed-student-edition/>

²⁶ Banes, E., & Davidson Pisacreta, E. (2020). *Higher ed's response to COVID-19 and plans for reopening: A synthesis of fall 2020 college reopening plans*. Ithaka S+R. Retrieved from <https://sr.ithaka.org/our-work/higher-eds-response-to-covid-19-and-plans-for-reopening/>

²⁷ Johnson, E. (2020). *How 5 colleges are tackling virtual orientation*. The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved from https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-five-colleges-are-tackling-virtual-orientation?utm_source=iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=campaign_1428960_nl_Academe-Today_date_20200811&cid=at&source=&sourceId=

through, their postsecondary experience.²⁸ While student leaders might not be as accessible or visible when residence halls are closed and in-person student activities are limited, it is still vital that they remain at the forefront of the student experience.

Student leaders, in some ways, should be leading the charge when it comes to building relationships and community with different groups of students. They are well-positioned to connect with students, and they often understand and relate to student experiences better than faculty and staff.²⁹ Most of the administrators we interviewed mentioned that their student leaders seem to have a renewed energy to help their peers weather the impacts of the pandemic, and that students are more inclined than usual to ask their peers for support rather than institution staff. Therefore, administrators should engage student leaders and peer mentors across campus in this capacity and, where appropriate, increase the number of these student representatives and expand their responsibilities.

Student leaders are deeply connected to the student body, so enlisting student leaders in the dissemination of important information and campus announcements can ensure all are well-informed. According to the administrators we interviewed, students at their institutions communicate with their peers often on apps such as GroupMe, Discord, HouseParty, and other social media platforms. One administrator at Texas A&M shared that student leaders can serve as “co-constructors of knowledge,” and should be viewed as such. By assisting with activities such as event planning and curriculum writing, student leaders share their expertise and insight with college administrators and then the information and sense of belonging trickles down to other students.

Identifying and developing common bonds between students is more challenging, but just as vital to building community in a virtual environment. For example, student leaders in the Groups Scholars Program at Indiana University have united students around the traditional group song and generated excitement about adding something to their face masks to easily identify each other.³⁰ Serving as role models, these leaders not only build community and generate enthusiasm among students, but they also grow and develop both personally and professionally.

Practice 4 - Give students ample opportunities to share their experiences, and demonstrate they are heard by following through with appropriate support.

In-person interactions are an important component of relationship-building, essential for ensuring that students engage in open, honest dialogue about personal experiences and provide direct, constructive feedback. Students need the opportunity to share their experiences and provide feedback, now more than ever, but without in-person interactions, administrators and staff have to be more intentional in

²⁸ Shook, J.L. and Keup, J.R. (2012), The benefits of peer leader programs: An overview from the literature. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 5-16. doi:10.1002/he.20002

²⁹ The principles of near-peer advising help articulate why student leaders are well positioned to connect with prospective students in particular. Learn more at <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/engaging-and-supporting-prospective-students/>

³⁰ The Groups Scholars Program was created as a way to increase college attendance among first-generation, underrepresented students at Indiana University. The program provides academic, financial, and social support to help students attain a bachelor's degree at Indiana University. Learn more at <https://groupsscholars.indiana.edu/>

giving students' meaningful opportunities to do so. In order to feel connected to the institution and to develop a sense of belonging, students have to feel their voices are heard, especially since they bear the burden of many institutional decisions.

Providing students with a variety of different opportunities to share experiences, and feedback is also important.³¹ Program staff should use regularly-scheduled cohort meetings, workshops, and other events, to check-in on students' well-being and remind students that the program staff is there to support them, hear them, give them a voice, and advocate for them. Program staff and administrators can also schedule town hall meetings and other Q&A sessions, specifically for the purpose of providing students the opportunity to share. Indiana University's Groups Scholars Program, for example, organized live "What's the Tea?" Q&A forums (recorded for those students who could not attend live), where students could engage in conversations about their experiences amidst the pandemic and ask questions in an open forum about campus resources. Similarly, the University of Central Florida student government hosted a virtual forum and administered a student survey to gauge students' needs, and presented their data to the Board of Trustees, Faculty Senate, and other campus partners.

We know that students' needs vary, so institutions should differentiate the type, and level, of their support in response. For example, incoming first-year and transfer students are likely to need more support establishing peer-to-peer connections than will rising seniors.^{32,33,34} Yet, seniors, especially, need access to career development counseling and networking support and deserve to feel celebrated as they approach graduation. In addition, student experiences might differ geographically, as the pandemic and resulting stressors vary across the country and world. Students in certain academic programs, especially those that involve experiential learning, internships and work-study, or laboratory experiences, may also need additional support to reimagine subject-specific academic collaboration. The Rapidly Accelerated Research Experience (RARE) program at Lehigh University, for example, converted as many of the program's lab-based summer research experiences to virtual experiences as possible, leaning on faculty with computational research components.³⁵ Finally, regardless of class year or program, Black, Indigenous, and students of color experience a lower sense of belonging than white students, and may need specific supports or opportunities to convene with others who share a common identity.³⁶

³¹ Schwartz, E., & Davidson Pisacreta, E. (2020). *COVID-19: Incorporating the student perspective into institutional decision-making*. Ithaka S+R. Retrieved from <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/covid-19-incorporating-the-student-perspective-into-institutional-decision-making/>

³² Hoffman, M., Richmond, J., Morrow, J., & Salomone, K. (2016). Investigating "sense of belonging" in first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 4(3), 227–256. <https://doi.org/10.2190/dryc-cxq9-jq8v-ht4v>

³³ Thompson, A. (2018). *The influence of sense of belonging on intent to persist and the academic and social experiences of transfer students*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

³⁴ Schriver, J., & Teske, N. (2020). Anticipating college graduation: The concerns and coping methods of college seniors. *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 32(1), pp. 79-95.

³⁵ Rapidly Accelerated Research Experience (RARE) is a focused pre-admission-to-graduation STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) immersion program. The overarching goal of the program is to provide opportunities for students from backgrounds underrepresented in STEM fields to develop outstanding scientific skills in an environment that emphasizes preparation for leadership in addressing the increasingly complex issues facing the sciences, engineering, and society in the 21st century. Learn more at <https://hhmi.cas.lehigh.edu/content/rare/>

³⁶ Duran, A., Dahl, L., Stipeck, C., & Mayhew, M. (2020). A critical quantitative analysis of students' sense of belonging: Perspectives on race, generation status, and collegiate environments. *Journal of College Student Development*, 61(2), 133–153. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2020.0014>

Practice 5 - Engage parents and families, providing them with tools and resources to support their students.

As many students return to live at home while campuses are closed, engaging family members is an even more important part of cultivating a sense of belonging amongst students and can have positive impacts on their academic outcomes.³⁷ Institutions should develop and compile resources specifically for parents, family members, friends, or significant others, posting those in a centralized location. The administrators we interviewed recommended that these resources be focused on topics such as coursework, advising, financial aid, mentoring, and more. With these materials, family members can help encourage a sense of community and belonging.

Institutions can also include family members in planned events, where possible or appropriate. For example, the ACREW (Aggie Collegiates Ready to Explore the World) and Ignite programs at Texas A&M invited students to bring a family member, or even a pet, to a special virtual dinner event, giving students, staff, and family members the opportunity to meet one another and build relationships.^{38,39} Many cohort programs pride themselves on the “family” aspects of their programs, and so, institutions can find success by sharing this sentiment with students and their families. Welcoming, and normalizing, the home environment that students are in can further enrich a sense of belonging.

Practice 6 - Increase collaboration to ensure that students are at the center of all decisions.

We heard from every administrator interviewed that departments and divisions at their institutions prioritized collaboration in order to meet students’ needs during the switch to remote learning in spring 2020. Many colleges and universities have established processes to facilitate cross-functional collaboration, but the rapid and unprecedented shift to remote learning in the spring and the planning for re-opening in the fall called for institutions to augment and re-evaluate established processes to meet the current moment.⁴⁰ For example, in spring 2020, Johns Hopkins University departments each articulated a “pivot plan:” a compilation of changes in operations, activities, and policies as campuses closed. These plans were shared across departments to foster increased collaboration and encourage the sharing of ideas.

³⁷ Roksa, J., & Kinsley, P. (2019). The role of family support in facilitating academic success of low-income students. *Research in Higher Education*, 60, 415–436. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-018-9517-z>

³⁸ Aggie Collegiates Ready to Explore the World (ACREW) is a recognized student organization and learning community for freshmen Regents' Scholars who are awarded the President's Achievement Scholarship. Through support and mentorship, ACREW upperclassmen aid ACREW freshmen in the transition from high school to college life. Learn more at <http://studentsuccess.tamu.edu/First-Generation/First-Generation-Learning-Communities/ACREW>

³⁹ Ignite is a new learning community at Texas A&M focused on providing academic and social enrichment to first- generation college students who have not received a Regent's Scholarship. Ignite students build their connections with people who know what it means to be a first generation college student. Learn more at <http://studentsuccess.tamu.edu/First-Generation/First-Generation-Learning-Communities/Ignite>

⁴⁰ Joo, J., Selingo, J. J., & Alamuddin, R. (2019, October 17). *Unlocking the power of collaboration: How to develop a successful collaborative network in and around higher education*. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.312001>

Collaboration can also involve individuals, business, and other groups in the broader campus community. For example, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW), staff in the FASTrack and BANNER programs use local minority-owned businesses to cater their events.⁴¹ Now that these events are no longer in-person, UW is planning to set up deliveries from these businesses directly to students during virtual events, so that there is some continuity and familiarity in their community-building programs. Collaboration across campus can signal to students that their needs matter to the institution at large.

Practice 7 - Demonstrate care and compassion.

Demonstrating care and compassion for students' feelings, experiences, and circumstances is morally right and essential to cultivating a sense of student belonging; perhaps more so now, than ever. The consequences of a global health pandemic, historic economic recession, and a national awakening to persistent systemic racism are impacting the health and well-being of all students, especially those who are disproportionately affected by these crises.^{42,43} Administrators at Lehigh University shared examples of how they kept in touch consistently with students in their cohort programs to gather personal items from their residence halls to mail back to them (e.g. books, lab materials). One staff member is even storing various personal items (e.g. two guitars) at their home for students in their program.

Leadership rooted in empathy is of the utmost importance during these times. Every institution we spoke with emphasized how students do not always have a home environment that is conducive to learning, and that it is necessary to have some grace, whether with deadlines, responsiveness, level of participation, or otherwise. The current moment has highlighted a lot of inequities in this respect, including students' hesitancy at times to have their camera on during classes and other gatherings.⁴⁴ University staff and faculty should accept and encourage students to take care of themselves, including keeping their video off whenever it makes sense. UCF also infused compassion and equity into their digital pedagogy. For example, faculty opted to avoid single-question pages in virtual assignments and exams, despite the fact that the practice discourages cheating, since loading new pages was more difficult for students with limited broadband access.

⁴¹ These programs are designed to assist Badgers from low-income households pay for college through a combination of grants, work-study, and small loans. It includes a commitment to meeting a student's financial need for four consecutive years. Learn more at <https://financialaid.wisc.edu/types-of-aid/ftb/>

⁴² Blankstein, M., Frederick, J. K., & Wolff-Eisenberg, C. (2020, June 25). *Student experiences during the pandemic pivot*. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.313461>

⁴³ Brown, S. (2020). *Students of color are not OK. Here's how colleges can support them*. The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved from https://www.chronicle.com/article/Students-of-Color-Are-Not-OK/249125?utm_source=at&utm_medium=en&utm_source=iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=campaign_1340712&cid=at&source=ams&sourceid=5273600

⁴⁴ Casey, N. (2020). *College made them feel equal. The virus exposed how unequal their lives are*. The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/04/us/politics/coronavirus-zoom-college-classes.html>

Conclusion

As COVID-19 precipitated a wave of closures, colleges and universities across the country made significant efforts to meet students' evolving needs and keep them connected to their peers and to the institution. However, decisions to close campus happened very quickly and institutional leaders had little time to plan for the transition to remote learning.

There are still many different scenarios for what college campuses will look like throughout the fall, particularly as the circumstances of the campus community and the virus itself evolve.^{45,46} Cultivating student belonging in a virtual context will not be easy. When campuses closed in the spring, students, staff, and faculty relied on the relationships they developed in-person earlier in the semester or academic year. Many students, especially incoming students, will not have the benefit of those established relationships, and building those new relationships online takes more intention and effort.

To do this work effectively, institutions will need to commit financial and human resources, both likely constrained in the current environment. Along the way, it will also be essential to continually evaluate the impacts of these practices as they vary across contexts and student populations, modifying and enhancing them as necessary. While outside the scope of this brief, faculty and academic affairs administrators should also provide opportunities to build a sense of community within virtual classrooms as well, leveraging the many pedagogical techniques at their disposal.^{47,48} The consequences of inaction or inadequacy are potentially dire: students who bear the greatest burden of the effects of the pandemic are at the greatest risk of feeling disconnected and dropping out.

As the fall 2020 semester begins, colleges and universities should prioritize efforts to build community and foster a sense of belonging among students, even if they cannot return to campus in-person. Using the lessons from spring 2020 as a guide, we have devised these seven practices to inform institutions' plans for engaging students in a remote campus community during the fall and beyond.

⁴⁵ The Chronicle of Higher Education. (2020). *The reopened campus: What it will take. How it will look*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/package/the-reopened-campus-what-it-might-look-like-what-needs-to-happen>

⁴⁶ The Chronicle of Higher Education. (2020). *How will the pandemic change higher education?* Retrieved from https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-will-the-pandemic-change-higher-education/?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in

⁴⁷ Toor, R. (2020). *Turns out you can build community in a zoom classroom*. The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/turns-out-you-can-build-community-in-a-zoom-classroom>

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The **American Talent Initiative (ATI)** is a Bloomberg Philanthropies-supported collaboration between the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, Ithaka S+R, and a growing alliance of top colleges and universities committed to expanding access and opportunity for lower-income students.

ATI seeks to substantially expand access and opportunity for talented, low- and moderate-income students at the nation's colleges and universities with the highest graduation rates. Specifically, the initiative has one central goal: attract, enroll, and graduate 50,000 additional high-achieving, lower-income students at the nation's colleges and universities with the highest graduation rates by 2025.

Leading public and private colleges and universities comprise ATI's membership, collectively representing 31 states, seven Carnegie Classes, and a wide range of institution sizes. With the support of its member institutions, ATI centers its work around a commitment to achieve access and attainment goals, compile and elevate related research and promising practices, and regularly highlight the importance of its work.



The **Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program** aims to advance higher education practices, policies, and leadership that significantly improve student outcomes. The program is part of The Aspen Institute, a global nonprofit organization committed to realizing a free, just, and equitable society.



Ithaka S+R is a not-for-profit service that provides research and strategic guidance to help the academic and cultural communities serve the public good and navigate economic, technological, and demographic change. Ithaka S+R is part of ITHAKA.