

# Understanding Latinx Students Sense of Belonging

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For San Francisco State University  
June 2024

In an increasingly diverse higher education landscape, ensuring that all students feel a strong sense of belonging is more important than ever.

This is particularly true for Latinx students, who often face unique challenges and barriers to success in college. By understanding the multifaceted nature of belonging and the critical role it plays in the experiences of Latinx students, universities can take actionable steps to create more inclusive and supportive environments that empower this growing student population to thrive.

# Understanding Latinx Students Sense of Belonging

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San Francisco State University (SFSU) enlisted KNow Research to conduct market research among the Latinx student population using a 2-phase mixed methods approach initiative sponsored by SFSU and the Latinx Student Center.

## Project Objectives:

1. Gather information from Latinx students on the topics of belonging, engagement, and self-confidence
2. Gather feedback on the aspects of their student experience that were positive and/or challenging and better understand their experiences with university activities and programs

The data was used to help SFSU improve the Latinx undergraduate student experience and their sense of belonging on campus. It will also aid the University in its application for the Seal of Excelencia, a credential that will enhance San Francisco State University's commitment to accelerate Latinx student success

### Phase 1: Quantitative Survey

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A 10-minute survey of N=868 students ran in March of 2024, to understand how well SFSU serves its Latino/a/x students representing 40% of the undergraduate student population

### Phase 2: Qualitative Interviews

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N=13 Latinx students engaged in a 30-minute webcam interview to dig deeper into the Latino/a/x student experience at SFSU in April of 2024



# Unpacking the Latinx Student Experience

## Navigating Dual Identities

For many Latinx students, a sense of belonging is closely tied to their ability to navigate the complexities of being bi-cultural; living within the Latinx and "US General" worlds. This duality can sometimes lead to feelings of not being "enough" in either culture, which can impact their sense of belonging on campus.

## Seeking Authentic Connections

Latinx students crave more genuine relationships with faculty and staff, seeking mentorship, guidance in navigating university bureaucracy, and understanding of their personal circumstances. Building these authentic connections can significantly boost their sense of belonging and engagement.

## Balancing Responsibilities

Financial pressures often require Latinx students to work while attending school, limiting their ability to connect with peers and participate in campus activities. Providing targeted support and resources help these students navigate the challenges of balancing work, school, and personal responsibilities.

**Feeling represented, respected, and connected directly contributes to most Latinx students reporting a high sense of belonging, engagement, and self-confidence at San Francisco State University**



**Total Belonging**

**3.65/5**



**Total Engagement**

**3.65/5**



**Total Self-Confidence**

**3.23/5**

# The Power of Belonging

1

## Feeling Visible and Included

Latinx students at SFSU report that a strong sense of belonging is closely tied to feelings of visibility, inclusion, and acceptance on campus. This allows them to show up authentically and feel part of a community with similar backgrounds.

2

## Thriving Academically

When Latinx students feel a strong sense of belonging, they are more engaged, motivated, and successful in their academic pursuits. This positive cycle of belonging and achievement can have a profound impact on their overall college experience and future outcomes.

3

## Developing Resilience

Despite the challenges they face, Latinx students at SFSU demonstrate remarkable resilience and determination. By fostering a sense of belonging, universities can help these students tap into their innate grit and reach their full potential.

*Belonging is when you feel you are seen for who you are, valued, and feel like you deserve to be there*

*- 1st Generation Student*



*Sense of belonging in classes \**

**3.77/5**



*Feeling respected by other students \*\**

**3.95/5**



*Feeling welcomed \*\*\**

**3.78/5**



*Feeling understood as a person by others \*\*\*\**

**3.50/5**



\*Q: Overall, how much do you feel like you belong in your classes at SFSU? N=775

\*\*Q: How much respect do other students at SFSU show toward you? N=779

\*\*\*Q: How welcoming have you found SFSU to be? N=781

\*\*\*\*Q: How well do people at SFSU understand you as a person? N=779

# Role of Faculty & Staff

## 1 Respect and Understanding

Latinx students at SFSU report feeling highly respected by faculty and staff; a key driver of their sense of belonging. Maintaining this level of respect and understanding is crucial.

## 2 Authentic Relationships

Latinx students seek more meaningful connections with their advisors, professors, and administrators. They crave mentorship, guidance, and a genuine understanding of their personal circumstances.

## 3 Advocate and Ally

When faculty and staff act as advocates and allies for Latinx students, it can have a significant impact on their sense of belonging and their ability to navigate the challenges they face.

## 4 Representation Matters

Seeing Latinx faculty and staff in leadership positions can help Latinx students feel more represented and supported, further strengthening their sense of belonging.



Feeling **respected** by staff/faculty at SFSU\*

**4.13/5**

Most students feel respected by staff and faculty. The welcoming, friendly, and open environments create more belonging and connection opportunities



Feeling **connected** to staff/faculty at SFSU\*\*

**2.99/5**

A stronger connection with their advisors, professors, and administrators could help them to navigate university bureaucracy and systems with more ease

***I feel like to be seen by the people higher up in the organization, having a mentor is necessary***  
- Continuing Generation Student

# Importance of Latinx-Centric Programs

## Positive Impact

The data shows that students who participate in Latinx-centric programs and services, particularly METRO and EOP, report a stronger sense of belonging compared to those who do not. These programs provide academic support, mentorship, and community-building opportunities that help students feel more connected and validated in their experiences.

## Visibility and Representation

Campus clubs and organizations that celebrate Latinx culture and identity are crucial for helping students feel seen, heard, and empowered within the larger university community. The university's commitment to hosting Latinx-focused events, workshops, and speakers helps Latinx students feel visible, valued, and connected to their cultural heritage.

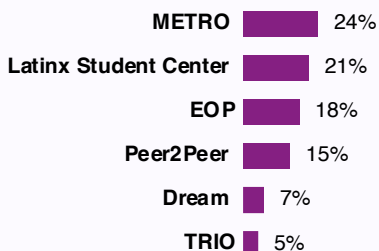
## Underutilization

Despite the clear benefits of these programs, they are often underutilized by Latinx students. Reasons for this include a lack of awareness about the programs, limited time to participate due to competing responsibilities, and a focus on coursework over extracurricular activities.

## Strategies for Improvement

Consider strategies to increase participation in Latinx-centric programs, such as more targeted outreach and marketing efforts, partnerships with faculty, department newsletters or emails, and offering more flexible scheduling options to accommodate students' busy lives.

### Percent Program Utilization\*



*I'm a commuter student who works and goes to school full time. I don't have the privilege of time to just hang out on campus and do stuff.*

*- 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Student*

*The METRO Program helped guide me as a first-generation Latina student...I love that SFSU provides these resources and programs because they actually help students excel.*

*- 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Student*



\*Q: Which of the following university programs and services have you used in the past year? Mark all that apply. N=771

# Overcoming Belonging Barriers

1

## Financial Pressures

Financial pressures are a major source of stress for Latinx students, with many working to afford tuition and living expenses. This leaves little time for campus involvement or relationship-building with peers and faculty. Financial pressures were the top reason\* most Latinx students took a pause (35%) or considered (36%) stopping out of school.

2

## Navigating University Systems and Bureaucracy

A mix of experiences across different offices impact students' sense of belonging and if they matter at SFSU. Students reported more challenging than supportive experiences with Financial Aid, Housing, and Registration & Enrollment. When students feel alone in their struggles and like a burden when they seek help, they feel like they don't matter.

3

## Helpful Latinx Faculty and Allies

When they find Latinx faculty and helpful Allies (Non-Hispanic supportive faculty/staff), Latinx students feel understood, connected, welcomed, and reassured. Acknowledging their personal circumstances and sensitivities can make a significant impact on Latinx students' morale.



*I love my [professor;] he has shown me that even while being Latinx and facing hardships you work you can always reach your goals. He has really motivated me to achieve more for myself and go above and beyond like he has, he's the best professor ever and good representation for my community.*

*-1st Generation Student*



*Classes and finances are always hard for most POC people, especially first-generation. Admission, financial aid, housing... all the above, are not as accessible as it seems to be. Many students end up homeless or drop out because these departments do not try to work things out and work with the student, either deny them without any effort or take a long time and have no sense of urgency.*

*- 1st Generation Student*



# Resilience & Determination of Latinx Students



## Academic Motivation

The research shows Latinx students are highly motivated to succeed academically. They're driven by the belief that their education will lead to a better, more prosperous future.



## Confidence in Completion

Despite financial hardship, balancing jobs with coursework, and imposter syndrome that can impact their classroom experience, the majority reported feeling confident they will complete their degree successfully.



## Resilience and Grit

Latinx students at SFSU demonstrate remarkable resilience, grit, and determination. Students described their education as a pathway to a better future and expressed a deep commitment to persisting in the face of obstacles.



## Motivation to Succeed

For students who had taken a pause or stopped out of school due to personal or financial challenges, this determination was often what brought them back to campus, with nearly half citing a desire for a better future as their primary motivation for returning.



*I worry about the difficulty of my major or classes.\**

**3.63/5**



*I am motivated towards my studies.\*\**

**4.26/5**



*I'm confident I will complete my degree successfully.\*\*\**

**4.28/5**

***I wanted to finish it for myself and my family. I've made it this far and I want to prove that people who don't get the resources needed can still make it***  
- Woman, Commuter



# How to Foster Belonging

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## 1 Celebrate and Elevate Belonging

Recognize the high levels of belonging among Latinx students while strategically targeting efforts to engage busy students and those with lower reported belonging. Explore innovative programming and scheduling to accommodate diverse needs and commitments.

## 2 Ignite Belonging from Day One

Foster a strong sense of belonging for Latinx students from their first interactions with the university. Incorporate Latinx-specific resources and information into campus visits, orientations, and ongoing programming.

## 3 Navigate Cultural Complexities

Educate and unify students about the university's use of "Latinx" while considering the use of alternative terms like Latiné/a/o or Hispanic in targeted marketing materials.

## 4 Illuminate Pathways to Success

Increase visibility and utilization of programs designed for undocumented, first-generation, and low-income students. Provide clear guidance and mentorship to help Latinx students navigate these resources and access additional financial solutions.

# How to Foster Belonging – continued

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## 5 Cultivate Community and Connection

Create accessible, engaging opportunities for Latinx students to connect with one another and explore their diverse heritages. Offer a mix of informational events, cultural celebrations, and casual gatherings that accommodate busy schedules and demonstrate inclusivity.

## 6 Empower Faculty and Staff as Belonging Ambassadors

Share research findings and provide targeted training to equip faculty and staff with the tools to foster belonging in their classrooms and interactions. Offer multiple engagement options, such as informational resources, workshops, and webinars.

## 7 Embrace Resilience and Determination

Acknowledge and celebrate the resilience and grit demonstrated by Latinx students, particularly those who have persisted through challenges or returned to their educational pursuits. Highlight these positive characteristics in university messaging, counselor connections, and student interactions.

# Sources

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For the SFSU Undergraduate Belonging Survey, we used a Sense of Belonging Scale designed and validated by the Imperial College of London Centre for Higher Education and Research. You can find more information about the scale on the College's website:

- <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/research-and-innovation/education-research/evaluation/what-can-i-evaluate/sense-of-belonging/tools-for-assessing-sense-of-belonging/sense-of-belonging-scale/>

Peer-reviewed published research from other University studies using the scale can be found using the following links:

- <https://bmcmmededuc.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12909-023-04061-2>
- <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol19/iss4/06/>
- <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/12/803>

To measure Engagement and Self-Confidence, we borrowed items from the validated "What Works?: Student Retention and Success Change Survey, another validated instrument created by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education Academy. Research findings from the full "What Works?" Survey can be found here:

- <https://www.phf.org.uk/programmes/works/>