

Concord University

Athens, West Virginia



Social-Belonging for College Students

Low retention and graduation rates are a big challenge at Concord University, in part because many rural West Virginia students don't feel comfortable in college. To change that, Concord is working to increase their students' sense of belonging on campus.

Overcoming Stereotypes

Long before Sarah Beasley became Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students at Concord University, she wrote her doctoral dissertation on the experience of first-generation college goers who grew up in rural, low-income communities in and around the coal fields of West Virginia near Concord.

Beasley's research found that many of those students fail to persist and earn degrees in part because they lack role models and feel out of place.

"There's a saying in West Virginia that 'you can't get above your raising,'" Beasley said. "West Virginia has one of the lowest education attainment rates in the country, and often going to college means leaving behind your families and communities."

Many rural students are also keenly aware of cultural stereotypes that people like them are "uneducated hillbillies" who aren't supposed to be in college and don't have what it takes to succeed.

As a result, Beasley believes that a lack of belonging is a big reason only 35 percent of Concord University students earn a degree in six years, well below the national average of 60 percent. And only 64 percent of Concord University freshmen return for their sophomore year versus 80 percent, on average, nationally.

Normalizing Challenges

Almost all first-year students experience challenges in the transition to college, such as failing a test or feeling like they aren't making friends. For students of color, low income students, and first-generation college students, persistent negative stereotypes and underrepresentation can lead them to wonder if they belong in college, especially when faced with challenges and setbacks. This concern can lead to social and academic withdrawal which, in turn, leads to lower academic achievement and persistence.

To improve students' sense of belonging at Concord, Beasley in 2017 persuaded the school to begin offering new students Social-Belonging for College Students, a 30-minute, online program developed by the College Transition Collaborative in partnership with the Project for Education Research at Scales (PERTS).

The Social-Belonging Program aims to help students view challenges encountered in the transition to college as normal and improvable, so they are more likely to remain socially and academically engaged in the face of challenges. In previous studies, the Social-Belonging Program has been effective in improving both social and academic engagement on campus as well as GPA and retention among socially disadvantaged students.



Undergraduate enrollment:
1,875
students

Concord University undergraduate students are:
87% White
9% Black
2% Asian
1.5% Hispanic

35%
of Concord University
students graduate with a
degree in six years
*vs. a national average of 60%
for all U.S. college students*

64%
of Concord University
freshmen return for their
sophomore year
*vs. a national average of 80%
for all U.S. college students*

49%
of Concord University
students receive an
income-based federal Pell
grant intended for
low-income students



A Holistic Approach to Retention

PERTS' Social-Belonging Program is one of a wide array of initiatives at Concord to help its students navigate their college experience. All new Concord students attend a for-credit class called "University 100," which is designed to help smooth students' transition and set them up for academic success. Since 2008, Concord has had an Academic Success Center to coordinate various campus retention efforts and help more students achieve their academic, personal, and career goals. When the school found 43 percent of Concord students faced food insecurity, they established a food pantry and emergency grant funds to help students meet basic needs.

"We try to take a holistic approach to retention," Beasley said. "I really think we owe it to our students to provide as much support as we can to ensure they are successful and make it to graduation."

When Beasley proposed adding the Social-Belonging Program to the mix at Concord, her fellow administrators embraced the idea, in part because many of Concord's existing retention initiatives are informed by Carol Dweck's work on growth mindset and related non-cognitive factors that impact learning.

The Front Lines of College Access

"One of the helpful things is that it's already been tested, and there's clear evidence that it's had an effect (on academic outcomes) in other places," Beasley said. "That helped create buy-in among faculty and administrators."

Beasley has been pleased with the rollout and the feedback on the Social-Belonging Program so far. In partnership with PERTS Concord is exploring ways to increase the program's reach and impact. For instance, in 2017 only 50 percent of new students took the program even though it was a requirement, in part because they could only take the program in one of Concord's computer labs. In 2018 Concord allowed students to complete the Social-Belonging Program on their own time and on their own devices, and participation jumped to 73%.

Beasley is gratified that Concord does not have to pay a fee to offer the Social-Belonging Program to its students, since the 140-year-old public university has little money to spend on new retention efforts.

"I was thrilled to learn that PERTS was making things like the Social-Belonging Program available for free," Beasley said. "It's institutions like Concord and other regional public universities that serve the highest percentage of low-income and first-generation students that are on the front lines of college access, but we often don't have adequate resources" to properly support students at risk of dropping out.