Ready, Set, Match: Helping Students Feel as if They Matter Through Virtual Events

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Abstract: As online education expands, cultivating a sense of belonging becomes increasingly complex, especially for students who may never set foot on a physical campus. In this article, we explore the nuanced nature of fostering a sense of belonging and mattering among distance learners on our own campus, Indiana University (IU) East. To address these students' unique needs, our English department organized three virtual events (the Alumni Career panel, the Faculty+Student Reading of creative work and the Celebration of Student Writing) utilizing Facebook Live, Zoom, and Pressbooks. Drawing on the concept of "belonging" as articulated by Strayhorn (2019), we examine the degree to which these virtual events fostered a sense of belonging and mattering, particularly through the concept of "matched pairs," which emerged as a useful framework for creating personalized connections between faculty and students, a critical ingredient in both belonging and mattering. Both the Faculty+Student Reading and the Celebration of Student Writing worked to establish closer ties between participating faculty and student pairs, while the third event, the Alumni Career Panel, encouraged students to interact with alumni in a virtual "living room," a relaxed online space (via Zoom) where they could learn about career paths. However, we also found that events like these cannot be viewed as "one-and-done" but rather must be part of a sustained program to enhance student connections. Acknowledging the time-intensive nature of planning and organizing such events, we caution against assumptions of seamless execution and underscore the need for purposeful planning, inclusive design, and flexibility to accommodate diverse student needs.

Keywords: Belonging, mattering, connection, validation, distance education students, online learning, virtual events, social identity, campus community, matched pairs

As the proportion of online students increases, the question of how to foster their sense of belonging becomes complicated, particularly when many of these students may never physically visit their home campus. The most recent census for our own campus, Indiana University (IU) East, revealed that 68% of all current students had no on-campus presence whatsoever (IU Institutional Analytics, personal communication, May 24, 2023). Many (if not most) work full-time or close to it and have a multitude of family and other obligations. Their need to feel a sense of belonging is not quite the same as that of more traditional (younger, in-person) students. In our own English studies program, this has been expressed in terms of desiring more connection or social interaction in which online, distance students can participate. For example, in a recent exit survey, student comments included a desire for faculty to better understand the differences between online and in-person students and adjust teaching/cocurricular interactions with their needs in mind, as well as a desire for more synchronous Zoom meetings in order to feel connected. This deeply resonates with us, as faculty, not just with respect to our individual teaching but with our overall approach to helping our online students feel as

if they belong—in our courses, in our program, and on our campus, even if they live on the other side of the country or just in a different time zone.

Strayhorn (2019) described "belonging" as "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group," related to feelings of acceptance, inclusion, importance and that one has a meaningful role to play (p. 27). A sense of belonging can result in a host of positive student outcomes, including improved mental health, greater use of campus resources, and a heightened determination to succeed; conversely, a lowered sense of belonging is linked to lower academic persistence (Brodie & Osowska, 2021; Gopalan & Brady, 2019; O'Keefe, 2013; Peacock et al., 2020). A sense of belonging is tied to a student's perception of themself as a "legitimate and valued member of a knowledge-building community" (Koole & Parchoma, 2012, p.15). This need is particularly acute for underrepresented, minority, and historically marginalized groups who have a higher propensity not to feel as if they belong (see Anderman & Freeman, 2004, as cited in Strayhorn, 2019, p. 20; Bettencourt, 2021; Gopalan & Brady, 2019). For these groups especially, personalized faculty attention can make, quite literally, a world of difference (O'Keefe, 2013).

Belonging is enmeshed with students' social identities and is related to, though not identical with, a sense of mattering to peers, faculty, and other campus members (Potts, 2021; see also Tovar & Simon, 2010). Mattering is the belief that one is "significant and important to other people" (Flett et al., 2019, p. 667), that one is valued and appreciated (Schlossberg, 1989; Shine et al., 2021, p. 282). Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) defined it as "the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate" (as cited in Strayhorn, 2019, p. 151). Mattering is connected to a student's perception of faculty attention, an awareness that faculty notice their presence and recognize their significance as people (Johnson et al., 2007). Again and again, it has been shown that the role of faculty is critical to fostering both belonging and mattering in students, a significance to which we will return.

Much of the research on belonging and mattering has focused more on traditional students in seated programs and less on those in online programs and who do not fit this profile (e.g., Ahn & Davis, 2020 Kirby & Thomas, 2022). As already mentioned, online students tend to work more hours and have greater home responsibilities and so are not necessarily in a position to participate in many of the kinds of activities that can heighten a feeling of belonging, such as clubs, student government, sports, and other endeavors that require at least some commitment of time and energy and contribute to what Ahn and Davis (2020 referred to as the "social domain" of belonging. At the same time, or perhaps because of this, many of these students do not feel impelled to develop a strong sense of belonging, as they have lives engaged in arenas outside of their campuses (Brodie & Osowska, 2021; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022).

This is not to assume that online students do not desire *any* feeling of connection to their campuses; rather, it underscores how belonging as a phenomenon is not fixed or immutable but subject to a variety of influences (Allen et al., 2021). Indeed, it is deeply personal, bound up in a student's understanding of themself, "multifaceted, fluctuating and ephemeral in nature and differing for learners according to the context of their studies, individual needs and self-efficacy" (Peacock et al., 2020, p. 76). In fact, Gravett and Ajjawi (2022) suggested that belonging is a "nomadic process" that shifts as a student moves through their academic career, assessing and reassessing their personal situation and adjusting to educational, home, and work-life changes (p. 1393). Accordingly, Flett et al. (2019) noted the importance of keeping the student's sense of individuality in mind and advocated for an increase in positive one-on-one encounters with faculty (p. 676), which aligns with our overall strategy in fostering a sense of belonging and mattering in our own students, as described further in this case study.

Employing Technology to Foster Belonging

Recently, our English department held three events spaced throughout the academic year, aimed at helping online students, in particular, feel as if they belonged. We employed three technologies: our campus's Facebook Live platform (for Event 1, Faculty+Student Reading); the online conferencing platform Zoom (for Event 2, English Alum Career Panel); and the e-book platform Pressbooks (for Event 3, Celebration of Student Writing). These apps let people connect over distance and time zones, synchronously and/or asynchronously, are both enduring and easily accessible, and create experiences that are both public and communal, yet they can also feel unexpectedly personal at the same time, as we will explain. The three events were also quite different from each other: The Faculty+Student Reading was the first of its kind to be held by our department and had a creative writing focus; the English Alum Career Panel had been held in prior years but in a campus-based format. Similarly, the third, Celebration of Student Writing, had been held since 2018, with participation by in-person students from across the campus but, up until the pandemic, in a mode that excluded distance students (which can contribute to feelings of isolation for online students; Thomas et al., 2014, p. 76). In all three events, our shift to online and digital access opened up involvement to all students, no matter where they lived or what their personal/professional situation. All were fairly low-threshold events in terms of time commitment or advance preparation (for students). That is, none of them asked students to do extra work, an important aspect when considering the needs of online students, who already tend to feel overstretched (Thomas et al., 2014). Two events involved student presentations and had a celebratory element (one of Boyer's, 1990, principles of campus community life) and the third involved alumni.

For the Faculty+Student Reading and the Celebration of Student Writing, the two celebratory events, our approach in obtaining student participation was on an individualized basis. Although this meant somewhat more involvement by individual faculty than might otherwise be needed in planning student events, quantitative and qualitative data suggested this was a highly effective component, as we elaborate below. Common to all three events, in various forms, was the idea of "matched pairs." For both the Faculty+Student Reading and the Celebration of Student Writing, the matched pair was the faculty initiator and the student presenter; the English Alum Career Panel echoed the matched pairs theme by helping students feel a sense of identification with an alum who had been through the program and was now in a satisfying career, fostering a sense of "If they can do it, I can do it." Following two of the events (English Alum Career Panel and Celebration of Student Writing), attendees completed surveys on the event's effect on students' sense of belonging and mattering.

Event 1: Faculty+Student Reading

The first event was scheduled early in the academic year. Three creative writing faculty each personally invited one student to join them in a public reading of a poem or prose excerpt, live streamed on our campus's Facebook Live page. The technology that allowed us to offer this event was Zoom, an easy-to-use synchronous conferencing application. The students were free to choose which of their works they wanted to read. Since this was the first time reading in public for some students, faculty also arranged to meet for one rehearsal via Zoom with their student; this was optional and inability to rehearse did not preclude a student from participating. In discussing validation, a concept closely related to mattering, Swanson and Cole (2022) found that when faculty take the initiative to reach out to a student in a publicly affirming way, as in the case here, it can lead to a range of positive results, both emotional and academic (p. 1369). In fact, validation as a concept rests on the idea of proactive steps taken by the validator, in this case, the faculty member, to foster the student's academic development and autonomy (Swanson & Cole, 2022; see also Barnett, 2011, who asserted a measurable

relationship between validation, as described here, and a student's sense of belonging). The event itself was limited to an hour and each student's name was paired with the faculty name on the program schedule.

To run the technical side of the event for us, we enlisted help from our campus marketing director. Asking for help from an experienced user, as we did, relieved a measure of stress from the faculty organizers, which included one of the authors (Perkins). To watch the event (and comment via text and emoticons), viewers simply went to our campus Facebook page—no special link or password needed. Student and faculty participants gathered virtually in the Zoom room 15 minutes prior to the start, which felt analogous to being backstage waiting for the curtain to rise. This short time offered a somewhat unexpectedly personal, even intimate, interlude where faculty and student participants alike could share feelings of nervousness and excitement; again, this created a feeling of collegiality and connection between students and faculty, only made possible through use of this particular live conferencing technology, since student participants were scattered across the state. Streaming Zoom via Facebook Live, however, created what were essentially two separate virtual "rooms"—the audience was on the Facebook side, separated from participants, who were on the Zoom side. This kind of separation has both advantages and drawbacks, which we discuss in further detail in the following section.

Although the audience attendance was modest (fewer than 20 attendees), the event still represented an opportunity for students to potentially experience both belonging and mattering; interestingly, the presence of opportunity itself is part of the belonging framework (Allen et al., 2021). This occurred in at least four ways: (1) social engagement with both faculty and peers, which occurred online via Zoom both before and after the live-streamed Facebook event; (2) personalized invitation from and one-on-one practice with a faculty member; (3) public recognition (by family, faculty, and peers) in a celebratory setting. A sense of mattering was further enhanced by positive comments and emoticons in the publicly visible chat, left by nonparticipating faculty attendees as well as family and friends (e.g., "So proud of you, X!" "Great reading, Y!"). This aspect of back-channel chat as public affirmation cannot be overlooked as a contribution to a sense of recognition for the student. In a 2021 study of help-seeking behaviors among online and blended learning students, Broadbent and Lodge (2021, Conclusion and implications) argued that live-chat technology enables online learners to feel "more cared about by the teaching team." Other studies have found that instant messaging enhances a sense of connection (Klein et al., 2018; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). Finally, (4) belonging and mattering occurred through validation of the student as a writer via the opportunity to share the virtual stage with their professor. In this regard, a public reading forum, as a collective experience, has an equalizing effect on participants; everyone is in the same boat, even if briefly (Allen et al., 2021).

We did not collect survey data from this event. However, students' personal expressions anecdotally attest to the positive effects and mostly align with the research findings discussed above. Student participants shared how being invited by a professor to join them in a public reading made them feel as if their writing had worth, that it mattered. They used words such as "excited" and "thrilled" in communication with faculty, and they invited (noncampus) friends and family to the event, some of whom attended. One of the faculty participants described the event as "transformational" in her observation of student effect (J.M. Blankenship, personal communication, July 26, 2023). Still, the question remains as to the longer term efficacy of an online event such as the Faculty+Student Reading.

The strength of the matched pair nature of the event is also its liability, since the number of students that can directly participate is limited by both the number of faculty available and the time span of the event itself. In future readings, faculty could each invite two or three students, which would expand opportunity for newer writers but also significantly lengthen the event's duration, which could negatively affect attendance. As well, there is some evidence suggesting that online events do

not have an impact or meaning for students enrolled in in-person programs and/or at residential institution (see, e.g., Potts, 2021). However, this might not necessarily be true for nontraditional, online students who have different personal and professional situations, as we have already elaborated. Our approach in creating the Faculty+Student Facebook Live event as part of the three-event series described in this case study was built on research suggesting that providing multiple *opportunities* for social interaction and participation with faculty and peers is helpful in and of itself for new students, but even more so when combined with personal faculty attention (Thomas et al., 2014). Moreover, we would suggest that events such as this need to be part of a larger quilt of purposeful faculty engagement with online students, whereby a sense of belonging (and mattering) can evolve organically over time. Kirby and Thomas (2022) noted that it is "*repeated* positive interactions with faculty members" (emphasis added) that are needed, not a one-and-done (p. 369).

Event 2: English Alum Career Panel

The Panel

For this event, select alumni were invited to talk about their postgraduation experiences via Zoom. The panel, held in late January, was required for all students in the Technical & Professional Writing Senior Seminar (either live on Zoom or watching the Zoom recording) and also available to all other English majors who wanted to attend. For those watching live, there was an opportunity to ask questions at the end. Prior to the pandemic, we held Career Panels on campus with a live-stream option; however, few of our students lived close enough to attend in person. In 2023, we decided to bring the Career Panel back but make it a virtual event. This made it accessible to both students and alumni, some of whom reside in other states, including Florida, California, and New York.

We carefully selected a diverse array of alumni who each had different career paths. Five alumni participated: a digital media writer; an SEO content supervisor; a digital editor for Disney working with e-books and audiobooks; a grant writer who owns her own grant-writing business; and an assistant acquisitions editor at a publishing company. They spoke for about 5 minutes each on their path since graduation, highlighting specific professional experiences. In addition, we invited a local professional in the communications field to talk to students about the job search process and what employers look for in job applicants. For convenience, this was prerecorded and aired during the panel. The presentation used a question-and-answer format with prompts to the speaker to talk about specific topics. All participants shared their contact information with the students so they could reach out, follow up, and connect with the presenters.

We decided to hold it via Zoom and not as a Facebook Live event. Both platforms have advantages; Facebook Live locates events within the visual interface of IU East's Facebook page, with its numerous links, images, and other media to reinforce campus personality/presence. Moreover, Facebook Live events are archived on the campus Facebook site, so that they can be watched anytime, even by non-campus-based viewers. However, for us, the primary disadvantage was that Facebook Live streaming created what was essentially two separate virtual "rooms," as discussed earlier. For this particular event, we decided on Zoom for its "living room" environment, in which everyone can be seen, either with their cameras on or just by their names (offering a cameras-off option is important to make an online event inclusive; Cirucci, 2023).

In contrast to the Faculty+Student Reading, this event was not open to the public. We did not want to separate audience attendees, who would be primarily students, from participants, who were mostly alumni. Our hope was that the final question-and-answer period would turn into more of an open discussion between alumni and students. We also liked how Zoom made it easier for attendees to comment and communicate to the group as a whole, either by voice or via chat, which was enabled

for this event to encourage communication, as well as to individuals and that it would foster a sense of community and impel student participation (see Miller's 2020 essay on the particular affordances of the Zoom chat during synchronous online classes). The use of streaming technology also let us embed videos prepared by participants unable to attend in person. They prepared their videos in consultation with faculty and so the videos were timed in length and tailored in content to the particular needs of our students who made up the audience.

Survey Results

After watching the panel, Senior Seminar students, who attended as part of their coursework, were invited to complete anonymous surveys about the value of the panel, using a Likert scale measuring from strongly positive to strongly negative. The survey was completed by five students (more than a third of students enrolled in the seminar). All were fully online students. Students were also asked if they would be willing to share their reflection about the panel (a required component in the class) with the researchers. Two students agreed to do this. The results suggest that the Alum Career Panel event had a moderately positive effect on students' sense of belonging; however, the low participation rate constrains our ability to make any generalizable conclusions.

Survey responses indicate that the Career Panel was most helpful in supporting students' sense of connection with faculty ("After watching the English Majors Career Panel (either live or the recording), do you feel a stronger connection to faculty or your campus?" Yes: $n = 4$; maybe: $n = 1$), and less so with fellow students, including alumni ("After watching the English Majors Career Panel, do you feel a stronger connection to your fellow students (including alum)?" Yes: $n = 2$; maybe $n = 3$). One student commented: "I truly believe that our professors care for their students…. I'm glad to have ended up at IU East even if I'm purely online." This may reflect faculty interaction in inviting students to the event, as well as interactions prior to the event as everyone was entering the Zoom room and waiting for the event to begin. The time before and after events can be impactful in connecting with students; for this particular event, several faculty attended and greeted students by name as their icons appeared in the Zoom room. Although casual and brief, these kinds of interchanges can let students feel that they are seen; even "small nuances" such as remembering a student's name or other detail can have positive effects (Flett et al., 2019, p. 676). Students had the option to turn their cameras on or keep them off; most, though not all, kept them off. Although it may seem minor, recognizing and welcoming students, regardless of whether their camera is on or not, is important, especially for minority students and those with lower household incomes, who may not want to reveal themselves and their living spaces via Zoom (Cirucci, 2023).

Although the survey pool was small, it does indicate that overall, students found the panel useful ("Did you find the content of the alum presentations useful for you as an English Major?" Extremely useful: $n = 3$; very useful: $n = 1$; moderately useful: $n = 1$. "Did you find the Q&A at the end useful for you as an English Major?" Definitely: $n = 3$; probably: $n = 2$) and felt it helped connect them, at least somewhat, to campus and faculty ("After watching the English Majors Career Panel (either live or the recording), do you feel a stronger connection to faculty or your campus?" Yes: $n = 4$; maybe: $n = 1$).

Hearing about alumni presenters' experiences also resonated for some ("Did you feel like any of the alum presenters had experienced challenges or situations as a student similar to what you have experienced?" Very much so: $n = 2$; perhaps: $n = 3$). One student wrote:

> There was one alum speaker who said he worked retail (as a manager) and his schedule allowed him little time to see his family due to working nights. He used his experience in retail and business to help him land a career in technical writing using these skills. His past job is similar

to my job right now, since I am a retail manager who works mostly nights. Hearing that I could use my experience in retail like he did in technical writing was very interesting.

Another commented: "I enjoyed the chance to hear from people using my degree in the real world after college." One student indicated they "live out of state," which may indicate they were a respondent who answered that it did not make them feel as if they belonged on campus ("Did watching the English Majors Career Panel affect whether you feel like you belong on this campus?" Yes: $n = 2$; maybe: $n = 1$; no: $n = 2$).

The event was recorded and uploaded to the Senior Seminar Canvas site, so that students unable to attend in person could watch the event later. This kind of flexibility in access is part of adjusting teaching (and other) interactions with distance and working students' needs in mind (Thomas et al., 2014, p.78), which echoes the senior exit survey comment mentioned above. The two students who granted us permission to use their reflections about the panel in our research both attended the live version of the Career Panel, which might indicate a stronger desire to connect with the speakers and campus community. Other students could not attend owing to their schedules or perhaps a lack of desire to engage with the speakers; those students watched the recording.

The idea of matched pairs was also part of what we wanted to accomplish with this event, as we hoped to foster identification among current students and alums, such as that of the student quoted above who identified with the night-work manager. Beyond the survey data, this identification also appeared in the reflection excerpts from two students, both of whom were fully online, nontraditional, and worked full-time. Student A responded:

> The English Majors Career Panel was very informative and insightful as to what I can do with my degree in the future. The panelists were from all types of careers and different backgrounds, giving us students a variety of perspectives and demonstrating that my degree can fit wherever I need it within the English realm.... Listening in on the part of this career panel felt in some ways like *I am not alone* [emphasis added], rethinking my future career path along with *giving me the ability to see that there are a plethora of paths that I can take with the degree I am earning* [emphasis added].

Student B commented: "One common theme that stood out to me from the alumni panelists is they all seemed happy with their current work positions. *Seeing their satisfaction helped me to feel that I will find a job that I enjoy* [emphasis added]."

These comments indicate that the panel may broaden students' thinking about the possibilities for them when they graduate with a technical writing degree. As all students create a LinkedIn profile, which provides faculty with a way to keep in touch with our alumni (and find panelists), it would also be an ideal way to pair former students with current students in a mentoring relationship. Ideally this would occur long before the Senior Seminar class, perhaps during the gateway course. Students could be matched based on career interests or other demographics. Being in contact with former students also opens possible avenues for internships. An interesting example of this resulted from the Career Panel. The panelist who was a grant writer/business owner approached one of us (M.T.E.) after the panel to ask for help in finding a remote intern, specifically someone to focus on marketing/social media, to help grow her already successful business. This may potentially lead to further work, perhaps full-time employment, and subsequent internships. Similar future opportunities/partnerships would provide excellent experiences for our students.

Event 3: Celebration of Student Writing

The Event and Associated Publications

Celebration of Student Writing is "a term which generally refers to events hosted at colleges or universities with the express purpose of displaying first-year writing (FYW) students' classroom work for live audiences via art installations, posters, and presentations" (Carter & Gallegos, 2017, p. 74). The IU East Writing Program had been hosting Celebration events since 2018 but during the first 2 years, the focus was almost exclusively on in-person students. Teachers signed up their classes, and they all arrived on the appointed day, with posters and talks and PowerPoints, to present their work in an event similar to a science fair. Then, in 2020, in the throes of the pandemic, Celebration moved online. Rather than students synchronously presenting their work, five students (a mix of online and on-campus students) made short videos about their writing, which were presented during a Facebook live-streaming event, along with a keynote address on composing during times of disruption. The event was later archived on our campus YouTube channel. Reimagining the event had a fortuitous byproduct: Online students could participate and attend.

To strengthen the participation of students in the online event, and again echoing the idea of matched pairs, starting in 2021, we asked faculty across the curriculum to individually nominate students for the event via a Qualtrics survey. Nominated students, whether from an in-person or an online class, were then notified of the professor's nomination and invited to participate in the event, which involved the publication of their work in an IU Pressbook, accompanied by an individualized introduction that included quotes from their faculty nomination.

Pressbooks is an online e-book platform that is an ideal tool for publishing student work of all kinds. The layout is clean, the entries are easy to navigate, and the format creates space for multiple voices: nominators (faculty), writers (students), keynote speakers, and event organizers. This technology—a digital space for multiple voices—fostered a sense of belonging in student writers in a visually powerful way, because it let us bring together, on the same digital book page, a faculty voice (the nomination) with a corresponding student voice (the nominated work), as a matched pair. The pages were designed so that the text of the faculty nomination was at the top, followed by the title of the work, the student's name, and the work itself. The faculty nomination was specific to the student and their original work; the nomination form asked the faculty to elaborate on why they were nominating the work and let them know that their words would be included as part of the student's page.

Our goal in using this technology, among other reasons, was for the student to be able to read their professor's rationale in a public space, and for them to (hopefully) see that they are "an important part of the life and activity" of the campus, a key ingredient to feeling like one belongs (Goodenow, 1993a, p. 25, as cited in Strayhorn, 2019, p. 11). As Blewett wrote in the introduction to the first IU Celebration Pressbook in 2021: "These pages make visible the appreciation and affirmation that is often communicated in private educational spaces, such as the margins of papers or an electronic gradebook" (Blewett et al., 2021).

The platform supports images, text, video, and audio within the Pressbook, which in turn allows publication of diverse genres of student work, such as essays, magazine articles, website pages, videos, and infographics. The publication of the Pressbook creates an important context for the synchronous, live-streamed keynote, and it is publicly accessible to everyone, not just the IU community. It is easy to create a Pressbook, with just a modest learning curve. Finally, the product of the Pressbook, as a URL, is durable, stable, and easily shareable.

About 50% of nominated students opted to participate. Ultimately 25 students participated in the Pressbook project that year, and each received a signed copy of the 2021 keynote's latest book.

The keynote itself was live streamed using Facebook Live and subsequently archived in the Pressbook, enabling students to access the address asynchronously if preferred, an important option for inclusive online programming (Liasidou, 2022, p. 12).

Celebration of Student Writing has continued to evolve over the last 2 years. In 2022, the in-person student showcase was reinstated, and the Pressbook project was retained. That year, 45 students were published in the Pressbook, and, again, all participating students received a signed copy of the keynote speaker's most recent book In 2023, the event again included both the in-person showcase and the IU Pressbook, but this time Pressbook students were invited to present their work synchronously on campus. At the on-campus event, the Pressbook was pulled up on a big screen, and students from three participating on-campus classes gathered in small groups to watch the Pressbook students present their pieces (occasionally with faculty nominators standing nearby and beaming). Again, all participating students (in-person and online) received a signed copy of the book of our 2023 keynote speaker, who also attended the in-person student showcase and whose address was archived in the Pressbook. Of the 49 students whose work was published in the 2023 Pressbook, 12 participated in the in-person showcase. All 2023 Pressbook students were subsequently asked to complete a feedback survey that asked specifically about their feelings of belonging as related to the event.

Survey Results

The survey was completed by 16 students (just over a third of all 2023 Pressbook participants). Several respondents were at the on-campus event. Of the 16 students, eight took classes only online, and eight took classes both online and in-person. Results overwhelmingly demonstrate that the Celebration event effectively impacts several dimensions of belonging for both online and on-campus students.

The first striking thing about the survey results is that all 16 students were "extremely happy" (i.e., 5 on a 5-point Likert scale) to receive the nomination, and nearly the same number of students indicated that they felt the nomination was evidence that they mattered to their professor (definitely yes: $n = 15$; probably: $n = 1$). To better understand these numbers, qualitative comments from the survey were analyzed. The comments, 40 in all, were written in response to the following open-ended survey questions:

- Question 6: Can you say more about why you answered the way you did? [This question appeared after four Likert-scale questions regarding feelings regarding the faculty nomination]
- Question 9: Can you say more about why you answered the way you did? [This question appeared after two Likert-scale questions regarding the publication]
- Question 12: Can you say more about why you answered the way you did? [This question appeared after two Likert-scale questions regarding awareness of peers]
- Question 13: What did you like best about being included in the Pressbook? What suggestions can you make for how we can make the experience better for next time?

To complete the analysis, one author (Blewett) individually numbered the comments and pasted them into an Excel grid, whereupon she read through them looking for patterns and keywords. This process yielded five general themes, four of which we report on in this article (we discarded data regarding improvements that could be made to the event next time). The first theme, which underscores why receiving a nomination felt significant, is about feeling acknowledged and seen as an online student. See representative student comments below (emphasis added):

- It is easy to feel sort of disconnected and invisible when attending school online, especially if one lives so far from the actual campus. It is encouraging to know that even though I do not get the opportunity to meet my fellow students and my professors in person, *I am not just another enrollment number.*

- In the online environment, it's easy to feel as if your assignments are simply checked off of a list—a good student can feel like the good kid in a family, the one that no one worries about and therefore gets less attention than the unruly kid. *This program helps students feel seen and recognized* for the hard work they put into their writing.

- A lot of times as an online student I have little to no interaction with my professors. It often feels that all my effort I put in, though I'm receiving good grades does not matter, so *to be acknowledged is really nice.*

- I often wonder how much impact online students have in the overall course of classes taught during any given semester. The fact that [my professor] not only remembered my work from the previous semester, but thought enough of it to nominate me has *changed my perspective of how an online student can make an impact.*

The nominations represent an opportunity to provide a moment of personalized recognition for students, including online students who are particularly at risk of feeling disconnected (Brodie & Osawska, 2021; Thomas et al., 2014). "Not just another enrollment number" is a slogan worthy of a Celebration t-shirt! A deeper dive into the affective dimensions of this theme underscored the positive emotions that came from feeling acknowledged (emphasis added):

- My professor's nomination message was *uplifting* to me.
- When I heard [my professor] nominated me, *I was touched.*
- I feel that *my instructors are interested in my work.*
- This acknowledgement lets the student know that faculty is not just reading for accuracy and application of instruction. I feel as if they are also looking for ways to *elevate and cultivate* talent.

These comments get at the emotional dimension of the nomination (uplifting, touching), while also describing the excitement of being "cultivated" versus simply assessed. A second theme that came through very strongly via the qualitative comments was validation and accomplishment:

- [The nomination] helped me feel like I chose the right program and am succeeding towards my graduating and future career goals.
- The nomination showed me my work is good.
- I am proud to have my work on display.
- It was great seeing my name in a publication.
- Being published was an honor.

The accomplishment, though, seemed for some students more an individual achievement versus evidence of belonging to a community. In fact, three students went out of their way to make exactly that distinction, which Blewett tracked as the third theme, ambivalence about campus belonging:

- I'm [an] online student who lives out of state, so "belonging on-campus" is difficult. But it did make me feel more confident in my writing.
- I don't go to IUE [IU East]. I attend IUS [IU Southeast] and the class that I wrote this paper for was online through IUE. That being said, I did feel a large sense of accomplishment to have my work recognized by a professor who had only ever known me through Zoom.
- Being nominated for the Pressbook didn't really give me a sense of belonging as much as it gave me a sense of pride in my work.

These students did not feel more of a sense of belonging at IU East as a campus as a result of their participation in this event, but that was not necessarily what they were looking for. These examples underscore the need to attend to the diversity of student experiences and desires (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022). For our Celebration events, it is up to faculty organizers to "avoid generalized assumptions" (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022, p. 1392) and to provide multiple options for students, such as the option in 2023 for students to interact with peers at the synchronous event. For students who accepted this option, as well as students who took the time to read their peers' entries in the Pressbook, feelings of belonging to the campus increased, as evidenced by these remarks, which are drawn from the fourth theme: the significance of peers in fostering feelings of belonging:

- Actually, it was standing with the other nominated students at the Celebration, discussing as a group and individually what inspired us to write our papers, how they connected to our majors or interests, and our joint nervousness in presenting our works [that] really helped me to feel connected to them.
- I am always amazed at the quality of work students at IUE [IU East] are producing. Having the opportunity to view their work helps encourages me to do the same. This, to me, is one of the benefits of such a community.
- Reading the other entries and nomination notes from the instructors has increased my sense of belonging…. I value sharing the same alma mater with my fellow writers.

One student took the day off work to be at the event. They wrote: "I'm an older student. But I was on campus for the first time for IU East last night. I realized I miss the campus experience." This is an important insight for us as event organizers, but it is also important to realize that for some students, coming to an on-campus event is not feasible or desirable. They may feel affiliations to other communities, such as the student who identified as attending IU Southeast, or the students who report living out of state. What we need to do now, perhaps more than at other stages of our institution's existence, is to think about the multiple dimensions of belonging and to design occasions that will connect to them, in different ways for different students, so that students have options for participation that reflect their interests and can take from the events what they need.

Reflections and Cautions

It would be naïve to assume that single events, such as described here, are a silver bullet. Rather, they should be viewed as just a few examples of numerous interventions, as part of a sustained program of fostering belonging and sense of mattering (Flett et al., 2019). Another caution is that these events take time. Just as online courses require careful planning and preparation, so too do these events. Online students are often pressed for time, and notions that "online learning can happen anywhere, anytime" have been found to place additional "stress and burden on students" (Gravett & Ajjawi,

2022, p. 1391). Setting up events such as these in inclusive and purposeful ways will require increased planning and time from organizers—thinking through synchronous versus asynchronous options, marketing the event ahead of time, keeping the burden on students appropriately light so that participation in the event feels doable, not penalizing students for their inability to participate as fully as the organizers (or they) might like. Event organizers should offer "multiple and varied opportunities to interact" to allow "a diverse range of students to select opportunities to engage that best fit within their own unique learning needs" (Thomas et al., 2014, p.79). With these cautions in mind, we do think the events we have described here offer insights for faculty interested in using technology to enhance feelings of belonging and mattering for distance students.

Most importantly, they collectively suggest that the idea of matched pairs provides a framework for student connections to be forged or enhanced in online spaces in highly personalized ways. In terms of events that pair students and teachers, such as the Faculty+Student Reading and the Celebration of Student Writing, these online spaces may present an opportunity for the domains of academic belonging and social belonging to converge (Ahn & Davis, 2020, broadening the potential takeaways for students (e.g., feelings of camaraderie and/or feelings of individual accomplishment). In reflecting on the events featured here, we noticed that the Faculty+Student Reading offered a closer and more equalizing tie between the three participating faculty/student pairs, whereas the Celebration of Student Writing took advantage of a polyvocal online publication to feature many matched pairs simultaneously, while keeping the faculty/student hierarchy more or less intact. They thus offer useful models for how technology can be used to enhance faculty–student connections. The English Alum Career Panel also successfully fostered identification for a different type of matched pair—current and former students—and was open-ended enough to create space for students to see themselves in the presenters in multiple ways.

Moving beyond these events, there may be other pairings that would be helpful for students, such as community leader/student, internship opportunity/student, and student/student. For example, in an online writing course this spring, one of us (Blewett) realized that two students were mothers of children of a similar age and working in similar fields. She pointed out this commonality on a discussion forum, sharing details about her own children and noting that over half the class were working parents. In light of the idea of matched pairs, this everyday encounter on an online discussion board, which Blewett had previously framed as a self-introduction activity along the lines described by Thomas et al. (2014, p. 76), gleams with new potential. What would it look like to create a space for students who are working parents to connect with each other, foregrounding the similarities in the intersections of their identities? Such an opportunity would certainly be logistically tricky to facilitate, but the potential payoffs in terms of belonging are high.

University educators are accustomed to thinking about belonging as representing the fit between a student and an on-campus culture, often connected to "the privileged identities of the 'typical' or 'authentic' student: young, full-time and residential" (Thomas, 2015, as cited in Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022, p. 1388), yet in reality, campuses are bigger and more diffuse than the physical spaces in which they reside, and students are more complex and diverse than the privileged identities previously assumed. In the midst of these changes, the case study presented here suggests something hopeful: that technology can be purposefully used to foster belonging in small spaces, celebrating individual connections and prompting greater attention not only to student retention but also to the "constellation of relations, intimately entangled with identities, becoming and learning" (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022, p. 1393) that students want and need.

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