Psychologically Wise Strategies to Support Belonging in a Diverse College Community

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Stanford University

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Some worries students have in school
Do I belong?
When I feel lonely (or disrespected, etc.), does it mean I don’t belong?

Can I do it?
When it’s hard, does it mean I can’t do it?

Does it matter?
When it’s boring, does it mean there’s no reason to try?
They’re Magic*

• #1 – They’re magic … tricks.
  – *These effects can’t be real*

• #2 – They’re magic … bullets.
  – *Scale everywhere immediately without delay*

*They’re not magic (Yeager & Walton, 2011)*
Students’ worries about belonging, about fixed intelligence, about stereotypes

Opportunities for learning; Teachers’ parents’, and students’ motivation for students to do well in school
A Question of Belonging
Psychologically Wise Interventions
(Walton & Wilson, in press)

• Not programs or skill-building

• Address subjective-meanings
  • Most proximate driver of behavior
  • Readily become recursive—behaviors can reconfirm meanings to drive lasting change

• Questions and answers
  • Socio-cultural contexts often raise questions, or interpretive lenses; these can be pejorative
  • People construct answers through their experience
Merit and Deservingness
From Alfred Binet

“After the illness, the remedy”
-Alfred Binet (1857-1911)
Children of this group should be segregated in special classes and be given instruction which is concrete and practical. They cannot master, but they can often be made efficient workers, able to look out for themselves. There is no possibility at present of convincing society that they should not be allowed to reproduce, although from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their unusually prolific breeding.

-Lewis M. Terman

The Measurement of Intelligence (pp. 91-92, 1916)
School Desegregation, and Resegregation
Stereotype Threat
Stereotype threat

A psychological burden caused by the concern that one’s performance or behavior might seem to confirm a negative stereotype about one’s group.

Claude Steele
Am I the kind of person who can go to college and succeed in America?
Contexts Raise Questions;

[At Princeton, I felt like] a visitor landing in an alien land . . . I have spent my years since Princeton, while at law school, and in my various professional jobs, not feeling completely a part of the worlds I inhabit.

- Sonia Sotomayor (memoir)

Race matters, because of the slights, the snickers, the silent judgments that reinforce that most crippling of thoughts: ‘I do not belong here.’

- Sonia Sotomayor (in dissent)
My experiences at Princeton have made me far more aware of my “Blackness” than ever before . . . no matter how liberal and open-minded some of my White professors and classmates try to be toward me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don’t belong . . . It often seems as if, to them, I will always be Black first and a student second.

- Michelle Robinson (1985)
When I first arrived at school as a first-generation college student, I didn’t know anyone on campus except my brother. I didn’t know how to pick the right classes or find the right buildings. I didn’t even bring the right size sheets for my dorm room bed. I didn’t realize those beds were so long. So I was a little overwhelmed and a little isolated.

-Michelle Obama (2014)
Belonging Uncertainty
(Walton & Cohen, 2007)
Strategy #1

Address High-Level Beliefs People Use to Make Sense of Many Aspects of the World
The Social Belonging Intervention

Stories + “Saying-Is-Believing”
Highly Selective College
College Grade Point Average by Year

Walton & Cohen (2011)

- European Americans, Control
- African Americans, Control
- European Americans, Social-Belonging Treatment
- African Americans, Social-Belonging Treatment

- Reduced the Black/White achievement gap through senior year by 52%
- Improved self-reported health and well-being

Social-Belonging Treatment (1-hour in-person exercise)

Walton & Cohen (2011)
Everyone is going out without me, and they didn’t consider me when making their plans. At times like this I feel like I don’t belong here and that I’m alienated.

-Black female, control condition
A Deleterious Interpretation of Social Adversity

Everyone is going out without me, and they didn’t consider me when making their plans. At times like this I feel like I don’t belong here and that I’m alienated.

-Black female, control condition

Statistical mediation:
This change in social construal statistically mediated the 3-year gain in academic performance.
Membership in an under-represented or stigmatized group in higher education

Experiences of challenge or setback (e.g., critical feedback, low exam score, feelings of loneliness)

If the student believes this experience is not typical...

“"I / people like me don’t belong / can’t fit in / can’t succeed at my college.”"

Withdrawal from the social / academic environment

Worse achievement, lower persistence and college completion

Belief

If the student believes this is typical and it’s normal to worry about whether you belong when you struggle...

“It’s common to go through challenges like this and overcome them.”

Sustained engagement in the social / academic environment

Higher achievement, greater persistence and college completion

PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

BEHAVIORAL RESPONSE

ACADEMIC OUTCOME

How does it work? A model from multiple studies
Changing Lives
A Long Long-Term Follow-Up

Shannon Brady
Stanford University

Shoshana Jarvis
Columbia University

Geoff Cohen
Stanford University
Young Adulthood

- Walton & Cohen (2011) participants surveyed 7-9 years after participation, 3-5 years post-college (87% retention)

### Career Satisfaction and Success
(Satisfaction, Belonging Uncertainty [RC], Success, Potential)

### Psychological Well-Being
(Life satisfaction, Stress [RC], Happiness)

Condition: $F(1, 75)=9.90, p=0.002$
Race X Condition: $F<1$

Condition: $F(1, 75)=4.58, p=0.04$
Race X Condition: $F(1, 75)=3.05, p=0.09$
How did students get there?

• GPA?
  – No. GPA predicts none of these outcomes.

• Mentorship?
Academic Mentorship

“While you were an undergraduate, did anyone associated with [school], other than fellow undergraduates, take a special interest in you and your academic development? (e.g., faculty mentor, graduate student, etc.)”

Academic Mentor in College?

If Yes: Continue After College?

Composite mentorship mediates long-term gains in career satisfaction and success, psychological well-being

Treatment: $\chi^2(1) = 4.67, p=0.03$

Treatment: $\chi^2(1) = 15.05, p=0.002$
CONTROL:
I wouldn't say I received any mentorship at [school] - not for lack of interested professors, but I didn't really seek it.

TREATMENT:
The first semester of my freshman year was very difficult for me. I was struggling academically, didn't feel like I fit in, and was unhappy with my major…I began to spend more time speaking with my freshman counselor. We really bonded, and she helped me to realize that I did belong at [school]. Thanks to her, I was able to connect better with my peers and perform better academically. We've kept in touch ever since.

I had a very deep relationship with my senior thesis adviser. One summer, while I was doing an internship in Greece in a field related to my studies, my mentor came to visit me all the way from the United States. Given his old age, I think this was a true sign of how much he cared. He always took interest in how am I balancing academia and athletics and took an effort to get to know me personally.
Helping Students Anticipate Challenges in Advance

- *Pre-matriculation* intervention
  - Can we give students helpful theories about challenges in the college transition in advance?

- Potential for large-scale dissemination
  - Possible to reach entire cohorts of students through online pre-enrollment materials

- Three trials (Yeager, Walton, Brady et al., 2016)
  - Charter school networks
  - A large public university
  - A selective private university
Helping Students Anticipate Challenges in Advance

• *Pre-matriculation* intervention

• Can we give students helpful theories about challenges in the college transition in advance?

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• Three trials  *(Yeager, Walton, Brady et al., 2016)*

• Charter school networks

• A large public university

• A selective private university
University Partnership 2: A Selective Private University

Shannon Brady
Stanford

Ezgi Akcinar
Stanford

David Yeager
U-Texas, Austin

Geoff Cohen
Stanford

Dave Paunesku
Stanford/PERTS

Carol Dweck
Stanford

Hazel Markus
Stanford

Rob Urstein
Stanford

PERTS
Improving education through science
Evaluation

• 90% of incoming students \((N=1,592)\) at a selective private university (416 African American, Latino, Native, or White first-gen)

• Link on orientation website

• Directed to online survey
  • Control group (information about moving to California)
  • Three interventions (quotes + letter)
    • Social belonging
    • Cultural fit
    • Critical feedback
Please follow the link below to take a brief survey about social and academic life at Stanford. This survey shares stories from current and former Stanford students about their experiences with the transition. You will then be asked about your thoughts and feelings about coming to Stanford. The thoughts shared in this survey will be used to help improve student life.

Click here for the Survey.

Check here to complete the Social and Academic Life at Stanford form.

Go To Form

You’re in.
You’re coming.
You’re excited.

You probably have lots of questions about what to expect.

This survey will give you an opportunity to learn more about students’ experiences coming to Stanford.

Because we value your point of view, we’ll also ask you to share your thoughts and feelings about coming to “The Farm.” We want to hear more about your and other students’ perspectives so we can give future Stanford students better insight into what coming to college is like.

Welcome to Stanford.

We're so very glad you're (almost) here.
Lay Theories of Three Types of Challenges in the College Transition

• **Social-belonging: Can I belong?** (Walton & Cohen, 2011)
  
  • *Everyone worries at first about whether they belong in college, but with time you feel at home.*

• **Culture fit: Can I be an interdependent self at college?** (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012)
  
  • *Students can maintain interdependent ties with people back home and join interdependent communities in college*

• **Critical feedback: What does critical academic feedback mean?** (Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999; Yeager, Purdie-Vaughns…& Cohen, 2014)
  
  • *When instructors give critical feedback in college, they do so to help students learn—because they have high standards and are confident students can reach them*
First-Year Grade Point Average

(raw means)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Any Treatment</th>
<th>Prior Two Years (N=968)</th>
<th>Social-Belonging</th>
<th>Cultural Fit</th>
<th>Critical Feedback</th>
<th>Any Treatment</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>3.42</td>
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Advantaged Students
(Asian and White continuing-gen; N=1,183)

Social-Belonging Intervention
Disadvantaged Students
(non-Asian minority, White first-gen; N=409)

Subgroup X Treatment (any) interaction: F(1, 1588)=4.04, p=0.045; Contrast for Disadvantaged: t(1591)=2.16, p=0.031, d=0.25
First-Year Grade Point Average

(Controlled for SAT/ACT, high school class rank, gender)

Social-Belonging Intervention

Achievement Gap Reduction
Raw Means: 31%
Adjusted means: 47%

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Subgroup X Treatment (any) interaction: $F(1, 1584)=5.66, p=0.017$; Contrast for Disadvantaged: $t(1584)=2.52, p=0.012, d=0.26$
Social and Academic Engagement
(African American, Latino, and First-Gen White students; Spring Term First Year)

**Made Close Friends**
3-item scale (e.g., “I have made some close friends at [school name]”) + average closeness of 7 closest friends (1-7)

**Extracurricular Involvement**
Sum of involvement in top three extracurricular activities (0-15)

**Use of Academic Support Services**
3-items: e.g., “So far this quarter, how often have you...met with a professor or TA outside of class? (1-5)

**Developed Mentor Relationship**
1-item: “Has anyone associated with [school name] taken a special interest in you and your personal and academic development?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Any Treatment</th>
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<tr>
<td>Made Close Friends</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular Involvement</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Academic Support Services</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developed Mentor Relationship</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>58%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Meaning & Purpose
(End of College Report)

![Bar chart showing eudaimonic wellbeing for advantaged and disadvantaged conditions.](chart.png)
% with a Mentor
(End of College Report)

- Male:
  - Control: 76.92%
  - Any Treatment: 72.41%

- Female:
  - Control: 83.33%
  - Any Treatment: 77.27%

- Control:
  - Disadvantaged: 84%
  - Advantaged: 82.43%

- Any Treatment:
  - Disadvantaged: 72.41%
  - Advantaged: 77.41%
# of Days Visited the Health Center
(Throughout College)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>advantaged</th>
<th>disadvantaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>control</td>
<td>M = 10.67</td>
<td>M = 14.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>any treatment</td>
<td>SD = 11.49</td>
<td>SD = 11.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD = 10.74</td>
<td>SD = 9.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Women in Engineering

Christine Logel
Waterloo

Jen Peach
Waterloo

Mark Zanna
Waterloo

Steve Spencer
Ohio State
Adaptation for Women in Engineering
(Walton, Logel, Peach, Spencer, & Zanna 2015)

- Extensive focus groups and interviews to identify novel themes
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Insight</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Optimization (revision to intervention message)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Women felt excluded from male peer groups</strong></td>
<td>Students described feeling excluded from male groups, not feeling “one of the guys”</td>
<td>Describe feeling excluded from a male subgroup in a conversation about hockey, but included when the conversation turned to engineering, a relevant TV show, and realizing that “even though I don’t share their love of hockey…we do have a lot in common”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Women experienced sexist disrespect</strong></td>
<td>Students described making a “classy” women in engineering calendar, and then having a male professor make a sexist remark about and a female professor tell us “not to present [ourselves] as women first if [we] wanted to be taken seriously as engineers</td>
<td>Seed alternative attributions for what could feel like sexist disrespect. Have a student describe feeling dismissed by a male professor—and seen as “dumb”—but make the student male not female, and have him learn that in fact the professor just wasn’t a good teacher.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First-Year GPA in Engineering
(Controlling for within-major mean)

Dean's Honour List
At Risk of Being Dismissed from Engineering

Men | Women
---|---
77 | 77
78 | 78
65 | 65
74 | 74

Randomized Control
Social-Belonging

p=0.023


Gender-Diverse Majors
(~33% women)

Men | Women
---|---
74 | 78

Male Dominated Majors
(~10% women)

Men | Women
---|---
65 | 77
Women’s Friendship Groups
(controlling for preintervention)

In Male-Dominated Majors

Control

Social-Belonging

- % Male Non-Engineers
- % Female Non-Engineers
- % Male Engineers
- % Female Engineers

Christine Logel
University of Waterloo

Mary Murphy
Indiana University

Gregory Walton
Stanford University

David Yeager
University of Texas at Austin

Christopher Smith
Executive Director
Stanford University

Ali Blodron
Senior Research Manager
Stanford University

Rob Urstein
Board Member
Stanford University

Shannon Brady
Project PI
Stanford University

Principal Investigators

Leadership
CTC Partners

Improving education through science

30+ schools
40K+ students
40+ liaisons
~300+

Additional schools have expressed interest
Strategy #2

Remedy Threatening Meanings Likely to Arise in Specific Situations
MY HERO

Dear Mr. Warner Prouty,

My hero is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. My hero has courage to do what he has to and when he has to do it. He is a testimony to others, and when he was tested he over came it. He went through trials after trials and he did not hold a grudge.

First Dr. Martin Luther King Jr has courage. He did not have to speak for “his people” but he did it because he cares. King lead some civil rights movements in his time. Dr. King also gave a speech in front of 200,000 of his supporters.

Second Dr. Martin Luther King is a testimony to me and others. He is a testimony to me because he did everything he could do to fight for the freedom for him, his family, and others. Now when I look at the simplest things and complain I think of what Dr. King would do.

Finally Dr. King is my hero because when he was tested he did not complain instead he over came the worst. Dr. King had many good reasons to quit what he was doing and curse everyone, but he didn’t. In the worst of times Dr. King kept his chin up. When King’s home was bombed all he said was “We must learn to meet hate with love” Dr. King was a great man and he helped change our world as we know it.

In conclusion Dr. Martin Luther King Jr is my hero because he had courage. He is a testimony to me and to others. Also he over came his troubles when he was tested.

“I have a dream that little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and little white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.”
Wise feedback:
I’m giving you these comments because I have high standards and I know that you can meet them.

First Dr. Marian Luther King JR has courage. He did not have to speak for “his people” but he did it because he cares. King lead some civil rights movements in his time. Dr. King also gave a speech in front of 200,000 of his supporters.

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“I have a dream that little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and little white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.”
Placebo:
I’m giving you these comments so you have feedback on your essay.

First Dr. Martian Luther king JR has courage. He did not have to speak for “his people” but he did it because he cares. King lead some civil rights movements in his time. Dr. King also gave a speech in front of 200,000 of his supporters.

Second Dr. Martian Luther king is a testimony to me and others. He is a testimony to me because he did everything he could do to fight for the freedom for him, his family, and others. Now when I look at the simplest things and complain I think of what Dr. King would do.

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“I have a dream that little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and little white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.”
Percentage Resubmitting Essay (7th graders)

- Criticism + Placebo
- Criticism + High Standards + Assurance

Yeager, Purdie-Vaughns, et al. (2014)
Meanings are malleable, but they can become fixed, like clay especially when they become “baked into” the structure of people’s lives.
Recursive Change

• For Black students most distrustful of school, the wise feedback note halted a decline in school trust over the next two years.

• Reduced disciplinary citations in 8th grade by half.

• Increased on-time enrollment in a 4-year college 6 years later from 45% to 64%.

Percentage Resubmitting Essay (7th Grade)

Criticism + Placebo  □ Criticism + High Standards + Assurance

White Students  Black Students

Academic Probation

Shannon Brady
Greg Walton
Geoff Cohen
Eric Gomez
Omid Fotuhi

Rob Urstein
Lourdes Andrade

Randy Williams
Shirley Matsumoto

Research Assistants
Marleyna Mohler
Brittany Torrez
Heidi Williams
Shelby Marcus
Amy Zeng
Mark Hardy
Ari Greif
Eileen Gao
Lucy Zhang
Adam Kaplan
The Problem

• Director of Undergraduate Advising:
  • Most students placed on academic probation don’t return to good academic standing

• Purpose of probation
  • Due notice (keep the lawyers happy)
  • Also: Intended to be helpful for students

• What’s the experience like for students?
Tell me your probation story
Survey: Students said...

• I felt like a **failure** when I got my probation.

• I felt incredibly **alone. No one seems to struggle**, or at least not to that degree….I felt like I couldn’t tell anyone…

• Being on probation **sucked. I lied so many times**….For some time after getting the letter, I felt that I **didn't belong**. I had already felt that way coming in, but that letter seemed to confirm that. For a minute I wanted to dropout…

• Being put on probation was **hell**.

• I **met some great people** during the process of being placed on academic probation…I am **thankful** [School] has a **strong safety net** to catch students who are struggling, whatever the reason. I really **appreciate** all the advisors at [School] who **really care** about student well-being. **I could not have finished my degree without all of you.**
Revise the Letter

• Frame probation as process not a label
  • Placement on academic Probation… -> The process for academic probation…

• Communicate “you’re not the only one”
  • [nothing] -> You should also know that you are not alone in experiencing these difficulties.

• Acknowledge many reasons
  • Whatever difficulties -> There are many reasons students enter the academic probation process. These reasons can include personal, financial, health, family, or other issues.

• Offer hope for returning to good standing
  • [nothing] -> By working with their advisors, many [students on probation] leave the process and continue a successful career at [School].
Add Student Perspectives

When I failed an important math class, I was devastated. If anything, getting the probation notice made me feel worse. I thought I was the only one having a hard time. Eventually, I got up the courage to talk to my RA….He told me, ‘You’d be surprised how many times I’ve had this conversation. Every time a person walks in thinking they are the only one, but really, lots of students struggle.’ … I learned something important in the process, about how to face up to challenges, to reach out to others for help, and find a way forward.

-“Michael,” Junior
The Approach

• Not tough love
• Not downplaying, not vague and avoidant, not kiddy gloves
• Psychologically clear; Caring and growth-oriented
## How Did Students Respond?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect Sizes (Cohen’s d)</th>
<th>Elite Univ. Between S</th>
<th>Elite Univ. Within S</th>
<th>State Univ. Between S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less ashamed</td>
<td>0.44*</td>
<td>0.34*</td>
<td>0.43*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less stigmatized</td>
<td>0.77**</td>
<td>0.73**</td>
<td>0.22†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less likely to consider dropping out</td>
<td>0.41*</td>
<td>0.44**</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
</tr>
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</table>

† p = .06, * p < .05, ** p < .01

In the within-subjects study, 78.8% of students recommend the revised letter
Educational Outcomes

• 61 students being placed on probation by the university
  – 21% freshmen, 33% sophomores, 18% juniors, 28% seniors
  – 70% men, 30% women
  – 18% Asian, 12% Black, 20% Latino, 7% Native, 38% White
  – Criterion: 5% low GPA, 95% insufficient units

• Receive the standard letter or the revised letter (randomized)
Did students contact an advisor soon (within 3 weeks) after receiving the letter?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Revised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visited advisor in person</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emailed/called advisor</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not contact advisor</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
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</table>
A year later: Were students off probation?

Ordinal regression, $p = .02$
A year later: Were students still enrolled?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Revised</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dropped out</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspended</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still enrolled</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>79%</td>
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Condition difference: $\chi^2(1) = 5.23, p = .02$
A win for psychological science, and for students

Shannon—

We have rolled out the revised probation letter to all students. So no need to randomize again. The new letter is THE letter.
Institutional Change: Academic Outcomes in Cohorts 2-5

Off probation?

Still enrolled?

Cohort 1
Cohorts 2-5

Cohort 1
Cohorts 2-5

Institutional Change:
Academic Outcomes in Cohorts 2-5

Off probation?

Still enrolled?

Institutional Change:
Academic Outcomes in Cohorts 2-5

Off probation?

Still enrolled?

Institutional Change:
Academic Outcomes in Cohorts 2-5

Off probation?

Still enrolled?

Institutional Change:
Academic Outcomes in Cohorts 2-5

Off probation?

Still enrolled?

Institutional Change:
Academic Outcomes in Cohorts 2-5

Off probation?

Still enrolled?

Institutional Change:
Academic Outcomes in Cohorts 2-5

Off probation?

Still enrolled?

Institutional Change:
Academic Outcomes in Cohorts 2-5

Off probation?

Still enrolled?

Institutional Change:
Academic Outcomes in Cohorts 2-5

Off probation?

Still enrolled?

Institutional Change:
Academic Outcomes in Cohorts 2-5

Off probation?

Still enrolled?

Institutional Change:
Academic Outcomes in Cohorts 2-5

Off probation?

Still enrolled?

Institutional Change:
Academic Outcomes in Cohorts 2-5

Off probation?

Still enrolled?
“Psychologically Wise” Interventions
(Walton & Wilson, in press, *Psych Review*)

- **Are not:**
  - Programs
  - “Nudges”—changes to a situation to make a desired choice or behavior easier or more likely
  - “Non cognitive skill” building

- **Address *subjective meanings***
  - Aka. “construals,” “interpretations,” “inferences,” “mindsets,” “beliefs,” “attributions,” “narratives”
  - How people make sense of themselves, other people, and social situations
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Why Are Subjective Meanings So Important?
(Walton & Wilson, in press, Psych Review)

- Are the most proximate driver of behavior
- Often function as working hypotheses or psychological questions—and so are malleable at key times
- Readily become recursive—behaviors can reconfirm meanings to drive lasting change
Where Do Meanings Come From? From Sociocultural Contexts

1. **The world**: Personal experiences, information, and ideas in the social and cultural context

2. **Perspectives and contingencies rooted in personal and social identity**, e.g., awareness of negative stereotypes and the risks they pose
Psychologically Wise Interventions
(Walton & Wilson, in press, Psych Review)

- Aim to understand the hypotheses (or psychological questions) people bring to a situation, as a function of the sociocultural context
- The better we understand the questions people ask, the more effectively we can redirect their inferences in adaptive ways
In social management as in medicine, there are no patent medicines and each case demands careful diagnosis.

- Lewin, 1958

(Director of the Center for Group Dynamics at MIT in 1946)
Necessity of Basic and Iterative Design Research

• To understand how a given meaning arises in a given context, its particular form and quality
• If this process is maladaptive, to understand how it can be changed effectively
• To understand the consequences of doing so
25 experiments [showed that]...although a large majority of pretest participants *believed* that [asking people to take another person's perspective] would systematically increase accuracy [of interpersonal understanding], we failed to find any consistent evidence that it actually did so.

A final experiment confirmed that getting another person's perspective directly, through conversation, increased accuracy...Increasing interpersonal accuracy seems to require gaining new information rather than utilizing existing knowledge about another person.
Conclusions

• Social meanings
  • Inherently ambiguous, profoundly important
  • Corrupted by negative sociocultural contexts and history
  • Psychology mediates the reproduction of inequality

• Psychological intervention
  • Can clarify meanings
  • Changed meanings can change behaviors, relationships, and lives
  • Engine oil, not the engine; Complement structural reforms and opportunities
Understanding Psychological Interventions in Context

- Psychological interventions are like **engine oil**, not the engine
  - They “grease” a complex system to allow it to function more smoothly
- Not **“either/or”** but **“both/and”**
  - Psychological interventions **complement** traditional reforms (e.g., in education: structural, curricular, pedagogical, financial reforms) to expand learning opportunities
- To be effective, psychological interventions:
  - Must speak to people’s experience in the setting at hand: Need for design processes and optimization
  - Must be delivered in contexts that afford better outcomes: Need for a better understanding of contexts