**Intervention Example 1: Normalizing Concerns About Belonging**

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| **Research Base:**  **A Question of Belonging: Race, Social Fit, and Achievement**  Walton & Cohen, 2007 |
| Stigmatization can lead to doubts about belonging, which in turn impacts motivation and achievement. Is it possible to disrupt this cycle by reframing uncertainty about belonging as typical for everyone? To test this, Walton and Cohen studied white and African American students early in their college career. Some of these students received an intervention in which they heard from more advanced students who described their experiences of feeling uncertain about their belonging when they first came to college but with time they came to feel like they fit in. African American students who received the intervention showed more academic engagement (e.g., time spent studying), better academic performance (GPA), and were more optimistic about their academic potential. Additionally, day-to-day sense of belonging was less strongly correlated with experiencing adversity (e.g., getting a bad grade, a friend who canceled plans) for African American students who received the intervention, suggesting that the intervention made these individuals’ sense of belonging more stable. The intervention did not impact white students’ outcomes. |

Here’s how it works:

* **Tell first-person stories from upper-year students** (juniors or seniors) that illustrate the common struggle of freshman students to feel like they belong in college. These stories should convey the fact that, with time, all students can come to feel at home in college and that there are many types of support available. These stories should be carefully written.

The stories should:

(1) **Dispel the perception** that “Only I or people like me worry about belonging at first in a new place.”

(2) **Represent trajectories of growth** by showing how, with time, students can come to feel like they belong.

(3) **Contradict stereotypes**, for instance by showing how people in the majority group also have these worries.

(4) **Reinforce a growth mindset** about intelligence by *avoiding* phrases like “I’m not smart” or “I’m not a math person.”

* Give people the opportunity to describe how this process of change has been or could be true for them. This “saying-is-believing” exercise can help people internalize the intervention message. Writing exercises are recommended.
* Avoid the potential stigma participants may feel if they are targeted for an intervention. Participants can be told their essays and speeches will be used to help future students, so that they see themselves as benefactors rather than beneficiaries.
* Subtlety—*less* conscious awareness of the intervention helps it to be *more* effective.

Example: As a freshman at the University of Washington, Jerry was feeling overwhelmed by college. He noticed that there were very few African-American men on campus and felt that he would not do well in school because he did not fit in. In his freshman seminar, he had the opportunity to meet one-on-one with an upperclassman who talked with him about his own experiences as a freshman. He told Jerry that it was normal to worry about fitting in during your first year—regardless of your ethnicity—and that over time he would feel more at home. After this meeting, Jerry went back to his dorm and reflected on the conversation. It did help him feel less isolated and like he might be able to fit in if he gave it some time. During the next seminar, the professor asked the class to write about their one-on-one conversations with upperclassmen. The process of writing about it helped Jerry feel even more reassured. Throughout the course of the year, Jerry did begin to feel more and more that he belonged at the University of Washington, and he went on to connect with many students and adults that would shape his successful college career.

More information: <http://tinyurl.com/jdye94h> or <http://tinyurl.com/haewtbs>