



# FOSTERING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND BELONGING ONLINE: A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN RIO SALADO COLLEGE AND AMERICAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Janet M. Athanasiou, American Public University System

Michelle Reese, Rio Salado College

Floyd H. Hardin, III, Rio Salado College

*This scholarship-to-practice paper examines the importance of engagement among college students and highlights a partnership between two online institutions - a two-year community college and a university - dedicated to fostering diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Guiding this work is the premise that higher education should be accessible to all who wish to pursue it, and that two institutions of higher education on opposite sides of the country can work together to share the stories and experiences of their students. The authors applied literature relating to belonging, engaging in campus activities, and the importance of sharing one's story to a partnership involving two different institutions and webinar discussions featuring underrepresented students.*

## INTRODUCTION

A 2021 *Inside Higher Ed* survey showed 71% of students report a lack of connection with peers and faculty as a result of online learning (Ezarik, 2022). A survey by the College Innovation Network indicated similar results: 69% of students felt less connected to peers; students also noted that college activities are an “important aspect” of their learning experience (College Innovation Network, 2022, p. 6). The coronavirus pandemic forced much of higher education and student activities to pivot and provide classes, activities, and services online, which continues today. With that, conversations at institutions emerged around maintaining an online presence in light of the shift in education. This change rose on the heels of the social justice revolution after the 2016 federal election spurred student activism and advocacy from already increased levels of civic engagement (Jacoby, 2017; Savas & Stewart, 2019). Born from a desire to provide more student activities and support for underrepresented students, leaders at Rio Salado College, a primarily online community college in Tempe, Arizona, and American Public University System (APUS), a fully online university with offices in Charles Town, West Virginia, partnered to spotlight the student experience in online education around themes related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB).

One outcome of the shared commitment to student activities and DEIB were quarterly panels with a keynote speaker, as well as student leader and alumni panelists from Rio Salado and APUS discussing the impact being an online student has on inclusion and belonging. Participants in these panels were campus leaders involved in student activities, honor societies, and other leadership opportunities. These activities helped build that sense of belonging craved by online students who felt isolated from their peers. They also put into practice research surrounding the themes of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.

## OVERVIEW OF THE PARTNERSHIP

School representatives from Rio Salado and APUS discovered a like-minded focus on DEIB activities and efforts that promote engagement. The cross-institutional team augmented existing co-curricular activities with creation of the webinars to provide space for students, staff, and the community to come together to learn, share, and grow, providing an opportunity and platform for underrepresented students to share their stories. In addition to giving participants space to talk about their experiences, the institutions fostered a commitment to providing underserved populations of students the opportunity to pursue higher education goals.

Project management and a regular cadence of meetings were key tools for a successful program launch. The meetings included representatives of the Rio Salado President's Office and Institutional Advancement team, members of the APUS Office of Student and Alumni Affairs, APUS Provost Office, and APUS University Events team.

### Planning Process

The schools worked together to provide the quarterly webinars with hopes of raising awareness, to promote diversity of thought, to educate, and to inspire our collective communities to do better and take action on DEIB issues. College and university leadership with connections recruited subject matter experts as keynote speakers. Each institution then sought individuals for the student and/or alumni panel. Pre-event meetings built familiarity among participants, allowing for a more open conversation during the webinars. Introducing student and alumni panelists to one another, as well as the keynote speakers and leadership, provided a more collegial environment. It also allowed for a final technology review to assure quality of sound and visual assets. The moderator worked with committee members to develop questions for the event, noting that incoming questions from the audience would be interspersed throughout the Q&A period. Finally, providing gate-keeping steps, including the monitoring of registrations and assigning off-screen team members to watch the chat, helped maintain a smoother production. Leaders at the institutions set a timeline prior to the events, typically three to six weeks in advance, to inform and invite their student, alumni, employee, and leadership populations through email, newsletters, blogs, and social media.

## OVERVIEW OF WEBINARS

The first events provided an opportunity to explore the online platform and hone in on the best use of time. Initial events were capped at 60 minutes, but that proved to pass too quickly. Later events were extended to 90 minutes to allow time for student panel participation and the question-and-answer session. The team solidified the meeting structure as the partnership progressed, establishing a cadence of:

- Moderator: Introduction of topic
- School leadership: Welcome
- Moderator: Introduction of keynote speaker(s), including biographies
- Keynote: 20-30 minute address
- Moderator: Introduction of student panel, including biographies
- Moderator: Pre-established questions for keynote speaker and student panel
- Moderator and behind-the-scenes team members: Pull questions from chat to weave into the pre-existing cadence
- Moderator: Closing remarks

Panel discussions were scheduled in alignment with cultural awareness months such as International Women's History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, and Pride Month. Table 1 outlines the topics, keynote speakers, and other important details of the webinars.

**Table 1. Dates, Titles, Keynote Speaker, Student Panel, and Links to the Rio Salado/APUS Panel Discussions**

Date	Title	Keynote	Student Panel	Recording
January 2021	Rio Salado College and American Public University System Partnership Announced	Rio Salado President, Dr. Kate Smith, and American Public University System Provost Dr. Vernon Smith	N/A	N/A
March 2021	Aligning our Institutions with Ideals of Belonging	Provost/Senior VP Virginia Union University, Dr. Terrell Strayhorn	Shayla Pollard, Rio Salado student; Cordero Holmes, Rio Salado student; Hannah Via, APUS student; Willis Jackson, APUS student	<a href="http://www.kaltura.com/tiny/kfstm">http://www.kaltura.com/tiny/kfstm</a>
June 2021	Ideals of Belonging: Creating Sustainable Support	APUS Department Chair, Ret. Lt. Col. Dr. Larry Parker	Carolyn Shack, Rio Salado student; Jennifer Gushwa, APUS student; Jacob Bailes, APUS student	<a href="http://www.kaltura.com/tiny/zttfv">http://www.kaltura.com/tiny/zttfv</a>
October 2021	Ideals of Belonging: Continuing the Legacy of Civil and Personal Rights	Civil Rights Activist, Alejandro Chavez	Ashanti Ruiz, Rio Salado alumnae; Nina Rivera-Nunez, APUS student, Hilda Sanchez-Herrera, APUS student	<a href="http://www.kaltura.com/tiny/mi7v3">http://www.kaltura.com/tiny/mi7v3</a>
March 2022	Leadership Perspectives	Rio Salado College President, Dr. Kate Smith; Acting APUS President, Dr. Kate Zatz	N/A	N/A
June 2022	Be PROUD of Your Voice: An Interactive Discussion on Advocacy and Inclusion Strategies	New York State Supreme Court Justice, Honorable Franc Perry	Emma Harlow, Rio Salado student; Giselle Velazquez; Rio Salado alumnae; Alyssa Holmes, APUS alumnae; Danielle Fergus, APUS alumnae	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sx3AQ-V5CRU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sx3AQ-V5CRU</a>
November 2022	Fostering Belonging through Storytelling	Kyle Mitchell, Diné (Navajo) Storyteller	Bridget Kimsey, APUS student	<a href="https://youtu.be/2zt27XeSjIM">https://youtu.be/2zt27XeSjIM</a>

## PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE STUDENT ACTIVITIES

Research shows online communities can provide a safe space for students to engage with peers and faculty. For example, LGBTQ+ students use social media and online networks to better understand, explore, and embrace their LGBTQ+ identities, particularly if they are not ready to come out to friends and family (Fox & Ralston, 2016). Within a college setting, engagement in online activities, such as the APUS and Rio Salado webinars, provides a space for students to feel like they are a part of their community, even if they are not physically present (O’Shea, Stone & Delahunty, 2015). Knowing that online communities help provide a safe space where members can feel connected to shared values provided a starting point for the teams when considering student participants for our panels. Students who engaged with their institutions, either through student activities or opportunities to connect with faculty and staff, and were willing to talk about their experiences made for excellent panelists for the discussions.

## SENSE OF BELONGING

There is much work campuses can do to enable their students to create a sense of belonging, from co-curricular activities allowing for out-of-class interaction with faculty, to campus activities, clubs, and organizations centered on shared interests and achievements. Sense of belonging refers to the feeling of connectedness, or that one feels they are important to others (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981) on a college campus, either in person or virtually. When institutions provide opportunities for students to engage in purposefully designed activities to promote learning, their students possess a stronger sense of belonging (Komives, 2019). Our student panelists

reiterated this many times: “The more we talk about transgender issues, LGBT issues, racial issues, I believe, schools have the ability to create a more accepting environment for every student,” said Rio Salado graduate Giselle Velazquez (2022).

While engagement in campus activities will not look the same for each institution, providing space for students to connect and interact can have a positive impact on their overall experience. For schools that are primarily or solely online, this means creating virtual space to build a community. Students familiar with online learning technology and social media often look to virtual communities and web-based platforms to create connections and build friendships (Williams & Whiting, 2016). “Availability to access these programs can help, even if it’s not taken advantage of,” American Military University alumna Alyssa Holmes (2022) told the audience during one of the webinars. While co-curricular offerings are not often the reason students elect to attend one institution over another, when providing online education, they can make a difference to students who are looking to reduce the isolation that comes with online learning (Athanasίου, 2020).

### **Underrepresented Students and Engaging in Discussion**

Sense of belonging is particularly meaningful for students who perceive themselves as marginal to the mainstream life of campus (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), meaning institutions must ensure they are working with all populations of students, not just those who already feel as though they belong on campus. Strayhorn (2019) asserts that “encouraging positive peer interactions, connecting students with supportive faculty, and providing opportunities for student involvement” (p. 22) help with establishing a sense of belonging. Furthermore, participation in campus activities provided by the institutions allows for a greater sense of belonging than if students seek out engagement opportunities on their own (Ellison & Braxton, 2022), so inviting active campus leaders to be panelists allowed the students to share their involvement history and realize their importance to the institutions.

Research shows that peers are influential in students experiencing a sense of belonging, which is amplified when students can socialize with peers from different backgrounds (Strayhorn, 2019). The webinars created that space for interaction. The colleges built off a foundation of a sense of belonging, knowing that conversations regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion needed to start with ensuring students felt like they belonged on their respective campuses and that they were free to share their experiences, positive and negative. Higher education can benefit from intergroup dialogue that assists students in making sense of race, ethnicity, cultural background, religion, and gender (Maher & Thompson Tetrault, 2007). Brown (2020) recommends a co-curricular intergroup dialogue program situated in student affairs to promote understanding amongst undergraduate students. Engaging in discussions allow online students to build relationships with classmates and peers (Hatcher, 2012), while also building those intergroup dialogues that can help to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts on campus and increase the sense of belonging for non-dominant campus populations (Raphael, 2021). Participation in co-curricular programming, such as online student organizations, promotes a sense of community, builds relationships, and allows students to connect with others who share an interest or identity (Athanasίου, 2020).

### **Sharing Stories to Build Inclusion**

Knowing where those around you come from and how you are connected in order to create a sense of belonging requires empathy. Storytelling as a uniting force finds its place among several scholarly articles (Soule & Wilson, 2002; Dunn & Cherup, 2021). Storytelling is empowering and “one of the most universal human experiences” (Gordon & Rezvani, 2021, summary). The sharing of narratives “builds trust, cultivates norms, transfers tacit knowledge, facilitates unlearning, and generates emotional connections” (Soule & Wilson, 2002, abstract). The webinar series created by Rio Salado and American Public University System was designed around this central idea. When we hear the perspectives of those around us, we see a glimpse into other cultures and identities and build inclusivity. “We can make actual progress on inclusion by implementing a story-based approach where employees are encouraged to tell their stories, own them, and consider how they impact their day-to-day experiences at work,” inclusion consultants Gordon and Rezvani explain (2021, para. 4). The fundamental idea of storytelling and belonging is not unique to corporate America. Alejandro Chavez, grandson of civil rights activist Cesar Chavez, shared the power of storytelling during one of the webinars:

One of the great things about this community and everybody here is you're getting... tools to share your stories, our stories. I encourage us to remember we have to constantly be sharing our stories, sharing our narratives. That's how we move people (2021).

Throughout the webinar series, keynote speakers and panelists shared their stories - from the first-generation Latina student navigating higher education to the transgender student who discovered a college community of like individuals to the student who found their place in an online community, confirming their decision to seek a degree. Each shared their individual backgrounds and experiences, providing perspectives into different cultures, pathways, and peer groups.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Allowing members within a community to holistically contribute to important dialogue, meaningful engagement, and intentional collaboration transforms neutral spaces into brave spaces and brave spaces into safe spaces. Building a brave space requires designing space within the community where students, staff, and alumni have permission to bring the entirety of their experiences to the forefront without negative judgment. Fashioning the unification of these dissimilar worldviews to create a shared vision, yielding sustainability is the creation of safe spaces. Relevant topic-intensive webinars, culturally focused online conversation communities, lifestyle-adequate website blogs, and digitizing personal testimonials for mass consideration are strategies campus activities professionals can operationalize to foster college environments that cultivate inclusion and bolster belonging.

Utilizing webinar sessions is one mechanism educational leadership can implement to raise purposeful student connection to, and within, the organization. One of the first steps in launching community dialogue around diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging is to gain support from leadership. "Educational leaders, as a result of their roles, often function as cultural gatekeepers" (Aidman & Long, 2017, p. 109). In their research with future educational leaders, Aidman and Long (2017) noted a connection between the use of storytelling as a strategy to build "capacity and transmitting culture" (p. 121). Leaders who embrace storytelling as a way to develop belonging and inclusion could model this through community webinars with subject matter experts and students who share their experiences and history.

Our last recommendation is to develop a partnership to bring together like-minded communities to reach a common goal. Rio Salado and APUS are both online schools with similar student populations. Universities and colleges are microcosms of society, "uniquely poised to collaborate with local people and organisations [sic] to address societal challenges" (Wilson, 2021, para. 2). With online education becoming more ubiquitous, the collaborative effort to address social challenges can be expanded to institutions with similar goals located across the country.

## CONCLUSION

Building a community of inclusion means providing a safe space for students, staff, and alumni to dialogue and engage with one another. Embracing this idea within the parameters of an online higher education institution requires intentional creativity, collaboration, and communication. Campus activities professionals can cultivate environments that holistically include and support all students through the creation of online spaces such as webinars, online conversation communities, or website blogs and personal testimonials. Rio Salado and APUS took steps to intentionally invite participants that represent systemically underserved communities who do not meet the mold of the typical college student. By doing so, it opened the doors to often unheard stories and histories, allowing a deeper understanding of the student populations we serve. We plan to continue these efforts, taking forward what we've learned to unfold areas that can be improved within our institutions to better engage students from all backgrounds.

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