

## Finding Community on Campus

College is an eventful time for the roughly 60% of Americans who attend.<sup>1</sup> It is seen as an important transitional period from late adolescence to adulthood and the workforce. At its best it can be a time for exploration and challenge that will lead to growth. One of the biggest struggles though facing college students today is finding belonging and community on campus. In a study that surveyed 1,100 college students, nearly two thirds reported feeling lonely and over half said they were concerned about a friend's mental well-being.<sup>2</sup> This loneliness is felt even more acutely by historically marginalized communities.<sup>3</sup> There are several factors in the contemporary digital-dependent society that have exacerbated these issues.

While smartphones and the internet have given us the ability to connect across space they also have the capacity to make us feel more isolated. Social Media apps like Instagram and Snapchat are ubiquitous on college campuses with studies reporting that 98% of college students are using them daily.<sup>4</sup> These technologies allow users to connect with classmates and see what they are up to at any given time. However, by the same token, these apps can make users feel even more isolated causing phenomena like FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). Even in the classroom technology can have adverse impacts. While computers are amazing tools for note taking and writing there is also data to show how their proliferation in classrooms has decreased productivity and even reduced feelings of connectivity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "61.4 Percent of Recent High School Graduates Enrolled in College in October 2023," Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 10, 2024, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2024/61-4-percent-of-recent-high-school-graduates-enrolled-in-college-in-october-2023.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Active Minds, "New Data Emphasizes the Correlation between Loneliness and Student Mental Health," Active Minds, May 22, 2024, <https://activeminds.org/press-release/new-data-emphasizes-the-correlation-between-loneliness-and-student-mental-health/>.

<sup>3</sup> Active Minds, "New Data Emphasizes the Correlation between Loneliness and Student Mental Health."

<sup>4</sup> Marilyn Cooper, "Disconnected Social Media Leaves College Students Paradoxically Alone," AAC&U, 2024, <https://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/articles/disconnected>.

<sup>5</sup> Leslie Reed, "Digital Distraction in Class Is on the Rise, Study Says," Phys.org, January 15, 2016, <https://phys.org/news/2016-01-digital-distraction-class.html>.

One way to foster connection and belonging on campus is to have students become more aware and in touch with their identities. The use of the plural here is intentional. No person fits just one identity label; rather, we all have many different identities pertaining to race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and age which intersect. This model of intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw as a way to understand the multifaceted and interlocking ways in which people's identities affect the way they see and experience the world.<sup>6</sup> Conversations across identity groups about their experiences of belonging to a group are often seen as taboo and impolite even though they are important to forming close social bonds and communities as a whole.<sup>7</sup> If college is a time meant for self discovery then the best way to aid that is having conversations across differences as communities.

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<sup>6</sup> Brittney Cooper, Intersectionality, ed. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth, Oxford Handbooks Online (Oxford University Press, 2015), 385–406, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328581.013.20>.

<sup>7</sup> Beverly L. Smith-Keiling et al., “Starting the Conversation: Initial Listening and Identity Approaches to Community Cultural Wellness,” *Journal of Microbiology & Biology Education* 21, no. 1 (April 10, 2020): 21.1.33, <https://doi.org/10.1128/jmbe.v21i1.2073>.

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