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KIMBERLY HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Welcome to *What We're Learning About Learning*, a podcast about higher ed teaching and learning produced by the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship at Georgetown University. I'm Kimberly Huisman Lubreski.

JOE KING: And I'm Joe King. Welcome to the second installment of our two-part series on belonging and academic success. In the first part, we examined the relationship between belonging and academic success, focusing on the importance of making students feel valued beyond just fitting in. We highlighted the concept of mattering, as emphasized by Peter Felten and others, which they describe as the value part of belonging.

In this segment, we'll continue our conversation with Georgetown staff and faculty; Susan Cheng, adjunct associate professor in the Department of Family Medicine at the Georgetown School of Medicine, former senior associate dean for DEI in the School of Medicine, associate professor of family medicine, and a deputy Title IX coordinator; Stephon Hamell, advising dean in Georgetown's College of Arts and Sciences; and Yulia Chentsova Dutton, associate professor in the Department of Psychology. Throughout, we'll interweave relevant scholarship and offer concrete ways to proactively foster belonging through reflection, thoughtful planning and small and mighty acts of intervention.

KIMBERLY HUISMAN LUBRESKI: We'll begin with reflection. When considering how to foster belonging, perhaps the best place to start is with ourselves. Here's Stephon Hamell, advising dean in Georgetown's College of Arts and Sciences, reminding us that the need to belong is universal.

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STEPHON HAMELL: I think in my conversations with colleagues and with faculty and with some students, we talk around belongingness and academic success. And I agree, there are some who still struggle sometimes to understand or really put their thumb on it. And I encourage those to think back through their own experiences.

I think we are all human beings, and human beings have this inclination to want to socialize and belong to groups and have relationships. And part of that is, belonging doesn't just have to be confined to being a student at Georgetown. We also all have to belong typically to a neighborhood or to a faith group or to our own families. And I often share the example of, I got married into a Colombian family. So they have different cultures and customs.

And sometimes you can feel from a language point or a culture point that, do they really understand who I am? They do the small, subtle things that make you understand, oh, we see you and recognize you. And that brings me belongingness and comfort.

JOE KING: Reflecting on her own experiences during the pandemic, Susan emphasizes the significance of self-reflection, role modeling, and genuinely showing up for students. By embracing our whole selves, we can encourage students to do the same, fostering an environment where everyone feels seen and supported.

SUSAN CHANG: As faculty and staff, we oftentimes have the opportunity to be role models, demonstrate what are the advantages of showing up as your true self in your workplace. When we were working from home, I would have to take these conference calls. And then my newborn kid would be crying in the background.

And I used to feel like, oh, I should be more keeping those two parts of myself separate because it's like, here, I'm Work Susan, and now I'm Mom Susan, Parent Susan. And it just wasn't possible during the pandemic.

It was just really eye-opening to me to humanize where we're all coming from, that's it's OK to present more of a full picture of your authentic self, the different aspects of yourself that make you a parent, a worker, an educator. It all comes into your identity. And I think it makes me more relatable to my students who are also coming from non-traditional backgrounds themselves.

I have a lot of students who are going through medical school as first-time parents. They're getting married. They're having children. They come to me and they ask me, how are you juggling it all? And I say, I don't always juggle it all. That's the theme that's emerging.

Talk is just really important because if you can't show your own vulnerability and show up, it's hard to tell a student, hey, Student, why don't you be vulnerable? If you don't feel it yourself, hard to model it, hard to ask someone to join you. It makes for a really great, equitable exchange of identity. The faculty, professor, and students, we are equally exchanging in this design marketplace of learning.

**KIMBERLY
HUISMAN
LUBRESKI:**

Susan's reflection about role modeling resonates with Albert Bandura's theory of social modeling, which suggests that observation and modeling can positively impact student learning.

JOE KING:

Susan utilizes the culturally responsive support system checklist not only as a personal self-regulation tool, but also as a means of encouraging her colleagues to explore methods that foster deeper connections with their students. This approach is rooted in the culturally responsive pedagogy framework developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gaye in the 1990s and early 2000s. According to this framework, culturally responsive teaching can help create a relationship-rich educational environment, promoting a sense of belonging and purpose among students.

SUSAN CHENG: Some of the survey items are just very fundamental, and they surprised me. Because I was like, small, mighty acts, we could do them. And it doesn't take more time in the day for a professor to actually ask these questions, or a staff member, and it can make a huge difference for underrepresented students.

So some of the checklist items are, I shared my personal story with a student today. I asked about their life outside of class. I checked in with a student to see how they were doing. I checked in with a student to see if they were handling their schoolwork well. I told a student that I know they can succeed. I did something that showed a student that I cared about them excelling in the classroom.

We took this checklist and made it a one-pager handout that's on the website. So it's actually a resource tool for all our faculty to, hey, you don't have to engage all these questions. Maybe ask a few. But they will actually engender a sense of connectivity, create more of a conversation starter.

Sometimes [INAUDIBLE] like, what do I do? And students are like, I don't really know what to say or do in office hours. So it just gives a suggestive menu of what you could say and do to create more sense of belonging, connectivity and community. I think it's such a little gem of a tool to get these conversations going.

KIMBERLY HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Now we turn our attention to purposeful interventions that faculty can implement both within and beyond the classroom to strengthen connections and cultivate a sense of belonging among their students. We'll begin by exploring individual level strategies and then expand our focus to encompass departmental, classroom and institutional approaches.

JOE KING: Mary Rowe, Candice Powell and others argue that micro-affirmations, small acts of recognizing and informally engaging with students, can significantly enhance their sense of belonging. Here's Stephon, followed by Yulia, discussing informal interactions they use to connect with students.

STEPHON HAMELL: Showing up. Some of the easy things I tell faculty is, have you ever just walked down to Market Square on Wednesday and just seen a couple students and said hello just to say hello? Nothing more. But when they see you out, they know that you have a bigger space on the community than just in your classroom, which I think adds to the students that we all live here, and we're part of this bigger community. So they don't feel so scared to go to an office hours because they've seen you.

SUSAN CHENG: Sometimes I walk out of my building, and I'm exhausted after a day of meetings, teaching. And all I want to do is listen to my earphones and just walk to my car. And I remind myself that what I need to do actually is to start looking at who is passing by me, to pay attention. Have I seen this person before? Are they my student?

Do I recognize them from my classes this semester or past semester? And can I take that second to smile and ask them how they're doing, make that contact? Because I know that also matters to the students' sense of, somebody on the campus knows who I am.

KIMBERLY HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Susan and Yulia also describe some of the thoughtful and intentional strategies that their departments have implemented to build connections and foster belonging. First, you'll hear from Susan, then Yulia.

SUSAN CHENG: At the medical school, we're entertaining more ways we can build up study spaces that promote a sense of affinity and connection and belonging. So we have student artwork up. The DEI office is designed with really bright colors to invite coming in and taking up more space and just trying to connect with people. There's a student lounge. I know that our school is really interested in seeing ways that we can open up more spaces for students to connect socially, to help the belonging pieces thrive more at our school.

YULIA CHENTSOVA DUTTON: In psychology department, we have been thinking strategically of, how do we create these interactions where we are in the same space with our students, but we don't have a pedagogical goal? We can just connect with them. Last year, I organized a tea, thinking I was inspired.

My father's research institute has a tea time twice a day where all the researchers-- this is an astronomy institute. All the researchers hear a signal, and they go downstairs, and they have tea. They have cookies.

Everybody has their tea and cookies, talks to each other for a little bit and then goes right back to work. But it serves to build connections between researchers. And so I think we need to think about rituals like this that help us reconnect again, pull away from our digital devices and go say hello to those around us.

JOE KING: Susan goes on to describe how peer-to-peer messaging can also serve as a strategy for cultivating belonging. This idea is also supported by research on peer-assisted learning strategies, such as a 2019 study by Emily and Bill, who found that peer-assisted learning is an effective strategy for facilitating social and academic integration.

SUSAN CHENG: We tried to experiment with messaging. Who would med students like to hear from if they're experiencing a sense of doubt and like they don't fit in, they don't belong, imposter syndrome type experiences? Would a message be more impactful coming from an administrator like me or a peer who is a little bit older in the process, or is a fourth-year student or third-year down the line versus an administrator?

And the research would suggest that there's a lot of promise, at least in the undergraduate world, that peer-to-peer based messaging is very powerful, especially if the message comes down to the element of, I faced this challenge. It's not you. It's a challenge that's commonplace at the school. And I overcame it, and so can you. That is the basic element of the message.

And what we did was we got-- we recruited a cohort of students for their third and fourth year of med schools to record these messages and write them down and record them on videos. And then we played these videos to first- and second-year students who are struggling. They're like, do I fit in? Can I cut it in medical school? Do I belong here at Georgetown?

And once they heard these messages, they were very empowered. They felt like a sense of, yeah, this is not me. It's not a me problem. It's actually a normal part of the medical school experience and is rigorous in a challenging environment. I can overcome this.

We found that there's a lot of promise there to these messages. We have a whole video library. At orientation a couple of years ago, we recorded a whole new message for the incoming class. So we were just experimenting with different ways at different points of time in the year, like orientation, at the end of the year, the middle of the year, where students might need a refresh on the message.

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KIMBERLY HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Susan, Yulia and Stephon each discuss various innovative and purposeful techniques they have effectively incorporated into their teaching and advising roles. Stephon describes his proactive approach that he employs before the students even get to campus.

STEPHON HAMELL: Every summer, I send out a survey and allow them to tell me what updates have changed, who they feel their community is. Do they feel like they have people at Georgetown that they could ask for a letter or go see if they're having a challenge? And part of that is to get a sense of where students are individually. And it can certainly vary, but it gives me a good impression of what my students are feeling right now and do they feel connected. And then I can follow-up when I meet with students.

JOE KING: When Yulia discusses her approach to fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom, she emphasizes the importance of combining structured and informal interactions to enhance emotional engagement and incorporate group activities. This multifaceted strategy aligns with Walton and Cohen's research on social belonging interventions, which shows that such practices can significantly boost academic performance and student well-being. Moreover, the value of group activities aligns with Tinto's theory of student retention, which emphasizes the importance of both academic and social integration for student success and retention.

**KIMBERLY
HUISMAN
LUBRESKI:**

These activities, designed with intentionality, are effective in fostering a community where students not only feel included, but are also more likely to thrive academically and personally. Here's Yulia.

**YULIA
CHENTSOVA
DUTTON:**

In my classrooms, I strategically deliver in each class time where the students are connecting to each other. We have a brief period of time where students are just checking in with each other. My classes are psychology classes, so I ask them to talk about how they are doing emotionally, how their stress level is, what is on the horizon, what they're looking forward to. What is it that they're dreading in the coming week?

I give them little prompts initially. Eventually, they know the drill, and they're just going in there and doing it all on their own, deciding how to guide that conversation on their own. We add element of game to them often. And so in one of my seminars, we evolved a practice where I had a little bell.

And one of the students was given a bell. We rotate it. And at some point during the seminar, we would be talking about content, discussing. And the student would decide to ring the bell whenever they felt like it. We would all obey.

We would go into this interaction where students connected with each other, then a few takeaways from the conversations to me. Usually, I would say, I'm interested in what's happening in your lives. Give me an average temperature. How is everyone doing?

They'll bring back this information to me. And then we will ring the bell again and go right back to the seminar discussion. Although occasionally, I would spill because my seminars are about mental health. So some of the questions sometimes would interface.

And it seems like it's time lost to me as a professor because I-- out of my 75 minutes that I have with them, I took out 5, 10 minutes for things that are seemingly unrelated to content. But I actually found out that it was incredibly useful because they connected to each other. They formed peer groups.

And what then happened is, students who were shy and reluctant to talk are now sitting next to peers that they feel connected to, and they feel braver entering into the larger discussion, bringing in their voices. The discussion is more rich. The discussion has a lot more personal examples. They trust each other.

They're more prepared to handle topics that are potentially risky topics for them, where they might feel that others might criticize them for a particular opinion. Now that they feel that they are among friends, it's easier to share. And students report that that's one of the most rewarding aspects of the seminar, along with the course content.

And in my large classes, I do a variation of it, but I do it in a more structured way. So I give them an activity. It's ostensibly a course-related activity. I have them some idea from class. They take it out for a drive.

They talk about-- my class is on emotion this semester, so they talk about how they use emotion regulation in their lives, aided by a questionnaire, and then they share. But my goal, really, is only partly for them to try out a particular idea and discuss it with their peers and really, largely, for them to form a peer group in the larger class with similar effects in order for them to feel like they have a foothold in that classroom. They know people. They have talked to them.

They know a little bit something in their lives because the activity is almost inevitably asking them to bring in examples from their lives. So they do a little bit of disclosure, which we, of course, know builds belonging, builds connection. And similarly, I think it's helpful.

JOE KING: Yulia notes the positive impact of her small group interventions.

**YULIA
CHENTSOVA
DUTTON:** I think the primary path that I'm seeing is that they are more willing to talk both in their small groups and in the larger group and seminars all about exchange of ideas. We have this complex material that I gave them to read. And now in the classroom, we are fleshing out, what does it mean? What are the implications? How do we think about it? What are the different ways of interpreting these data?

And so what happens is that we have more students talking and students taking more risks while talking. And then that loops back to better mastery of material because now they've heard many more voices. They have been given an opportunity to think about it in a variety of ways. Prior to that, I would-- it would very much depend on the personality make-up of my seminar classroom.

Sometimes I would get a very outgoing seminar, lots of students talking, and that would be a great experience for everyone. Sometimes I would get a relatively more shy seminar group, and that would for me a lot of effort to animate that group. I would be talking more. I would be doing more to try to get them to talk. Sometimes it would be slow-going. And then that would be a less rewarding experience for the students, for all the students in that group.

And so now that I've introduced the connection times, it has become a much more uniform experience for me because it helps me. Without doing a whole lot of intervention, it helps me get much of the class talking and connecting. And then I also have them do empirical projects. And oftentimes, these little connection groups form foundations for the research groups, and you have these research groups working together, including students who are getting along, clearly enjoying each other.

And as I do updates on the projects, it's clear they're engaged. They're becoming friends. They're working effectively together, and that has implications for their performance. So since I started doing it, my grades in the seminars have become much more uniform with a much higher number of students getting A's, not because I'm inflating their grades, but because on this very complex set of projects, they are actually doing all the work required to get that A.

**KIMBERLY
HUISMAN
LUBRESKI:** Yet Yulia also cautions against overly orchestrating group formation.

**YULIA
CHENTSOVA
DUTTON:** In many classrooms, minoritized students clustering together for a good reason. My own research suggests that when they have a friend in the classroom that shares their identity, they feel that they belong more. They feel that connection. So I'm mindful of that.

I don't want to break up those groups. I don't want to have a token minoritized student in each of the groups. Simultaneously, I encourage interactions between those two groups. I will have activities where the groups are smaller and when they're larger.

And I would say, today we have a larger group. I want you to pull opinions. How about those two groups? You come together. And so they are cross-pollinating across different groups, allowing groups that have higher proportion of minoritized students to share their opinions with others without feeling like they have to break up and go deliver diversity to other students' connections in the classroom.

JOE KING: Yulia also notes how the students often don't realize the impact that these intervention strategies can have on them.

**YULIA
CHENTSOVA
DUTTON:** For my students, I think the students very much think that here I am, giving them time away from their work, something that is a little bit of rest, a little bit of a reward for being attentive and engaged. What they don't realize is, this is my roundabout way to actually increase their connection to the classroom, to get their questions answered. Because to each other, they're much more likely to admit they didn't understand something.

So when I say, How is this data point connected to this theory? they might not understand the theory, and they'll ask their peers. So this has implications for how well they're going to do. But to them, it feels-- especially when I ask them to talk about something unrelated to class, like how they're doing, how is their semester going, to them, it feels like this is a tiny little vacation from class. But it isn't. Just like real vacation helps us be more productive, these mini departures from class into the territory of, I am here to connect with my peers as humans, has important benefits for how they are going to do.

We had this senior luncheon for psychology majors who are graduating, and so the seniors came with their family members. And I saw students from my seminar reconnecting maybe for the last time or for the last time in a while. And I can see that these connections are not trivial, that they care about each other, that they rushed to introduce parents to each other, and that this is going to be something that they'll remember after they depart from Georgetown.

**KIMBERLY
HUISMAN
LUBRESKI:** Throughout our discussions, Yulia, Stephon and Susan consistently emphasized the significance of intentional student interventions to foster a sense of belonging. Their strategies align with research by Yeager and Walton, which suggests that framing interventions can positively influence students' perceptions, enhancing both motivation and persistence. These approaches also resonate with Peter Felten's work, which found that when students feel that they're taken seriously, have a voice and perceive their professors and mentors as investing in them, they're more likely to feel that they matter and belong. Stephon concludes this episode by encouraging faculty to help students cultivate a scholar identity as a way to make them feel valued and engaged. His approach is supported by research from Susie Chan and others, who found a strong correlation between a well-developed science identity and a sense of belonging, particularly among minority students.

**STEPHON
HAMELL:** Because oftentimes, cultivating a relationship hasn't provided its space because that student didn't feel like they mattered to the faculty they've interacted with. And it really impacts their sense of belonging in that academic space, and their academic identity or their scholar identity is really what's struggling. And we can talk about how we can work to minimize some of those challenges when that happens, but also how we can help coach faculty to build up scholar identity for students to increase mattering so that they don't get to the end and feel that way.

There's been some recent work since 2020, since the pandemic, on framing interventions when we talk about belonging. And I'm thinking specifically around science, scholar identity. There's now a humanities identity. I used to direct a whole program just on humanities students.

But we start to think about that scholarly framework, that building of students to be scholars and students. And the framing intervention is, to me, an interesting space that I think is easy to tap into because we can talk about how-- what it's like to be a chemist, what it's like to be a humanitarian. You can have that conversation with a student at an early stage and identify the strengths and talents you would need outside of the academic space. And I think that framing intervention helps create positive environments to promote learning and engagement. And so it's relatively new. I'm curious to see how it still develops.

But I think, if I'm thinking about belonging and I'm thinking about the future of higher ed, I think framing conversations and interventions will become a big part of that because I think about students and families as they meet a university and transition to being here. It's new. It's a new world, new languages. And how do we frame these things so that they're willing to engage and that it's understandable, that they can navigate it without needing a hurdle to get over?

JOE KING: Through this episode, we've tried to follow Stephon's recommendation by sharing practices that foster belonging, like structuring check-ins with students, as Yulia has done, or offering affirmations, like the med school did. We hope you enjoyed this episode of *What We're Learning About Learning*. To learn more, be sure to check out our show notes.

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**KIMBERLY
HUISMAN
LUBRESKI:** And I'm Kimberly Huisman Lubreski. Thanks for listening.