

# Peer roles in fostering a sense of belonging

*From the Anti-Racism Action Committee to Chair Michael Oskin  
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April 28, 2021*

**Proposed changes:** Encourage anti-racist actions that can be taken by student and postdoc peers in the EPS department that increase the sense of belonging for BIPOC members of the department.

**Why:** Small actions and changes can add up to have meaningful impacts. These suggestions from the literature have been shown to increase a sense of belonging among students and postdocs, a critical aspect to the success and satisfaction of all peers, especially those who identify as BIPOC.

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**Purpose:** The suggestions are detailed in the [Examples for Peers to Increase a Sense of Belonging in the EPS Department](#) document. Specifically, each suggestion has been shown to increase the sense of belonging and mattering in students. The “background” section of this proposal explains that these feelings are directly related to a student’s overall success and satisfaction with their educational experiences.

This proposal is one of three related documents: *Faculty, instructors, and advisors role in fostering a sense of belonging*; *Department’s role in fostering a sense of belonging*; and *Peer roles in fostering a sense of belonging*.

**Implementation:** These suggestions are each provided as a resource for students to implement and for faculty and the department to encourage and support in order to help foster a supportive and anti-racist culture in the department. It is the hope that peers can review, discuss, learn about, and incorporate as many of these examples as they wish. It is not expected that all examples are implemented, however all can be considered for their relevance and feasibility. One strategy is to choose a few suggestions to implement each year. To help in these efforts, ARAC commits to reaching out to student leaders annually or quarterly to offer support in implementing these suggestions within the student body. In addition, the student advisor will incorporate portions of this proposal and the accompanying *Examples* document in start-of-the-year activities like orientation, Fall welcomes, and student club meetings.

Students make up the majority of the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences, and many of them hold official or unofficial roles within the student body that guide the department’s culture. First and foremost, it should be emphasized that the burden of creating a sense of belonging does not fall only on students. However, peer to peer support is unique and invaluable to students’ experiences in college. Students can have an important role in developing or increasing a sense of belonging among minoritized students especially. Sense of belonging actions and conversations can and should be aided by department mentors, including faculty, staff, and student leadership.

The incentive to incorporate these suggestions is that they are effective at the primary goal of increasing people’s sense of belonging. This has a secondary goal of increasing students’

academic performance as well as their overall satisfaction with their college or graduate school experience. Most peers share all these goals, and so hopefully will be willing to take the time and effort to incorporate these suggestions as appropriate.

**Audience:** This proposal and the *Examples for Peers to Increase a Sense of Belonging in the EPS Department* will help all students and postdocs with how to create and foster a supportive environment. Additionally, some examples are aimed directly at student club leadership and official and unofficial student and postdoc mentors. This information is also valuable for all faculty, staff, and other department and community members to be aware of in order to best support students and postdocs.

Throughout this proposal and the examples, "students" refers to both undergraduate and graduate students, and can include any communities within the department that benefit from peer support like postdoctoral scholars, research staff, and lab staff. Some suggestions are best implemented by students in leadership positions in clubs and organizations, while others can be implemented by any and all students.

**Background:**

A sense of belonging, mattering to another person, and being involved in a campus community all directly and positively impacts a student's academic success and their overall satisfaction with their time in college or graduate school (Roufs, 2015, p. 74). Additionally, students' involvement in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities directly and positively impacts their academic success and persistence to graduation (Roufs, 2015, p. 70-71; Negrone et al., 2006, p. 208). Peers help each other feel this sense of belonging and mattering and they connect each other with opportunities to get involved inside and outside the classroom.

Peer group interactions affect students' sense of belonging, especially early in their college careers (Thiry et al., 2019, p. 301). Supportive, inclusive student organizations provide important sources of support among peers (AIP, 2020, p. 64). Peer support can mitigate negative experiences for students of color at predominantly White institutions (Thiry et al., 2019, p. 301). When guided by inclusive guidelines, student organizations can alleviate [imposter syndrome](#) (attributing success to luck rather than one's own skills) and stereotype threat (the fear that a negative stereotype about one's background might be true for them) (AIP, 2020, p. 64; Thiry et al., 2019, p. 316).

**Evaluation:** Assessment of these suggestions should answer the question: *Do students and postdocs feel a sense of belonging in the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences?* This question can be answered within a climate survey as part of a larger department assessment program. This assessment program will evaluate the climate of the overall department, but should be developed in such a way as to address disparities in experience between folks of different races.

The *Examples for Peers to Increase a Sense of Belonging in the EPS Department* will be a living document, edited over time to incorporate successful suggestions from folks inside and outside the department.

**Affordances and Limitations:** The biggest consideration is time and effort to intentionally build in new practices for increasing a sense of belonging among students. We highly recommend that students incorporate a few suggestions each quarter or each year.

## References

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