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# Sense of Belonging Experiences of Arts and Design Alumni

**snaap**

**STRATEGIC  
NATIONAL  
ARTS ALUMNI  
PROJECT**

*Tracking the  
lives & careers of  
arts graduates*

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# Executive Summary

A sense of belonging, the feeling of being accepted, supported, and valued within an academic environment, is a powerful predictor of persistence, creative identity, and long-term success in higher education. Within arts and design education, belonging is uniquely intertwined with artistic identity, critique culture, and inclusivity. Drawing on the 2022 Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) survey, this first of two reports examines how respect, value, and accessibility shape alumni perceptions of belonging across creative disciplines.

This national analysis of over 20,000 arts alumni represents one of the largest quantitative studies to date of belonging in arts and design higher education. It explores how identity, institutional context, and learning environments influence alumni experiences, providing evidence to guide inclusive pedagogical and policy practices.

## Highlights

### **BELONGING AND RESPECT**

- Nearly two-thirds (63%) of alumni reported *often feeling respected* by faculty, and about seven in ten said the same of classmates.
- Faculty relationships remain a cornerstone of belonging: about 90% of alumni said they “sometimes” or “often” felt respected and valued by instructors.
- Notably, nonbinary alumni reported significantly lower respect from faculty: fewer than half “often felt respected” compared to men (67%) and women (63%).
- Racial disparities persist: White and Hispanic/Latine alumni most often reported faculty respect, while Asian, Black, and multiracial alumni were less likely to do so.

### **PEER DYNAMICS AND INCLUSION**

- Around 70% of alumni felt respected by peers, yet one in five reported being treated differently by classmates in ways that affected them negatively.

- Nonbinary and Black alumni were most likely to report differential treatment, highlighting persistent gaps in peer inclusion.
- Alumni narratives revealed conditional belonging, where respect was often present but dependent on cultural conformity or comfort within dominant norms.

#### **ACCESSIBILITY AND SUPPORT**

- About 15% of alumni used at least one form of accessibility support during their training, most often for emotional or behavioral needs (9%).
- One in three nonbinary alumni reported using accessibility supports, especially emotional accommodations, suggesting that mental-health resources often substitute for a lack of broader identity-based belonging.

#### **ENGAGEMENT WITH DIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY**

- Four in ten alumni said they often learned about creative works from diverse cultures, and one in three often learned from faculty of diverse identities.
- Fewer than one-third (29%) said they often studied artistic practices from cultures different from their own.
- Over half (52%) engaged at least occasionally with issues of racial justice or social equity, while most (66%) participated in community-based creative projects, signaling progress but inconsistent integration of diversity and equity themes in curricula.

#### **CONTINUITY BEYOND GRADUATION**

- Identity-based differences in perceived respect continued into the workplace: White alumni most often reported feeling respected at work (62%), compared to under 50% of Black alumni.
- Nonbinary alumni again reported the lowest workplace respect rates, revealing the persistence of inequities across the creative sector.

# Introduction

A strong sense of belonging, generally described as how students perceive being accepted, supported, and valued within academic environments, is consistently linked to persistence, identity formation, and long-term success in higher education (Ahn & Davis, 2023; Allen et al., 2024). Although extensively examined in general higher education, belonging remains underexplored in creative disciplines, where artistic identity and pedagogy may alter how inclusion is experienced (Long & McLaren, 2024; Stickley, 2010).

The Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) provides a key resource in this regard. Its 2022 survey introduced new measures of belonging, offering one of the most comprehensive datasets on how arts graduates perceived connection and inclusion in higher education (SNAAP, 2022). Understanding belonging within the arts is critical not only for current students but also for shaping institutional policy, alumni engagement, and equity-focused arts education (Allen et al., 2024; Stachler, 2023).

This review contextualizes the 2022 SNAAP findings by synthesizing theoretical models, higher education research, and arts-specific studies. It emphasizes how creative identity, faculty interaction, peer community, and cultural inclusivity intersect to shape students' belonging.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF BELONGING**

Belonging has been theorized as a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), a component of motivation and engagement (Goodenow, 1992), and an institutional process of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1997). Synthesizing these perspectives provides a multidimensional understanding of how belonging operates across academic and disciplinary contexts (Allen et al., 2024; Long & McLaren, 2024).

Strayhorn (2018) reframed belonging as both a psychological necessity and a predictor of educational outcomes, emphasizing its contextual nature: shaped by peer relationships, faculty support, and campus climate. For arts students, belonging often develops through creative collaboration and feedback, where participation affirms one's legitimacy as an artist (Gervan, 2013; Long & McLaren, 2024).

The communities of practice framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) deepens this view by positioning learning as participation in shared disciplinary practices. Within studio and ensemble environments, students move from peripheral to central membership, developing artistic identity through social engagement. Studies confirm that such disciplinary belonging fosters both skill development and emotional investment (Busbridge et al., 2024).

Overall, these frameworks converge to depict belonging as a synthesis of psychological connection, institutional integration, and disciplinary participation (Allen et al., 2024; Strayhorn, 2018). In creative fields, this convergence is heightened: belonging is negotiated through the interplay of individual identity, artistic practice, and academic culture (Stachler, 2023; Stickley, 2010).

## **BELONGING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: BROAD TRENDS**

Across higher education, belonging predicts persistence, academic engagement, and well-being (Ahn & Davis, 2023; Allen et al., 2024). Transitions into college, especially during the first year, are critical; early peer and faculty connections are strong predictors of retention (Meehan & Howells, 2019; Tinto, 1997). Institutions that promote interaction and inclusive environments show stronger outcomes in student belonging and satisfaction (Crawford et al., 2024).

Identity authenticity is another consistent determinant. Students who feel pressure to conform to dominant cultural or academic norms report diminished belonging and motivation (Strayhorn, 2018; Verbree & van der Schaaf, 2025). This issue is particularly relevant in creative disciplines, where self-expression is tied to personal identity (Long & McLaren, 2024).

Belonging is also stratified along race, class, and gender lines. Decades of research highlight how students from marginalized backgrounds often perceive exclusion within predominantly white institutions (Hurtado, 1994; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado et al., 2015). Structural diversity alone is insufficient; genuine inclusion requires culturally responsive climates (Allen et al., 2024; Stachler, 2023).

Pedagogical approaches matter as well. Culturally responsive teaching fosters students' sense of belonging and academic confidence (Ladson-Billings, 1995). When faculty respect diverse identities and integrate cultural expression into curricula, belonging improves across disciplines, including the arts (Meehan & Howells, 2019). Collectively, these studies conceptualize belonging as multilayered, linking institutional structures, faculty practice, and personal identity (Allen et al., 2024; Strayhorn, 2018).

## **BELONGING IN THE ARTS: IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND CHALLENGES**

In visual and performing arts, belonging is mediated by creative identity, peer collaboration, and perceptions of legitimacy (Gervan, 2013; Stickley, 2010). Arts education is typically intimate and immersive, with critiques, performances, and exhibitions acting as both pedagogical and social rituals. These spaces can powerfully affirm belonging through shared creative purpose but

may also heighten exclusion when aesthetic norms are narrow or competitive (Long & McLaren, 2024; Stachler, 2023).

Cultural representation significantly shapes belonging. Stachler (2023) found that BIPOC arts students often experienced their work as “othered” when programs prioritized Eurocentric standards. Similarly, lack of cultural responsiveness in studio critiques can erode belonging even in otherwise supportive environments (Allen et al., 2024; Hurtado et al., 2015).

Perceived career value also influences belonging. Arts students frequently face skepticism regarding employability, which can weaken institutional identification (Busbridge et al., 2024). Those who view their training as legitimate preparation for meaningful careers demonstrate stronger connection and persistence (Ahn & Davis, 2023).

Finally, the emotional vulnerability of creative work amplifies the stakes of belonging. Because students’ identities are entwined with their art, critique and feedback deeply affect self-perception and inclusion (Gervan, 2013; Stickle, 2010). When institutional support, inclusive teaching, and peer community align, arts students report profound meaning and connection to their disciplines (Long & McLaren, 2024; Stachler, 2023).

## **GAPS IN THE LITERATURE**

Despite progress, major gaps persist. Most belonging research centers on STEM and social science fields, leaving the arts underexamined (Allen et al., 2024; Long & McLaren, 2024). What exists is often small-scale and qualitative, with limited generalizability (Gervan, 2013). Comparative analyses across disciplines are also lacking, obscuring how arts students’ belonging differs from that of peers in other fields (Allen et al., 2024). Moreover, most studies are cross-sectional; longitudinal perspectives on how belonging evolves across educational and professional trajectories are rare (Ahn & Davis, 2023; Crawford et al., 2024).

Another underdeveloped area within arts-specific belonging research is intersectionality. While broader studies recognize how race, gender, and class shape belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), few arts-focused works interrogate these factors (Stachler, 2023). Faculty influence is yet another neglected dimension. While mentorship is critical to belonging, little empirical work examines how feedback and critique, central to arts pedagogy, affect students’ inclusion and identity validation (Gervan, 2013). Addressing these methodological and conceptual gaps is essential for developing interventions responsive to the unique emotional and cultural conditions of arts education (Stachler, 2023).

## **PURPOSE**

The literature establishes belonging as a core determinant of academic success, identity development, and institutional engagement (Ahn & Davis, 2023; Allen et al., 2024; Strayhorn, 2018). Within creative disciplines, belonging is distinctively shaped by identity, expression, critique culture, and perceptions of artistic value (Busbridge et al., 2024; Long & McLaren, 2024).

The 2022 SNAAP survey provides a rare opportunity to explore these dynamics at a national level. The data illuminate how creative alumni perceive belonging years after graduation, across disciplines and institutional types (SNAAP, 2022). Integrating these findings with existing literature, particularly regarding peer community, faculty respect, and identity inclusion, offers a framework for understanding both the successes and inequities of arts education (Allen et al., 2024; Stachler, 2023).

This synthesis positions belonging as a complex, multifaceted construct central to equity in the arts. It underscores the importance of intentional institutional design to nurture inclusive creative environments and highlights how national data such as SNAAP can guide evidence-based policy, teaching, and student support.

Building on this literature, this first of two reports addresses the persistent gaps in understanding belonging within arts education through a large-scale quantitative analysis of SNAAP data. While prior research has illuminated the emotional, pedagogical, and identity dimensions of belonging in creative disciplines, few studies have examined these dynamics using representative datasets or across diverse institutional contexts. Using the 2022 SNAAP data, this report uses descriptive statistics to analyze how background, institutional, and college experience factors intersect with the sense of belonging perceived by respondents.

## **SAMPLE**

Our analysis focuses on 20,093 undergraduate arts alumni who were 64 years or younger at the time of the 2022 SNAAP survey. The number of alumni per institution in our sample ranged from a minimum of 22 to a maximum of 1,071, with a mean of 184.3 alumni per institution. We use weighted data in these analyses (see the 2022 SNAAP Technical Report (Novak-Leonard et al., 2023) for further details). Our use of a large, diverse sample of arts alumni enhances the statistical power necessary to detect subtle relationships across a range of arts programs and institutional types. Although SNAAP also surveys alumni with graduate degrees, because there are many differences in the educational experiences for these degree levels, here we focus on the undergraduate alumni in the sample.

### Sense of Belonging Items

How often did you feel the following while enrolled at [INSTITUTION]?	
Respected by your instructors and faculty	-1 = Did not receive this question 1 = Never 2 = Rarely 3 = Sometimes 4 = Often
Respected by your classmates	
Treated differently by your instructors and faculty in a way that affected you negatively	
Treated differently by your classmates in a way that affected you negatively	
Valued by your classmates	
Valued by your instructors and faculty	

# Results

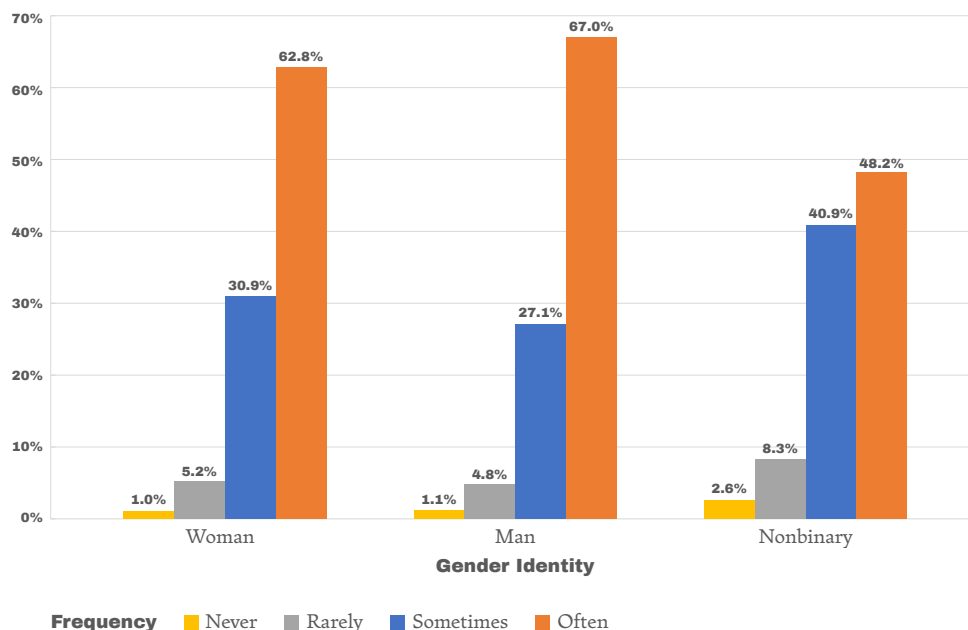
## Respect and Value

Respect and value remain central to belonging in arts education. The 2022 SNAAP survey found that 63% of alumni said they often felt respected by faculty, and about seven in ten said the same of classmates. These strong overall results indicate that most graduates experienced programs grounded in collaboration and mutual appreciation. Yet within this broadly positive picture, meaningful differences appear across race and gender.

### FACULTY RESPECT AND VALUE

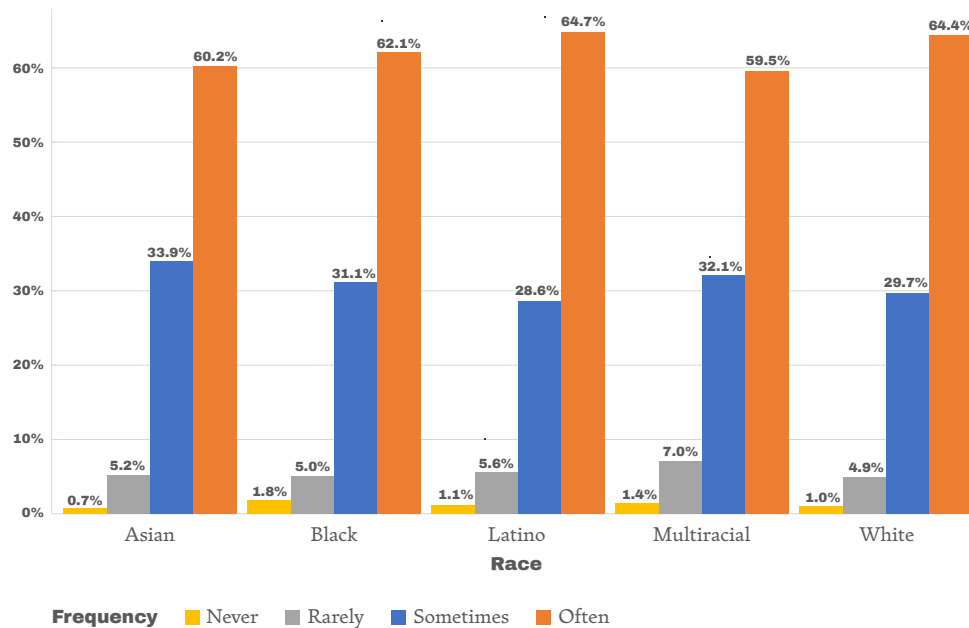
Faculty interactions form the most consistent foundation of belonging. Roughly 9 in 10 alumni reported feeling sometimes or often respected by instructors, and a similar percentage said they felt valued by instructors. These relationships often serve as the bedrock of artistic and professional growth, shaping confidence, motivation, and creative identity. Differences by gender were generally modest, but the experience of nonbinary alumni stood out (see Figure 1). While about two-thirds of men and 63% of women said they often felt respected by faculty, less than half of nonbinary alumni did, a notable gap that underscores uneven inclusion across gender identities.

**Figure 1. Frequency of Feeling Respected by Faculty by Alumni Gender**



Racial differences followed a similar gradient (see Figure 2). White and Hispanic/Latine alumni most often reported consistent respect from faculty, while Asian, Black, and multiracial alumni were less likely to do so. These findings suggest that although arts programs value inclusivity, many students of color still navigate environments where recognition and validation are unevenly distributed.

**Figure 2. Frequency of Feeling Respected by Faculty by Alumni Race**



Taken together, these descriptive statistics suggest that faculty relationships remain a key anchor for belonging, yet they also mirror broader cultural dynamics. Respect, while widely felt, is not equally distributed. The nuances of identities can often impact who feels most seen and supported in academic spaces.

### PEER RESPECT AND DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT

Peer relationships emerged as more variable than faculty interactions. Across the dataset, about 7 in 10 alumni said they often felt respected by classmates, and 53% said they often felt valued. However, around 1 in 5 reported being sometimes or often treated differently by peers, revealing that informal social environments can be more uneven than structured classroom settings.

By gender, men and women reported similar levels of peer respect, while nonbinary alumni were significantly lower. Over 1 in 4 nonbinary respondents said they were sometimes or often treated differently by peers, compared to only 18% of men. This pattern suggests that informal peer culture

still reflects gender binary norms, where gender diversity may be acknowledged in principle but not consistently affirmed in practice.

Racial differences followed familiar lines. White and Black alumni were most likely to feel respected by classmates, while Hispanic/Latine, Asian, and multiracial alumni reported lower rates. Reports of differential treatment were highest among Black respondents, indicating that experiences of exclusion or bias often extend beyond faculty dynamics into peer interactions.

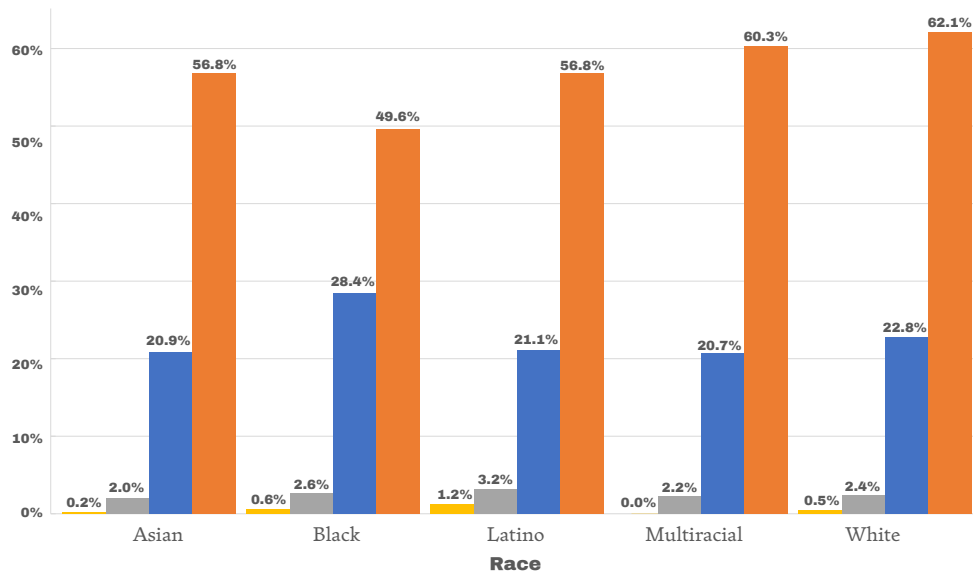
Open-ended comments help illustrate these dynamics. Alumni of color described learning environments that were polite and outwardly inclusive but lacked deeper engagement with equity and lived experience. Several alumni said they were asked to represent their entire cultural or identity group in classroom discussions, while others described peers who were supportive yet hesitant to engage in complex conversations about race or gender. One respondent noted, “As a minority in my classes, I never had the opportunity to learn under an African American professor. Sometimes I felt pressured to make work about my racial experience, or that I was wasting my time by being interested in things outside of that experience.” In such spaces, respect was often present, but conditional, dependent on how comfortably one’s identity fit into the dominant culture of the program. These accounts underscore a critical distinction between being respected and feeling fully included.

## **CONTINUITIES BEYOND GRADUATION**

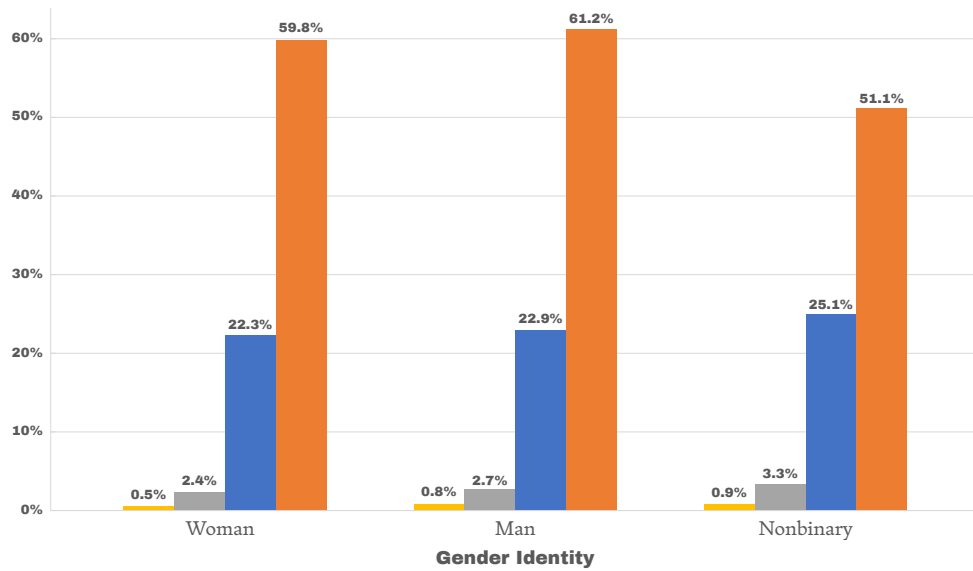
Patterns of respect and value in arts education appear to carry forward into the workplace, with the same identity gaps persisting after graduation. White alumni most often reported feeling respected at work (62% reporting often feeling respected by coworkers), while non-white respondents had lower levels of perceived respect (see Figure 3). Black respondents indicated the lowest levels, with less than half indicating they often felt respected by coworkers. Men and women remained closely aligned in their reports of workplace respect, but nonbinary alumni again recorded the lowest levels, with just over half reporting often feeling respected by coworkers. These trends suggest that while arts graduates may enter more open-minded industries, inclusion remains uneven, and social hierarchies within identity categories endure even in creative fields that claim to value diversity.

Respect and value remain foundational to belonging in arts education and beyond, but they are not distributed evenly. Institutional cultures often promote civility and appreciation, yet the depth of that respect varies with identity and context. For many students and alumni, especially those from marginalized groups, belonging requires ongoing negotiation, balancing pride in one’s creative voice with the reality of uneven affirmation.

**Figure 3. Percentage of Alumni Reporting Respect by Coworkers, by Gender and Race**



**Frequency** ■ Never ■ Rarely ■ Sometimes ■ Often



**Frequency** ■ Never ■ Rarely ■ Sometimes ■ Often

## Accessibility and Support Across Identity

Accessibility and inclusion are essential foundations of equitable arts learning. While most alumni reported that their institutions aimed to support a wide range of learners, the data reveal ongoing disparities. Access to formal accommodations and disability-related resources remains limited and often distributed unevenly across gender and race.

## **LIST OF ACCESSIBILITY SUPPORTS ON SURVEY**

- Visual assistance, screen readers, and/or audio descriptions
- Assistance in speaking, language interpretation
- Emotional or behavioral supports or assistance
- Assistive listening devices, captioning, or other deaf or hard-of-hearing supports
- Intellectual, cognitive, or developmental supports or assistance
- Assistance with a learning disability
- Mobility assistance, for example, automated doors, elevators, or wheelchairs

## **OVERALL PATTERNS OF ACCESSIBILITY SUPPORT**

Across all respondents, about 15% of alumni said they had used at least one form of accessibility support during their arts training. The most common type of assistance addressed emotional or behavioral health (about 9%). Far fewer reported supports related to mobility, vision, speech, hearing, or intellectual disabilities, all under 5%. These modest participation rates highlight both progress and persistent gaps. Arts programs often emphasize physical performance, studio critique, and public presentation, contexts that can make requesting accommodations difficult.

## **ACCESSIBILITY BY GENDER**

Gender differences were apparent but not extreme. Women were slightly more likely than men to report using at least one accessibility service, while over 1 in 3 nonbinary alumni reported using some kind of accessibility service. Nonbinary alumni accessibility rates were particularly elevated for emotional or behavioral supports, with 25% of respondents indicating they had used those supports during their programs. Physical accommodations, by contrast, were relatively uncommon for all groups and reported by only a small fraction of alumni.

These patterns suggest that arts alumni more frequently utilize emotional accommodations than physical or learning services. The relatively high use of emotional health supports among gender-diverse alumni may also reflect the lack of broader identity-based safety within some arts environments, where mental-health accommodations can function as a proxy for belonging.

## **ACCESSIBILITY BY RACE**

Racial differences in accessibility support were measurable but subtle. Hispanic/Latine and multiracial alumni were slightly more likely to use

at least one service, followed by Black, Asian, and white alumni. Learning accommodations appeared most common among white and Black alumni, while emotional or behavioral supports were more frequently reported by white, Hispanic/Latine, and multiracial alumni.

Open-ended comments from these respondents suggest that for students with disabilities and impairments, acquiring accommodations and having them enacted in the academic environment is still a complex process and often a barrier to success for individuals. A respondent stated, “As a disabled student, there were times professors’ lack of education on accessibility and disability resulted in uncomfortable or disrespectful experiences in the classroom.” Across all groups, a consistent theme emerges: accessibility is most effective when it is proactive, not reactive. When accessibility is built into program design, such as through streamlined accessibility services and expanded faculty education, students can focus on their education with the proper accommodations. When it depends on self-advocacy or personal goodwill, inequities deepen. The 2022 SNAAP findings show that even though most arts programs aspire to inclusion, the lived reality of accessibility still depends on other factors.

## Experiences of Diversity and Community Engagement

### DEIA Items

<b>How often did you do the following while enrolled at [INSTITUTION2]?</b>	
All alumni who graduated within the past 25 years.	
Learn about creative works from diverse cultures or from creators with diverse backgrounds within your coursework	
Learn from faculty and instructors who represent a diversity of identities	
Learn from guest speakers, artists, or other visiting professionals who represent a diversity of identities	
Learn about matters of racial justice or social equity within your coursework	
Learn about artistic or creative practices from cultural backgrounds different from your own within your coursework	
Work with an artist in the local community	
Work on a creative project with or in a role serving the local community	
	-1 = Did not receive this question 1 = Never 2 = Rarely 3 = Sometimes 4 = Often

The 2022 SNAAP survey asked alumni who graduated within the past 25 years to reflect on the diversity, inclusiveness, and community focus of their postsecondary programs in the arts and design. Their responses reveal that, while opportunities to engage with diverse perspectives were present, such experiences were more occasional than consistent across institutions.

### **LEARNING FROM DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES**

Forty percent of alumni reported that they often learned about creative works from a range of cultures and creators, and about 1 in 3 said they often learned from faculty representing diverse identities. Nearly a third (29%) of alumni from the past 25 years said they often learned about artistic or creative practices rooted in cultures different from their own. Yet fewer reported sustained engagement with equity or community-based themes. About 52% said that discussions of racial justice or social equity occurred often or sometimes during their studies. More respondents reported working with an artist in the local community (72%) or contributing to a creative project that served the community (66%) at least once during their programs.

Taken together, these data suggest that many arts programs introduce students to the idea of diversity, and are increasingly providing opportunities to apply or extend those principles through collaboration, community partnerships, or real-world creative practice, but that these experiences were not a defining or routine part of the arts curriculum.

# Synthesizing the Findings

The 2022 SNAAP data provide one of the most comprehensive national portraits to date of how arts graduates perceive belonging, respect, and inclusion in higher education. The findings affirm that belonging remains a cornerstone of student development and professional formation, yet they also reveal persistent inequities tied to identity and institutional culture. By situating these results within the theoretical and empirical literature on belonging, these findings illustrate how relational, structural, and cultural dimensions interact to shape inclusion in creative disciplines.

Overall, the results suggest that while arts programs often cultivate a sense of respect and value through collaboration and mentorship, belonging remains unevenly distributed across gender and race. These findings echo long-standing research in higher education showing that belonging is not merely an individual feeling but a reflection of systemic recognition, of whose identities, voices, and ways of making art are legitimized within the academic and professional canon (Allen et al., 2024; Hurtado et al., 2015; Strayhorn, 2018).

## **FACULTY INTERACTIONS AT THE CORE OF BELONGING**

Faculty interactions emerged as a consistent positive perception of belonging. Nearly nine in ten alumni reported sometimes or often feeling respected by their instructors, affirming that faculty-student relationships serve as a primary conduit through which belonging is cultivated in arts education. This aligns with Tinto's (1997) notion of academic and social integration and Strayhorn's (2018) conceptualization of belonging as a fundamental human motivation reinforced through meaningful interpersonal connection.

In arts education, these interactions take on added significance. Studio critiques, performance feedback, and one-on-one mentorships are not simply evaluative processes but also identity-shaping encounters. As Gervan (2013) implies, feedback is a ritual through which students learn not only technical competence but also whether their creative voice is seen as legitimate. Thus, faculty respect communicates much more than interpersonal civility, but also signals whether a student's identity and artistry are valued within the institution's cultural frame.

However, the data reveal notable disparities by gender identity and race. Nonbinary alumni were substantially less likely to report feeling respected or valued by faculty, a finding that underscores the challenges of navigating institutions that still operate within largely binary and heteronormative frameworks. Similarly, alumni of color, particularly Black, Asian, and multiracial graduates, reported lower rates of faculty respect than their white

or Hispanic/Latine peers. These results parallel national studies in higher education showing that faculty-student relationships are deeply conditioned by representation and bias (Hurtado et al., 2015).

The literature suggests two possible mechanisms underlying these disparities. First, implicit bias within critique culture may affect how instructors interpret students' artistic intent, especially when creative expression departs from dominant Western or Eurocentric aesthetics (Stachler, 2023). Second, limited diversity among faculty constrains the range of mentorship available to underrepresented students (Allen et al., 2024). Alumni reflections highlight how the absence of shared identity can compound feelings of alienation. This dynamic illustrates the principle advanced by Lave and Wenger (1991): belonging in a community of practice requires recognition from established members. When that recognition is absent or inconsistent, peripheral participation becomes prolonged, and belonging remains conditional.

## **PEER INTERACTIONS AND BELONGING**

While faculty relationships anchor belonging structurally, peer relationships are also critical to an alumni's sense of belonging. Approximately 70% of alumni reported often feeling respected by classmates, and over half said they felt valued, an encouraging baseline. However, nearly one in five alumni reported being treated differently by peers, a sign that informal social environments remain less equitable than formal academic ones.

These patterns underscore a key insight from Strayhorn (2018) that belonging is negotiated, not bestowed. In creative disciplines, where learning often occurs through collaboration, critique, and ensemble work, peer dynamics carry heightened stakes. Respect from peers not only supports emotional well-being but also validates artistic identity. Conversely, exclusion or bias from classmates can signal that one's creative contributions are not fully legitimate.

The gender and racial disparities in peer treatment parallel those found in faculty interactions but manifest differently. Nonbinary alumni were the most likely to report differential treatment—over one in four—indicating that informal cultures may lag behind institutional statements of inclusion. Such environments may outwardly promote openness yet tacitly reinforce binary or heteronormative assumptions. Similarly, Black alumni reported the highest rates of differential treatment by peers, a finding consistent with research on racialized belonging in higher education (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Meehan & Howells, 2019).

Open-ended comments reinforce these quantitative patterns. Alumni described “polite but surface-level” inclusivity, where peers avoided meaningful engagement with issues of race or gender. Respect was often conditional on staying within the comfort zones of dominant identities. This form of

symbolic inclusion, being acknowledged but not deeply understood, reflects what Allen et al. (2024) describe as performative belonging: a social environment that values diversity rhetorically but not relationally. The creative disciplines' reliance on subjective interpretation and critique may inadvertently amplify this phenomenon, as cultural misunderstanding can be reframed as aesthetic disagreement rather than exclusion.

## **ACCESSIBILITY AND STRUCTURES OF BELONGING**

Accessibility is an essential yet often neglected component of belonging. The finding that only 15% of alumni used accessibility services, with the majority accessing emotional or behavioral supports, reveals both progress and limitation. Arts programs may be increasingly responsive to mental-health needs but remain less equipped to address physical, sensory, and cognitive differences.

The elevated use of emotional and behavioral supports among nonbinary alumni (25%) suggests a link between identity-based marginalization and psychological strain. As scholars such as Allen et al. (2024) argue, institutional climates that lack identity affirmation often translate into higher stress, anxiety, and disengagement. For many students, therefore, mental-health supports may function as a proxy for safety and recognition.

Respondent comments also underscore the importance of faculty education in accessibility. Alumni who identified as disabled described frustration with instructors' limited understanding of accommodations. This aligns with the broader literature emphasizing proactive over reactive inclusion (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Crawford et al., 2024). When accessibility depends on self-advocacy, belonging becomes contingent on the student's ability to negotiate institutional barriers, a burden that disproportionately affects those already marginalized.

Structurally, this finding reinforces the multidimensional model of belonging proposed by Allen et al. (2024), who posited that belonging is simultaneously psychological (feeling accepted), social (feeling connected), and institutional (feeling supported). Arts programs that integrate accessibility into course design, rather than treating it as an exception, create belonging as a default condition rather than an earned privilege.

## **CURRICULAR DIVERSITY AND BELONGING**

The SNAAP data show that while diversity is increasingly visible within arts curricula, it remains unevenly embedded. Only 40% of alumni reported often learning from diverse cultural perspectives, and fewer than one in three frequently engaged with faculty from diverse backgrounds. This confirms what Stachler (2023) describes as a space where institutions embrace

multiculturalism symbolically but continue to privilege Eurocentric traditions in pedagogy and evaluation.

Discussions of racial justice and equity occurred “often or sometimes” for just over half of respondents, indicating growing awareness but limited integration. When diversity is presented as a discrete topic rather than a constitutive element of artistic training, belonging becomes segmented, available to some contexts but not others.

Nonetheless, there are signs of transformation. The majority of alumni (over 70%) reported participating in community-based or collaborative projects, and two-thirds contributed to creative work that served the public. Such experiences embody what Wenger (1998) terms “legitimate peripheral participation”: learning through engagement in socially meaningful practice. By connecting art-making to community contexts, students locate belonging not only within the institution but within the broader civic sphere. This form of public belonging may represent one of the most powerful mechanisms for inclusive identity formation in the arts.

# Translating Into Action

## **INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN AND SUPPORT STRUCTURES**

At the institutional level, belonging should be recognized as a measurable outcome of program quality and student success. This implies the establishment of belonging-centered assessment frameworks, akin to those tracking retention or learning outcomes. Data from instruments like SNAAP can guide equity audits to identify departments or programs where belonging disparities are most pronounced. Institutions should also invest in mentorship networks that link students and alumni, creating longitudinal continuity in support and identity affirmation.

## **POLICY AND SECTOR-WIDE IMPLICATIONS**

At a policy level, the results affirm the need to frame belonging as a core equity indicator within arts education. Accrediting bodies and funding agencies can incentivize programs to adopt inclusive pedagogical models and measure belonging outcomes as markers of institutional climate. Given that diversity experiences exert strong positive experiences for nonwhite alumni, equity-focused policy should prioritize faculty diversity, representation in leadership, and funding for community-engaged creative initiatives. These approaches position belonging as both an individual experience and a systemic responsibility.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

This report opens several avenues for further inquiry. Longitudinal research could trace how belonging during college predicts later professional identity, career persistence, and community participation among artists. Mixed-methods studies might explore how critique culture, mentorship, and aesthetic norms shape belonging in specific disciplines (e.g., dance vs. design). Comparative analyses between arts and non-arts fields could clarify whether belonging functions differently in disciplines where self-expression is central to pedagogy. Finally, intersectional analyses are needed to capture how race, gender identity, disability, and socioeconomic background jointly shape belonging experiences in creative education.

In the forthcoming second Sense of Belonging report, we will explore some of these possibilities with a study that identifies background and college factors predictive of a greater sense of belonging. The descriptive results presented here are illuminating and serve as a jumping off point for consideration of how sense of belonging is related to many other factors of the educational experience. However, applying more sophisticated inferential statistical techniques, as will be featured in the follow-up report, can shine even more light on the complexity of how these various identities and factors can interact.

# Conclusion

In this report, we reinforce belonging as a foundational, yet often unevenly distributed, element of arts education. While demographic inequities persist, particularly for racially minoritized and gender minoritized alumni, arts institutions possess powerful levers to foster more equitable belonging through participatory, inclusive, and diversity-enriched experiences. The evidence suggests that belonging thrives where creative identity is affirmed, diversity is celebrated, and students are engaged as collaborators in the artistic process.

Ultimately, the findings challenge arts educators to move beyond symbolic diversity toward structural inclusion. Diversity experiences are not ancillary to artistic excellence but integral to it; they cultivate the empathy, innovation, and cultural literacy that contemporary arts practice demands. When students see their identities reflected in the curriculum and validated in critique, belonging becomes not just a feeling but a condition of learning.

In this light, belonging represents both a pedagogical philosophy and a moral commitment. It bridges the psychological with the institutional, linking how individuals experience inclusion with how institutions design it. For the arts sector, a field that prizes authenticity and expression, the stakes of belonging are uniquely profound. To belong in the arts is to be seen, to be valued, and to be empowered to create. Ensuring that all students have access to that experience is not only a matter of equity, but of sustaining the creative vitality of the field itself.

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