



belonging in museums

grounding, affirmations,
and resources

**because you
are human, you
deserve to feel:**

**safe,
connected,
and free
to be you.**

**and when
you feel**

**safe,
connected,
and free
to be you,**

**you'll want to
help others feel
that way, too.**

Belonging in museums

A kid races down the hall to their favorite exhibit, which they've already seen dozens of times. An educator provides novel experiences to youth from the neighborhood where the educator grew up. A grandparent tears up with nostalgia when seeing an artifact from a television show they watched as a child. A facilities manager feels more comfortable with their colleagues than with their family at home.

Museums can be havens of belonging where people find themselves in settings that inspire joy, wonder, and connection. But what about the kid who experiences fear and sensory overload, the overworked and underpaid educator, the grandparent who loses their grandchild in the crowd, and the facilities manager who is completely overwhelmed by a growing list of broken exhibits? As much as our spaces generate millions of transformative moments each year, they can also alienate, drain, and bore our staff and audiences.

How would you describe your current state of belonging at your museum?

What contributes to or detracts from your sense of belonging?

Some aspects of belonging can feel beyond our control, but we've also witnessed how museums' actions can effectively nurture belonging and minimize feelings of isolation and distance. And while no single change can guarantee belonging for all people, each thoughtful action can move us closer to it.

**belonging isn't
something we finish—
it's something we
practice, over and over,
in the choices we make
every day.**



What is belonging?

You may know belonging when you feel it (or when you don't)—but actually defining it can be more difficult. Part of that is because belonging is personal, so it can mean one thing for one person and something else for another.

- Abraham Maslow identified belonging as a fundamental human need tied to motivation and wellbeing.¹
- John Powell argues that belonging is about acknowledging people's differences while bridging connections across them.²
- Aaron Price and Lauren Applebaum's exploration of belonging in museums emphasized experiences of inclusion and exclusion within a physical space and its broader context.³
- Evelyn Ronning and her collaborators worked with visitors to develop a framework of belonging that includes connections to experience, self/group, place, and comfort within a physical space.⁴
- A group of middle schoolers at Children's Museum of Pittsburgh came up with this definition:

Belonging is a feeling of safety and connection that helps me be my true self and motivates me to have a positive impact.

¹ Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological review*, 50(4), 370.

² Powell, J. A. (2024). *Racing to justice: Transforming our conceptions of self and other to build an inclusive society*. Indiana University Press.

³ Price, C. A., & Applebaum, L. (2022). Measuring a sense of belonging at museums and cultural centers. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 65(1), 135–160.

⁴ Christian Ronning, E., Lukowski, S., Grack Nelson, A., & Bequette, M. (2023). Visitor belonging in museums: A museum professional reflective guide. Science Museum of Minnesota.

Which of these resonate with you most strongly?

What would you change about them?

How is your understanding similar to or different from your colleagues'?

Working with museum colleagues to agree on a shared definition can offer clarity and alignment while building relationships through the process of co-creation.



**belonging is messy.
belonging is not linear.
that makes this work all
the more meaningful.**

Why do museums care about belonging?

Just as people define belonging in different ways, there are many reasons why museum staff may care about it:

- **Career connections:** Many museums aim to prepare youth for careers in STEM, art, history, and other fields. Exhibits or programs that foster disciplinary belonging can support these pathways.
- **Changing demographics:** Future audiences will likely differ in race, age, language, and more. Building new audiences' sense of belonging may be crucial for long-term viability.
- **Equity and social justice:** Some view belonging as a way to address injustice, often focusing on marginalized groups.
- **Financial stability:** When more people feel like they belong, visitation may increase, strengthening ticket sales and financial wellness.
- **Human needs:** Some people are motivated to support belonging because they see it as a basic human need.
- **Mental health:** As mental health concerns rise, belonging can support individual and collective wellbeing, positioning museums as contributors to public health.
- **Mission enhancement:** Belonging helps people fully engage in museum experiences, advancing goals such as learning, inspiration, or memorability.
- **Stronger work performance:** Belonging can boost staff motivation, improve performance, and reduce turnover.

Which of these are most important to you?

What about your colleagues?

Embracing different motivations can help get more people invested in working towards belonging. It can help us find alignment about what to do, even if we may disagree about why.

conflict doesn't have to harm belonging. each disagreement gives us a chance to deepen it.



Resources for fostering belonging in your museum

We are a group of current and former museum staff with backgrounds in research, education, design, accessibility, community engagement, and visitor service. Our team brings a tapestry of histories and lived experiences of (not) belonging in museums and other spaces. Organizationally, we are affiliated with Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, Fred Rogers Institute, Madison Children's Museum, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Together, we led a multi-year participatory design research project to nurture belonging in museums. This work was funded in part by a National Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (MG-251989-OMS-22).

Through this work, we learned there is no simple recipe for belonging that all museums can apply. True belonging requires being in community with audiences and staff—listening, learning, and responding to changing needs. We hope our project resources, listed below, will help you as you work to foster belonging in your museum.

- **Belonging in museums: A process guide:** This document is designed for practitioners and leaders across roles—education, exhibits, outreach, administration, and more. It offers foundational information, practical activities, and strategic guidance to nurture belonging for staff and visitors.
- **Spoons Full of Belonging:** When conversations about belonging became touchy and personal, staff at Children's Museum of Pittsburgh used play to diffuse the tension. This collaborative board game builds connections and shares research findings.

- **Audio and video resources:** Recorded videos and podcast-style audio provide information about our project in multiple formats and feature candid, empathetic reflections on the joys and challenges of belonging work.

Access the
resources
here:



**friction isn't failure. your
perseverance is where
transformation happens.**

**Your workplace and community
are stronger because of you.**

You have everything it takes. Not by yourself—you'll need to work with others—but you have the skills, the passion, and the fortitude to foster belonging. We know it. There will be times when you won't feel like you have it in you. Remember, some things are beyond your control. Factors that threaten belonging have been entrenched in our society for generations. You won't fix it all today, or even tomorrow. But a museum and a culture that prioritizes belonging is an ongoing movement. And we're glad you're a part of it.

**you are
exactly
who our
world
needs.**



children's
museum.
pittsburgh

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Saint Vincent College

 madison
children's
museum

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