



belonging in museums:

a process guide

Contents

Introduction	3
Belonging in Museums	3
Our Project	3
Making Change	4
About This Guide	4
Additional Resources	5
A Note on Context	5
Laying Foundations	6
Defining Belonging	7
Rationales for Fostering Belonging in Museums	9
Evaluating your Belonging Baseline	11
Forming a Working Group	13
Learning and Making Change	15
Learning and Designing Change in Community	16
Learning with Staff	19
Learning with Public Audiences	23
Developing Guidance from Data	26
Example Themes of Belonging	29
What helps visitors feel like they belong?	29
What helps staff feel like they belong?	30
Making & Evaluating Change	31
Navigating the Complexities of Change	33
Scaling Change Efforts	34
First Aid Kit	35
Motivation Deficiency	35
Dissociation from Responsibility	35
Progress Paralysis	35
Chronic Hypocrisy Hypersensitivity	36
Relationship Fracture	36
Conclusion	37
You are exactly who our world needs	37





introduction

- **Belonging in Museums**
- **Our Project**
- **Making Change**
- **About This Guide**
- **Additional Resources**
- **A Note on Context**

Belonging
in Museums

why is it
that a single
location can
feel completely
different for
two people?

As museum professionals, we aim to design public spaces where everyone can feel like they belong. Yet, sometimes we may wonder: is that goal even possible? Our audiences span generations, cultures, abilities, and geographies. Sometimes their needs are in direct opposition to each other. Consider the two examples below:

● A family with a young child approaches the Museum. Hearing a familiar sound, the child squeals with delight: the plant roller coaster is nearing the top of its track! The child rushes over to watch the cars fly down, then up, then down again. As the grown-ups catch up, the little one leads them up the ramp. Sliding doors part before them, revealing a massive art piece of mesmerizing balls that float effortlessly above the lobby. The museum is the perfect mixture of nostalgic and new. The family feels safe and free. They build memories together and share their enthusiasm with everyone around them.

● Ten minutes later, another family approaches. Hearing the ticking sound, the child looks around, concerned that something is wrong. The child's suspicion seems confirmed when something comes swooping into the corner of their eyes: a strange contraption flying down a track. The child shows hesitation about walking under this machine, unsure whether it will move again. As the sliding doors open, the child jumps at the unexpected movement and becomes increasingly overwhelmed by a cacophony of confusion in the lobby, amplified by a sense that none of the people in sight look like their family group. The museum is the perfect storm of unpredictable, sensory overload and the eerie feeling of being alone among a crowd. It's a place where the family is on edge with hypervigilance. They feel unwritten rules about how they should act, and they're ready to leave as soon as they arrive.

Across cultural organizations, our missions and hearts compel us to serve anyone who enters our buildings looking for inspiration, connection, learning, and memories. Our work depends on belonging, and yet it requires ongoing effort to nurture and sustain it.

Our Project

Recognizing the museum field’s widespread desire to foster belonging, our team led a multi-year effort to study belonging through collaborative research and design. The project, which we called Communities of Belonging, was funded in part by a National Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (MG-251989-OMS-22). This funding allowed us to conduct a multi-site research-and-design project, through which we learned about belonging as we actively worked to enhance it in museums.

We, the members of the initial Communities of Belonging cohort, are a group of current and former museum staff with backgrounds in research, education, design, accessibility, community engagement, visitor services, and more. Institutionally, we are affiliated with Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh, Madison Children’s Museum, Fred Rogers’ Institute, and the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Our team members have brought a range of perspectives on belonging based on our identities and individual histories. We have different levels of institutional authority (from entry-level positions through executive leadership), a range of identities (including race, gender, ability, LGBTQIA+ status, and age), and various cultural perspectives (including religions, languages, and more). This breadth of experience enriched our project work and positioned us to make change across our organizations.

Making Change

Our philosophy on belonging, which our research confirmed, is that there is no simple one-size-fits-all approach for fostering belonging that all museums can use to deliver consistent results. True belonging requires us to be in community with our audiences and staff. Discussing and enhancing belonging can be personal, challenging, emotional, and messy. It can spark conflict. We must listen, learn, and demonstrate our willingness to respond to changing needs. But we have seen it is worth it, and this guide will give you tools to navigate your own process.

About This Guide

This process guide is designed for museum practitioners and leaders across roles in education, exhibits, outreach, administration, and more. It aims to help you map your own journey to explore the power of belonging at your own museum. Any museum worker can use this guide, whether you are planning a large-scale project, an organizational change effort, or a small change you can make in your day-to-day interactions. We recognize that most museums may not have grants to support their efforts towards belonging, so the materials we provide are designed to be adaptable for museums and teams of all sizes who have different amounts of time and resources to dedicate to the work. The guide shares a range of flexible resources and insights including:

- Grounding definitions and rationales on the importance of belonging in museums
- Practical tools and processes to use with staff and public audiences
- Guidance for scaling effective efforts and navigating organizational change

This process guide follows the stages that we used for our project (shown to the right). As you use this document, you may find that a different trajectory makes sense: you might re-order these stages, skip some, or add others. That is ok! We hope you will trust your knowledge of your context, and work collaboratively with colleagues and community members to use our resources in whatever ways will best enhance belonging at your museum.

- 1

Laying Foundations
Prepare and plan your belonging journey.
- 2

Learning & Designing Change in Community
Work with staff and visitors to explore the topic of belonging in museums.
- 3

Developing Guidance from Data
Analyze and use data to articulate a framework of factors that contribute to belonging.
- 4

Making & Evaluating Change
Refine your framework as you design, test, and evaluate efforts intended to boost belonging.
- 5

Navigating the Complexities of Change
Expand the impact of your work and practice care for yourself, your colleagues, and your audiences.

Additional Resources

Aside from this document, our project also produced a shorter booklet called *Belonging in Museums: Grounding, Affirmations, and Resources* and a collaborative board game called *Spoons Full of Belonging* that engages museum staff in discussions about belonging. We also have a collection of audio and video materials on our webpage. We encourage you to find these resources using the QR code below. Just as there is no single recipe for belonging, there is no one “right” way to use these materials. We hope you will find something useful to you.

Access the resources here:



A Note on Context

We designed this project in 2021, in the wake of global reckonings around equity, justice, inclusion, and repair. Over the course of the project, the landscape for our work has changed dramatically, with funding disruptions, shifting terminology, and legal and political backlash. Despite this, we assert that belonging transcends these debates and remains foundational to our missions as public institutions. Whether we see it as a moral imperative, a financial opportunity, or a programmatic necessity, recent events have shown us that our very existence as museums may depend on our ability to connect with broad audiences. Belonging is good for us all, and we can do something about it.

now is the time to get started.





laying foundations

- **Defining Belonging**
- **Rationales for Belonging in Museums**
- **Forming a Working Group**
- **Evaluating your Belonging Baseline**

Defining Belonging

There are many definitions of belonging.

Many have an intuitive sense of belonging—we know it when we feel it—but actually defining it can be more difficult. It can be even more difficult to operationalize and measure. Definitions of belonging vary across people and contexts. At the beginning of our project, we explored several research-based definitions and frameworks. For example, Abraham Maslow identifies belonging as a fundamental human need tied to motivation and wellbeing.¹ We found our understanding aligned with John Powell’s work, which emphasizes the acknowledgement of differences while bridging connections across them.² We reviewed Aaron Price and Lauren Applebaum’s model of belonging in museums, which considers how people experience inclusion and exclusion within a physical space and its broader context.³ In addition, we looked at the ways museums were already talking about and enacting belonging in practice.

Each of these resources shaped our thinking. At the same time, the research-based definitions sometimes felt abstract and difficult to apply. We also felt uncomfortable elevating academic expertise over the lived experiences and wisdom of our full community. Similar to what Evelyn Christian Ronning and her collaborators argued in their project about belonging in museums, we found it was valuable for our staff and visitors to define belonging for themselves.⁴ We reviewed a wide range of perspectives on belonging—including research-informed definitions, non-academic writings, and personal reflections. Drawing on the pieces that resonated most strongly, we developed the following definition together:

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

How will your museum define belonging?

For your work on belonging, we recommend working with your colleagues to agree on a shared definition for your museum or group. Starting with a shared definition will allow your team to begin the work with clarity and alignment. You might choose an existing definition, create one collaboratively, or use a combination of both. Our appendix of online resources can support your process. Here are some things to consider when selecting or creating a definition:

- **How does your process support belonging?** When you define what belonging is, you are also defining what belonging is not. Be thoughtful about the power dynamics of your decision-making process; the way you define belonging can either invite participation or limit it. Think carefully about who could be left out.
- **How will your definition support your group’s purpose?** If your goal is to guide internal change, a definition rooted in your specific context may be most valuable. If you hope to connect your work to broader field-wide conversations, aligning your definition with existing, research-based frameworks may be more helpful.

Defining belonging is not simply a conceptual exercise; it is a meaningful step in building a shared understanding of belonging to support your work moving forward.

Access the online resources here:



Rationales for Belonging in Museums

There are many reasons why belonging matters.

Just as different people define belonging in different ways, there are various reasons why museum staff might care about belonging. Making changes to enhance belonging often requires collaboration. When you are trying to build your team of collaborators, it can help to appeal to the rationales for belonging that most matter to them. Here are some common reasons why museum staff might care about belonging (listed alphabetically!):

- **Career connections:** Many museums wish to prepare people for careers in STEM, art, history, or other disciplines. If an exhibit or program can foster a sense of belonging within a discipline, it can support people as they explore these career pathways.
- **Changing demographics:** Demographic projections show that many museums’ future audiences will be different than they are now. This might include shifts in audiences’ races, ages, languages spoken, or other factors. Building a sense of belonging with new audiences may be crucial for museums’ long-term viability.
- **Equity and social justice:** Some people are passionate about belonging as a tool to rectify injustice, often focusing on belonging for people who are marginalized. They might prioritize belonging for a particular audience due to existing inequities and bias.
- **Financial stability:** If more people feel a sense of belonging, more people may visit a museum, which may lead to increased ticket sales and, ultimately, a stronger financial foundation for the museum.
- **Human needs:** For some people, the idea that belonging is a human need motivates their focus on belonging in museums. This core belief, that everyone deserves to belong, inspires museum professionals to ensure that staff and visitors are meaningfully supported in these spaces.

- **Mental health:** Our society is experiencing a rise in mental health concerns, and seeing others in pain is damaging to the psychology of the individual and the collective. A sense of belonging can be a positive contributor to mental wellbeing, and museums can support public health through a commitment to belonging.
- **Mission enhancement:** When people feel a sense of belonging, they are better able to achieve the best of what we hope for in museum experiences. Whether your mission articulates learning, inspiration, emotional outcomes, memorable experiences, or something else, belonging will advance your mission.
- **Modeling positive behaviors:** As museum staff, we play a vital role in modeling positive behaviors, influencing how both children and caregivers interact with one another. By creating welcoming environments, we can help nurture a culture of belonging among our visitors.
- **Stronger work performance:** Belonging increases motivation and allows staff to do their best work. It can also reduce job turnover. People who care about organizational wellbeing may be particularly motivated by this rationale for belonging.

Why do you and your colleagues value belonging?

Asking your colleagues why belonging matters to them can bolster your belonging work. Sometimes people’s reasons may surprise you. If their rationales are different from yours, listen with an open mind. Because these motivations can be closely tied to our values, they can spark conflict and emotion when we sense disagreement. As hard as it is, those emotions are good; they show that we care. Often, if we focus on what we want to do, we can strive for belonging for multiple purposes, so many different people will be motivated to contribute. The key is to approach this work with care towards yourself and others. If you and your team feel overwhelmed by the task of navigating complex emotions, the First Aid Kit at the end of this toolkit may help.

Evaluating your Belonging Baseline

Data can help you understand how to enhance belonging.

The next sections of this process guide share ways you can work with staff and public audiences to explore the factors that contribute to or hinder belonging—and make changes to strengthen belonging in your context. Before embarking on those efforts, it may be helpful to get a general sense of belonging at your museum and where there might be room for improvement. This can also serve as a baseline that you can compare to after you have worked for change. The online resources provide two tools you can use or adapt to compare belonging over time:

- 1 Visitor belonging survey:** This is a set of questions we have used with both children and adults. It is based on the definition we co-developed during our project, addressing safety, connectedness, comfort being one’s full self, and motivation to contribute to community as well as an overall sense of belonging.
- 2 Staff belonging survey:** This survey was written to gauge how staff members across our organizations understand their sense of belonging within the museum as a workplace. Questions ask about alignment between personal values and the organization, aspects of identity that are salient to the work, what staff perceive as spaces of learning or opportunity for the organization, and employees’ prior experience with thinking about issues related to belonging.

Both of these tools generate quantitative data. The surveys are relatively simple to use and can gather a large amount of data in a short amount of time. As with any tool, no single approach is perfect, so we encourage you to adapt these, find something that works better for your museum, or complement these tools with other approaches you find valuable.

Belonging is complicated and rarely linear. After starting this project, belonging data at Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh declined before it improved again. This was discouraging, but there were many contributing factors, some of which were outside of our control. During this project, our staff unionized, which was a tumultuous process but ultimately led to increased transparency and security for many workers: during the unionization process, belonging dropped. But following the period of instability during negotiations, we have seen improvement.

Belonging can also depend on what is happening outside of the museum. At Madison Children’s Museum, for example, this project work was suspended for several months in 2025 following the cancellation of federal project grants and subsequent financial challenges at the museum. A financially-driven reduction in staff further impacted the staff team’s collective sense of belonging. Rebuilding trust following layoffs takes time and patience on all sides. For those staff that remained, relationships with coworkers and leadership changed. Staff had to adjust to new ways of working. Working toward belonging had to take a few steps back as the team regrouped to focus on restabilizing in order to flourish and thrive.

How do your colleagues feel about the topic of belonging?

Thinking about belonging—and understanding the factors that can disrupt it—may lead to feelings of overwhelm or discouragement before people can find hope and assurance in the change they are making. This is a well-documented trend in research about confidence: people tend to be overconfident when they start new things. As they learn how complicated a topic or skill is, their confidence drops, then gradually rebounds as skills and knowledge increase.⁵ Belonging may act similarly. Be mindful of supporting team members’ personal feelings of belonging during early phases of belonging work to avoid discouragement and remind the group that you are working towards active change.

Forming a Working Group

You cannot foster belonging alone.

Belonging is an inherently social concept. While an individual can make a difference in helping someone feel like they belong, museums’ efforts to support belonging will be stronger if multiple people work together. For this reason, we started our project by forming working groups of staff at our museums. These were people who were invested in wanting to learn about and enhance belonging through their work. The next sections of this document share about the research and design process, but some preparatory work can be valuable to get a group ready to embark on a belonging project. The sections below share about how you can assemble a working group, establish group norms, and develop shared language to guide your work together.

Who should be in your group?

There are many potential factors to consider when forming a working group. In some cases, you might have a pre-existing group—such as a project team, department, or committee—that wishes to focus on belonging. In other cases, you might choose to form a new, cross-departmental and/or mixed-seniority group. Forming a group also means defining who is not in a group, so use care and caution when making decisions. Below is a list of questions to guide you. Some questions may feel at odds with one another, which is intentional because belonging is complicated! Use your knowledge of your context to decide what works best for your museum.

- Power & Identity:** How can you elevate people who do not feel belonging in the museum? You may wish to use data to identify patterns in identity factors such as race, gender, disability, or age; job factors such as tenure, department, or people who engage directly with visitors; or cultural factors such as religion, language, and education.
- Emotional Labor:** People who have experienced exclusion have valuable wisdom about belonging. How will you create

opportunities for their perspectives to shape the work without requiring them to relive, explain, or fix the conditions that caused their harm?

- Scope of Influence:** What will you have the ability to change? What will you not? How can your group composition ensure that you’ll have the institutional autonomy and resources to make the changes you need to make?
- Freedom & Safety:** What are the power dynamics between group members? Are there supervisory relationships or other factors that may affect participants’ sense of safety and willingness to share openly?
- Logistics & Scheduling:** Are there practical considerations that may make it challenging or impossible for certain people to participate?

If you do not have enough internal colleagues to form a subgroup around the topic of belonging, or your institution is not focused on this work, be creative! Perhaps you met someone at a conference who works at a different museum or a friend or partner who works in another context but cares about belonging. You can encourage one another, provide accountability, and learn together while going through similar processes.

How will your group work effectively together?

Especially when you are working on a topic like belonging, it is valuable to consider how your group will operate in a way that supports every person’s needs. Your organization likely has many unspoken norms about how things work. Spend some time trying to articulate those unspoken norms, and reflect on what is or is not working. Work together to consider how you can clarify or adjust these norms. Be especially conscious about acknowledging and addressing each person’s concerns during this process; it is counterproductive if your project about belonging is actively harming group members’ sense of belonging. There are many ways to decide on group norms. Our online resources share some activities to scaffold norm setting within a group.

What does belonging mean to your group?

As described previously, people may come to your project with different definitions of belonging. No single definition is “right” or “wrong” but it can also be complicated if, every time you say the word belonging, each person thinks of something different. For example, one colleague motivated by supporting youth in STEM may think belonging is about feeling individual agency during museum programs; another colleague motivated by social justice may think belonging is about addressing gaps in access to the museum for a specific group of people. Taking the time to agree on a definition can help the working group find a shared purpose. Our online resources share instructions and materials to do an activity that will help you develop a group definition.

**Access the
online
resources
here:**





learning and making change

- Learning and Designing Change in Community
- Learning with Staff
- Learning with Public Audiences
- Developing Guidance from Data
- Example Themes of Belonging
- Making & Evaluating Change

Learning and Designing Change in Community

We are grateful for the wisdom of researchers who have informed our work.

There are many ways to cultivate belonging in a museum. This process guide shares resources that are informed by an approach called participatory design research. As scholars Megan Bang and Shirin Vossoughi describe, participatory design research combines collaborative research and practical change efforts in order to "contribute to a socially just democracy."⁶ Our approach draws on wisdom from culturally responsive evaluation, a practice developed by experts including Stafford Hood, Rodney Hopson, and Karen Kirkhart.⁷ We also depend on Donna Mertens' approach to transformative research and evaluation,⁸ and the practice of improvement science as defined by Brandi Hinnant-Crawford and others.⁹ These authors and approaches intentionally challenge some of the traditional norms of research, and advance thinking and practice that is often marginalized within scholarly settings.

While these perspectives are foundational to our work, we also recognize that peer-reviewed articles can be inaccessible and overly theoretical for many people. This project repeatedly found value in demystifying research and emphasizing the ways anyone can contribute. In plain language, our project was a process of learning and making change in our communities. The following sections describe what we mean.

Research is a learning process.

Museums are busy! We often find that before we are even done with one thing we are already thinking about the next. However, this can have a real human cost. Working without pause or reflection can lead to burnout and high staff turnover. Belonging compels us to slow down, listen, and reflect so that we can actually make progress rather than recreating mechanisms

that threaten our sense of safety and connection. To do this, we use data-driven methods from the fields of research and evaluation. If you have a team member with research expertise who can lead the data-focused aspects of this work, that is great. But practitioners have the skills they need to investigate belonging; research is just a more structured approach to many things practitioners may already be doing, such as making adjustments to their work; reflecting about what is effective and what could be improved; and documenting their learning. Here are a few keys to keep in mind for your research-as-learning process (later sections in this guide provide additional detail):

- 1 Evidence-driven:** This work is based on data. You cannot tell if someone feels a sense of belonging just by looking at them. Instead, we allow each person to describe their own experience and use the evidence they provide to guide our understanding.
- 2 Systematic:** Research is defined by logical, replicable methods. First, this means that you develop a clear and thoughtful plan; you should be able to explain why you make each choice you make. Then, you make sure everyone who is involved understands the plan in the same way, and each person follows the plan consistently at each step of the process.
- 3 Responsive:** Remember that our goal is belonging. Efforts to be evidence-driven and systematic should not sacrifice human comfort and connection. We should be responsive to each person's needs by actively designing data collection approaches that affirm people's cultures and abilities. While we want to be systematic, it is okay to change a plan if we think it is causing harm.
- 4 Ethical:** Because the activities described in this toolkit are focused on learning about your museum context rather than producing generalizable findings, they typically fall outside of formal requirements of an Institutional Review Board (a group that

reviews research studies to ensure ethical compliance). However, you should follow basic ethical principles such as giving people clear information about your plans and allowing them to choose whether or not to participate; keeping data anonymous, and ensuring the research is a valuable experience for participants. It may make sense for staff to go through a human research protection course to learn more.

Museums can design for belonging.

We do not expect belonging to blossom on its own—in fact, we know that there are many forces all around us that threaten belonging. It is not sufficient to simply learn about or describe how much people belong. We want to make proactive changes that cultivate belonging in museums! Fortunately, museums are already experts at designing experiences. Every day, we make choices about how we welcome visitors, communicate with them, meet their needs, engage them in learning experiences, and hopefully develop sustained connections. Whether it is in-house, outsourced, or somewhere in between, museum practitioners design:

- Signage
- Social Media campaigns
- Exhibits
- Programs
- Curricula
- Cafes
- Partnership models
- Private events
- Offices
- Seating
- Merchandise
- Accessibility measures
- Project management strategies
- Buildings
- Workplace policies
- And much more!

Every choice we make during the design process can contribute to or detract from a sense of belonging. Through an intentional process, we can leverage our design expertise to ensure that we are actively making choices that enhance belonging for our community.

Belonging requires community.

To be most effective, belonging efforts should incorporate the experiences, wisdom, and energies of many people. Everyone who has ever felt a sense of belonging and everyone who has ever felt a lack of belonging has lived expertise about this topic. You do not need degrees or formal credentials to contribute to conversations about belonging, to learn how to improve your work, and to deepen your connections to your community.

Consider whose perspectives typically drive decision-making processes at your museum. Then, consider whose perspectives are not generally included in those conversations. If you have ongoing data collection efforts, who is included—and who is not? While there is always variability in groups, generally people in positions of power (leadership staff, parents, group organizers, etc.) are more likely to be included and are more likely to feel like they belong.

It can be highly valuable to make intentional efforts to engage people whose perspectives your museum has often overlooked. When doing so, you may encounter distrust or lack of motivation. That is a natural response. Be willing to come up with new ways to connect that are comfortable for the people you wish to engage with. Often, this means making yourself somewhat uncomfortable or doing things that are not convenient, like going to their location rather than expecting them to come to you. Approach this work with patience, care, and humility.

Learning with Staff

Museum staff and volunteers are crucial for belonging.

As much as we fill our museums with beautiful and engaging things, people are what make a museum magical. Many visitors may never notice or appreciate the work we do, but our efforts—whether engaging directly with visitors or providing behind-the-scenes support—are crucial for belonging. Researchers have shown that visitors’ engagement with staff can make or break a visit; positive interactions between staff and visitors can promote belonging whereas unpleasant encounters or a feeling that staff are unlike visitors can contribute to feeling out-of-place.¹⁰ When staff feel a sense of belonging, they can contribute more fully to our shared mission.¹¹ But the importance of staff belonging doesn’t need to be tied to visitors, mission, or the amount or quality of what we produce as workers—supporting one another’s belonging is a prosocial act of humanity. Involving staff in a project about belonging allows us to learn about one another more deeply, explore the ways things work, and build each other’s agency. This process builds our critical consciousness, or our awareness and motivation to improve organizational systems.¹²

These activities can help you explore what contributes to staff belonging.

Below, we briefly describe a selection of activities that we developed, tested, and refined specifically for museum staff. The online resources share facilitation guides for each one. If your vision of research is a sterile laboratory with careful numerical measurements, these activities may not be what you expect from a research experience. That is intentional! Each activity was created by museum professionals, for museum professionals, to be consistent with the ways we like to interact. Yet, if you remember the foundational aspects of research from the prior section (evidence-driven, systematic, responsive, and ethical), you can generate valuable data through these activities.

- **Data Sharing & Listening Sessions:** As a practice of participatory research, making sense of data is a shared responsibility. Because belonging is a deeply local and relative experience, decentering traditional ‘authority’ or ideas of leadership can add nuance to our interpretation of the data we collect to solve a problem. In this spirit, the working group at Madison Children’s Museum collated and shared the results of the Staff Belonging Survey with all staff members, and invited everyone to participate in a listening session. Listening sessions were facilitated by a variety of working group members with different roles; they were scheduled to accommodate many work routines, invite collaborative sense-making, and share the work of developing possible solutions with staff whose varied experiences were important to center in understanding belonging.
- **Journals and Case Studies:** Belonging is personal and multifaceted. To fully empathize with others, it can be valuable to reflect on your own experiences. This multi-part activity invites museum staff to think about their relationship to belonging over time. The online resources provide a list of journal prompts that address different aspects of belonging. At Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh, working group members reflected on one prompt a week over several months. We also distributed staff surveys about belonging several months apart. After that, each staff member reviewed their own journal and survey responses and created an artifact that illustrated the ways their belonging had evolved and what contributed to the changes. Staff at Madison Children’s Museum did journaling in a more informal way.
- **Belonging Asset Mapping:** Maps are incredible visualizations of data. They mix physical realities with subjective values, demonstrating what the map’s creator feels is worth highlighting. In this activity, museum staff annotate or create maps that illustrate places where they feel a sense of belonging. This creates documentation about where

people spend their time, how they move around your region and beyond, and what contributes to or detracts from belonging in these spaces. The activity has many extension opportunities that can layer new discussion topics about the proximity of resources (i.e., transportation, food, culture, family, etc.) to spaces of belonging, discussing the historical influences on spaces of (un)belonging, and more.

- **Book Group:** At the start of the project, multiple staff teams at Madison Children’s Museum held small group book club discussion sessions centered on Brené Brown’s *Dare to Lead* and accompanying workbook exercises, which helped to build trust across departments. Utilizing a more formally structured, off-the-shelf resource as a first step helped the group establish a shared vocabulary and group discussion practice.
- **A Lineage of Community-builders:** Many cultures find a sense of belonging that comes from connections with their ancestors.^{13,14} In this activity, staff create a timeline that visually connects them to those who have come before them. Participants can draw on their memories to highlight people who supported their belonging, review historical records to learn about people whose efforts they wish to extend, or interview former staff or community members to generate examples they wish to amplify. After doing this research, staff add themselves to the timeline, showing how they are continuing a legacy of belonging into the future.
- **Sources:** This flexible activity analyzes documents and objects through the lens of belonging. You might review organizational materials such as your mission statement, HR handbook, onboarding policies, training materials, website, or marketing. You could look at historical records. Or, you might encourage people to look at exhibits in your museum or works of art or pop culture. This activity also works for reviewing prior research about belonging. The online resources share guiding questions

and processes for gathering data from the sources to help you understand belonging more deeply and articulate the factors that contribute to it for your colleagues. Due to the breadth of available material for this activity, it can be repeated many times for different purposes.

- **Day of Play:** In advance of Madison Children’s Museum’s annual maintenance closure in 2025, the working group saw an opportunity to collect data about belonging but also test out emerging principles of belonging. The focus was on connection and cross-departmental appreciation through a variety of activities rooted in the museum’s core commitments: play, art, and sustainability. Using talk-back boards and informal conversations, the working group learned that staff appreciated the variety of activities, the connections across departments, and the way the day signaled the organization’s investment in taking a rest and reconnecting with priorities. This form of playful activity can be revisited over and over as a boost for belonging.

Defined roles give group members meaningful ways to contribute.

When doing activities to explore what contributes to belonging in your context, it can be valuable to designate roles for your group members. If you plan to do multiple activities, you may choose to rotate roles, as the people focused on data collection may not be able to give their full attention to participating in the activity. One person can take on multiple roles as needed.

- **Note-taker:** Throughout the session, one person may take notes about the discussions. A few things to consider when taking notes are:
 - Format:** The note-taker can use paper or a computer. Because belonging can be a personal topic, consider what note-taking methods may make people feel uncomfortable. For example, some people may not feel comfortable being recorded. Always ask for consent and prepare a back-up method.

Focus: Ahead of time, identify what your group is hoping to learn from the session (i.e., what contributes to a sense of belonging). Every time someone mentions something about that topic, write down as many actual words the person uses as you can (rather than your own paraphrase). You can leave out connector words (the, a, etc.) and fill them in later.

Anonymity: Typically we would have notes be anonymous, as this helps people feel more comfortable sharing freely without risk of judgment if data are shared outside the group. If anyone does not want their comments included in the notes, they can tell the note-taker to not record their data. In some cases, people may want their names associated with their comments so they get credit for their ideas. This is fine as long as you are not bound by an Institutional Review Board requirement that prevents you from doing so.

- **Artifact collector:** Most of the activities above involve making or analyzing objects, art pieces, or other materials. A designated person can document these materials during and at the completion of the activity. Often this involves taking photographs. It can also be gathering and storing note-taking posters, post-its, or other products.
- **Facilitator:** At least one person should review the facilitation guide ahead of time, gather materials, and lead the group through the activity. The facilitator adopts a position of power so they should use this position carefully—creating a safe space and including each participant. If you’re doing multiple activities in an ongoing process, we recommend either rotating the facilitation role or being very thoughtful about selecting the right person.

• **Participant:** Depending on your group size, some people may not have a designated role for a session beyond being there to listen and contribute. People have different ways of participating; someone may be engaged without looking like your image of model engagement—and that’s ok! Be open-minded while reaching out to check in with people to see if there are ways the facilitation and activity design can better allow each person to participate in a way that feels good to them.

Learning with Public Audiences

A sense of belonging for visitors is vital for museums’ missions.

If you ask museum staff what they find most meaningful about their jobs, many people talk about memorable moments with visitors: sharing a young child’s sense of wonder, encouraging someone to overcome their fear, building a relationship with visitors who return regularly, or laughing with people you otherwise never may have met. These experiences turn our missions into reality and it can be an honor to be a part of them.

Unfortunately, not every visitor’s trip to a museum involves these positive moments. Our research—including conversations with people at our museums and outside their walls—showed that many people think museums are not designed for them, are apprehensive about museums’ (often hidden) social norms, or experience judgment from staff and other visitors who may not share aspects of their identities and culture. While these findings are common in many areas across the country, understanding the specifics of your local audience’s concerns can help you design changes that will best foster their belonging.

These activities can show you what influences visitors’ belonging.

Below, we share a collection of activities that we have used to gather data about our audiences’ perspectives on belonging in the museum. Each activity collects information about belonging in a different way, offering you options based on your audience’s age, abilities, cultural norms, the context you’re in, and the amount of time you have. As with the activities for staff, these ways of collecting data prioritize enjoyment and cultural appropriateness while also gathering valuable data. We want to make sure that the data collection itself fosters belonging by drawing people into the process of shaping their local museum; it would be a great disservice if the data collection further contributed to feelings of othering and distanced them from

the museum! Trust your knowledge of your audience: we hope you will adapt these exercises or design your own approaches to learn from your visitors in a way that highlights their strengths and preferences for communication.

- **Podcast Chat:** This activity is a fun twist on a traditional focus group, making the conversation feel more like a podcast conversation. A podcast station is typically facilitated by a researcher or museum staff member who invites a group of visitors to participate (we’ve also had youth interview each other without a facilitator present). The facilitator shares several questions that the group members can respond to. Conversations can last from a few minutes to more than an hour, depending on the questions, how much the facilitator asks for more detail, and the participants’ eagerness to share. Data collection can involve note-taking or audio recording, depending on consent, preferences, and availability of technology.
- **Sticker Voting:** This activity starts with a question prompt written at the top of a large piece of paper. People write their answers on sticky notes underneath the question. Visitors can then review others’ responses and annotate them with stickers. For example, we might provide stickers that represent “I love this”, “this is important to me”, or “yes, and...” People sometimes add a follow-up sticky note to explain their sticker, creating a chain reaction of comments based on one original thought (much like a conversation would happen in person, but written down on paper).
- **Mark Up:** In this activity, visitors receive dry erase markers and 1–5 laminated images of a space you are looking to get feedback on (an exhibit, your lobby or cafe, etc.). Visitors look at the images and consider what (1) helps them feel like they belong, and (2) hurts their sense of belonging. Staff prompt visitors to circle positive elements and cross out the negative ones, asking prompting questions to understand visitors’ choices (the online resources provide sample scripts and

guidance about how to discuss the complex topic of belonging with visitors). Once they are finished, the data collector writes down notes or takes photos of the images and then wipes them clean for the next visitors.

- **Spend your Budget:** In this activity, people get a set number of small objects (pom poms, tokens, coins, marbles, etc.) and they allocate them between different containers (cups, baskets, boxes, etc.) labeled with different options. For instance, a question might ask what contributes to a sense of belonging and people could divide their tokens between options like: other people, physical comfort, clear communication, or a sense of familiarity. The data from this activity is similar to what you would get from a survey, but the tactile nature of it tends to be much more fun!
- **Photovoice:** Photovoice is an established research method that has been used in many contexts, including museums.¹⁵ There are many ways to facilitate data collection with photovoice, but we like to give participants an instant camera and a prompt to go take photos in the museum that illustrate moments of belonging. People can also use their own devices and share pictures with you. After taking a picture, each photographer will write or tell you a description of why they took the photo and how it relates to belonging. If people want to take their photos home, a data collector can take a picture of the visitor’s photo to maintain a record of it.

Advance planning will make your activities more successful.

Here are some things to consider when leading activities with the goal of learning about public audiences’ sense of belonging:

- **Mutually beneficial goals:** Before you begin, you’ll want to agree on the goals for your interaction with the public audiences. Make sure to think about what your audience will get out of the experience as well as what you will learn from them.

Developing Guidance from Data

Data analysis does not need to be scary!

The activities in the previous sections generate insights about how your museum currently supports belonging and areas for improvement. These activities can also help you understand what your audience and staff value. As you do the activities, you will likely start to get ideas about what you can change—and that’s great! Sometimes, though, trends and insights are not immediately obvious as you go. Whether after a single activity or at the end of multiple activities, it is crucial to set aside time for reflection, making sense of the data, and asking more or different questions.

In the research world, we call this stage analysis. Basically, it is a process of reviewing the breadth of data you’ve gathered and condensing the complexity into actionable insights. If you have a trained researcher on your team, they can guide this process. But if you do not have a researcher to work with, that is also ok!

The specifics of analysis depend on the types of data you collected. Most data fall into two categories:

- quantitative data consists of numbers
- qualitative data involves words, photographs, artifacts, etc.

Your goal is to use data to develop theories about what impacts belonging.

Your goal for analysis is to use data to articulate hypotheses (informed guesses) about what supports belonging in your museum. Staying focused on this singular goal will help your team move towards actionable changes in your museum. Ultimately, aiming to have 3-10 hypotheses will set you up to start designing change ideas. Your hypotheses should be based on your data, but it’s ok if you don’t feel like you have enough data to “prove” them. You will test, refine, and confirm or reject your hypotheses as

you learn from your change efforts. Hypotheses don’t need to be overly formal. They can be simple statements like, “Seeing familiar objects in an exhibit helps visitors feel like they belong in a space.”

Quantitative analysis helps make sense of numbers.

This encompasses numerical information that often comes from multiple-choice survey questions, voting activities, or counts of behaviors you might observe. While you may have heard of things like statistical significance or advanced statistical techniques, the types of analysis needed for the activities in this process guide are simple. Typically we would use descriptive statistics, which means we’re using numbers to describe the data rather than trying to assess whether there is a meaningful difference between two groups or trying to predict future values. You can calculate descriptive statistics using Excel, Google Sheets, or a similar spreadsheet. You do not need advanced statistical software. If your dataset is small enough, you could even do much of it by hand or with a calculator. Descriptive statistics include:

- **Average or mean:** This is a measure of the “middle” of a dataset, calculated by adding up all the numbers and dividing by the number of values you added together.
- **Median:** This is another measure of the “middle” of a group of numbers, but this is calculated by putting the numbers in order and determining which is right in the middle. The median identifies the true center of the data. This provides a more accurate picture of the “normal” results when extreme outliers distort the distribution of numbers.
- **Minimum and maximum:** These values are the smallest and biggest numbers in your dataset. When it comes to belonging, even if most people feel a sense of belonging, attending to the people who really do and really do not feel belonging can provide valuable insights.

- **Standard deviation:** This value describes how spread out your dataset is. It tells you about how much of your dataset is near your average or median and how much is nearer your minimum and maximum values.

In addition to calculating descriptive statistics, it is often valuable to create graphs of your data to look at it visually. Again, you can use basic programs like Excel or Google Sheets to generate graphs for this purpose, or you can even draw them by hand. There are many ways to visualize data but often a bar chart is effective for the types of data you would generate from the activities described in the prior section. Some examples of simple graphs include:

- **Bar graph:** This can compare quantities across distinct categories. One example of this might be the number of people in each department in your museum.
- **Line graph:** This can show trends or change over time. An example might be Monday attendance in your museum across multiple weeks.
- **Pie graph:** This can show proportions of a whole with the data. One example of this would be the allocation of the budget for your museum.
- **Scatter plot:** This can show the relationship between two variables. An example of this might be the relationship between a staff member's years on staff and their sense of belonging in their museum.

Qualitative analysis crystalizes insights from text.

Qualitative data are rich sources of information. Much qualitative data is in the form of words, but other materials like photographs and artifacts can also be considered qualitative data. Analysis of qualitative data can be time-intensive and complex, but it can also generate very valuable information, particularly about a topic like belonging. When working with qualitative data, your goal is to take that

complexity and use a systematic process to identify themes and findings. Here are some tips:

- **Look for trends and outliers:** Typically, you will look to identify patterns and trends that come up repeatedly in the data, although there may be times that there are uncommon but potent and actionable findings in your data—and it is useful not to dismiss those simply because people mention them less frequently.
- **Make it visual:** If you are working with an in-person group, it can be helpful to put different pieces of data (for instance, different people's responses to a question) on post-it notes or separate pieces of paper. Then you can physically move these around to put them in groups with other similar comments. If you're working digitally, you can use a spreadsheet or online whiteboard to do the same thing.
- **Stay open-minded:** It is common, and often valuable, to re-organize your groupings as you go. You can also have multiple group members analyze the data independently and then come together to discuss. Considering alternate ways of organizing the data and discussing the merits of different approaches to sorting, categorizing, or grouping the material will help you better understand your data.
- **Focus on action:** When in doubt, ask yourself and your colleagues what will be most helpful for identifying actionable ideas to nurture belonging in your museum. You don't want your themes to be overly broad or too specific to be helpful. For instance, saying something like "interactions with other people influence belonging" is likely true, but it is so general it does not give you a clear idea about what to change. It would be more helpful if you could structure your findings at a more specific level, perhaps noting something like, "interactions with visitor services staff at the front desk influence belonging."

Analysis is part of your ongoing process of learning about belonging.

Once you have analyzed your data and developed a set of hypotheses about what contributes to belonging in your museum, it is time to refine them. You might first review the hypotheses with colleagues or visitors, or you may choose to move straight to the design phase, where you start making actual changes. Your hypotheses become a guide for you, offering ideas about where to focus your attention. Take the time to celebrate your team's work so far: getting to this stage is an accomplishment! It's also not the end of the journey. In fact, now that you have a better understanding of what's needed, you have a responsibility to the people who shared their perspectives and helped inform your understanding. Now, you can honor them, your colleagues, and your community by becoming an active change maker for belonging.



Example Themes of Belonging

These examples illustrate data-driven insights about belonging in a museum.

The following themes of belonging shown were developed through the activities and analysis processes described in the previous sections. To create them, Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh worked with a team of more than 20 museum staff and engaged with over 250 visitors, youth co-researchers, and community members. After developing an initial draft of the themes based on their data, the staff designed, led, and evaluated change ideas to put the themes into practice. We revised the themes based on what we learned through these design processes and added the subpoints below each bolded header.

While the data that informed these themes comes only from Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh and was not designed to be a generalizable statement about how to support belonging in all museums, the findings here may give you ideas about the types of things that can make a difference in your location. If you do not have the capacity or do not think an exploratory approach to learning about belonging in your museum makes sense, you could use these themes as a starting point for your change efforts.

What helps visitors feel like they belong?

Developing connections

- Spending time and creating connections with family and friends.
- Learning more about my family and friends.
- Meeting other people and families.

Engaging in interests

- Learning about topics I am interested in.
- Learning and exploring in a space I know well.
- Meeting others with similar interests.
- The space does not feel ‘too young’ or ‘too old’ for me.

Comfort & safety

- Knowing my group can explore and have fun while being safe.
- Being able to take risks or try something new while feeling supported.
- Having the space and resources I need to be comfortable.

Choice & agency

- Being able to choose where I go, what to do, and when to do it.
- Working together to both learn and educate.
- Making decisions together as a group.

Communication

- Having wayfinding resources such as maps, schedules, and more.
- Access to an updated website.
- Knowing where to find accessibility resources.

Cultural celebration

- Being able to celebrate and share my background, culture, and experiences.
- My needs are anticipated, met, and do not feel like a burden to others.
- Being around people who look, sound, and act like me.

What helps staff feel like they belong?

Open & transparent communication

- Articulating what’s going on and what’s expected of people.
- Encouraging others to share their thoughts and ask questions.
- Listening without judgment before reacting.

Shared humanity

- Taking time to build trust and learn about each other.
- Mutual aid: Sharing what we need and providing what others need.
- Practicing forgiveness and accepting people as they are.

Commitment to ongoing growth

- Being clear about goals and plans for achieving them.
- Staying focused on goals even when it’s hard or progress is slow.
- Practicing continuous learning and reflection.

Design for every body

- Celebrating and anticipating the needs of diverse bodies and minds.
- Including multiple perspectives and cultures wherever possible.
- Creating spaces that are comfortable to be in.

Choice & agency

- Making choices about how we learn and work.
- Encouraging multiple ways of communicating and doing tasks.
- Sharing power: everyone is both a learner and educator.

Accountability

- Developing systems for preventing harm.
- Acknowledging harm and taking appropriate responsibility.
- Making space for healing.

Making & Evaluating Change

Try-it-out projects turn hypotheses into action.

After learning from staff and visitors and using data to articulate your hypotheses about what supports belonging in your museum, now is the time to start making changes. In our project, the way we did this was informed by improvement science and it involved what we call try-it-out projects.¹⁶ A try-it-out project identifies a change idea you can do in a short time period, gives it a try, and evaluates how it goes.

Three key elements of a try-it-out project are:

- 1 Supported by thoughtful rationale:** Try-it-out projects put theory into practice. Sometimes this can be formal theory as articulated in peer-reviewed research articles, but other times it can be more localized, grounded ideas about how things work. In our case, the hypotheses that we developed through activities with staff and visitors become our theory. Use your hypotheses as inspiration to brainstorm your try-it-out projects.
- 2 Small-to-moderate in scope:** We love radical ideas, but try-it-out projects are not the time to completely restructure your museum. Instead, these projects should be small adjustments you can make in a short time period (one program, one meeting, one prototype, etc.). If things go well, you can scale them up (see the next section). If not, you can adjust quickly. When designing your project, make sure you have the time, materials, financial support, and the right people involved. We saw multiple staff brainstorm ideas that they wanted colleagues to do, without asking those colleagues. Start first with the people you have. Once you've shown your own willingness to change, others will want to join you.
- 3 Measurable:** Before you begin your try-it-out project, decide what evidence would tell you whether or not it is working. This does not need to be an extensive research project, but it should be grounded in data. If your change idea involves a public audience, it can be valuable to consider perspectives of both your audience and the staff who implement a change idea. Many of the tools in the online resources can gather data to help you assess the effectiveness of a try-it-out project.

Make sure to reflect about what you learn from your try-it-out project.

Once you have done your initial try-it-out project, you will want to review the data you gathered and consider two questions:

- 1. What should we change about the design?
- 2. How can we update our hypothesis?

It is possible that your answer to both of these questions will be "nothing," in which case you can continue doing what works. You might choose to do a different try-it-out project. If you have ideas about what to change in your design, this is a time to enhance your change idea and try it again. You can do numerous rounds of try-it-out projects, continuously improving your design. It is also possible that you would decide that your change idea is not actually a good idea after all. Rather than trying to improve it, you might choose to move on to another idea. Taking the time to reflect on your hypothesis—in addition to your design—is also an important step in this process because it helps you continuously refine your overall understanding of what works to support belonging in your museum.

These example try-it-out projects may inspire ideas for your museum.

The following list shares examples of try-it-out projects we have led in our museums:

- **Morning Meeting Routines:** Data from surveys and listening sessions showed a gap in awareness and appreciation between visitor-facing staff and behind-the-scenes roles. The working group developed a protocol for representatives from each museum department to participate in and share out at daily morning meetings to create connections among staff.

Cohesive icons: Visitor data highlighted the importance of clear messaging about what to expect. We realized different teams were using different icons and worked to make our visual communication more consistent and accessible.

Kudos board: Based on a data-driven hypothesis that public recognition boosts staff belonging, we began posting shout-outs for staff on a bulletin board, and celebrated several of these shout-outs each month at all-staff town hall meetings.

Public announcements: After data showed that some staff-visitor interactions were harming belonging, we developed new messaging over the public announcements to emphasize our mission of kindness to all.

Partner paperwork: Our paperwork process for new partners was providing barriers that harmed a sense of belonging, so we developed guidance for demystifying and navigating the process of securing clearances, insurance, and other requirements.

Onboarding: New staff members' enthusiasm started high but we learned that belonging reached a low after an initial "honeymoon" phase. The education team developed a new, extended onboarding approach that provided additional support.

navigating the complexities of change

- Scaling Change Efforts
- First Aid Kit

Scaling Change Efforts

Spreading belonging across an organization can be both powerful and challenging.

Try-it-out projects are wonderful for exploring new ways of supporting belonging without having to make major investments of time or resources. When we want large-scale impact, though, we'll generally need to do more than try-it-out projects. Like belonging work in general, organizational change work is complex and challenging. There are many excellent existing resources about leading change efforts, but here are some factors that were particularly relevant to our project on fostering belonging in museums:

- **Crossing hierarchies (depth):** Institutional hierarchies were a major discussion point in our project. At times, we organized activities among people in similar positions—especially by creating safe spaces just for people in entry-level positions. While this led to measurable growth in belonging among people in that group, it led to tensions with managers that harmed broader feelings of belonging. It also meant that, when ideas emerged, the people with organizational authority to make those changes happen were often not in the room. Affinity groups and safe spaces for people with shared roles, identities, or experiences have a valuable place in belonging work. Wide-scale organizational change benefits from the involvement of people at different levels. It is the work of lasting, systemic change to engage staff at all levels in meaningful ways.
- **Connecting departments (breadth):** Some effective practices for belonging might be the primary responsibility of a single department. Others might have cross-institutional impact. For example, an effort to make wayfinding information consistent across a museum might involve people in exhibits, education, marketing, visitor services, facilities, and more. Including

people from different teams is valuable for making the work spread more broadly and it also supports belonging by amplifying the sense that each team is working together towards a shared purpose.

- **Getting "sticky":** Museum staff are juggling many things and despite our best intentions, we often fall into old habits. Some organizational features tend to persist, including things like formal policies, routines (such as recurring meetings), the metrics we use to evaluate success, and cultural norms (the ways meetings are facilitated, etc.).¹⁷ If we can embed our change efforts within these lasting organizational features, they will be more likely to continue. For instance, if we start to evaluate staff based on their continued investment in belonging, they will likely be motivated to do so.
- **Staying human:** As much as strategy is useful for fostering organizational change, remember that organizations consist of people. Relationships between people will always be the cornerstone of change. Taking the time to build those relationships and strengthen partnerships will not only make your scaling more effective but it will complement your belonging effort as you go.

First Aid Kit

Belonging work is messy and difficult.

Change, even when well-planned and communicated, can be upsetting. Even people with the best intentions cause harm. Things happen beyond our control that set us back. When one person is motivated to act, others who could strengthen the movement are focused elsewhere. When you're feeling discouraged (or angry or anything else), know that you are not alone. This "first aid" section shares some common challenges ("symptoms") we encountered in our work as well as strategies ("treatments") for addressing them.

Motivation Deficiency

Symptoms: We faced numerous people who thought our museums were doing well with belonging—and implying that it was not worth trying to improve it. We heard people say that staff should focus on work and we should not focus on social or emotional factors.

Treatment: In general, these sentiments came from people who felt a sense of belonging. Their experiences are valid—and we're glad they felt like they belong! The challenge was that they discounted other people's experiences. Data was effective for showing the magnitude of need, especially when we disaggregated the data to demonstrate that certain groups of staff (such as staff who engage directly with visitors) consistently had lower belonging ratings than leadership. The staff and visitor surveys in the online resources may be helpful tools if you're facing motivation deficiency in your museum.

Dissociation from Responsibility

Symptoms: We encountered people who felt passionately about belonging but did not see themselves having a role in addressing it. These folks made astute analyses of the systems that harmed their belonging, yet placed responsibility for action solely on museum leadership.

Treatment: Many of our organizational hierarchies separate people from direct interaction, so disrupting these trends can be powerful! For instance, one educator interviewed a senior leader about belonging and the conversation generated newfound respect for leadership, a sense of shared purpose, and a greater understanding of who has the agency to make what kinds of change. We also found that encouraging people to build connections with others—even small actions with close colleagues—helped them feel more positive about their workplace.

Progress Paralysis

Symptoms: So many factors that contribute to belonging are outside of our control. People's sense of belonging is threatened by wars, political unrest, family troubles, health challenges, and more. Some people feel like there is no point of trying to address belonging because you cannot fully control the outcome.

Treatment: Try-it-out projects are effective ways of getting started when people feel stuck or overwhelmed. Making small-scale change and showing measurable improvement is encouraging. It's also helpful to have open and realistic conversations about expectations: sometimes we don't see the types of measurable growth we'd hope for. It can be helpful to emphasize that as long as we are making choices with well-informed, good intentions and we're learning from our actions, that is progress in itself.

Chronic Hypocrisy Hypersensitivity

Symptoms: As people become more aware of factors that influence belonging, their awareness of others' mistakes can become overly heightened. They may be especially keen to call out the shortcomings of people who have claimed to care about belonging, highlighting them as hypocrites, and possibly judging them as permanently untrustworthy.

Treatment: Emphasize repeatedly that no one is perfect and that everyone does things that both foster and hinder belonging. When you feel comfortable, share openly about your own mistakes. The journaling activity in the online resources may help encourage quiet reflection without publicly calling people out. Discuss how accountability and forgiveness can coexist, and develop norms for both within your team and organization.

Relationship Fracture

Symptoms: Sometimes actions that are designed to support belonging actually backfire and end up causing harm. Other times they can do both: they nurture belonging for some while making others feel excluded. When this happens, people can experience a wide range of emotions from guilt to anger to frustration to sadness and more. People might want to give up.

Treatment: Recognize that this work is hard. Saying this aloud is powerful—the work is difficult, and still worth doing. Remind yourself that change and improvement necessitate discomfort. But also, it’s crucial to reflect on your role in the work. When you’ve caused harm, acknowledge it. If appropriate, apologize. Trying to justify your actions can further exacerbate harm. Instead, make space for listening and healing. Realize that, even if you cannot fully empathize with someone or think they are taking something more seriously than they should, their emotions are valid. Healing might take longer than you want it to. Yet, just as muscles grow stronger when they recover from tiny tears and strain, museums can grow to thrive as we learn from our mistakes and invest in healing rifts in our relationships.



Conclusion

you are
exactly
who our
world
needs.

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.

End Notes

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.

⁵ Dunning, D. (2011). The Dunning–Kruger effect: On being ignorant of one's own ignorance. In *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 44, pp. 247–296). Academic Press.

⁶ Bang, M., & Vossoughi, S. (2016). Participatory design research and educational justice: Studying learning and relations within social change making. *Cognition and instruction*, 34(3), 173–193, quotation from page 173.

⁷ Hood, S., Hopson, R. K., & Kirkhart, K. E. (2015). Culturally responsive evaluation. *Handbook of practical program evaluation*, 281–317.

⁸ Mertens, D. M. (2008). *Transformative research and evaluation*. Guilford press.

⁹ Hinnant–Crawford, B. N. (2020). *Improvement science in education: A primer*. Myers Education Press.

¹⁰ Dawson, E. (2014). "Not designed for us": How science museums and science centers socially exclude low income, minority ethnic groups. *Science education*, 98(6), 981–1008.

¹¹ Hagerty, B. M., Lynch–Sauer, J., Patusky, K. L., Bouwsema, M., & Collier, P. (1992). Sense of belonging: A vital mental health concept. *Archives of psychiatric nursing*, 6(3), 172–177; Thissen, L., Biermann–Teuscher, D., Horstman, K., & Meershoek, A. (2023). (Un) belonging at work: an overlooked ingredient of workplace health. *Health promotion international*, 38(3).

¹² Freire, P. (1997). *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Continuum

¹³ Viscogliosi, C., Asselin, H., Basile, S., Borwick, K., Couturier, Y., Drolet, M. J., ... & Levasseur, M. (2020). Importance of Indigenous elders' contributions to individual and community wellness: results from a scoping review on social participation and intergenerational solidarity. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 111(5), 667–681.

¹⁴ Sung, K. T. (2001). Elder respect: Exploration of ideals and forms in East Asia. *Journal of aging studies*, 15(1), 13–26.

¹⁵ Ronning, E., Lukowski, S., Grack_Nelson, A., & Bequette, M. (2023). Moments that matter: Toward a visitor-centered understanding of belonging in museum spaces. *Exhibition*, 42(2).

¹⁶ Akiva, T., White, A. M., Colvin, S., Li, J., & Wardrip, P. S. (2022). Can we efficiently help adults strengthen their relational practice?. *Journal of Youth Development*, 17(4), 26–47.

¹⁷ Anderson, E. R., & Colyvas, J. A. (2021). What sticks and why? A MoRe institutional framework for education research. *Teachers College Record*, 123(7), 1–34.



children's
museum.
pittsburgh

museumlab.


FRED ROGERS
— INSTITUTE —
Saint Vincent College

 madison
children's
museum

 **WISCONSIN**
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

 INSTITUTE of
Museum and Library
SERVICES

EdenHall
FOUNDATION