2022 CIN Post-Convening Report
What belonging, engagement, and equity mean for CIN and Higher Ed

April 2022

The College Innovation Network (CIN) at WGU Labs is a network of higher education institutions committed to **promoting belonging and engagement in the modern higher education environment.** To address this challenge, we leverage technology and research to build highly engaged learning communities from enrollment through graduation—and beyond.

In April, we hosted our **2022 Annual CIN Convening** where our Network convened for two days of action-packed programming, engaging in deep discussion and collaborative brainstorming. The primary focus of this meeting was to create a shared understanding of what belonging, engagement, and equity mean for CIN and higher ed and, most importantly, how each of these concepts map across the full student lifecycle experience.
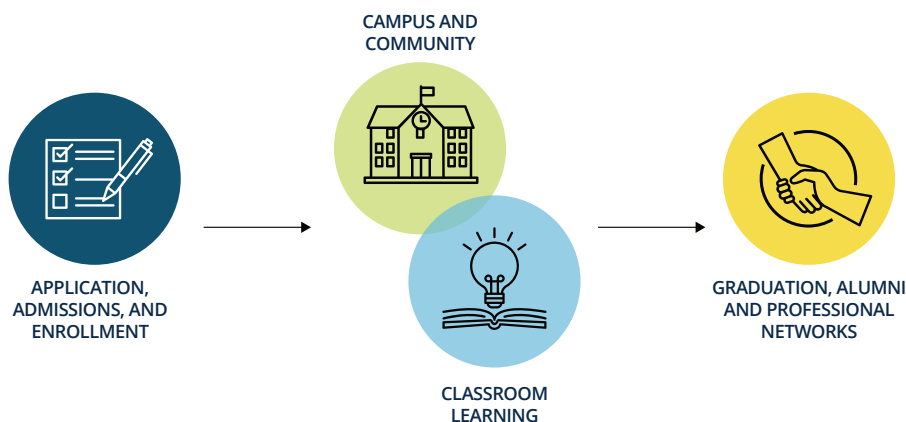
Here, we share the collective outputs of the 2022 CIN Convening.

Understanding The Student Lifecycle

Building belonging, fostering engagement, and promoting equity requires intentional engagement with students across their entire educational journey—and this journey begins long before their first day of classes.

Students typically have months of engagement before starting their first class, during which time they are applying and completing enrollment. This means that institutions have numerous opportunities to boost belonging, foster engagement, and promote equity even before students officially start. Once enrolled, opportunities for institutions to connect continue to proliferate. Students are involved not only in their courses, but also with the broader (virtual) campus and institutional community. Then after graduation, institutions can foster alumni networks for current and former students to connect across their professional journeys.

THE STUDENT LIFECYCLE

CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY

APPLICATION, ADMISSIONS, AND ENROLLMENT

CLASSROOM LEARNING

GRADUATION, ALUMNI AND PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS

At CIN, we're using this student lifecycle as a guiding map for how we address belonging, engagement, and equity across the Network. Student needs and experiences will look different at each stage in their educational journey. The outcomes institutions are hoping to achieve will also vary at each stage. And the EdTech solutions designed and implemented will be specific to address the unique challenges across the lifecycle.

CIN EDTECH VENDORS ACROSS THE STUDENT LIFECYCLE

APPLICATION, ADMISSIONS & ENROLLMENT	CAMPUS & COMMUNITY	CLASSROOM LEARNING
Nearpeer mainstay formerly AdmitHub	InScribe YOU at COLLEGE Nearpeer	Harmonize class Built on Zoom

Since the beginning of 2021, CIN has implemented and evaluated four of our available vendors at six Member institutions. We have added two new vendors for 2022-23, and have added "Graduation, Alumni, and Professional Networks" as a new focus area for future projects.

Crafting A Shared Understanding

Our primary goal of the 2022 CIN Convening was to **collaboratively determine what belonging, engagement, and equity mean** by crafting shared definitions that resonate across our institutions, and then brainstorming about what successful belonging, engagement, and equity look like at each stage of a student's education journey.

By crafting a shared understanding, these outputs can serve as a **logic model for our Network** to assess potential projects, design evaluation studies, focus our bi-annual EdTech Surveys, and partner with impactful EdTech vendors.

Through sharing our work widely, our goal is to impact the higher education sector broadly and provide valuable insights to other education leaders dedicated to building belonging, fostering engagement, and promoting equity at their institutions.

BELONGING: "WE FEEL"

Student belonging is when students have positive and purposeful connections to the institution, and believe their authentic self is validated and elevated by its community.

BUILDING BELONGING ACROSS THE STUDENT LIFECYCLE	WHAT SUCCESSFUL BELONGING FEELS LIKE
Admissions and Enrollment • Effective advising. • Warm welcoming of students by community. • Track benchmarks of belonging from day one. **Campus and Classroom** • Faculty who are representative of the student population. • Provide ways for students to easily connect with one another. • Students having school pride. • All students have a role model or mentor. **Graduation and Beyond** • Building strong social ties among alumni and students. • Celebrating students across their educational journeys.	• I have a seat at the table and my voice is heard. • I feel like my authentic self is accepted, validated, and elevated by the institutional community. • I belong here. • I fit in here. • I am proud of my school and its community. • I see others like myself among the students, faculty, staff, and alumni. • I feel respected by those in the community. • I feel confident to use my power to lift others in the community. • I have friends here. • I feel like others believe in me.

ENGAGEMENT: "WE DO"

Engagement is when members of the institutional community act to create individualized connections with each other and provide meaningful experiences.

FOSTERING ENGAGEMENT ACROSS THE STUDENT LIFECYCLE	WHAT SUCCESSFUL ENGAGEMENT LOOKS LIKE
Admissions and Enrollment • Students have a college guidebook of the "hidden curriculum" and other information to succeed. • Positive and impactful orientation experiences. **Campus and Classroom** • Fun, intriguing, and useful courses. • Multi-format course materials and modalities. • Easily accessible resources for students. • Student participation in classes. • Engaging events for students, including those based on non-academic interests of students. • Reconceptualizing what "the campus" is. **Graduation and Beyond** • Meaningful and valuable alumni engagement. • Alumni have continued access to college resources.	• Course evaluations are actionable and lead to change. • Students complete courses at high rates. • There is active learning and participation in classes. • Communications within the community are effective and valuable. • Students can engage with their institution in a variety of modalities. • Students engage when it's most important to them. • The community acts on email communications. • The community commits to engage when at events. • Community members have meaningful interactions. • Students get the right information and resources when they need them.

EQUITY: "WE SUCCEED"

Equity is honoring individual differences and experiences, and providing effective resources and support necessary for each person to reach their educational goals.

PROMOTING EQUITY ACROSS THE STUDENT LIFECYCLE	WHAT SUCCESSFUL EQUITY LOOKS LIKE
Admissions and Enrollment • Transparency of admissions process and the removal of admissions barriers. • Transparency of costs and financial aid processes. • Flexible enrollment options for students. **Campus and Classroom** • Accessibility for students of all abilities in all spaces of the college. • Opportunities and environments for all students to engage and participate with the institutional community. • Community health and wellness for the institutional community. • Adopting high impact practices in the classroom to enhance learning for all students. **Graduation and Beyond** • Continuing education options for students. • Holistic and effective career development plans.	• Students have effective support from the institution and its members. • The institution meets students where they are. • The institution proactively reduces bias, harassment, and discrimination, and then effectively responds to it when it does occur. • Students feel they will succeed at the institution. • Members of the campus community learn diverse student experiences. • The institution acknowledges systemic inequities. • Everyone gets to contribute. • Student communities reflect the communities of which the institution serves.

Unbundling Belonging: Perspectives from Experts in The Field

To deepen the conversation on our core focus, we invited a panel of experts (see **Panelists** below) to have an open conversation, moderated by **Jason Thompson,** around unbundling belonging in higher education.

The conversation (available on YouTube) features rich discussion by our panelists on what belonging means and why we need to focus on it, how institutions can build belonging among their communities, and why diversity, equity, and inclusion are central to achieving true belonging in higher education. Here are five key takeaways from their conversation:

1. **Belonging is an outcome.** The addition of "belonging" to the "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" (DEI) conceptual trio reflects an evolution of our understanding of belonging and what we're trying to achieve within our institutions. Belonging is best viewed as the outcome of DEI work. Diversity is a fact, equity is a choice, and inclusion is a seat at the table. Belonging takes DEI to the next level and helps put our words into action because belonging is more than just inclusion—it's hearing and valuing the contributions of everyone at the table.

2. **Diversity is a fact.** One doesn't have to believe in diversity—it is a fact. We all have unique roles, identities, backgrounds, and experiences. We are diverse by default. What institutions must focus on in the DEI and belonging work is becoming diverse by design and thinking about becoming intentional and purposeful about diversity.

3. **Flip the model to become student-ready.** Historically, higher education was not designed to be inclusive and diverse; rather, it was designed to serve an exclusive, homogenous population of students. Our institutions today must adapt and design themselves to be prepared for the wide range of students that are now accessing higher education. This means that institutions must rethink and revisit their policies, procedures, and structures within classrooms and across campus to flip the model and become student-ready, rather than asking our students to assimilate to a narrow exemplar of a college student.

4. **Institutional transformation must be a holistic strategy.** Institutions typically create DEI and belonging strategies, or have programs and departments develop independent strategies to promote DEI and belonging. The key to effective DEI and belonging, however, is a holistic integration into all of the strategic plans for the institution. DEI and belonging should be a part of all policies, systems, and strategies for the institution, not separate work. It's also critical to treat student experience metrics as vital outcomes in themselves. We need to collect and use that data in a meaningful way to improve belonging experiences on campus.

5. **Listen to the student voice.** Students are playing a key role in pushing the narrative and driving institutions to recognize what DEI and belonging mean for their institutions. By allowing students to lead the conversation around their needs and experiences, receptive institutions can incorporate their student voice into the transformational change work occurring. Through purposefully listening to students, institutions can accurately and effectively address the barriers students are facing, leading to true systemic transformation of policies and procedures designed to promote equity on campus.

PANELISTS

Jason Thompson (moderator) is the Vice President of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Western Governors University, and author of *Diversity and Inclusion Matters: Tactics and Tools to Inspire Equity and Game-Changing Performance* (2021).

Rosetta Clay is a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Facilitator with 15 years experience, and currently a full-time doctoral student studying Diversity & Equity in Education with an emphasis in Human Resource Development at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

AJ Leu is the Director of Diversity, Belonging, and Professional Development in the College of Communication and Information at Kent State University, and also serves as an independent consultant and trainer for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging initiatives for a wide variety of organizations.

Chris Smith is the Executive Director, College Transition Collaborative, which bridges research and practice to help colleges create learning environments that foster equitable student engagement and success.

The Future of CIN

Our 2022 convening served as a powerful reflection of the great things our Network has accomplished together in the first two years, as well as a starting point for the next phase of our evolution. The urgency for solutions to address growing needs of belonging, engagement, and equity across the CIN institutions prompted clarity in our focus as an organization moving forward.

The work that was accomplished at the annual convening will guide our future engagement across the Network. As we continue to grow CIN, its impact within higher education will also grow, and contribute to meaningful, positive change to the student experience. As we move forward, expect more from CIN.

MORE MEMBERS

Each year we intentionally recruit and select new institutions to join CIN and engage with our community of practice.

We will soon begin recruiting our third cohort of institutions to join our Network of 10 institutions serving over 250,000 students collectively.

MORE VENDORS

With further clarity of the space CIN will be operating in, we will focus on adding EdTech vendor options to best serve the needs of our Network.

Vendors provide exclusive discounts to Network Members, and are vetted by the CIN staff to ensure smooth implementation and

MORE INSIGHTS

CIN's core mission is to drive action from research insights. We will continue to expand our research by developing new research tools and addressing emerging themes of greatest relevance.

These will be translated into actionable insights and practical strategies for CIN members and the broader educational community.

We seek institutions that educate diverse student populations—including a significant proportion of traditionally underrepresented and underserved students. By joining CIN, institutions are connected with a community of like-minded education leaders who are committed to the common goal of leveraging technology and designing innovations to better support belonging, engagement, and equity.

We would love to chat with you and see if your institution would be a good fit for our growing Network.

Contact Business Operations & Product Manager Erika Wandsneider at cin@wgulabs.org to get started.

JOIN US AS WE BUILD LEARNING COMMUNITIES WHERE ALL STUDENTS BELONG.