



# Who Belongs? Who Matters?

Connecting racism and health equity  
to sense of belonging at UW–Madison

Reonda Washington, MPH, CHES

Paris Wicker, MSE, NCC



# Objectives

## Learn

- How campus climate shapes students' experiences of belonging on campus

## Describe

- How sense of belonging impacts the health and well-being of UW–Madison students

## Reflect

- Lived experiences with fostering belonging on campus and explore strategies for structural change

## Identify

- Why sense of belonging connects to issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity



# Roadmap

1. Belonging exercise
2. What is ‘sense of belonging?’
3. Belonging research
4. Belonging at UW–Madison
5. Why belonging matters as an equity and health issue
6. Reflections and call to action

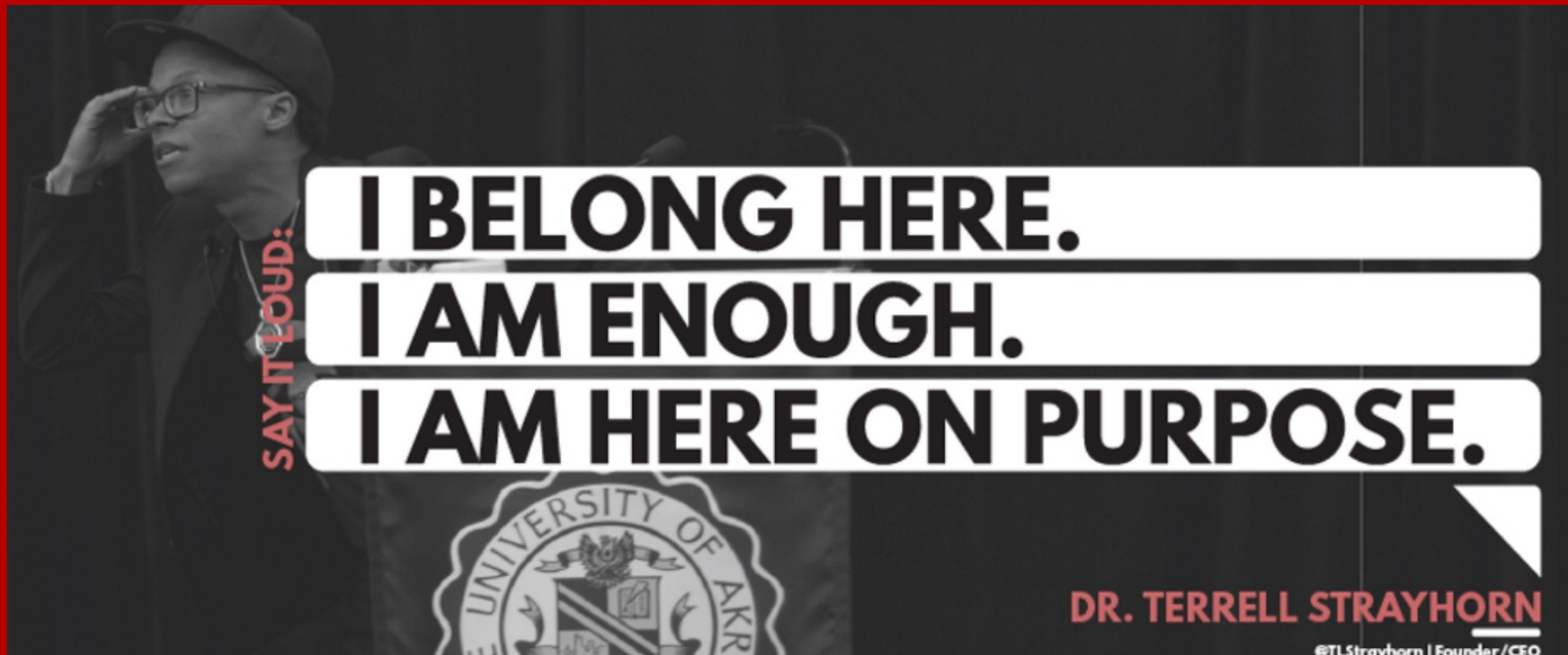


# Roadmap

- 1. Belonging exercise**
2. What is 'sense of belonging?'
3. Belonging research
4. Belonging at UW-Madison
5. Why belonging matters as an equity and health issue
6. Reflections and call to action



# Belonging Exercise

A black and white photograph of Dr. Terrell Strayhorn, a Black man wearing a cap and glasses, speaking at a podium. The podium features the University of Akron seal. Overlaid on the image are three white rectangular boxes containing the text: 'I BELONG HERE.', 'I AM ENOUGH.', and 'I AM HERE ON PURPOSE.' To the left of these boxes, the text 'SAY IT LOUD:' is written vertically in red. In the bottom right corner, the text 'DR. TERRELL STRAYHORN' is written in red, with '@TLStrayhorn | Founder / CEO' in smaller black text below it.

**SAY IT LOUD:**

**I BELONG HERE.**

**I AM ENOUGH.**

**I AM HERE ON PURPOSE.**

**DR. TERRELL STRAYHORN**  
@TLStrayhorn | Founder / CEO



# Roadmap

1. Belonging exercise
- 2. What is ‘sense of belonging?’**
3. Belonging research
4. Belonging at UW–Madison
5. Why belonging matters as an equity and health issue
6. Reflections and call to action



Students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers.

(Strayhorn, 2019)



# Point of Clarity

Often a sense of either belonging or isolation is a more transient experience of the degree to which one feels like an integral part of a system or group, which may be overcome by seeking out new relationships and social bonds; however, Lee and colleagues (2001) suggest that for some individuals, a lack of belonging is experienced as a more persistent state of disconnection from society as a whole that may result in personal dysfunction and a state of psychological distress.

(Barrett, 2019)





# Roadmap

1. Belonging exercise
2. What is ‘sense of belonging?’
- 3. Belonging research**
4. Belonging at UW–Madison
5. Why belonging matters as an equity and health issue
6. Reflections and call to action



Belonging is...	Belonging is not...
A human need and right	Simply fitting in
A cognitive process that shapes feelings and behaviors	Individually constructed
Relational and reciprocal	Solved by only adding more program and support staff



# The Cost of Inclusion



*How* **STUDENT CONFORMITY**  
*Leads to* **INEQUALITY on**  
**COLLEGE CAMPUSES**

**BLAKE R. SILVER**

To be part of the campus social landscape, students:

- Worked diligently to be liked by others.
- Gave up opportunities for self-fulfillment.
- Sacrificed personal integrity and self-actualization
- Limited themselves and their peers to narrow stereotypes



# Sense of belonging drives student behavior

## Factors

- Identity and Institution matter *Gopalan & Brady, 2020*)
- Perceived support from peers, teachers, and family
- Positive interpersonal peer interactions

**Lack of belonging** undermines academic performance

*(Hagerty, Williams, & Oe, 2002; Walton & Cohen, 2007)*

Satisfaction of **sense of belonging** leads to:

- Positive psychological and physical outcomes
- Thriving, happiness, well-being, and optimal functioning  
*(Strayhorn, 2019)*

**To gain a sense of belonging**, some student sacrifice their personal integrity for a sense of belonging, and others feel they have to change who they are in order to fit in

*(Silver, 2020; Wellbeing Collaborative)*



# Roadmap

1. Belonging exercise
2. What is ‘sense of belonging?’
3. Belonging research
4. **Belonging at UW–Madison**
5. Why belonging matters as an equity and health issue
6. Reflections and call to action

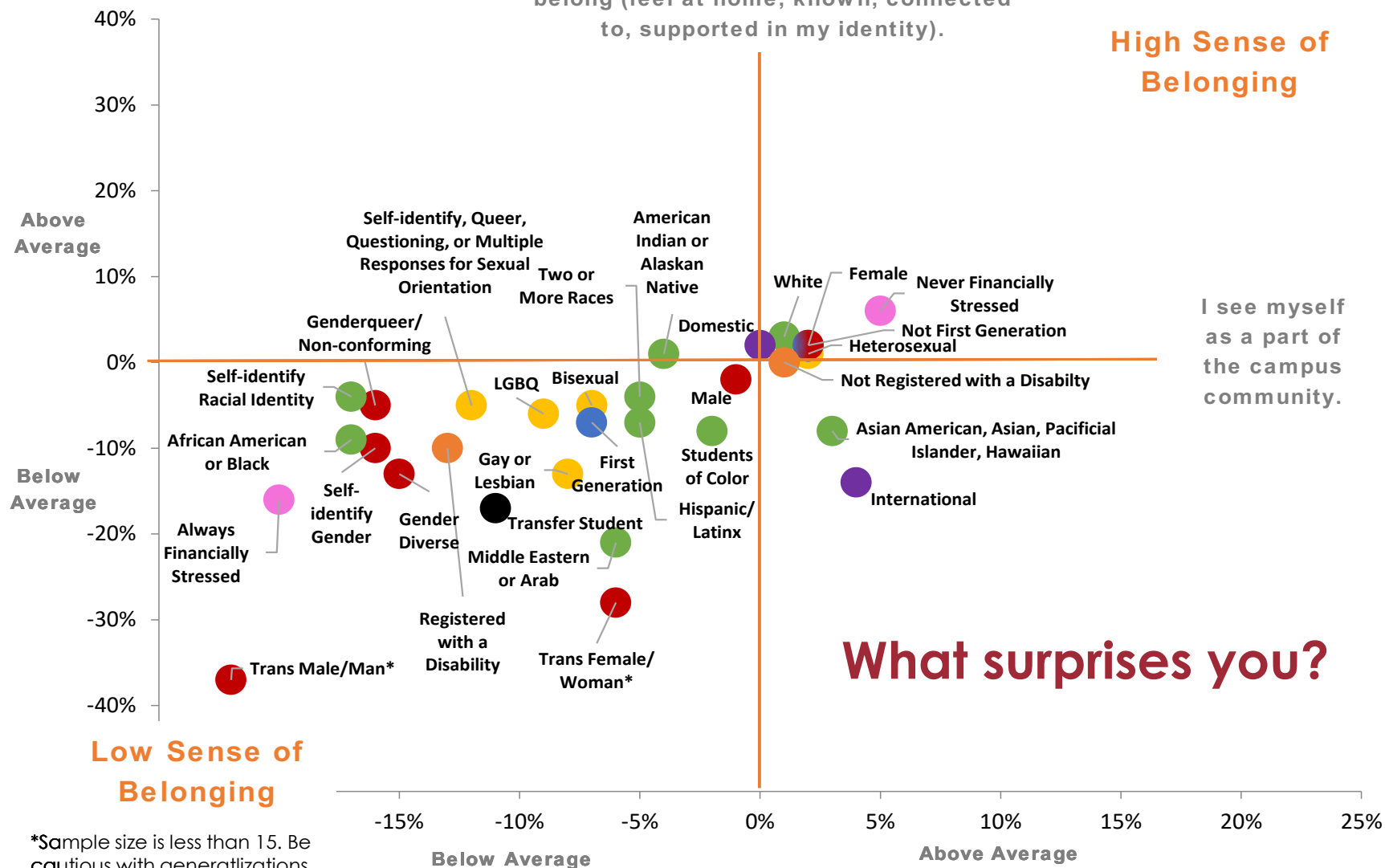


## All Students

I have a group, community, or social circle at UW-Madison where I feel I belong (feel at home, known, connected to, supported in my identity).

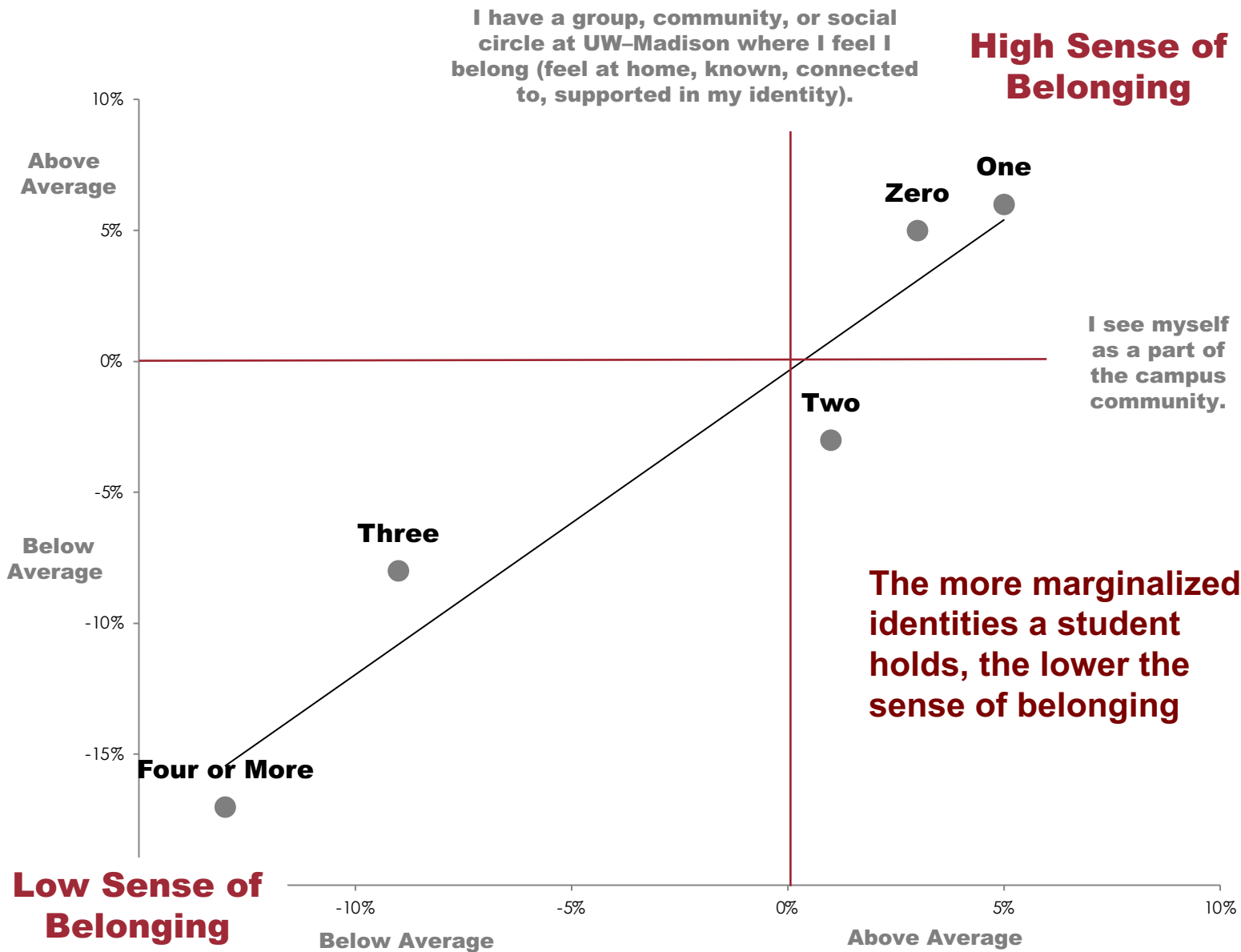
High Sense of Belonging

I see myself as a part of the campus community.



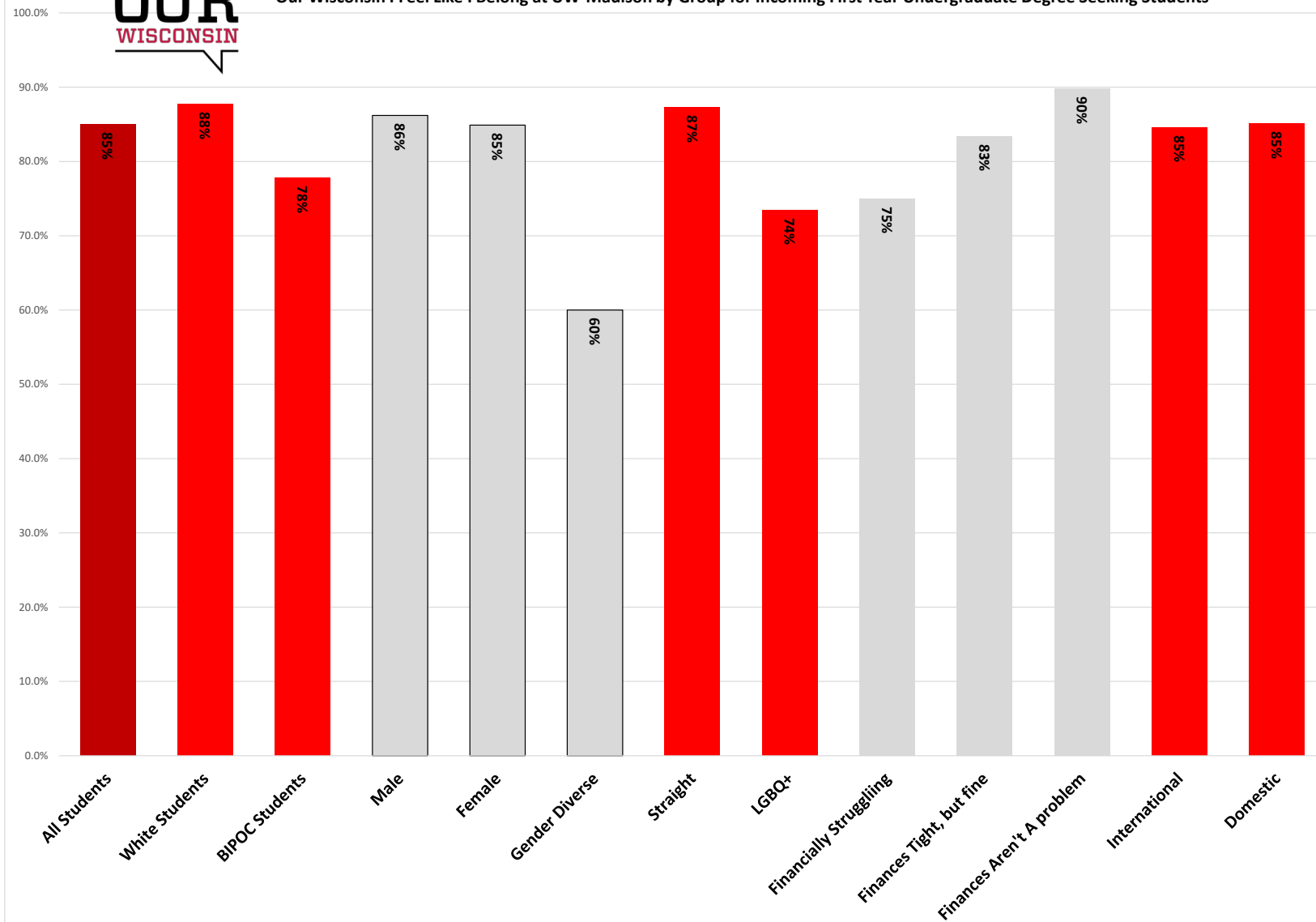


All Students





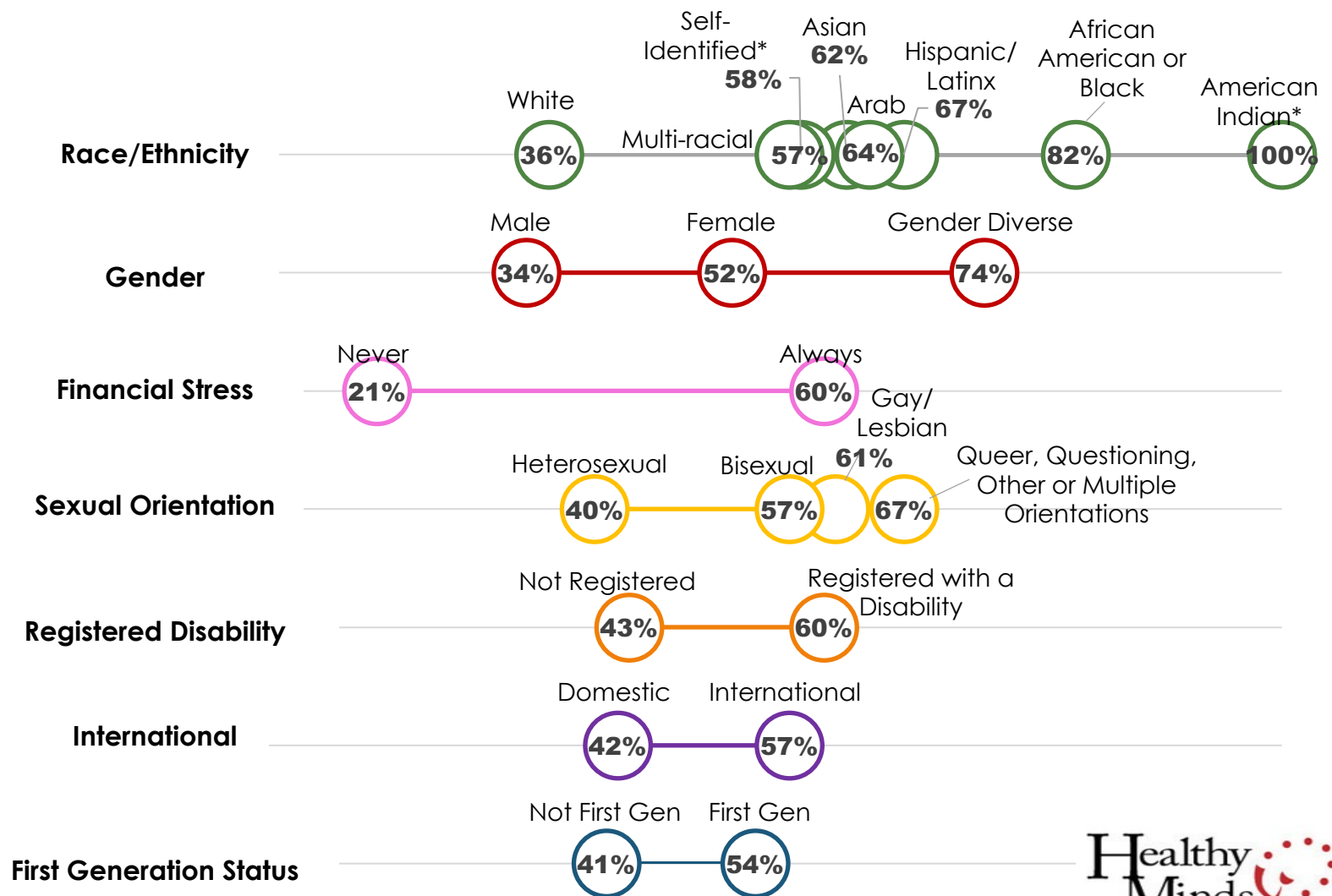
Our Wisconsin I Feel Like I Belong at UW-Madison by Group for Incoming First Year Undergraduate Degree Seeking Students







## American Indian or Alaskan Native, African American or Black, and gender diverse students experienced the highest rates of discrimination on campus





## Microaggressions impact sense of belonging

“Asked where I’m from originally by Chancellor and Dean of Students...  
been dismissed, written off, and told I don’t belong.”

“I have heard around campus that many say that the people of color are  
here because of a scholarship.”

“Being underestimated in the classroom; comments made in an attempt  
to relate but rooted in stereotypes; being called poor in a lighthearted arguments.”

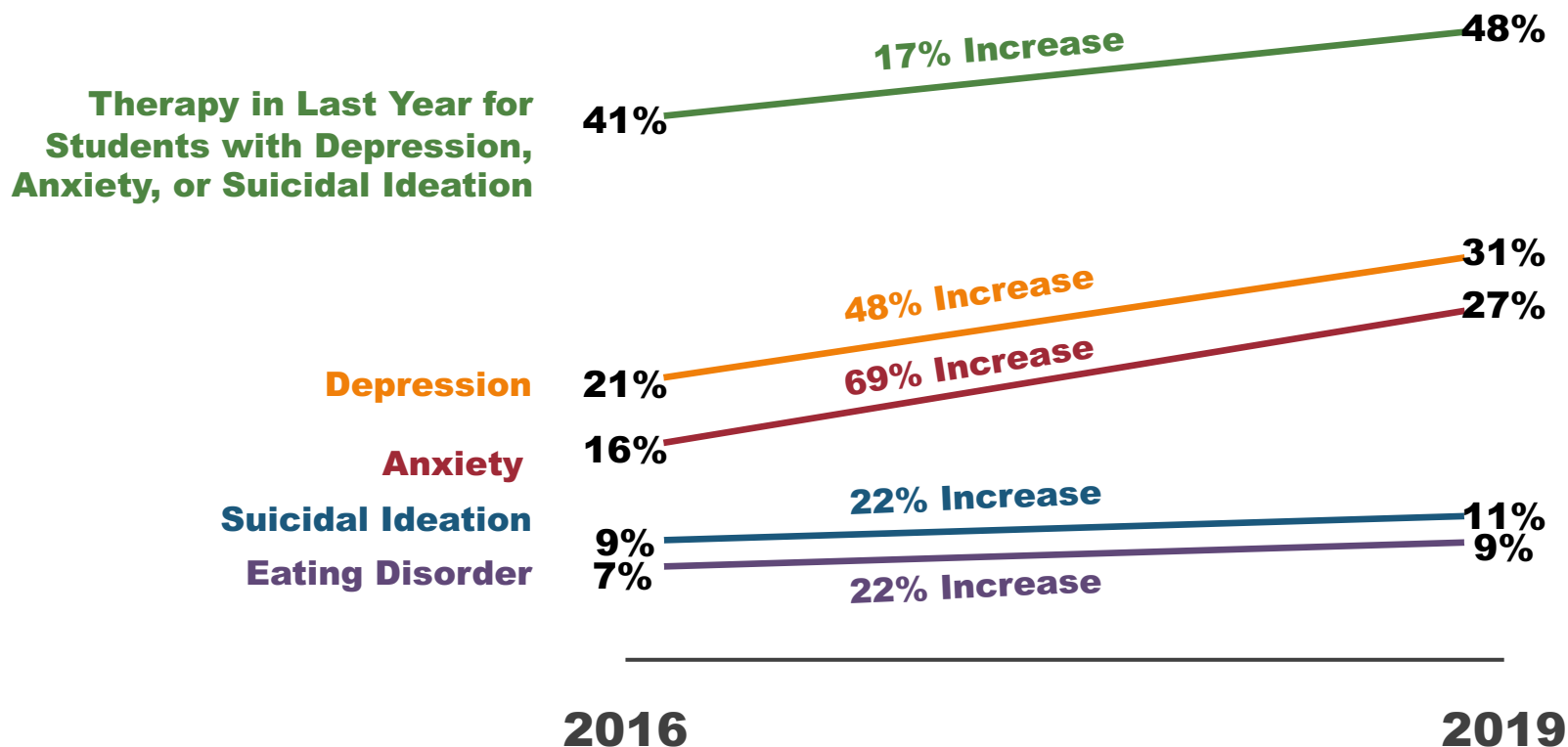
“I sometimes find in my classrooms that people often chose to ignore me or turn  
to a different person when given time to discuss certain topics. I have to go out  
of my way to talk to others, but even then I can sense some individuals do not feel  
comfortable talking to me. Although, I acknowledge I can be more proactive and  
go out of my way to talk to others instead of waiting for them to talk to me.”

“People/faculty at this university seem to think I am not capable of succeeding  
like my white peers. Never really have a sense of fitting in.”

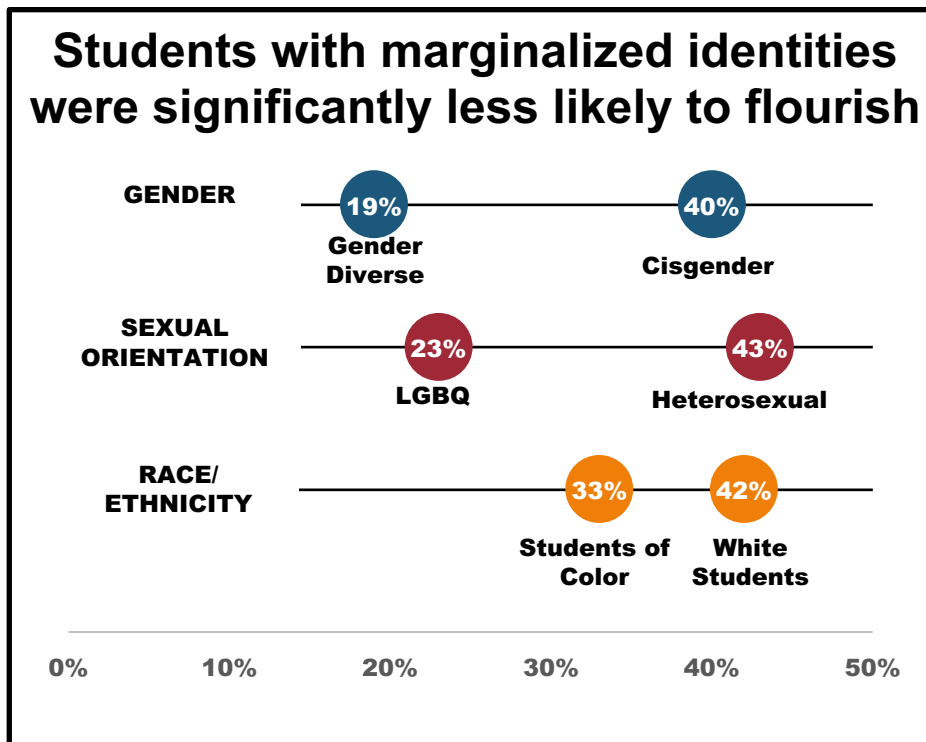
— *Color of Drinking*, 2018



## Depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and therapy significantly increased from 2016 to 2019



Disparities exist for students with marginalized identities by gender, sexual orientation, financial stress, and in some cases, race or ethnicity, international students, or first generation



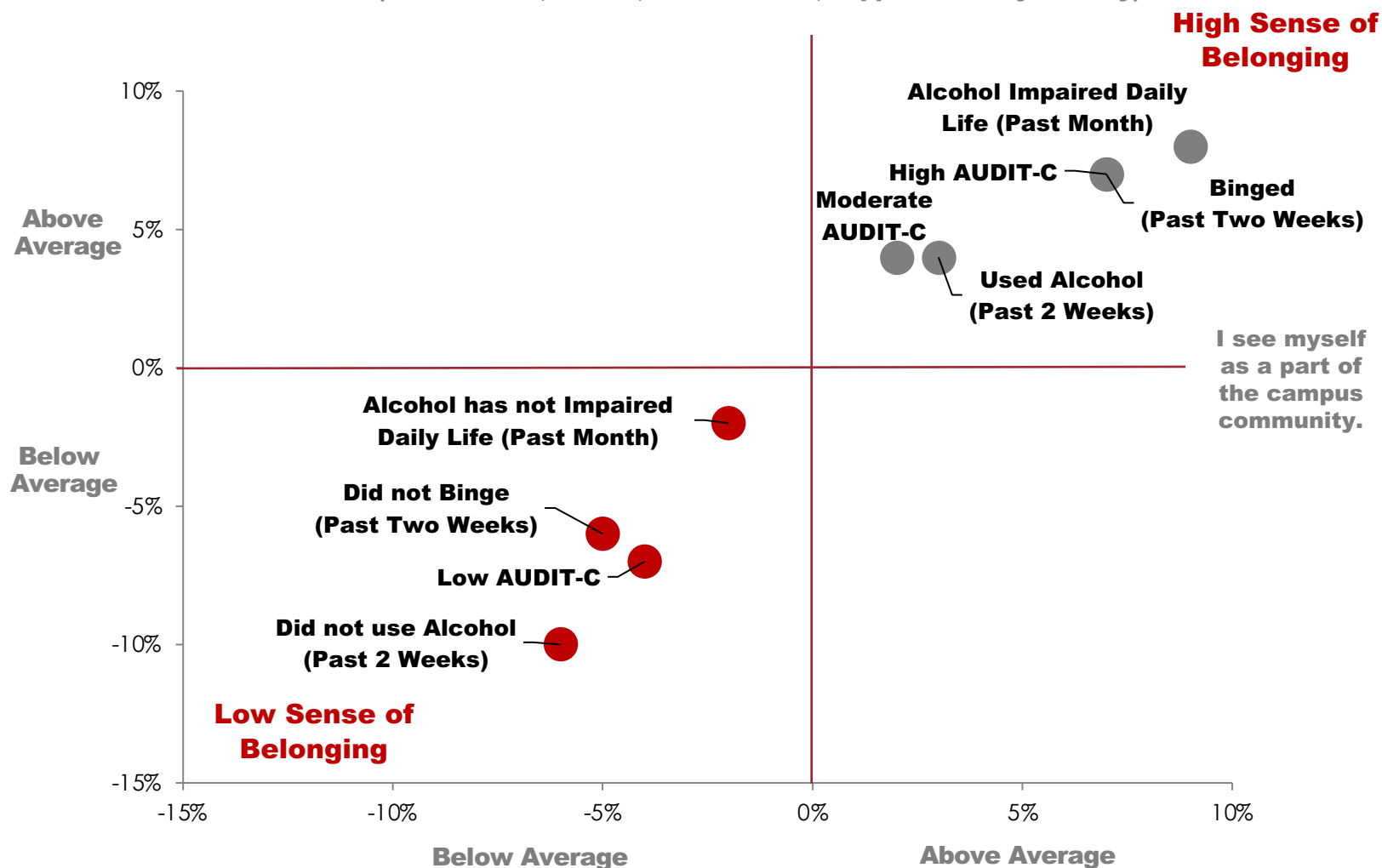
**Students who were significantly less likely to flourish identify as:**

- Gender diverse (19%)
- Individuals with more financial stress (21%)
- LGBTQ (23%)
- International students (29%)
- Students of Color (33%)
- Transfer students (36%)
- First generation students (36%)



## All Students

I have a group, community, or social circle at UW-Madison where I feel I belong  
(feel at home, known, connected to, supported in my identity).





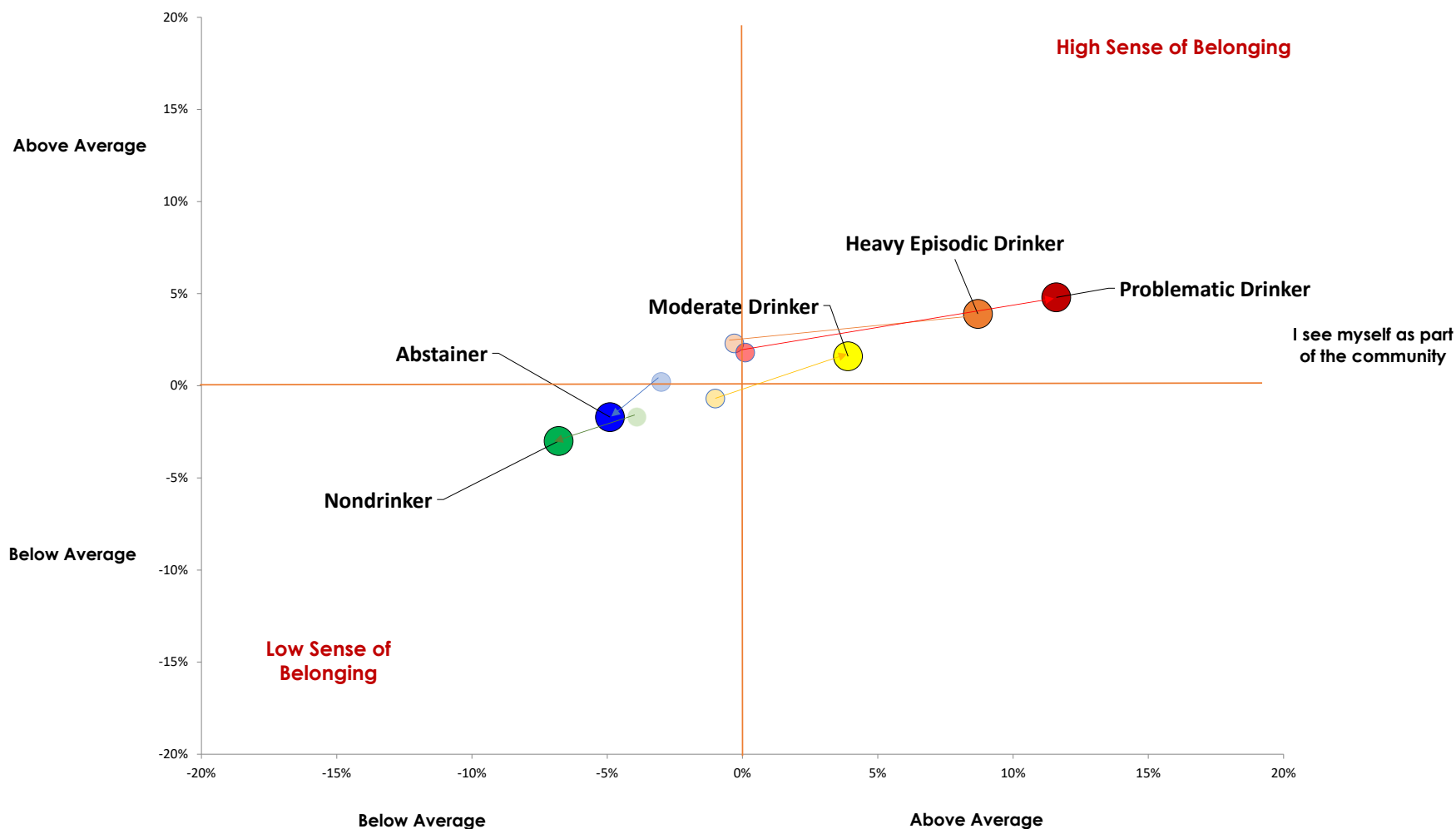
# UNIVERSITY HEALTH SERVICES

University of Wisconsin-Madison

All Incoming first year  
undergraduate degree seeking  
students

I have a group, community, or social circle at UW-Madison, where I  
felt like I belonged (felt at home, known, connected to, supported in  
my identity)

AlcoholEdu

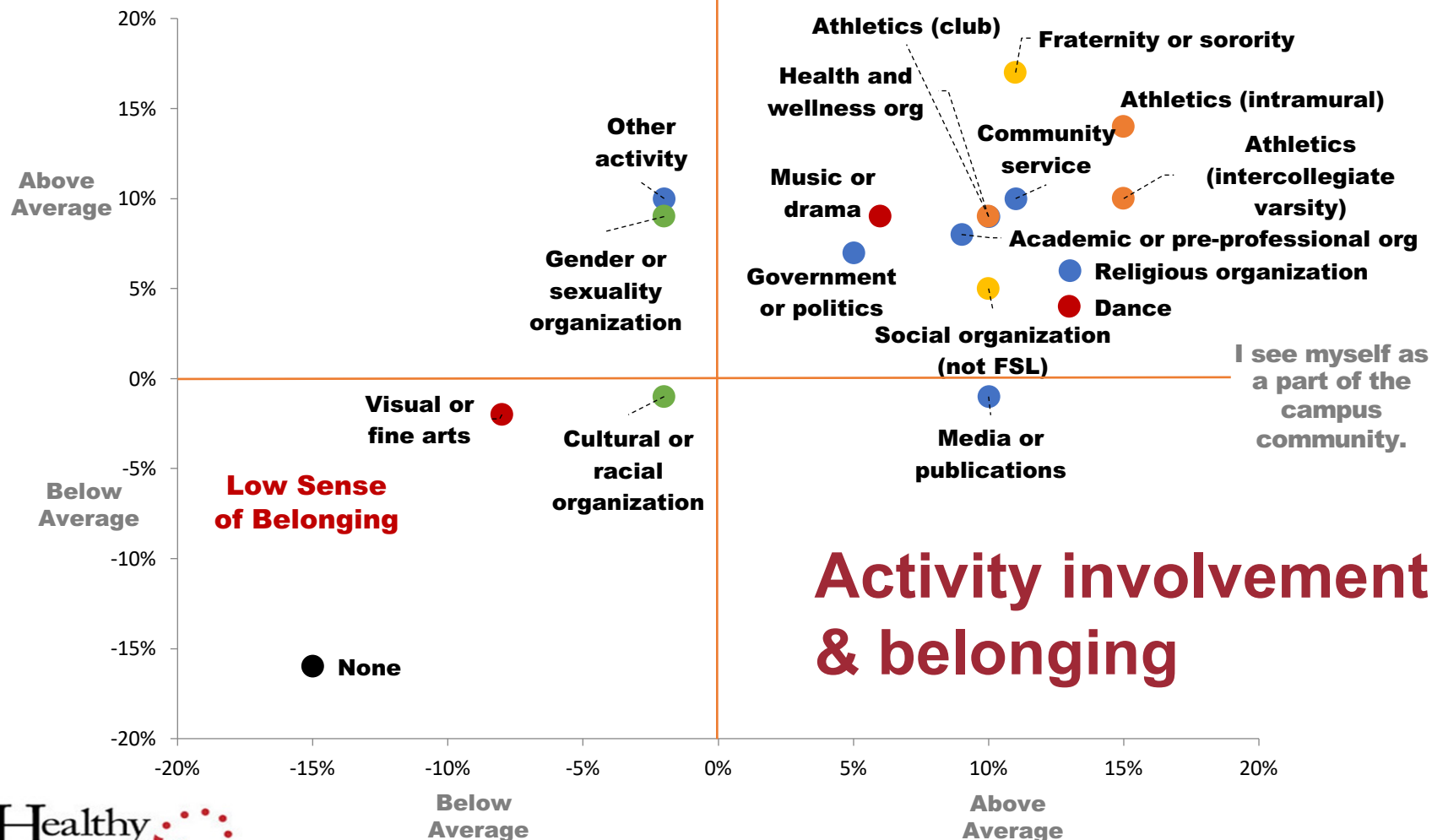




## All Students

I have a group, community, or social circle at UW-Madison where I feel I belong (feel at home, known, connected to, supported in my identity).

**High Sense of Belonging**





# Regardless of involvement, Black students have lower sense of belonging compared to other groups

- **In racial and cultural organizations:**
  - **62% of Black students** reported feeling like they belonged.
  - The next lowest was **69% for Latinx students**.
  - The average sense of belonging **among all students was 72%**
- **Overall, only 59% of Black students agreed they belong** compared to 74% of all students.
- Participation in more organizations does increase Black students' sense of belonging, but their sense of belonging is still far below campus average.
- **Few Black students reported participating in fraternity or sorority life or athletics**, the groups that report high senses of belongingx
- The organizations with the **highest sense of belonging for Black students were academic student organizations (65%)**, but this is still well below campus average.





## Incoming students' expectations for diversity, equity, and inclusion

“To find a place where I belong.”

“To feel like I belong and be proud of who I am without fearing racism or putting myself in danger.”

“To have a community that supports anyone's belief and ideals that creates a sense of belonging for everyone.”

“That all people are not ONLY WELCOMED but that they will feel welcomed and comfortable to express who they truly are.”



Our Wisconsin Survey, 2021



# Summary

## Belonging at UW–Madison

- Within a student's first semester, belonging starts to erode for marginalized student populations.
- Race/ethnicity has a greater weight in impacts of belonging but other marginalized identities impact students.
- Marginalized student groups who report lower rates of belonging have:
  - Higher rates of mental health
  - Higher rates of victimization
  - Higher rates of experiencing discrimination
  - Lower rates of alcohol use



# Roadmap

1. Belonging exercise
2. What is ‘sense of belonging?’
3. Belonging research
4. Belonging at UW–Madison
- 5. Why belonging matters as an equity and health issue**
6. Reflections and call to action



# Creating Change at UW–Madison



Source: Unsplash



# Frameworks for change

- Shape campus climate and create conditions for a sense of belonging in policy, systems, and environments.
- Institutional commitment and responsibility for creating an equitable sense of belonging
  - Address the symptoms and the disease
- Spheres of Influences
- Points of entry model



# Cultivating sense of belonging

- Expose students to role models from marginalized backgrounds
- Model inclusive behavior and attitudes
- Host inclusive events from the outset
- Facilitate the development of positive teacher-student relationships
- Facilitate the development of positive peer relationships
- Meet students' basic needs
- Give students opportunities to be heard
- Engage parents and families
- Embrace student led and student-centered decisions
- Demonstrate care and compassion
- Normalize challenges to belonging
- Consider social context constructed inside and outside the classroom
- Disaggregate, disaggregate, disaggregate data!



# Roadmap

1. Belonging exercise
2. What is ‘sense of belonging?’
3. Belonging research
4. Belonging at UW–Madison
5. Why belonging matters as an equity and health issue
- 6. Reflections and call to action**



# Reflections and call to action

- Where do you see yourself in the sense of belonging narrative at UW–Madison?
- What surprised you about the data/information presented in this session?
- What questions remain?
- What do you see as your part in addressing Belonging disparities?
- Name one person in your department/unit that you will share this information with.

## Additional Resources





# Contact

## Paris Wicker, MSE, NCC

Graduate Assistant  
UHS, Prevention and Campus Health Initiatives

PhD Student  
Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

Fellow, Collaborative Training Grant

[pwicker@wisc.edu](mailto:pwicker@wisc.edu)

## Reonda Washington, MPH, CHES

Substance Abuse Prevention Specialist  
UHS, Prevention and Campus Health Initiatives

Inclusion Education Assessment Specialist,  
Office of Inclusion Education

[reonda.washington@wisc.edu](mailto:reonda.washington@wisc.edu)



## References

- Beauchamp, J., Schwartz, E., & Piscreta, E. D. (2020). Seven Practices for Building Community and Student Belonging Virtually. *Ithaka S+R*. <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/seven-practices-for-building-community-and-student-belonging-virtually/>
- Barrett, B. J., Peirone, A., & Cheung, C. H. (2020). Help Seeking Experiences of Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence in Canada: The Role of Gender, Violence Severity, and Social Belonging. *Journal of Family Violence*, 35(1), 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-019-00086-8>
- Gopalan, M., & Brady, S. T. (2020). College Students' Sense of Belonging: A National Perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 49(2), 134–137. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19897622>
- Hagerty, B. M., Williams, R. A., & Oe, H. (2002). Childhood antecedents of adult sense of belonging. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 58(7), 793–801. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.2007>
- Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of College Transition and Perceptions of the Campus Racial Climate on Latino College Students' Sense of Belonging. *Sociology of Education*, 70(4), 324–345. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2673270>
- Allen, K. A., & Bowles, T. (2012). Belonging as a Guiding Principle in the Education of Adolescents. *Australian Journal of Educational & Developmental Psychology*, 12, 108–119. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1002251>
- Silver, B. L. (2020). *The cost of inclusion: How student conformity leads to inequality on college campuses*. University of Chicago Press
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge.
- The healthy minds study: 2018-2019 data report (n.d.) University of Wisconsin- Madison. [https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/HMS\\_WiscMadison\\_exec-sum-18-19.pdf](https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/HMS_WiscMadison_exec-sum-18-19.pdf)
- UW Belonging Spring 2019. [https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/peter7644/viz/Belongingness\\_Draft/Main](https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/peter7644/viz/Belongingness_Draft/Main)
- Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2007). A question of belonging: Race, social fit, and achievement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(1), 82–96. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.1.82>
- Wellbeing Collaborative (n.d.) Belonging dimension spotlight. Wake Forest University. [https://drive.google.com/file/d/139MmEYUeG\\_0iFJ\\_6OK5wXVRagtBABw9U/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/139MmEYUeG_0iFJ_6OK5wXVRagtBABw9U/view)