



## Symposium #1 - Transcript

### Belonging: Building and Sustaining Environments that Support High Expectations, Engagement, and Empowerment for All!

**October 25, 2023**

**1:00 – 2:30 pm**

**Virtual Event**

Genee Norbert: Hi everyone, and welcome to the first of a series of symposia as part of the Expect, Engage, Empower, Transition Initiative. I'm Genee Norbert, a state lead here in OSEP. We are happy you've joined us and have a full agenda to get to. But first, there are a few housekeeping items to share before we begin. This event will be recorded and posted to the Expect, Engage, Empower website following the event. While there is no live chat, audience members are welcome to submit questions by clicking on the Q&A button. You can access the live captioning by clicking the CC button. And finally, please submit any technical questions to [osep-eee@air.org](mailto:osep-eee@air.org). Again, that's OSEP, [osep-eee@air.org](mailto:osep-eee@air.org). Now let's turn our attention to today's event.

The Expect, Engage, Empower, Transition Initiative challenges the field to join OSERS to raise expectations, engage families earlier, and empower all who support transition services to measurably and significantly improve post-secondary outcomes for children and youth with disabilities and their families. In addition to the three E's, students must have a genuine sense of belonging in their school, secondary transition experience, and in their lives afterwards, which is what we will be speaking about today. Now I would like to introduce two individuals who have recognized the importance of successful secondary transitions, which led to the creation of this initiative. Valerie C. Williams is the Director of the Office of Special Education Programs, and Carol Dobak is

the Deputy Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration. So over to you OSEP Director Valerie C. Williams.

Valerie Williams: Thank you for your opening remarks and kicking us off today, Genee, and good afternoon or good morning, depending on where you are. I hope you are doing well. Before we get started with today's symposium, please allow me the opportunity to introduce myself. I'm Valerie Williams, Director at the Office of Special Education Programs in the US Department of Education. I am very excited to speak to you today at our first symposium for our Expect, Engage, and Empower: Successful Transitions for All Initiative. We kicked off this initiative on May 10th of this year, 2023 by hearing about the range of experiences of students, families, and practitioners who have engaged in the secondary transition process. Those stories were incredibly powerful and set the stage beautifully for our subsequent and ongoing activities, including today's symposium. Whether you joined us for the kickoff event or today is your first interaction with this initiative, I want to thank you for taking the time out of your busy day to join us for this incredibly important topic.

This initiative is a call to action to transform how we see, plan, and implement secondary transition practices to advance educational equity excellence, and post-school outcomes for the students we serve. Every family that has an infant child or youth identified with a disability needs to be exposed to high expectations from day one. They deserve a comprehensive, rigorous education with appropriate conditions for learning that ensures they have a successful pathway to their lives beyond high school. However, today we're going to examine an additional element to ensuring a successful pathway to life after high school. Our students, all students in fact, deserve and need a sense of belonging in their school, community, and post high school environments to truly achieve lifelong engagement and success. When students feel like they don't belong, their performance, engagement and sense of wellbeing can suffer. Creating genuine feelings of belonging for all is a critical factor in improving the educational experience for all students.

However, it is especially important for those who are most vulnerable to feeling excluded, such as students with disabilities. I've lived this firsthand as the parent of a child with down syndrome, and I know just how important it is for my son to belong in all facets of his life. By beginning the transition process early, we allow time for planning and accessing the support services needed in the future. We also have a greater opportunity to cultivate that critical sense of belonging for students of all abilities before they leave high school and enter the world as adults. This is not done by a single individual. Rather, it requires the

collaboration of many to achieve this success. If you joined us for the kickoff event, then you're familiar with our position on the importance of collaboration and partnership to ensure successful transition planning. I want to reiterate that collaboration is critical at all levels, federal, state, and district. At the federal level, secondary transition requires the collaboration between us and OSEP and with our colleagues in the Rehabilitation Services Administration or RSA. I'm now pleased to introduce Carol Dobak, Deputy Commissioner of RSA.

Carol Dobak:

Thank you Valerie, and thanks to each of you joining us today during this symposia. Successful collaboration results from positive relationships that are built on engagement in a variety of activities related to secondary transition, such as timely referrals to services under IDA and vocational rehabilitation program, participation in IEP meetings, back to school nights, information sessions, and other activities that bring together students and youth with disabilities, their families and teachers, vocational rehabilitation professionals and other service providers. And we here at the federal level at RSA are very excited to be continuing our ongoing collaboration with OSEP in this OSERS wide transition initiative, the three E's, expect, engage, and empower. At OSERS, we believe that this initiative, including its activities and symposia are rich investment in the futures of students and youth with disabilities, one that can bring about change at early ages, one that can raise expectations, expand engagement, and empower students, youth, and their families to maximize opportunities for success.

Today's symposia is focused on the role that a strong sense of belonging can play in improving secondary transition for students and youth with disabilities. And what we mean by belonging is that sense of connection that students and youth with disabilities feel to the activities they engage in their communities. And we know that a strong sense of belonging can unlock the power of diversity that these students and youth bring to these activities. And now I'm going to describe to you the three E's, expect, engage, and empower. And as I do, I would like you to think about how these three E's can strengthen a student in sense of belonging and help them thrive in their education, employment, and future lives.

What we mean by expect, expect requires that teachers, service providers, vocational rehabilitation professionals learn about the requirements of secondary transition under IDA and the vocational rehabilitation program, and that they also have a clear understanding of what high quality implementation of these services mean and that they begin the service provision as early as possible in a student... with a child with disabilities life, and continue this high quality service provision

throughout their schooling, so that families and students and youth with disabilities can engage. And what is required for these families and students to engage is that they acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to engage in the implementation of the services, including planning for strong transition services, including pre-employment transition services, and that this planning will lead to realistic yet high quality or high expectations for their students and youth with disabilities. And that ultimately teachers and service providers, vocation, rehabilitation professionals and others support these expectations that the families and students have developed for themselves with the results that in the end, families, students and youth with disabilities will feel empowered as they navigate through education, employment, independent living throughout the rest of their lives.

And I know that you also share our commitment to ensuring that these three E's of expect, empower, or engage and empower, become a reality for every student and youth with a disability and their families. And I now turn to Hunter Steinitz who will facilitate the rest of this symposia.

Hunter Steinitz:

Thank you so much, Ms. Williams and Ms. Dobak. I am so excited to be here with you all today as we talk about a very important and often unnoticed part of transition and that's belonging. Now. When we say belonging, what are we really talking about? What does it look like? Why is it hard to describe and why is it part of this transition conversation in the first place? Well, I hope that through our conversations today, we might come away with a better idea of how belonging fits into the bigger transition picture. And when I think about belonging, I think of being in a place where I don't have to explain or justify my presence where I can be myself, I can try new things, maybe make mistakes, maybe learn some things and all of it in an environment of support and growth. Looking back on my own transition process, I learned more and grew into myself when I felt like I could belong where I was and with those around me.

You see, I was born with a rare genetic skin disorder. It's why my skin is bright red. And along with that comes a rigorous routine of bathing and ointments to help me stay healthy. So when it came time to look at my post-secondary options, I didn't really think I could go to college because part of that routine requires a bathtub. And those are not particularly common on college campuses. But I was really fortunate to find a friend and a support in the Disability Services Offices at Westminister College in Pennsylvania where I'm from. And with their help, I was able to attend classes in the dorms alongside my peers. My adaptations weren't treated as big unreasonable asks. They were just accepted as coming with the territory of accepting me as a student. And so many students with

disabilities struggle because they feel like they shouldn't need help or that they shouldn't ask for help. They don't want to seem different because they want to belong with their peers who often don't seem to need any help, but everyone needs help with something.

And we really belong when we can let our hair down and stretch the growing parts of ourselves in a safe environment. And so with all that in mind, now let's turn to our content for today. First, we'll begin by hearing from an expert in belonging. Dr. Erik Carter is the Luther Sweet Endowed Chair in Disabilities. His research and writing focus on principal driven and research-based strategies for promoting full participation relationships and valued roles for children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, or IDD's. He serves as the Executive Director of the Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities, which aims to promote the thriving of people with disabilities and their families. He joined the Baylor faculty this year in 2023.

Dr. Carter will help us better understand what belonging is, and then later he'll discuss how it can be measured to ensure that everyone with a disability, regardless of type or context that they find themselves in, feels that sense of belonging. We'll then hear from two different panels. Our first panel will share with us their experience about what belonging can look and feel like in a school-based setting. And our second panel will help us understand what it can look and feel like in a college and workplace setting. We'll also share some technical assistance resources that can be used to support belonging in the secondary transition experience. And we'll have a short Q&A session. And now with all of that, I would like to turn it over to Dr. Carter. Erik, the stage is yours.

Erik Carter:

Well, thank you Hunter. It's so good to be with you all virtually among educators and providers and leaders and others who I know care so deeply about the thriving of youth with disabilities, this is the work that matters most. We're helping youth catch a vision of a flourishing future and then navigate that kind of windy way from here to there. And this is at the heart of our work to make impactful field of transition, one which equips middle and high school students with disabilities for a good life after high school, we might even say an abundant life. And so I think most of you would probably recognize this as among the primary purposes of special education, we're preparing our students for further education, for employment, for independent living. And in the field of transition, we often talk about pursuing positive post-school outcomes. And this is no doubt important work.

Too many young people with disabilities still miss out on opportunities to continue their learning in college and beyond to obtain a good job, to live independently, to enjoy all that their community might have to offer. But I suspect that real flourishing involves more than nearly attaining good post-school outcomes. When people talk about what really brings them life, what really matters most to them individually, these conversations tend to focus on having enduring friendships and intimate relationships on having opportunities to make a difference in the lives of others, on feeling valued on finding purpose and meaning, on being able to steer your life in ways and directions that you choose, on being part of a caring community and on this experience of belonging. And I suspect what we really want is for youth with disabilities to experience good outcomes and flourishing lives. They're both so closely connected to one another, aren't they? A meaningful job and lifelong learning opportunities and involvement in the community provide young people with opportunities to develop friendships and to live out their vocation, to contribute in valued roles and to experience that joy of belonging.

So it's this particular area of belonging that we're focusing on today as part of this three E initiative. And I think a successful transition involves finding a purposeful place in the world where young people experience that assurance of belonging. So how can we help youth with disabilities find a place of belonging in their schools and their workplaces and in their communities? Not merely to be present in each of these places, but to really have a presence in each of these places. And how do we help our schools and workplaces and communities adopt the sort of practices and policies and postures that we know lead to belonging for young people of all abilities and backgrounds?

What role would we have in empowering that kind of change? So of course, this all begs the question, how do we know whether our students are experiencing belonging in the communities that really matter most to them? What would tell us that belonging really abounds? Well, in my brief time with you, I want to share a practical framework for thinking about belonging that emerges from our research with transition age, youth with disabilities, a sort of reflection guide of what it might look... what we might look for, and what we might advocate for in our work. So what does it mean to belong? To belong is to be present, to be invited, to be welcomed and known, to be supported and accepted, to be heard, to be befriended, to be needed, and to be loved. These 10 dimensions of belonging are what we hope every youth experiences in their school, in their college, in their workplace, in their community.

And yet we know that each can be especially elusive for the youth we serve and support. Now later in the symposium, you're going to hear from students and educators about the power of belonging and what leads towards them. But for now, I'll briefly highlight what each of these 10 looks like and why they matter. And we'll begin with presence, which is the foundation for belonging. And yet, in so many communities, the primary barrier to belonging for youth with disabilities is their absence from the classrooms, from the clubs and cafeterias and our schools, from colleges, from community centers, from our workplaces, and even our worship spaces, it's really hard for anyone to feel like part of a community from the outside looking in or from the edges looking in. And the data consistently bear this out. In too many areas, absence is more common than presence.

Students without disabilities spend all of their school day attending a wide range of interesting academic and elective and related arts classes, but yet less than half of students with intellectual disability, for example, spend a sizable percentage of their school day learning alongside these peers. They aren't present in those classrooms. More than half of all Americans continue on to post-secondary education in those first few years after high school. That's true for just one quarter of young adults with intellectual disability who have a presence on those college campuses. And nearly 75% of working age Americans are contributing their time and talents and businesses throughout their communities. That's true for less than one in five adults with intellectual disability who are present in those workplaces. In so many of these areas, there's a gap between youth with and without disabilities. And we have to ask that question, are there gaps for the students that we serve?

And if there are, what stands in the way of presence in our schools and workplaces and communities? What are the barriers we have to break down of architecture and attitude, of awareness, of expectation, of invitation even of our values? Presence is the baseline for belonging. It's our starting point, but we really have to press deeper than mere presence. Well, the antidote to absence is always invitation. It's so encouraging to know that other people want to be in your midst, that your company is desired and even needed. And in so many schools and workplaces and community settings, if we're going to increase presence that requires extending new invitations. There's something about being pursued and sought out that sends this powerful message to youth with disabilities that we want you here. We need your presence. It just wouldn't be the same without you. And this might involve being asked by peers to join you for lunch, to collaborate on a project, to get together after school or work to attend a birthday party or a Super Bowl party.

Or what are we doing as educators to prime these sorts of invitations? And what might stand in the way of those opportunities? Or how might we as educators ensure that we are inviting youth with disabilities to join in extracurricular clubs, to attend inclusive field trips, to contribute on service projects, to take part in other school activities. When belonging becomes an ordinary everyday occurrence, that's what we want to see happen from our peers, from teachers and from others in our schools. And what role might we have in then priming employers and community programs and other groups to pursue the presence and contributions of youth with disabilities? What awareness and guidance and encouragement might they need? The third belonging involves being welcomed. It's the way people are greeted and treated that says something about your place in the community. We want our youth to be welcomed with warmth and friendliness with this delight.

When people find pleasure in your presence, that's when you feel welcomed. Now, how do we ensure that youth are welcomed well in their schools and at their jobs and elsewhere in their community? It's actually ordinary gestures that lead people to feel welcomed, when others greet them and strike up a conversation and sit with them at lunch and ask about their day and join them in shared activities and remember their birthday and notice when they're not there and ask about why. It's about being acknowledged. But it's much more than that.

There's ordinary gestures remind people that they're wanted, but they're gestures that some members of our schools and communities need guidance or reminders on how to do. If you're an employer or a community that doesn't have a history of including youth with disabilities, you may not know how to move forward in these areas. And they might benefit from receiving guidance on how to engage individuals who might communicate differently or require ongoing assistance or behave in unfamiliar ways or guidance on how to talk about disability in relevant ways or to design their programs and spaces with a much broader view of community in mind.

Those are the kinds of efforts that makes your community members and employers are comfortable and confident in their interactions before someone arrives to their communities for the first time. And I think this is a place for schools and organizations like yours that can be instrumental in these efforts to provide training to workplaces and community programs on how to widen their welcome. Well, fourth, belonging is personal, and it's always involves being known, to be seen as a unique individual, to be appreciated for all of who you are, kind of where everybody knows your name as the old sitcom theme song says. And I



think about having relationships with people who really understand you and affirm you is core to belonging. But there's another aspect of being known that I want to emphasize, and it's how youth with disabilities are known, not solely by their special education labels, but by their individual names, not solely by their struggles or challenges, but by their strengths and their gifts. Too often we define disability only in terms of deficits. Our culture thinks only about limitations or challenges or struggles that someone experiences. In fact, if you read most IEPs or transition plans, you might come away with that far too narrow impression, but that's an incomplete way of knowing the youth we serve, and it flattens their portrait. There's a danger in making that be a single story we tell about our students, because youth of disabilities also are people with incredible gifts, and talents, and character, and passion, and skills that enrich and enliven their community. They possess strengths that make them absolutely indispensable, and that kind of strengths-based stance should always be our posture in the area of transition. We have to be steeped in those gifts, and talents, and enviable qualities, and our students do too, so they can be shared with others in the community who still struggle to recognize the contributions these youth are ready to make.

Fifth, being included is certainly not the same as being accepted. We're still a long way from that assurance of acceptance in our culture. How can we help our schools, and workplaces, and communities widen their welcome in ways that embrace youth with disabilities without condition, and wholeheartedly? While shifting attitudes towards others isn't easy, we know it's long haul work, but we actually know as a field quite a bit about changing attitudes. We know there's a place for sharing accurate information and providing education. We know we can host activities for students, and staff, and others, that raise awareness and increase that kind of understanding. We know there's power in what we model to others and in the stories that we tell. When we hold high expectations and support shared activities, we know that attitudes start to change.

But it's ultimately the investments that we make in fostering friendships and promoting inclusive activities that has the most substantial impact on the views that communities hold. It turns out that personal contact is the key to promoting acceptance, not from merely learning about someone, but from coming to know someone personally. That's when those preconceived ideas about someone else get overturned.

Six, support is critical to belonging. Like anyone else, youth with disabilities are going to need support to participate fully in the life of their school and community. Some of those supports are going to be pretty ordinary, encouragement to participate, connections to others,

invitations to serve, financial assistance, transportation, mentorship. Other students are going to need much more individualized and intensive support. But when we're committed to belonging, we see that investment in support as essential, it's not optional. Best practices remind us that the best supports are always individualized and contextualized.

Are we using person-centered planning approaches to decide what supports each student will need? Are we building the capacity of staff to support a diversity of individuals well in their classes, in their businesses, in their programs? Are we engaging peers and coworkers as natural supports, and revisiting those supports regularly to make sure they're continuing to work well for each of our students?

Seventh is to be heard. Best practices emphasize the necessity of ensuring that youth with disabilities have a say in all aspects of their lives. There's something about being part of a community that yearns to hear your voice that leads to belonging. It's about having a seat at the table and being listened to, about being acknowledged or asked what you think, about having an influence, all of which communicate that your involvement and your insights matter.

Our students will benefit from having opportunities to learn and practice the skills that they need to share their preferences and perspectives. The better that they know themselves, their strengths, and their needs, and interests, and goals, the better they are positioned to advocate for themselves and to advocate for others. This is where instruction in these areas of self-determination, and self-advocacy, and leadership can really help students share their thoughts more effectively. At the same time, we've got to provide our community's guidance and encouragement to seek out the perspectives of youth with disabilities, to value their voices, and to pursue their perspectives.

Eighth, relationships are at the heart of belonging. Friendships contribute so heavily to our wellbeing, they give us meaning in our lives, they make us who we are, they help us navigate challenges, they provide support, they bring us joy. We thrive most in community with others, and this is no less true for youth and young adults with disabilities. We have to be intentional about fostering relationships or they just remain far too elusive for youth, particularly youth with developmental disabilities. Relationships have to be at the center of anything that we call inclusive, whether that's a transition experience or a community experience. We can't call it inclusive education if there are no peer relationships, and we can't call it integrated employment if few of her coworkers know her

name. It's certainly not community living if there's no community that embraces youth.

Relationships matter, and here too, we know something about fostering relationships. We know that friendships tend to come about when people are part of shared activities, built around common interests with sufficient support and repeated over time. Youth with disabilities should also have valued roles in those activities, and enough support to participate fully and meaningfully. When they do, it turns out that they find deep and lasting friendships with others. But so often what we do stands in the way of those kinds of friendships. I think this has clear implications for how we think about programming related to youth with disabilities. If our main approaches are largely separated or segregated, then the opportunity to be chosen as a friend becomes limited. Then the opportunities for others in a community to encounter the friendship and enviable qualities of youth with disabilities that we just talked about become unduly limited.

Ninth, we know we belong when we're needed, and we feel needed when others see us as bringing gifts and talents that benefit the entire community that are essential to its thriving. This is serviced by youth with disabilities, and leadership by youth with disabilities, and ministry by youth with disabilities. I could go on, you get the preposition change there not, not to, but by youth with disabilities. It reflects this recognition that they are indispensable members of the community. We want every youth in our midst to know they have measurable worth, that they're deeply valued, and we want to help our schools and workplaces and communities recognize the contributions that youth with disabilities have to make.

When youth assume valued roles in their school and community, the way they are viewed by others starts to change. It comes through volunteering, from taking on leadership responsibilities, from having a paid job, to helping others in need, to being part of high status activities, to assisting on important projects, to having a role on a team. All of these things communicate that you are valued and you're needed, and when you are needed and you're not there, you're missed. When you're missed, that's when you know for certain that you belong.

Finally, out of all of these 10 dimensions of belonging, there's love. When people talk about the communities that matter most to them, they talk about the love they encounter there. We don't talk a lot about love in our work, but it matters immensely. It drives what we do as educators and providers, as leaders and parents. It's what motivates us to invite, and

welcome, and support, and accept, and befriend, and need others in our midst. Where love abounds, that's where belonging is much more likely to be experienced. That's the portrait of belonging for youth with disabilities, and it's one that ought to push us towards deeper reflection and greater response.

As we think about our schools, and workplaces, and communities, are youth with disabilities present in all aspects of the life of their community? Is that presence actively pursued and invited? Are they experiencing a warm welcome whenever they arrive? Are they well-known and known well? Are they accepted without condition or caveat and provided the support they need to participate in all that we offer in our community? Are they given a voice and a seat at the table? Are they developing and deepening friendships with others? Are they seen as needed and indispensable to the thriving of our communities? Are they loved deeply and unconditionally?

You see, most of us entered this field because we care deeply about the flourishing of youth with disabilities. We want our students to have good outcomes, but even more than that, we want them to experience good lives. We want every youth to experience a place of belonging in their school, in their workplace, and in their community. The road that leads there certainly begins long before graduation. My deep gratitude goes to each of you who are creating flourishing futures for the diversity of students that you serve and support. This really is the work that matters most, and so I'm just grateful to know all of you are allies in that effort. Let me turn it back to you, Hunter, to continue on with the symposium. Thank you.

Hunter Steinitz: Wow, Eric, thank you. I really like your description of belonging. It's incredibly powerful. Your words really resonate with me and I hope that it will with our audience too. So thank you for setting the stage for the rest of our guests today. I'm excited now, to move to our first panel that will speak to us about why belonging matters in a school setting, and their experience in their school.

Please join me in giving a warm welcome to our panelists, Dawn De Lorenzo, she'll be the moderator. She is the special education teacher at Union Township School District in Hampton, New Jersey. She's joined by one of her students, Devin, their guardian, Steven, Devin's paraprofessional, Lisa, and Health and PE teacher, Rob, and a few friends of Devin's, Caiden, Ty, and Gianni.

Dawn De Lorenzo: Today we're talking about feelings of belonging and ways that we can increase expectations, engagement, and empowerment for better post-secondary outcomes of students and their families. I'd like to welcome Devin and his dad, Steven McKenney. Let's begin by hearing a little bit about how you feel about this school year and how it's going. Devin, can you tell us also what grade you're in? I know all of these things, but the audience doesn't.

Devin: So I'm in eighth grade. I think this school year's going pretty well in terms of all my social life and stuff. My friends are as great as they always are. We always enjoy talking during lunch, or playing kickball, or something during recess, stuff like that. This year so far as going great, honestly.

Dawn De Lorenzo: Awesome. Devin, I know that we've talked about this before and you don't have to pick a career, but what do you want for yourself when you get out of school?

Devin: I want to be able to do a job where me being physically impaired doesn't change anything, where I'm not treated any differently than anyone else that's working just because I'm in a wheelchair.

Dawn De Lorenzo: That's awesome. I know you mentioned liking school. We know that you enjoy coming here, we're happy about that. Today we're also joined by your friends, Caiden, Ty and Gianni. Hi, boys.

Caiden: Hi.

Dawn De Lorenzo: Caiden, I'm going to start with you. You came to the middle school and became a good friend of Devin's. What is it like being in school with Devin? What's your experience like?

Caiden: It is fun to be with him. I find him funny. It's nice to sit with him. But it's also hard because there's other people making fun of him because of his disabilities, and it's hard to do other activities with him because of his disability.

Dawn De Lorenzo: Interesting. I've always seen you be a good friend to Devin and include Devin in pretty much every activity possible, whether that's during gym or recess time. What about in the classroom also, like group work? Do you find anything challenging? Sometimes Devin gets certain accommodations or modifications. How does group work look? What does that look like in class?

Caiden: With group work, it's not really anything different or special. He may get a bit of help, but it's one of the easier things to do with him, and it's one of the times that we can kind of socialize. But since we're in school, we can't talk that much doing work, but we can still chat there.

Dawn De Lorenzo: That's awesome. Yeah, we do try to keep you on track. I know Ms. Schoberl is a big help with that. Mr. McKenney, so glad that you're here joining us with Devin today.

Steven McKenney: Thank you.

Dawn De Lorenzo: You're welcome. What are your expectations and your hopes for Devin for the remainder of his eighth grade year, and then moving into high school?

Steven McKenney: Physically, we are hoping that he can work to get back to where he was three years ago. He had progressed a lot, and three years ago he wasn't using a wheelchair, he was getting around with one crutch. He just underwent some serious surgery to help get to that point again, so that's what our goal is. A year out from now, I'm hoping that he's not in the same position he is now.

Dawn De Lorenzo: How about academically and socially, and as far as long-term hopes and dreams for Devin?

Steven McKenney: Academically, we're really very happy with the way he performs in school. Socially, he just tells us all the time about all the fun he has and all his friends and what he's able to do. I'm pretty impressed with what he says he can do, like out in the ball field and playing soccer and stuff like that. I hope he can feel like he is just part of the group.

Dawn De Lorenzo: Absolutely. Devin, from the first time I met you, I just adored you, and one of the things that I love about you is how outgoing you are. You are a student that we never had to push to become involved, because you just naturally want to be involved in everything. You're involved in a ton of clubs, and I know that you connected with Mr. Frenzy pretty quickly when you started here in fifth grade. I know there was a love of basketball between the two of you.

Devin: Yes.

Dawn De Lorenzo: Mr. Frinzi made you the captain of the basketball team. Mr. Frinzi, I know that Devin holds a soft space in your heart. If you could just speak to the

things that you do to make Devin feel included, and the intentional and nurturing acts that you take to foster his belonging.

Mr. Frinzi: Absolutely. First and most, Devin is an inspiration to myself, to his peers, and to the whole community at the school. He comes to class every day with the biggest smile in his face. We connected day one. Unfortunately, during COVID, we were having our Zooms. He was a very first student that I met in fifth grade. He was always the first one on my Zooms, and for something outside the classroom. I took notes every day, he wore a different basketball jersey. I'm like, "Oo, I like this kid." So we just got a connection right there with a basketball.

He's my go-to guy in health class. He always volunteers. He volunteer to read. For gym class, I think it's one of his favorite classes. He just lights up the room when he walks into the gym.

Dawn De Lorenzo: That's awesome. Mr. Frinzi, you would, of all the classes, I would imagine, because Devin's disability falls under the physical domain, you would have to really plan intentionally. Can you just speak to that?

Mr. Frinzi: Yeah. I make my lessons that can fit any single student. I'll go one step further. Even with my field day, I create every single station that every student can participate in. It does take time, I do a lot of research as well for that, but he's a natural in my class. I don't see any difference between Devin and anybody else. The only difference I do see, I see the love and passion for my class, and that's my high priority for Devin.

Dawn De Lorenzo: That's awesome. I feel the same way. Ms. Schoberl, I want to bring you in at this time to talk about the fact that a lot of the things that we plan for Devin to take very intentional love and forethought. You've been with Devin from the start, you are such an asset to our school. Paraprofessionals in the classroom, and one-on-ones especially, is a big topic right now in special education. How do you juggle being there for Devin and providing support for him while also melting into the background so that he can have those social situations?

Lisa Schoberl: I think my goal as a paraprofessional has always been to foster independence. I think that's huge. I am always saying, "Dev, you can do this. Let's try this." He also advocates for himself, and especially a lot this eighth grade year. So he'll be like, "I can do Mrs. Schoberl," and so I kind of go off to the side.

I also try to initiate his peers to help support him, because I think me being in the background, if he needs me, he knows I'm there. He'll give

me a signal, a very subtle signal, and I'll just come over. But once I get him in a class, I kind of go and walk around the class and help other students as well. Devin needs more physical help at times to go places than academic. He's extremely smart, well organized, has everything in place. It's more that I'm there physically to help him.

But my goal for him, because I adore him, and I am going to be sad when he leaves me in eighth grade.

Dawn De Lorenzo: I know.

Lisa Schoberl: I know, right? Is that he'd be independent enough to do the things that he wants to do and get his goals to make him the happy person he is.

Dawn De Lorenzo: One thing that I remember you and I talking about often in math in previous years was the assistive technology. That's probably one of the most challenging classes because of the fine motor issues. Was math, using the assistive technology tools, whether it was CAMI or Equatio. One of the things that you and I talked about earlier this year was that there was coordination between us and the high school because they're using something different. It's like you and I, I may have a preference for a certain platform, but ultimately I remember having conversations where Devin's 10 feet away and finally it's like, "Dev, what do you think? Do you like using CAMI or do you like using Equatio? What works for you?"

What was the coordination with the high school? What did we find out there? Is he using that now?

Lisa Schoberl: We met with a technology advocate to help with where we go further, with that in mind. We have an iPad that he can use that we put a new adaptations on. Not always easy for him to do the equations on that, sometimes it makes it a little more difficult. They are going to put that onto his Chromebook that he will have next year. We also have him writing notes, as well as I'm writing notes. We've enlarged papers, so he has more space. He is wanting to write a lot of things himself, which, math is that we need him to be able to do. What I've been doing is making the papers much larger, giving him more space to do that.

His writing has improved since the beginning of this year, greatly, which I think has made him feel... The whole point is I want him to feel like he's doing what everybody else is doing. I don't want him to be singled out and being different in that regard. He doesn't have to be, because he's more than capable of doing it. So if I give him a little more enlarged



paper, he's writing like everybody else, and the high school, we've kind of met with them to do the same things at this point.

Dawn De Lorenzo: Yeah, I know you and I and all the teachers have always had the same goals. Prepare Devin to be ready for what he'll face and experience in high school.

Lisa Schoberl: Absolutely.

Dawn De Lorenzo: Thank you, Mrs. Schorl. I want to bring his friends back in, Caiden, Ty and Gianni. Ty and Gianni, you guys have been around since kindergarten with Devin, kindergarten through eighth grade, so you've been there for this journey from the very start. I'm very curious to hear what you guys admire most about Devin.

Caiden: I admire Devin because he is always there for everybody. Even if they don't treat him the same, he's always kind to them. He's always supporting the sports teams, and always wants to be part of them. He never lets his disability stop him from doing what everybody wants him to do.

Dawn De Lorenzo: Awesome. Gianni?

Gianni: I admire him because he always wants to play kickball and stuff outside. It's hard for him to get to the bases and stuff, but he does really well with it. Like Ty, he wants to support the baseball or the basketball team and stuff.

Dawn De Lorenzo: Yeah, absolutely. It's been a pleasure being out there and seeing you guys all playing during recess. Devin, do you feel that the belonging that you feel now here at UTMS will carry over to your adulthood? How do you think that will impact what you do as you get older? Hopefully we've set you up for success.

Devin: Yeah, I hope it does carry over. I like having the feeling like where I'm not any different than anyone else, that I'm able to do things that everyone else is able to do. I really do hope that that continues as I get older because it just feels good to just feel like I'm not really any different than anybody, and I'm just trying to do my best to be normal. I know that's not a great word to say with this, but-

Dawn De Lorenzo: We understand.

Devin: But I very much try my best to fit in, to be more normal, to be to just try to be everyone else as much as I can, while sometimes it is hard.

Dawn De Lorenzo: Absolutely. Sometimes the adults in our lives can have limitations or get wrapped up in what we're supposed to be doing for you, that we lose sight of your dreams and the systems may not necessarily support those dreams. I definitely feel that we've been there for you, and I know you've shared that, I know your family has shared that. But we've grown as teachers having you in the building too. I personally have felt that it's more important to turn to the individual who's right there and say, "Is this working for you?" We've had conversations before, it's like you're 10 feet away and we're having a conversation about a computer program, and it's like, "Why don't we ask Devin if it's working?"

The last thing I'd like to know, maybe from Mr. Frenzy and Ms. Schorl, from both of you, do you feel that your expectations have changed? When you reflect upon Devin's time here, has that changed-

When you reflect upon Devin's time here, has that changed you and your thoughts and the way that you teach or perceive students with disabilities?

Lisa Schoberl: I would say that I think it has, yes. I find it... And I've been a paraprofessional for a long time, so I've had many different children with different disabilities. I find every time I'm with a new student, I learn something so much from them and how I can help them better. For Devin, he wants to be like everybody else, he wants that independence, he wants to advocate for himself. So I find myself setting back, not trying to say, "Hey, how about this?" I'm learning to look at him and say, "What do you think? What do you want? What's going to be the best thing for you that's going to make you successful and feel good in a classroom setting with your friends when I'm outside, when I'm in PE with Mr. Frenzy," things that will make him feel good about himself and feel that he's been successful. So I do. I have learned to go to him first.

Dawn De Lorenzo: I just want to end by saying that I really believe that high expectations and engagement and empowerment for students with disabilities starts with the culture and climate of your school district. And I would be remiss if I left out the fact that we have an amazing administrative team whose goal is for every student to walk into this building and love being here every day. And I really feel that's what moves things from being inclusive to true belonging for students who have special needs.

Hunter Steinitz: Thank you, panel. That was such a great reminder about just how important the sense of belonging is to the success of students in school-based settings. And it can help us support a positive and effective transition process. So now let's move to our second panel who will talk to us about the importance of belonging in a college and workplace setting. I'd like to introduce representatives from two states that will speak to the belonging experience in college and workplace settings. Please join me in welcoming Tonya Stellar from RSA, and she'll introduce the rest of the panel. Take it away, Tonya.

Tonya Stellar: Thank you, Hunter. During this next panel, we will be discussing inclusion and a sense of belonging in college and workplace settings as well as ways we can increase expectations, engagement and empowerment in those settings. I'm excited to introduce our panelists today, including Chris Carter, Wyoming, division of vocational rehabilitation, transition client and college student. He's a freshman at Central Wyoming College, majoring in criminal justice and interning as a security staff.

Callie Davis, program coordinator with Wyoming DVR and Chris's former DVR counselor. As well as Whitney Martinez, the disability coordinator and counselor with the Central Wyoming College who assisted Chris with securing his internship and accommodations. Welcome.

Callie Davis: Thank you.

Tonya Stellar: I'd like to start with Chris. We have a few questions for you, Chris, and we really appreciate you being here and sharing your journey and your experiences. Can you share your experience transitioning from secondary to post-secondary education and an internship?

Chris Carter: Well, I mean, at first I was a little bit worried on how I was going to bounce between the two things, but as time went on, it would be a lot easier than what I thought. But still has its struggles but the job was really good. I think it was a nice change in pace to ease me into what I was getting into with college. College is... in my opinion, it's really good.

Tonya Stellar: That's really good to hear. And I'm excited that you're enjoying yourself. As you said, there have been some challenges. What has perhaps been the most valuable, educational or environmental support, or accommodation that's helped you make that transition from high school to college or to your internship?

Chris Carter: I'd have to say having the support of knowing that I'm not alone throughout this whole thing when times get rough and knowing that I can get help when I start to struggle.

Tonya Stellar: Can you discuss a time when you felt a sense of belonging to Central Wyoming College? Perhaps an experience that stood out for you where you felt like you belonged either at school in your classes or in your internship?

Chris Carter: Well, a time when that happened is about a month ago. I was out with my parents helping them out with a few things and my mom asked me how college is going and I told her, "Hey, college is going great. I'm just chugging along." And my mom said that she was happy that I'm doing good and said she was proud. At that moment I kind of realized, "Hey, I belong here. I'm here for my future."

Callie Davis: Chris, would you like to talk about how you met Whitney and how all that happened?

Chris Carter: How I met Whitney was during the summer. Was it July? During July is... When it was my last DVR appointment?

Callie Davis: Mm-hmm.

Chris Carter: Yeah, my last DVR appointment. This was kind of the turning point before college, got called into the office, here at Whitney's office, and I walked in there. Whitney was... We got everything lined up. We set up a date to come back in and review, and she also helped me out with getting my job.

Callie Davis: And in that meeting, Chris, what did you talk about in regards to what you needed at school? Like what would help?

Chris Carter: Well, in regards, I needed to have... for my accommodations able to have a reader, and also to be able to go to a quiet space if needed because I focus better when everything's quiet.

Callie Davis: Did you tell Whitney those things?

Chris Carter: Yeah, sure did.

Callie Davis: Okay. All right. That's that self-advocacy what you needed.

Chris Carter: Callie, how did you work with the educational institution as well as Chris's internship sites to foster an inclusive environment and a sense of belonging for him?

Callie Davis: I think in working with post-secondary schools, post-secondary institutions, it's longitudinal. It's not a one and done thing. So working with Whitney in disability services, it's relationship building. I know what Whitney's program can do and she knows what I can do. So in communication with her, not just on student by student, but continuously understanding what her program does, and communicating that to the wide variety of students I work with saying, "Hey, you're working with me. You're working with Voc Rehab, but you also should likely look into Whitney's program as well because she can do some cool things that I can't."

And having that relationship not only with her, but then communicating it to the student and doing the soft handoff, helping Chris make that appointment with Whitney, coming with Chris to Whitney's appointment to making it not only easier for him to introduce him to Whitney so he's more comfortable, but also making sure it's happening. That's what makes it successful.

Tonya Stellar: And then Whitney, how did you work with Chris and Callie to provide those educational supports and help Chris secure his internship, and ensure that he felt a sense of belonging both on campus and at his work site?

Whitney Martinez: So initially we had that first meeting where they brought Chris's documentation and he kind of explained his disabilities and his needs to me, and we kind of worked through that, and it was more of that initial connection, check the box kind of stuff. And then to kind of encourage him to do some things on his own and self-advocate. We scheduled a follow-up appointment closer to the semester and he came back in and was able to recommunicate those things to me. And we talked about what they would really look like in the classroom and how we would transition those high school accommodations to a post-secondary setting, and were able to do that.

And prior to that second meeting, we had found time for him to come and meet with our head of campus security and they were able to have those... I felt good about that connection. Chris isn't the only student that learns differently and experiences life differently that's on that staff, and so I knew it would be a good fit and fell in line with what he was wanting to pursue degree-wise. And so mostly just about connection and referral.

Tonya Stellar: We're so glad that you've had a wonderful experience. Callie or Whitney... Maybe Callie could take this question. Can you share some of the best practices for promoting a sense of belonging for individuals with disabilities in post-secondary education and workplace settings? Since we're presenting on a national level, what are some of the practices you've seen or you've implemented that you feel are best practices for promoting that sense of belonging?

Callie Davis: I think first and foremost, everything that we do as providers, as rehab counselors, as disability coordinators has to be tied to what the person we're working with wants. We have great ideas, we have great dreams, but if the person that we're working with is not bought into the plan, what are we doing? So everything, best practices, everything that we do needs to be for the person that we're representing. They need to be involved. They need to be with us, walking to the campus with us, meeting with the disability coordinator, helping making those phone calls to set up the internships, helping to access different resources because I'm not always going to be here to help Chris. Whitney is not always going to be here. So developing those self-advocacy skills start right now. Helping him to navigate these things. So that's a best practice.

Tonya Stellar: Well, thank you all so much. And Chris specifically, we'd like to thank you for your time, your willingness to share your journey and your experiences with us. Callie and Whitney, we appreciate your time in sharing how the team worked together to ensure that Chris felt valued, welcomed, and respected in his campus at the central Wyoming College, as well as in his internship. Chris, obviously you are a leader and have a great impact on your friends, your coworkers, and we wish you much success in all of your endeavors and for being with us today.

Next, I'm really excited to introduce a panel of individuals from Colorado. First we have Brandon Chavez, a client of the Colorado Division of Vocational Rehabilitation DVR. Mary Dick, a DVR rehabilitation counselor. And then two employers joining us today, Katrina Ruggles at Center High School and Carmen Pavlovsky at the Center Viking Youth Club. So first we'd like to start with questions for Brandon. Brandon, can you share your experience transitioning from high school to post-secondary education and employment, and what that was like for you?

Brandon Chavez: For secondary education, it was really rough for my first semester, basically transitioning, compared to high school, since some of the teachers that I worked with at Center were more lenient on their due dates as well for their assignments compared to at the college level with professors and what they need to do with their class schedules. So that

took a little taking use too for me. And as well as what they were asking in particular assignments like when we're writing essays with MLA and APA format, I really haven't worked with that before, or not as much as well. And then also citing my sources because there would be sometimes in classes where I would cite my sources, how I thought I needed to be corrected, and sometimes I had to redo it or I got more time to work on that.

And as well as adapting to mainly all my assignments on online because I didn't get that much assignments online when I was in high school. So that's taking a lot of use too. And then for my employment, just greeting people every day. I'm particularly a shy person most of the time, so if I don't really need to talk, I just sit back and listen and respectfully just talk when I needed to talk most of the time. But other than that, just learning how to be social with people in classrooms that I haven't usually gotten to know, and trying to make connections with those people was hard at first.

Tonya Stellar: What were the most valuable supports you received, whether at school, in high school or college or on your job site, that really helped you feel a sense of belonging to that school setting or on the job?

Brandon Chavez: I think one valuable education support that I got when I was in high school was just experiences from other teachers about how to manage yourself in college and just treating yourself just like everybody else, even though you come from different backgrounds, just try to stay true to yourself mainly when you're struggling, just try to persevere, was mainly something that I got out of it. Especially when I moved on to college, I had to ask more questions when I didn't know the answer to, and it was definitely hard for me to ask those uncomfortable questions because sometimes I felt like I didn't really know much at the time compared to other people, and it just made me a little anxious at times to speak up. But as the years went on, I built that courage in myself to just try to answer questions as best as I can and try to keep up when I needed to.

Tonya Stellar: Now, Mary, as his vocational rehabilitation counselor, did you provide any specialized supports or accommodations that enhanced Brandon's learning experience, or feeling like he belonged in the education or employment settings?

Mary Dick: Yes, Brandon was referred... Alamosa is fortunate to have the School to Work Alliance Program. So Amy Raya, the coordinator of that program, worked with him. She provided self-advocacy services as well as the post-secondary counseling services. So she did help him develop those self-

advocacy skills. And she also helped him make that transition from secondary to post-secondary education. She helped helped him with all that paperwork to get accepted into college as well as to fill out the FAFSA, the federal financial aid paperwork, as well as to fill out all of the DVR paperwork so that he could be in a individual's plan for employment before school started so that he could qualify for DVR services such as mileage reimbursement, which Brandon was so happy to receive because he had about a 45-minute commute to school from Center to Alamosa.

Brandon Chavez: Yeah, it definitely made it easier to commute in the weather circumstances.

Mary Dick: So he also got help with tuition and books later on, I think after 12 semesters financial aid drops off, so we were able to help him with that later on. We also made sure that Brandon met with an advisor at ASU, Adam State University, to make sure he enrolled in the proper training programs before he started school. Brandon's original goal was to go to graduate school to be athletic trainer, so he made sure to graduate with at least a GPA of 3.0, which he actually graduated from junior college with a 3.18 and bachelor's with a 3.22, which was just astounding with an SLD.

Tonya Stellar: Thank you both so much. We also have a question for either Katrina or Carmen, and we were wondering if you could just share, as employers, how your organization fostered a sense of belonging for Brandon on the work site? If you could just describe some of those supports that were put in place for him?

Katrina Ruggles: When he applied for the position, obviously there's already a relationship, but I think some of the things that we've tried to do is, one, be strength-based and recognize the strengths that our staff bring to the table and the things that... how that enriches both our organization, and we're working with young people, how that enriches the lives of young people so they can see all the paths to success, that there isn't just one way. So I think that's one of the things that we try to do. We try to really address and provide professional development around people first language, ableist kind of language, so that we recognize we want to talk about our young people and their strengths, and the same of our staff.

We also provide professional development, and Brandon has participated in the professional development that we've provided. In addition, we try to provide supports around technology that he might need to support his needs and as well as coaching and support that way. So those are some of the things that I can think of that I think we've really worked hard to



make sure that we have a diverse... and we have a commitment to having diversity in our workforce so that young people can also have role models for all the many things that they can accomplish in their life. And because we know that that diversity of voices makes our work that much better, so yeah.

Tonya Stellar: Well, thank you. And Brandon, thank you for sharing your story and experiences with us. We're so grateful for your time as well as the time given by Mary, Katrina and Carmen. We appreciate the partnership that you all have had working as a team to ensure that Brandon felt a sense of belonging in high school and on his work site. And we look forward to achieving all of your goals, Brandon, and the wonderful things that you're going to do and the difference that you're going to make. Thank you all for joining us today.

Katrina Ruggles: Thank you.

Mary Dick: Thank you.

Brandon Chavez: Thank you.

Hunter Steinitz: Thank you so much to our panels for giving us a glimpse into what belonging looks like in a K to 12 environment. I think it's so important that we get to hear from these young voices and their own reflections on what they're experiencing and their process. So thank you guys for being such strong self-advocates. We really admire you. We heard directly from panelists about how important belonging is to capitalize on the K through 12 experience as well as a successful transition to post-secondary opportunities. But how do you measure belonging in those different contexts? Well, Eric is going to talk to us a little bit about that.

Erik Carter: Well, thank you again, Hunter. And again, to all of you who are part of this symposium, I hope you are enjoying each of these mini panels. I think it's just so helpful to hear these firsthand stories that foreground the experiences and the insights of youth, also of their educators, their employers and their schools. And you start to see that these aspects of belonging cut through all of these stories that you heard, whether that's in secondary experiences or post-secondary experiences. Whether we're talking about what happens in the classrooms or in our clubs or in our internships, or even our workplaces and colleges. This isn't an abstract concept we're talking about. This issue of belonging is our lived experience, and it's one that matters to all of us, including the youth and young adults that we serve.

So if we're going to move forward in this area, we've got to have some way of knowing whether the efforts that we're making are leading toward full participation and belonging, or whether they're inadvertently leading away from these various goals. And the thing is that we have to, in all the work that we do in transition, we have to measure what matters most. And this is the challenge. The things that matter most are always the hardest to measure. The things that matter most are always the hardest to measure. Good outcomes are much easier to measure than flourishing lives. And yet, I would argue, and I think you would agree, that we have to figure out a way to capture both of these, all of these.

Now, we in the field of transition have really been captivated by documenting the post-school outcomes of our students and the factors that predict those. Many of you're thinking about Indicator 14, for example, that appropriately calls our attention to the percentage of students with disabilities who are working or in post-secondary education one year after high school. While we must move the numbers up on these kinds of outcomes, I'm not sure that they fully capture what we know matters when it comes to flourishing. And I'll just share one example to kind of illustrate this as we segue into belonging. But we almost always treat, for example, post-school employment outcomes as a dichotomous outcome. We do that in research and practice and policy. We measure either whether youth are working or whether they're not working one year after graduation. And we want to celebrate good employment rates for sure, but it's good to know certainly whether our graduates obtain jobs, but it's equally important to know, for example, whether those jobs are satisfying and meaningful. Do their jobs offer the right hours, sufficient pay, adequate benefits, opportunities for advancement, alignment with their interests? Do they provide the right availability of supports, interactions with great coworkers? And yes, do they provide a sense of belonging? Right? Is it a job they love or a job they dread?

I've just placed on the screen some different markers of meaningful work. This comes from one of our recent studies really focused on integrated employment for youth and young adults with developmental disabilities. Just examples of metrics that can be captured that also matter alongside our blunter outcomes like employment rates. I think we could compile something similar in the areas of further education and independent living.

In each of those lists, as we really dive deeper beyond just the outcome, we start to see that there's an important place for belonging in our measurement of these kinds of outcomes. The young people belong in

their workplace, feel like they belong, or are certain they belong in their workplace, in their college, in their community, in their congregations, and on and on and on. Of course, that same challenge arises when we consider the experience of belonging. Right? It's a very easy to affirm. It's much harder to define. It's something you feel viscerally either the deep joy of belonging to a people or a place, or they feel that ache or hurt when we are told we don't belong. We all know that. It's hard to put belonging into words, let alone capture on a data collection sheet. But again, I offer this framework, I think because it is a way of helping break down this concept that breaks it down into really these 10 component areas that I think can be much more easily examined.

Each has its own indicators that speak to its presence or its absence. The challenge for you is to think about what could you point to that tells you that youth are present in the places that matter most to them, that tells you that they've been invited, that they feel welcomed, that they're known well, that they're accepted fully, that they're supported wholly, that they're heard, that they're befriended, that they're needed, and they're loved. I think you noticed already some of these indicators as Devin and his friends and his teachers shared about his middle school experience, you picked up elements of things that would be indicators of these dimensions of belonging from Chris and Brandon and from others who were important in their lives.

Here's one way of approaching this reflection process as you think about your school or your district, or you think about the youth that you serve through your agency or your organization. In each of those 10 dimensions of belonging, think about the experiences of individual youth or broadly on the youth collectively that you serve. Ask yourself, what are we doing really well right now in each of those 10 areas of being invited and present and welcomed and known and accepted and on, those are the things you want to celebrate and keep doing.

Then that second question is, well, how do you know. How do we actually know that we're doing a good job in each of these areas? That we're doing well in our workplace or college or community setting? What are the things that tell us these things are in place? Then third, what should we be doing better or differently? These are the things we want to change or adapt or revisit. Of course, the question is, what should we do next? These are the things that we want to pursue. They're simple questions to ask that lead us to thinking about the kinds of indicators or markers or data, but they take time and deliberation, I think, to answer well. It's that second question of how do we know that I think probably

requires the most thought in this area. How do we know we're doing well in these areas?

Let's pause for a moment on this second question of how do we know and how might you measure this? I think there's a few sort of guiding questions that you might point you to what kind of data you might collect. The first is, what do youth say? What do youth say about their own sense of belonging? I think this is what cut across the mini panels that you just heard. What would a conversation or a survey reveal about the degree to which youth with disabilities feel like they belong in their school or in their workplace or in some other community setting or context? I think Devin spoke powerfully about his own belonging in his middle school and among his peers. Youth are usually in the best position to speak to their experiences and encounters.

Think about how you might ask for their insights in ways that would reveal a candid response. What could be shared during a conversation or an interview in a focus group of youth through an anonymous survey? Second, what do others in their lives share? What do others in their lives or in their midst to tell you about what they notice? I think this can be especially important when youth have complex communication needs or just have difficulty sharing their thoughts or experiences in this way. What could you learn from teachers, from club leaders, from coworkers, from employers or paraprofessionals or parents, about the extent to which each of these 10 dimensions of belonging are being experienced or whether they're still elusive? How could you invite that input from others who have a vantage point to observe and notice these things? Third, think about what you could observe.

What could we directly observe with regard to the presence or absence of each of these 10 dimensions of belonging? Think about your school, for example. What interactions with fellow classmates or schoolmates or club mates or other peers look like across the school day. With whom do youth spend time? Who seeks them out? This might reveal something about whether students are welcomed or accepted or befriended. How do youth participate in class or club activities? How do they contribute at their own transition planning meetings? This might reveal something about whether youth are heard or needed or supported.

How do educators and support staff at your school talk about the youth with disabilities they serve? This might reveal something about whether youth are truly accepted and needed. Of course, there's things we could review. What are the artifacts that you might review that say something again about these dimensions of belonging. What would a glance at a

student's schedule or transcript reveal about their presence in classes and clubs alongside their peers? What would their resume reveal about their presence in afterschool jobs, their extracurricular involvement, their volunteer experiences, their leadership roles, each of which speaks to the degree to which they're needed and present. How does their IEP and their transition describe the supports that they receive throughout the school day or in their community? This might provide insights into whether they're present and whether they feel supported. Even think about what things like attendance or behavior data might reveal about whether youth feel welcomed or accepted or loved. There's so many things in your midst that you can sort of look to give you insights into this experience of belonging. What do youth say? What do others share? What could we observe?

What could we review and what might we track? This is just a sampling of ways you might gain insight into the extent to which youth you serve, experience belonging in their schools and their workplaces and in their community. Well, over the last few years of presenting on and teaching about these moving of various communities towards belonging, I'm still struck by how a series of very simple images that I use and others certainly use, how this provokes the most insightful reflection and responses among schools and colleges and congregations and workplaces. I wonder if this will also do the same for you and think about the data that you collect or the things that you notice. As you think about the various places and programs and communities that matter most to your students and that are really critical to their flourishing during and after graduation or during high school, are those experiences of your youth marked by exclusion?

Is your community one filled with holes where the presence and the talents and the friendship and contributions of youth with disabilities are omitted or excluded? What do you hear or observe that indicates that's the case? Or as you think about the experiences of your youth, are they marked by separation or even segregation where opportunities for young people with and without disabilities are limited in the chances they have to ever meet and get to know one another? What are the things that you see or hear that tell you that maybe this is the portrait of community that your youth are experiencing, or are those experiences marked merely by integration where young people with and without disabilities are near one another but not really among one another? They're in different classes down a rarely traveled hallway, they graduate to large group homes tucked away in untraveled parts of town.

They are working in enclaves that place young people near, but not really among their same age peers. There's a difference between being near and being among. What do you see or what do you hear or notice that tells you this might be the case or are those experiences marked by inclusion? In all aspects of school and work and community life where people are moving away from being apart from one another to being among one another to now being with one another, what do you see or hear that tells you this is the case for the students that you serve and support that their school and post-school experiences are marked by inclusion and all the places that matter most to them?

Or are those experiences actually marked not just merely by inclusion, but actually by belonging? Where youth are seen in fundamentally different ways as valued and indispensable, not as the other or the stranger, but as a member, and where they don't just share space, but they also share lives and become knitted together in relationships with fellow schoolmates and classmates and club mates with fellow coworkers and neighbors and friends, where friendships start to abound, not just like in integration and inclusion where kids or youth rather are sharing space, but they're actually getting engaged in one another's lives.

The question for you is to think about which of these portraits describes your school or your college, or which of these portraits best describes the workplaces in your city or in your county or in your state? Which of these portraits describes the other kinds of programs or activities that make up your community? What are the kinds of data that you might collect that speak to which of these portraits dominates the experiences of your graduates? I think this is a really critical place for reflection in all of our transition related work. We want to make sure that we are collecting meaningful data all along the way. We have to know whether our practices and our partnerships are actually leading to better outcomes. More than that, whether they're leading to real flourishing to belonging in our schools and workplaces and in our communities, we need a way to gauge our success and to guide any of our needed course corrections.

So do we understand the experiences that our youth are having? Do we know which of those portraits captures the communities they encounter? What is it that's telling us how to move forward or how to move differently in different ways? I hope this conversation's been fruitful in just spurring your thinking about this important aspect of transition, that aspect of belonging, that as we think about helping young people move from school to all the good things a community has to offer, that we don't just focus on the outcomes they experience, but the belonging that they have in those different kinds of experiences. Again, I'm grateful for

your ongoing investment in trying to change the landscape for youth with disabilities, your efforts to listen to youth with disabilities, to learn with youth with disabilities, and to spur communities to move forward in different ways for youth with disabilities. I hope this has sort of sparked your own imagination about what it might look like to make those movements in your own community. Grateful for your time again, and let me turn it back over to you, Hunter, to take us further along in this symposium.

Hunter Steinitz: Thank you again, Dr. Carter. You've given us a really helpful explanation of all these different elements that make up belonging. We've heard some wonderful examples from our panelists about what it can look like in K through 12 settings as well as post-school settings. Dr. Carter, you gave us some guidance on how we can measure the belonging that we see in our community around us. And I feel like with all of that, we are a lot better positioned now to act with this knowledge in our own settings. Previously you heard about how critically important it is to collaborate in order to have successful transition planning. For more information, please visit our resource database to learn about what resources on belonging the OSER founded centers will have access to. Please find this link to the resource database in the chat. And before we wrap up today, OSEP Director Williams is going to lead us in some questions and answers with some of our speakers from today.

Valerie Williams: Thank you, Hunter. I greatly appreciate it. We are almost at time, but I could not pass up the opportunity to just close us out with a few last thoughts. This might be relatively rapid fire, but I definitely wanted to make sure that we got this in. Hunter, I'll start with you. What is one takeaway or one action that you hope the members of our audience will do following today's symposium?

Hunter Steinitz: Oh, I only get to pick one? My first takeaway would be to talk to your students, to ask them do they feel like they belong in whatever point in the process they're at, do they feel like they're being heard? And then if the answer is yes, then great. If the answer is no, then maybe follow up questions, "Well, why?" And, "How can we make it better?" That's my initial takeaway.

Valerie Williams: Thank you so much. Sorry you had to narrow it down to just one, but I appreciate that. Dawn, can you come on camera for me please? Perfect.

Dawn De Lorenzo: Hi.

Valerie Williams: That moderation of that panel was fabulous. I really, really want to thank you for that.

Dawn De Lorenzo: Thank you.

Valerie Williams: I have a question for you. Can you talk about the importance of leadership in establishing a school environment of belonging and one strategy that you think can be used to help create this type of atmosphere?

Dawn De Lorenzo: I think the leadership is truly the cornerstone, making sure that your students have a sense of belonging, because honestly, the message from the top in our district has always been for all of our students, especially with the youth that are struggling right now across the entire nation, there's been an extremely high emphasis on knowing that we want our students to feel comfortable and look forward to coming to school every day. One of our case managers always says how they feel emotionally is what makes them available for learning. If they're shut down or they don't feel that they belong, they're not going to be ready to learn. Without that feeling and sense of belonging and accomplishment and knowing that you care, you can't move them forward in their learning.

Valerie Williams: A hundred percent agree. Thank you. Thank you so much. Mary, can you come on camera please? Perfect. Take yourself off mute because it's your rapid fire moment. Perfect. Tell me, Mary, how do you ensure that accommodations and supports that were available to students in high school continue to be available or they're adapted in their work or higher education settings?

Mary Dick: Yes. Well, the difference between high school and college is that in high school, students with disabilities, their curriculum can be modified. They do get accommodations in college, but the curriculum is not modified. That is a change for students with disabilities. We do ensure as rehab counselors that all students with disabilities meet with the disability coordinator at the college before they begin college. I work with a disability coordinator to ensure that they know this person is indeed someone with a disability.

The way that works is the disability coordinator will email the standard list of accommodations to all of the students' instructors, and the student actually decides which of those accommodations they want to utilize. In Brandon's case, I don't think we even talked about, he chose to use the extended time on assignments and quizzes and tests, which are typically online. He and his instructors were the only ones that knew that he was



using that particular accommodation, but that is how he got through school. He had a specific learning disability with significant deficits in reading and math. The fact that he graduated with a 3.18 in junior college and 3.2 with his bachelor's degree, that's just him working so hard. He worked so hard to graduate with those GPAs.

Valerie Williams: Thank you for that answer. Since you brought his name up, Brandon, can you come on screen for me?

Brandon Chavez: Yes, I can hear you.

Valerie Williams: Perfect. Very good. Brandon, I have an important question for you. I'd like your thoughts as we come to a close. What kind of advice would you give to educational institutions, employers about how to create accessible environments, fostering a sense of belonging and overall just providing adequate support for students or employees with disabilities? Can you give me your thoughts on that?

Brandon Chavez: Well, for education and for the institutions, I think just trying to keep them engaged and just giving them just a positive attitude and just trying to help them pursue what their goals and try to accomplish as much as they can with each other and building that relationship. Then with the employers, just making sure that their voices are being heard throughout different activities or in different stages of the workplace so that they know that their employers have their back, as well as just fostering the relationship again, to just meet all the requirements and just trying to give them their voice and letting know that they're there for them.

Valerie Williams: Thank you, Brandon. Thank you for sharing your thoughts and for being such a passionate advocate, not only for yourself, but for others. We do greatly appreciate it. I'm going to wrap up my questions. Dr. Carter, you are up last. This is a question I think we thought long and hard about what do you think is a critical step in establishing or maintaining a sense of belonging in either school or work environments when there is constant turnover with people in those settings?

Erik Carter: Right. Yeah, I think it has to become a hardwired feature of our school and workplace culture where we elevate it and name it as a core value, and we introduce it to new staff at the outset. We encourage it and reinforce it regularly. As I shared earlier that we reflect on it often together, that we're making really belonging, not a peripheral goal of our work, but at the heart of it. And so then we have to equip all of our staff to implement those practices and postures that lead toward belonging. I would emphasize that we have to be equally attentive to belonging

among our staff because special educators, paraprofessionals, job coaches, and others don't always experience belonging in their school and their community. It turns out these 10 dimensions of belonging that I talked about matter as much for staff. If we make sure they feel accepted and supported and known and heard and needed and loved, that actually leads to less turnover.

Valerie Williams: Perfect. Thank you so much. I appreciate that. It's been a whirlwind 90 minutes, a little over. We wanted to squeeze in as much as we possibly could. But before we go, I want to honestly and sincerely from the bottom of my heart, thank all of our panelists for participating in what we believe is an extremely important discussion and sharing your personal stories and experiences on belonging with secondary transition and post-school settings. Today would not have been possible without you, and it means a lot to us.

It was a pleasure to be involved in such important work, and we appreciate the opportunity to facilitate this symposium. There will be more coming behind it, so stay tuned. Also, want to thank Hunter for facilitating. You did a wonderful job. On behalf of OSERS, I want to say thank you to all of our colleagues in OSERS and AIR who are always more than ready, willing, and extremely passionate about this topic, always wanting to lend a hand and support to make this event and the ones that we have coming up and the ones that we've had in the past, very much a success. I will not try to list the names because I will surely forget some, but just know that we greatly appreciate you.

Lastly, to each and every person who was on here and listened, and those who are going to watch the recording at a later date, thank you, thank you, thank you for your support for this being something that you want to pay close attention to and make inroads on. And please share this information with all of your colleagues. We absolutely hope to see you again as some future events. More is coming. Stay tuned. There's information that's going to be dropped in the chat about how you can keep up with us in the interim, whether it's our blog or just all of the activities and things that we have planned and resources going on. Once again, thank you, thank you, thank you for joining us and for your continued work and support in this effort. Have a great day and rest of your week.