

# I'll be there for you: exploring a sense of belonging to enhance student engagement.

Josiena GOTZSCH, DBA, MSc

Grenoble Ecole de Management - France  
jose.gotzsch@grenoble-em.com

## Abstract

"I'll be there for you ... this song from the series "Friends" was produced by students at a Musical Comedy. The performers, business students from various programs within the Grenoble Ecole de Management, clearly enjoyed presenting their show. They worked together in a sporty and entertaining way, at an excellent level. At the end of the performance, each student was called on stage and individual contributions were valorized, showing support, warmth, and encouragement for each student. Their mutual support was remarkable.

Seeing students perform with such commitment and being so supportive to each other was inspirational, specifically, since we had just discussed a decline in student's study engagement in the classroom with staff and student representatives. What if ... we could build a community with students willing to motivate one another beyond this theatre challenge, encourage one another in their studies, in the development of their creativity and in multiple other activities. A warm, supportive environment could lead to keen students, and to a greater alumni network.

An exploratory project "I'll be there for you" was born to investigate this issue. In a Design Thinking class, 101 students of 4 different programs, from bachelor to MBA's, were asked to develop projects to reinforce peer culture, to imagine how to help each other more. During these Design Thinking pro-

jects, the insight emerged that some students are feeling lonely. From the outside it looks that students are having a great time. Knowing that some of the students feel lonely is not fitting within the culture we would like to have in our institute. Moreover, research indicates that when students have a sense of belonging, their happiness increases and with it their engagement in learning and academic performance.

## Author keywords

Sense of belonging, community building, inclusion, peer support, peer culture, design thinking, creativity

## Introduction

The students' peer support showed to be an important factor to bring the musical comedy at a high level. The performance provided an insight on the influence of mutual support and the group cohesion that it created. What if we could stimulate peer support to enrich students' engagement in their study and to strengthen their sense of belonging?

Multiple scholars indicate the importance of the social context in which learning happens. Rode et al. (2005) found a significant link between life satisfaction and student performance. Inclusive classrooms (Rangvid, 2018) and a sense of belonging (Zosel, 2018) contribute to student engagement. Berg (2022) resumes this by stating that students will choose to be in classrooms where they feel they belong, valued, and loved. Bloom (2013) describes education as a learning experience through which students, faculty, and staff learn together and support and challenge each other".

How does a sense of belonging contribute to enhance student engagement?

A first assumption is that a supportive attitude from staff, helps to motivate students in smaller and larger programs.

Secondly, peer support could also improve students' self-development. Helping one another requires soft skills, such as empathy, the capacity to give constructive feedback, and a positive attitude. These qualities are needed to become a supportive manager.

Lastly, after graduation a sense of belonging to a learning community, strengthens the alumni network. If students have helped one another during studies, why not continue in later life ...?

The below figure aims to visualize how a sense of belonging fits into an education setting. The programs and its pedagogy

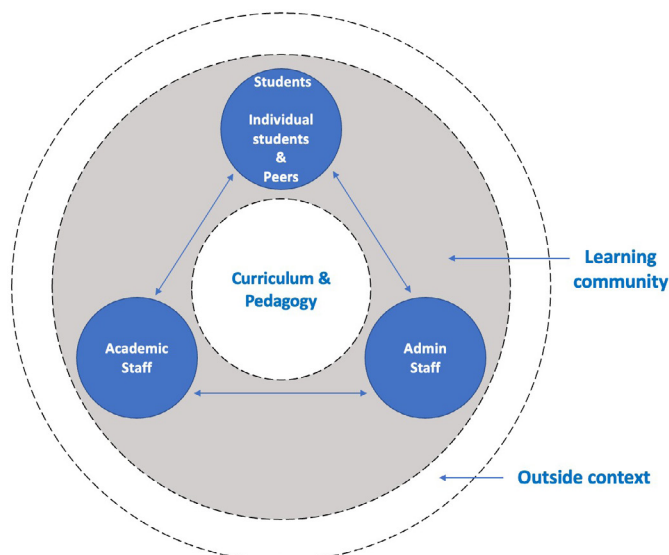


Figure 1. Learning model



are surrounded by two structures, its learning community, and the outside context.

Central in this model are curriculum, the program's content, and its pedagogy, the teaching method. In general, our pedagogy makes students, active participators in the classroom, with a lot of teamwork, variation in topics and activities and exposure to the international context.

The learning community is formed by students, academic and administrative staff. All are part of the learning community and influence student experience and engagement. The way students step into the learning process, with a growth or fixed learning mindset (Dweck, 2015), is essential. Student's self-confidence, self-concept happiness, study organization, capacity to focus, and ability to avoid procrastination are also important factors. To achieve a supportive peer culture, students need empathy for other learners, curiosity to learn about others' opinions, and ought to understand differences in personalities. They should know how to give constructive, hands-on feedback (Berger, 2013) and need the tools and mindset to use their collaborative instincts (Tamm, 2015).

The contacts that students have with teachers and administrative staff, such as program coordinators and student services influence their student experience and sense of belonging.

Teachers can create a welcoming atmosphere in the classroom, by for example at the start of classes checking whether students know at least each other's names and by initiating with some "getting to know" activities. Even in a smaller class of 20 students, learners often do not know each other.

The outside world, with international student exchange, internships, and the job market influences the learning community and its curriculum. The same counts for external events, as the Covid-19 pandemic shaped on-line teaching.

In all this, a sense of belonging is the transversal factor that brings trust, support, and constructive exchange. From a student's perspective it is shaped in the interactions of students among peers within and outside the classroom, with student associations, with teachers, and with student services and program administration.

### An exploratory case study, based on the students' perspective.

Students from 4 different programs were asked: "How might we create or reinforce a peer-culture?". The students used the Stanford Design Thinking process (Doorley et al. 2018) to explore this question and to propose solutions. This happened during in-class modules, that varied from a 12 to 21 hours duration, depending on the program. A total of 101 students were involved, approximately 45% with the French nationality and 55% international students.

- » 39 international students in the MSc ISE Innovation, Strategy & Entrepreneurship (15 hours)
- » 24 international students in the 3rd year Bachelor BIB Management in the Fashion & Design Industry (15 hours)
- » 26 mostly French students in the 1st year PGE Ulysse Grand Ecole Program (12 hours)

- » 12 MBA students from the University of Kentucky following a Design Thinking module in our institute (21 hours)

Additionally, 7 staff members from the Student Experience & Employability center were asked to reflect on activities that already take place within our school to create a sense of belonging and peer culture. Also, a debriefing reflective session took place with one program, having 39 students.

At the Grenoble Ecole de Management, approximately 70% of the student population is studying in the French Grand Ecole program, and most students in this program are native French speakers. The students of the international programs use English as the common language in their program but speak a variety of languages among them.

The students in the French Grand Ecole program lead a variety of student associations. The integration into those associations is not easy for international students. Selectivity through admission interviews, and a language barrier hinder their integration into the associations. Knowing how to join associations, or joining events planned by the associations is not clear to several international students. The integration for French students entering the campus at the 2nd year of the French Grand Ecole program was also said to be more challenging.

Before working with students, the instructor assumed that ideas for peer support would mostly emerge in study-related activities, and in life-style improvements: fitness activities, and helping each other to stop smoking. Nevertheless, the need for friendship and social support appeared very strongly. Loneliness and feeling excluded showed to be an important issue. Some students indicated to feel lonely at multiple occasions: in class, during lunches, in free time, or in the evening. A team of French students from the 1st year PGE program, clearly pointed towards solitude of students and inactivity, caused by this solitude. Some students rather stay at their apartment, than being seen as lonely (Figure 2). They also indicated a lack of contacts between the different programs.

Students recommended a large variety of "buddy" program. These buddy projects are described below in point 1 to 5. Proposals also included activities to meet others from the Grenoble Ecole de Management throughout the year (point 6 to



Figure 1. A team of French students indicating a lack of integration, solitude, and inactivity.

8), and physical space in the building for leisure and to meet (point 9 & 10).

Finally, proposals for co-working study space (point 11 & 12), GMAT study support and sharing of study notes and time-management (point 13 & 14).

1. Multiple early buddy programs, prior to arrival at our school were proposed. Such an early buddy program assigns incoming students (see figure 2), to their buddies before arrival at the campus.
2. Other buddy programs start with the beginning of the academic year. At present, the Grenoble Ecole de Management proposes multiple sessions in the welcome week, to make it easier for new students to get to know the school, its services and all it offers. Students propose to integrate a buddy program into this orientation week.
3. Other projects connect international and French students for a complete buddy week or a welcome challenge.
4. An orientation buddy proposal formally reinforces the contact between French and international students. It implies an international student pairing up with a French student buddy. For this we would have a formal buddy link into our intranet (see figure 3).

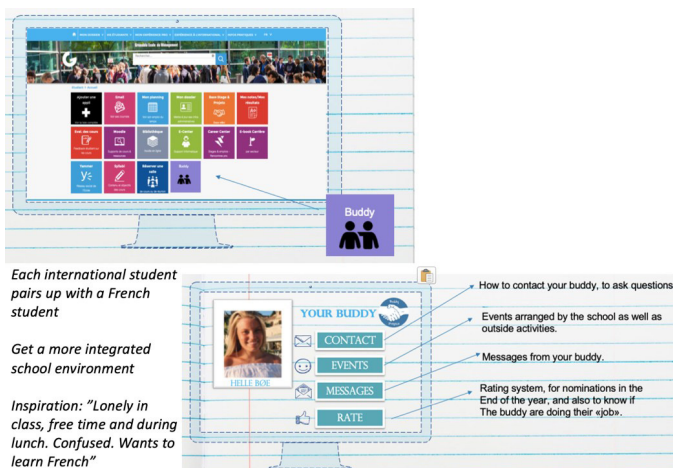


Figure 3. Orientation Buddy project (BIB3 2019-2020)

5. Some buddy projects propose a professional buddy approach with follow up throughout the year, a training, a contact person for the buddy, and nominations for "best buddy".

A second cluster of propositions concerns meeting other students at GEM throughout the year.

6. Multiple ideas for breakfast & debate, international breakfast, lunch, or dinner at minimal to no cost were suggested (figure 4). As well as "After School" inclusion and drop-in events, specifically indicating, that one does not have to be a member of one of GEM's association to participate.
7. Other proposals, in the form of applications (apps) or organized events, intend to meet others at GEM for activities: either inside the building to have lunch together, or for activities elsewhere, such as skiing together, or traveling. Specifically international students like to

visit places in France or Europe and can abandon their travel project, not liking to go alone.

8. Other collective activities include climbing, swimming, dancing, yoga classes or tennis for people, specifically for those students not member of an association.

One student had doubts about an application to meet other students for activities: the student liked the idea but expressed concerns that it might end up as a "tinker for students".



Figure 4. Activities for student interaction throughout the year

In term of physical space in the building for leisure and meet others, students advocated for:

9. A playground or playrooms to meet others and create more interaction between students. The suggested lounge has different spaces to project movies, to allow different activities: plays, culinary courses, exchange fairs for clothing ...
10. Also, the concept of an international corner is recommended. This room is dedicated to cultural and language exchanges. A place where students can study and relax, read the world press, meet, and exchange with students from all over the world, with free access.

Concerning spaces to study:

11. One of the students observed that students are hesitant to ask sharing a table when a student is already using this table. They might not want to disturb the student. Having a small lamp integrated in the table that turns green, allows anybody to sit at that table, or red when the student needs to focus (figure 5).
12. When our building is fully occupied, students might be looking for a space to meet for teamwork. A sugges-

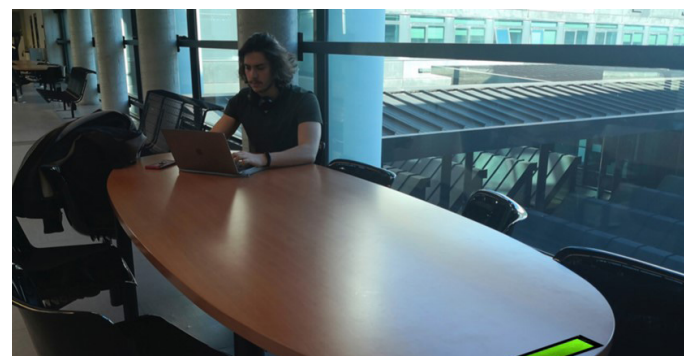


Figure 5. Welcome sign to share study space.

tion is a digital board on the 1st and 2nd floor, that indicates available spaces.

For study support, the following projects were put forward:

13. One proposal concerns a GMAT support group. Several universities require a GMAT score, at the level of the top 10% of students. The GMAT support group invites students who have passed the exam to teach students who are preparing the exam.
14. Awareness projects for improved time-management and less use of social media are also on the agenda, as well as a student platform with study resources shared by students. Such a platform is also imagined to be useful to share information about housing, jobs, and a second-hand market for furniture and items (especially for exchange students).

## Conclusion

This exploratory study contains proposals by students to enhance student interaction. Loneliness was a theme expressed by students. It indicates that not all students feel included. Students from the French and the international programs miss occasions to meet. International students have fewer options to integrate the activities of the primarily French student association.

In their projects, students recommend multiple buddy projects, events to meet students from other programs, and activities for which one does not need to be a member of a student association. They suggested a rich panorama of possibilities to improve student experience.

Integrating the students' suggestions has consequences on the design of multiple school events. It could also have impact on the spatial design in our building, for example to upgrade an existing space or create a playful student lounge area.

The students' viewpoint is important and an eye-opener. Most students give the impression to have an enjoyable study time, but the study shows that not all students are in this situation. The awareness on this inclusion gap is a first step. Creating a sense of belonging at an institutional level based on the principle "I'll be there for you", next to testing buddy projects is a very good next one.

## Acknowledgments

The author thanks the students from the BIB3 MFDI major 2019-2020 (Management of Fashion and Design Industry), the specialized master program MSc ISE 2019-2020 (Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Innovation), the Grand Ecole 1st year Ulysse program 2019-2020 and the MBA University of Kentucky (Design Thinking Certificate 2018-2019) for their participation and constructive suggestions.

## References

- Berg, T. (2022) Love as a Classroom Strategy, *6 Paths to Bring Resilience, Belonging, and Encouragement into Your Teaching – and Watch Students Flourish*, Harvard Business School Publishing
- Berger, R. (2013), Austin's Butterfly: Building Excellence in Teamwork - Critique and Feedback, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqh1MRWZjms>
- Bloom, J., Hutson, B., He, Y. & Konkle, E. (2013), Appreciative Education, *New Directions for Student Services*, No 143, Fall, DOI: 10.1002/ss.20055
- Doorley, S., Holcomb, S., Klebahn, P., Segovia, K. & Utley, J. (2018), *Design Thinking Bootleg*, Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford
- Dweck, C. (2015), Developing a Growth Mindset – The Power of yet, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiiEeMN7vbQ>
- Rode, J., Arthaud-Day, M., Mooney, C., Near, J., Baldwin, T., Bommer, W. and Rubin, R. (2005), Life Satisfaction and Student Performance, *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, Vol 4, No 4, 421-433
- Schindler-Rangvid, B. (2018), Student Engagement in Inclusive Classrooms, *Educational Economics*, Vol 26, No 3, 266-284
- Tamm, J. (2015), Cultivating Collaboration: Don't Be so Defensive, Tedx Talks, [https://www.ted.com/talks/jim\\_tamm\\_first\\_step\\_to\\_collaboration\\_don\\_t\\_be\\_so\\_defensive](https://www.ted.com/talks/jim_tamm_first_step_to_collaboration_don_t_be_so_defensive)
- Zosel, D. (2018), Creating a sense of belonging: How Intergroup Dialogue Projects and Restorative Justice Programs Could improve Campus Climate, *Dispute Resolution Journal DRJ*, Vol 73, No 2