



**Belonging, Mattering,
and Student Success:**

What We Can Do

Office of Institutional Equity and Compliance

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Belonging

Social belonging is the subjective feeling of fitting in and of being valued, accepted, and included by others. (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Ryan and Deci, 2002)

The need to belong is a fundamental human motivation—not just “nice to have.”

Belonging is shaped by identity, prior experience, and campus influences.



Undergraduate Belonging

2014 Social Climate Survey

2014 CUBE Survey

2015 First-Year Experience Survey

2018 End-of-Year Survey

2021 Campus Culture Survey

2023 Williams Village First-Semester Survey

2024 Sexual Assault & Related Harms Survey

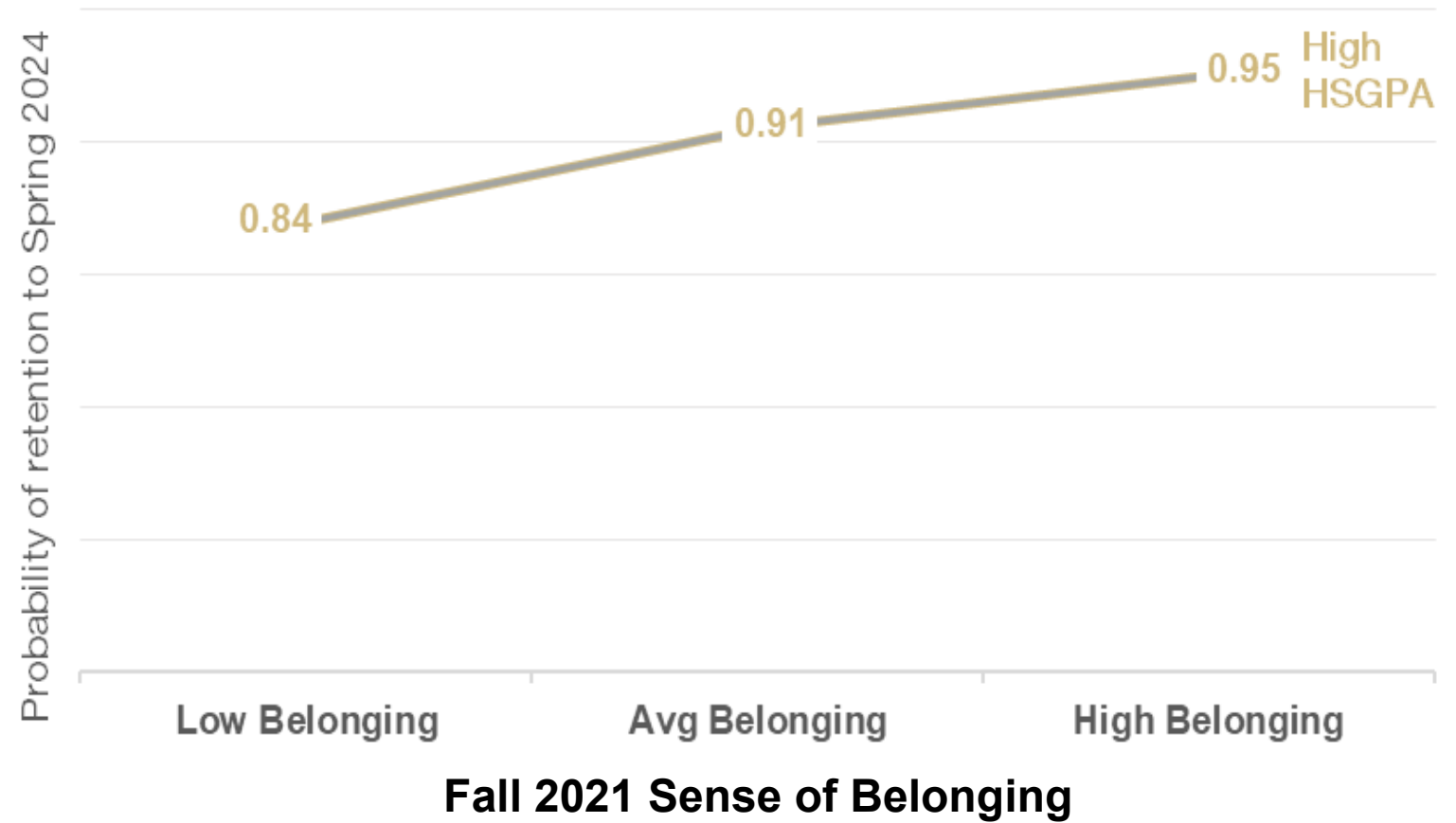
**Sense of
Belonging**
predicts CU
undergraduate
retention to the
second fall—

Even after we
control for
everything that
people assume
drives retention

- Ability belonging
 - Academic Tenacity
 - Growth Mindset
 - HS GPA
-
- First-generation status
 - Race/ethnicity
 - Pell eligibility/income
 - Residency
 - Housing confirmation date
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- Getting involved
 - School/College
 - Living in a RAP
 - **First-semester GPA (if 2.0 or greater)**

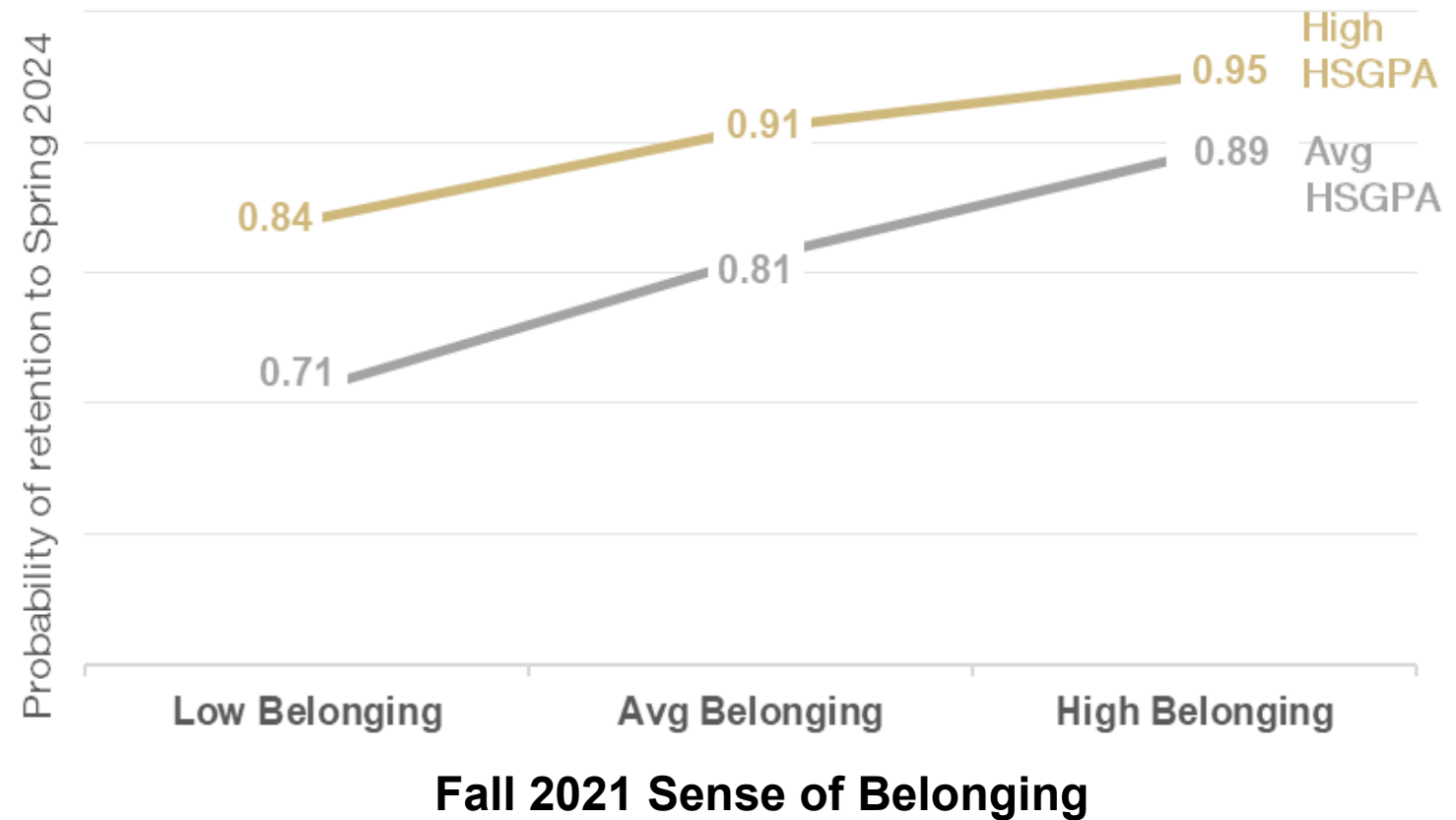
2021 Campus Culture Survey

Probability of retention of incoming 2021 students to Spring 2024



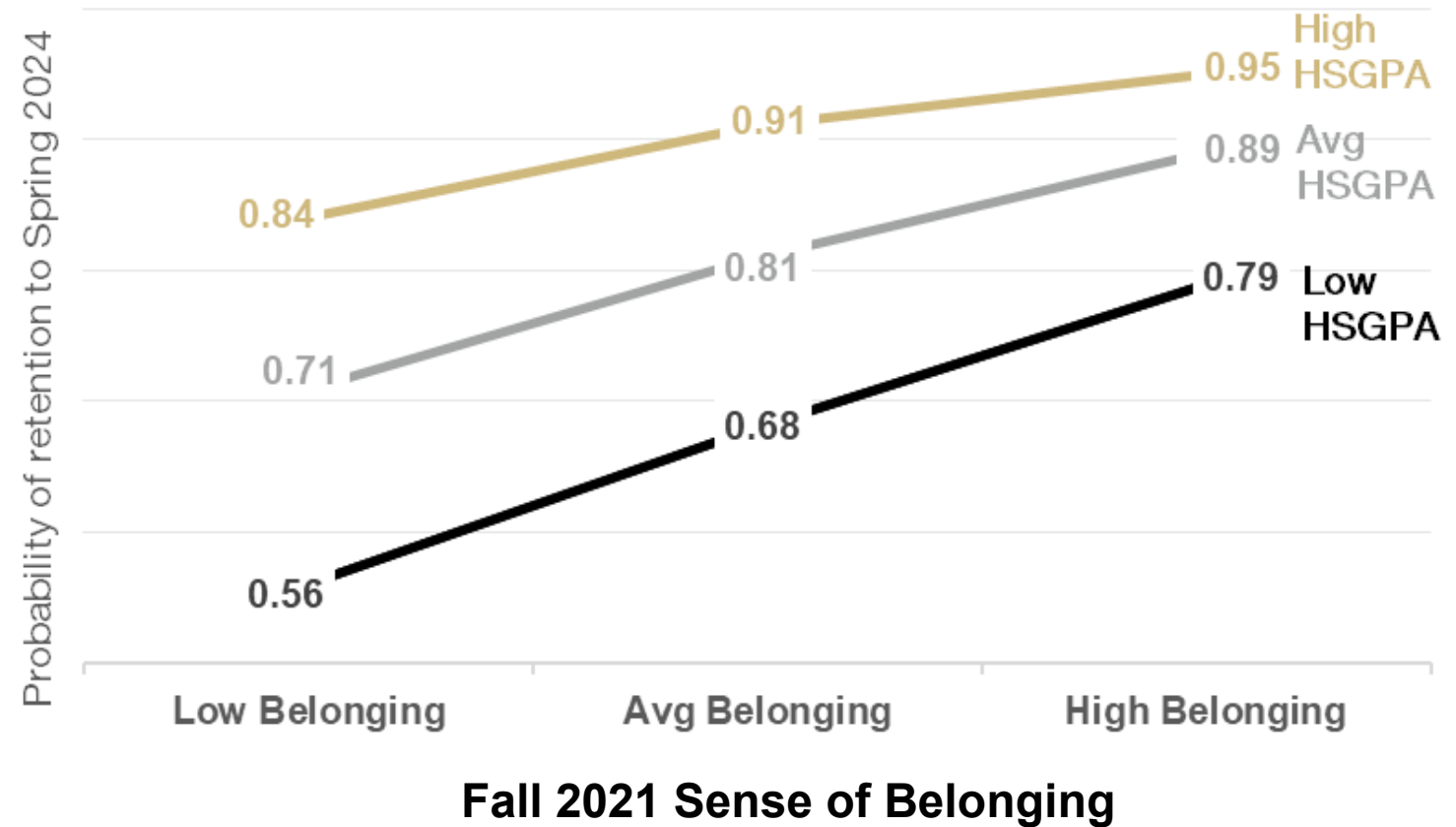
2021 Campus Culture Survey

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2021 Campus Culture Survey

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Belonging Predictors

Social

- Residence hall belonging
- Satisfaction with making friends
- Having a close friend
- Ease of finding study peers*
- Social isolation
- Sexual assault
- Sense of mutual accountability

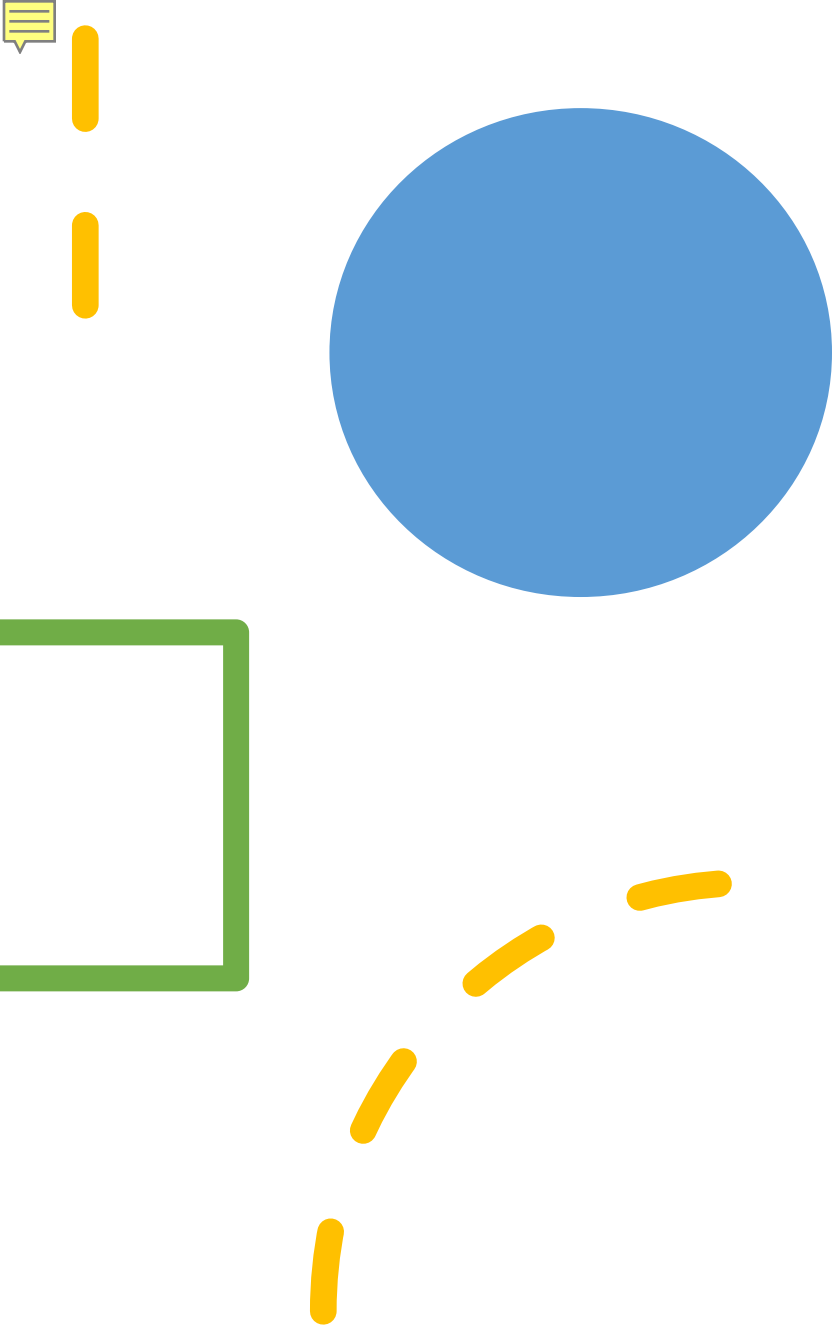
Academic

- Having more than one mentor**
- Classroom leaders with skills for managing difficult or sensitive conversations
- Getting to know people in class

**Students identify faculty, staff, grad students, and other undergrads as mentors.

Values

- Dislike of party culture
- Disrespectful students
- Perceptions that faculty aren't invested in their success
- Perceptions that the university doesn't care if they succeed



Mattering

The feeling of being:

- **Significant**
- **Important**
- **Valued...**

To someone else

Mattering

- Mattering is a person's perceptions of their *significance to others*.
 - Belonging is more about ***feeling part of a group or community***.
- Mattering fuels well-being, motivation, and engagement.
- Lack of mattering is associated with depression, anxiety, and vulnerability to setbacks. It leads to:
 - Withdrawal, reduced help-seeking, and academic disengagement



Measuring *matter*ing

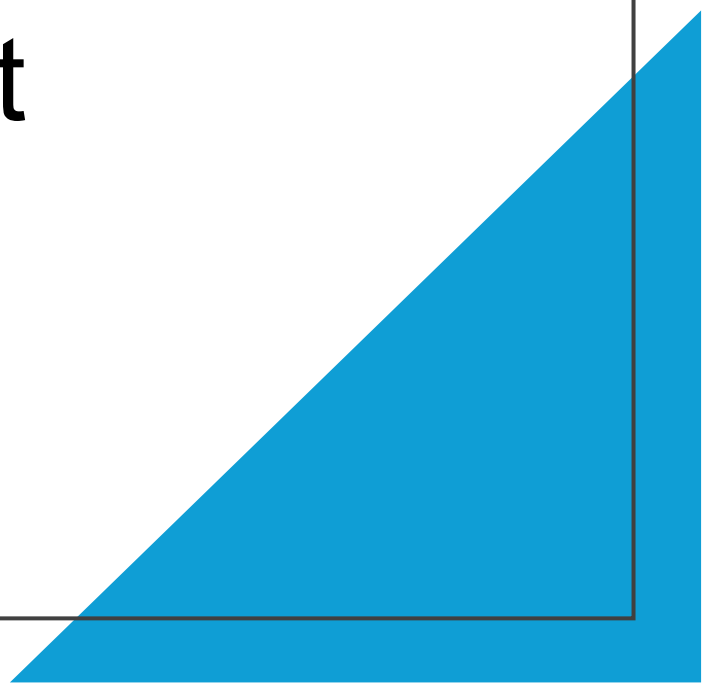
There are people on campus who:

- **Depend** on me
- Are **genuinely interested** in me as a person (value my uniqueness)
- **Care** about me as a person
- Are **concerned about my future**



Mattering

As with sense of belonging at CU, mattering is a significant predictor of retention.





Belonging and Mattering

- **Are built through small, repeated signals.**
 - Using names
 - Remembering details
 - Follow-up emails
 - Early outreach
 - Noticing absences (and signaling they were missed)
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Where does belonging break down?

Where do students most often feel invisible?

At what points in the semester does belonging erode?

Which students are most vulnerable?

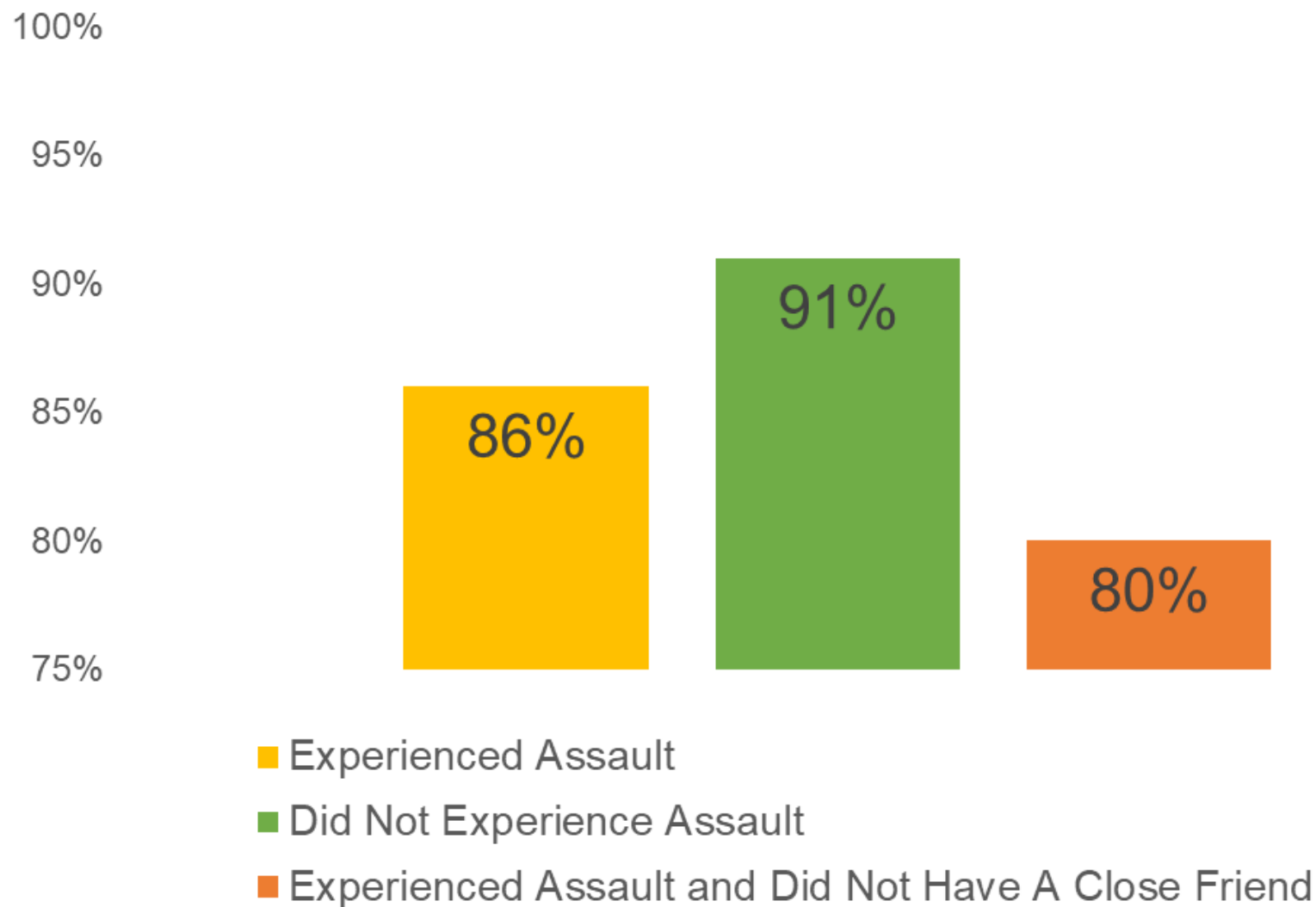
When belonging and mattering increase:

- Academic persistence increases
 - Help-seeking increases
 - Peer accountability increases
 - Vulnerability to harm decreases
-

Everything is
everything...

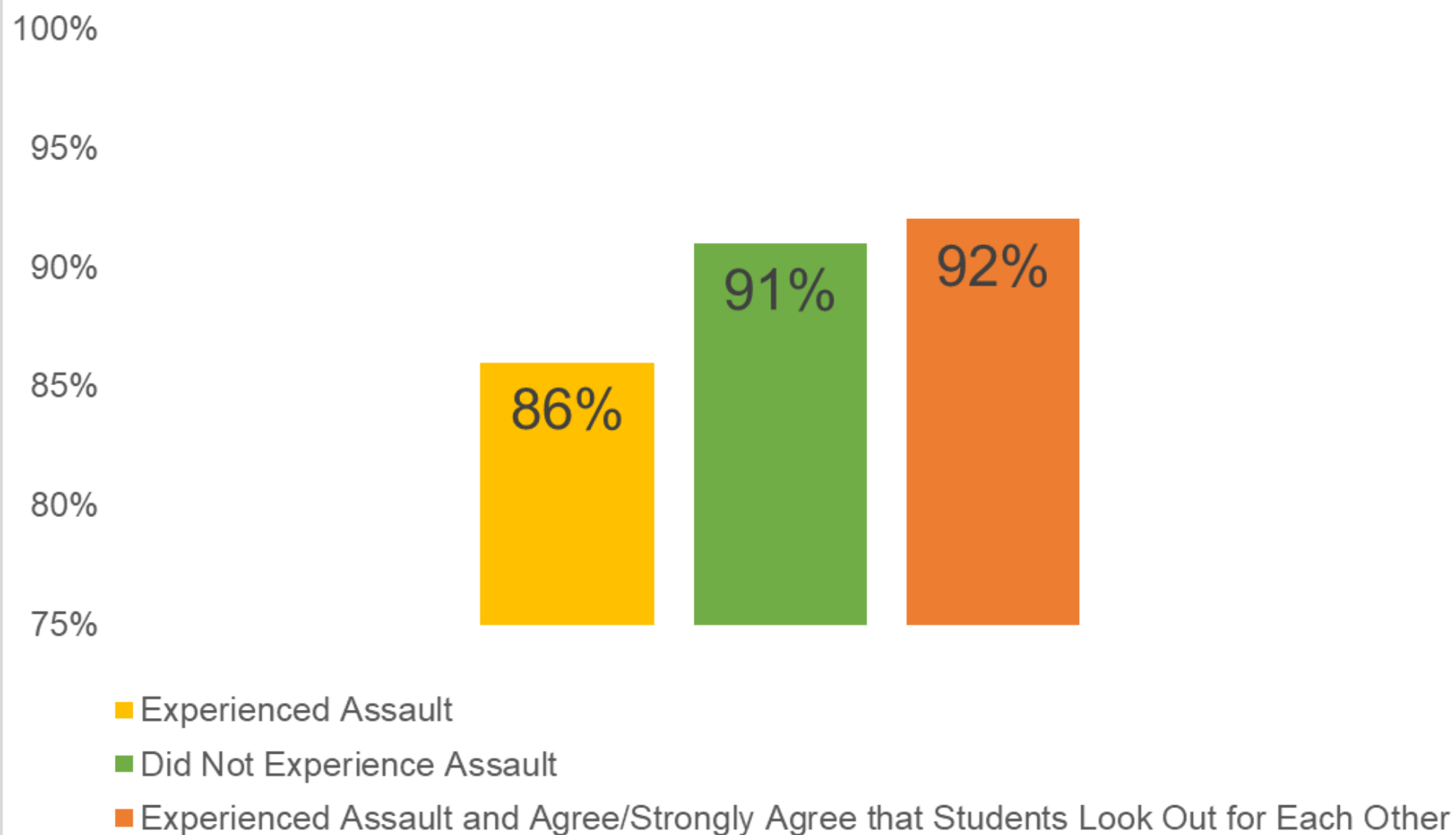


Percent retention of incoming 2024 women students to Fall 2025





Percent retention of incoming 2024 women students to Fall 2025



Looking out for each other

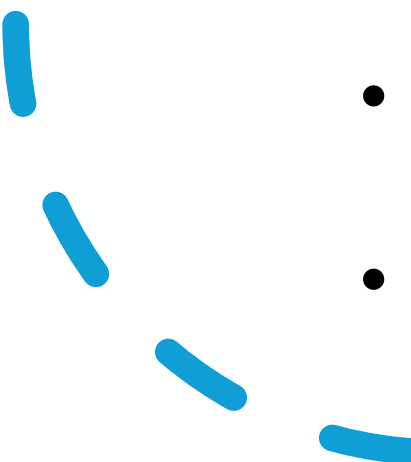
- Students are already doing this.
 - Ask how they are showing up for friends and peers.
 - Ask what makes helping difficult — what gets in the way.
 - Ask how they navigate those barriers — what strategies they use when helping is hard.
- Students readily identify both the obstacles and the workarounds.
- In group settings, this process does three important things:
 - It normalizes helping is “what we do here,”
 - It generates practical, peer-to-peer strategies.
 - The norm becomes mutual accountability.
- In 1:1 conversation with you, you are reflecting to the student, and the student is reflecting back to themselves.

Promising Strategies





Institutional Strategies: Design for belonging

- Shorten the orientation window
 - *Reduce time students spend disconnected before classes begin.*
 - Provide opportunities for students to connect in a non-drinking environment
 - *Students forge more reliable friendships outside of party contexts.*
 - Start classes on Thursday
 - *Reduce unstructured time.*
 - Establish norms around academic rigor
 - *Signal academic seriousness from day one.*
 - Residential Academic Communities
 - *Residence halls are where belonging can become mutual accountability.*
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Staff Strategies: Signal belonging

- **Cultivate mentoring relationships...**
 - *Invest in ongoing mentoring relationships with students you encounter most.*
- **Regularly share the value they bring...**
 - *Name the specific value a student brings—and your appreciation for it.*
- **Normalize that students can struggle...**
 - *and still belong in college (and at CU).*
- **Attend programs and events with your students...**
 - *It fosters connection with you and with their peers.*
- **Connect them with peers...**
 - *Actively broker peer connections.*
- **Help them access academic and wellness resources...**
 - *You don't need to know every available option—become familiar with the **Don't Ignore It** website.*
- **Attend an OVA workshop...**
 - *Augment your skills for responding well when students disclose a traumatic event.*
- **Help them recognize the ways they look out for each other...**
 - *Make mutual accountability visible.*



Faculty Strategies: Structure belonging

- **Collaborate on developing classroom community agreements...**
 - *Co-create rules, norms, and expectations.*
- **Assign meaningful work on the first weekend...**
 - *Signal purpose and rigor immediately.*
- **Build in early academic demand...**
 - *Provides an early warning and keeps students from falling behind.*
- **Help your students get to know each other *throughout* the semester...**
 - *Provides opportunities to break the ice and identify new friends and study peers.*
- **Scaffold study pairs and groups...**
 - *Establish new habits and expectations.*
- **Normalize that mastery takes time...**
 - *Normalize that competence develops through struggle.*
- **Be open about your own academic struggles...**
 - *Model intellectual humility.*
- **Highlight mutual accountability...**
 - *Walk them through the ways they already look out for each other.*
- **Attend an OVA workshop...**
 - *Augment your skills for responding well to disclosures. Become familiar with **Don't Ignore It.***

Student Strategies: Practice belonging

- **Let your friends know they matter...**
 - *Tell your friends explicitly that they matter to you; let them know you depend on them.*
- **When going out, talk about who will stay more sober...**
 - *In case someone needs help.*
- **Think about all the ways you look out for people...**
 - *Reflect on what can make that challenging and how to deal with those challenges.*
- **Pay attention in new environments...**
 - *Be alert in unfamiliar spaces—vulnerability increases when norms are unclear.*
- **Look out for others and have a plan...**
 - *Stay connected and plan for how you'll regroup if you get separated.*
- **Learn and practice strategies for responding if a friend discloses a traumatic experience...**
 - *Check out the **Don't Ignore It** website for ideas on how to respond or attend an OVA workshop.*

Translate research into practice

- With a partner:
 - What is one small, repeatable action you can implement next fall?
 - Where could you make students' importance more explicit?
 - What structural barrier could we remove that quietly erodes belonging?

Thank you!

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