



**Learnings and inspiration
from the U.S.**

GENDER & DIVERSITY

- IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

Part of the project 'Designing a Happier
Student Life For Better Learning: International
experiences and capacity building'

**INNOVATION
CENTRE
DENMARK**

 **Ministry of Higher
Education and Science
Denmark**

DESIGNING A HAPPIER STUDENT LIFE

This case is a part of the project 'Designing a happier student life for better learning,' managed by the Danish Innovation Centres in Silicon Valley and Boston, and the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science.

About the project

"Designing a happier student life for better learning' is an internationally focused project on how to 'design' a better student life, increase student well-being and thus create optimal conditions for better learning. The project draws on the knowledge and experience of elite US universities working on the well-being agenda and leading experts in the field.

A growing body of evidence shows that student well-being is an essential element of education and overall student success. In a recent national survey of Danish students, 48% reported feeling stressed, and 22-26% felt that they were feeling lonely, which calls for action in both amending bad mental health and strengthening good mental health. Systematically working on improving mental health and building strong and healthy minds has a range of benefits for students personally and their learning, which is why the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science supports this project.

Via Innovation Centre Denmark in Silicon Valley and Innovation Centre Denmark in Boston, the international perspective and inspiration are integrated into the design of such initiatives by involving key US experts in the field and setting up partnerships for the Danish stakeholders

via:

- Capacity-building
- Knowledge-sharing
- Networks and partnerships

The project targets Danish Higher Education institutions, its students and relevant staff involved in student life and well-being, such as student counselors, faculty, and top management. You can read more about the project (in Danish) here: ufm.dk/designing-a-happier-student-life, where you can also find other cases (in English) and relevant material about the project's activities. If you like to get in touch with the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science about well-being to discuss the project further, you can mail trivsel@ufm.dk.

GENDER & DIVERSITY: IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

TAKE-AWAY POINTS

- Students have vastly different experiences of university life and learning spaces due to diversity in identities and background.
- The university context is often characterized by prevailing norms and sentiments, which can lead students to feel that they do not belong.
- Research shows that this results in achievement gaps and unhappiness across student populations, but particularly for minority and socially disadvantaged groups.
- Ultimately, educational equity suffers, if diverse and inclusive educational spaces is not addressed.
- Psychological interventions are tools that counter stereotypes and help create a more inclusive learning environment.

In most of the world, higher education is open and accessible to everyone, regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religious beliefs, and disabilities. Nonetheless, research shows a systematic performance gap for those students who do not experience a feeling of belonging or social connectedness in the educational system, despite being formally welcomed by their respective institutions and peers.

The performance gap belongs to the research field of Educational Equity, covering the study and measuring of achievement, fairness, and opportunity in education.

This article will present key findings and hands-on tools to improve Educational Equity, based on spearheading research from American universities, here among an exclusive Innovation Centre Denmark interview with Psychology Professor Greg Walton at the Department of Psychology, Stanford University.

Self-regulation, a key to well-being

Attending university is becoming a mainstream experience, with an increasingly diverse student composition pursuing degrees within various fields.

The diversity spurs new experiences and perceptions of learning spaces and university life in general, which can sometimes lead to feelings of not belonging. Especially the transition to university can alleviate negative emotions, which has consequences for students' self-regulating abilities.



In other words, academic performance and social life suffer when belonging is lacking, as social connectedness directly correlates with the student's ability to perform better.

According to psychology professors Greg Walton and Geoffrey Cohen from Stanford University, recognizing negative emotions are essential factor influencing performance.

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**“Thoughts and feelings matter.
They are powerful but invisible”**

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- Prof. Geoffrey Cohen, Stanford University

For the individual student, learning to reframe “bad” events can help develop new ways of understanding events. “Bad” in this context is subjective and a function of interpretations people draw to themselves, others, and their situations.

An example of such an event may be if you are a first-year college student spending Friday night alone. Some students may perceive this as an opportunity to rest, rather than interpreting it as an exclusion from the social scene. However, others might experience a Friday night alone as a social exclusion, which can be an upsetting experience.

How one makes sense of experiences and understands events can, therefore, positively or negatively affect one's well-being based on the framing that is used.

On the next page, Walton and Cohen present five principles that can help reframe “bad” events for the individual.

5 PRINCIPLES THAT CAN HELP TO REFRAME "BAD" EVENTS

1 ENCOURAGE POSITIVE LABELS

Encourage a positive view of oneself. Identify factors leading to the "bad" event, e.g., by acknowledging it is a common challenge that happens to many people. Dismiss and forestall negative labels about own future prospects and how others view oneself.

2 COMMUNICATE "YOU ARE NOT THE ONLY ONE"

Communicate "you are not the only one" and recognize others who have faced the same challenges and use their experiences to address those challenges productively.

3 ACKNOWLEDGE THE CHALLENGES AND DO NOT BLAME YOURSELF

Legitimize "bad" events as usual challenges that happen to many people and are not a reflection of their own deficits, such as laziness, lack of intelligence, etc.

4 FORECAST IMPROVEMENT

Emphasize the possibility for improvement, and focus on process as people can fear that adverse events forecast a fixed negative future.

5 RECOGNIZE OPPORTUNITIES

Represent aspects of "bad" events as an opportunity for growth and improvement.

Institutions role in "bad" events

For institutions, the principles offer an approach to learning how people from various backgrounds understand experiences and how the institution can change standard practices to improve outcomes for all.

The role of institutional context on educational equity

For an institution with a rich history that may date several decades back in time, the prevailing set of norms can have a negative impact on students that do not recognize themselves in the established context - often characterized by being white, male, heterosexual, and from affluent backgrounds.

According to Professor Geoffrey Cohen, the prevailing belief system of a person's context defines a person's behavior to a certain extent. This perceived context causes achievement gaps between those students who view themselves as fitting into the educational space and those who do not, often exacerbating existing social and economic inequalities.

The context and its framework are not the responsibility or in control of the individual. This responsibility is institutional, societal, and structural. The soil must be fertile for good seeds to grow. Therefore, institutions must pay attention to making the soil fertile and promote institutional contexts that will help students grow. However, the responsibility of the change of mindsets lays within the individual and can be promoted by context.

“Does this context afford a mindset change?”

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- Prof. Greg Walton, Stanford University

To avoid a negative impact on minority groups, Professor Greg Walton emphasizes the importance of asking, “Does this context afford a mindset change” when working towards improving educational equity.

The question implies using interventions as a helpful tool to counter stereotypes, challenge prevailing norms and foster a sense of belonging. The intervention can take place on different levels. On the collective level, leaders have the influence to change the belief system or prevailing group norm that characterizes a university setting. However, on the individual level, each student has the agency to challenge the present context, so everyday narratives become inclusive.

Offering a space where different experiences can be shared and acknowledged is, fortunately, often enough to create a sense of belonging and minimize negative emotions. However, there is sadly an increasing number of instances where the feeling of not belonging is more severe due to gender oppression and/or dismissing racism.

For the same reason, institutions play a crucial role in combatting events that provoke negative reactions, as they know better than anyone else when and where “bad” events occur. Therefore, by taking a formal approach to learning how people understand these experiences, institutions can develop systemic changes to standard practices that embrace and respect everyone.

Case: Innovation in Educational Equity at Harvard

Harvard University is another example of a university working on tangible community building and securing safe spaces where different experiences can be shared and discussed. According to Alexis Stokes, Associate Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer at Harvard University, it is essential that these discussions are facilitated across various disciplines, focusing on best practices and how they are implemented. Harvard University has recently implemented a new Innovation fund to ignite small projects in this space. It can be grants to fund video series, art exhibitions, gender-free bathrooms, or support to specific minority groups, to name a few examples.



As part of this effort, Harvard is working on various data and assessment tools to ensure the university is on the right track. Recently Harvard developed a new Inclusion index, and more of these data-driven tools will come.

The power of interventions

Ultimately, the goal with interventions is to change the achievement trajectory over time, allowing the increasingly diverse student population to start on somewhat equal footing regarding their academic path, future career, and life.

Specifically, working with what Professors Cohen and Walton refer to as “wise” psychological interventions can help institutions function more effectively in terms of diversity and inclusion.

“Wise” interventions generally address how people make sense of themselves, others, or social situations and focus on mindsets rather than specific “bad” events. The interventions possess an extraordinary power as they address a breadth of mindsets and help shape how people interpret and respond to whole classes of experiences.

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Ultimately, the racial achievement gap between White and African American students was cut in half over the next three years after the intervention, emphasizing the immense impact of feelings and mindset on performance.

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The practice of interventions is already a part of the culture at Stanford.

For instance, Stanford held a one-hour-long intervention for African American Students, where challenges to belonging in transition to college were presented as normal and improving over time. The intervention helped to change how the students interpreted their daily social events, so experiences such as difficulty making friends, receiving critical feedback, and being homesick was not a manifestation of not belonging but rather were a sign of them belonging to all the other students in transition who were feeling the same. Ultimately, the

racial achievement gap between White and African American students was cut in half over the next three years after the intervention, emphasizing the immense impact of feelings and mindset on performance.



Institutional obligations going forward

Given the power of mindset interventions, teaching students how to reframe “bad” events may seem obsolete. However, although “wise” interventions can be embedded productively in an institutional context, professors and other institutional actors cannot, on a day-to-day basis, reflect upon the belief systems with whom they interact. Instead, it is in the process of planning experiences and routine information – events or functions that rely on a prevailing set of norms – where educational equity can be improved.

For the same reason, institutions have a unique role and obligation to help their students make sense of their experiences. In other words, if institutions fail to help students make good sense of “bad” events, the achievement gap will not be improved, and educational equity not be achieved.

