The Faculty Conference session, "Students of Color at PLU: Belonging and Persistence" on September 3, 2015 addressed three questions: what is belonging and why is it important; do students of color feel like they belong at PLU; and how can faculty contribute to students' sense of belonging?

1.   What is belonging and why is it important?

Belonging refers to students' sense of being accepted, valued, and supported in an educational setting. It is about being **valued as an integral part of a community**. Encouraging student belonging means doing more than welcoming students as guests to an existing community; it means creating a culture that sees the needs of all students as equally important and creating educational conditions that support the success of all students.

Belonging is important in higher education because it is directly related to student persistence. Researchers have found that the strongest predictors of persistence are students' (1) level of integration into the "social and intellectual fabric of an institution"; (2) commitment to the institution; and (3) commitment to the goal of earning a college degree (Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods 2007). Belonging is a central part of these processes.

Students' sense of belonging can be encouraged in both curricular and co-curricular realms of university experiences. Curricularly, course content, classroom experiences, and interactions with faculty can either enhance or undermine student belonging. Co-curricularly, students are influenced by residential experiences, interactions with peers, and events and activities on campus. This presentation focuses on curricular experiences.

2.   Do students of color feel like they belong at PLU?

Data on retention and graduation show that students of color are less likely to return to PLU for a second year and less likely to graduate within four or six years. This is especially true for African American, Asian American, and Native American students.

One of the challenges in investigating these trends is the small number of students in each of the non-white racial-ethnic categories. For example, the 2013 graduation data presented by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* is based on only 17 Black students and 10 American Indian students. An idiosyncratic experience by only one or two of these students will significantly affect the overall rates. Of course, the fact that the number of students in each of these groups is so small is one of the central problems shaping the experiences of students of color at PLU.

To better understand why these retention and graduation rates vary by race/ethnicity, we can look at data that focus on students' subjective experiences at PLU. We have three main sources for this: the 2012 Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI), the 2012 Diverse Learning Environments Survey (DLE); and annual MAP-Works survey. The SSI and DLE were given to samples of PLU students, which exacerbates the problem of small category sizes. However, multiple years of MAP-Works data can be combined to allow for more detailed analysis of the student experience across racial-ethnic categories.

The good news from these data sources is that **students are satisfied with the academic climate on campus**. They are satisfied with our academic excellence, course content, faculty knowledge and support, opportunity for intellectual growth, empowerment to learn, and academic advising.

The not-so-good news is that **students of color, particularly African American students, report lower levels of belonging to the PLU community**. For example, the DLE survey found that African American students are more likely to report being singled out in class because of their race, feeling uncomfortable sharing perspectives in class, and being dissatisfied with the racial/ethnic diversity of faculty, staff, and students. Similarly, the SSI found that African American students were disappointed with PLU's commitment to racial harmony. (Again, because of small sample sizes, we should interpret these findings only in the context of broader institutional knowledge and other data sources.)

Analysis of two years of MAP-Works data (fall 2013 and fall 2014) shows that African American students, but not other students of color, report significantly lower levels of belonging than White students. **This difference persists after controlling for first generation status, commuter status, gender, and high school GPA**. Thus, the differences in Black and White students' reported belonging cannot be explained away by these other factors. **Race, itself, matters.**

Further analysis revealed that sense of belonging is the mechanism through which Black students report lower levels of learning and weaker intentions to return to PLU the following year. In other words, when Black students feel like they belong, they are as likely as other students to report high levels of learning and strong intentions to return to PLU. **Thus, belonging is an important point of intervention to improve the educational experiences of African American students, and other students of color, at PLU.**

3. How can faculty contribute to students' sense of belonging?

Experiences with faculty are one of the strongest ways to support student belonging. National research has shown that, for all students, having "significant contact" with faculty in the first few weeks of a semester increases persistence. Other research shows that **interactions with faculty members are especially important for the learning experiences and overall academic satisfaction of students of color.**

What can faculty do? Faculty can foster an **environment of equity**, creating learning conditions that support all students. They can **design course materials mindfully and use inclusive practices**, incorporating diverse voices, materials, and pedagogies. Faculty can also be **thoughtful with language**, talking with students about why they use the language they do and encouraging students to reflect on their own language use and its implications. Faculty should **address microaggressions** when they observe them. Finally, faculty should do the hard work of **self-reflection and self-education** to be better educators for all of their students.