

CREATING BELONGING

Equity and Inclusion

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

What would it look like if we claimed a shared humanity and replaced what currently exists with an environment in which youth of color know they belong and are given all the privileges and opportunities we give to those who are already in “the circle of human concern?”

Research has shown that a sense of *belonging* has demonstrable positive effects on our physical and mental health. Belonging shapes our civic engagement, our sense of entitlement to what society has to offer and our own sense of self-worth. When we are acutely aware that we don't belong or are not welcomed and instead feel isolated, opportunities are missed and dreams are deferred.

History has demonstrated that one of the most effective tactics for excluding a group of people from having the same opportunity or resources is to “other” them — to create a societal belief that they are different, and therefore less than, everyone else. That means less capable, less intelligent, less moral, less human and less deserving of the service and protection of our shared institutions.

John A. Powell, a leading scholar on race equity and the director of the Othering & Belonging Institute at University of California, Berkeley and close partner in the Foundation's Equity and Inclusion work, has described the root of racial, ethnic and religious conflict exploding across the globe as a problem of “*othering*.” He defines othering as the systems of individualism, isolation and racialization that underpin pervasive and perpetual disparities. He posits that to counter these tactics, we must identify and advocate for interventions that foster and promote “*belonging*.” What's needed are new inclusive structures, new identities and new narratives that will help us to expand, as Powell calls it, “the circle of human concern.”

Creating belonging at the institutional level requires real ownership by those who have been othered by the institution. Otherwise, structural racism will continue to shape our institutions just as policies such as mandatory minimum prison sentences and redlining practices in real estate have effectively dictated who can prosper and who will struggle for generations.

Typically, the effort to shift such entrenched systems and institutions requires tireless, undervalued labor by those who have been oppressed and othered by those very institutions. What if we could create better pathways for groups that have experienced oppression to reshape institutions and systems to better reflect and address their needs? What if these institutions could be reimaged and rebuilt in forms that fundamentally foster and affirm equity and belonging — especially among young people of color?

Belonging is a fundamental human need, especially critical for teenagers in the midst of forming their identities, and a key ingredient to produce equitable outcomes. It's difficult to talk about belonging without addressing identity and culture, and its role in how we see ourselves and treat each other. So how do we achieve this belonging? And how do we address identity and culture?

To achieve better results for youth of color, we are going to have to think imaginatively and act inclusively and more equitably.

In 2019, leveraging the curb cut theory,¹ the Foundation's Equity and Inclusion team engaged youth of color, elders, thought leaders and youth movement organizers to define what it would take to create a truly inclusive environment in which young people feel they belong. The Foundation's hope for this work is to learn from organizations advancing innovative strategies that propel youth of color forward and promote their right to belong and to bring ideas to the surface that would radically change the current infrastructure for young people.

¹ Coined by Angela Glover Blackwell, PolicyLink:
https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_curb_cut_effect

IN OUR CONVERSATIONS, WE HEARD AND EXPERIENCED SEVEN CORE ELEMENTS OF WHAT CHARACTERIZES "BELONGING:"

EXTRAVAGANT WELCOME: YOU BELONG!

Ceremony that acknowledges and invites young people to bring their whole selves into a space.

BEING SEEN

Indigenous youth feel invisible and desire to be seen for who they are. African Americans feel they are seen but in a negative way; their desire is to be seen differently.

BEING AFFIRMED

Whiteness is affirmed in every aspect of life. Youth of color are looking for affirmation.

CULTURE

Affirmation is steeped in culture and it is culture that helps Black and indigenous youth see themselves in a positive frame free of racism. Their identities are affirmed by hearing and learning of the contributions, power and resiliency of their people. All young people need to be seen and their identity affirmed, no matter how different.

BEING HEARD

This space makes time for young people's stories, questions, ideas and ways of expressing themselves. What they have to say is of value.

SELF-DETERMINATION

Feeling a sense of agency to control your individual outcomes and create change in your environment is deeply connected to positive youth development.

FOCUS ON WELL-BEING

Organizations and institutions hold themselves accountable for well-being measures for belonging, thriving and flourishing. Assessments would capture data on a young person's connection to land, nature, community and culture.