WELCOME!

Our first Climate Survey Report explored feelings of belonging at UMass, and how foundational it is to individuals’ overall well being and success. This report, centered on Connection and Friendships, digs a bit deeper into the relationships we have on the campus – both with the institution, and with one another. These connections shape our access to resources for success, how valued and supported we feel, how closely tied we are to the wider community, and often, the degree to which we are able to engage with diversity.

The years following the 2016 Campus Climate Survey saw a significant level of polarization across communities in the U.S., and the effects of that polarization were felt on this campus as well. For the 2021 survey we introduced a series of questions to better understand the relationships that people had with those of different backgrounds and identities; to provide a glimpse into whether and how people bridge common (and often politicized) social divides. One observable trend showed that members of underrepresented groups were generally more likely to have friends from different social backgrounds, while identity groups with greater campus representation tended toward greater homogeneity in their social circles.

We hope you find this toolkit informative and instructive as you seek to understand, reflect upon, and respond to this data on connectedness and friendships at UMass.

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SURVEY QUESTIONS

At UMass Amherst, how connected do you feel to...

- Your department or program? Other students? One or more faculty members? (all students)
- Your college/school? One or more staff members? (undergraduate students)
- Your advisor or dissertation chair? (graduate students)
- Your specific work unit or department? Other staff members? (staff)
- Your department or program? Your college/school? Other faculty members? (faculty)
- UMass Amherst overall? (all)

Considering your five closest friends or acquaintances at UMass Amherst, how many of them are a different...

- Gender?
- Sexual orientation?
- Race/ethnicity?
- Socioeconomic background?

KEY FINDINGS

Overall survey results support the idea that one’s sense of belonging hinges on connection to peers and colleagues.

One positive finding is that vast majorities of both students and faculty reported that at least one of their five closest friends at UMass Amherst is of a gender different from their own, and that at least one is of a different race/ethnicity.

Undergraduate Students

- Undergraduates who are affiliated with student organizations or serve in leadership roles were more likely to report a positive sense of belonging
- Feelings of connection are somewhat lower for Black students, students with mobility and mental health-related disabilities, and transfer students

Graduate Students

- The highest level of connectedness occurred in two areas: 49% reported feeling Very Connected to their advisor or dissertation chair, and 59% indicated that they feel Very Connected to their program/department
- Asian and International students reported greater levels of connection to their graduate department or program than their multiracial, Black, and Latinx peers

Staff

- 61% reported that they feel Very Connected to their department/unit and only 7% reported feeling Not Connected
- 86% of those in Executive, Administrative, and Managerial roles reported feeling Very Connected to their work unit or department, compared to 46% of Technical/Paraprofessional staff

Faculty

- Nearly one-third indicated that none of their close friends has a sexual orientation or class background different from their own
- 26% reported feeling Not Connected to other faculty members
- Nonbinary faculty and faculty who identified as having a disability reported lower levels of connectedness to both their department and college/school compared to their cisgender and non-disabled peers
QUESTIONS FOR SELF REFLECTION

- What is your initial response to this data? Which emotions do you notice? (Note: you may find this Feelings Inventory list helpful!)

Some common reactions to this type of information may include...

- Members of marginalized or minoritized groups most directly impacted might feel...
  - Affirmed to see their experiences reflected
  - Frustrated that this experience is not already common knowledge
  - Cautious/skeptical about the potential for change
  - Vigilant to see how others will respond

- Those not directly impacted, but who strive towards allyship might feel...
  - Surprise or sadness to learn that things are “worse than you realized”
  - Increasingly committed to advocate for positive change and growth
  - A sense of urgency to act immediately and fix every problem

- Those who have not yet had an opportunity (or obligation) to consider these topics might feel...
  - Disengaged — “what does this have to do with me anyway?”
  - Confused, impatient, or even irritated by others’ strong reactions
  - Embarrassed by a lack of knowledge or awareness

Remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel—all emotional responses are helpful information!

One fairly common response to climate survey data is an instinct to question the validity of the survey tools or outcomes before (or even instead of) deeply considering the findings themselves – and what they may reveal about our communities and ourselves. If you think you’ve noticed this type of deflection or defensiveness in yourself or others...

- How do you know? What does deflection look and sound like?
- Where do you think this defensiveness comes from? How is it trying to help or protect you? What can it teach us?
- What do you need in order to move through deflection and become available for reflection, especially with others? How will you ensure that these needs are met?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

- How do you personally define friendship? How can you tell the difference between an acquaintance and a friend? How do identity and experience influence your answer?

- Friends and acquaintances can serve as both mirrors of our own experience, as well as windows into different identities and perspectives. Which kinds of connections do you prioritize and why? What factors influence who is in your “inner circle”?

- Have you ever been part of a friendship where each individual had a different perception of the importance or closeness of that connection? How did you navigate communication with that person?
WHAT WE KNOW...AND WHAT WE DON'T

Across all four populations surveyed, participants were more likely to indicate uncertainty about the sexual orientations and socioeconomic backgrounds of their five closest friends than about their races/ethnicities and genders. Some possible explanations for this include:

**Visible vs Invisible Identities**
Some social identities, like race or age, may be more visibly apparent and easier to “guess” without being explicitly told. However, we are less likely to accurately ascertain other identities, such as class background, citizenship status, spirituality, etc., without having deeper discussions.

**Cisgender* and Heterosexual**
Simply put, dominant cultural norms in the U.S. support the idea that people are cisgender* and heterosexual unless proven otherwise. This is why the concept of “coming out” about one’s LGBTQ+ identity exists! Because many people have not had access to comprehensive, inclusive education about human sexuality, we may shy away from conversations about these aspects of identity. This not only prevents us from more fully knowing those around us, but also serves to uphold inaccurate and inequitable ideas about who is “normal” and who is “other”.

* Cisgender — having an internal sense of gender which is aligned with one’s sex assigned/assumed at birth

**Assumptions Based on Appearance**
While most survey participants self-reported more certainty about the gender makeup of their social circles than other identity markers, these assumptions may not always be accurate. One’s gender identity – their internal sense of gender – is not necessarily evidenced by or aligned with their gender expression, or how they communicate gender through clothing, speech, and other markers. The only way to know for sure how someone experiences and describes their unique gender is through conversation!

**Cultural Scripts & Values**
In mainstream U.S. culture, it is often considered rude to openly discuss one’s financial status and class background. Additionally, low-income and working class individuals and communities are often implicitly or overtly blamed for their socioeconomic status, despite numerous historical, ongoing systemic barriers which greatly impact class mobility. Interconnected themes of politeness and shame may help to explain why survey respondents were less likely to be certain about this aspect of their friends’ identity and experience.

As you engage with this data and toolkit, continue to reflect and consider: **Which other factors could be at play here?**

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONTINUED LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT

**Books:**
- Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community by Robert D. Putnam
- Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives by James H. Fowler and Nicholas A. Christakis

**Articles:**
- Why We Are Wired to Connect
- The Connection Crisis: Craving Friends At Work And How To Bring Back Belonging
- What Is the True Cost of Polarization in America?
- Political Polarization is About Feelings, Not Facts
- How Business Leaders Can Reduce Polarization

**Multimedia:**
- Podcast: Unlocking Us: Loneliness and Connection
- Video: Why Coalition Building is Necessary