

*Could a meaningful solution to increased retention
and graduation rates be as simple as...*

SMILE. GREET. ENGAGE.

*A Comprehensive, Research-Based
Guide for Transforming Campus Culture
through Human Connection*

with Practical Strategies for Faculty, Staff, Students, and Organizations

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Smile. Greet. Engage.

It is not everything. But it might be where everything begins.

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Executive Summary

American higher education faces a **loneliness crisis** of unprecedented proportions. According to Active Minds and TimelyCare (2024), nearly two-thirds (64.7%) of college students report feeling lonely, with students who feel lonely more than four times more likely to experience severe psychological distress. U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has declared loneliness a public health epidemic, noting that lacking social connection carries health risks comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes per day.

Yet the solution may be simpler than we imagine. Research consistently demonstrates that **brief, everyday social interactions** - a smile, a greeting, a moment of genuine engagement - can significantly **boost well-being, sense of belonging, and ultimately, student retention and graduation rates**. Sandstrom and Dunn (2014) found that students experienced greater happiness and greater feelings of belonging on days when they interacted with more classmates, even when those interactions were minimal. Brady and Gopalan's (2025) longitudinal analysis of 21,700 students established that first-year belonging predicts graduation four to six years later, with a one-point increase on a five-point belonging scale associated with a 3.4 percentage-point increase in four-year graduation rates.

This guide presents a **comprehensive framework for implementing "Smile, Greet, Engage" initiatives across college campuses**. Drawing on principles from the Disney Corporation's world-renowned hospitality training, evidence-based belonging interventions, and years of classroom implementation experience, it provides practical activities for faculty, staff, students, and organizations to transform campus culture through human connection.

The stakes could not be higher. When students feel invisible, they leave. When they feel seen, they persist. This guide offers the tools to ensure every member of your campus community feels acknowledged, valued, and connected.

Part One: The Invisible Campus

Walk across any college campus at midday. What do you see? Hundreds of people moving in parallel isolation. Earbuds in. Eyes down. Faces illuminated by screens. Bodies present, spirits elsewhere.

The Loneliness Epidemic in Numbers

The data paint a troubling picture. According to the 2024 national survey by Active Minds and TimelyCare of nearly 1,100 college students:

- **Nearly two-thirds of college students report feeling lonely**
- 28% feel isolated from others
- 23% feel left out
- 21% report lacking companionship
- LGBTQ+ students experience even higher rates of loneliness (70.3% vs. 60.6% for non-LGBTQ+ students)
- Students feeling lonely are more than 4x more likely to experience severe psychological distress

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2020) found that **first-year students intending to return scored notably higher on measures of belonging**. While 90% of students reported feeling comfortable being themselves on campus, only 80% felt valued by their institution - a significant gap that represents hundreds of thousands of students nationally who do not feel their institution values them as individuals.

The Belonging-Retention Connection

Research unequivocally links belonging to retention and graduation. Brady and Gopalan's (2025) longitudinal study of 21,700 students established that first-year sense of belonging predicts graduation four to six years later. A one-point increase on a five-point belonging scale was associated with a 3.4 percentage-point increase in four-year graduation and a 2.7 percentage-point increase in six-year graduation - effects that persisted even after controlling for high school achievement, demographics, and financial aid.

Walton and colleagues' (2023) landmark study in Science examined 26,911 students across 22 institutions and found that a brief online social-belonging intervention increased first-year completion rates, with particularly strong effects for historically underrepresented groups. Critically, the intervention worked only at institutions that

afforded opportunities for students to belong - suggesting that structural opportunities for connection must accompany individual-level interventions.

"The 'extraneous' material in this class, such as your "Expand Your Comfort Zone" assignments, has completely changed my college experience and, to be quite honest, my life. Because of these assignments, my social skills, self-confidence, and overall mental wellbeing have been changed for the better."

The Power of Micro-Interactions

If belonging matters so much, how is it built? Research increasingly points to the **cumulative power of brief, everyday social interactions** - what researchers call "weak ties" or "minimal social interactions."

Sandstrom and Dunn (2014), publishing in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, found that **students experienced greater happiness and greater feelings of belonging on days when they interacted with more classmates than usual**. These interactions did not need to be deep or prolonged - simple acknowledgments mattered. A 2023 study published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* found that even greeting or thanking someone was associated with higher life satisfaction, with effects that generalized across both Western and non-Western cultural contexts.

"I like the group work that we set to do in teams; through this I have made friends with classmates I never would have met before."

This research suggests a profound truth: belonging is not built solely through deep friendships or formal programs. **Belonging accumulates through hundreds of brief moments of acknowledgment** - a smile in the hallway, a greeting from a professor, a nod from a fellow student. When these **micro-interactions** are absent, students feel invisible. When they are present, students feel they belong.

"Classes that are overall engaging always leave a great impact on college students because we leave class having learned something about our peers, and we get to know potential lifelong friends."

Part Two: The Smile, Greet, Engage Framework

The "Smile, Greet, Engage" framework distills the science of belonging into three actionable behaviors that anyone - faculty, staff, students, administrators - can practice daily.

SMILE: The Foundation of Approachability

Smiling is **the universal signal of warmth and approachability**. Research shows that a genuine smile activates mirror neurons in observers, literally making them feel what you project. You are not just being pleasant - you are **creating neurological change in every person you encounter**.

- Smile before you know if someone will smile back
- Smile when entering any room - classroom, dining hall, office
- Maintain a pleasant, open expression even when walking alone
- Remember: a smile costs nothing but changes everything

"The more I smiled, the better I felt! It was nice to receive smiles back as well, especially when people look pleasantly surprised."

GREET: The Power of Acknowledgment

A simple "hello," "good morning," or nod of recognition breaks the bubble of isolation that surrounds so many students. Consider: how many people feel invisible on any given day? Your greeting might be the only acknowledgment someone receives. You are not just saying hello - **you are saying "I see you. You exist. You matter."**

- Acknowledge people in hallways, elevators, and common spaces
- Use simple greetings: "Hi," "Good morning," "How's it going?"
- Make eye contact before and during the greeting
- Do not let headphones or phones prevent acknowledgment

"Greetings like 'Hi, how are you?' or 'Good afternoon' seemed to put a smile on their faces. Some of these interactions actually led to some nice conversations about the upcoming weekend."

ENGAGE: Creating Connection

When time and context allow, engagement moves beyond acknowledgment to genuine connection. **Engagement is where relationships begin, opportunities emerge, and community forms.** Engagement requires asking questions and - critically - listening to the answers.

- Ask open-ended questions that show genuine interest
- Listen to understand, not to respond
- Follow up on previous conversations ("How did that exam go?")
- Remember and use names
- Be fully present - put away your phone



"I introduced myself to a guy in the hallway before my class and the next thing you know we are already making plans to go play beach volleyball over the Labor Day weekend. The fear factor that used to exist before I would introduce myself has quickly subsided."

"This class engaged my social skills, and I wish more professors would take this approach."

"I came into this class thinking that no one around me would want to talk to me or for me to talk to them and my self-confidence was essentially nonexistent. Exercises from this class helped me break that unhealthy cycle and escape the feeling of being stuck inside a cloud."

Part Three: Learning from The Disney Way

Walt Disney Corporation has spent decades perfecting the art of making every guest feel welcomed and valued. Their approach offers powerful lessons for higher education.

Disney's Service Philosophy: From Guidelines to Lasting Memories

When people reflect on a visit to Walt Disney World, the memories that linger are often not the thrill of Space Mountain or the grandeur of EPCOT's Spaceship Earth. Instead, what endures is something quieter and more human: the cast member who smiled at checkout, asked where they were from, showed genuine interest in their day, or offered a sincere compliment. These brief, personal interactions - often lasting less than a minute - are what transform a transactional moment into a memorable experience.

Disney institutionalizes this philosophy through its renowned "Traditions" training program, which introduces cast members to a set of service expectations commonly referred to as the Seven Service Guidelines, memorably tied to the Seven Dwarfs:

- *Be Happy*: Make eye contact and smile.
- *Be like Sneezy*: Greet and welcome every guest; hospitality is contagious.
- *Don't be Bashful*: Seek out guest contact rather than waiting passively.
- *Be like Doc*: Take ownership and provide immediate service recovery.
- *Don't be Grumpy*: Maintain positive, appropriate body language at all times.
- *Be like Sleepy*: Create dreams and protect the magic of the guest experience.
- *Don't be Dopey*: Thank each and every guest.

These standards are powerful, but Disney also recognizes an important truth: seven principles, while meaningful, can be difficult to recall consistently in fast-paced, real-world interactions. As a result, the essence of these guidelines can be distilled into something far more actionable and memorable - a simple service mantra:

Smile. Greet. Engage.

This simplification does not dilute the philosophy; it strengthens it. A genuine smile signals welcome. A warm greeting establishes connection. Meaningful engagement affirms that the guest matters. Together, these behaviors capture the spirit of Disney's service model in a way that is easy to remember and natural to practice.

The Guest Mindset

At the core of Disney's approach is not a checklist of behaviors, but a mindset. Cast members are trained to think of customers as guests - welcomed visitors to be cared for - rather than transactions to be processed. As former Disney trainer Dennis Snow explains, "Thinking of customers as guests helps to move away from a task mindset to a mindset focused on building relationships."

This shift in perspective is transformative. It reframes every interaction, no matter how routine, as an opportunity to create trust, warmth, and belonging.

Now imagine applying this philosophy to higher education:

- **Students viewed as honored guests, not enrollment statistics.**
- **Every interaction—advising, registration, financial aid, classroom exchanges - as a chance to create a positive, lasting impression.**
- **Faculty and staff serving as hosts who guide, support, and encourage.**
- **The campus designed not merely for instruction, but for connection, dignity, and care.**

In this light, institutional excellence is not measured solely by programs or facilities, but by how students feel when they are seen, welcomed, and engaged.

As Disney has long understood, it is often the smallest moments - executed with intention - that leave the greatest impact.

Disney Training Principles for Campus Application

Disney's "Traditions" training program offers specific techniques applicable to higher education:

- **Welcoming Presence:** Disney trainers are at the door welcoming every participant as they arrive. Faculty can adopt this by arriving early and greeting students at the classroom door.
- **Storytelling:** Disney uses stories to teach principles and build culture. Universities can share stories of connection, belonging, and student success.
- **Exceeding Expectations:** Disney trains employees to go beyond the minimum. A faculty member who remembers a student's name exceeds expectations.
- **The 10-5 Rule:** At Disney, when you're within 10 feet of a guest, you smile and make eye contact. Within 5 feet, you offer a greeting.

Part Four: Activities for Students

Students can practice connection skills individually, building confidence through graduated challenges.

Level 1: Foundation Building (Week 1-2)

- **The Smile Entry:** Before walking through any doorway - classroom, dining hall, library - pause for one second and consciously put a pleasant expression on your face. Enter as if you are genuinely happy to be there.
- **Hallway Acknowledgment:** Make eye contact with at least five people per day and give a simple nod or 'hey.' Track your progress - it's harder than you think.
- **The First Fifteen Challenge:** For the first fifteen minutes on campus each day, commit to greeting every single person you pass. No exceptions. No averting your eyes.
- **Phone-Free Walking:** Walk between classes without looking at your phone. Keep your head up and eyes available for connection.

Level 2: Initial Conversations (Week 3-4)

- **Pre-Class Connection:** Before class begins, turn to someone sitting near you and ask one question: 'Have you taken a class with this professor before?' or 'What made you choose this course?'
- **The Name Challenge:** Learn and use one new person's name every day. When you learn their name, use it: 'Nice to meet you, Marcus.' Next time: 'Hey Marcus, how's it going?'
- **Study Spot Conversation:** In the library or coffee shop, ask someone nearby: 'Is this seat taken?' followed by 'What are you working on?'
- **Compliment Challenge:** Give at least three genuine compliments in one day - to classmates, staff, or faculty.



Level 3: Building Relationships (Week 5-8)

- **Office Hours Visit:** Visit a professor's office hours with career questions (not just assignment questions): What drew you to this field? What do you wish you'd known starting out? What skills matter most?
- **Alumni Outreach:** Connect with three alumni on LinkedIn in your field of interest. Request 15-minute informational interviews. Follow up with handwritten thank-you notes.
- **The Follow-Up:** Reference previous conversations when you see someone: 'How did that project turn out?' or 'Did you try that restaurant you mentioned?'
- **Say Yes Challenge:** Say 'yes' to an activity another person invites you to - an event, club meeting, or social gathering you would normally decline.

Level 4: Community Building (Ongoing)

- **No One Eats Alone:** Designate one day per month to sit with someone eating alone. Simply ask: 'Mind if I join you?'
- **Connection Ambassador:** Train yourself to spot people who look lost, lonely, or uncertain. Approach proactively: 'You look like you might be looking for something - can I help?'
- **Bridge Builder:** Introduce two people who might benefit from knowing each other. Be the connector in your network.

The Four Trials: An Icebreaker for Overcoming Fear of Judgment

The "Four Trials" is an in-class activity designed to help students overcome fear of judgment while building immediate connections with classmates. It addresses one of the most common barriers to connection: social anxiety.

Research shows that 40% of the population experiences anxiety about meeting new people, and 61% of college students fear public speaking. The Four Trials normalizes this discomfort by having everyone experience it together, creating shared vulnerability that paradoxically builds connection.

Trial One: Meet Your Teammates

After watching a short video, "Big Talk" by Kalina (on YouTube), students interview team members to discover:

- Name and hometown
- Activities, sports, clubs, organizations
- Personal interests
- "The best thing about this university is ..."
- "My 'perfect day' would be ..."
- "If I had one day to live, I would ..."
- "My greatest fear about college or my career is ..."
- "One thing others typically don't know about me is ..."

Trial Two: Smile, Greet, and Walk Tall

As a group, students walk through building hallways while:

- Smiling at all times;
- Greeting any faculty or staff members encountered;
- Maintaining confident posture ("walking tall"); and
- Making eye contact with everyone they pass.

Trial Three: Public Speaking Challenge

Students "shout out" a success tip or affirmation to the class. After each shout-out, the class responds with "HOO RAH!" in support. Example statements include:

- "When you see something that you fear - run toward it as fast as you can - because life is beautiful on the other side."
- "Until you spread your wings, you will have no idea how far you can fly."
- "I possess the qualities needed to be extremely successful."
- "Never, never, never, never give up." - Winston Churchill

Trial Four: Interview a Stranger

Students approach someone they do not know elsewhere on campus and engage in a meaningful conversation using suggested questions:

- Major or occupation?
- What do you like most about this university?
- If you could do one thing before you died, what would it be?
- What are you thankful for at this very moment?
- What is your favorite hobby or activity?

"I know some of these tasks might come by easy to some people, but they were hard ones for me. I realize that stepping outside your comfort zone not only builds strength, but it also helps you realize things about yourself you would have never known if you didn't do the unusual."

Expand Your Comfort Zone Activities

Beyond the Four Trials, students can choose from a menu of activities that challenge them to grow in different dimensions.

Social Connection Activities

- **Speak Up in Class:** Ask a question or share a comment when you normally would remain silent. Go above and beyond required participation.
- **Join a New Organization:** Attend one full meeting of a club you've never visited. You need not continue, but exposure matters.
- **Karaoke Performance:** Perform at a karaoke event. The vulnerability builds confidence.
- **Random Acts of Kindness:** Perform three random acts of kindness in one day - holding doors, offering help, leaving encouraging notes.

- **Sit with Someone Alone:** In any dining area, find someone eating alone and ask to join them. Then interview them - find out about their life.

"I really enjoy the expand your comfort zone assignments. They have been really unique and helpful to do for confidence boosting and helping be successful in classes."

Digital Wellness Activities

A 2025 JAMA study found that young adults who reduced social media use for one week experienced 16% reduction in anxiety, 25% reduction in depression, and 15% reduction in insomnia.

- **Social Media Disconnect:** Disconnect from all social media for 48 hours. Let others know in advance.
- **Screen-Free Week:** Unplug from TV, Netflix, and video games for one entire week.
- **Phone-Free Day:** Turn off your phone for one entire day (notify others first).
- **Phones-Down Meal:** At a meal with friends, everyone places phones face-down on the table. First person to check pays the tip.

"The first 2 days were not easy at all. I struggled to stay engaged with other things because I was thinking I was missing out on something on my phone. But by the 3rd and 4th day it was easier because I realized that I was doing just fine without checking on my socials or doom scrolling."

Gratitude and Emotional Intelligence Activities

Research shows gratitude interventions produce 6.86% higher life satisfaction and 5.77% better mental health outcomes (Cunha et al., 2023).

- **Express Gratitude:** Thank a friend or family member for their ongoing support - in person, via FaceTime, or by phone call. (Caution: very powerful activity!)
- **Gratitude App:** Download and use a gratitude app for two weeks straight.
- **Forgiveness Journal:** Write a journal entry forgiving someone for something they did. You need not share it with them.
- **Self-Compassion Day:** Let go of all negative self-judgment for an entire day.
- **Seek Support:** Obtain counseling at your campus counseling center. Normalize help-seeking.

"I called my papa to thank him for his support. I'm the first granddaughter to navigate college in our family. My papa isn't one for tears, but when I thanked him for his support, he got very emotional. This was a very powerful activity."

"As a result of all these experiences, I have realized how important it is to step outside your comfort zone. I never realized how much you could be missing out on when you stay within your safe day-to-day routine. Although not every experience was a pleasant one, I still enjoyed all of these exercises."

"The fear factor that used to exist before I would introduce myself has quickly subsided due to these expand your comfort zone activities."

"I feel that doing things which are uncomfortable can make life more worthwhile."

"I came into this class thinking that no one around me would want to talk to me or for me to talk to them and my self-confidence was essentially nonexistent. Exercises from this class helped me break that unhealthy cycle and escape the feeling of being stuck inside a cloud."

"My suggestion is simply to never omit them from the course curriculum. The 'Expand Your Comfort Zone' activities were the most beneficial part of taking this course, and I am very fortunate to be able to express how important those assignments were to me."

Part Five: Implementation for Student Organizations

Greek organizations, athletic teams, clubs, bands, and other student groups have **enormous power to transform campus culture**. When **connection** becomes organizational identity, it **spreads exponentially**.

Organizational Culture Shift

Frame Smile, Greet, Engage to members this way:

"The skills that will make you successful in your career and life are not just learned in classrooms. They are practiced in hallways, dining halls, and chance encounters. Every time you smile at someone who looks lonely, greet someone you don't know, or engage someone in conversation, you're not just helping them - you are training yourself for the interviews, the client meetings, the team dynamics, and the relationships that will define your future."

"I personally think these are the most important assignments I've ever done in all my education. They are more important for developing real life skills rather than just completing an assignment."

Meeting Welcome Protocols

How leaders greet arriving members and visitors signals organizational culture:

- **Door Greeters:** Assign two members to stand at the entrance, smile, greet everyone by name, and welcome newcomers personally.
- **New Member Introduction:** When visitors or new members attend, pause the meeting for personal introductions. Have each person share their name and one interesting fact.
- **Connection Buddies:** Pair new members with established members for their first three meetings.
- **Pre-Meeting Mingling:** Start meetings 10 minutes early with music and encouraged socializing - no business until the official start time.
- **Post-Meeting Follow-Up:** Text or email every visitor within 24 hours thanking them for attending.

Inter-Organizational Competitions

Create friendly competition around connection:

- **Connection Challenge Week:** Track documented greetings and conversations across organizations. Award the most connected organization.
- **No One Sits Alone Day:** Challenge organizations to ensure no one in the dining hall sits alone for one designated day. Assign members to community tables.
- **Cross-Org Mixers:** Partner with a different organization each month for joint social events. Break silos.
- **Campus-Wide Smile Day:** Coordinate with Student Government to declare an official Smile, Greet, Engage day with participation tracked by organization.
- **Random Acts Competition:** Challenge organizations to document random acts of kindness. Share stories and award winners.

Community Tables in Dining Halls

The "No One Eats Alone" initiative, now sponsored by the Sandy Hook Promise Foundation, has reached over 1.5 million students nationally. Adapt it for your campus:

- **Designate Tables:** Work with dining services to create clearly marked "Community Tables" where anyone can sit to find conversation.
- **Table Hosts:** Schedule organization members to sit at community tables during peak hours, welcoming anyone who joins.
- **Conversation Starters:** Place cards with icebreaker questions on community tables.
- **Monthly Events:** Host one *No One Eats Alone Day* per month with special activities and incentives.

"This is actually my favorite part of the month and my school year. To me, it means that you can bring more people together and that people can start making new friends if they really want to."

Words and Phrases for Student Engagement

Students often struggle not with willingness to connect, but with knowing what to say. Here are tested conversation starters:

For Fellow Students:

- "I'm [name] - I don't think we've met. What's your major?"
- "That's a great [laptop sticker/shirt/bag] - what's the story behind it?"

- "How's your semester going so far?"
- "What's keeping you busy these days?"
- "Have you found any good spots on campus to study?"
- "What are you most looking forward to this week?"
- "What brought you to this university?"
- "Mind if I join you?"
- "What class is this for?" (when seeing someone studying)
- "Any fun plans for the weekend?"

For Professors and Faculty:

- "What drew you to this field originally?"
- "What advice would you give someone considering this career path?"
- "What's the most interesting development in your field right now?"
- "Is there anything you wish you'd known when you were starting out?"
- "What skills do you think are most important for success in this profession?"

For Staff:

- "I see you around a lot - what department are you with?"
- "What are some of the things you do?"
- "How long have you been working here?"
- "What's been a bright spot in your week?"

For Anyone, Anywhere:

- "I don't think we've met - I'm [name]."
- "That looks interesting - what are you working on?"
- "How's your day going?"
- "I like your [specific item] - where did you get it?"

Part Six: Implementation for Faculty

Students who fear judgment will not engage. Faculty can create classrooms where risk-taking feels safe by establishing explicit norms:

- **It's okay to speak up:** There are no stupid questions. Every question benefits someone else who was afraid to ask.
- **It's okay to make mistakes:** Errors are learning opportunities. We celebrate the attempt.
- **Effort is what matters:** Participation is graded on willingness to engage, not perfection of response.
- **We support each other:** When someone speaks, we listen with respect. We build on ideas rather than tear them down. If we are presenting as a team, we back each other up.
- **We don't judge each other:** This classroom is a judgment-free zone. What's shared here stays here.
- **We have each other's back:** If you see someone struggling, offer help. We succeed together.

First-Day Icebreakers

- **Two Truths and a Lie:** Students share three statements about themselves; classmates guess which is false.
- **Name Tent Questions:** Students write their name on a folded card along with answers to 2-3 questions that others can see and reference.
- **Pair and Share:** Students interview the person next to them for 3 minutes, then introduce their partner to the class.
- **Common Ground:** In small groups, students find five things everyone has in common (beyond being students at this university).
- **The Four Trials:** Use the Four Trials activity described earlier as a first-week icebreaker.

Daily Practices

- **Doorway Greeting:** Arrive early and stand at the door. Greet each student by name as they enter.
- **Name Investment:** Learn names within the first two weeks. Use a seating chart, name tents, or photos to accelerate learning.
- **Pre-Class Connection:** Use the five minutes before class starts to chat with students about their lives, not just coursework.
- **Good News Great Day:** Begin each class by asking if anyone has good news to share. Celebrate wins together.
- **Hallway Recognition:** Greet students you recognize across campus. A simple 'Hi Sarah, how did that exam go?' makes a lasting impression.
- **Personal Office Hours:** Dedicate office hour time to knowing students as people, not just answering assignment questions.

The Power of Names

Cooper and colleagues (2017) found that 78% of students perceived their instructor knew their name when only 53% actually did - suggesting **students deeply value name recognition**. Romney (2025) found that instructor name recognition predicts classroom belonging, with underrepresented minority students having lower perceptions of being known.

Strategies for learning names quickly:

- Use name tents for the first several weeks;
- Take photos with names on the first day;
- Use a seating chart and call on students by name;
- Review names before each class;
- Use names when responding to questions or comments; and
- Remember one personal fact about each student.

"Having changed majors, I felt like I restarted college the way I started initially, but Dr. Bear's lessons about life and what truly matters helped push me to reconnect with old friends, make new friends, introduce those friends to grow new connections, and step out of my comfort zone whenever possible."

Part Seven: Implementation for Staff and Administrators

For Staff Members

Staff interactions often determine whether students feel the institution values them:

- **See People, Not Transactions:** The student across from your desk isn't an interruption. They are the reason you're here.
- **The Three-Second Rule:** Within three seconds of seeing someone, make eye contact, smile, and offer a greeting.
- **Learn the Regulars:** Know the students who study in 'your' building or get coffee at 8 AM. Greet them by name.
- **Warm Transfer Protocol:** When directing someone elsewhere, don't just point. Walk with them partway and/or call ahead to introduce them.
- **Follow-Up Outreach:** After helping a student with a complex issue, follow up to see how things resolved.
- **Colleague Connection:** Greet fellow staff members too. Staff can feel just as invisible as students.

For Administrators

- **Walk Your Campus:** Walk slowly. Make eye contact. Stop and talk. Don't rush between meetings.
- **Model the Behavior:** Greet the facilities worker. Chat with the student waiting for the elevator. If you want a connected campus, be connected.
- **Champion the Initiative:** Make Smile, Greet, Engage part of new employee orientation. Recognize those who exemplify it.
- **Create Infrastructure:** Establish community tables in dining halls, welcoming spaces in buildings, and programs that bring people together.
- **Presidential Communication:** Include belonging and connection in presidential messages. Articulate the institutional commitment.

Institutional Implementation Phases

Phase 1: Foundation (Months 1-3)

- Establish baseline belonging data through campus climate survey
- Form cross-functional implementation team (faculty, staff, students, administration)
- Develop training materials and messaging
- Pilot in selected departments or colleges

Phase 2: Launch (Months 4-6)

- Presidential communication announcing initiative
- Staff and faculty training sessions
- Student ambassador program launch
- First campus-wide Smile, Greet, Engage Day
- Community table installation in dining halls

Phase 3: Intensification (Months 7-12)

- Mid-year survey to assess progress
- Integration into performance expectations where appropriate
- Recognition program for exemplary connectors
- Expansion to all departments and student organizations

Phase 4: Sustainability (Year 2+)

- Integration into strategic plan and institutional identity
- New employee and new student orientation inclusion
- Longitudinal analysis of retention and belonging data
- Continuous improvement based on feedback

Part Eight: The Research Foundation

The **Smile, Greet, Engage framework** is built on a substantial body of research spanning psychology, education, and neuroscience.

Belonging and Student Success

Brady, S. T., & Gopalan, M. (2025). Longitudinal study of 21,700 students establishing that first-year belonging predicts graduation 4-6 years later. A one-point increase on a 5-point belonging scale was associated with 3.4 percentage-point increase in 4-year graduation.

Walton, G. M., et al. (2023). Science study of 26,911 students showing brief social-belonging intervention increased first-year completion. Effects were stronger for historically underrepresented groups and generalized across 22 institutions.

Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2011). Brief belonging intervention raised African American GPAs and halved the achievement gap over three years, with improved health outcomes.

Micro-Interactions and Well-Being

Sandstrom, G. M., & Dunn, E. W. (2014). Published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, found students experienced greater happiness and belonging on days with more interactions with weak ties (acquaintances).

Aşçıgil et al. (2023). Social Psychological and Personality Science study showing minimal interactions like greeting and thanking others were associated with greater life satisfaction across cultural contexts.

The Loneliness Crisis

Active Minds & TimelyCare (2024). National survey finding 64.7% of college students report feeling lonely; students feeling lonely 4x more likely to experience severe psychological distress.

Murthy, V. (2023). U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on loneliness and isolation, declaring a public health epidemic with health risks comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes daily.

Name Recognition

Cooper, K. M., et al. (2017). Found 78% of students perceived instructor knew their name when only 53% actually did; 30.6% said name recognition made them feel valued.

Romney, J. (2025). Established that instructor name recognition predicts classroom belonging, with URM students having lower perceptions of being known.

Digital Wellness

Calvert, S., et al. (2025). JAMA study showing young adults (18-25) who reduced social media use for one week experienced 16% reduction in anxiety, 25% reduction in depression, and 15% reduction in insomnia.

Fear of Judgment

Dwyer, K. K., & Davidson, M. M. (2012). Found 61% of college students fear public speaking, second only to death. Fear of judgment underlies most social anxiety in college settings.

National Institute of Mental Health. Reports public speaking anxiety (glossophobia) affects approximately 40% of the population, with underlying fear being negative evaluation by others.

Conclusion: The Ripple Effect

When you smile at someone, they are statistically more likely to smile at the next person they see. Warmth spreads. Connection multiplies.

We spend enormous resources on retention initiatives, mental health services, and community-building programs. All valuable. All necessary. **But what if our most powerful intervention was simply seeing each other?**

Picture two versions of your campus:

Campus A: People walk with eyes down, earbuds in, focused on the next destination. The dining hall hums with the sound of individual screens. Students sit in class, leave class, and never learn each other's names. Faculty close office doors. Staff feel invisible. Everyone is on campus but no one feels like they belong to it.

Campus B: People catch each other's eyes and nod. A professor stops to ask a student about their weekend. A custodian knows the names of students who study late in 'her' building. The dining hall has a table where anyone can sit if they want conversation. New students are greeted by upperclassmen who remember what it felt like to be lost. The campus feels alive.

The difference between these campuses is not resources, geography, or prestige. It is culture. And culture is built one interaction at a time.

Smile. Greet. Engage.

It is not everything. But it might be where everything begins.

What would change on your campus if everyone adopted this mantra?

What's stopping you from starting today?

About the Author

Ron A. Rhoades, JD, CFP® is an associate professor of finance at Western Kentucky University's Gordon Ford College of Business, where he teaches courses in personal finance, applied investments, and financial planning.

A fee-only personal financial advisor and NAPFA member (and former member of its national Board of Directors), he operates Scholar Financial through the XY Investment Solutions, LLC, in partnership with Chris Brown, Ph.D., CFP®. Ron has served on numerous professional committees and task forces.

His career has spanned roles as a practicing attorney specializing in estate planning, trust administration, and fiduciary duties. He is an investment adviser and educator dedicated to evidence-based investing principles. He has been a frequent speaker at national conferences, and he has been extensively quoted in national publications.

Ron has provided testimony on Capitol Hill and visited various government agencies numerous times in his public advocacy efforts in support of the fiduciary standard of conduct for the delivery of financial planning and investment advice.

Professor Rhoades has also authored extensive educational content across multiple manuscripts, including works on the science of investing, estate planning, personal finance, student success, and life skills development.

Before entering academia, Ron's journey took him through remarkably diverse experiences that inform his teaching philosophy. He sailed on the USCGC Eagle, marched in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, rowed crew, and performed as Disney characters. He also performed a memorable stint as the Tin Man at the Land of Oz theme park. These experiences taught him that growth happens outside one's comfort zone, a principle he now instills in his students through innovative pedagogical approaches.

Ron is passionate about helping students develop not just financial literacy, but the interpersonal skills, confidence, and human connections that lead to flourishing careers and meaningful lives. He believes that education should transform students - and that transformation begins with a smile, a greeting, and genuine engagement.

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