



Othering & Belonging
Institute at UC Berkeley

A Resource Guide for **Belonging- Builders**

**Belonging,
A Definition**

**Design Principles
For Belonging**

**Targeted
Universalism**





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Introduction: Resources for Building a World Where We All Belong

AROUND THE WORLD, people are seeking effective ways to build just, equitable, and inclusive institutions that can serve everyone without fueling fragmentation, division, and fear.

At the **Othering & Belonging Institute (OBI)**, we've answered this call with frameworks that go beyond mere inclusion into existing structures. Instead, we advocate for the co-creation of new structures, identities, and stories that are designed for everyone.

Our core frameworks—"othering and belonging," "targeted universalism," and "bridging"—are practical and more durable against backlash. They are applied universally and emphasize narrative transformation, co-creation, and centering marginalized groups while recognizing that everyone inherently has the right to belong.

Belonging is both a feeling and a practice—something we can experience personally, and **something we create collectively**. Its robustness comes from its roots in a range of fields including sociology, neuroscience, psychology, law, and political science, but it draws equally from the wisdom and experiences of community-builders, artists, and storytellers.

Most critically, **belonging is an effective, powerful antidote to othering**—the processes of exclusion, marginalization, and dehumanization that harms individuals and communities and generates structural inequality found at every level of society. Our analysis of othering helps uncover the deep and often interconnected disparities in areas such as poverty, healthcare, education, and justice.

And because the reach and impact of institutions, including government, have greater implications on our lives than what we do individually, we place significant emphasis on the **role of structures and systems** when building for belonging.

Why Belonging Matters

We believe building places and narratives anchored in belonging can shift us from dominant and extractive norms to new ways of being where **every person** has a meaningful voice and agency in the systems that affect their lives. Simply put, **differences of all kinds should be celebrated**, not turned into fictitious stories that sort people into hierarchies of value.

Belonging is an aspirational north star that helps us declare the kind of world and communities we want to live in—vibrant and interconnected healthy ones in which everyone holds the agency, responsibility, and power to co-create the structures that serve the good of the whole.

We have honed our definition of belonging, and worked to make it widely applicable for belonging-builders everywhere, because we know that **if we continue to divide into smaller we's, we simply will not survive as a species**.

We are thrilled to be on this evolving journey of creating more just and joyful schools, workplaces, and societies together with you. If you have thoughts about enhancing the definition and components of belonging, drop us a line at belonging@berkeley.edu.

Defining Belonging

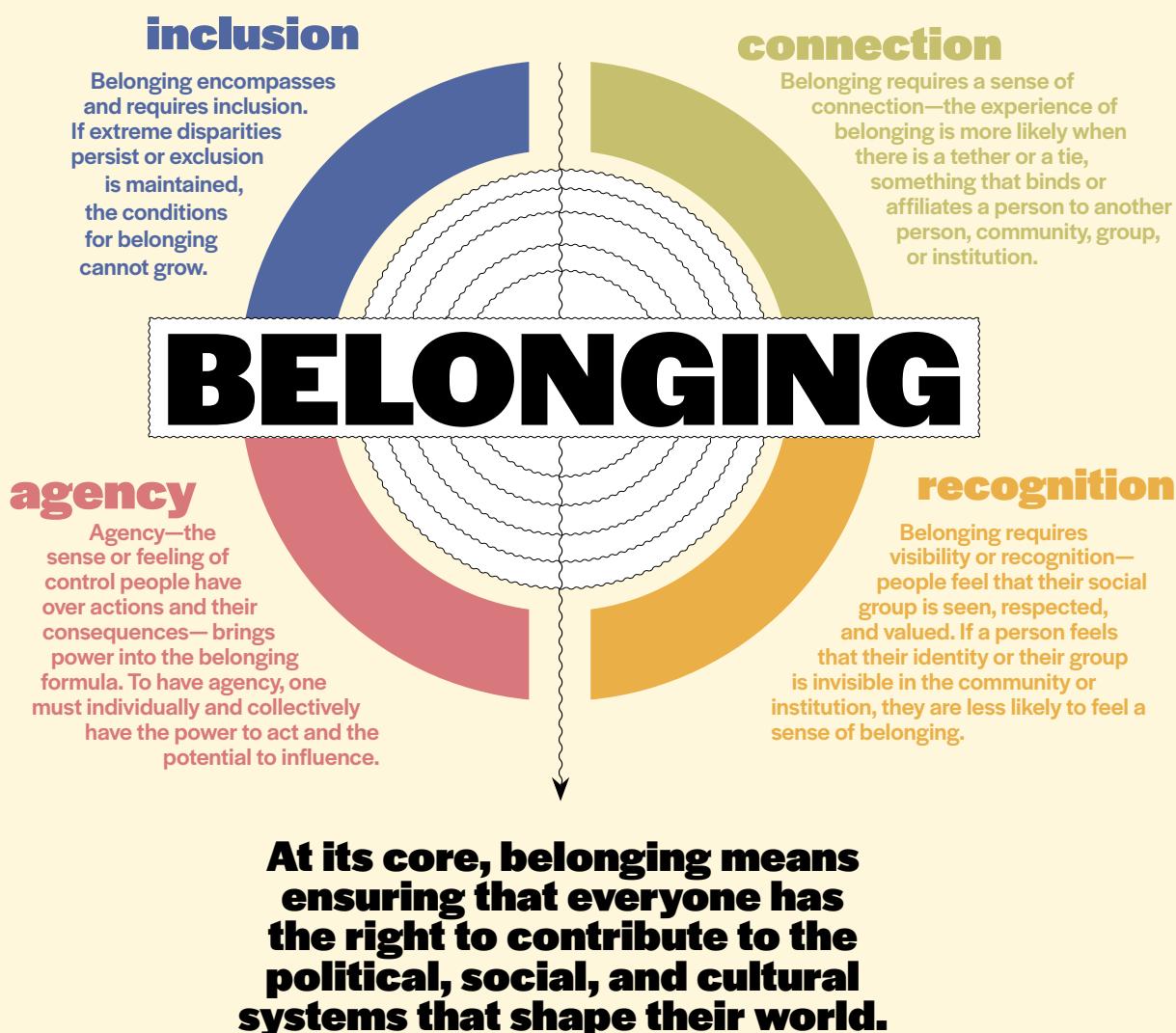
The Othering & Belonging Institute's definition of belonging includes four mutually-reinforcing components.

Inclusion: when all social groups are included in critical institutions in society and their communities; **Recognition:** when all are accorded visibility within those institutions or communities; **Agency:** the ability and power to actively shape those institutions and

communities; and, **Connection:** report a sense or feeling of belonging.*

Belonging can be seen as an ever-expanding circle, one that keeps growing to recognize the dignity and humanity of all people.

*powell, john a., and Stephen Menendian. *Belonging without Othering: How We Save Ourselves and the World*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024.



Belonging Design Principles



At-A-Glance

Belonging Design Principles

Developed by the Othering & Belonging Institute (OBI), these are a set of principles and practices that can help articulate and mitigate structural inequality and exclusion while helping us turn toward, rather than against, each other.

<p>1 BIG IDEA The root of the problem is othering</p>	<p>2 BIG IDEA Everyone belongs</p>		<p>3 Prioritize structural change</p>
	<p>4 Recognize and address power dynamics</p>	<p>5 Foster agency and inclusive co-creation</p>	
<p>6 Embrace mutual responsibility</p>	<p>7 Celebrate and value diversity</p>		<p>8 Prioritize and value relationships</p>
<p>9 Recognize that identities are multifaceted and dynamic</p>		<p>10 Harness the power of interconnection</p>	

Belonging Design Principles

The design principles labeled **BIG IDEA** are foundational principles—ones we consider necessary in order for all the others to fall into place.

BIG IDEA

1

The root of the problem is othering

Though the types of groups that are marginalized may be different in every culture and setting, we can identify a similar set of processes that gives some groups more access to goods, authority, opportunities, and rights than others. These hierarchies of value are presented as natural, usually through collective narratives, but are manufactured by those who have something to gain from division and treating others as less than equal. They also do the most harm when they become self-sustaining parts of structures, continuing to fuel inequity long after individuals cease holding bigoted attitudes. The solution to [othering](#) is not more othering. Nor is it what we call “same-ing,” in which we erase our diversity and claim we’re all the same. The solution is belonging.



While many liberation efforts end up replacing one othered group with another, thus continuing the cycle of othering, our definition of belonging is radical because it includes everyone. A place of belonging is not one in which certain “in groups” are welcome, and “out groups” are not. This may be a big ask for some, but it is critical to embrace universal positive regard for all members of a community whose belonging is not contingent but a given. The universal right to belong should not be confused with the right to harm or dominate others.

BIG IDEA

Everyone belongs

2

3 Prioritize structural change

While the work of building belonging includes interpersonal work, it must always involve transforming structures. That is because structures most often do the work of exclusion, regardless of the attitudes or identities of the people whose job it is to uphold them. Put another way, places of belonging go tough on structures and soft on people.

Power and power imbalances are woven into everything including the distribution of work, program design, collective histories, relationships, and much more. Effective belonging initiatives are transparent about how power is distributed and how that distribution may need to change to create belonging. They also provide spaces for acknowledgment and repair of historical or present-day harms with the goal of advancing forward together.

Recognize and address power dynamics

4

5 Foster agency & inclusive co-creation

Individuals must be able to contribute to an initiative on belonging. This means they must have ways to express agency without elevating one person’s needs above the needs of the collective. The work must include mechanisms for making sure people are heard, and how or when spaces or projects can be co-created, and to what extent.

Belonging Design Principles continued



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Belonging requires some form of co-creation, which means everyone has some responsibility for creating the whole. This includes being self-aware of behaviors, responses, and contributions to inclusive structure-building outside of specific work projects. All people hold responsibility for learning and growing together.

6

Embrace mutual responsibility

7

Celebrate and value diversity

Universal belonging does not mean everyone is or must be the same. We each have different histories, communities, needs, and ways of showing up in the world. Research shows that diversity leads to greater problem solving and creativity—we are better when we are diverse. Belonging means that all of these differences are valued and respected, and that different groups, based often on deep histories of exclusion, may need different kinds of support to create an equitable place of belonging.

No one is just one thing. We each carry multiple interests, identities, and relationships to power. This means flattening others into a singular identity is a way of reducing them. But it also means we can always find commonalities with each other because no identity is singular. Identities are fluid, complex and continuously evolving; they are not static or rigid. Belonging invites us into curiosity and connection across varying identities with respect and appreciation.

8

Recognize that identities are multifaceted and dynamic

9

Prioritize and value relationships

Because we are interconnected, relationships are central to our transformation into places of belonging. Tough moments or conflicts are inevitable, and we can move through them when we are rooted in relationships. In places of belonging, we exercise our bridging muscles, which means we get practice at moving towards each other with curiosity and a willingness to be transformed, rather than away from each other.



No one is an island. Even if the impact is not immediately observable, our actions and choices impact others and can change the dynamics of a team, a structure, even the planet. This principle of interconnection helps us understand the tremendous power individuals have to enhance or diminish the world around them. Because we are wired for and exist in relationships, both our problems and the solutions are also based on relationships.

10

Harness the power of interconnection

Targeted Universalism



Targeted Universalism

A step-by-step methodology for creating belonging

BELONGING IS A FRAMEWORK developed by the Othering & Belonging Institute (OBI) that goes beyond a call for inclusion in existing structures that serve only some of us. Instead, it invites members of any community to roll up their sleeves and co-create new structures designed to serve **all of us**. Our [Belonging Design Principles](#) outline the foundational elements of these co-created structures and policies. Here, we focus on [Targeted Universalism \(TU\)](#), our methodology for creating them.

Developed by john a. powell, and expanded by OBI researchers Stephen Menendian and Wendy Ake, TU encourages belonging-builders to **identify universal goals for all** while recognizing the need for **tailored approaches** to help different groups reach those goals. By acknowledging both our shared aspirations and diverse paths, TU can build broader support for equitable interventions.

Targeted Universalism can be applied across a wide range of contexts—whether in classrooms, small nonprofits, large philanthropic organizations, businesses, or even entire governments.



What problem does Targeted Universalism solve?

A growing awareness of group-based disparities means that many of us are searching for ways to make policies and programs more inclusive, successful, and fair for everyone.

However, change initiatives aimed at addressing years of structural marginalization are often seen as a zero-sum game, where one group benefits at the expense of another. This leads to divided communities and well-meaning efforts that fail due to a lack of collective support. In some cases, progress is blocked by hostility from those who feel they're losing out or that their own struggles aren't being recognized.

Targeted Universalism addresses this common dynamic by taking a fresh approach to policy and program design and jettisoning a one-size-fits-all formula, focusing instead on outcomes, relationships, and co-creation.

In short, TU can help you:

- make current and emerging initiatives more effective, inclusive and durable, widening who is included and diminishing the likelihood of backlash
- create more lasting and fair solutions through widened data sets used to analyze the root of a problem
- encourage multiple strategies that help bring all people closer to the intended outcome
- build broad-based community support by shaping inclusive leadership and policy narratives

Targeted Universalism is Unique

Differing from traditional policy approaches in a number of ways, TU:

- Starts with the foundational principle that everyone belongs and considers all groups in the design
- Is directed in service of a shared universal goal developed collaboratively
- Has a commitment to everyone reaching the goal, not disparity reduction
- Employs a sharp focus on structures
- Accounts for how different groups are situated—spatially, materially, and culturally
- Centers inclusive narratives to build broad support
- Reconceives narrow fights over equal expenditures

How does Targeted Universalism work?

Targeted Universalism is designed to break through gridlock and provide a sustainable approach to developing vibrant programs and policies in several innovative ways, as outlined below.

Targeted Universalism is focused on reaching universal goals instead of closing gaps

While we know the world is unequal, we often design goals or initiatives to focus on what one group lacks, rather than what all people deserve. While it's important to acknowledge the sometimes stark disparities between groups in life outcomes and resources, TU encourages us to broaden our view when developing interventions and better understand the full scope of inequality.

Built on the core principle that everyone belongs, TU moves beyond a “closing disparities” model, which can unintentionally divide groups or pit them against each other. Instead, it aims to uplift everyone.

A good example of this would be college graduation rates. Suppose a community college discovers that it has a 49% graduation rate, but that the rate is only 39% for students who are parents and 35% for students with disabilities. The community college may set as a universal goal the target of getting 60% of all students to graduate. This may require intensive targeted support for students who are parents and students with disabilities. Thus, the universal goal does not specify the reduction of a particular disparity or make reference to how some student populations are performing relative to other ones, but provides a realistic target which will demand intensive efforts to achieve it.¹

In essence, TU establishes a universal policy goal for all people in any setting, while also acknowledging that tailored approaches for different groups are needed. Because TU design allows for the group to articulate a set of shared aspirations – like higher graduation rates for everyone – while honoring diverse and unique paths, it helps build support for equitable interventions.

Intergroup disparities are used as a diagnostic tool to assess relative performance, but not as a policy focus.

¹ Stephen Menendian, “FAQ: Targeted Universalism,” Othering and Belonging Institute, August 12, 2024, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/faq-targeted-universalism>.

Five Steps of Targeted Universalism

1

Set universal goal based upon broadly shared recognition of a societal problem and collective aspirations

2

Assess general population performance relative to the universal goal

3

Identify groups and places that are performing differently with respect to the goal

4

Assess and understand the structures that support or impede each group or community from achieving the universal goal

5

Develop and implement targeted strategies for each group to reach the universal goal

Targeted Universalism acknowledges the different positionality of groups and their needs, and addresses them through a wide range of strategies

Many strategies for creating equitable structures risk using simplified identity categories, which can unintentionally make people feel even more excluded. Differences aren't just defined by race, income, sex, or any single category. Depending on the community, factors like access to transportation, immigration status, disability, and adverse childhood experiences may play a much larger role in creating equity.

For example, if our universal goal is to have all children reading by the time they finish elementary school, understanding racial and ethnic group disparities offers a limited picture. To build a more robust program that addresses the needs of all students, it is also important to know how students with different learning abilities are doing, how learning styles are being addressed, how parents are able to contribute to reading development, what support programs the school and community

offer, and much more. Gaining inputs from a wide range of areas that all contribute to the goal help shape a more comprehensive approach to help all students reach the universal goal.

Targeted Universalism takes a both/and approach to universal and targeted approaches

While universal policies, like social security, enjoy a degree of legitimacy in a diverse society, they may be viewed as overly ambitious, or inadequate to helping those most in need.

On the other hand, targeted policies like affirmative action may be more efficient at addressing a harm experienced more acutely by a particular group. But by targeting that group, such policies are often viewed as unfairly favoring one group over another. Targeted-only approaches can seed resentment, reinforce damaging narratives, contribute to practices of breaking and bring about legal risk and backlash.

Rejecting the framing of either/or, TU borrows the strengths and avoids the weaknesses of these approaches.

Targeted Universalism advises us to put the principle of “everyone belongs” to work through new narratives based on the inherent belonging of all groups.



Targeted Universalism continued

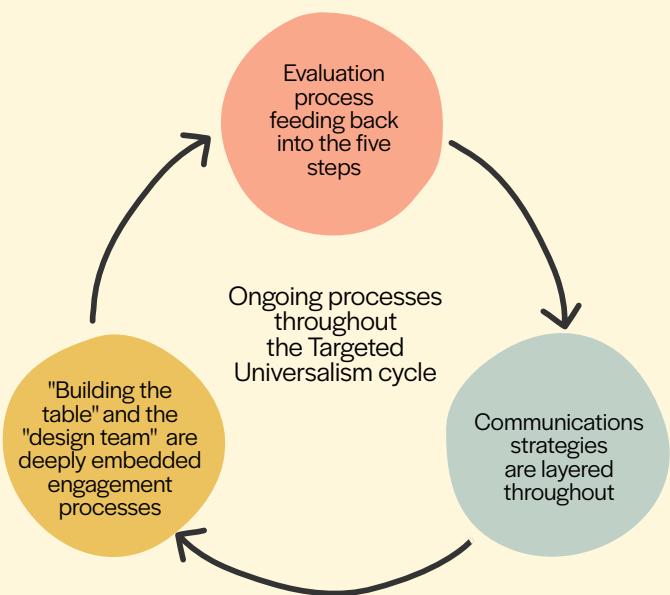
Targeted Universalism builds in inclusive co-creation by seeking input and engagement from a broad range of stakeholders

Targeted Universalism builds inclusive environments by establishing co-creation practices. Decision-making is a key process that is often overlooked or left to those in traditional positions of authority. In the pursuit of co-creation, groups can actively reshape decision-making by integrating inclusive methods early in program and process design, seeking input from a broad range of people who will be impacted by the decisions. Building broad-based coalitions encourages everyone to contribute and make decisions together—or, at the very least, clarifies how decisions are made. By involving those often left out of the process and recognizing diverse skills, TU can create stronger support for shared universal goals while transforming decision-making into a more inclusive process.

Targeted Universalism helps create new narratives

The stories that we tell, or that are told about us, matter. Within our world, many of the most marginalized groups are also the least favored in the larger public imagination. This phenomenon is not natural—it was manufactured by stories, narratives and reinforcement through othering.

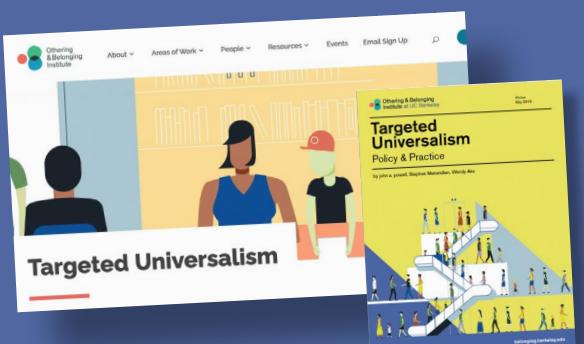
If we truly seek to create inclusive policies or programs for all, we cannot consider others as less than “our” group. Even well-intended policies may exacerbate and perpetuate narratives about groups, reinforcing the idea of some as deserving and others as undeserving.



When policies that are too narrowly targeted come under attack, this can create or amplify negative stereotypes about the group it is designed to serve.

Targeted Universalism advises us to put the principle of “everyone belongs” to work through new narratives based on the inherent belonging of all groups.

Targeted Universalism focuses on shared aspirations and the overall community, which shifts public discourse toward possibility, collaboration, and outcomes. It also helps move stagnant conversations about expenditures, deservedness, and short-term thinking into broader aspirations that reinforce what we have in common without erasing our differences.



Additional Resources

We hope that this sheet helps guide you and your team into further discussions about the benefits and applications of Targeted Universalism. All Targeted Universalism resources, including a short explainer video that you can watch and share can be accessed at belonging.berkeley.edu/TargetedUniversalism

**Together, we can
make belonging
without othering
the norm not the
exception**



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