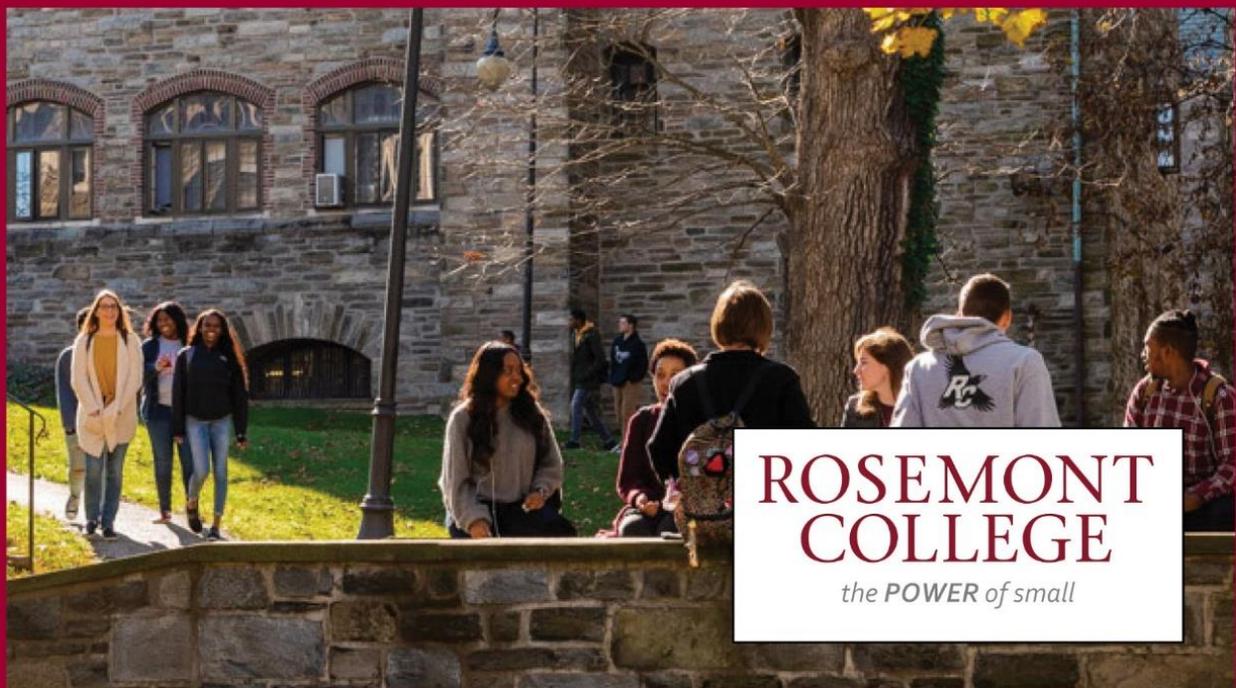


REAL TALK:

TRANSFORMING DIVERSITY INTO BELONGING

An Executive Review of
Listening Sessions from
Lived Experiences

Yoli Alover, PhD; Chief of Staff & VP of Diversity and Belonging



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Introduction

Rosemont's mission promotes a deep sense of diversity and belonging. Our core values exemplify how to cultivate a sense of belonging, which is key to a progressive and healthy collegiate environment. "*Rosemont College seeks to develop in all members of the community open and critical minds, the ability to make reasoned moral decisions, and a sense of responsibility to serve others in our global society.*"¹ It is the goal of Rosemont to increase our efforts in diversity and belonging in order to expand the ways in which we work together as a campus and larger community.

"Rosemont College values:

- Trust in and reverence for the dignity of each person;
- Diversity with a commitment to building an intercultural community;
- Persistence and courage in promoting justice with compassion;
- Care for the Earth as our common home.²

In October of 2020, Rosemont College hired their first Chief of Staff and Vice President, Yoli Alover, Ph.D. The need for the two titles indicates the strong embracement of diversity and belonging from both the Board of Trustees and the office of the president. Thus, on October 26th, 2020, under the leadership of Dr. Alover, we began exploring the first step of transformational change in the area of diversity and belonging.

To accomplish this goal, we aimed to explore factors contributing to diversity and belonging, including students' relationships with peers, faculty, and staff. This allowed us to hear ideas on what factors promote a strong sense of belonging and areas that need improvement.

This report is intended to serve as insight into discussions held with students, staff, and faculty. Individual and focus groups conducted over three weeks included representation from all departments across our campus. The panels were comprised of seventeen students, twenty-five staff, and thirteen faculty members. We engaged each of these participants in a 1-panel session which resulted in 20 hours of discussions. A specific interview guide of structured questions was used for these discussions (see Appendix A). The key to successfully obtaining genuine and authentic feedback from the participants was that the panels were conducted in a *safe space*. Additionally, the panels were intended to be listening sessions in which Dr. Alover could take note of participants' lived experiences without judgment or immediate feedback.

Dr. Alover and two moderators attended each panel session to listen and debrief on the feedback given by the students, faculty, and staff. One moderator served as a facilitator of the questions and the other as an ethnographer. All three leaders created a structured debriefing sheet to maintain a log of thoughts and observations throughout the course of the panel discussion. This data collection method helped develop a wide range of understanding of our participants' lived experiences at Rosemont (Patton, 1999).³

¹ Rosemont College. (2020). Vision, mission, and goals. 2019-2020 Webpage <https://www.rosemont.edu/about/>

² Rosemont College. (2020). Vision, mission, and goals. 2019-2020 Webpage <https://www.rosemont.edu/about/>

³ Patton, M. Q. (1999). Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *Health services research*, 34(5 Pt 2), 1189.

A careful review of the data resulted in four themes and four conclusions. **The themes include** 1) *Rosemont's sense of belonging feels like a family.* 2) *Students foster belonging among one another.* 3) *Belonging and accountability are not always translated in staff/faculty and administrative leadership; a sense of belonging should be authentic to be effective.* Finally, 4) *Belonging, sense of well-being, and health are significantly connected.*

The four conclusions that surfaced from analysis of the data include: 1) *When close relationships at school are fostered, Rosemont was perceived as an extended family for students.* 2) *Diversity and Belonging training is fundamental to maintain lasting, constructive, and significant relationships among students, staff, and faculty,* 3) *Diversity and Belonging is not a symbol of expression and;* 4) *When the campus functions as an extended family, addressing the needs of the whole person, can greatly increase the outcomes of success.*

Additionally, Dr. Alover outlined three immediate recommendations to be implemented during Q1-Q2 of 2021 as we begin expanding and building our Diversity and Belonging (D&B) Department. They include:

- 1) Conduct a campus-wide survey to help determine a baseline measurement of D&B
- 2) Implement the first phase of campus-wide training for all students, staff, and faculty on D&B.
- 3) Conduct a review of policies and practices surrounding employment and opportunity

Recognized Themes and Conclusions

Expression of Belonging

The sense of well-being grows out of a multifaceted network of social interactions and relationships (Goodenow & Grady, 1993).⁴ Thus, there is a robust framework for understanding belonging and the characteristics of this theory, and it was an evident and resounding theme in our panel discussion. As members of a community feel valued, they are willing to put forth more effort, make strong commitments toward intrinsic excellence, and feel like they are a part of their community. This was clear in our discussions.

The first theme of "*Rosemont's sense of belonging feels like a family*" came from numerous remarks made during the panel discussion. The link between Rosemont and family attributes was mentioned frequently in our chats and answers to a variety of interview questions. Many members made the correlation between belonging and family of each group (students, staff, and faculty) interviewed. In many cases for faculty and staff, this was the foundation of why they held such long tenure on our campus.

The second theme of "*Students foster belonging among one another*" was foundational to the first. Eighty-five percent of the student body made inferences that they could relate to their peers regardless of how they identified. The same group of students agreed that this could be an area of improvement for our staff and faculty.

The third theme that emerged was "*Belonging and accountability is not always translated in staff/faculty and administrative leadership; a sense of belonging should be authentic to be effective.*" This is where the cracks at a larger school can often be disregarded, but these struggles are noticeable and evident in a small school. The data from the panels from all groups expressed that the campus exemplifies a stronger sense of belonging when the leadership exhibits and endorses a belonging environment. However, over 60% of the panelist indicated room for improvement in this area at Rosemont. This theme is critical and needs close attention for authentic implementation of D&B from the top down. The panelists made this

⁴ Goodenow, C., & Grady, K. E. (1993). The relationship of school belonging and friends' values to academic motivation among urban adolescent students. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 62(1), 60-71.

assertion often, which included feedback about past attempts to address D&B that was often met with the lack of follow-through and effective accountability.

Finally, the fourth theme intersects mental health and overall well-being; *Belonging, sense of well-being, and health are greatly connected*. A healthy work, and school environment, reinforces trust, compassion, respect, and understanding. It's also one in which you're confident that you can be authentic and vulnerable at work, and there is engagement on campus. Members in a healthy environment feel they can trust and are trusted. In more than 70% of the student interviews, there was an expression and the desire to address more mental health and well-being aspects. Among our staff and faculty, the theme of trust and the ability to speak openly without retaliation was present. Notably, this is becoming more important and increasingly complex on our college campus. Importantly, recent societal and pandemic-related stresses have required a desire for more access and resources related to mental health and physical well-being. This need was expressed in our discussions.

What this all means?

The themes and conclusions support one another. Four conclusions emerged.

Conclusion 1) *When close relationships at school are fostered, Rosemont was perceived as an extended family for students*. This conclusion includes the need for personal solid and genuine acknowledgment, positive interpersonal interactions, and an inclusive environment for all groups.

Conclusion 2) *Diversity and Belonging training are fundamental to maintain lasting, constructive, and significant relationships among students, staff, and faculty*. Training is key to building a holistic approach to a more diverse and belonging environment. Education is an effective tool to promote the importance of diversity. Still, the long-lasting effects of training not only educate students, faculty, and staff but it gives them tools and resources to engage in day-to-day interactions with others. Successful D&B training raises awareness of concepts related to diversity and inclusion, makes space for diverse perspectives, and drives collaboration and innovation on campuses. This, in turn, creates room for inclusive thinking and actions and promotes trust and accountability.

Conclusion 3) *Diversity and Belonging is not a symbol of expression*. While the importance of training was heavily embraced in all groups at Rosemont, there was an overwhelming need to ensure that D & B training and the department would not be just an expression. More importantly, over 60% of those interviewed felt that much of the kindness exhibited by staff and faculty was disingenuous or misguided. Our panelists indicated that ongoing D&B training could help dispel any disillusionments of a cohesive campus. In addition, these trainings can open dialogue and encourage relationship building that may otherwise not exist.

Conclusion 4) *When the campus functions as an extended family, addressing the needs of the whole person can greatly increase the outcomes of success*. We cannot separate the importance of a sense of belonging from our physical and mental health. All groups on campus acknowledged or addressed the need for Rosemont to embrace a whole-person education. For many of the panelists, this included expanding services in mindfulness and behavioral health, increasing diverse academic curriculum and academic program offerings, and creating campus spaces for groups to share knowledge and life experiences with those on the same or opposite spectrum.

Phase 1: Proposed Immediate Action Items

Recommendation 1: Measure Diversity and Belonging at Rosemont

As we prepare for strategic planning in 2021, it's important to note that while we understand Rosemont's long-lasting commitment to diversity and belonging, we desire to become intentional with our goal planning. This includes ensuring that we develop and maintain our progress to ensure that D&B principles are interweaved in all aspects of our campus.

This starts with defining and quantifying D&B. When participants in the listening sessions were asked, *"What does diversity and belonging mean to you?"* responses varied. However, there were significant overarching patterns of response. For over 80% of our participants, diversity encompasses the various forms of gender, race, ethnicity, disability, geography, socioeconomic status, age, politics, religion, philosophy, sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression. Many concluded that diversity is not always evident to the human senses, which must be considered in our definition of diversity. Cognitive diversity, which focuses on intellectual thought processes, can vary significantly among the same demographic, socioeconomic status, and discipline, but it is a critical part of diversity⁴. Many of our participants acknowledged this to be true.

Over 75% of our participants concluded that a sense of belonging results in tangible outcomes that can be measured. These outcomes translate into an environment where one feels valued and appreciated. This environment encourages functional interactions between and among groups. In these spaces, all can participate in academic and organizational decision-making. This environment also aids in acknowledging and identifying systematic and overt barriers to campus belonging and address them appropriately and expeditiously.

Therefore, our first immediate action item will be to implement a campus-wide D&B survey. Recommended highlights include:

- 1) Conduct a pulse survey that will provide quantitative data and serve as a baseline to guide the infrastructure that will support our diversity and belonging initiatives and programming.
- 2) Build a campus-wide task force comprised of students, staff, faculty, alumni, and community leaders. These members will help develop Phase II and III goals for our campus.

Recommendation 2: Implement Phase I of Campus-wide D & B Education and Training

We all see life through our lenses. We are the sum of our own experiences, and therefore it may present barriers to empathizing with others' challenges and struggles. While this means cognitive dissonance is expected—if not addressed appropriately, it can often stifle progress. Our differences in problem-solving will not impede Rosemont from moving forward. In fact, because we have such a wide variety of perspectives, our problem-solving skills will not only be enhanced. Still, they will give us a unique approach in identifying and addressing impediments to creating a diverse and belonging environment.

While the student body at Rosemont is diverse, not all diverse groups feel supported in the same way. Among our staff and faculty, this inequity is even more substantial. To call attention to this pattern and tackle challenges at the onset, over ninety percent of the students, staff, and faculty on our panels would like more access to information about how to have conversations about race and increase diverse academic and support services and identification information.

One of the first ways Rosemont's departments can expedite the sense of belonging would be through education and training. This includes having difficult and uncomfortable conversations surrounding anti-racism, unconscious/conscious biases, and other systemic barriers that restrict belonging. Our first efforts of this training will be used to support and promote the value that diverse individuals bring to our college and the importance of their voice. In our panels, many indicated their voices and stories had been silenced. This D&B training will allow for them to be heard.

Recommendations include:

- 1) Enact an initial diversity and belonging training program tailored to Rosemont's needs and informed by the D & B pulse survey.
- 2) Conduct campus-wide Real-talk Panel session as a follow-up to October's Listening Sessions. This will allow us to be more transparent with our campus community and give all voices a chance to be heard among different sub-groups of our campus population.

Recommendation 3: Complete Review of Talent Retention and Acquisition

Our students' academic success, staff/faculty retention rate, employee productivity, and practical financial outcomes indicate a strong sense of belonging on campus. These indicators help inform us of the processes we need to use for recruitment and hiring. Students are more likely to be effective if they have mentors, professors, and administrators that identify with their journey. This is true for a workforce.

In our panel discussion, over 80% of the panelist expressed the need to hire and retain staff and faculty that can identify with our student demographics. This strategy brings diverse ideas and perspectives to the campus, but it allows students to see themselves as capable of achieving, thriving, and belonging in these roles, jobs, and fields. Furthermore, when students learn from faculty and staff they identify with and feel comfortable asking questions, it may invite them to seek help and build lasting relationships far beyond Rosemont's walls.

A diverse faculty and staff also offer a rich and varying cognitive perspective to Rosemont's academic environment. Recommendations in this area include:

- 1) Complete a review of the current talent retention and acquisition and make recommendations for improvements to establish best practices for recruiting candidates from underrepresented and marginalized groups.
- 2) Develop a strategic plan for talent retention and acquisition that mirror's Rosemont's goals outlined in our 100-day report.

Dr. Alover's Concluding Thoughts

I spent over twenty hours **listening** to the voices on our campus. Through their personal stories, there were resounding themes of past memories, hope for the present, and expectancy for the future. Some voices spoke of a campus that has consistently demonstrated diversity excellence through service, relationship building, Christian tolerance, and fraternal love—all in all, the voices blended into a chorus of a gratifying and belonging environment.

Yet, alongside those who expressed the sentiment of Rosemont's open, inclusive environment, some whose experience of belonging was not the same. These voices expressed the need for Rosemont to be more deliberate, thoughtful, and intentional in our belonging efforts. These voices expressed extreme joy in attending this one-hour panel session. This was a celebratory opportunity in which they hoped their lived experiences would finally be heard instead of falling silent.

So, as I thought about possible next steps and the challenges of creating a solid proof model that encompassed all students, staff, and faculty have a sense of belonging, I realized it does not exist. I realized to construct such a model, the very world we live in must first be stained by perfection. Although Rosemont is far from perfect, it has always striven for such. This is what makes us unique as a community. What is evident to anyone that walks the hallowed pathways of Rosemont's campus is that we have a steadfast desire for our community to live out our core values:

Trust in and reverence for the dignity of each person; Diversity with a commitment to building an intercultural community; Persistence and courage in promoting justice with compassion; Care for the Earth as our common home.

These past three weeks of heeding the collective voices taunted me and challenged us. It challenges us to grow and learn from open, sincere conversations. It challenges us to be uncomfortable in our cherished perspectives as we willingly embrace others' viewpoints. The voices invited us to be curious with an objective mind. But, more importantly, these voices encouraged us to be introspective. We are all ultimately responsible for how we act and respond to our ever-changing environment. So let us listen with open minds, lead with empathy, and continue to embrace diversity and belonging on our journey to excellence.

It is my complete joy to be a part of Rosemont's community. **I belong here.** I look forward to what is next to come.

Acknowledgments and special thanks:

I want to acknowledge and thank all Moderators/Ethnographers that carved out time in their busy schedule to help with our listening sessions.

Panel Moderators/Ethnographers:

- 1) Matthew Baker; Director of Public Safety
- 2) Brittney Nix-Crawford, MS; Assistant Professor and Discipline Chair of Communications
- 3) Ashley Hodges, MS, EdD; Assistant Athletic Director/Senior Woman Administrator
- 4) Ben Huelskamp, Med; Assistant Dean/Director of Residence Life
- 5) Arlicia Miller, EdD; Coordinator of Advising and Student Academic Success

** A very special thanks to Prof. Brittney Nix-Crawford and Dr. Arlicia Miller for aiding in panel set-up and serving as moderators/ethnographers during the entire three-week period.*

APPENDIX A
PANEL QUESTIONNAIRE

- 1) When you hear the words "diversity and belonging," what does that mean to you?
- 2) Do you think diversity and belonging mean the same thing to everyone? What are the key differences?
- 3) In your opinion, what is the most challenging aspect of going to school in a diverse environment?
- 4) How do your value system and beliefs translate into belonging?
 - a. In what ways can we leverage Rosemont's four values to foster a sense of inclusion and belonging?
- 5) How can we better advocate for Diversity and Belonging among our students, staff, and faculty who don't understand its importance?
- 6) How would you handle a situation where someone was culturally insensitive, sexist, racist, or homophobic?
- 7) In what ways could the Rosemont and the surrounding community actively support marginalized groups?
- 8) What types of on-campus resources would you like to see in and around our campus/classrooms to help increase diversity awareness and the actions of belonging?
- 9) What next steps do you recommend for Rosemont after completing these panel discussions on diversity and belonging?
- 10) What is the best advice you can give Dr. Alover on beginning to move Rosemont from an awareness of diversity and belonging to outcomes and change? (One, three, and five years from now?)