

# Chapin Hall Research Brief

## The Role of Social Support and Belonging in a Professional Network

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*There is a strong link between social support, the feeling of belonging, and academic and career success amongst members in a professional network. In this study, network members identified four factors that positively affected their sense of social support, including discussing their personal lives and professional challenges with others in the network; communicating often; prioritizing each other; and offering a space for candid conversations. Network members recommended strategies for sustaining a sense of belonging in a network, including facilitating intentional connections and conversations; strategizing recruitment, retention, and outreach with new members; and formalizing inclusion practices. With these factors in place, networks will be poised to create a positive and inclusive culture and experience for all members.*

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**Doris Duke Fellowships**  
for the Promotion of Child Well-Being  
*Seeking innovations to prevent child abuse and neglect*

 **CHAPIN HALL**  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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## INTRODUCTION

Established in 2010, the Doris Duke Fellowships for the Promotion of Child Well-Being (“fellowships”) focused on two core ideas: that learning is best accomplished in interdisciplinary groups and that carefully crafted research can improve public policy and practice. Over 10 years, the program engaged 120 fellows from diverse disciplines in a peer-learning network that fostered interdisciplinary thinking and collaboration while promoting actionable research. The final cohort was selected in 2018. Since then, a fellow-led transition has begun to expand the network to other emerging scholars and researchers. The Child Well-Being Research Network launched in 2021, with a central focus on improving diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in the child well-being research field. Network activities include a mentoring program, writing retreats, learning and networking activities, support for strategic research translation and dissemination, and leadership development opportunities for network members.

In the midst of transforming from the Doris Duke Fellowships into the Child Well-Being Research Network, an equity study was conducted to assess how staff members, national advisory board members, academic and policy mentors, and Doris Duke Fellows experienced diversity, equity, and inclusion (“DEI”) during their participation in the Doris Duke Fellowships. This research brief focuses on two themes that emerged: the importance of social support and feeling a sense of belonging within a fellowships program. These concepts are inexplicitly linked to DEI. This brief discusses how all of these principles contribute to the fellowships’ culture, the engagement of fellows, and the strength of the network in advancing the child well-being field.

## METHODOLOGY

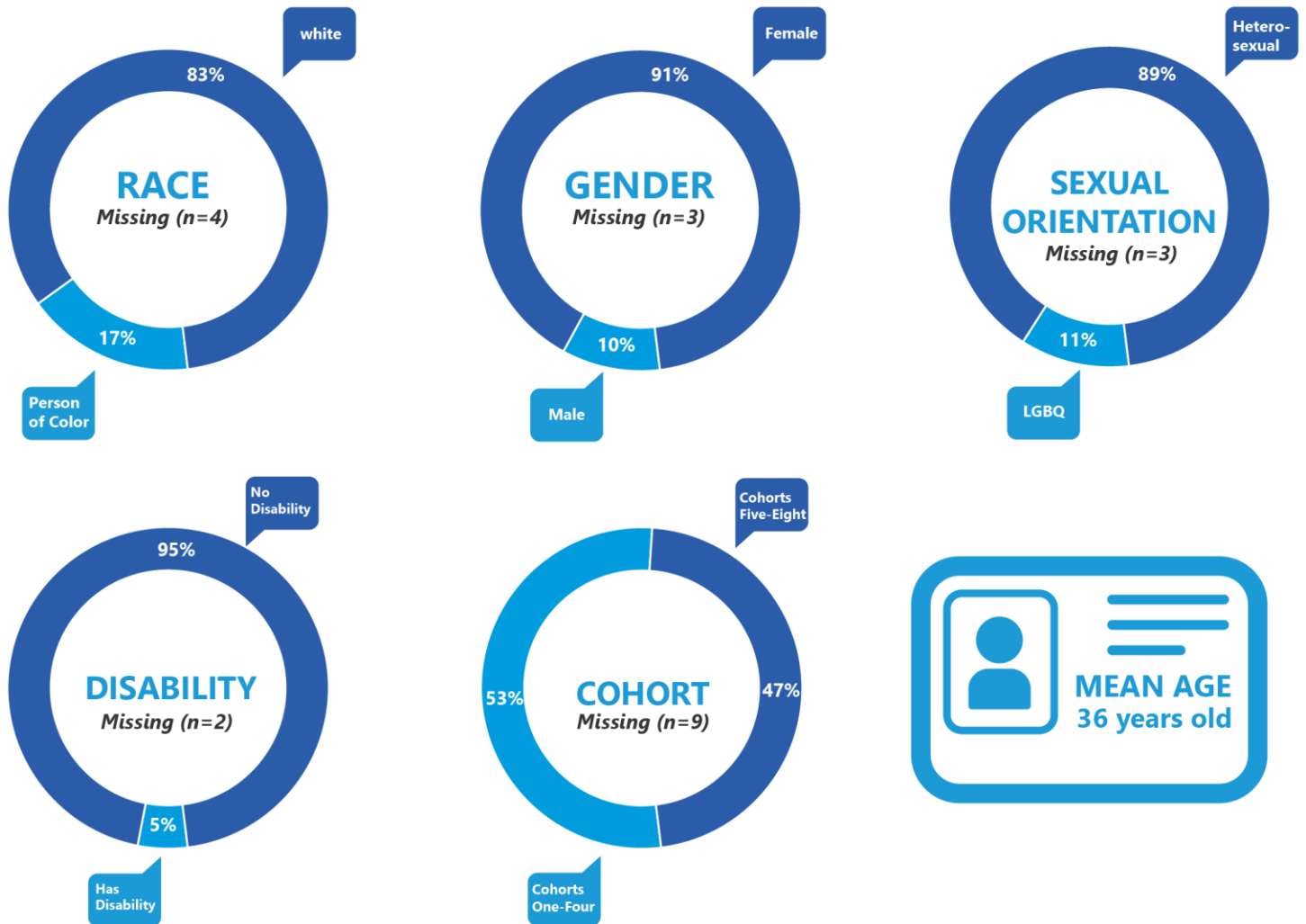
The data reviewed for this study were collected via a sequential mixed-methods approach that included online surveys and videoconference interviews with Doris Duke Fellowships staff, the advisory board, academic and policy mentors, and fellows. (See Table 1 for participation numbers.) A third-party service transcribed audio recordings of interviews. After the interviewer redacted identifying information, transcriptions were shared with the research team. Qualitative interview data were thematically analyzed using Atlas.ti (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Surveys were collected via REDCap and analyzed using SPSS. After all data were collected, the research team identified and summarized similarities and differences in themes across data sets. Participation in the fellow and mentor surveys was anonymous, thus the number of unique fellows who completed both an interview and a survey is unknown.

The research team looked at aggregated survey findings by subgroups and used qualitative data to extend our understanding of what the quantitative data analysis revealed. For each section, we present both qualitative and quantitative data together.

**Table 1. Equity Study Participants**

| Role                     | Data Collection Method | Total Participants | Participation Rate |
|--------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Fellowships Staff        | Interview              | 4                  | 100%               |
| Advisory Board Member    | Interview              | 9                  | 53%                |
| Academic & Policy Mentor | Survey                 | 69                 | 36%                |
| Fellow                   | Survey                 | 94                 | 78%                |
| Fellow                   | Interview              | 28                 | 23%                |

This brief focuses on the fellow survey and interview findings. Survey respondents ( $n = 94$ ) were asked to provide demographic information, highlighted below.<sup>1</sup>



## A STRONG CULTURE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

### The Influence of Social Support in Networks

The importance of social support in a group, academic cohort, or professional network is not unique to the Doris Duke Fellowships. Social support in a doctoral or academic setting is “the perception and actuality of the student being cared about, receiving assistance, and having a sense of belonging to a supportive social environment” (Kim et al., 2017). The doctoral program experience can be isolating, rigorous, and competitive. Because of this environment, it can be difficult for students to form bonds. Yet one of the strongest protective factors for scholars is having positive and productive relationships with peers by forming a community (Berry, 2017; Lovitts, 2001).

<sup>1</sup> Fellows are grouped into broad demographic characteristics to preserve anonymity.

Fostering peer relationships and a sense of belonging in networks is key in nurturing diverse and equitable networks. In one study that mapped the experiences of Black, Millennial women in graduate programs, peer relationships within their cohort were found to be a mitigating factor in processing the emotional toll of racist microaggressions and lack of perceived institutional support they experienced in graduate school (Apugo, 2017). These social supports protect individuals from the negative effects of stressors that often lead to burnout, or losing their scholarship (Kim et al., 2017). Between 11 and 68% of attrition from doctoral programs is associated with a lack of social connections with peers, depending on academic discipline (Nettles & Millett, 2006).

Additionally, most doctoral students are early- to mid-level professionals, and they often juggle their doctoral studies with work, family, and other personal responsibilities (Berry, 2017). The reality that despite dissertation deadlines, life continues outside the walls of academia places new constraints and stressors on these scholars. The most formative way that students cope is by connecting with other students as friends based on their mutual understanding of these tensions (Berry, 2017). These connections are not just fostering a sense of inclusion in a group, but also fostering a deeper social and emotional connection. This connection leads to a sense of empowerment, a sense of collective support, and safe place of refuge.

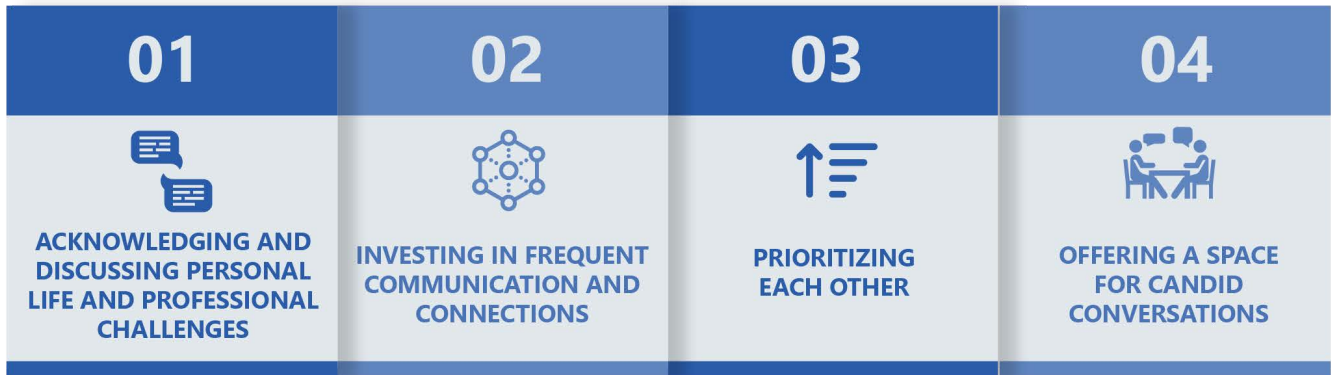
**Fellows’ Experiences of Social Support**

In the Doris Duke Fellowships, most fellows experienced a strong culture of social support. In the fellow survey, respondents were asked to review a pair of opposing adjectives on either end of a scale. The respondents were instructed to select a number on the scale that best described their experiences as a fellow. A number of 100 indicated strong feelings of belonging and social support, and a number of 0 indicated total absence of those feelings. The average responses to five of the adjective pairings provided can be seen in Figure 1. Overall means indicate that fellows viewed the fellowships’ climate as friendly, respectful, collegial, cooperative, and welcoming. We analyzed these findings by subgroup, including race, and no significant differences were found.

**Figure 1. Mean Scores for Variables Indicative of Social Support**





Fellow interview responses revealed four primary factors that affected their sense of social support within the fellowships:




We share direct quotes from the fellows’ interviews to highlight these elements and how they contributed to positive social support within the fellowships program.


### **Acknowledging and discussing personal life and professional challenges**

 “For me, as someone who has two young kids, I’ve always felt like in other spaces in academia, talking about those challenges of being a mom and also being in academia are something that I have to hold inside. I feel like with the fellowship, I’ve been able to find other people where we can talk about those challenges and that’s felt extremely inclusive. There seems to be an understanding that people have different things that are challenging and different life experiences. And that’s okay.”


 “One of the things that’s been most valuable to me about the fellowship, especially these past couple years now that we’ve been out and working, is that social support that you can share, like how hard it is to be a junior-ranking person in your institution and where and when to just put your head down and try to do the work, but also where to try to question things. And I think because the fellowship exists outside of one institution that’s such an opportunity to be able to have those conversations and also to have that social support.”


### **Investing in frequent communication and connections**

 “I definitely felt valued, welcomed, respected, and I really belonged. I think that came from both feeling a sense that the fellowship was really investing in me, and also cared personally about how I was doing. [They] actually [checked] in and [made] sure I was doing well and [had] what I needed to succeed.”


 “The [fellowships] staff were like, ‘We’re going to help you with your ideas. Here are wonderful people doing similar work. Create something wonderful. We’re going to keep encouraging you and create opportunities for you to get this work out that just create greatness,’ and that’s been really helpful.”


### **Prioritizing each other**


 “Now that we’re all fellows, if you need something from me, I’m not going to ignore your email. I’m going to get back to you right away and sort of prioritize you, because other fellows did that for me.”

 “Things happen to people along the way. . . just having somebody who says, ‘I have noticed you haven’t been able to reply back, just checking in’. . . help[s] keep people engaged over time.”

### **Offering space for candid conversations**

 “The fellowships really did feel like a . . . nice place to get away from everything that was happening in the world and just the everyday situations that have been professional and academic. . . . It was a brave space in the fact that we were able to grow and we were able to talk about things. Even if we didn’t agree, it felt like it was a very nurturing place to do that. So it gave folks bravery in order to talk about these issues versus a safe space where there’s no discomfort and everybody is just comfortable. That wasn’t this place.”

 “Everyone was at least comfortable being interrupted just to get clarification, to help promote differential perspectives because sometimes we get our blinders on, right? So we just think we’re talking to the same audience and we’re not. And so I think that has been a wonderful experience to get us to think about our own perspective and how we can see others so that we can have a conversation between two different disciplines.”

 “The fellowship brought us together in a way that allowed us to . . . meet other people from different backgrounds and to have those experiences to say, what’s it like, what’s your doctoral program like, what’s your experiences like, how are your mentors, how do they support you? And I do think I had some great discussions about. . . what it was like to have different experiences and to just have to be with other colleagues that were not from my own program that also added to that experience. So I think we were able to have a dialogue about those kinds of things.”



## Summary

Fellows described the fellowships as a network fostering high levels of social support. There were important qualities that contributed to the sense of social support, including respect, collegiality, and a welcoming environment. Fellows further described the role that creating supportive spaces had on them where individuals felt like they could be themselves and have conversations often avoided in other circles. Social support can be encouraged and experienced within an academic cohort, membership group, or professional network in several ways; networks should consider how to create a culture of social support that fosters professional success for the group overall as well as for individual members of the group.

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## A STRONG CULTURE OF BELONGING

### The Influence of Belonging in Networks

A sense of belonging is “the extent to which one believes they are accepted and included as a legitimate member of a group, community, or network and that their presence is valued” (Stachl & Baranger, 2020). Focusing on fostering a strong sense of belonging in a group is important for doctoral students and early career scholars because it is often cited as a main “predictor of success,” not only in their graduate program, but also their future career (Stachl & Baranger, 2020).

When individuals in a community have “feelings of belonging,” they can practice interpersonal skills, manage the tensions of working with people of differing backgrounds and opinions, and contribute to the sustainability of their group (Burns & Schneider, 2019). Thus, by feeling a sense of belonging, individual members might contribute more to their network in order to replicate that experience for others. Facilitating a sense of belonging within a community or group can help members attain individual and collaborative confidence and success.

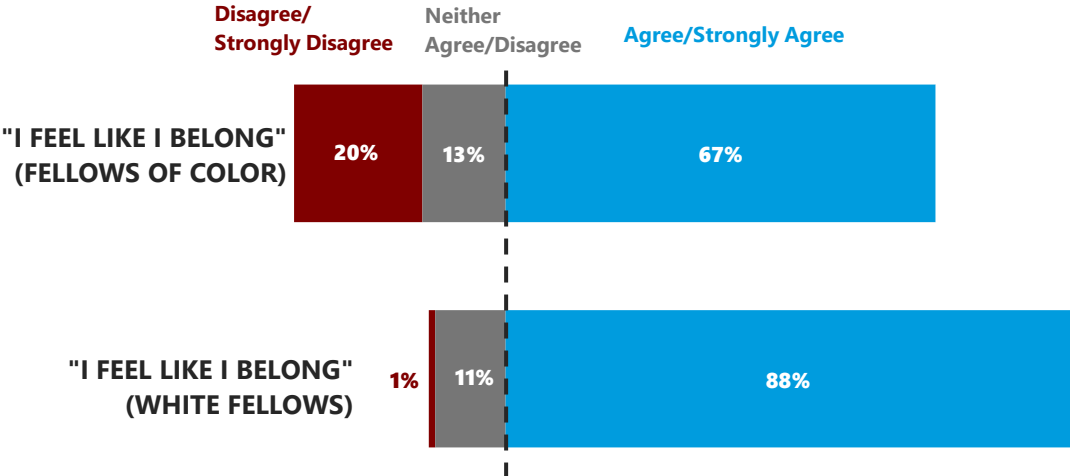
A recent study among STEM graduate and postdoctoral students highlights that those who are underrepresented in a group are significantly less likely to feel a sense of belonging in their program compared to those who identify with a majority group (Stachl & Baranger, 2020). This lessened sense of belonging can also continue throughout a scholar’s career in predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Thus, groups and membership networks working with scholars outside of academia can help all members feel a sense of belonging by being cognizant of individual differences. Network staff should also intentionally create space for all members to feel a sense of legitimate membership and valued presence. An increase in sense of belonging within a group can positively impact an individual’s career trajectory and overall influence in their field (Stachl & Baranger, 2020).

### Fellows’ Experiences of Belonging

The fellow survey asked several questions related to this sense of belonging. Responses indicate that most respondents experienced a strong culture of belonging in the fellowships overall. However, there were some important differences by race. As seen in Figure 2, on a 5-point Likert scale, 82% of all survey respondents

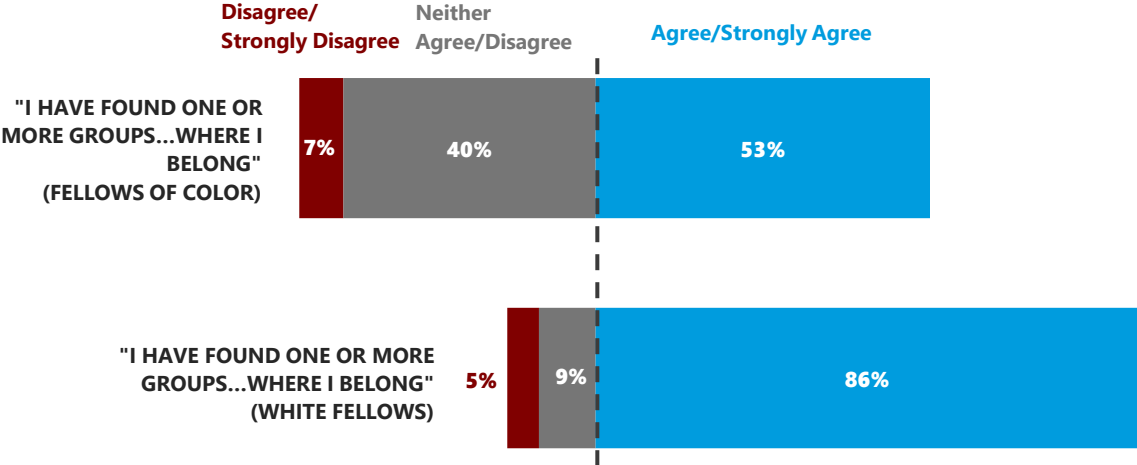
( $n = 84$ ) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I feel like I belong." Fellows of color<sup>2</sup> were less likely to express positive feelings of belonging compared to white fellows ( $p = 0.03$ ). While 88% of white fellows strongly agreed or agreed that they belonged, 67% of fellows of color felt this way.

**Figure 2. Feelings of Belonging by Race Identity, by percentage**



Fellows also reported finding colleagues they "belonged with" in the fellowships. Eighty percent of all survey respondents ( $n = 84$ ) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I have found one or more communities or groups where I feel I belong within the Doris Duke Fellowships." As seen in Figure 3, only 53% of fellows of color agreed or strongly agreed that they found one or more groups within the fellowships where they belong, whereas 86% of white fellows expressed this belief ( $p = 0.01$ ).

**Figure 3: Feelings of Belonging in a Group, by Race Identity**



<sup>2</sup> Fellows of color consisted of any fellows identifying as African American/Black, Asian/Asian American, Hispanic or Latinx, Middle Eastern/North African, Native American/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, Other, or Multiracial. All of these races, ethnicities, and identities were grouped into the category as "fellow of color" for analysis purposes and to preserve anonymity.



Fellows offered three overarching recommendations for networks that want to promote and sustain a sense of belonging among their members:



We share direct quotes from the fellows' interviews to highlight these elements and how they contributed to positive sense of belonging within the fellowships program.

### **Facilitate Intentional Connections and Conversations**

“Creat[e] activities and opportunities that don't fit one mold, that different people from different points in their career or their life or whatever can get value out of. I think it also goes back to who is making these decisions and how are these decisions being made. I think, again, hopefully facilitating opportunities where we can continue to strengthen the meaningful connections we did make.”

“[Ask] ‘What's working for you?’ This is what's working for me. This is what doesn't seem to be working. That kind of community of practice.”

“Mak[e] sure we [have] different opportunities to mix and meet with different people [and] find people with a similar core of passion.”

### **Strategize Recruitment, Retention, and Outreach**

“I think, too, just an act of going back and making sure that individuals who feel marginalized or who are not coming forward to participate in the follow-up activities of the fellowship are being reached back out to and told that, ‘We'd like to have your voice at the table and we'd love to have you participate.’ Because people may feel like, ‘Well, if I didn't go into academia or my career didn't go in the direction that I was originally planning, maybe this is just meant to be.’”

“[We need to be] thoughtful about whose voice is not present, whose experience is not reflected and the fact that if people are to feel valued and welcomed and respected and have a sense of belonging, even if we do those things for the new people coming in we need to make sure that the existing fellows and the people who are in the network already are attuned beyond just being sensitive, but to create proactively welcoming spaces for people and sometimes that might mean stepping back, which is a little uncomfortable in some cases where we're all taught. . . you got to get your name out there.”

### **Formalize Inclusion Practices and Culture**

“I think the fellowship either implicitly or explicitly wanted to know about us and our backgrounds and use that information to create at least what I generally perceived to be an inclusive space. I think that initial reaching out and wanting to know about our backgrounds, that's really important and I think would be important to continue.”

“It'll be really important to be much more explicit about what the standards [for culture] are, what the priorities are in terms of inclusion. I would hope that the feeling would stay the same, but I wonder if it needs to be more explicit in what that means.”

### **Summary**

A majority of fellows described having a strong sense of belonging in the fellowships; however, there were differences in experiences among fellows of color. Fellows reflected on aspects of the fellowships that helped support a strong sense of belonging and suggested ways to increase that sense among underrepresented individuals and new members as the group expands. Networks should be intentional in how they foster a sense of belonging for members with a variety of experiences and backgrounds. This intentionality can positively impact the field of child well-being as a whole.

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## CONCLUSION

"[It is important] that the culture of this fellowship [program] is like **'We're here, we believe you, we stand by you,** and when you just need someone to lean on, whether it's to help you formally apply for a job or respond to a problematic thing, or informally in terms of your emotional well-being, **you'll always have this network of people.'** I also think that if you have a network that is constantly pushing itself to incorporate, include, and kind of coinvestigate with new folks all the time, then they also create a culture of 'it doesn't matter if you're seasoned or new. **We just value good researchers trying to do good work. . . that'll make a difference.'**"

The Doris Duke Fellowships created a strong culture of social support between its eight cohorts of fellows. Quantitative and qualitative findings highlighted most fellows had positive experiences of social support. Although survey respondents overall experienced a strong and positive sense of belonging in the program, fellows of color reported that they did not experience this sense of belonging as strongly as their white peers. The extant literature indicates a strong link between social support, the experience of belonging, and academic success; the Doris Duke Fellowships provided a network experience that met these needs for most fellows. However, every fellowship or similar program would benefit from envisioning and purposely creating structures that support all participants, especially those from underrepresented groups. By addressing individual needs and fostering social support and a sense of belonging amongst all fellows, a network can create a positive and equitable experience that benefits everyone.

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Established in 1985, Chapin Hall's areas of research include child welfare systems, community capacity to support children and families, and youth homelessness. For more information about Chapin Hall, visit [www.chapinhall.org](http://www.chapinhall.org) or @Chapin\_Hall.

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The opinions, findings, and recommendations expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Inc., the Doris Duke Fellowships for the Promotion of Child Well-Being, or the Child Well-Being Research Network.

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