

# The Emerging Equity Scholars Program: A Belonging Intervention to Address Othering in Research Careers

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## **Abstract**

Emerging scholars from groups that have been historically excluded from and are currently othered in research careers are vital to developing innovative approaches to studying and remedying the world's most challenging equity and social justice issues. In predominantly white institutions, scholars from othered groups may feel tokenized and pressured to conform to the status quo if employers do not commit to support them in thriving. The Emerging Equity Scholars (EES) program is a belonging intervention created for people from othered groups embarking upon professional research careers that was piloted from 2022 to 2023 at RTI International. This paper explains EES's conception of holistic mentorship, which builds belonging by focusing on well-being, equity-centered research, community building, honoring diverse perspectives and lived expertise, and sharing power and resources. We describe how EES centers well-being by cultivating practices among program participants that support mindfulness, healing, and joy, and discuss EES's research mentorship strategies that recognize emerging scholars' knowledge, honor their experiences, and support their exploration of novel research approaches. We conclude with reflections from pilot participants about how EES cultivates a sense of belonging within the program, the broader work environment, and the field of research, and how the EES program will be adapted for future cohorts.

## Introduction

In their groundbreaking work on “belonging without othering,” John A. Powell and Stephen Menéndez, the director and assistant director, respectively, of the Othering & Belonging Institute (OBI) at the University of California, Berkeley, define othering as:

a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that, consciously or unconsciously, denies, or fails to accord, full and equal membership in society as well as human dignity on the basis of social group affiliation and identity, and therefore tends to engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities. Dimensions of othering include, but are not limited to, religion, sex, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (class), caste, disability, sexual orientation, and skin tone. (Powell & Menéndez, 2024, p. 5)

Contending that othering is “a persistent and recurring problem in our world that organizes or informs nearly every major problem on the planet,” Powell and Menéndez look to institutions as sites where othering can be addressed, reduced, and potentially eradicated (2024, pp. 3, 164–170). They provide actionable steps for those willing to do the hard work of assessing their institutional cultures and structures to identify areas where othering is being instigated, perpetuated, or intensified, and posit an overarching solution of engendering *belonging*. They describe belonging as “occur[ing] when the members of the [othered] group are made to feel as if they belong to the institution, and when members of those groups are empowered and have a say in the organization, design, construction, or reconstruction of that institution” (Powell & Menéndez, 2024, p. 136). Conceiving of belonging as a practice, the authors point to the need for *belonging interventions* that can actively counteract and dismantle the forces of othering and cultivate more expansive and inclusive processes and systems in their place. The OBI’s Belonging Design Principles (Gallegos & Surasky, 2023) provide concrete guidance for those seeking to serve as “architects of belonging” by developing such interventions.

When thinking about the roles of institutions in othering and belonging, turning the lens on research

is important. Many traditional research approaches and methodologies have institutionalized the harms of white supremacy as common practice, which profoundly shapes societal views of who and what are considered problems to be analyzed and how solutions to these problems are developed and implemented (Venkateswaran et al., 2023). The individuals and teams that enact these forms of othering typically are themselves embedded in universities, organizations, and companies, the majority of which in the United States are predominantly white institutions (PWIs) that will further perpetuate othering within their workforces unless they take explicit steps to interrupt and change these dynamics.

In recent years, there has been much talk about conducting research with an “equity lens” that informs conceptual, methodological, analytic, and dissemination approaches (Crosman et al., 2022; Douglas et al., 2019; Farley & Burbules, 2022), yet translating this goal to actual practice requires sustained commitment that is backed by resources and demonstrated action within all levels of an organization. Among the many changes PWIs must make, increasing the number of researchers from othered groups they employ and creating a culture in which those researchers are “empowered and have a say in the organization, design, construction, or reconstruction of that institution” (Powell & Menéndez, 2024, p. 136) are essential steps to decenter whiteness, strengthen equity across the workforce, expand the diversity of perspectives and approaches in research, and improve the quality of the research itself (AlShebli et al., 2018; K. Powell, 2018; Smith et al., 2004). Merely hiring researchers from othered groups will not automatically lead to equity, inclusion, and belonging (Ahmed & Adams, 2023; Shore et al., 2018). Indeed, relying on “business as usual” is likely to perpetuate practices that have led to exclusion and othering and risks making these researchers feel like they are being tokenized and need to suppress their insights and perspectives in favor of conforming to the status quo (Jackson et al., 1995; Payne & Keeffe, 2023). This is not only harmful to individuals but also deprives the research field of these researchers’ tremendous potential to expand

and improve approaches to studying and solving some of the most challenging issues of our time.

In this paper, we describe the development and piloting of the Emerging Equity Scholars (EES) program, a mentorship program designed as a belonging intervention for early-career scholars from historically excluded and currently othered groups embarking upon professional research careers in PWIs. During the 9-month program, Scholars are paired with two mentors, one who focuses on supporting well-being and one who focuses on research as a career pathway. Inspired by Black feminist thought leaders and leveraging the transformative potential of mentorship, this program is grounded in a holistic mentorship model that emphasizes the importance of physical and emotional well-being, equity-centered research, community building, honoring and amplifying diverse perspectives and lived expertise, and sharing power and resources. These core principles of the EES holistic mentorship model are continually foregrounded through program practices aimed at creating a culture that recognizes that self-care, collective support, acknowledgment of emotions and experiences, rest, imagination, and celebration strengthen the research enterprise by equipping scholars who have been systemically marginalized and minoritized to thrive while advancing their expertise and leadership.

EES was created specifically for people from othered groups embarking upon professional research careers at RTI International, an independent nonprofit research institute dedicated to improving the human condition. RTI's headquarters are located in North Carolina's Research Triangle Park, with regional offices on four continents and a staff of nearly 6,000 people working around the globe. Researchers join RTI at all career stages, from high school interns to people holding advanced degrees with decades of experience. As a PWI with a commitment to conducting equity-centered research, RTI recognized the need to reflect upon and address how othering could be affecting its research and staff members, including by limiting their potential to drive innovative thinking, advance nontraditional methods, and bring new lenses to entrenched social issues.

EES is intended to serve as a belonging intervention for early-career scholars from groups historically excluded from and currently othered in research careers, including people who have been racialized as Black, Indigenous, and of color; grew up in rural or agricultural areas; were the first in their families to attend college; identify as LGBTQIA+; are living with disabilities or chronic illnesses; or are affected by the criminal legal system; along with members of other systemically marginalized or minoritized groups and people with intersectional identities across any of these groups. The program was conceived with the belief that nurturing and growing these scholars in ways that support and honor their skills, achievements, perspectives, and lived expertise can build their sense of belonging in research professions. The EES program's near-term goals are to equip early-career scholars to advance their desired career pathways by questioning and reexamining traditional approaches, deepening their knowledge of topic areas or methodologies that are meaningful to them, feeling confident in the value of understandings gained through their lived experiences, and believing in their ability to thrive as researchers. Longer term, our goal is that cultivating belonging early in their careers will position these scholars to lead transformative research and occupy the highest levels of power and decision-making across a vast array of institutions and organizations, thereby improving the field as a whole and making significant contributions to dismantling oppressive systems and achieving equitable societies.

Once the EES program was developed, we conducted a pilot from October 2022 through September 2023 with four scholars, eight mentors, and five advisors who were identified through our network at RTI as people likely to be interested in program participation. In the following, we describe how we developed, piloted, and qualitatively assessed EES with the aim of sharing lessons learned and highlighting concrete steps that PWIs can take to foster belonging. Despite the practical guidance provided by Powell and Menéndez, the OBI, and others (see, for example, Cohen, 2023; Corbett, 2024), the concept of belonging can be slippery, and people working at PWIs may struggle to envision ways to operationalize it. Although we comprehensively



present the program in this paper, we encourage readers to consider how specific strategies or components could be implemented at their research institution if full implementation is not feasible. We begin by describing the impetus and framework for our model of *holistic mentorship*, which is grounded in practices to foster well-being, equity-centered research, community building, honoring and amplifying diverse perspectives and lived expertise, and sharing power and resources.

The next section of the paper details the content of the five program modules, followed by an in-depth discussion of how holistic mentorship is operationalized in the well-being and research components of the program. We conclude by discussing next steps for growing the program within RTI as well as its potential adoption by other organizations, given the promise it shows as a belonging intervention that aligns with the OBI's Belonging Design Principles (Gallegos & Surasky, 2023). Due to the relatively small scale of the pilot, we do not report findings from a quantitative evaluation but rather focus on the feasibility and acceptability of this formative work.

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## The Creation of EES

As we undertook the work of developing an innovative belonging intervention, we looked to Black feminist thought leadership to help us reimagine what mentorship could look like. These teachings led us to develop a *holistic mentorship* approach for EES, which conceives of mentorship as being provided in community by a diverse array of people in ways that continually foreground the importance of well-being and sharing power and resources alongside the recognition that scholars who have been systemically marginalized and minoritized possess key insights for innovations to transform equity-centered research and the research enterprise as a whole (see Figure 1). In line with this philosophy:

- Each Scholar is paired with a well-being mentor who shares similar sociodemographic characteristics and who can guide the Scholar in finding supportive communities at work, navigating

workplace processes and cultures, and fostering long-term emotional and physical health.

- Each Scholar is also paired with a research mentor who has advanced along a professional pathway that the Scholar wishes to follow and who can guide the Scholar in designing, conducting, and disseminating an Equity Project that advances their research skills over the course of the program, while respecting the Scholar's independence of thought and the unique lens of their lived expertise.
- The EES program is delivered in a cohort so that Scholars and mentors can learn from and support each other as a collective.
- Two co-directors—one of whom is responsible for the well-being component and the other for the research component—lead the program with assistance from a program manager and multiple advisors who provide input, support, and ad hoc mentorship (including covering for well-being or research mentors when they are traveling or if they need to step away from the program).

From its inception, the EES program comprised a collaborative process. Initially conceived of by two researchers in RTI International's Transformative Research Unit for Equity (TRUE), an additional RTI colleague and an external consultant joined the leadership team before any formal development work began. This team represented a range of intersectional identities, including people who are racialized as Black, Latinx, and white; were the first in their family to attend college; identify as LBGTQIA+; and are living with chronic illness. All members of the leadership team identified as female midcareer researchers. Our processes for generating ideas, developing materials, and finalizing drafts followed inclusive workstyle principles that centered nonhierarchical and power-sharing relationships; the equal valuing of academic and lived expertise; and iterative cycles of brainstorming, drafting, feedback, and revision before finalization (Shrivastava et al., 2024).

Our leadership team began with the core idea that there was tremendous potential in the power of mentorship to address othering and foster belonging in the professional research environment. Mentorship is widely recognized as central to

**Figure 1. The EES holistic mentorship model**

advancement in research careers (Bagaka's et al., 2015; Sorkness et al., 2017), and many universities and research organizations have mentorship programs for students, post-doctoral fellows, and early-career faculty members. Some PWIs have created programs specifically for scholars from minoritized racial and ethnic groups as a way to support them in developing programs of research that incorporate the insights they bring through their combined lived and academic expertise. Examples of these programs include:

- The *University of California, San Francisco, Visiting Professors program* was started in 1997 as a means to provide intensive training and mentorship to early-career researchers conducting HIV-prevention research with minoritized communities in the United States (Division of Prevention Science, Department of Medicine, University of California, San Francisco, 2024). Participants convene for 6 weeks for three consecutive summers to attend seminars and workshops and meet with mentors as they develop proposals for the National Institutes of Health.
- The *Racial Democracy Crime and Justice Network (RDCJN)* was founded in 2003 at the Criminal Justice Research Center at Ohio State University and moved to Rutgers University in 2016 and to the University of Maryland in 2024 (Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Maryland, 2024). Each year, the RDCJN hosts a 3-week summer research institute during which scholars receive mentorship to support the development of a manuscript and other activities to facilitate “the academic success of junior faculty from underrepresented groups, and assures that their perspectives and approaches on crime and justice reach relevant audiences” (School of Criminal Justice, Rutgers University, 2024). RDCJN also convenes an annual conference to foster intellectual exchange and collaboration.
- Founded in 2019, the *Mentoring of Students and Igniting Community (MOSAIC)* program at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health was designed as a “comprehensive and anti-racist faculty-to-student mentorship initiative for BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color]



and first-generation students” (Samari et al., 2022). MOSAIC provides support and resources across five domains: professional development, faculty mentorship, navigating institutions and academic support, guest speakers, and incident management to help students digest and respond to events on campus and in the world (Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, 2024).

We were greatly inspired by these programs, whose tenure speaks to their successful approaches and whose network members and former participants have gone on to lead groundbreaking research and become giants in their respective fields. Drawing on our experiences as mentors during the evolving climate of intersectional crises in the early 2020s and, for the majority of us, our direct experiences of being othered in research careers, we saw a need for a mentorship program that included an intentional focus on fostering belonging for emerging scholars. Importantly, we recognize that the exemplar programs we mentioned previously are strongly marked by a sense of belonging, as is apparent in their promotional materials that include comments from former participants and in the word-of-mouth reputations they have established. For EES, we decided to build on this byproduct of well-designed and thoughtful programs by centering belonging as an intentional outcome of our design.

The OBI’s Belonging Design Principles (Gallegos & Surasky, 2023) begin with two complementary “big ideas.” First, “the root of the problem is othering,” and second, “everyone belongs.” These principles jointly establish that othering is structural and often driven by collective narratives, and that the “solution to othering is not more othering” and neither is it “same-ing, in which we erase our diversity and claim we’re all the same” (Gallegos & Surasky, 2023, p. 5). Rather, othering must be disassembled by building belonging through four elements: inclusion, connection, recognition, and agency (powell & Menendian, 2024). Although the Belonging Design Principles were not published until shortly before the EES pilot ended and powell and Menendian’s book was not released until 2024, we see the EES

program modules as cultivating participants’ experiences of these four elements. In the following section, we provide details about the genesis and content of these modules.

## EES Modules

The five-module EES program is structured around each Scholar’s development, completion, and dissemination of an Equity Project that they design. Each module begins with a kickoff meeting attended by EES program leadership, Scholars, and well-being and research mentors. Kickoff meetings provide opportunities for the full cohort to learn about the focus and thought leader for the upcoming module and to share ideas and successes to date.

Inspired by thought leader Tricia Hersey’s revolutionary work theorizing rest as resistance through her “Nap Ministry,” EES begins with **Rest** in recognition of the “legacy of exhaustion” wrought by systems of oppression and the belief that “grind culture” robs minoritized people of the rest they are owed (Hersey, 2022). This module (Figure 2) is intended to set the tone for the entire program by underscoring that what we call “intentional rest”—active cognitive activities such as daydreaming, playing, meditating, creating art, and other forms of resting our brains and bodies—is vital not only for the generation of new ideas and innovations but also for survival. During this 1-month module, Scholars and mentors are encouraged to dedicate their monthly allocated program participation time to engaging in intentional rest activities of their choosing on their

**Figure 2. Module 1: Rest**

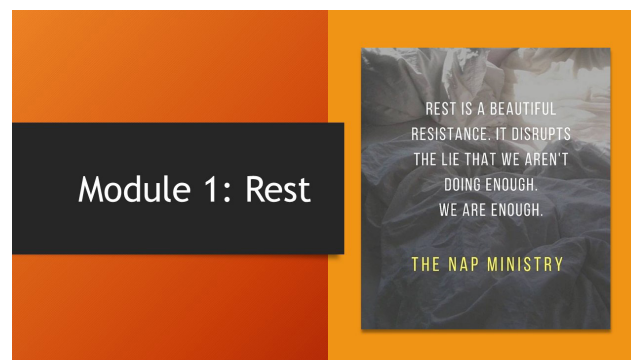


Figure 3. Module 2: Reimagine



own or in collaborative spaces (virtual or in person) with other EES Scholars and mentors.

The second module (Figure 3) of EES invites Scholars to **Reimagine** research through the teachings of adrienne maree brown's Emergent Strategy framework, which fosters iterative and adaptive thinking and the creation of new possibilities (brown, 2017). Having stepped away from their Equity Projects while resting, Scholars are encouraged to look at their proposed work plan with fresh eyes and consider creative shifts in scope, methodology, or dissemination strategies that could strengthen the alignment between this research and their professional goals. Maintaining a central focus on personal well-being is core to this process: EES mentors guide Scholars through their reimagining by asking questions such as, *What adjustments to scope are needed to make it feasible to accomplish this project in the time you have to devote to it? What aspects of this research ignite your passion, and how can you center those? and What are your well-being needs and how can you continually protect those while advancing this project?* At the end of this 1-month module, Scholars have refined and finalized their Equity Project plans.

In module 3 (Figure 4), group discussions of Stacey Abrams' (2018) *Lead from the Outside* provide forums to **Reinvigorate** excitement about professional possibilities. In these discussions, the entire EES cohort delves deeply into the specific challenges faced by researchers from historically excluded and currently othered groups, shares strategies for addressing them, and identifies the strengths EES

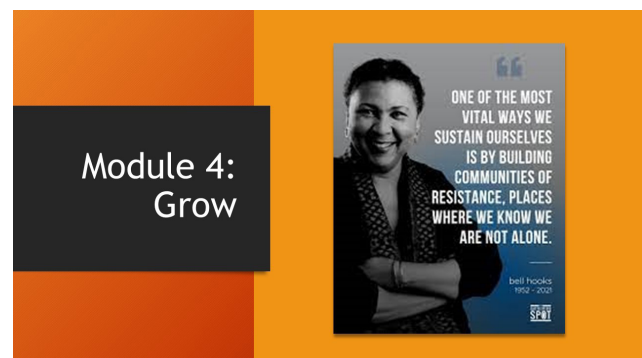
Figure 4. Module 3: Reinvigorate



participants bring to their careers. In addition, the module encourages the EES Scholars to expand their visions for leadership potential and possibilities. Alongside the book discussions, mentors work with the Scholars to leverage and honor their unique talents as they begin conducting their Equity Projects and cultivating individualized well-being practices. At the end of this 2-month module, Scholars have launched their Equity Project research and the EES community has collectively identified, built, and strengthened practices that support thriving in research careers.

During the fourth module (Figure 5), Scholars **Grow** their Equity Projects and their well-being practices into fruition. Scholars' voices and agency are also recognized by having them collaboratively select the module's thought leader. The pilot cohort of EES Scholars chose bell hooks as the thought leader for the module, highlighting her advocacy that "one of the most vital ways we sustain ourselves is by building communities of resistance, places where we know we are not alone" (hooks, 1990, p. 213). Throughout

Figure 5. Module 4: Grow



this module, mentors strive to keep Scholars feeling connected and “not alone” as they complete their Equity Projects. This 4-month module is designed to provide Scholars with time to build on the foundation they created in the previous three modules and establish consistent practices that advance their work and continually center their well-being. During this module, scholars are also encouraged to identify opportunities for growth in their work at RTI outside of EES, and the program leadership and mentors actively facilitate connections and network building.

In the fifth module, the Scholars are applauded and provided with platforms to **Shine**. Just as the EES ethos emphasizes the importance of carving out dedicated time to rest, we intentionally commit the final month of the program to celebrating achievements, including the community we have built. The Scholars themselves are the thought leaders for this module, and EES leadership organizes multiple opportunities for them to present their Equity Projects and their program experiences through webinars, videos, social media posts, and other dissemination materials. During the full cohort and peer group meetings, leadership, mentors, and Scholars are invited to share reflections on their own and others’ accomplishments, with the goal that each person concludes the program fully aware of how much they are appreciated and confident in their own potential.

Across all five modules, Scholars meet twice monthly with their well-being mentor and with their research mentor. They are encouraged to schedule these meetings on alternating weeks, so that they have a direct interaction with a mentor each week. In addition, the Scholars meet monthly as a peer group, and the well-being director and the research director convene monthly meetings for each set of mentors that provide a forum during which to discuss challenges and brainstorm strategies in a confidential and supportive environment. These community-building activities are supplemented by a Microsoft Teams channel for all EES participants to share photographs, celebrations, and personal and professional updates. Finally, the program hosts the EES Speaker Series, which is a forum for RTI researchers and subject matter experts as well

as external experts to explore the intersection of research and well-being as a means to transform the research enterprise by re-imagining the possibilities, opportunities, and joys of research careers. These events are open to everyone working at RTI to provide visibility for EES and amplify the importance of holistic mentorship and belonging interventions.

In the next section on “Well-Being as a Central Pillar of Holistic Mentorship,” we describe how EES actively centers well-being by cultivating practices among all program participants that support mindfulness, healing, nourishment, and joy. This is followed by a section on “Equity-Focused Research Mentorship,” in which we elucidate strategies that recognize and amplify emerging scholars’ knowledge, honor their experiences, and support their exploration of novel theories, methods, and dissemination. The paper concludes with reflections from EES participants about how this model of holistic mentorship cultivates a sense of belonging not only within the program, but in the broader work environment and the field of research as a whole. We also address adaptations we have made based on the EES pilot in anticipation of enrolling future cohorts in this belonging intervention.

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## Well-Being as a Central Pillar of Holistic Mentorship

Traditional academic mentoring models often emphasize performance, research productivity, and career advancement (Dominguez & Hager, 2013). There is a growing recognition that such models neglect an equally important aspect: the well-being of early-career scholars (Oddone Paolucci et al., 2021). Evidence shows that mentors can help create a supportive and nurturing environment that can significantly enhance academic and personal outcomes for students from othered racial and ethnic groups attending PWIs (Hurd et al., 2016). Furthermore, employees who feel valued and supported not only for their productivity, but also for their personal development, are more likely to thrive, showing higher levels of engagement, creativity, and resilience (Inam et al., 2021).



## The Relationship Between Well-Being and Equity

Well-being can be difficult to prioritize and achieve for people who come from systemically marginalized and minoritized communities (Wallace, 2017). This occurs for a myriad of reasons, many of which are directly linked to structural racism and other social determinants of health that interfere with access to safe and secure housing, transportation, employment, education, and health care. Indeed, adverse social determinants of health have been reported to be significantly higher for almost all groups of people of color compared with white people (Town et al., 2024). Furthermore, coping with the daily stresses of racism has been documented to seriously damage physical and mental health (Geronimus, 2023).

Scholars from groups that have been historically excluded from and are currently othered in research careers may be contending with an array of these factors, or with emotional or physical health issues that resulted from prior exposures to adverse conditions caused by racism and other systems of oppression. In addition, scholars from othered groups, and particularly those who are the first in their families to graduate from college, frequently have familial obligations and become a resource for their loved ones as their careers advance, providing financial and practical support while also managing their professional lives (Covarrubias et al., 2019). Paradoxically, the flexibility offered in many research professions can add further challenges, because family members may expect scholars to be able to interrupt their workday to assist with family matters, leading to additional misunderstandings and stress. Due to health disparities driven by racism, scholars of color are also more likely than white scholars to experience the death of loved ones (Williams, 1999) and thus may have a need for more bereavement leave than they are allocated. Whether coping with their own current structural barriers, issues that arose due to prior exposures, the ongoing needs of family members, or a combination of all of these contexts, scholars from systemically marginalized and minoritized groups typically find themselves navigating a complex set of demands that are often poorly understood or ignored by their colleagues from more privileged and dominant groups.

Scholars who possess lived expertise on the topics they research may face additional strains. On study teams, there often is an implicit divide between “us” (the researchers) and “them” (the people being researched). An early-career scholar who has direct experience because they, their family, or their community are dealing with consequences related to substance use, criminal legal system involvement, health or mental health conditions, or other frequently studied topics that disproportionately affect systemically marginalized and minoritized groups may fear being stigmatized if they disclose this information. This may lead to the researcher choosing not to share their lived expertise to avoid revealing private information in workspaces, which then could put them in the position of having to manage in isolation feeling triggered or overwhelmed by reading literature, collecting or analyzing data, or being in discussions about issues they have directly experienced. It also could lead to them deciding to leave a team or switch topic areas if they are put in a position of having their expertise revealed against their will—for instance if they are required to undergo a background check to access a dataset or enter a facility to conduct interviews. In addition to being profoundly harmful for scholars, these situations also significantly diminish the quality of research if it remains devoid of the insights and perspectives of researchers who have deep, rich, and nuanced understandings of these areas of study.

The EES leadership team understood that in a program for scholars from othered groups working in a PWI, well-being clearly is a core component of equity. People cannot feel like they belong in an environment that harms them. Actively communicating concern about and support for well-being in ways that are tailored to the needs of people from a wide array of groups is key to cultivating a sense of belonging within PWIs. Thus, we decided to thoughtfully incorporate and prioritize well-being as an integral part of EES.

## Well-Being Mentorship

A key innovation of the EES program is the inclusion of well-being mentors. In the pilot cohort, well-being mentors primarily were RTI staff working in roles that supported research endeavors but who did

not self-identify as “researchers.” These colleagues were invited to become well-being mentors based on their varied and significant contributions across our research institute, their tenure, and shared sociodemographic characteristics with EES Scholars. Because the goal of well-being mentorship was to establish empathic communities at work, receive support navigating workplace processes and cultures, and foster long-term emotional and physical health, it was important that the Scholars could relate to their well-being mentor on a personal level.

Successful well-being mentorship required ongoing relationship and trust building, which well-being mentors attempted to develop through their twice monthly check-ins. While the Scholars’ experiences and needs were always centered, well-being mentors would often share their own relevant personal and work experiences to demonstrate compassion and empathy for the Scholars and provide examples of practical strategies. Throughout the program, well-being mentors supported Scholars in thinking through their well-being goals, achievements, and ongoing needs; exploring new practices such as journaling; and normalizing seeking therapy.

Since well-being mentors were also from othered groups, there was a possibility they were affected by the same workplace culture issues as the Scholars. To minimize harms or experiences of vicarious trauma, well-being mentors were provided with support through monthly one-on-one meetings with the well-being director and participation in the monthly well-being mentor peer support group. These forums contributed to building community and provided structured space for support. For example, when one well-being mentor experienced the death of a loved one, time was devoted during the peer meeting to supporting her with heartfelt condolences, tips on navigating the complexities of grief and loss, and encouragement to pay special attention to her well-being during this difficult time. The well-being mentor later expressed how meaningful the support felt and how much she appreciated the opportunity to connect with the group when it was most needed.

## EES Well-Being Programmatic Practices

Well-being mentorship requires an authentic look at day-to-day activities and examining them for ways to create a safe and inclusive environment in which emerging scholars can openly discuss challenges and seek guidance without fear of judgment. We began by identifying three dominant constructs of well-being and how they connect to types of rest (see Figure 6). We then incorporated these concepts into EES program activities.

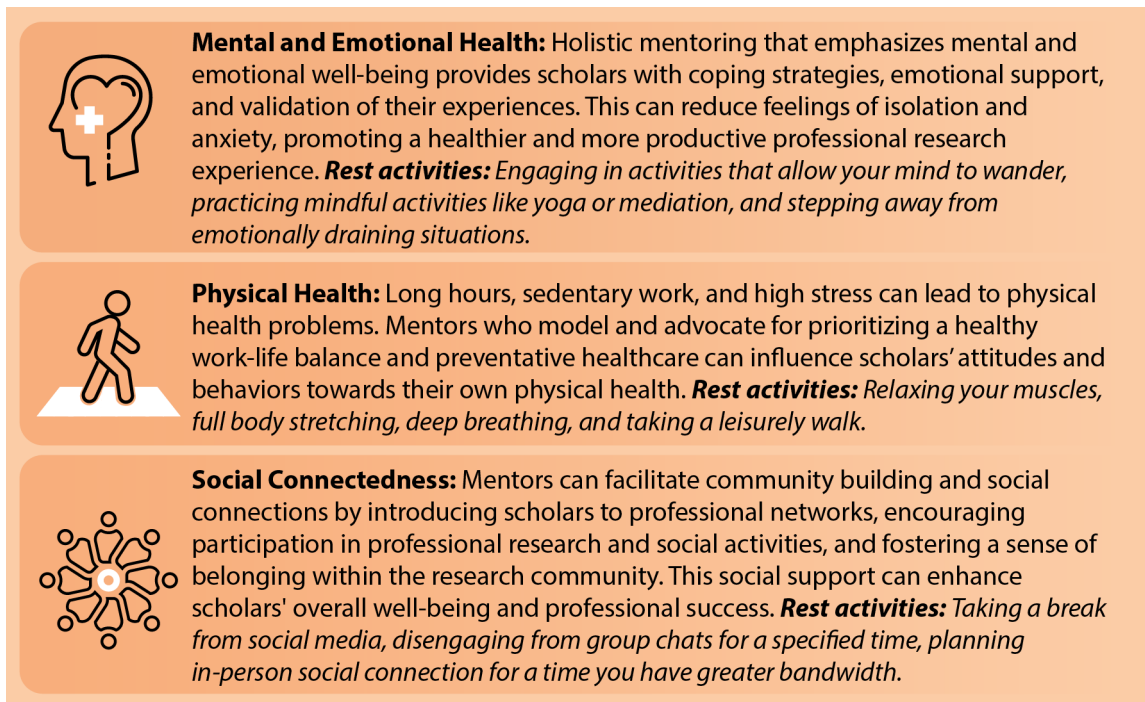
### Creating Space for Rest

As noted in the section on the EES modules, in recent years activists and thought leaders such as author Tricia Hersey (2022) have achieved acclaim for their bold and transformative ideas on rest, including how working nonstop to achieve professional success is harmful for many people and especially people from systemically marginalized and minoritized groups. Unlike the beginning of many work projects or initiatives in which everyone is expected to jump in and immediately ramp up full steam ahead, the EES curriculum begins with a module on rest, a concept introduced in program materials as being essential for the rigor and integrity of the research process:

Scholars from groups that have been historically excluded from and are currently othered in research careers often have been required to work incredibly hard to prove themselves in educational and professional environments, while simultaneously being pushed not to attend to their own needs or to invest in caring for themselves. Designing a program that centers intentional rest is a step toward dismantling white supremacy. Beginning with rest helps create an atmosphere of rejuvenation that is essential for true reimagining. This is also needed and critical for individuals to craft personal visions for how they want to grow. (source: EES program materials)

After module 1, in support of sustaining the value of rest over the course of the EES program, all EES program participants were provided with and encouraged to use 4 hours per month of protected time covered by the program to practice intentional rest. This emphasized our commitment to maintain our collective focus on the need to step away from work and allow our brains and bodies to dream, play,



**Figure 6. Well-being constructs and types of rest**

and create. Scholars were encouraged to prioritize and keep track of their rest activities as a way of building a consistent practice.

### Celebrating Joy

EES was designed to promote well-being in community. The Microsoft Teams channel was used to post encouragement, share resources, and to celebrate “wins.” **Well-Being Wins** were an important part of the program so that participants understood that despite current challenges, it was also possible to experience joys and successes. These wins also served to remind participants of the larger context of narratives of thriving. Program participants were encouraged to post and amplify wins or accomplishments that were large or small, professional or personal. This practice was validated midway through the program year when leadership coach and consultant Asila Calhoun spoke at an EES Speaker Series event on imposter syndrome attended by more than 140 people (Calhoun, 2024). Ms. Calhoun discussed the importance of acknowledging wins and featuring them in her midweek *WINS*Day newsletter that she distributes to a listserv of people who are interested in recognizing and celebrating

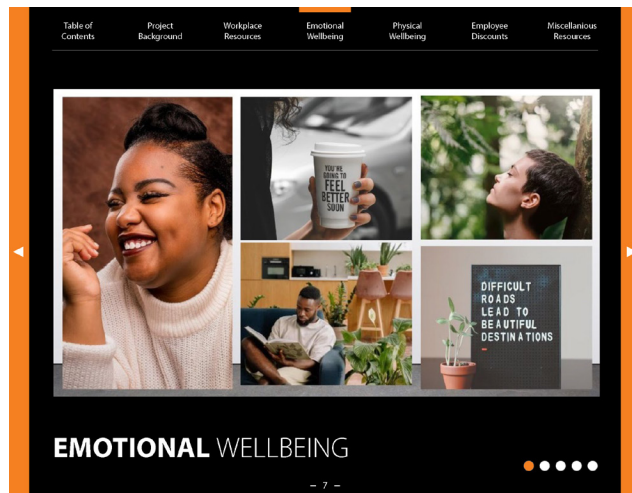
personal wins and receiving resources and training to aid in their professional development.

### Acknowledging Impactful Events

The EES community held space for one another, recognizing important anniversaries of loss and other sorrowful life events. All program participants were encouraged to note specific dates or times of the year, referred to as **Impact Days**, when a personal event or experience may have an emotional toll and possibly affect how they were able to show up for work. No details were ever required to be provided. Instead, this was used as a signal to fellow program participants that someone may need a little extra time, understanding, or grace around that date.

### Sharing Resources

In EES, we recognized that people from marginalized or minoritized groups likely have more well-being needs directly related to oppressive systems than their counterparts. Therefore, we developed the **EES Well-Being Resource Guide** (see Figure 7) to give EES participants easily accessible information about more than 50 employer-provided resources as well as external resources that could be accessed at no or relatively low cost to assist with mental, physical, and

**Figure 7. Image from EES Resource Guide**

social well-being goals. From suggestions on finding a new therapist, introducing readers to inspirational people to follow on social media, or linking them to information about health care benefits, the Well-Being Resource Guide was intended to be a repository that was not only informative but also nurtured the soul, featuring inspirational quotes and beautiful, representative images throughout the guide.

### Taking a Moment

EES leadership wanted to ensure well-being practices were woven into the fabric of the program and that participants felt the positive effects of focusing on well-being during the program and beyond. Administrative and programmatic efforts included setting acceptable and agreed-upon norms. Examples included scheduling meetings to start at 5 minutes past the hour to allow for a small break between meetings, beginning each module kickoff meeting or Speaker Series with a theme song to create a more relaxed and positive virtual environment, and making space at the beginning of meetings for personal connections, updates, or acknowledgments.

In addition to holding space for the individual, we were intentional about leaving time to discuss or even just acknowledge significant events outside of our control that affect well-being. We want participants to feel that they can show up as their authentic selves when national news or world events may bring feelings of joy or grief, and “taking a moment” honors that.

Through the active participation of well-being mentors and the practices described previously, well-being was the bedrock of EES. From this foundation, Scholars were supported to engage in equity-centered research with curiosity and confidence, as we discuss in the next section.

### Equity-Focused Research Mentorship

While we believe that equity-focused research mentorship can be provided by people from any sociodemographic group, we assert that researchers from dominant groups must actively work to decenter whiteness, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and other forces that traditionally have been central in systems of oppression. This is imperative not only to avoid inflicting harm on emerging scholars but also to avoid stifling innovations and advancements in research that can only be made by examining existing issues through new lenses. Furthermore, in the EES conception of holistic mentorship, there is a strong synergy between well-being and research. To foster this connection, EES research mentorship focuses on nurturing confidence and a sense of belonging—not just within a certain group or institution but within the research profession as a whole.

### Sharing Power in Research Mentorship

Mentorship is recognized as a key factor for success in research professions. In recent years, it also has been increasingly scrutinized and critiqued for being rife with possibilities for exploitation, gatekeeping, and other forms of toxic work culture and harmful interpersonal dynamics (Horton, 2023). We designed EES to provide the benefits of engaging with more experienced colleagues while cultivating interactions between research mentors and Scholars that are attentive to the importance of sharing learnings and power.

As discussed in the previous section, a key innovation in EES is pairing Scholars with a well-being mentor as well as a research mentor. In our messaging around this dual mentorship model, we continually foregrounded the importance of well-being and emphasized that the well-being mentors’ insights and guidance held equal weight alongside those of the research mentor. This was a deliberate effort on our

part to disrupt traditional hierarchies that prioritize academic training over other forms of knowledge. In full cohort meetings, the well-being director always welcomed participants and opened the meeting before the research director spoke, and in meetings with multiple mentors present, well-being mentors were invited to share their thoughts first, followed by research mentors. Likewise, we began meeting agendas, check-in conversations, and written communications by addressing well-being (e.g., opening the floor for sharing well-being wins, asking people if they needed support with challenges, reminding participants to take time for intentional rest), only moving onto research items once people's humanity had been acknowledged. These practices of consistently holding space for and leading with well-being also helped to avoid wellness as being construed as secondary or an "add-on" to the focus on research.

In addition, we encouraged Scholars to meet with colleagues beyond their officially assigned mentors as a way of ensuring that no single person exerted disproportionate influence over their well-being or their research. While Scholars met weekly with either their well-being mentor or research mentor, they were welcome to connect with any of the EES mentors or advisors to discuss a specific question, get feedback on their Equity Project, or learn more about someone's professional trajectory. The research director also met with the Scholars periodically to hear about their program experiences and their work on their Equity Project. Although no adjustments were needed in the pilot year, these check-ins were intended to provide opportunities for the Scholars to identify any challenges in working with their research mentors and obtain support in addressing an issue or changing mentors. In addition, since broadening Scholars' networks was considered integral to fostering a sense of belonging in a research profession, the research director and mentors facilitated introductions to senior colleagues outside of EES.

Finally, the concept of holistic mentorship being provided in community was applied to the research mentors as a collective. The monthly peer meetings gave research mentors a forum in which they could solicit advice for addressing mentorship questions,

ideas for strengthening the equity focus of their own research, or creative strategies for prioritizing their own well-being. These opportunities for connection yielded rich conversations about topics such as the complexities of helping Scholars stay emotionally and physically well in an increasingly high-pressure and demanding global economy and tactics for providing Scholars with a supportive infrastructure that would cultivate intellectual independence.

### **Equity Projects: Honoring Agency and Lived Expertise in Research**

In the professional research environment, early-career scholars frequently do not have the chance to design and conduct studies on topics of their choice. Rather, they typically are assigned specific tasks under the direction of a more senior researcher, which potentially equips them with valuable experience but also can leave them with a lack of clarity about how different components tie together and feeling unsure about their own abilities to lead a project from start to finish. The intention of the EES Equity Project is to provide Scholars with the support and opportunity to exercise agency in choosing a focal area and crafting a project design, deepen their understanding of the research process by engaging them in all stages of the work, and experience a sense of accomplishment and ownership over the final product.

During the pilot year, the EES research director and research mentors endeavored to implement equity-focused practices to create a highly supportive environment in which Scholars could attain these goals. As Scholars were contemplating topic areas and project designs, we continually encouraged them to honor their own interests and drive the process. Scholars sometimes expressed the sense that they "should" undertake a certain set of activities that would be beneficial for a more senior scholar's program of research or meet expectations that someone else had of them. We acknowledged these pressures and realities of the professional world, but emphasized to them that EES offered a uniquely protected space in which they were being encouraged to pursue their own intellectual passions.

At times, Scholars also expressed insecurities about their ability to conceive of an Equity Project idea

since they customarily worked to advance the ideas of others. To address this, we engaged Scholars in brainstorming sessions and provided them with examples of how we generate ideas for our research, being transparent about our own self-doubts and blockages and the strategies we use to move beyond those. Importantly, during the idea generation process and throughout the Equity Projects, we strove to promote an atmosphere of curiosity, innovation, and exploration in which we and the Scholars placed trust in their intuitions and hunches, even when they opposed traditional research theories and approaches or the ways the research mentors conducted their own work. This approach included encouraging Scholars to explicitly incorporate knowledge developed through their lived expertise into their work in ways that felt comfortable and welcome for them.

While we reinforced this messaging in our mentorship conversations and group meetings, a primary way we elevated the value of lived expertise in research was through the EES Speaker Series. In our inaugural event, Professors Reuben Jonathan Miller and Michael Walker elucidated the concept of “proximity as methodology” and how their personal experiences richly inform and strengthen their award-winning research (Miller, 2021; Walker, 2022). During the discussion following the talk, each Scholar was invited to pose a question they had formulated in advance to the speakers. This event was attended by more than 200 people across our research institute. Many colleagues contacted us afterward to express appreciation for the platform we provided for the Scholars, noting that typically questions and comments from senior researchers are prioritized in large-audience settings. Throughout the program year, we involved the Scholars as co-organizers and facilitators of each EES Speaker Series event. By suggesting guest speakers, crafting discussion questions, and sharing their own wisdom and learnings as they moderated conversations, the Scholars gained further visibility across our institute and modeled the benefits of disrupting traditional hierarchies in favor of a culture of power sharing.

Finally, we strongly supported Scholars in designing Equity Projects that were feasible. Each Scholar

initially proposed a scope of work that would have been extremely challenging to complete due to the amount of work required within the program’s timeframe. Research mentors used this opportunity to discuss how our profession’s culture promotes “performative productivity” and projecting ambition by setting unrealistic goals, which in turn leads to internalizing harmful normative expectations and sacrificing well-being in an effort to manage an overwhelming workload (Kenny, 2017).

Research mentors and Scholars worked together to adjust the scale of the Equity Projects, a process which helped the Scholars better understand the “building blocks” of research and how the necessary steps leading to a final product have value in and of themselves. For example, several Scholars originally stated that they wanted to publish a manuscript for a peer-reviewed journal on an analysis of research they would conduct in a topic area or using a methodology that was relatively new to them. While the research mentors acknowledged the high currency of peer-reviewed publications in research professions in their discussions with these Scholars, they also shared their experiences of how long the writing process often takes and the anxiety it can produce when rushed due to a demanding deadline. In addition, they highlighted the importance of and sense of fulfillment in taking one’s time to master a new skill or develop a comprehensive understanding of a novel topic, which then could provide the infrastructure for future work, including a published manuscript.

After Scholars reimagined the shape their interests and goals could take, the final EES Equity Projects for the pilot cohort included:

- Learning Geographic Information Systems (GIS) analysis techniques and conducting an analysis of maternal and child health disparities in Alabama, the Scholar’s home state, using data from RTI Rarity™.
- Undertaking an extensive literature review of the impact of municipal incorporation in Black-majority suburbs—a new topic area for the Scholar—and conducting a case study of several municipalities in Georgia.



- Developing a blog dedicated to advocating, inspiring, and showcasing how to equitably and inclusively build and sustain community partnerships in research, which involved the Scholar forming relationships with local community-based organizations and learning how to create a website.
- Conducting a thorough literature review and creating a resource guide for researchers on health equity and intersectional theory, with an emphasis on Black feminist thought leadership.

In preparation for module 5 (Shine), research mentors also worked closely with Scholars to help them develop 10-minute presentations for webinars and a one-page overview of their Equity Project to share with colleagues. The final EES Speaker Series event was held during Shine and featured each Scholar discussing their Equity Project and well-being reflections. In preparation for the “Shine Showcase,” the Scholars conducted practice runs with the well-being director and research director and then presented to the entire EES program at the module 5 kickoff meeting and to two other groups of approximately 15 researchers who provided feedback on the Scholars’ slides and talking points. This series of preliminary presentations helped Scholars hone their public-speaking skills, refine their materials, and build confidence before the final Speaker Series event, which was attended by more than 120 people, including the president of our research institute and other members of RTI’s executive leadership team as well as an interdisciplinary mix of researchers across all career stages.

The full month of Shine activities was intended to encourage Scholars to reflect on their hard work and feel pride in what they had accomplished. During this period, research mentors also talked with Scholars about how they could build on their Equity Projects to continue advancing their work in areas of interest to them, such as by submitting their presentation abstracts to conferences or developing their one-pagers into blog posts. Following their participation in EES, all the Scholars were asked by their managers or other senior colleagues to join project teams due to specific expertise they had developed during the program (e.g., GIS analysis, community engagement).

Throughout the pilot year, we strove to support the Scholars in approaching their equity-centered research from a foundation of well-being. Although deadlines for completing the Equity Projects and developing presentations aroused understandable stress, program leadership and the mentors continually encouraged Scholars to find the joy in their work and take time to celebrate their successes. We conclude this paper by reflecting on what we learned from the pilot year and our ideas for moving EES forward.

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### Assessing the EES Pilot

Due to the relatively small size of the pilot cohort, we did not conduct a rigorous quantitative evaluation of the EES program. However, we were interested in capturing feasibility and acceptability data during this formative stage of development to inform our decisions about whether the program should continue, and if so, what adaptations we should make to the program content and structure. In this section, we describe the methods we used for our qualitative assessment and how what we learned will inform the program’s future directions. We conclude with a discussion of how feedback and reflections from Scholars, mentors, advisors, and RTI researchers who attended EES Speaker Series events align with the OBI’s Belonging Design Principles (Gallegos & Surasky, 2023), indicating that EES holds much promise as a belonging intervention.

We collected feasibility and acceptability data through various methods. First, the well-being director and research director met weekly to discuss program progress and address emergent challenges, all of which they documented in detailed notes. Their discussions included reviewing notes taken during their respective monthly meetings with the well-being and research mentors, during which they solicited input on facilitators of and barriers to program participation based on the mentors’ own experiences and their observations of the Scholars’ experiences.

The well-being and research directors also met roughly quarterly with the Scholars for one-on-one check-ins and documented feedback that the Scholars provided in these meetings. Understanding that the



Scholars might feel reluctant to share critiques of the program with the directors due to power differentials. Scholars also were regularly encouraged to bring up challenges with either of their mentors or to bring issues to the directors' attention as a group during monthly office hours, so that feedback could be framed as coming from the collective and not from an individual.

In addition to documentation generated through meetings and discussions, we periodically requested written feedback on various aspects of the program, and the pilot Scholars and several mentors created brief videos for social media posts at the end of EES in which they responded to prompts about their experiences. Finally, we kept track of participation numbers at module kickoff meetings and EES Speaker Series events (which were open to all people working at RTI), and we also saved feedback entered into the Zoom "chat" during these events.

Our primary aim in collecting feasibility and acceptability data was to understand in real time how the program was being received and to learn how to best adapt EES to meet participants' needs. Therefore, rather than conducting a formal analysis using a qualitative software program, we iteratively reflected upon the feedback being provided (including factors such as low participation numbers at an event, or slow response times or requests for deadline extensions from program participants), discussed possible changes to address key issues, and reached out for more input as to whether we had correctly identified a problem and how our proposed solution might be received. All our discussions, including identifying challenges and generating possible solutions, were documented in notes that were accessible by the full leadership team. When we made a shift in practice, we revised the EES program manual to reflect the change and noted how we had arrived at making this decision. We also requested feedback on whether the change addressed the targeted issue and continued to adjust our operations as required.

The majority of adaptations we made during the EES pilot focused on our evolving understanding of participants' communication practices (e.g., email or Teams, providing details orally or in written materials), the adjustment of timelines, and other

day-to-day operations of the program. We next present our more substantive lessons learned and plans for program improvement that could not be implemented during the pilot year. These ideas were developed through written memos that tracked feedback received over time about specific topics as well as our developing thoughts about what could be added, reconfigured, or refined to improve those aspects of the program.

### EES Lessons Learned

Perhaps the most notable learning we gained from the EES pilot is the program's impact on mentors. Although we had been attentive to mentors' experiences when designing EES, we considered the peer-support groups and check-ins with the co-directors as ways of supporting their mentorship—that is, we anticipated that discussions would focus primarily on discussing challenges such as experiencing vicarious trauma when helping Scholars navigate an issue or sharing resources about equity-centered research methodologies. However, from the early months of the program, we realized that EES has the potential to serve as a belonging intervention for mentors as well as Scholars. This insight did not change our implementation approach but is an unanticipated strength of the program that we will attempt to maximize moving forward by continuing to include frequent opportunities for mentors to connect with each other, be recognized and celebrated for their talents and achievements, and play a central role in the program.

Based on other learnings and feedback received from pilot participants, we plan to make the following program adaptations:

*Develop enhanced materials for well-being mentorship.* Although the focus on well-being in EES was warmly received, both Scholars and well-being mentors indicated that additional guidance such as suggested topics for routine check-ins and activities to facilitate relationship building would be welcome in the early stages of the program. We recognize that including well-being is a highly innovative aspect of EES and understand that more structure helping people to learn how to talk about, identify, and develop well-being would be helpful. At the same time, flexibility

and individuality will continue to be central themes for the well-being component so that we can continue to implement an equitable program and be responsive to individual needs.

*Provide Scholars with concrete strategies for conceptualizing Equity Projects.* Although the intention in EES was to provide Scholars with a maximum amount of freedom in designing their Equity Projects, the lack of structure for deciding upon a topic and approach felt disorienting to them. From a mentorship perspective, we wanted Scholars to feel like they could rest first and then take their time with the project's design. We did not provide them with suggestions of possible projects because we did not want them to feel like they needed to conform to our ideas. However, as early-career researchers who had limited experience developing research projects, Scholars felt uncertain about how to move forward and unsure about their abilities. Their feedback helped us understand that it would be beneficial to provide them with more structure to guide them through the process of conceptualizing and finalizing their project designs.

In the future, we will provide Scholars with written resources and engage them in small-group discussions about concrete strategies and steps for developing an Equity Project. These strategies will include feasibility considerations regarding timeline and the scale of work proposed. Future cohorts of Scholars also will be able to access the pilot cohort's Shine presentations to see examples of previous Equity Projects.

*Provide opportunities to develop financial literacy in the context of career growth.* Financial literacy is a dimension of well-being. EES did not provide dedicated resources about financial literacy during the pilot, but this topic arose in module 3 during the discussion of the "Money Matters" chapter of thought leader Stacey Abrams' (2018) *Lead from the Outside*, and participants expressed a desire to focus on this topic more intensively. Financial literacy includes principles that reinforce earning potential, the importance of saving and investing, and responsible and accessible borrowing. Given the systemic barriers faced by people from othered groups, financial literacy is not something everyone has had

an opportunity to learn about or develop. Including financial literacy moving forward will normalize talking about finances and hopefully encourage program participants to consider this aspect of their overall well-being.

*Actively support Scholars and mentors to integrate EES learnings and experiences into other work projects and leadership opportunities.* We heard from pilot program participants that they made efforts to disseminate EES practices and approaches to other RTI colleagues. Although we had not specifically asked them to do this, we recognize these actions as fruitful avenues for systemic change and plan to build intention around this practice moving forward. Specifically, we will periodically solicit feedback from program participants regarding what learnings or experiences they think would be beneficial for our broader research institute to consider. We then will engage the cohort in brainstorming messaging frameworks we can amplify as a collective and strategies for doing so.

*Conduct a full evaluation.* While the EES pilot was extremely promising, scaling up the program will lead to new challenges and evolutions. We plan to conduct a rigorous evaluation of the next iteration of the program, which will include quantitative as well as qualitative data across a variety of metrics to help us understand the program's capacity to enhance professional development and well-being as well as build belonging.

Our efforts to assess the feasibility and acceptability helped us focus on the need for these changes. As we delineate in our concluding section, they also affirmed that EES contains enormous potential to operate as a belonging intervention.

### **Building Belonging Through Holistic Mentorship**

When our team set out in January 2022 to develop the EES program, we were inspired by Black feminist thought leaders to reimagine mentorship as set of communal relationships that synergistically foreground the importance of well-being and thriving for early-career scholars launching their careers. We drew on the teachings of John A. Powell (2012), but did not have the benefit of *Belonging Without Othring* (Powell & Menéndez, 2024) or the OBI's

Belonging Design Principles (Gallegos & Surasky, 2023) at the time. However, these materials became available as we concluded the pilot and began a full review of our extensive program documentation. As we deepened our study of building belonging, we were struck by the close alignment between the core components of EES, the feedback we received about the program, and the Belonging Design Principles, which are encapsulated in a reader-friendly resource guide (see Figure 8) and are conceptually expanded in *Belonging Without Othering*. We therefore undertook an exercise of mapping the program structure, content, and feedback across the Belonging Design Principles as a means of assessing whether EES robustly addresses the OBI's call for belonging interventions to “root out structural inequality and exclusion of all kinds while helping us turn toward, rather than against, each other” (Gallegos & Surasky, 2023, p. 3).

As noted in the introduction, the first two Belonging Design principles are complementary “big ideas” (“the root of the problem is othering” and “everyone belongs”) that align with the inspiration for developing EES. The third principle, “prioritize structural change,” highlights that “structures most often do the work of exclusion” and therefore should be a key target of transformation (Gallegos & Surasky, 2023, p. 5). EES operates in accordance with this principle in multiple ways. One, the EES program was created to function *as a structure*: rather than providing individualized support for scholar-mentor dyads within the dominant culture, EES aims to build a novel research ecosystem with norms, values, and practices that disrupt traditional paradigms. As such, it engages participants in the active work of systemic change and serves as a model for reimagined ways of being (Benjamin, 2022). In the words of one mentor, “I am not aware of any corporate program that actually centers around growing young professionals in their area of research. I feel the EES program can serve as a blueprint for a longstanding program.” This ripple effect was frequently apparent in feedback we received about Speaker Series events from colleagues outside of EES that indicated expanded mindsets and the desire to reexamine customary norms, such as:

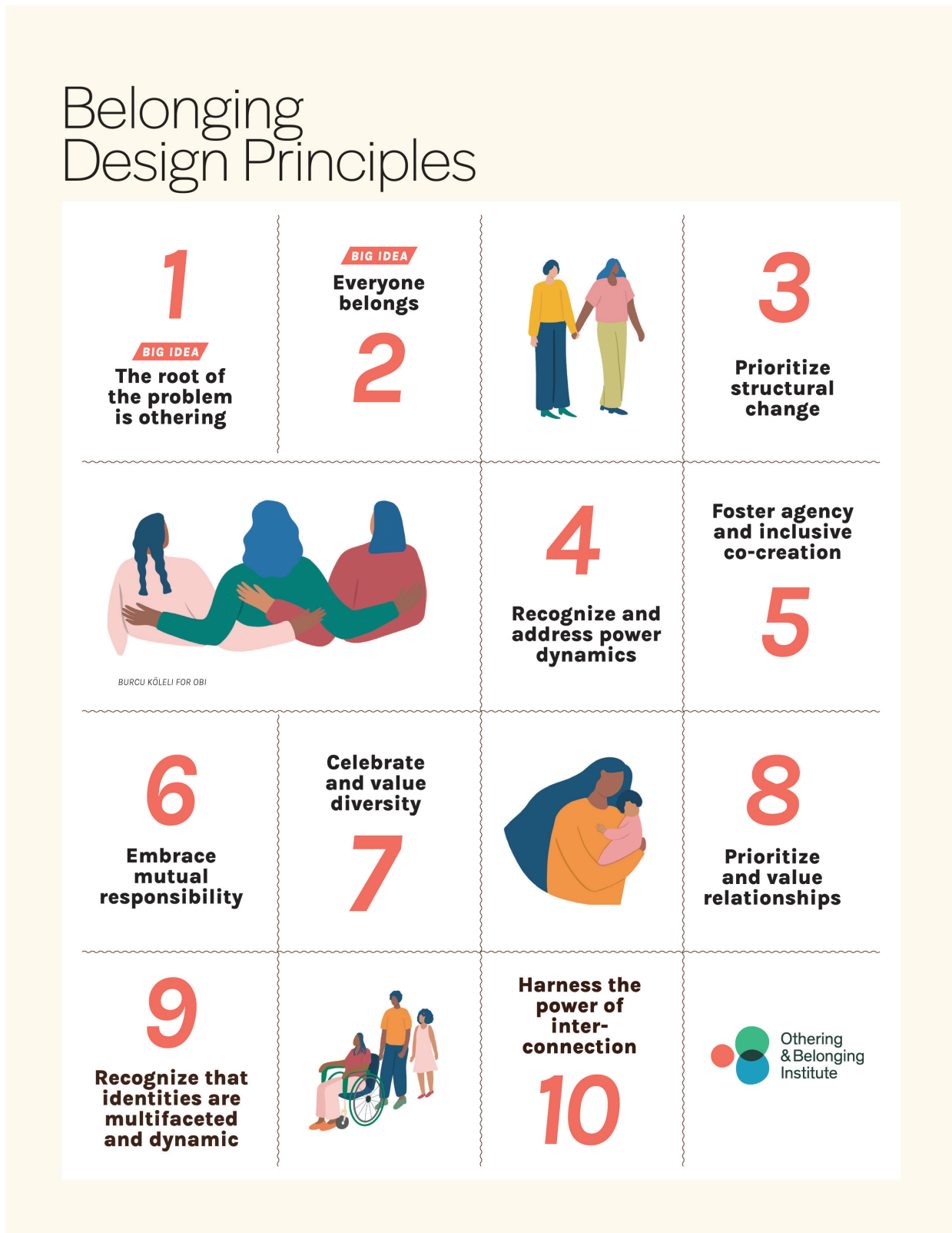
- “This needs to be mandatory RTI-wide training!”
- “[An] incredibly important door opened today.”

- “I love, love, love seeing these wellbeing reflections. I want this in all project spaces here at RTI!”
- “[I’m learning that] well-being is not just about the individual... it's resisting the structural factors that disproportionately pose difficulties in the lives of underrepresented people.”
- “This was truly amazing! I really would like to explore the possibility to make this practice of genuine speech [sharing lived expertise] a practice across disciplines.”

In addition, because EES participants remain involved in their day-to-day work with colleagues outside of the program, they are well-positioned to disseminate ideas and practices into other groups. These changes may be small or incremental but introduce systemic shifts nonetheless. As one concrete example, many participants noted that they appreciated beginning meetings at 5 minutes past the hour and had started implementing this practice in meetings outside of EES. This practice was enthusiastically embraced by many of their colleagues, and over time, we have seen an increase in meetings scheduled for 55 minutes instead of a full hour, a change we cannot fully attribute to EES but that indicates movement toward prioritizing well-being at the institute level. The following comment from a mentor further encapsulates how EES participants shared the program's approach as a model for changing customary practices:

My experience as a mentor has completely shifted my perspective, philosophy, and approach to mentoring in general but specifically underrepresented and first-generation scholars. The opportunity to have continuous discussions with other mentors and mentees around materials, content, ideas and their implementation in the pilot improved my capacity and joy around mentoring. Without question, this work is critical for fostering equity within RTI and beyond. This work also allowed me to take these experiences to my own program as it highlighted ways I can help my peers in leadership weave mentoring into their daily interactions.

Figure 8. OBI's Belonging Design Principles



Source: Gallegos and Surasky (2023). Belonging Design Principles© were developed by the Othering & Belonging Institute at University of California, Berkeley. Authored by Ashley Gallegos and Cecelie Surasky. Design by Rachelle Galloway-Popotas. Illustrations by Burcu Köleli for OBI X Fine Acts, modified for OBI. Used with permission.



The fourth Belonging Design Principle is to “recognize and address power dynamics” by being “transparent about how power is distributed and how that distribution may need to change to create belonging” (Gallegos & Surasky, 2023, p. 5). This principle closely connects to the fifth principle, “foster agency and inclusive co-creation,” which accentuates the need to prioritize ways for people to contribute, have their voices heard, and be involved in the construction of spaces and projects. The fourth principle also connects to the sixth principle, “embrace mutual responsibility,” highlighting the accountability of the collective for creating the whole. These three principles are woven into the fabric of EES, beginning with having two co-directors who share equal leadership and the emphasis on providing mentorship in community to afford all participants the opportunity to learn and grow. Indeed, Scholars and mentors frequently made comments about how much they learned from each other and from those in their peer groups:

Participating in the EES program has been such an amazing experience. As a mentor, I have had the great fortune of meeting and collaborating with RTI colleagues across different fields, supporting my mentee while also learning from them, and strengthening my own skills as a mentor. This experience has helped me professionally to understand the value of quality and in-depth mentorship at all stages of careers and reconceptualize how my lived experience and wellness impacts my research. This program is a powerful resource at RTI both to create transformational research and to develop the next generation of researchers.

Thoughtfulness around power dynamics and mutual responsibility also correspond to the intentional efforts to support Scholars in pursuing their own research interests in their Equity Projects, choosing well-being practices that advance their personal goals, and selecting the module 4 thought leader and organizing and facilitating Speaker Series events. As one Scholar reflected:

Being a part of EES meant that I had an opportunity to radically imagine what a career in equity-engaged research can look like, and also take up space as an underrepresented person in a research profession more generally. It also meant

that my scholarly interests and abilities were being invested in, which is something I’m truly grateful for... My confidence as a researcher has grown tremendously! Prior to the program, most of my scientific contributions to equity work took place behind the scenes. Now I am confident in my ability to take leadership and equity in research initiatives and also effectively communicate my science to a wide range of audiences.

The seventh principle is to “celebrate and value diversity,” recognizing both that belonging “does not mean everyone is or must be the same” and that “different groups, based often on deep histories of exclusion, may need different kinds of support to create an equitable place of belonging” (Gallegos & Surasky, 2023, p. 6). Relatedly, the eighth principle underscores the need to “recognize that identities are multifaceted and dynamic” and that people should not be flattened into a singular identity or have their identities considered static or rigid. We made efforts not only to include people with intersectional identities and multiple forms of diversity as program leaders, mentors, advisors, Scholars, and guest speakers—but also to continually honor diverse histories, experiences, perspectives, disciplines, methodologies, and forms of expression for their potential to spark curiosity and learning, impart wisdom, transform understanding, and ignite joy. An attendee of a Speakers Series event expressed appreciation for a conversation about incorporating lived expertise in research by writing, “I think about this as what we ‘can’t’ or ‘shouldn’t’ talk about in research...as a queer researcher, what about myself can’t I share because it’s not ‘appropriate’ in the research space.”

We also see EES’s focus on well-being as intrinsically tied to these principles. Recognizing that different people need different forms of support and that these needs are fluid and ever-changing is central to our approach of providing time, space, and encouragement for people to tend to their well-being but allowing them to decide for themselves and express to others what care they want and need. Scholars described the program’s focus on well-being as helping to increase their understanding of themselves and what their priorities are, identify new practices that felt helpful to their emotional health



(e.g., keeping an audio journal or sitting in the sun for a few moments each day), and remain mindful of the importance of taking action to counteract the strains of a research career. In one Scholar's words:

EES stands out from other mentorship programs I've participated in due to its strong emphasis on well-being as a research professional. Especially in terms of equity-engaged research, where burnout is unfortunately so common, my experience in EES constantly reminded me that we can only produce science as good as we take care of ourselves, and that we are people first, but committed researchers and scientists immediately after.

The final two OBI Belonging Design Principles are "prioritize and value relationships" and "harness the power of interconnection." The primary importance of relationships and connections grounded every decision made about EES: the concept of providing mentorship in community, emphasis on Scholars meeting weekly with a mentor, bringing Scholars and mentors into monthly peer group discussions, sharing celebrations and challenges on the Teams channel, and countless other details through which we strove to express care and appreciation for each other. Scholars noted this as a key strength of the program, and mentors also lauded the program for the connections it created:

It can be lonely as a person of color in traditional research settings. We are often the "only one in the room," or "one of a few," which only gets worse over the course of one's career. Becoming an EES research mentor has reconnected me to the vast but sometimes invisible web of Black and Brown scholars who are passionate about research in service of racial equity and change. It has also replenished some of [the] community feel that was lost during the pandemic. Regardless of whether we are mentors or mentees, we can look at each other and say, "I see you, and you deserve to be here."

All in all, the EES program structure and the feedback we received during the pilot strongly align with the OBI Belonging Design Principles, indicating the program's significant potential as a belonging intervention.

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## Conclusion

In this paper, we have described the development and piloting of a novel mentorship program created specifically for people from othered groups embarking upon professional research careers. Leadership by people from groups that have been historically excluded from and are currently othered in research careers is essential for addressing the most complex issues of our time. The EES program was designed as a belonging intervention to support early-career scholars working in PWIs to pursue their desired career pathways, gain confidence in the value of their lived experiences, and believe in their ability to thrive in research professions.

Based on the EES pilot, we can report that the program was feasible and acceptable within RTI, and that the program structure and participants' reflections on their experiences strongly align with best practices for building belonging interventions. Coupled with the program's robust conceptual and theoretical foundation, we see enormous potential for this program to position scholars from systemically marginalized and minoritized groups to occupy positions of power and decision-making and deeply transform the research enterprise in ways that significantly advance just and equitable societies.

Our intention is to revise the EES curriculum in accordance with our lessons learned and then expand and rigorously evaluate the program at RTI, as well as to support its dissemination and evaluation in other professional research settings, including universities. In PWIs where full-scale program implementation is not feasible, our holistic mentorship model's components and practices can provide ideas for concrete steps or specific strategies to operationalize and advance belonging.

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## Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the current study are not available due to the need to protect the privacy of qualitative data from a small sample.

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