SEM AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES

From Transactional to Transformational: Advancing SEM Through the Pedagogy of Real Talk

By Kayla Boyd Caron, Paul Hernandez, Beth Kelley, and Christine Bell

This study examines Middlesex Community College's implementation of the Pedagogy of Real Talk (PRT) through a Staff Academy as part of its strategic enrollment management approach. Students with documented PRT interactions reported stronger belonging and higher fall-to-spring retention, suggesting relationship-rich professional learning may support student persistence and enrollment stability.

Strategic enrollment management (SEM) has never been just about the numbers; it serves as a broader lens for understanding institutional effectiveness and student outcomes. Over the past 50 years, enrollment management has evolved from a primary focus on enrollment processes to a more comprehensive approach that emphasizes student belonging, retention, and success. Retention is now one of the most fiscally responsible and strategically significant priorities within SEM. In their 2021 study, *SEM as a Connector: Building Relationships in a New Normal*, Henderson and Pollock argue that although the literature identifies three foundational faces of SEM: structure, planning, and leadership; the fourth face, "community face," is crucial (4). "Community face" focuses on creating and nurturing relationships across campus communities and is grounded in relationship building (Henderson 2012, Henderson and Pollock 2021.) As institutions face enrollment pressures, demographic decline, and increased competition for students, the question is no longer simply whether relationships matter but how colleges can intentionally cultivate belonging at scale. This article examines how Middlesex Community College (MCC) operationalized that vision through the Pedagogy of Real Talk (PRT), a framework focused on building and sustaining relationships so students feel seen, valued, and heard. In this context, connection is not a feel-good initiative, but a mission-driven and fiscally-sound SEM approach associated with measurable gains in student belonging and persistence.

SEM Context and Rationale

In the current higher education landscape, student retention offers one of the strongest returns on invest-

ment for institutions. Colleges invest substantial time and financial resources to recruit, onboard, and support students upon entry. When students depart without earning a credential, institutions absorb not only lost tuition revenue but also the sunk cost of instructional, advising, and support infrastructures established to serve those students. For students, it can mean that their educational goals are disrupted or unfulfilled. As a result, attrition represents a significant loss for both institutions and students rather than a neutral enrollment outcome.

Prevailing SEM literature emphasizes that enrollment growth driven solely by new student recruitment has become increasingly costly and volatile, particularly in the context of identifying new recruitment pipelines. Increased cost can also be exacerbated by generational demographic shifts, such as mean age of students, declining student demand, skepticism about higher education's value, policy changes, and technological disruptions. There is also a national decline in traditional-aged student populations (Koehler and Haller 2026). Enrollment and admissions teams are now forced to pivot strategy and focus to engage and recruit new students. This takes time, resources, training, and money. For this reason, retaining currently enrolled students stabilizes tuition revenue while leveraging existing instructional and student support infrastructures. From a financial perspective, student retention yields multi-term revenue without proportional increases in cost, positioning retention as a core component of institutional sustainability rather than a secondary student success concern (Koehler and Haller 2026). Equally important, retention matters because it supports students in progressing toward their educational goals.

Recent SEM scholarship further reframes retention as a shared institutional responsibility rather than the exclusive domain of enrollment offices. From this scholarship, SEM models increasingly emphasize coordinated engagement across academic and student support units, recognizing that enrollment outcomes are shaped by the cumulative quality of students' experiences throughout their educational journey (Trainer 2018). Within this framework, student success and retention are linked to institutional fiscal resilience, as students who experience consistent connection and support are more likely to retain term-to-term.

Given the significant implications of this scholarship, and in alignment with their strategic direction, MCC has chosen to use the Pedagogy of Real Talk (Hernandez 2021) as a central part of its SEM approach. By treating each student encounter as an opportunity for authentic connection and each transactional interaction as an opportunity for transformation, Middlesex has positioned belonging as a central mechanism driving retention. While students may not initially choose an institution because of its support services, consistent access to resources, clear navigation of institutional systems, and a pervasive culture of care can be foundational reasons students choose to stay.

From an SEM perspective, PRT supports retention by creating and fostering connection that helps students experience belonging and community. Students who remain technically enrolled but lack meaningful connection to faculty, staff, or campus resources often exhibit inconsistent participation and are at heightened risk of dropping out or leaving without completing a credential. Research on engaged learning demonstrates that students' decisions to persist are shaped by a constellation of experiences inside and outside the classroom, underscoring the need for institution-wide responsibility for engagement and belonging (Trainer 2018; Moore 2023).

In his 2018 study, "Strategic Enrollment Management and the Student Experience," Trainer argues that effective SEM models operate through dual-level structures in which both academic and non-academic units share responsibility for enrollment outcomes. This collaborative perspective positions retention as a function of the quality and consistency of student experiences across the enrollment lifecycle inside and outside of the classroom. Within such a framework, SEM becomes inseparable from teaching, advising, and student support practices that influence students' sense of connection, academic momentum, and confidence. Retention, therefore, is not merely a metric to be monitored but a strategic condition to be cultivated intentionally.

According to its framework, the phased implementation of PRT, beginning with faculty cohorts and later expanding into student services and student affairs, exemplifies an applied SEM model for retention grounded in current SEM design principles. This intentional, cross-functional approach aligns with Trainer's (2018) emphasis on shared accountability and with engaged learning practices that prioritize relationship-building, reflection, and equity of experience (Moore 2023; Zilvinskis, *et al.* 2022). By positioning student belonging as a strategic enrollment lever rather than an ancillary initiative, Middlesex demonstrates how relational pedagogy can produce measurable retention outcomes while reinforcing institutional mission and financial resilience. As Koehler and Haller (2026) suggest, such integrated approaches reflect the future direction of SEM, where student persistence, institutional sustainability, and shared responsibility converge.

PRT as a Framework for Belonging and Student Success

Created by Dr. Paul Hernandez (Hernandez 2015; Hernandez 2021), PRT is a framework that informs and guides practice and is rooted in human connection. In practice, PRT develops the capacity of faculty, staff, and administrators to examine how they engage students and intentionally apply relationship-rich practices in their everyday interactions. With connection as the foundation and driving force of the student experience, PRT helps faculty, staff, and administrators connect with and engage students in and out of the classroom. A central element of PRT is that students should experience connection as a meaningful part of their education. Creating engaging, relevant, and inclusive classrooms and campus environments is also central to the framework. Although students are at the heart of PRT, the transformation of those who shape the student experience is equally important, as their growth helps create meaningful and transformative opportunities for students during college and beyond. In doing so, PRT helps create educational settings in which students feel seen, heard, and understood.

Through connection, engagement, relevance, and inclusion, PRT is designed to create and foster a sense of belonging. The importance of belonging for student success, particularly among marginalized students, is well established in an extensive body of research (Bentrim and Henning 2022; Cohen 2022; Felten and Lambert 2020; Hurtado and Carter 1997; Kirp 2019; Strayhorn 2019; Walton and Cohen 2011). PRT recognizes that social interaction alone is insufficient to foster a genuine sense of belonging; instead, the central focus must be on the quality of interactions between students, faculty, staff, and administrators (Bono 2022). PRT helps create the conditions through which students can experience belonging as a meaningful part of their education.

At MCC, PRT serves as the foundation for the Staff Academy, a three-year, cohort-based professional learning experience for college staff. Through the Academy, PRT shapes how participants intentionally approach connection, engagement, and belonging. Real Talk, a core element of PRT practice, enables participants to connect with students in intentional ways. It is a relational practice designed to build understanding, trust, empathy, compassion, and connection with students. Real Talk moves connection and belonging from abstract ideas to a way of being in participants' daily work. PRT grounded what staff learned and applied in their day-to-day work with students at MCC.

Institutional Context and Staff Academy

The Staff Academy is a three-year professional learning experience for college staff who do not teach in the classroom. Grounded in PRT, it is a structured, cohort-based opportunity for participants to learn, create, practice, implement, and reflect. The structure is consistent across years one, two, and three. Participants engage in five days of professional learning each year, followed by monthly cohort meetings over the course of the year. Each year, a new cohort joins the academy, increasing the number of staff engaging in the work. The cohort model was designed to build community as part of the professional learning experience. This created a connection not only between staff and students, but also

among colleagues across roles and departments, helping to create a more connected and collaborative approach to participants' work across the college. Participants become a connected group of best practitioners who share experiences and opportunities to continually identify ways to improve student service and connection.

The five days of professional learning, led by Dr. Paul Hernandez during the first three years, are organized through a scaffolded curriculum that moves participants from foundational understanding to practice and application. The curriculum introduces participants to foundational PRT concepts, including vulnerability, empathy, growth mindset, and grit, and supports them in considering how these concepts inform their work with students (Hernandez 2021). Across the three-year experience, participants are encouraged to examine their roles and interactions with students and supported in implementing the work in their everyday practice. Rather than functioning as a one-time workshop, the curriculum is designed to build over time so that participants can deepen their understanding of PRT and integrate what they learn into their day-to-day work.

One core practice participants learn is Real Talk (Hernandez 2015; Hernandez 2021). Real Talks are discussions centered on broad, universal themes that connect to a wide range of human experiences. They are intended to support student-centered outcomes by strengthening understanding, trust, empathy, care, and genuine connection between educators and students (Hernandez 2021, 21–22). In doing so, Real Talk helps create the conditions for belonging. Within the Staff Academy, participants apply what they learn, including creating and implementing Real Talks in their day-to-day roles and interactions with students.

The Staff Academy also has an embedded leadership model for sustainability and scale with staff leads. In this study, Dr. Hernandez worked directly with the staff leads to develop them as facilitators of the work within the college. As part of their development, staff leads met regularly with Dr. Hernandez to prepare for their role in guiding cohort meetings, gradually facilitate the work themselves, and build the capacity needed to sustain the academy. The academy was designed not only as a professional learning experience for participants, but also as a program for long-term institutional implementation.

As part of the Staff Academy, data collection is embedded into the structure to assess its effectiveness. Here, Middlesex has further demonstrated the effectiveness of PRT through its broader commitment to data-informed decision-making that directly impacts student success. The college uses data to identify trends, anticipate student needs, and support its diverse students. Through this commitment to understanding and strengthening effective interventions, Middlesex was positioned to intentionally examine PRT interactions and their relationship to students' sense of belonging.

Research Design and Methodology

The first Staff Academy cohort formed in Spring 2022, with new cohorts joining the Staff Academy in Spring 2023 and Spring 2024. The Staff Academy cohorts include staff from several areas across the college including Enrollment, Advising, Admissions, TRIO, Student Engagement, and Academic Support. Students were tagged in EAB Navigate (a student success software platform used to manage academic advising, scheduling, and student retention) as having engaged in at least one PRT interaction with a member of the PRT-trained staff cohort. In this study, a PRT interaction was defined as anytime an encounter with a student leads to a spontaneous, genuine, or intentional conversation that incorporates a component of Real Talk such as vulnerability, care, connection, and honesty and results in a transformational experience for all.

A college-wide Student Climate Survey to measure student sense of belonging was first implemented in October 2023, following the completion of the first year of PRT training with the first Staff Academy cohort. The survey, in its original form, has been administered annually each October through October 2025. The survey was distributed through multiple modalities, including Blackboard, institutional email, and text messaging, to maximize accessibility and response rates.

The Student Climate Survey was developed using established, peer-reviewed frameworks for measuring sense of belonging, and was influenced by the Psycho-

logical Sense of School Membership scale (Goodenow 1993). The first Staff Academy cohort members selected and prioritized survey domains based on these peer-reviewed frameworks. It was also shaped through collaboration with MCC's Institutional Research team and college leadership.

The survey consisted of five Likert-scale questions, with open-response prompts for students to provide more detail if they responded negatively. The questions assessed five domains, which included questions related to students' experiences with connection to faculty and staff, perceived respect, connection to campus community, psychological safety, and perceived barriers to acceptance. Two survey questions were intentionally written in a negative form (*e.g.*, "I don't feel safe being my authentic self") to capture students' experiences of exclusion. The Likert scores were reversed during analysis so they could be interpreted alongside the other belonging questions, with higher scores consistently representing a greater sense of belonging. Students who selected low-belonging responses were prompted to provide open-ended narrative explanations.

Quantitatively, survey response rates were robust: 2,572 responses (44%) in 2023 and 2,708 responses (47%) in 2024. Of the total respondents, 61 were identified as having had a PRT interaction in 2023, and 56 had a PRT interaction in 2024.

Mean response scores for each survey question were compared between students who had a PRT interaction and the overall MCC student population. For each year of data, z-tests were conducted to determine whether there were statistical differences between the two groups. The difference in mean scores and corresponding p-values were calculated. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

In addition to student belonging, this study examined fall-to-spring retention rates for students who received and documented PRT interaction, using retention as an indicator of students' persistence toward their educational goals. Fall-to-spring retention was defined as continued enrollment at Middlesex Community College in the subsequent spring semester. Fall-to-spring retention rates for students flagged with a PRT intervention were compared to Middlesex Community College's overall student retention rates. Retention rates for the PRT-tagged student population were compared descriptively to the overall Middlesex Community College student population across three academic years (Fall 2022–Spring 2023 through Fall 2024–Spring 2025). No statistical significance testing was conducted for these data; rather, retention rates were reviewed to identify patterns and determine whether students who experienced PRT interactions were retained at higher rates than the overall college population.

Findings

Two outcome measures were examined in this study: student belonging and fall-to-spring retention. Findings from the October 2023 and October 2024 Student Climate Surveys showed that students who experienced a PRT-defined interaction reported stronger feelings of belonging than the overall student population across all five domains assessed. The data was captured in the following categories: acceptance, connection to faculty and staff, connection to campus community, safety, and respect.

Specifically, in the two domains of connection to faculty and staff and connection to campus community, student responses showed a statistically significant difference in 2023 faculty and staff connection (p-value 0.0026), and 2023 campus community connection (p-value 0.026) and 2024 faculty and staff connection (p-value 0.0001) and 2024 campus community connection (p-value <0.001) from the PRT tagged population responses and the general population responses. (*See* Figure 1, on page 204 and Figure 2, on page 205).

The October 2025 climate survey study again showed that students who experienced a PRT-defined interaction reported stronger feelings of belonging than the overall student population across three of the five domain categories (connection to faculty and staff, connection to the campus community, and respect) but failed to show statistically significant difference. Findings across all years suggest that the observed differences are not attributable to a single cohort or single year, but instead reflect a repeatable pattern associated with this intervention.



FIGURE 1 ➤ 2023 Belonging Data Comparison, by Measurement Domain

Note: PRT = Pedagogy of Real Talk; Star indicates statistically significant difference between student populations within domain group ($p < 0.05$)

Across climate surveys, PRT-tagged students reported a higher sense of belonging. From a SEM perspective, these findings are significant because belonging and connection function as leading indicators of behaviors associated with retention, including help-seeking, advising engagement, and sustained enrollment momentum.

Retention data further reinforces the relationship between PRT experience and SEM targets. Over a three-year period, Middlesex Community College's overall fall-to-spring retention rate increased from approximately 68 percent to 72 percent. During the same period, students identified within the PRT intervention population consistently retained at rates exceeding 84 percent. This reflects a sustained performance gap over the three-year period. (*See* Figure 3, on page 206).

From a SEM lens, this differential retention rate is particularly meaningful. While overall institutional fall-to-spring retention reflects cumulative efforts and a multitude of initiatives, the consistently higher retention rates of the PRT intervention population suggest PRT may function as a protective factor against disengagement or stop-outs.

Implications for SEM Leadership, Belonging, and Success

At MCC, this shift is reflected in the college's efforts to move beyond siloed, transactional practices toward a more integrated and holistic SEM model. MCC is working to embed SEM principles across the community. Within this changing SEM landscape, PRT is not simply another professional development initiative, but a SEM tool with measurable implications for increasing student belonging.

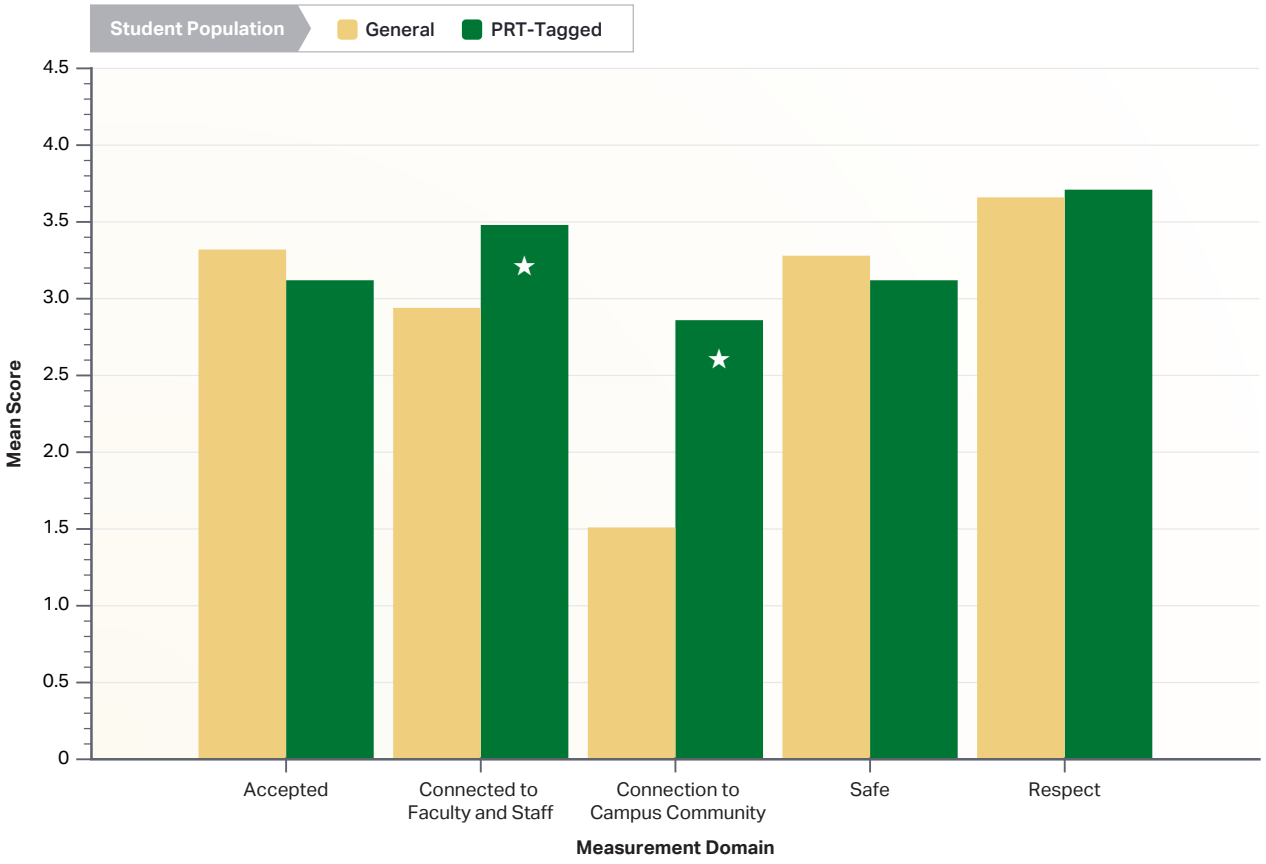


FIGURE 2 ➤ 2024 Belonging Data Comparison, by Measurement Domain

Note: PRT = Pedagogy of Real Talk; Star indicates statistically significant difference between student populations within domain group ($p < 0.05$)

Belonging is recognized as a critical factor in persistence, retention, and completion (Strayhorn 2019). This study demonstrates that students who experienced PRT interactions reported a stronger sense of belonging across all five survey categories, with statistically significant differences in connection to faculty and staff and connection to campus community. These findings suggest that belonging can be intentionally cultivated through everyday interactions, rather than occurring by chance.

The embedded leadership model built within the Staff Academy provides for scalability and sustainability. It is not a one-and-done approach to professional development. The Staff Academy was designed to build institutional capacity over time. As the Staff Academy continues to evolve, it is increasingly meaningful not only in a philosophical sense, but in its real-world application. Through the use of EAB Navigate as an institution-wide tool to track student interventions, MCC is advancing beyond conceptual frameworks to data-informed strategy that actively measures and validates the impact of the college's work on student outcomes.

In this study, sense of belonging is not a goal limited to co-curricular programming; it is a persistence and retention strategy that can be integrated institution-wide into everyday student interactions. Through its Staff Academy, PRT provides practitioners in all areas of the college with a framework that informs and guides practice in meaningful, relationship-rich ways.

Professional development initiatives such as the Staff Academy represent a strategic SEM investment in building a network of practitioners who foster a campus culture where students feel seen, heard, valued, and supported. Institutions that prioritize relational engage-

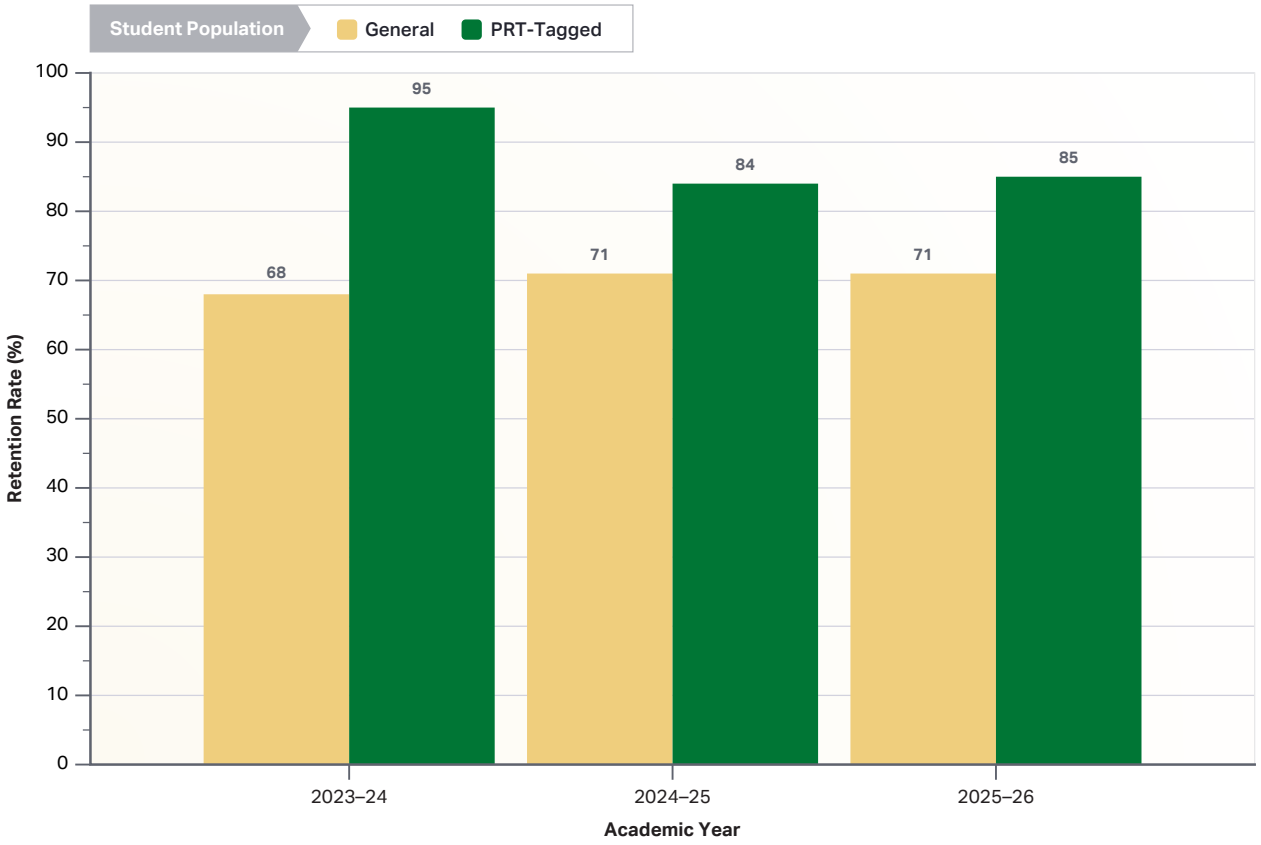


FIGURE 3 ➤ Three-Year Fall-to-Spring Retention Rate Comparison

Note: PRT = Pedagogy of Real Talk; Retention rate is defined as enrollment in the subsequent spring term following fall enrollment

ment strategies such as PRT will be better positioned to strengthen belonging and support student success.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, students identified as having a PRT interaction were those who had at least one face-to-face encounter or meaningful connection with a staff member. As a result, it is possible that these students were already more likely to be engaged with the institution prior to the PRT interaction. This presents a potential confounding variable, as higher levels of engagement, rather than the PRT interaction itself, may partially account for differences in belonging.

Second, institutional benchmarks for student belonging were not available prior to 2023 when the Climate Survey was first implemented. The lack of a pre-intervention baseline population for comparison limits the ability to assess longitudinal changes in belonging at the institutional level.

Third, the Climate Survey was developed internally by the institution. While the survey was developed using established peer-reviewed frameworks, and reviewed by institutional experts, it has not been externally validated. This limits the extent to which the survey can be generalized or directly compared to belonging measures used at other institutions.

Fourth, the sample size of students identified as having a PRT interaction (N = 61 for 2023 and N = 56 for 2024) was small compared with the overall survey respondent population. However, the PRT-tagged population has been demographically reflective of the overall Middlesex student population with regard to age, race, and first-generation student status. The findings are im-

portant, but the size of the tagged student group limits the extent to which the results can be generalized and should be considered when interpreting differences in belonging and persistence and retention.

Additionally, this study does not include a direct comparison between PRT and other intervention models. Due to the lack of a comparable framework, it is not possible to determine whether PRT is more or less effective than alternative approaches.

Finally, as staff become more experienced and adept with PRT, their ability to engage in relationship-rich Real Talk interactions continues to evolve. PRT has become woven into staff's daily practice. While this reflects a positive cultural shift within the institution, it also makes it challenging to consistently and clearly identify and document PRT interactions. This may introduce variability in how PRT interactions are interpreted and recorded over time.

Conclusion

Taken together, the 2023, 2024, and 2025 findings position PRT as an effective SEM-aligned retention strategy. Rather than operating as a standalone student success initiative, PRT functions as a relational framework embedded across academic and student service interactions. The consistency of belonging, retention, and academic momentum outcomes across multiple years supports that PRT can be implemented, scaled, repeated, and aligned with institutional capacity as a professional development and student support framework. These findings further suggest that belonging and retention can be strengthened through intentional, relationship-rich practices that are embedded into routine institutional processes.

From an enrollment management standpoint, these findings are particularly compelling because they highlight a model that supports student retention without reliance on new recruitment pipelines. By approaching everyday interactions as opportunities to build connections, strengthen student support, and move beyond transactional engagement, Middlesex has strengthened enrollment stability through practices that are student-success-driven, financially efficient, and mission-centered. In a SEM landscape increasingly defined by demographic contraction, fiscal constraint, and funding volatility, these outcomes suggest that intentional investment in relational frameworks such as PRT may offer institutions a strategic way to support student success and enrollment stability.

In light of the 50th anniversary of enrollment management, this study exemplifies how the field continues to evolve. The findings presented here suggest that the future of SEM will depend not only on effective planning, systems, and processes, but also on the quality of the relationships institutions build with students. By demonstrating how a relationship-rich framework such as PRT can be intentionally and operationally embedded, its outcomes measured, and the work sustainably scaled, this study highlights its potential institutional return on investment and contributes to the ongoing evolution of SEM.

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About the Authors



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Paul Hernandez, Ph.D., is the author of *The Pedagogy of Real Talk: Engaging, Teaching, and Connecting with Students At-Promise* and a nationally recognized leader in college access and success, belonging, and pedagogy. He is an experienced educational leader, practitioner, and researcher who has served as a senior advisor to CEOs and vice president of academic and student affairs, and who was an Aspen Rising Presidents Fellow. A former faculty member and nonprofit administrator, he has received national and state-level awards and recognition for his work.



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