
A STUDENT AFFAIRS FIELD GUIDE

BELONGING BUILDS EVERYTHING

*How smart campus programming drives retention,
reaches more students and proves its worth.*

You already know belonging matters. What's changed is *how much it matters.*

Research shows a greater sense of belonging is associated with higher academic performance, persistence and is protective for mental health¹. Yet, one in 10 college students report lacking a sense of belonging on campus², and fewer than one in three say their sense of belonging is above average³. At the same time, Student Affairs teams are being asked to do more with less, prove measurable outcomes and reach the students who keep opting out of traditional programming.

This whitepaper makes the case that movie events are one of the most effective, scalable tools campuses have to close that gap. We'll walk through the data, the real stories from campuses that are making it work and what it actually looks like in practice.

STATS THAT MATTER

WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

52%

OF COLLEGE STUDENTS REPORT HIGH LEVELS OF LONELINESS

237 / 250

TOP RETENTION COLLEGES HOST MOVIE EVENTS, AVERAGING 15 SCREENINGS PER YEAR

1 in 3

CONSIDERED DROPPING OUT IN THE PAST SIX MONTHS



The belonging crisis is real – *and it's getting harder to ignore.*

Belonging used to be a nice to have. Now it's a KPI.

Institutions across the country are measuring it, reporting on it and being held accountable for it, because the data connecting belonging to retention is too significant to ignore.

According to a 2025 survey from *Inside Higher Ed*, fewer than one-third of students say they have an excellent or above-average sense of social belonging on campus³. Meanwhile, the resources to address it are shrinking. More than 15 states enacted higher education funding cuts in 2025⁴. International enrollment fell 17 percent in fall 2025⁵. Demographic pressures are tightening enrollment pipelines⁶. The result? Student Affairs teams are being asked to move the needle on belonging with smaller teams, flatter budgets and fewer safety nets.

And the students themselves have changed.

One survey found that more than one in three currently enrolled students considered dropping out in the past six months⁷, and among those students, emotional stress and mental health concerns were the most cited reasons why. Additionally, a lack of belonging was cited just as often as cost for the reason why⁷. At the same time, 57 percent of college students feel lonely sometimes or always⁸, and 45 percent screen positive for depression or anxiety⁹.

High-energy, high-social-pressure events that were once a staple of campus life are increasingly inaccessible for a growing share of the student population. The hesitation isn't about interest. It's about comfort.

The question facing Student Affairs leaders today isn't whether to prioritize belonging. It's how to do it in a way that actually works – for more students, on a realistic budget, with outcomes you can measure and report.

The question isn't *whether* to prioritize belonging. It's how to do it for more students, on a realistic budget, with outcomes you can *measure and report*.

15+

STATES ENACTED
HIGHER-ED FUNDING
CUTS IN 2025

17%

DROP IN INTERNATIONAL
ENROLLMENT,
FALL 2025

57%

OF STUDENTS FEEL
LONELY SOMETIMES
OR ALWAYS

45%

SCREEN POSITIVE
FOR DEPRESSION
OR ANXIETY

Meet the students you're *not reaching.*

Every campus has them: the student who wants to connect but doesn't show up. They're not apathetic. They're anxious. They're overwhelmed. They don't have a friend group to walk in with. They scroll past event flyers because walking into a room full of strangers feels impossible.

Research from the Healthy Minds Study found that one in three college students deals with anxiety or related conditions¹⁰. First-year students are especially vulnerable – the period with the highest risk of dropping out coincides with the period of lowest social connection¹¹. If you're not reaching them in the first six weeks, you might not reach them at all.

To address this, some schools are now actively curating and promoting events students can attend alone and the demand for them is high. Not because students want to be alone, but because solo-friendly events feel safer as a first step. They lower the barrier to showing up at all.

This is exactly the student that the low-barrier programming is designed to reach – and exactly the student who often falls through the cracks of high-effort, high-pressure events.

Students navigating mental health challenges, financial stress or a difficult transition from high school are all more likely to disengage before they ever find their footing¹². The campus events that reach them aren't necessarily the biggest ones. They're the ones that feel approachable.

“Our movie program provides a socially safe environment for students to come out and enjoy campus life – whether they're attending with friends or on a solo adventure.”

MIDDLE TENNESSEE
STATE UNIVERSITY
CAMPUS PARTNER

HIGHEST REPORTED CAMPUS ISOLATION

HISPANIC



ASIAN



BLACK



STUDENTS IN THESE GROUPS REPORT THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF CAMPUS ISOLATION, IN THAT ORDER⁴.

Why movie events work: *three belonging events that matter.*

Movie events aren't magic. But when they're designed and positioned intentionally, they solve real problems that campuses are struggling to address. Here's what that looks like in practice.



01

THE STORY

The first-year student that came alone

It's week two. A first-year student has been in her dorm most evenings. She wants to meet people but the idea of walking into a party or a loud, structured social event feels like too much. She sees a flyer for a movie screening in the quad. No sign-up required. No pressure to participate. She can show up, sit in the back and leave whenever.

She goes. She stays for the whole movie. She talks to the person next to her during the post-screening chat. She comes back next month.

This is low-barrier programming working exactly as intended. The format removes friction – cost, social pressure, time commitment, the sense that you need to bring a group to belong. And it creates a first touchpoint for a student who might have otherwise stayed home.

“Our movie events helped create a welcoming and inclusive space on campus, especially for students who don’t usually feel comfortable attending large or high-energy events. We also noticed that newer movie releases attracted larger and more diverse audiences, bringing in students who hadn’t participated in previous campus events.”

NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE
CAMPUS PARTNER

02

THE STORY

The film that made a student feel seen

A student organization chair wants to host an event for Hispanic Heritage Month. She’s looking for something that will actually draw people – not just the same core group that shows up to every org meeting. She selects a film that reflects her community, builds in a short discussion after the credits roll and promotes it across campus.

Students who’ve never attended a campus event walk through the door. They stay for the conversation.

For some, it’s the first time they’ve felt genuinely represented in a campus programming context. A broad film catalog lets campuses align programming to different identities, cultures and campus initiatives throughout the year. As DEI programming conversations continue to evolve, flexible formats like film screenings make it possible to create inclusive spaces without requiring formal labels. The film does the work. The community does the rest.



“It provided a common topic for everybody to engage with each other and share their thoughts and opinions. It promoted a sense of an inclusive, shared experience and mutual engagement.”

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY
CAMPUS PARTNER

03

THE STORY

The data that justified the budget

At the end of the semester, a Director of Student Life needs to present to their VP. They have attendance numbers from every movie event, satisfaction scores averaging 4.7 out of 5 and survey data showing that students who attended rated their sense of campus belonging higher than those who didn't. They include it in the department's Impact Report. The movie program gets renewed and expanded.

Departments are being tasked with providing attendance and utilization data that gets paired with belonging and engagement assessments. Programs that can demonstrate those outcomes are easier to justify internally – and more likely to survive budget conversations. Movie events have a structural advantage here. Attendance is trackable. Student feedback is easy to collect. And when events are part of a consistent series rather than isolated one-offs, the data tells a clearer story about program impact over time.

THE BUDGET CASE IS JUST AS STRONG

A full year of consistent movie programming typically costs less than a single speaker appearance or campus concert, and it delivers far more: a dozen or more touchpoints, hundreds of aggregate attendees and a full semester of trackable data. The cost-per-engagement math is hard to argue with.



Gen Z *shows up* for movies.

Some people assume that Gen Z has moved on from movies. That streaming has replaced the shared experience. But the data says otherwise.

6.1x

AVERAGE THEATER VISITS
IN 2025 – MORE THAN ANY
OTHER GENERATION

#1

RANKED WEEKEND
ACTIVITY, FOR THE
SECOND YEAR RUNNING

72%

SAY MOVIEGOING
TOGETHERNESS MATTERS
MORE POST-PANDEMIC

Gen Z went to movie theaters an average of 6.1 times in 2025¹³ – more than any other generation. For the second year in a row, they ranked seeing a movie as their top weekend activity when cost and transportation weren't barriers¹⁴. Research from United Talent Agency's 2025 Culture IQ Report found that both Gen Z and Gen Alpha strongly prefer watching films with friends over viewing alone¹⁵.

And 72 percent of Gen Z say that the togetherness of moviegoing feels more important post-pandemic – not less¹⁷. The desire for shared, in-person experience hasn't gone away. It's just looking for the right environment.

The operative phrase is “when cost and transportation aren't barriers.” A significant portion of college students face real financial constraints. Trellis Strategies research consistently shows high rates of financial fragility among college students¹⁶ – meaning the experience they want is often one they can't easily access off campus. Bringing it onto campus removes that barrier entirely.

Campus movie events provide exactly that environment: familiar, low-cost, social without being overwhelming. For a generation that grew up streaming alone, gathering in a shared space to watch something together hits differently – in the best way.

“Movie nights allow our quieter students to still feel connected.”

— ARCADIA COLLEGE
CAMPUS PARTNER

“I would highly recommend a movie program. Students are craving a passive way to engage with their campus.”

— UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CAMPUS PARTNER

What high-retention campuses are *doing differently*.

237 / 250

Among the top 250 institutions by retention rate, **237 host movie-based programming**, averaging roughly 15 events per year. What separates the campuses seeing the strongest results isn't the size of their budget or their team. It's how they think about movie events: not as individual moments, but as a consistent program rhythm.

01 THEY BUILD CONSISTENCY

When students know a movie event is happening on a predictable schedule, they build it into their routine. Attendance stabilizes and often grows. The event becomes part of campus culture rather than a one-off surprise.

02 THEY USE EVERY FORMAT

Outdoor screenings. Dorm lounges. Student unions. Food trucks and themed snacks. Craft activities during the film. Trivia and interactive elements. The most successful programs treat the movie as a flexible foundation – not a fixed format.

03 THEY COME TO STUDENTS

Virginia Tech shared they found their highest engagement when events happened where students already were – in parking lots, residential quads and other informal gathering spaces. The lower the activation energy required to attend, the more students show up.

04 THEY LAYER THEIR APPROACH

High-performing campuses host both small, regular screenings and larger, signature events. Virginia Tech and the University of Maryland have both reported single-event attendance in the 200 to 300-plus range by turning screenings into full experiences.

PROOF ON CAMPUS

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

25 → 100

Average attendance rose from 25 to 100 after marketing upgrades, Screen Play and a better film mix.¹⁹

NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

250 – 500

Themed screenings draw 250–500 students per night, versus 100–150 for non-themed events.²⁰

Making the case internally: *belonging on a budget*

One of the most consistent challenges we hear from Student Affairs professionals is about justifying the investment to administrators¹⁸. ROI storytelling has become a core competency for Student Affairs leaders, and programs that can't demonstrate outcomes are increasingly at risk.

There are three programming approaches that consistently deliver results, and they can be layered, combined or adapted to fit almost any context.



MOVIE EVENTS HAVE A MEANINGFUL ADVANTAGE IN THIS CONVERSATION

- ✓ **They scale easily.** A monthly series with a consistent format requires far less planning lift than a comparable number of standalone events.
- ✓ **They require minimal staff resources** to execute, which matters when teams are running lean.
- ✓ **They produce trackable outputs:** headcounts, satisfaction scores, repeat attendance rates.
- ✓ **They can be run across a wide range of campus environments** – indoors, outdoors, residential spaces and common areas – without specialized infrastructure.
- ✓ **They reach students who aren't attending other events**, expanding the footprint of your engagement data rather than just serving the same group repeatedly.

Special movie events draw larger crowds on our campus! Students love to come out for the pre-show activities, enjoy enhanced snacks from concessions and thematic engagement.

— HIGH POINT UNIVERSITY
CAMPUS PARTNER

Three approaches you can *layer, combine or adapt.*



CONSISTENCY MODEL

BEST FOR

Campuses with low or inconsistent attendance; teams looking to build a reliable programming rhythm and hoping to target people who need to build connections.

WHAT IT DELIVERS

Regular touchpoints that students anticipate and return to; growing repeat attendance over time; connection.



SIGNATURE EVENT MODEL

BEST FOR

Campuses looking to create big campus moments around key dates: back to school, Halloween, end of year, etc.

WHAT IT DELIVERS

High-attendance marquee events that drive visibility and energy; strong data points for impact reports.



HYBRID MODEL

BEST FOR

Campuses that want to maximize reach and build both routine and community milestone moments.

WHAT IT DELIVERS

Consistent baseline engagement plus elevated events – reaching the widest range of students throughout the year.

The campuses with the strongest outcomes aren't choosing between big events and accessible programming. They're doing both – and movie events give them the flexibility to do exactly that.

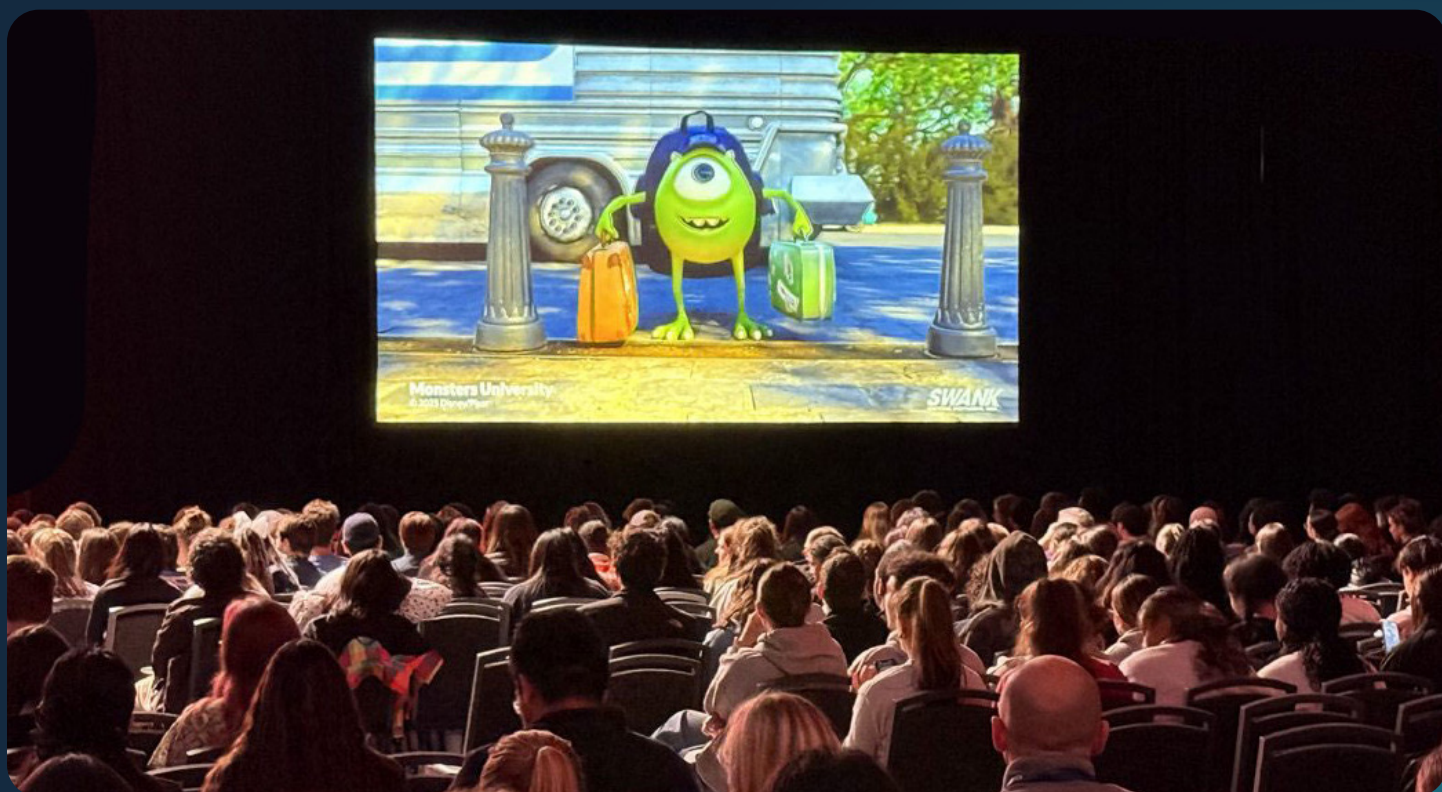
A movie night says: *You can show up, just as you are.*

The campuses that are winning on belonging aren't the ones with the biggest programming budgets. They're the ones that figured out how to reach the students who aren't already engaged – consistently, accessibly and in a way that actually feels good to show up for.

Movie events won't solve every challenge Student Affairs is facing. But when they're part of a consistent, intentional program strategy – aligned to belonging goals, inclusive by design and supported by trackable outcomes – they become one of the most effective tools you have.

The students who need it most aren't always the loudest. They're not filling out interest surveys or joining the first club they see. They're watching to see whether campus feels like a place for them.

Belonging builds everything.



YOUR PARTNER IN CAMPUS BELONGING

ABOUT SWANK MOTION PICTURES

For more than 85 years, Swank Motion Pictures has helped campuses turn movies into community. We give Student Affairs teams everything they need to program with confidence: public performance licensing, the latest Hollywood releases and innovative programming tools that bring students together. When belonging is the goal, we help you press play.

85+ years partnering with campuses nationwide

1,600+ campuses we work with today

10,000+ movie events supported every year

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