I. Welcome and Introductions: Susan Murphy, VP Student and Academic Services

II. Meeting agenda and context: Tim Marchell, Director Mental Health Initiatives

   a. Today’s focus is on the Walton/Yeager Social Belonging Intervention Project being implemented with our 2015 incoming first year students.

   b. This project aligns with several sections of our Mental Health Framework: foster a healthy educational environment, promote connectedness and resilience, and increase help-seeking.

   c. The concept of strengthening student resilience is gaining traction in higher education. Identification of experiences and structures that help students bounce back from the inherent stresses of college life is increasing.

   d. This particular intervention started out to increase academic performance, but revealed additional outcomes, such as the role of feelings of social belonging in strengthening persistence to graduation.

   e. Carol Grumbach, Director for Academically Engaged Learning and Faculty Living-Learning Programs and Special Assistant to the Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs is heading up this project and will share information about the “nuts and bolts” of the intervention, timing and impact hypothesis.

   f. Following her presentation we will have a discussion about how we might foster a greater sense of belonging on our campus in general, alongside this particular and other interventions or programs already occurring.

III. Walton/Yeager Social Belonging Project: Carol Grumbach, Director for Academically Engaged Learning and Faculty Living-Learning Programs and Special Assistant to the Senior vice Provost for Academic Affairs

   a. This is a 4-year research project involving 12 institutions of higher education. We are one of the twelve selected out of one hundred forty applicants to participate.

   b. The overall goal of the project is to increase academic achievement and persistence. The intervention is specifically targeted to first year entering students to improve the transition to college in order to improve outcomes throughout the
college years and especially for students at risk for lower academic performance and persistence to graduation.

c. Because feelings of belonging are highly correlated to persistence, the intervention is designed to foster a sense of belonging by providing the message that the “fear of fitting in” experience is common and temporary.

d. The intervention is a one-time, online, 30-40 minute experience which first year students will complete before they arrive on campus. It is an active reading and writing exercise to prevent students from over-interpreting negative events (such as not making friends right away) and to help students develop feelings of belonging.

e. Students will be asked to do this intervention through the New Student website “To Do” list.

   i. First, they will read 2-3 brief written accounts of upper-class students’ descriptions of their own challenge with fitting in when first coming to college, their realization that everyone feels similarly, the short-lived nature of this challenge and how they overcame the challenge.

   ii. Second, the student will be given three writing prompts and told that their written responses will be used to help future first year students. The writing prompts are: Do you have any worries about fitting in at college? What worries about fitting in do you think all students coming to college might have? and Why might you and other students begin to feel at home at college?

f. Representatives from all seven undergraduate colleges, SAS, OADI, Institutional Research & Planning, the University Registrar, University Communications, University IT and the VP for Enrollment are all participating in the campus working group, chaired by Carol Grumbach with oversight by Laura Brown, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education.

g. It is a randomized, control trial of all incoming freshmen August 2015 with 1/3 receiving the customized intervention, 1/3 receiving the standard intervention, and 1/3 control group receiving general information about college. The trial will be repeated with a second cohort, the entering class of 2016.

h. The researchers are hoping to learn

   i. if this intervention works when “scaled up”

   ii. does the intervention work at different kinds of institution of higher education (public, private, large, small, rural, urban, etc)

   iii. do customized interventions work better than the standardized intervention.

   i. While this intervention seems to serve as a buffer against adversity, it is not a “magic bullet” and should not be considered a substitute for creating a culture of belonging on our campuses.

IV. For more details on the project go to:  
http://sas.cornell.edu/sites/sas.cornell.edu/files/documents/College_Transition.pdf/

V. Review data-specific information and findings on the intervention  (pdf)

VI. Council Discussion: Questions and Themes

   a. Does this intervention address the Imposter Syndrome? Do feelings of not fitting in exacerbate the Imposter Syndrome?
b. Would this intervention work similarly for students lacking a sense of belonging due to a physical or learning disability, sexual orientation, veteran status or mental health diagnosis?

i. This intervention has not been specifically used with students from these identifies. It was designed for use with first year students to help with this transition.

ii. This intervention only addresses the effect of a specific growth-mindset type of messaging and active writing assignment on academic persistence.

iii. ISSO encourages International students to step out of their comfort zone in order to meet people different than themselves, learn about the new culture and environment in order to cultivate their own sense of belonging.

c. Are there principles from these researchers that could be used with graduate students at the Graduate Student, Graduate Stories table discussions?

i. Yes, provide messages which strengthen a culture of belonging. These include: “It is a sign of strength to use resources”; “Seeking out resources is a partnership and all students need to do this to succeed”; and “All graduate students need to learn to navigate the university at a new level.”

ii. There are probably implications for use of this type of messaging when working with upper-class students, and especially graduating seniors as they transition out of undergraduate life into what is next for them.

d. Are we allowed to do other belonging-type interventions during the 4-year student period?

i. Yes, as long as we offer it (potentially) to all students (i.e. RSRS) or if is offered to a very small number of students (i.e. a class of students) and let the researchers know. RAs speaking early on with their residents about their own experience of feelings of not fitting in and how they overcame those would be alright as this is “business as usual”.

ii. While we do not want to replicate the specific Walton/Yeager intervention we can apply the constructs and ideas that support a culture of belonging. Real Students, Reel Stories is an example of a social belonging intervention we already have in place.

e. Do we think students will actually do the intervention because there are many tasks to complete on the “To Do” List for new students?

i. The intervention is labeled as “Strongly encouraged” (but not “Mandatory”)

ii. The researchers are hoping for an 85% response rate.

iii. We won’t know until we run the intervention.