



## “It wasn’t just about information, it felt like home”: Reimagining first-year belonging through small shifts and shared experiences

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### ABSTRACT

Inspired by the European First Year Experience community, this vignette explores how the Marino Institute of Education (MIE), a small teacher education college in Dublin, redesigned its pre-arrival engagement to foreground belonging. Within Ireland’s centralised admissions system, where students often confirm their place only days before term begins, *Tasters and Tours* was created to offer early signals of connection and mattering rather than simply information.

Drawing on scholarship on belonging and student transition, the initiative replaced a traditional Spring open day with immersive taster classes, student-led tours, and parallel sessions for parents. Student ambassadors, selected for authenticity and supported through confidence-building workshops, played a central role, with 85% of attendees reporting an increased likelihood of applying.

The vignette concludes with reflections on how small, intentional design choices can shape whether an institution feels like somewhere a student might belong.

**Keywords:** belonging, student voice, pre-arrival engagement, first-year transitions, open days

### Introduction

What does it take to feel like you belong?

It’s 1998. I’m 17, from a town far smaller than Cork City, trying to be independent. I’ve taken the bus into the city and now I’m walking along Western Road beside the River Lee, heading toward University College Cork (UCC). It’s a part of the city I’ve rarely, if ever, been in. The campus feels enormous; the Boole Library alone dwarfs my entire secondary school. There are crowds, noise, and voices but I seem to have lost mine. I don’t know where to start, what to ask, or even what university life really means. I leave with a glossy prospectus but no real sense of what it means to be a student at UCC.

That moment stayed with me. It shapes how I think about transitions, support, and the messy magic of belonging. Years later, reading Schlossberg (1989), I found language for what I’d felt: marginality. The sense of being present but peripheral. What I’d needed that day, without knowing it, was a signal that I mattered. Over twenty years later, I now lead student engagement at Marino Institute of Education in Dublin, where I get to rethink how we introduce ourselves to prospective students.

Jakob Egholm Feldt (2024) calls on educators to organise around “what matters”. David Gilani’s (2024) encourages us to “empower students to take action to belong... without gaslighting them into believing they can single-handedly rectify systemic barriers” and to stop ‘doing’ belonging to students. Reflecting on

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these provocations, I began to rethink our approach to student events. Belonging is not something we declare in a presentation. It is something we must design for, through the conditions we create, and through the community we build. This prompted us to look beyond stagnant information sharing and to reflect on where connections are made, both to the institution and to each other.

**About the Marino Institute of Education (MIE)**

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MIE is a small educational institution, home to around 1,400 students, most of whom are aiming to become primary school teachers. A significant number of our students arrive with a clear sense of purpose, many have long aspired to become teachers, and this course is the pathway that makes that possible. Purpose helps. It doesn’t automatically translate into connection. Belonging needs to be nurtured through experiences that invite students in, rather than leaving it to chance, assuming they will find their own way. As Leask et al.(2018) argue, inclusion requires intentional design across the whole student experience, not isolated initiatives. For us, that raised a practical question: if inclusion matters, why would we wait until orientation week to begin?

Our small size gives us room to experiment and change direction quickly. We know our students by name, and we have the luxury of designing experiences at a scale that feels personal rather than procedural.

However, small does not mean simple. Like any institution, we face limited budgets, tight timelines, and students juggling long commutes and part-time work due to high living costs. And per-student costs for central services are higher than at larger institutions.

**An Irish solution to an Irish problem**

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In Ireland, most undergraduate students apply to higher education institutions through the Central Applications Office (CAO), submitting a ranked list of course preferences early in the year. Admission is based on their Leaving Certificate examination results, which are released in mid-August. Only then are offers made, meaning most students won’t know in what institution they’ll be studying until just days before the academic year begins. That short window leaves little time to prepare, visit campuses, or reflect on whether a course or institution, that may not have been their first or second preference, truly feels right for them.

At MIE, we saw this as a chance to rethink our approach to Open Days. By hosting *Tasters and Tours* in April, we gave prospective students a meaningful opportunity to experience campus life, connect with current students, and consider whether MIE felt like the right fit for them, while there was still time to adjust their preferences. It gave them space to explore the campus on their own terms, rather than simply hearing our version of it.

Traditional open days are polished and informative, but they tend to be passive experiences. Students sit through formal presentations, collect glossy brochures, follow guides on campus tours. They receive academic information. What they don’t receive is a feel for the social side of student life, the peer connections, the informal rhythms, the sense of fit. Tinto (1993) argues that both academic and social integration are essential to student persistence and sense of belonging. Traditional open days address the former, the academic bit. We wanted *Tasters and Tours* to focus on the latter, and to do so months before enrolment.

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### Finding a home on campus

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*Tasters and Tours* was born out of a desire to offer something more immersive and student-centred. Held in April, months before CAO offers of college places are announced, it gave prospective students a chance to step into real college classrooms, meet current students, and explore the campus in an authentic way and see themselves as students at MIE.

One of the most important elements was engaging a student ambassador team. We put out an open call to the student body, looking not for the most academically gifted or polished speakers, but for those actively involved in campus life who could speak honestly about their experience. We wanted authenticity, not a sales pitch. This reframed engagement as partnership. Students weren't delivering our message; they were sharing theirs. It was a small move toward the kind of co-created engagement that Lowe and El Hakim (2023) argue challenges performative institutional practice.

To support student ambassadors in their role, we ran a communication workshop focused on confidence building and preparing for the kinds of questions they might be asked on the day. It wasn't about scripting answers but rather encouraging them to reconnect with the questions they once had, stepping back into the mindset of a prospective student and overcoming the 'curse of knowledge' (Camerer et al., 1989).

What made this day unique from other opportunities to visit MIE was that while students took part in getting a feel for classes and campus life, parents attended parallel sessions focused on student support services and the shift from school to university. These sessions helped parents understand how communication works in higher education, where students are expected to take ownership and institutions speak directly to them, not through their families.

For students navigating the leap from second-level to third-level education, that early connection mattered. It helped them picture themselves at MIE, not just as first-year students, but as part of a community from the start.

85% of attendees reported that they were more likely to consider applying for a course in MIE after the event. We report this figure knowing it measures intent, not action, but in our experience, intent genuinely matters. Many kept in touch with peers and student ambassadors, arriving in September with a real sense of familiarity and confidence.

One student described the experience as transformative: “It wasn’t just about information; it felt like home.” That line became the heart of this vignette, a reminder that belonging is not a brochure, it is a feeling, what Schlossberg (1989) called 'mattering,' the sense that we are noticed, valued, and important to those around us.

*Tasters and Tours* was more than a rebrand. It shifted our early engagement with potential students from a recruitment exercise to an early community-building experience, months before orientation.

### Challenges along the way

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The initiative wasn't without its challenges. Securing faculty buy-in meant asking colleagues to teach on a weekend, so naturally there was initial scepticism. What prompted adoption was visible backing from the Registrar's Office and senior leadership. They publicly backed the initiative and encouraged colleagues to take part.

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Staff noted that the event felt genuinely student-centred in both design and delivery. These were simple shifts, but ones that made space for community. From the outset, the initiative involved collaboration across academic departments, student services, and campus operations. This shared ownership helped shape the tone and delivery of the event. Early conversations with departments focused on shared goals rather than logistics and framing the event as a pilot helped ease concerns and encourage experimentation. We learned the value of setting boundaries. For example, we crafted separate bespoke sessions for parents and for students, creating unique spaces for autonomy and curiosity.

We were guided by bell hooks’ (1994) reminder that our role is not merely to inform, but to share in our students’ growth. *Tasters and Tours* created space for that growth to begin, not through grand gestures, but rather through small, intentional shifts.

#### What we learned from our experience

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Our experience echoes themes that surface repeatedly in student engagement and transition scholarship (Lowe & El Hakim, 2023; Tinto, 1993). But they emerged here from practice, not theory. Three shifts mattered most. We involved students directly in design and delivery, made the day participatory rather than observational, and focused on what genuinely distinguishes MIE rather than what simply looks impressive in a brochure.

We didn’t set out to innovate. We set out to listen and to act with intention. We designed a dynamic opportunity for prospective students to connect with emotional aspects of choosing and starting college. This approach has already begun to influence how we think about orientation and peer engagement more broadly at MIE, with further opportunities to embed student-led, immersive practices across the student journey.

Traditional Open Days serve a vital purpose. And by adding immersive, student-centred experiences, we can deepen engagement and foster belonging in ways that glossy presentations alone cannot.

Information matters. But so does the early sense that you could belong here.

Belonging is not a checklist. It happens over time, through moments and experiences that make us feel seen. A classroom where you feel at ease. A conversation that makes you feel heard.

And sometimes, it is a simple sentence that stays with you:

“It wasn’t just about information, it felt like home.”

#### Biography

*Colum Cronin* is Student Engagement Officer at Marino Institute of Education, Dublin, where he redesigns student experiences around belonging and peer engagement. With over 20 years of experience creating award-winning programmes across Irish higher education, he advocates for systems that serve people, authentic connection, and the power of belonging. His work has been recognised at EFYE, AMOSHEE, and UKAT.

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## Ethics Statement

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Student feedback referenced in this vignette was gathered anonymously as part of routine event evaluation. It was not collected for research purposes and no identifiable information is included.