



University Lake School
Statement of Belonging - January 11, 2023

Consistent with our Mission and Branches of the Pine, the following Statement of Belonging is the joint work of the staffulty JEDI (Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) Group and the student SAFE (Student Alliance for Equity) Club, in collaboration with our Head of School.

This Statement has been presented to all ULS staffulty and a wide variety of stakeholders including students, parents, and alums for critique and collaboration, whose many hands have honed, expanded, and improved its words and scope.

This Statement has the unanimous endorsement of the Leadership Team, Head of School, and Board of Trustees.

Why do we wish to have an official Statement of Belonging endorsed at all levels of School governance?

1. To testify publicly to shared values around the topic of belonging in line with our Mission and Branches of the Pine.
2. To describe the spirit of our social and personal commitments to one another within the School and the School's institutional commitments to each of us.
3. To capture an aspirational ethos for our growing community – something to point to when we want to discern norms and guide policies.
4. To articulate a clear stance for the benefit of new and potential community members who wish to know how we approach questions of diversity and inclusion.
5. To seek alignment with best practices of our accrediting bodies and peers at ISACS and NAIS as we embrace the work of learning in community.
6. To anticipate the need for careful institutional responsiveness to questions of gender and race which, if left under-considered, can lead to division, alienation, or confusion.
7. To affirm our duty to elicit all voices and enforce appropriate protections of each other, acknowledging that even the best communities can fail their own members.
8. To generate thought and conversation about the character of our School and the things that matter to our members.
9. To make clear that we respect differences at ULS and that their history and value will neither be ignored nor taken for granted, but sought out and appreciated.

This is a living document and doesn't aim to capture every feeling on the matter. This document is not legally binding or contractual. This document differs from most corporate statements of inclusion because our mission is education; it differs from most educational statements of inclusion because we are not an ordinary school.

We hope it will be received in the spirit of intellectual curiosity and moral reasoning, prompted by the twin questions: 1) Who are we? and 2) How can we do right by all our members? We offer this document in commitment to cultivating personal integrity, pursuing great character through service to others, and educating the whole student.

We have boiled down our Statement of Belonging to seven core observations.

1. Belonging here is a daily experience and also a daily responsibility.

One student says: "Every morning I walk into this School and I feel an overwhelming amount of love and support from everyone here. I think that's special, and I want people to feel that. I didn't think a school could do that before and it astounds me." Is this true for all of us? Can this be true for all of us?

No matter who you are or what makes you different from others, you are welcome here. No matter where you come from, what you have, how you feel, or who you want to be. Come as your whole and authentic self. Here, you belong. "Laker" means family.

What makes us different from other schools is the feeling you get when you walk in, an overall ethos of openness, positive energy, freedom through expression, acceptance, license and support to exist as YOU.

2. Your story matters and you are free to tell it.

If you are not bringing your whole self to School, then we are failing to live up to our promise. Your story matters. Tell it.

You can be free here, but freedom doesn't mean you're off the hook. Freedom means you get to be known, to affect and be affected by others. That's part of living in this community, and we think it's a good part. Our School motto is *Libertas Veritate*- freedom through truth.

3. Safe and inclusive does not mean easy and comfortable.

A safe environment is one where we respect, love, and seek to know and understand each other. As Lakers we aim to assume the good and be quick to forgive. A safe environment is not one where we are magically free from heated arguments, hard questions, or hurt feelings. We get to enjoy those things because on some deeper level we are all in this together.

What if things we like about ourselves make others feel bad? That can happen. We are with you, or as people sometimes say, "We got you." Sometimes we upset one another. You should not expect to be comfortable all the time. Getting through it means more shared activity and more conversation, not less.

4. *It's okay not to know everything.*

Often we don't know what we want or need, are slow to understand why we do what we do, and fail to grasp our value to others. The pressure to make up our minds or know ourselves completely can be overwhelming. Sometimes it's good just to live; you can live here.

A great education celebrates ignorance as the start of learning. Errors are generally not born of ignorance; they are born from thinking we know something we don't. We are ready to make errors and hope they are the fair price for understanding.

5. *Differences, even when fraught, promote learning.*

Sometimes just having a statement (like this one) about difference can feel political; we hope differences offer a pathway to understanding, not a shield from it. Our differences are interesting, challenging, provide rich experience for all, and promote learning, awareness, and citizenship. Since we are all different, difference is also paradoxically something we all have in common.

If we don't understand things, we ask questions. Respecting difference doesn't mean choosing quiet anxiety over exuberant awkwardness. We think getting to know each other well is the beginning of a great education. We think a great education can be difficult and complicated, and this experience makes us flexible and resilient.

6. *Who you are can change.*

We do not take the position that we are static and that our minds are made up. People change their minds over the course of their lives about many things and often about the most important things. ULS is a place where you are known, and we hope that you are known in ways that allow and enjoy change. We are all growing and we get to grow together.

7. *We address the paradox that inclusion sometimes excludes.*

We are all capable of hateful thoughts and actions. We strive to understand the causes of fear and hatred, accommodate age-appropriate contexts for their expression, and provide a path back from poor choices. We feel it is necessary as a deliberate community, however, to draw a line at times and say, "Actually, we believe you don't belong here yet." For acts of violence, vengeance, or cruelty, or for certain verbal threats or expressions of hate, we might decide recovery is best accomplished at a distance.

We have and will continue to improve admissions, hiring, and community standards that reflect our hope that everyone will succeed in this environment, contribute to our differences, and build our culture of belonging. We take seriously our commitment to developing practices and systems that support the flourishing of all members of our community. We are a School that can bend your heart because we are people of great heart. We care for one another and we care for you.