



# Her Voice, Our Future:

## Insights from the 2023 Women + Girls Research Alliance Leadership Café

# Acknowledgments

## **Prepared by the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute**

The UNC Charlotte Urban Institute is our region's applied research and community outreach center. We seek solutions to the complex social, economic and environmental challenges facing our communities. We engage expertise across a diverse set of disciplines and life experiences to curate data, conducting actionable research and policy analysis that helps us make better decisions for the benefit of us all.

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## **Prepared for the Women + Girls Research Alliance**

Women + Girls Research Alliance (W+GRA) is a community-based research organization based at UNC Charlotte whose mission is to provide fair and unbiased data and analyses, which leaders and activists can use to improve the lives of women and girls. W+GRA has served the greater Charlotte metro area (Mecklenburg and surrounding counties) since 2006.

# Contents

1 | Executive Summary

2 | Who Attended the Café?

4 | Findings

9 | Recommendations for Schools

11 | Recommendations for Employers

13 | Description of Leadership Café Method



# Executive Summary

## Overview

Women + Girls Research Alliance (W+GRA) convened a Leadership Café in October 2023 to better understand the issues faced by women and girls in the greater Charlotte metro area. Café participants engaged in small, facilitated conversations around mental health and the ability to thrive in school and workplace settings. This report summarizes the findings and recommendations resulting from those conversations.

## Findings

From the hundreds of conversations held at the Café, the research team found common themes. Women and girls need:

- Strong systems of support,
- Safe and inclusive spaces of belonging,
- Purpose-driven connections, and
- Dynamic allyship to thrive mentally, emotionally, and socially in schools and at work.

The findings also show that **mental health and academic and workplace success are intrinsically linked.**

## Recommendations

The following recommendations stem from the Café findings and are informed by best practices in the policy and research literature.

Schools can enhance support systems and sense of belonging by:

- Practicing equitable enforcement of school policies,
- Evaluating mentorship needs, and
- Continuing to recognize and empower staff excellence.

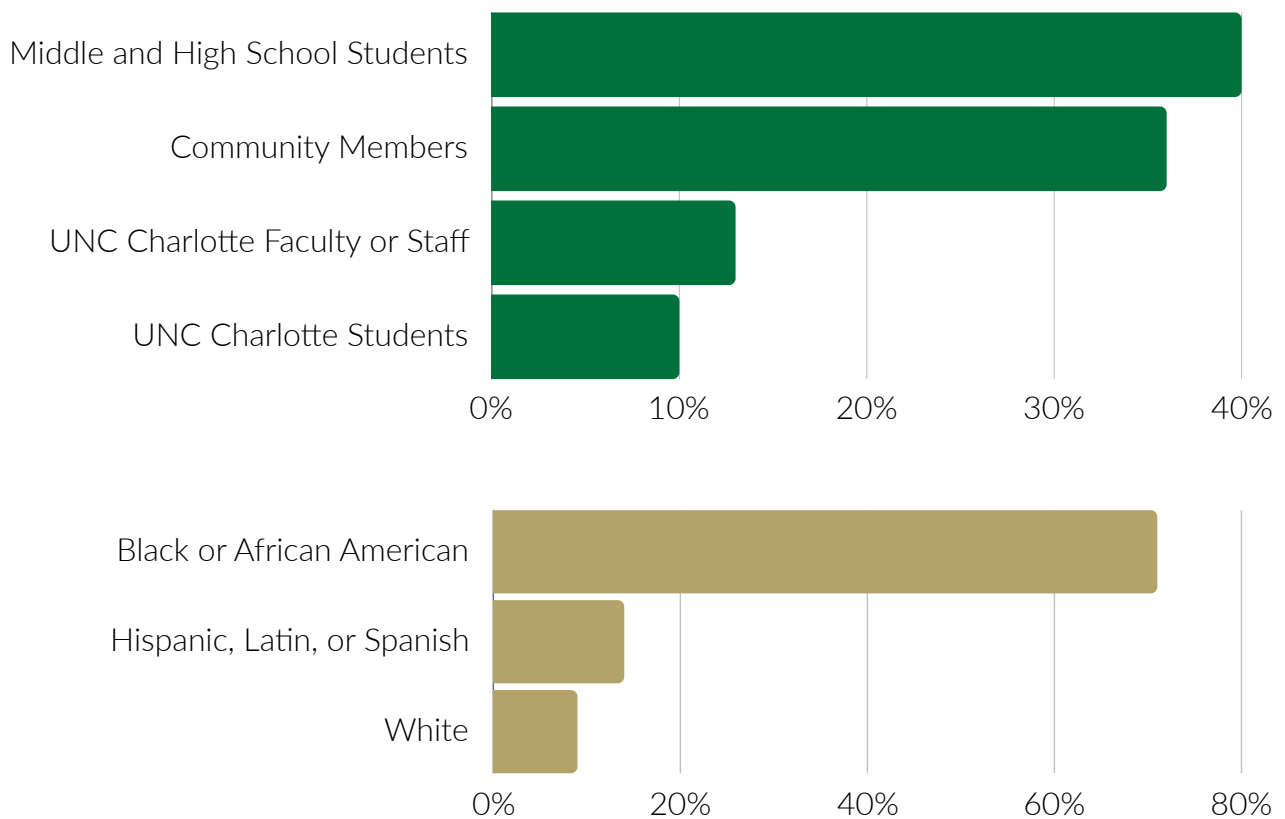
Employers can improve sense of belonging by:

- Standardizing compensation practices, and
- Promoting pay transparency.



# Who Attended the Café?

The Café hosted 269 participants, highly diverse in age and primarily women and girls of color:



**Gender:**  
100% Female\*

**Place of Residence:**  
90% Mecklenburg County\*

\*Seventy-nine participants (29% of total participants) filled out an optional demographic survey to record race, ethnicity, gender, and place of residence. The self-reported demographics were similar to researcher-observed gender, race, and ethnicity estimates of the entire participant body.

# Findings

## Why does mental health matter for school and workplace success?

- 1. Mental health practices can strengthen resilience.** Women and girls who reported using positive mental health strategies (e.g. positive self-talk, setting boundaries) and who had a positive social support network felt more resilient and therefore better equipped to handle stressors and challenges at school and work.

“In the morning, when I look in the mirror, I compliment myself and don’t put myself down.”

~ Café Participant



**2. Experiencing belonging at school and work is essential for sustaining positive mental health.** Schools and workplaces must address barriers to belonging within their walls to support the long-term success of students and employees. Participants defined belonging as the sense of feeling valued, respected, and appreciated in a space. Employees experienced belonging when they were paid adequately and fairly, given paid leave (including maternity leave), and felt supported by supervisors and peers. Students experienced belonging when their sports teams and activities were publicly promoted to the same level as boys'. Additionally, students experienced belonging when school policies (e.g. dress codes) were enforced equitably (across genders) and in ways that allowed girls to maintain dignity and respect. Women and girls shared that the workplace and school could feel isolating, particularly for those who considered themselves a minority in their class or field. The lack of diversity in these settings could make it feel riskier for women and girls to express their unique perspectives and needs for fear of being singled out or disregarded. It was important to Café participants that leaders recognize the challenges of diverse students and employees and address these issues through hiring diverse leaders and increasing access to mentorship.

“[We need] safe spaces for women of color to express themselves and share how they’ve overcome obstacles.”  
~ Café Participant



## What do women and girls in the Charlotte region need to thrive mentally, emotionally and socially at school and in the workplace?

**1. Strong systems of support.** Frequent systems identified during the Café were family and friends, communities of faith, colleagues, teachers, and older mentors. Women and girls look to their support networks for encouragement, empathy, advice, and motivation. Participants shared how the support they receive from these networks helps them to build confidence in themselves. While therapy was mentioned as a resource, women and girls in the region prefer relational connections to help them cope with life stress.



**"[A friend is] someone who wants the best for you and builds your confidence. People who won't let you fall."**

**~Café Participant**



“Perseverance and confidence go hand in hand- [I] deserve to take up space.”  
~ Café Participant

## 2. Safe & inclusive spaces of belonging.

Women and girls stressed the importance of having a **“safe space”** that was physically, emotionally, and relationally safe and comfortable. Participants identified safe spaces of belonging as those in which they shared certain similarities with other group members (e.g. life experiences, race, gender, faith) and places in which they felt valued, respected, and appreciated.



“My school has a lot of teachers who are women, and women of color. I feel comfortable going to teachers to talk about everything.”  
~ Café Participant



### 3. Purpose-driven/meaningful connection to work and activities.

Employees felt purpose in their work when they understood the larger mission of the company, or when they felt that their work enabled them to care well for their families. Students found purpose through goal setting and talking to older mentors about career and educational aspirations.



**4. Dynamic allyship.** Allyship begins with curiosity and listening and leads to advocacy through action. Women and girls wanted their male counterparts to speak up for them at work and school and to use the power differential to change the narrative. However, women and girls weren't looking for support in a vacuum, they also want to support their male counterparts.



# Recommendations for Schools

**Schools can create safe and inclusive spaces of belonging and foster strong systems of support by:**

## 1. Enforcing policies equitably.

**How?** Ensure that policies, such as dress codes, are enforced equitably (across genders) and in ways that allow girls to maintain dignity and respect.

**Why?** When policies were not enforced equitably or were enforced in ways that felt shaming, students reported feeling isolated and disengaged from their school experience. Schools can foster more positive school cultures through a gendered examination of school policies.

## 2. Evaluating their mentorship needs.

**How?** Consider hosting a student Leadership Café at your own school to better understand the specific mentorship needs of your students. Information about Leadership Cafés (also called World Cafés) can be found [here](#).

**Why?** Student participants desired more opportunities for mentorship at their schools, though the specific mentorship needs varied. Some participants desired more opportunities to learn from older peers (e.g. college mentors) who can guide and inspire their academic pursuits. Others desired more mentorship for students who are undocumented, who do not have English-speaking parents, and/or who are aspiring first-generation college students.

### 3. Continuing to recognize and empower staff excellence.

**How?** Consider hosting a staff Leadership Café at your own school to explore barriers and solutions to building strong student relationships, and to better understand how staff would like to be recognized and supported in their work. Information about Leadership Cafés (also called World Cafés) can be found [here](#).

**Why?** The Café found that supportive teachers and counselors are integral to student success. Students felt most supported by teachers and counselors who were relatable, trustworthy, encouraging, and respectful. The findings emphasize the importance of creating school atmospheres which provide staff members with the capacity and resources to invest deeply in student relationships.



# Recommendations for Employers

**Employers can create safe and inclusive spaces of belonging by:**

## 1. Standardizing compensation.

**How?** Employers can improve gender equity in their hiring practices by developing clear guidance on how base pay is determined for each role and clearly define how additional attributes are further compensated, rather than using applicants' past salary history or desired salary range to inform compensation.

**Why?** Café participants identified fair and adequate pay as a key attribute of a good workplace and an indicator of respect. However, gender and gender-race pay gaps are pervasive across nearly all industries in North Carolina. In 2022, the median hourly wage of a White man in North Carolina was \$24.31, compared to \$21.94 for a White woman, \$18.53 for a Black woman, and \$14.75 for a Hispanic woman (1). The data suggests that female applicants are more likely to have a lower pay history. Therefore, past pay inequity is likely to continue into the next job when hiring practices require that applicants list their most recent salary or require applicants to share a salary range.

1. North Carolina Justice Center. (2023). The State of Working Women: The 2023 State of Working North Carolina Report.

## 2. Promoting pay transparency.

**How?** Consider including pay ranges in all job postings and ensure that employees have access to information about salary ranges in their workplaces. Leaders should clearly and transparently communicate how pay is calculated and the qualifications for promotion for current employees.

**Why?** Job satisfaction is linked to perceptions of pay equity. In a recent survey of over 6,000 employees across 40 organizations, researchers found that employees who did not understand how their employer determined pay (45%) were less likely to perceive that pay was fair (2). Perceptions of unfair pay were highest among marginalized groups, including women and women of color. Perceptions of pay transparency have tangible effects on employee mental health; the survey found that when employees in historically marginalized groups perceive their pay is unfair, they are less likely to experience feelings of belonging and psychological safety in their workplaces. These findings suggest that pay transparency matters for employee retention and job satisfaction.



2. Ellequate. (2023). The Impact of Pay Transparency on Employee Well-being.

# Description of Leadership Café Method

The Leadership Café followed a modified version of the World Café model. The layout of the room was designed to evoke a warm and welcoming environment; coffee house music was played in the background and food and refreshments were available in the lobby.

After the welcome and a brief introduction to the World Café model, participants were instructed to discuss a set of questions with the 4 to 10 people at their immediate table. Each participant was assigned to a table discussion prior to the start of the event. There was one host per table who facilitated the conversation. Participants discussed 1-2 key questions per round and noted their responses on large post-it papers located at the tables. The key discussion questions were:

1. What does mental health mean to women and girls in the greater Charlotte region?\*
2. Who or what helps women and girls to be their best selves at work or school?
3. What resources and supports do women and girls in the Charlotte metro area need to thrive in work, school, or in the larger community?
4. How can men and boys be allies for women and girls?

\*Participants were asked to use an online polling platform to respond to Question 1, followed by table conversation.



## Data Analysis

Discussion notes written on the large post-it papers and question 1 responses submitted on the online polling platform were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative research software. Researchers also observed approximately 10% of table conversations and contributed notes and quotes from these conversations to the analysis. Finally, Café participants were invited to participate in a brief demographic survey. Using all three data sources, initial themes were identified, discussed and refined by the research team. Three Café table hosts reviewed the initial findings to validate and provide additional insights.



