

Eat, Sleep, Breathe, Study: Understanding What It Means to Belong at a University from the Student Perspective

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Abstract

The present study utilized consensual qualitative research (Hill 2012) to investigate undergraduate students' sense of belongingness to their university. The analysis revealed four broad domains: (1) valued group involvement, (2) meaningful personal relationships, (3) environmental factors, and (4) intrapersonal factors. Within these domains, six general categories and eight typical categories emerged. The results highlight the importance for students to have opportunities to meaningfully connect with other peers/faculty, the availability of a myriad of campus organizations and groups, and universities to foster an environment of diversity. Implications for higher education personnel as well as directions for future research are discussed.

Abstrak

Studi kali ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif konsensual (Hill 2012) untuk mempelajari rasa memiliki mahasiswa S-1 terhadap universitasnya. Hasil analisis menunjukkan empat ranah luas: (1) keterlibatan kelompok yang bernilai, (2) hubungan personal yang bermakna, (3) faktor lingkungan, dan (4) faktor intrapersonal. Dalam ranah ini, muncul enam kategori umum dan 8 kategori khusus. Hasil studi menekankan pentingnya bagi mahasiswa memperoleh kesempatan membangun relasi bermakna dengan sesama mahasiswa atau dosen, adanya beragam jenis kelompok dan organisasi kampus, dan universitas yang mendorong kebhinekaan lingkungan. Studi ini juga membahas implikasi dan masukan bagi karyawan/pejabat perguruan tinggi.

Key Words: Belonging, Consensual Qualitative Research, Higher Education, Connectedness, Inclusivity

College students across the country often struggle to stay committed to the college experience (Blustein et al. 2004). Retention rates for college students returning for a second year, after the completion of the first, are at a 20-year low (65 percent in 2013; ACT 2013). Further, approximately half of students that begin college will complete a bachelor's degree in five years or less (ACT 2013). Many students find themselves lost in the university environment and struggle to identify with their peers and the university culture. One construct that has received attention in trying to understand issues of retention in the college/university environment is belongingness (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Pittman and Richmond 2008). Belongingness has been researched by a wide variety

of scholastic disciplines, utilizing many different terms, most notably: feelings of relatedness (Deci and Ryan 1985), and Tinto's (1988) model of college student retention.

Researchers have theorized that underlying factors contributing to university belongingness include a sense of commitment to the institution, individual commitment to work in this setting, and a sense of one's abilities being recognized by others (Pittman and Richmond 2008). This suggests that students who feel a strong sense of school belonging are better able to adjust to academic life, experience lower levels of depressive symptoms, lower attrition rates, and better social adjustment as well as academic motivation (Goodenow 1993; Tao et al. 2000). Unfortunately, these conclusions are based on research examining school belonging at the K-12 level, rather than in postsecondary institutions. Consequently, the vast majority of empirical research looking at college or university level belonging has been theoretical in nature.

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Tinto (1988) stressed the importance of belongingness to college student attrition. Through his work, Tinto argued that the social aspects of belonging to the university were as important for students' retention as their academic concerns (Tinto 1993). Specifically, Tinto (1990) emphasized the importance of faculty to student relations both in and out of the classroom. He professed that having a good connection between student and faculty was essential to student retention and that this involved both frequency and quality of contact between faculty and students (Tinto 1993). Although Tinto's work is widely regarded as the most influential theory of college student departure, empirical research only provides modest support for its components (Braxton and Lee 2005). One of the most prevailing critiques of Tinto's work is the lack of consideration or recognition of contextual variables that may influence students' belongingness, and in turn, their retention (Guiffrida 2005; Kuh and Love 2000).

Another area of research that involves belonging is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasizes that the desire to belong (referred to as *relatedness*) is a fundamental psychological need (Deci and Ryan 1985). Unlike Tinto's (1993) conceptualization, SDT suggests that human beings best function when their interactions with the environment are governed by choice rather than coercion or obligation, placing an emphasis on socio-cultural conditions. In Deci and Ryan's (1985) view, this choice is based on an awareness of one's own needs and the contextual environment in which one exists. The need for relatedness is a cornerstone—along with the need for autonomy and competence—of self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 1985). The need for relatedness may play a crucial role in college retention. Ryan and Deci (2002, p. 7, emphasis added) define relatedness as “feeling connected to others, to caring for and being cared for by others, to having a sense of belongingness both with other individuals *and with one's community*.” They note it may be related to intrinsic motivation and facilitated by shared goals. Thus, campuses without a climate of inclusiveness may be places in which students are less likely to satisfy this need. The result could be a lack of connectedness to others in the college environment and lower performance. SDT is a widely recognized theory and numerous studies have examined its components and applicability. Nevertheless, few studies have specifically examined SDT's relation to student persistence and retention (Guiffrida et al. 2013). Moreover, understanding student perspectives on relatedness have yet to be considered in the literature.

The need to belong has long been seen as fundamental to the human experience. The theories mentioned above are all derived from Maslow (1970)'s original conceptualization of belonging as a deficiency need, noting that people will seek ways to meet this need if it is not being met. Building from this conceptualization,

Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that human beings have a fundamental “need to belong,” and that individuals experience optimal functioning when they have a few positive, stable relationships in their lives. Baumeister and Leary (1995) define belongingness as the perception of consistent interaction coupled with persistent caring from others. Based on this framework, Pittman and Richmond (2008) found that feeling connected in the university setting goes beyond the relationships with individuals in the school to a more global sense of belonging and feeling connected to the institutional community.

Considered collectively, the literature clearly suggests that a sense of university belongingness impacts students in a multitude of meaningful ways. However, it is unclear what mechanisms comprise university belongingness or how students' actually conceptualize and define the construct. Despite significant research examining the impact of belongingness in an academic setting, scholars have failed to identify how the definition of belongingness might change given the academic level (e.g., college versus K-12). Clarifying what it means to belong in a university environment helps further distinguish belongingness as a unique construct and combats against the future misuse or omission of the construct in the literature. The current study examines the student perspective on how they define the meaning of belonging to a university. This novel work can enable researchers to more accurately define the perception of student belonging, based on the source of the experience.

Research Design

A rigorous qualitative methodology called Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) was selected for this project (Hill 2012). CQR is distinct from other qualitative data analyses as it involves a comprehensive multi-step regimen where the research team members are asked to: (a) confront pre-existing biases in relationship to the phenomena of interest, (b) come to a full consensus on all important components of the analysis, and (c) submit their consensual work to an “auditor” who evaluates the decisions following each of the three phases of analysis. A more detailed description of the procedures can be found elsewhere (e.g., Hill 2012).

Participants

Participants (N =11; 5 women, 7 men) were composed of a stratified random sample of undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university with a total student body of over 40,000 that represent the general student body. Seven students identified as White, three as Asian/Asian-American, and one student identified as Black/African-American. Participants reported different levels of university experience; two participants identified as first year, five as sophomores, three as juniors, and one as a senior.

Procedures

The research team consisted of two faculty members in a college of education at a large Midwestern university, three doctoral students, three masters-level graduate students, and one undergraduate student. In addition, the research team included an external auditor, a faculty member familiar with CQR and with previous experience as an auditor. Hill's (2012) outline of the CQR process was followed as prescribed. Audio interviews were conducted by members of the research team after being trained by the first author in conducting qualitative interviews. Prior to developing the interview protocol, the research team acknowledged and addressed their biases before beginning data collection. The research team frequently discussed these biases and revisited them throughout the data collection and analysis process. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and de-identified for data analysis. Members of the team took part in data collection by interviewing, transcribing the interviews, coding the data through team consensus, and drawing conclusions from the themes generated.

Results

The domains represent content areas discussed by all interviewees (see Table 1). Sub-domains, or stratified categories, were established in order to further organize the data in a meaningful way. Four domains emerged: (1) valued group involvement, (2) meaningful personal relationships, (3) environmental factors, and (4) intrapersonal factors.

Valued Group Involvement

All of the participants discussed the importance of finding a group connection on campus or valued group involvement. The participants pointed out that they felt a sense of belongingness to the university through smaller group participation (e.g., academic major, fraternity/sorority). One male student explained the benefits

of connecting with small groups, "This is such a large campus. Being a part of a group like makes it more, it doesn't make it feel as big It definitely makes it feel more like a community." For some students the connection buffered the demands of college. "I mean, the camaraderie that you develop with these people, for me it has been very strong the past few years just because we have to band together to survive [our academic discipline]."

Table 1. Summary of Domains, Categories, and Frequencies

Domain/Category	Frequency*
Valued Group Involvement	General (11)
• Being affiliated/member of an organization(s) on campus	General (11)
• Group work that was identified as having meaning	Typical (8)
• Feeling valued within one's major	Typical (5)
Meaningful Personal Relationships	General (11)
• Having similar experiences as others	General (11)
• Having healthy relationships with faculty/staff	Typical (9)
• Building strong friendships with peers	Typical (8)
• Having family members that are alumni	Typical (6)
Environmental Factors	General (11)
• Global sense of university culture and/or pride	General (11)
• Influence of living community (i.e., dorms, apartment)	General (10)
• Classroom environment	Typical (9)
• The importance of diversity and inclusivity	Typical (7)
Intrapersonal Factors	General (11)
• Intrinsic motivation to seek out relationships with others	General (10)
• Opportunities for self-awareness and growth	General (10)
• Balancing Social and Academic Lives	Typical (6)

*Note: General = applicable to all the cases or all but one; Typical = applicable to at least half of the cases.

Meaningful Personal Relationships

All of the participants identified one-on-one personal relationships that impacted their connection to the university. A number of participants felt a connection to the university through a family legacy of attendance, developed friendships with peers, faculty or staff, or found connection with others in shared experiences (i.e., study abroad). Without exception, all participants reported that a few very intimate connections on campus, or sometimes off campus, were important factors in the extent to which they felt like they belonged on campus. Few participants mentioned intimate relationships with loved ones off-campus, they suggested that these relationships made it more difficult for them to feel connected to the university. These competing needs to belong typically

emerged in reference to long-distance attachments, familial or romantic in nature.

Environmental Factors

Another overarching theme involved environmental factors (e.g., the university culture, living situation/community, embracing diversity, classroom environment) that impacted belongingness. The participants discussed different aspects of the university, as a whole, in reference to their felt connection. Some students believed that the university did not care about them individually. One student stated:

The university in general is worried about how many credit hours I am taking, is my financial aid okay, where my money is coming from, are they getting paid, or am I being fed so I don't complain.... It's the other things on campus that actually care whether I'm here or not. Like the organizations that are involved in student life.

Each participant noted that his or her own experience of the university environment had an impact on their sense of belonging.

Intrapersonal Factors

All participants identified intrapersonal qualities that enabled them to build relationships, foster growth in their personal identity, or learn to balance social and academic life. One participant described her stance of open-mindedness in interpersonal relationships:

There are things that I'm going to tend towards and qualities in people I'm going to find more ideal and more, I don't know, accepting or interesting to me . . . going through the process is really going to help me identify how to be more open-minded about other people.

Discussion

The current study involved a qualitative investigation of college students' perspectives on what it means to belong at a university. Four domains were identified including: valued group involvement, meaningful personal relationships, environmental factors, and intrapersonal factors. Overall, participants were clear that each of these areas were of significant importance in how they came to experience belonging in a university setting.

Unlike Goodenow's (1993) common conceptualization of school or academic belonging at the K-12 level, college students

are not in the same building for eight hours a day. They are often involved in other connections with the university outside of academics. This creates a complex set of dynamics making it difficult to pinpoint how to help students meet their needs to belong. Understanding college students' perspective on meeting these needs was paramount. Based on their words and reflections in this study, the following implications are important to keep in mind for university personnel.

Opportunities to Connect With Individuals in a Meaningful Way

Participants identified the importance of having meaningful connections with people on an individual basis. Some mentioned connections with peers, while others mentioned connections with faculty and/or staff. Self-determination theory posits that humans are more likely to be intrinsically motivated when their need to belong, in combination with two other needs, self-determination and competence, are met (Deci and Ryan 1985). The above results underscore the importance of the role of belongingness needs for university students' educational, social, and intrapersonal growth. These students' narratives highlight a collective belief in the importance of having increased opportunities to connect with peers and faculty/staff in a meaningful way and on a regular basis. Practically, this involves faculty/staff being more available to students, confirming Tinto's (1993) previous conclusions about the importance of faculty and student relationships. Further, universities should create purposeful opportunities for students to interact socially in one-on-one connections and conversations.

A Diversity of Campus Organizations and Groups for Students

Each participant mentioned the value that he or she found in being part of a group on campus. Students discussed the various ways they navigate aspects of the university life to deepen their engagement with the institution. The results indicate that it may be more important for universities to create a positive atmosphere and offer small group opportunities and support, rather than more structured and required experiences. As a group, participants were just as adamant about their academic, social, and living communities being important factors in developing a connection on campus. We suggest that campus communities pay attention to being well rounded in being ready to offer both structured and unstructured, formal and informal, small group opportunities for students to connect on campus. Small groups are typically identified as a group of five to ten individuals, any more than that hinders the potential intimacy of the group as a whole and connections between individuals (Yalom 2005).

Fostering an Environment of Inclusivity

From a broader perspective, students mentioned that they felt that the university culture impacted their level of belonging substantially. When students reported feeling known and appreciated by others on campus, particularly university personnel, they reported an increased level of connection to the university. Students pointed out ways in which efforts of individuals or groups helped them feel comfortable by acknowledging their similarities and not turning their differences into obstacles. Thus, it is imperative that faculty and staff on campus convey the acceptance of each student's uniqueness.

Limitations

As with any qualitative study, the following methodological limitations must be acknowledged. These students, though from different individual backgrounds, were all enrolled at a single institution making generalizations to other students at other campuses unwise. The study design focused on understanding phenomenon rather than drawing cause-effect relationships, so all interpretations should be considered with that in mind.

We encourage researchers to examine narratives of those students who dropped out, transferred, or otherwise were not successful at continuing on a college campus to help understand how the need to belong impacted their decision to leave. Additionally, it would be of interest to develop a more complex understanding of how long-distance relationships may interfere with university belonging and, in turn, one's academic or social efficacy. The current study demonstrated factors that contribute to their sense of belonging on a University campus, allowing both researchers and educational professionals to more accurately ascertain how to impact student belonging on campus.

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