The Effects of Belonging on the Higher Education Experience of Undergraduates

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Belonging in college students is the foundation of student success in higher education. Because of its importance, student belonging is a priority for student affairs personnel at colleges all over the world. This paper provides a review of the relevant literature on the topic. Articles were gathered and analyzed for similarities in theory and practices. Some articles contained empirical research studies and others were peer-reviewed articles on the topics discussed. This research contributes to the ongoing goal of higher education professionals to provide students with a meaningful college experience. The researcher hopes to employ these practices in her future as a student affairs professional.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Kaufman for pushing me to do my best work and for his patience while I figured this project out. I would also like to thank my HONR 499 class for the always helpful edits and for the laughs.

I would like to thank my parents for inspiring me to pursue education administration. They taught me that a good leader combines clear direction with compassion and gratitude to change the world one student at a time.

I would like to thank my husband-to-be, Max, for loving me so well through this journey.

Process Analysis Statement

When deciding on a topic to explore for my senior thesis, I was asked to consider my most formative experiences during my time in college. What immediately came to mind was my involvement in Cardinal Catholic, the Catholic student organization on campus. When I first came to campus, I found a place that I could belong to immediately within the community. This sparked my interest in the research behind community and how it fits into the larger structure of higher education.

I originally wanted to study the experience of community in college students on Ball State's campus, since I believed that my participation in a student organization had helped me to succeed during my college years. I realized quickly that a full-blown research study would be a bit much for me to complete in only one semester, so I decided to review the major literature on belonging in higher education so that those in student affairs could benefit from my research. Specifically, I wanted to focus on what the research says about the connection between a feeling of belonging and student success. I have analyzed several sources and put them in conversation with each other to see what commonalities arise. This analysis will be helpful for student affairs professionals to see what specifically is working for creating a sense of community in college students.

While I was reading the original articles, I could feel myself getting excited as I made connections between the articles to my own experiences. As I examined the theories of belonging while I read, I realized that the field of higher education combined many of my interests: education, psychology, and leadership. It was through this exploration that I realized that I wanted to be a student affairs professional and continue the work that made such an impact on me of helping students find a community to belong to while in college.

Being passionate about me topic definitely helped me to stay focused while writing, but I did face some difficulties along the way. My first bump in the road occurred when I realized that higher education research reads slightly differently than the psychology literature I was used to reading. All the components were the same, but often times I found myself looking up terms and reading studies that were cited in the articles so that I could be on the same page, so to speak. It took me a bit more time than I had anticipated to complete my initial research because I didn't think the learning curve would be so steep. I think that this challenge has helped me in the long run because now I am more familiar with the literature that I want to go to graduate school and study. Having been exposed to this field, I now have an advantage as I apply for graduate programs in student affairs.

The second challenge I faced was creating the review of literature itself. I've created literature reviews before but never ones quite this in-depth, so it took me a while to figure out what I was really trying to say. Having completed this experience, I can now say with confidence that I can examine large bodies of literature and condense them down into a single work. This project has given me the skills to do this.

I am thankful for the opportunity to create this project because the process has taught me about what I want to do as a career post-graduation. I never would have discovered how deep my passion is for students if I wouldn't have undertaken this project.

The Effects of Belonging on the Higher Education Experience of Undergraduate Students

Introduction

The field of higher education has a long history of examining the factors that contribute to student success. One factor that is repeatedly salient in this research is student's experience of belonging to a community on campus. Recent studies by higher education researchers have sought to discover the causes of belonging and how it fits into the college experience. The present thesis is a review of the relevant literature in higher education research that pertains to topics including the keywords belonging and engagement over the past few years. The project will be divided into four main sections: the introduction to the topic and key terms, explanations of the foundational theories of this topic, a review of the relevant literature, and a discussion of the implications of this research for the field of higher education and in the researcher's life. This thesis will be a synthesis of information that will help student affairs professionals in higher education discern what works and what does not in relation to student affairs.

Definition of Terms

Before reviewing the literature, it is important to operationally define the terms that will be used. The first distinction that must be made is between "belonging" and "engagement." In a study done in 2015 that considered belonging and engagement among Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) students, the researchers uncovered some important distinctions between these two terms (Wilson, Jones, Bocell, Crawford, Kim, Veilleux, Floyd-Smith, Bates and Plett, 2015). According to these researchers, engagement is typically measured by examining the time that students spend participating in certain activities, such as homework, athletics, student organizations, research and more. Engagement is a construct of how students spend their time doing activities associated with college life. Belonging, on the other hand, is based on

perceptions of acceptance within the college setting (Wilson et al., 2015). It is characterized by personal, regular social connection that provides fulfillment. There are two main types of belonging which are frequently talked about in educational research: classroom-level belonging and school- (or institution-) level belonging. For the purposes of this project, belonging will be defined as the psychological sense that a student is a valued member of the college community (Branand, Masjck, Wray-Lake, and Coffey, 2015).

It is also important to define what is being discussed when the term "student success" is used. What are the measurable factors that make a student successful? Graduation and retention rates, as well as time to completion and academic performance are commonly used to measure student success (Kim, 2018). These are measures that are tremendously important when universities are considered for accreditation and funding, and they are used as well when schools advertise to potential students. For the purposes of this study, student success will be defined as the ability for a student to reach their educational and personal goals in the context of their time spent at a university.

Desirable Outcomes Related to Belonging

Belonging has been identified as a basic human need by Abraham Maslow, a well-known psychological researcher (Maslow, 1968). Many people are familiar with the research of Maslow and his hierarchy of needs, which suggests that to become self-actualized, humans have to have the foundation of our basic needs met. Belonging to a collective group is imperative to achieving higher-level goals for an individual. Therefore, a sense of belonging is necessary for learning to take place in an educational setting.

There is a salient correlation in psychological research between feelings of belonging and academic success. Belonging has also been shown to be related to other factors, such as con-

campus involvement, retention, and decreased burnout (Hausmann et al., 2007; McCarthy et al., 1990). Higher education researchers have expanded upon this basic premise to explore classroom and institutional belonging and its effects on motivation and academic success in college students. This research has related student belonging on the classroom and institutional levels to a multitude of desirable behaviors, such as academic achievement, emotional well-being, and the avoidance of risk-taking behaviors (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007).

Implications of Research

The behaviors just listed above are especially desirable for college administrators as measures of student success are often linked to enrollment, accreditation, and funding. On the other hand, administrators should be particularly concerned with this question because a lack of a sense belonging can lead to undesirable behaviors such as attrition, low academic achievement, and risk-taking (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007). Beyond these reasons, however, administrators are concerned with student's sense of belonging because satisfaction with their college experience can create a necessary alumni base and continued support of the financial and institution. It is therefore critical to examine what particular practices are efficacious for creating a sense of belonging on campus for students. The current research builds upon previously collected knowledge about student success and the present theories in higher education literature.

Theoretical Basis

There are various theories that higher education researchers use to define how students experience belonging on a college campus. Some of the more common theories that are used are the Aron's Self-Expansion Model, Wenger's Social Theory of Learning, and the Inclusion of the Community in the Self scale (ICS). These theories give direction to higher education researchers that study belonging and give the foundation for what is known about the development of

community in college students. Several of these theories were developed by psychologists who were interested in learning about how we learn in general, and a few of the theories were developed specifically in the context of higher education. These theories provide a framework for thinking about what creates an effective learning environment for students in college.

Self-Expansion Model

The self-expansion model was developed by Aron, Norman, and Aron in 1998. This theory of individual success is based on two principles. The first is that humans have a psychological motivation to self-expand, which is defined as the "desire to enhance an individual's potential efficacy" (Aron, Norman & Aron, 1998). The second principle is that humans often achieve this self-expansion through relationships with others. According to this theory, humans have a basic need to "expand one's self to enhance one's potential efficacy through the acquisition of novel resources, perspectives, and identities" (Branand, Mashek, Wray-Lake & Coffey, 2015). This model explains that students seek out relationships based on what peers can offer them in terms of novel knowledge and experiences. It is through these mutual relationships that a community of two is formed and is expanded to include larger groups of people that meet those ends as well. In essence, learning communities are just groups of individuals that are trying to become self-actualized. Belonging is the feeling between two people that they are mutually benefitting each other.

Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale

The psychological sense of school membership is a measure that was used by Goodenow in 1993 to measure middle schooler's experiences of school membership and was later used by Freeman, Anderman & Jensen, who adapted the scale for their 2007 study about college students and included measures of motivation and instructor characteristics. A series of questionnaires

measures the extent to which a student feels like "an accepted, respected, and valued part of their academic context" (Freeman, Anderman & Jensen, 2007). The PSSM includes a list of Likert scale question that collect self-reported data about a student's perceptions of their belongingness on campus and in the classroom. Students that felt as though they had a high psychological sense of membership at their school would score themselves higher on Likert scale measures. The purpose of the PSSM is to measure the degree to which students feel accepted in their educational setting.

Social Theory of Learning

Another common theory that is used to explore student belonging is Wenger's Social Theory of Learning. According to Etienne Wenger, learning is at the heart of the human experience and is a principally social phenomenon. He refers to places where learning happens in a group setting as communities of practice. Communities of practice are those places where individuals "share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner, E., Wenger-Trayner, B., 2011). Clearly, a college campus would fall into this category. Students gather in various groups (like student organizations or majors) because they share certain passions such as for their major or social rights activism or even a religious identity. Wenger would say that these communities of practice create a sense of belonging and push students to achieve more through social pressures and therefore can be linked to academic success.

Inclusion of the Community in the Self Scale

The Inclusion of the Community in the Self scale is a visual representation of the possible degrees to which a person perceives the inclusion of themselves in a group of people. Based on the original Inclusion of the Other in the Self scale developed by Aron et al.(1992), this

particular measure focuses on the group of people that the individual is measuring belonging to:

a community. The circles with different levels of overlapping signify the degree to which the

participant sees the "other" (in this case the institution or classroom) as belonging with the self.

It's the measure of which "them and me" becomes an "us" (Branand, Masjck, Wray-Lake, and

Coffey, 2015). See Figure 1 for an example of the ICS. Participants are asked to choose which

image on the page most closely resembles their relationship with another entity such as an

institution or other community, thus showing the researcher how strongly the student identifies a

feeling of belonging within that community.
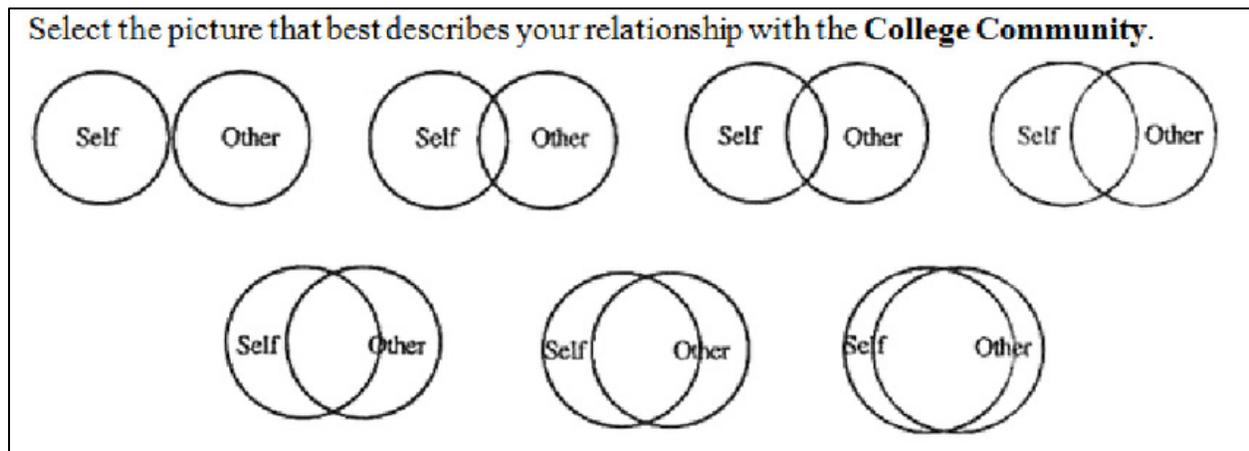
Figure 1. Inclusion of Community in Self (ICS) Scale. Reprinted from "Inclusion of College Community in the Self: A Longitudinal Study of the Role of Self-Expansion in Students' Satisfaction" by Branand, B., Mashek, D., Wray-Lake, L., & Coffey, J., 2015, *Journal of College Student Development, 56*(8), 833.

Review of Relevant Literature

The studies that are listed below are those that are most salient in this research retrieved from peer-reviewed academic journals. The studies were collected using a database search of articles published in reputable higher education journals that included the key terms belonging and/or engagement and were published in the past fifteen years. The research questions, methods, and results are listed for each one to show what individually they contributed to the field. A summative analysis is included to show the commonalities and differences between them.

One of the first groups of researchers to study student belonging in the modern sense were Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen. Their 2007 study expanded the literature on student belonging and academic achievement and motivation to include data on college-age populations, whereas previous research had focused on elementary and middle school students. These researchers focused on primarily institution-level belonging as it related to student motivation. First semester freshman students were asked to complete a questionnaire with various Likert scale questions about belonging, motivation, and instructor characteristics. There were three distinct sections of the questionnaire relating to the three aspects that the researchers wanted to measure in relation to a sense of belonging.

Based on the Psychological Sense of School Membership theory, the student responses that were collected were analyzed on three levels: feelings of belonging at the campus level, class belonging and motivation, and instructor characteristics and class belonging. The researchers found that "students' sense of class belonging was positively associated with their academic self-efficacy" meaning that the more students felt as though they belonged in a class, the more motivated they were in relation to the class (p. 214). Instructor characteristics such as

warmth and openness and organization were found to be positively correlated with student participation in class. There are many more arenas where students can feel accepted within a college setting, such as participation in student organizations on campus.

Campus activities can be the starting place for many students trying to find a community to belong to on a college campus. Clubs that are created based on interest groups, social justice issues, cultures and subcultures, and a variety of others can be a primary way that students connect with others. Branand, Mashek, Wray-Lake, and Coffey (2015) theorized that participation in campus activities such as student organizations would lead to a sense of connectedness and in turn would be related to satisfaction with a student's college experience. To study this, data was collected from a longitudinal study that took place over four years and contained six distinct waves of students. Participants were asked to provide a list of the number of campus activities they participated in. The researchers categorized campus activities into groups: academic clubs (college-specific and regional), cultural clubs (college-specific and regional), recreation clubs, music groups, student employment, and research groups. These categories were chosen because they represent categories of activities that students could be involved in and could possibly be involved in several of.

An additional layer of data was added to build upon research about the Inclusion of Community in Self Scale (Masheck et al., 2007). Using a visual representation, students selected to what degree they felt their college community was included in themselves. The final data collection piece of this study was a series of questions that students were asked to indicate their satisfaction with their college experience as a whole, by answering three questions about their enjoyment of their college experience.

The results found, in general, that higher levels of participation in groups on campus were positively correlated with higher levels of connectedness for students in the following academic year from when they took the survey. For example, highly involved sophomores rated feeling more connected during their junior year which in turn led them to rate high satisfaction with their college experience their senior year.

Masika and Jones (2016) used Wenger's social theory of learning to examine students' experience of communities of practice in higher education. They studied a program intervention designed to enhance student belonging, engagement, and success. First year business management students participated in a learning module aimed to foster students' sense of belonging and motivation during their first year. Data collection was two-fold. First, students kept an online blog and were required to record their reflections of milestones related to academic and social achievements. Second, students participated in focus groups that elicited their thoughts and opinions about co-learning on the institutional level. Data from the focus group was analyzed and found that the online component of the intervention was significantly beneficial to student's sense of belonging among peers and instructors. While the students struggled with the extra requirements to record their experiences, they felt that overall their experience was beneficial to creating relationships with others in their class. Students overall reported that they felt "accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by teachers and peers" through the online portfolio intervention (p. 138).

This research hinges on Wenger's assertion that learning is a social experience. Having other students learn and relate their experiences with one another enhanced their experience in the class. The students in this study fell into the typical pattern that is seen with communities of practice, they pushed each other to achieve more and provided steady social support throughout

the time in the class. Social support provides increased motivation and accountability therefore increasing positive behaviors such as retention and reducing negative ones such as mental health issues or poor academic performance.

Wilson, Jones, Bocell, Crawford, Kim, Veilleux, Floyd-Smith, Bates and Plett (2015) examined students in STEM majors at five different colleges across the country. The colleges were diverse enough that the results could be applied to pretty much any institution across the country. The questions that the researchers were interested in studying were: Which levels of belonging are most consistently associated with behavioral engagement? and What are the similarities and differences among the different types of institutions in terms of the relationships between belonging levels and engagement? This study is unique because it takes into account multiple levels of belonging such as on the classroom, major, and university levels.

Researchers distributed a survey designed to measure multiple levels of belonging and forms of behavioral and emotional engagement in students. The survey was distributed to the five schools and given to students over the course of two years. Participation was voluntary. Through survey data, the research team was interested in discovering how respondents answered on measures of belonging, behavioral/emotional engagement, and feelings of self-efficacy in the context of the multiple levels of belonging identified by researchers. These researchers found that self-efficacy and class belonging were most often correlated with engagement in the STEM coursework.

Especially in fields that are highly competitive, as some STEM careers can be, it is especially important to create a community of belonging for students, so they feel supported as they go along. As the results mentioned, the most significant link found in the survey data was that between belonging at the class level and positive emotional engagement.

Showing the impact of what focusing on student life in a university does to the overall satisfaction that students have begs the question, why aren't we doing more? And who are we ignoring in all this? In an article published by Ribera, Miller, Dumford (2017), the topic of what practices are most effective for cultivating student belonging is addressed.

Discussion

What these four studies tell us about the modern college experience for undergraduates is significant. Not only are students more motivated to succeed when pushed by their peer groups, but they also and experience success and more positive outcomes compared to their companions who did not participate in on-campus communities. While higher education professionals search for ways to improve the undergraduate experience, the foundational research that is needed already exists in higher education academic journals. It is clear according to the data that the experimental conditions illustrated in the studies discussed increased positive outcomes and created better learning environments for students.

It is also noteworthy that those students who participated in these studies experienced positive emotional experiences as well as academic ones. The communities that were formed on campus not only led students to study harder and be more successful in the classrooms but helped them to create healthy relationships with their peers. With the increased focus in our society on mental health and emotional well-being, these programs could be helpful for creating peer support systems that reduce overall anxiety levels.

Again, it should be emphasized that these results show staggering impacts on belonging and community life on the educational experience of the undergraduate. In terms of the "effects" that students experience when they have feelings of belonging, it is clear that academic performance and overall satisfaction increase while negative behaviors such as attrition decrease.

The present review of literature shows the significance of creating on-campus experimental communities for undergraduates.

Limitations of Research

The research is not without holes, however. There are still many unrecorded patterns in this field of research. The first major limitation is that experimental designs were often implemented in small numbers and for a limited period of time. For these results to be more generalizable, a larger *n* would be needed. There was also limited longitudinal data. This is troublesome in the majority of higher education research since the population is very hard to track once they graduate, but the question of how these conditions measure up long-term remains.

Another major limitation is that the majority of the institutions that were studied in these articles were public universities with very low minority populations. It is unclear if the same interventions that work for students at large, public universities will work for those that go to small, private ones or that those studies whose demographics were not exceptionally diverse could apply to students that hold a minority status. Another possible limitation to this area of study is that only one set of methods included major-level belonging in addition to institution and classroom level. Recently there has been more of an emphasis on a student's major as a source of community, and there was little to no research present concerning that topic.

Social Implications

While these findings reside on the institutional level, there are social implications as well. In an article published by the American Sociological Association, there has been research that shows that students that come into college under resourced have a harder time adapting to the culture of college (Jack, A., 2016). These students also struggle with building relationships and

feeling comfortable with authority figures such as professors and academic advisors. Those

students who had not build the appropriate cultural capital prior to enrolling in a higher

education institution fell significantly behind their peers and were at greater risk for dropping

out. This is why research on belonging is important. Building cultural capital with one's peers

while in college by a sense of belonging to a greater community is essential to the success of all

students, especially under resourced or otherwise disadvantaged students.

Future Plans

The researcher plans to pursue a degree in student affairs and use the information

collected through this project to improve her practice as a student affairs professional in the

future. Research like this is invaluable to informing decisions education administrators make on

behalf of students, and it is the opinion of the researcher that it is the responsibility of those who

serve in student services roles to assist students to the best of their ability, being informed by the

literature in every decision that is made. This line of work is extremely important to developing

the next generation of educated people, and those who pursue careers in this field should be

informed by the findings of research such as this.

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