

# **WHERE I SLEEP: THE RELATIONSHIP WITH RESIDENTIAL ENVIRONMENTS AND FIRST-GENERATION BELONGINGNESS**

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Sense of belonging contributes to academic success, persistence, and self-efficacy among students, and is especially poignant for first-generation students who are less likely to engage socially, intellectually, and academically. Residential spaces provide the ideal environment to examine belongingness among first-generation students because of the intersections of academic and social spaces. In our study, we utilized regression analysis supplemented by an analysis of open-ended responses to explore belongingness among first-generation students in residential spaces using Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging model. Our findings suggest that residential advisors, residence hall facilities and programming, and multiple identities contribute to first-generation student belongingness.

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Sense of belonging contributes to academic success, persistence, and self-efficacy among undergraduate students and is a crucial factor in the successful transition to college (Hausman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008). The factors that shape students' sense of belonging in college is the focus of a growing body of research (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salamone, 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nuñez, 2009), yet much is left to uncover regarding how belongingness shapes the experiences of first-generation students, in particular. The significance of belongingness to student success is especially poignant for first-generation students who are less likely to engage socially, intellectually, and academically in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Insufficient social and academic engagement by first-generation students can negatively affect completion rates. Recent NCES data indicate 33 percent of first-generation students left postsecondary education without a credential in comparison with 20 percent of their continuing generation peers whose parents completed some college and 14 percent of their peers whose parents earned a bachelor's degree (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018). The salience of belongingness for first-generation students' academic success is heightened when students hold other marginalized identities, including those related to gender expression, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, economic status, and social class (Bui, 2002; Ishitani, 2006; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Sáenz, Hurtado, Barreira, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007).

For residential students, their on-campus living experiences greatly shape their social and academic outcomes (Inkelas, Szelényi, Soldner, & Brower, 2007). The extant literature thoroughly documents the benefits of on-campus residential experiences but few scholars have explicitly studied how the intersecting nature of residential spaces, residential curricula, and residential staff can promote a sense of belonging for first-generation

students, many of whom hold marginalized identities. Given the depths of their experiences and interactions with students, residential staff anecdotally understand the importance of residential experiences for students' belongingness. Yet, practitioner knowledge and expertise is often overlooked in academia (Bensimon, 2007), thus necessitating an empirical examination to further explore belongingness in residential environments. Residential spaces provide the ideal environment to examine the intersections of academic and social spaces. Moreover, the growing popularity of residential curricula and living-learning programs, juxtaposed with the scant body of research regarding the efficacy of residential spaces, creates an urgency for administrators and scholars to empirically examine and understand the effect of residential environments on the student experience.

Given that extant body of work does not address specifics within the residential environment that are most salient for first-generation students for whom sense of belonging is so important, the purpose of this article is to fill that gap. Through increased examination of the intersecting nature of academic and social spaces in on-campus residential life, this contribution promises to offer new insight regarding ways to address the unique needs of first-generation students in college.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Utilizing a social cognitive perspective of achievement motivation, Strayhorn (2012) posited that sense of belonging is a fundamental human need that has an impact on students' behavior, and ultimately upon their success in the college environment. Although Strayhorn conceded that sense of belonging as a theoretical term has many meanings, he defined belongingness as "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g.

campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (p. 3).

Strayhorn (2012) understood belongingness as comprising both cognitive and affective functions. The cognitive component consists of a student’s assessment of their role within a given group, while the affective element involves the influence of self-assessment on a student’s actions. Using Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs as a framework, Strayhorn argued that sense of belonging is not solely a human need, but also a strong motivating force that shapes student behavior. As with other needs in Maslow’s hierarchy, Strayhorn (2012) hypothesized that a student will not be able to achieve self-actualization if sense of belonging is not cultivated.

According to Strayhorn (2012), students who feel they belong enjoy increased growth and happiness in college; however, students with low belongingness are less likely to be interested or engaged in their college experience. As such, belongingness holds significance for student experiences, both academically and socially (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Tovar & Simon 2010). According to Hausmann and colleagues (2007), students’ adjustment to the academic environment relates to sense of belonging, and students with higher academic integration develop higher belongingness, stronger academic performance, and higher self-worth. In addition, sense of belonging positively relates to academic engagement, which is important for student success (Stableton & Soria, 2012). In support of his theory, Strayhorn (2012) found that students who have achieved sense of belonging fared better academically and were more likely to persist at their institution.

### **First-Generation Student Belongingness**

Ostrove and Long (2007) reported that sense of belonging has crucial implications for the overall college experience and suggest that belongingness mediates positive

relationships between social class background and college adjustment. Thus, the power of belonging relative to students’ social identities and academic success is an important dynamic to explore. Museus, Yi, and Saelua (2017) investigated the impact of a culturally engaging campus environment on sense of belonging and suggested several dimensions of a culturally engaging campus environment positively correlate with sense of belonging, including cultural validation and holistic support. Strayhorn (2012) discovered that sense of belonging takes on a different significance for students depending upon the situation and context. Belonging mattered most in situations wherein students were unfamiliar in or were a newcomer to an environment, if they felt marginalized, or if they were in late adolescence. Based upon these findings, Strayhorn postulated that sense of belonging is especially vital to students who hold marginalized identities, including first-generation students.

Students whose parents never attended college generally experience lower levels of belonging in college (Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Stableton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012). Moreover, Ribera, Miller, and Dumford (2017) reported that first-generation students have a lower sense of peer and university acceptance than students whose parents have earned a college degree. They also found first-generation students are less likely to have favorable perceptions of peer belonging as a whole.

For first-generation students, feeling accepted by peers and becoming integrated into campus life is not an easy task. In a qualitative study of first-generation college students, Longwell-Grice, Adsitt, Mullins, and Serrata (2016) reported two key factors related to how first-generation students made sense of their college experience: 1) the intellectual and emotional labor required to master the hidden curriculum of higher education and 2) demonstration of resilience through utilization of mentor and peer support. First-generation students are

associated with a 45% decrease in the odds of returning to the second year of college, likely due to lower levels of engagement with the college environment and experience (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). Given that belongingness positively correlates to academic success (Strayhorn, 2012), low engagement could present significant barriers to first-generation students' ability to find their place in new college environments.

### **Belongingness and Residential Environments**

Overall, academic and peer environments are critical to the development of belongingness in the academic context, but there are other aspects of the university environment that can shape sense of belonging. Current findings suggest that both academic and social factors promote sense of belonging (Freeman, Anderman, & Jenson, 2007; Schussler & Fierros, 2008), and university residence halls function as a ubiquitous nexus where these factors converge. As one of the primary hubs of peer interaction, Strayhorn (2012) concluded that residence hall environments play a critical role in the development of belongingness. Students' interactions with their residential and campus environment can improve their overall adjustment and connection to the university as a whole (Spanierman et. al, 2013). For a majority of first-year college students, the residential environment is where they spend most of their time, and this space has great potential to contribute to belongingness (Johnson et. al, 2007).

Other scholars have contributed to knowledge concerning the connection between belongingness and residential spaces. For example, Inkelas and colleagues (2007) reported that students who live in residential environments that integrate academic and social supports interact with peers and faculty at higher rates and experience a greater overall sense of belonging relative to other students living on campus. Similarly, Jehangir (2010) studied multicultural learning communities and found that combining

academic and social engagements within a residential environment increased student involvement. Finally, Pittman and Richmond (2007) wrote that when properly offered, residence hall programs positively contribute to sense of belonging among residential students. These findings demonstrate that merely living on campus does not foster belongingness. Rather, space and programming within residential environments cultivates belongingness.

There exists an extensive body of work that speaks to the importance of campus engagement in first-generation student integration. In fact, recent data suggest first-generation students outperform their multigenerational peers in campus engagement, educational commitment, academic self-efficacy, and academic engagement while they trail in social comfort and resiliency (Smith, 2018). Given the highly personal nature of the living space in a students' adjustment to college, we chose to focus our review of the literature on the themes of belongingness for first-generation students within residential contexts. While campus engagement is an important component of success, we believe social comfort and resiliency might be shaped profoundly by the places where first-generation students sleep.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

Sense of belonging is important in both social and academic spheres of the university, yet little research has been conducted to determine how the residential environment influences sense of belonging, particularly for first-generation and students with marginalized identities. In light of Strayhorn's (2012) findings, and within the scope of his model, the college residential experience presents itself as a key factor when considering first-generation students' sense of belonging on college campuses. We also found it important to foreground variations within the residential experience, exploring differences in interactions and participation. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to

explore and to better understand the role that the residential environment plays in fostering a sense of belonging for first-year, first-generation residential students. Two questions guided our study:

1. What is the influence of student inputs and residential environments on sense of belonging among first-year, first-generation residential students?
2. How do first-year, first-generation residential students describe their experiences and belongingness?

## Method

### Theoretical Framework

We situate our study within Strayhorn's (2012) model for sense of belonging. Several scholars have utilized Strayhorn's model in their own research to examine belongingness within specific student populations and experiences, including students with disabilities (Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, & Newman, 2015), Asian American student experiences (Samura, 2016), and service learning opportunities (Pak, 2016). We continue this line of inquiry using Strayhorn's (2012) concept of belongingness to explore sense of belonging among first-generation undergraduate students in the residential environment.

### Site and Sample

We administered this study to all residential undergraduate students at a large public university in the Southeastern U.S. The university is a doctoral university of higher research activity according to the Carnegie Foundation classification. The study population included first-year, first-generation undergraduate students aged 18 years or older who lived in the residence halls during the spring 2016 semester ( $N = 390$ ). We classified students as first-generation if their parents/guardians received an associate's degree, attended some college, graduated from high school, or did not complete high school.

The sample consisted of 73% female

students ( $N = 283$ ) and 27% male students ( $N = 107$ ). The following racial identities are represented in the sample population: Asian American/Native American/Pacific Islander ( $N = 16$ , 4%), Black/African American ( $N = 75$ , 19%), Latinx ( $N = 14$ , 4%), Multiracial ( $N = 29$ , 7%), and White ( $N = 255$ , 65%). Approximately 9% ( $N = 36$ ) of participants identified as having a disability, and about 74% ( $N = 288$ ) identified as Christian. The average parental/guardian incomes were between \$55,000 and \$99,999. Only 29% ( $N = 114$ ) of respondents lived in traditional-style buildings, and 71% ( $N = 276$ ) lived in suite or apartment-style buildings.

### Survey Instrument and Data Collection

The Residential Curriculum Survey (RCS) asked closed- and open-ended questions to encourage respondents to provide quantitative and narrative insights regarding their experiences as residential students. We developed the RCS based upon Astin's (1993) college impact model, which posits that students' precollege characteristics and the college environment influence their college-related outcomes. In addition to data from the RCS, we also included information from students' institutional records, including demographic information and residence hall variables.

The majority of survey recruitment and communication occurred through electronic email using students' university-provided email addresses and via social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter). We provided incentives to promote survey completion among student respondents and to student staff to encourage their assistance with survey completion. The sample yield for the RCS was 2,569 (33%).

### Study Constructs

Regarding the residential environment, we asked students in the survey whether they participated in a series of six involvements: interaction with staff, participation in programs, use of residential staff as resource, use of common areas, interaction

with other residents, and engagement in unplanned activities. Students' responses were operationalized with a Likert-type scale (1 = never, 5 = always). Sense of belonging on the RCS measured students' perceptions of inclusion in the university community and was developed by Inkelas and colleagues (2007). Sense of belonging ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ) included four Likert-type items and was developed using principal axis factoring (Thurstone, 1935, 1947) with oblique rotation (Appendix A). For an overview of all variable operationalizations, please see Appendix B.

### Data Analysis

In our study, we utilized regression analysis supplemented by an analysis of open-ended responses to explore belongingness among first-generation students in residential spaces. We utilized regression analysis to answer the first research question, with sense of belonging as the outcome variable and two blocks of independent variables based upon Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging model: inputs and residential environment. We chose to include sex, race, disability, parents'/guardians' income, and religion as inputs given the relevance of privilege and marginalized with belongingness as experienced through students' social identities (Strayhorn, 2012).

We supplemented the quantitative analyses with participants' responses to open-ended questions to answer the second research question "in an attempt to confirm, cross-validate, or corroborate findings in a single study" (Creswell, 2009, p. 217). To contextualize quantitative findings, we analyzed two open-ended items from the survey that read, "How can Housing and Residential Communities staff improve your experience in the residence halls," and "If you would like to elaborate on your perceptions of Residential Curriculum, please do so here." Of the 390 total respondents, 197 answered the first item and 22 answered the second item. We used deductive coding and intercoder agreement (Creswell) to il-

luminare key themes and narrations based upon regression results.

### Limitations

We collected data from a single institution and geographic context. As such, readers should closely examine the contexts provided when making meaning of results, including the demographic composition of the sample. Additionally, the survey administration does not enable us to determine causality; rather, the results describe relationships between the outcome and independent variables.

### Results

The regression analysis with all independent variables explained 22% of the variance in sense of belonging among first-year first-generation respondents ( $p < 0.001$ ; Table 1). To check multicollinearity between variables in the model, we confirmed that variance inflation factor (VIF) values did not exceed 10 (Table 1) and correlations between each of the independent variables did not exceed 0.7 (Table 2). To assess independence of residuals, we determined that there were less than 0.5% of cases that had standardized residual values above 3.0 or below -3.0. The largest value for Cook's distance was 0.04, suggesting no major problems for independence (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Within inputs, female first-generation respondents demonstrated higher rates of belongingness compared with male first-generation respondents ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Respondents whose parents/guardians had higher income also reported higher belongingness ( $\beta = 0.12$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In addition, Christian first-generation respondents reported higher sense of belonging relative to non-Christian first-generation students ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Within residential environments, first-generation students who interacted with staff ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and interacted with other residents ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ) experienced increased belongingness.

Table 1			
<i>Regression Analysis for First-Generation Student Sense of Belonging</i>			
Block and Variable	$\beta$	p	VIF
<b>Inputs</b>			
Sex: Female	0.10	*	1.03
Race: Asian American/Native American/Pacific Islander	-0.07		1.10
Race: Black/African American	-0.09		1.28
Race: Latinx	0.01		1.10
Race: Multiracial	0.04		1.06
Disability: Yes	-0.08		1.07
Parents'/guardians' income	0.12	*	1.16
Religion: Christian	0.15	**	1.10
<b>Residential Environment</b>			
Building style: Traditional	0.04		1.09
Housing: Interact with staff	0.15	*	1.81
Housing: Participate in programs	-0.10		1.70
Housing: Use staff as resource	0.11		1.86
Housing: Use common areas	0.05		1.66
Housing: Interact with residents	0.22	***	2.03
Housing: Engage in unplanned activities	0.07		1.96
$R^2$	0.22	***	
<i>Note. *<math>p &lt; .05</math>; **<math>p &lt; .01</math>; ***<math>p &lt; .001</math>.</i>			
<i>Note. Reference groups for Sex (Male), Race (White), Disability (No), Religion (non-Christian), and Building style (Suite or apartment).</i>			

To understand first-year first-generation residential students' experiences and belongingness, we analyzed two open-ended items from the survey. Results from the open-ended item analysis revealed two dominant themes related to first-generation student belongingness: (1) the role of resident advisors (RAs) and (2) physical properties of the residential spaces.

### Resident Advisors

The first major theme that emerged from the open-ended questions suggests that RAs are important to first-generation students' belongingness as their presumptive first point of contact and support. Students expressed a strong desire for an in-

creased sense of connection amongst other residents and the RAs, both to cultivate bonds and to aid in the transition to college. One student shared their longing for connection:

I'd also like to be more engaged with the staff in my residence hall; I've talked to the people who clean the dorm (lovely people) more than the student staff in my time here. It'd be nice to have a weekly study or conversation time with the student leaders in order to get to know them better and be able to talk about my concerns and problems with an upperclassman.

Residents also expressed the urgent need for a sense of community in their living spac

Table 2  
Correlation Matrix between Independent Variables

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1 Sex: Female	---														
2 Race: Asian American/ Native American/Pacific Islander	-0.08	---													
3 Race: Black/African American	0.05	-0.10	---												
4 Race: Latinx	0.06	-0.04	-0.09	---											
5 Race: Multiracial	0.00	-0.06	-0.14	-0.05	---										
6 Disability: Yes	0.10	-0.02	-0.09	-0.06	-0.02	---									
7 Parents'/guardians' income	-0.03	-0.06	-0.30	-0.07	-0.01	-0.04	---								
8 Religion: Christian	0.04	-0.14	0.17	-0.10	-0.03	-0.15	-0.02	---							
9 Building style: Traditional	-0.03	-0.01	0.00	-0.12	-0.05	0.01	0.06	-0.02	---						
10 Housing: Interact with staff	0.02	-0.03	0.11	-0.06	-0.03	-0.06	-0.08	0.02	-0.08	---					
11 Housing: Participate in programs	-0.01	0.10	0.14	-0.04	-0.02	-0.09	-0.10	0.02	-0.04	0.49	---				
12 Housing: Use staff as resource	0.03	-0.01	0.10	0.02	0.00	-0.10	-0.05	0.07	0.00	0.60	0.50	---			
13 Housing: Use common areas	0.00	0.04	0.07	-0.01	0.01	-0.02	-0.10	0.00	-0.18	0.43	0.47	0.45	---		
14 Housing: Interact with residents	0.01	-0.10	0.02	-0.07	0.00	-0.04	0.05	0.08	-0.19	0.36	0.32	0.34	0.48	---	
15 Housing: Engage in unplanned activities	-0.03	-0.04	-0.11	0.02	-0.08	-0.05	0.08	0.00	-0.10	0.30	0.39	0.33	0.41	0.64	---

es. One first-generation resident observed: I think that one thing that most residence halls are missing is a community feeling. I feel like I am a part of a large community when I visit [another residence hall], but that feeling is not transferred to [my residence hall].

Another student spoke positively but underscored the role their RA played in fostering a sense of community:

I was lucky enough to have fantastic RAs in my building and they fostered such an incredible sense of community amongst the students in my building. I feel like they can make your experience fantastic. They help you to feel safe in your home and to feel like you always have someone to turn to.

Numerous additional comments from students called for increased closeness between the RAs and their students. One respondent suggested the institution could "make the bond between RAs and students stronger and plan more activities for the residents to get to know other residents." Another shared "the RAs should be there more often and available." Together, these observations and others suggest that the residential

experience varies by building, which could largely be a function of the distinct building cultures created and cultivated by RAs.

Students also commented generally about the importance of communication and accessibility of RAs. Regarding communication, students yearned for information about campus involvement, mentorship, transition to college, and tutoring. One student intuitively understood that increased access to information as vital to their success by sharing that RAs should "provide access to resources that no one else can. There is something to be said for these people having experience in the areas of study that their students are in and being able to help them succeed." Students also emphasized the need for clear, consistent, and thorough communication regarding pertinent information.

For example, one student offered a specific recommendation for RAs:

Advertise the floor meetings earlier than the day of them. I had to attend a play which I had already purchased tickets for a grade in my theatre class and was yelled at because I didn't attend the floor meeting.



Another student suggested that RAs “offer more social events and do a better job communicating them.” Regarding accessibility of RAs, one student reported:

I never ever had any contact with my 3rd floor resident advisor. Technically, she was the resident advisor for my side of the floor, but I always felt like the other resident advisor was more approachable and actually made an effort to come by and see if my dorm needed help or had questions.

Several students offered comments regarding comfort and safety within the residence halls, and the role of RAs in managing residential environments. From these comments, it seems the RA plays an important role through their regulatory capacity as agents of *in loco parentis* by ensuring that all residents feel safe. One student commented:

I think that the staff does an ok job, but honestly I hate how lax RAs are about noise...The RAs have even said, straight up, that they don't want to do the paperwork, so they don't write people up. It's just frustrating, but that's life.

Other comments demonstrated that students felt unsafe at times due to the lack of regulation. One student suggested a way to improve their residential environment would be through:

Stricter alcohol policy rules, because I'm tired of coming back to my dorm paranoid that I'm going to get attacked up by someone intoxicated because I see someone has put an entire hole in the wall and knocked the ceiling out of place.

### **Residential Spaces**

Students' responses showed that multiple aspects of their residences' physical spaces shaped their feelings of belongingness, including maintenance, cleanliness, aesthetics, sufficient study spaces, and functional utilities. For example, one student shared:

The only real problem I had with my

residence hall was that sometimes the bathrooms and showers were left very unsanitary, also when things were broken and we filed work orders it took extremely long for them to come and fix them.

Another student expressed frustration regarding an unanswered response to a printer repair: “The printer didn't work this whole semester...I called twice to get it fixed and they came once to fix it but it didn't work. I then called again and they never came back.” To a low-income first-generation student who is likely strapped for time and building a support network in college, a seemingly minor issue such as this could serve as a major impediment to their sense of belonging and academic progress.

Underscoring Strayhorn's (2012) emphasis on social and academic spaces as critical for belongingness, another major theme that emerged from the qualitative responses was a strong desire for residential housing to offer study spaces, study groups, and study resources, including computer labs. One student wrote that the institution should “provide a more comfortable studying environment within the residence communities,” and another suggested they “provide more study areas or computer lab.” Finally, another student commented, “It would be really nice if the study rooms [in the residence hall] were not used as storage rooms, but rather as study rooms.”

Students also expressed longing for more general activities and tutoring in the residence halls. Student comments included, “create study groups with flexible times and locations,” “offer study groups or tutors in common areas of dorms,” and “maybe have study days in the common areas where tutors, drinks, and snacks are provided.” One student suggested, “developing more social activities for those living in the housing communities to help build a better sense of home and friendship.” Considering the importance of both social and academic spaces to students' sense of belonging, it would seem that study spaces in the res-

idence halls could go a long way promote belongingness among first-generation students.

Finally, it is also worth noting that for some first-generation respondents, there appears to be a gap in their understanding regarding the connection between residential environments and their success. For example, one student stated, "I feel as though housing has little to no part in my academic aspects of college life," while another indicated, "I think that overall any issues that I had in the residence halls were not related to anything done or that could be done by the HRC." This dissonance suggests residential life staff may need to more intentionally inform students about the critical role residential life plays in their college experience so they might become better self-advocates and student leaders with respect to improving sense of belonging for residents, particularly first-generation students.

### Discussion

Results from our regression analysis and open-ended responses demonstrate the unique context of residential environments and their influence on the first-year experience for first-generation undergraduate students. In our discussion, we highlight three key findings from our study relative to belongingness among first-year first-generation residential students: (1) resident advisors, (2) residential spaces, and (3) multiple identities.

#### Resident Advisors

Our data demonstrate the importance of peer-to-peer interactions with RAs to promote first-generation students' belongingness. Respondents in our study expressed a disparate variety of experiences with their RAs, both positive and negative, and their sense of belonging was largely understood through informal relationships and resource availability and sharing.

Hoffman and colleagues (2002) have shown that having connections both in and outside of the classroom, especially with

faculty and staff, can positively influence belongingness and college student retention. Residential life staff, especially RAs, often serve as one of the first points of contact for first-generation students when they arrive on campus and therefore play a critical role in helping students navigate the college landscape. RAs who proactively build community with their residents and present themselves as available and supportive resources can promote sense of belonging among first-generation students.

RAs hold unique positionalities in university contexts, as they are both influential support systems for students and students themselves. RA positions often come with benefits, making these positions attractive to first-generation students who may require additional financial and housing support. As such, it is important that professional residence life staff effectively train, support, and supervise their undergraduate RAs to build and maintain community, and ensure that community is proactively and consistently cultivated across all campus residence halls. Our data suggest that some students perceived there to be a stronger sense of community in residence halls other than their own. Inconsistent community building may lead a first-generation college student to feel as though they are missing an important experience or that their individual residence hall staff do not care about their personal success. Both of these potential outcomes could stifle the development of belongingness for first-generation students.

Given the social capital and knowledge required to navigate college experiences and opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986), first-generation students require consistent communication about opportunities and available resources to achieve academic success and personal wellbeing. Students view their RAs as crucial stakeholders who are gatekeepers to important institutional knowledge and catalysts for potential community-building efforts. First-generation students often lack knowledge regarding the hidden curriculum

of college that is necessary to find on-campus involvement opportunities or academic resources. Responses from first-generation students in our study demonstrate how important it is for RAs to proactively communicate, express caring, build community, and provide essential information and programming, including group study opportunities and tutoring.

### **Residential Spaces**

Residence hall facilities are another important aspect of first-generation students' residential experiences due to the potential comfort and safety they provide. Based upon findings from open-ended responses, we suggest that there is a relationship between students' comfort in residence hall and their overall adjustment to college. Our data suggests many students felt the need for clean and comfortable residential facilities that foster healthy sleep habits as well as an environment conducive to their academic performance and success. Students in our study expressed concerns regarding facility comfort, cleanliness, and maintenance, thereby creating a less inviting living environment in their homes away from home. In addition, first-generation students must likely balance multiple commitments, including adjustment to college, academics, co-curricular activities, part-time jobs, and family obligations. Facility-related concerns can present frustrating barriers for first-generation students given the multiple competing demands on their time and resources.

The students in our study also emphasized the importance of university policies and RAs' role in enforcing them. Respondents expressed concerns about their feelings of safety and comfort, discussing a lack of quiet hours enforcement, interactions with intoxicated and destructive students, and lack of adherence to substance-abuse policies. Inconsistent or lack of policy enforcement can present challenges for students who are away from home for the first time. For first-generation students who may be experiencing adjustment challenges, ad-

ditional barriers to comfort and safety in the spaces where they sleep could decrease their sense of belonging, jeopardize their first-year transition and ultimately, challenge their long-term persistence.

Many students in our study expressed the desire to participate in study groups or spaces and to have access to computer labs, printers, and study materials in their residential contexts. These needs may be due to the financial constraints students endure related to computer expenses, specialized software for courses, or even printing needs. For first-generation students who may have limited financial resources, the ability to utilize technology in their residence halls could contribute to the sense that their needs matter, thus enhancing their sense of belonging. First-generation students may benefit in multiple ways from opportunities to study in a designated residential space with their peers. For example, these spaces could offer occasions to cultivate new relationships with peers who have similar academic interests and rigorous academic experiences, to gain support for their own academic challenges, and to build community.

As discussed by Inkelas and colleagues (2007), students who live in specialized communities are more likely to be highly successful than those who live in traditional housing. Living-learning communities often combine proactive community building, interactions with staff and faculty, academic and co-curricular programming, and academic components within residential facilities. Individually, these components may contribute to sense of belonging and connectedness for first-generation students. Combined, these benefits provide a strengthened and concentrated opportunity for first-generation students to engage with peers, faculty, and staff through intentional programmatic initiatives. Our data suggest that first-generation students desire flexible study groups and access to tutors in their residence halls. Depending upon the residential community, staff could provide these

academic resources to promote the integration of academic and social benefits.

### Multiple Identities

Results from our study demonstrate the multiple and intersecting identities that create varied narratives and needs amongst first-generation students. Combined with first-generation status, students who hold additional minoritized identities may experience greater barriers to belongingness within residential spaces.

As suggested by our data, first-generation Christian students are more likely to feel a greater sense of belonging in their residence hall experiences. Given privileges afforded to Christian students, they may experience benefits not granted to their peers, including access to increased numbers of student and campus organizations available to serve Christian students, and Christian-centric academic calendars that typically are tailored to accommodate more Christian holidays than other religious/spiritual affiliations.

Alternatively, based upon the results of our survey, students who do not identify as Christian are less likely to feel belongingness. Although institutions may strive to be welcoming to students with non-Christian religious and spiritual identities, the pervasiveness of Christian privilege can create barriers for them. Students who do not identify as Christian may feel the need to suppress or deny religious or spiritual viewpoints that do not conform to Christianity. Students who identify with other spiritual traditions may be victims of violence, experience invalidation about their beliefs, or perceive their campus climate to be more hostile than it is for students who hold majority religious identities (Mayhew, Bowman, & Rockenbach, 2014).

Our data also suggest that female first-generation students experienced a higher sense of belonging than male first-generation students. These results may be due to the different socialization processes experienced by male and female students. Often

times, male students are socialized to perform and learn in narrowly defined masculine ways. As Strayhorn (2015) wrote, male students who do not conform to prescribed standards of masculinity can often be subject to ridicule or isolation from peers, both male and female alike. For a male student who may not naturally conform to these standards, college can be a challenging time. Such dynamics may be especially salient for first-generation male students living in sex-segregated residence halls surrounded by other male students who may perform in masculine or hyper-masculine ways, and who may criticize and insult, either directly or through conversation, male students who act otherwise.

Male first-generation students may experience an implicit pressure to conform to traditional masculine standards or participate in activities or behaviors that are not of interest to them (e.g., attending parties, substance use/abuse) to fit in and make friends, which may not be congruent with their success as students. As a result, these male students may not feel they can be their authentic selves and subsequently may question their belonging. Additionally, there is a pervasive stereotype that male students do not or should not ask for help, which can also contribute to transition challenges (Palmer, 2015). To perform in a manner they deem necessary to fit in, first-generation male students may also not be comfortable reaching out for assistance to find the resources or opportunities needed for their successful transition.

Although female students have societal pressures of their own, our data suggests that they enjoy a higher sense of belonging in college residential environments than their male peers. One potential reason for this is the willingness of female students to ask for help, which could enable them to seek assistance from RAs and residence life staff to find resources and involvement opportunities on campus that contribute to their effective transition to college. Additionally, female students from our study

are more likely to become involved in campus activities, organizations, and sororities because of the campus culture surrounding Greek Life affiliation. This is important because, as Tovar and Simon (2010) suggest, faculty and peer support promotes integration into the university community and belongingness.

### **Implications**

Previous research has shown the importance of sense of belonging for retention among all students (Hausmann et al., 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Tovar & Simon 2010). For first-generation students, fostering a sense of belonging can be even more crucial since they may be less familiar or comfortable with the higher education environment. Given the relationship between residential experiences and belongingness among first-generation students, it is vitally important that college administrators attend to important implications within research, policy, and practice to promote higher belongingness within residence hall spaces for first-generation students.

### **Research**

This study specifically examined the experiences of first-generation residential students at a large, public flagship university in the Southeast. Highlighting the unique perspectives of this institution illuminated key findings related to first-generation residential student belongingness. It is important to study other institutional types and locations to examine additional factors related to first-generation student sense of belonging. Additional studies could analyze how institutional size, type, and location contribute to first-generation student sense of belonging.

Additionally, this study analyzed open-ended responses obtained via an electronic survey and did not include questions specific to residents' experiences as first-generation students. Researchers may add supplemental questions to future electronic surveys to explore students' experi-

ences and identities. Follow-up focus groups or interviews with first-generation residents could also provide researchers with the opportunity to delve deeper into students' perceptions of their belongingness, especially as it relates to first-generation status and students' other social identities.

### **Policy**

The positive impact that residential living has on students' sense of belonging justifies on-campus living requirements for first-year students. Existing literature supports that living on campus provides academic benefits for students, especially in their first year. For example, both retention rates and grade point averages are higher for those who live on campus compared with their peers who commute (De Araujo & Murray, 2010; Turley & Wodtke, 2010). Because of these academic advantages, some institutions have already established first-year residency programs that require first-year students to live in on-campus housing. The findings from this study further support the importance of maintaining an on-campus living requirement for first-year students.

To ensure first-generation students engage with members of their community and seek resources, residence life staff might consider establishing special living-learning communities. Living-learning communities provide an additional layer of support for students through specific and intentional programming (Inkelas et al., 2007). Additionally, the academic component of living-learning communities might bridge students' experiences inside and outside the classroom. A shared class experience can promote frequent interactions among residents, RAs, residence life staff, and faculty, thus fostering deeper interpersonal connections. Common classes among students in the same residence hall might also provide opportunities for first-generation students to establish study groups in the residence halls, which further supports their academic progress and sense of belonging on campus.

## Practice

Our results show that first-generation students who interacted with staff enjoyed a higher sense of belonging. Consequently, residence life staff should find ways to ensure that RAs and other student staff engage with residents on a regular and meaningful basis. Additionally, RAs and student staff must be educated regarding the impact their role has in increasing residents' sense of belonging and student retention, particularly for students with marginalized identities and experiences. Open-ended responses from participants revealed that some first-generation residents did not have frequent or positive interactions with RAs. Residence life staff must ensure that RAs are accessible and responsive to students. Residents with increased levels of interaction among other residents also experience an increased sense of belonging. Therefore, staff must find more opportunities for residents to interact with one another through intentional programming or casual interactions. Our data also suggest that residents do not always explicitly connect their residential living experience with their broader academic experiences. Therefore, RAs must better promote residence life as an important component of students' academic journeys. RAs and residential life staff must clearly communicate explicit connections between residential experiences, belongingness, and academic success.

Because of the importance of RA interactions on student sense of belonging, additional training around religion/spirituality, gender, and multiple intersecting identities would also benefit residential hall staff. Resident advisors should receive training on how to work with students from a variety of religious/spiritual backgrounds and strive to be welcoming and supportive of all their students. Residential life staff should also train RAs to ensure they are interacting with students at similar rates regardless of gender. Finally, residential staff must educate themselves of how different identity factors may contribute to a resident's belongingness.

Results from our study highlighted the importance of physical spaces and resource availability. Therefore, staff should ensure spaces are clean and that they promptly address resident concerns regarding cleanliness and maintenance. Staff should inform students regarding resources available to communicate concerns they have in effective and efficient ways. Residence life staff must understand the importance of resources such as functioning printers that may be more vital to first-generation students.

## Conclusion

Residential environments have a tremendous impact on belongingness and the success of first-generation college students. Findings from our study support the growing body of research that suggests sense of belonging is important for all students, especially those with marginalized identities. For first-generation students, sense of belonging can improve through positive interactions with RAs, opportunities for peer interactions, community building, strong communication, information-sharing, physical aesthetics, and safe residential spaces. As residential environments, programming, and curriculum are evolving, residential life staff should take into consideration the results of this study to ease the transition for first-generation students and to foster a sense of belonging throughout the campus community.

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Appendix A	
<i>Principal Axis Factoring and Coefficient Alphas</i>	
Item	Loading
Sense of Belonging (Inkelas, Szélenyi, Soldner, & Brower, 2007; $\alpha = 0.85$ )	
I feel that I am a member of the campus community.	0.82
I feel a sense of belonging to the campus community.	0.87
If I had to do it over again, I would choose the same university.	0.69
I feel comfortable on campus.	0.67

Appendix B			
<i>Coding and Descriptive Statistics for Variables</i>			
Variable	Coding Scheme	<i>M</i> / Frequency	<i>SD</i> / %
Input			
Sex: Female	1=Female; 0=Male	283	72.6
Race: Asian American/ Native American/Pacific Islander	1=Asian American/Native American/ Pacific Islander; 0=No	16	4.1
Race: Black/ African American	1=Black/African American; 0=No	75	19.2
Race: Latinx	1=Latinx; 0=No	14	3.6
Race: Multiracial	1=Multiracial; 0=No	29	7.4
(Race: White)	Reference group	255	65.4
Disability: Yes	1=Disability; 0=No disability	36	9.2
Parents'/guardians' income	1=less than \$12,500; 2=\$12,500- \$24,999; 3=\$25,000-\$39,999... 10=\$500,000 or more	5.12	2.27
Religion: Christian	1=Christian; 0=Not Christian	288	73.8
Residential Environment			
Building style: Traditional	1=Traditional; 0=Suite or apartment	114	29.2
Housing: Interact with staff	1=Never...5=Always	2.82	1.02
Housing: Participate in programs	1=Never...5=Always	1.92	0.84
Housing: Use staff as resource	1=Never...5=Always	2.52	1.17
Housing: Use common areas	1=Never...5=Always	2.83	1.23
Housing: Interact with residents	1=Never...5=Always	3.29	1.17
Housing: Engage in unplanned activities	1=Never...5=Always	2.67	1.34
Outcome			
Sense of belonging	Factor score across 4 Likert-type items	0.00	1.00