

SEEN AND UNSEEN: FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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This qualitative research study examines the sense of belonging among first year students during the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study focuses on how the Covid-19 pandemic has influenced a sense of belonging among first year students as they transition to college. Focus group data collected at a small, liberal arts institution was analyzed using thematic analysis, and three main themes are explored: Navigating uncertainty, seeking in-person connection, and developing resilience. Findings and implications from this study illuminate a need to rethink approaches to students whose sense of belonging has been impacted by disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: sense of belonging, first-year students, Covid-19

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The Covid-19 pandemic has created significant challenges for first-year students as they transition to college (Patel, 2020; Brown, 2020). The traditional ways in which students connect to peers and to their institution have been disrupted, and the feelings of belonging that students desire has been significantly complicated. The primary goal of this study was to identify how students' sense of belonging has been affected by transitioning to a four-year private college during a pandemic and to examine how students are finding belonging in a time of uncertainty and change.

This study explores the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on how students perceive a sense of belonging on campus. Extant research examines the importance of the transition to college and sense of belonging, but little is yet known about the influence that the pandemic has had on how students are experiencing belonging during their transition to college. The inquiry is timely because of the emergent and evolving nature of the pandemic and how it has affected higher education and the college student experience. This study analyzes qualitative focus group conversations with first-year college students, focusing on perceptions of belonging - both social and institutional - during the pandemic. Specifically, the central research question was: *How has the Covid-19 pandemic influenced a sense of belonging among first-year college students as they transition to college?*

Literature Review

Strayhorn (2019) asserted that all students desire, and need, to feel a sense of belonging in college. Human development literature demonstrates that the need to belong is fundamental to the human experience (Maslow, 1970). Humans strive to form relationships that are meaningful, positive, and long lasting (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Strayhorn's model stems from Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, and he defined a sense of belonging as "students' perceived social support on campus,

a feeling of connectedness, or that one is important to others" (p. 27). Strayhorn's (2019) model includes seven core elements of sense of belonging, among them the idea that sense of belonging is a universal, basic human need, that it is influenced by one's identities and relates to *mattering* (i.e., feeling that someone cares), and that it leads to positive outcomes and success.

Institutions play a key role in helping students cultivate a sense of belonging (Supiano, 2018). For first-year college students, finding and developing a sense of belonging on campus encompasses multiple dimensions and depends on various factors (Duran et al., 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Means & Pyne, 2017; Miller & Servaty-Seib, 2016; Museus et al., 2017; Stebleton et al., 2014; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Addressing a sense of belonging, in particular for first-year students, continues to be a priority, particularly for students from marginalized populations, such as students of color (Maramba & Museus, 2013; Strayhorn, 2019). Higher education scholars exploring sense of belonging often use the concept of social connectedness as a measure of belonging (Grieve & Kemp, 2015; Lee & Robbins, 1995). Grieve and Kemp (2015) define social connectedness as "the feelings of belonging and affiliation that emerge from interpersonal relationships within social networks" (p. 239). In a study of college students, a significant relationship existed between sense of belonging and mental health; students who indicated a strong sense of belonging reported lower levels of stress and depression (Stebleton et al., 2014).

The Covid-19 pandemic that started in the spring of 2020 created significant challenges for students seeking support and connection during their transition to college (Patel, 2020). Patel (2020) discussed the challenges that institutions face in continuing to provide "high touch" care to students in a "no touch" world (p. 4). Covid-19 continues to strain students' ability to feel that

they belong at an institution as opportunities for social engagement - both in and out of the classroom - have been affected in one way or another at most institutions across the country. Evidence suggests that the pandemic is exacerbating feelings of loneliness and isolation (Borkoski & Roos, 2020), and negatively affecting student mental health (The Healthy Minds Network & ACHA, 2020). Brown (2020) outlined the challenges first year students are facing during their complicated transition to college during a pandemic, from managing expectations to loneliness to trusting their institution's response. The loneliness and isolation created through necessary institutional pandemic response tactics threatens to inhibit the development of a strong sense of belonging which, as noted above (Stebleton, 2014), could result in higher reported levels of stress and depression.

Methodology

Focus groups of students were conducted to gather data related to shared experience around the transition to college and sense of belonging. Focus groups were used to create a more social, interactive, and collaborative environment for the discussion of a topic related to the social experience of participants. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) describe the "lively collective interaction" of focus groups that "may bring forth more spontaneous expressive and emotional views than in individual interviews" (p. 150). Due to restrictions around meetings and gatherings related to the Covid-19 pandemic, focus groups were conducted virtually via Google Meet. Participants at the Predominantly White, small, residential liberal arts institution were recruited via email using an email alias that reached approximately 580 full time enrolled first year students. Three focus groups of six participants each were created. Focus groups were conducted in December 2020, just before the conclusion of the fall semester - the first semester in college for all participants. Focus group sessions lasted approximately 60 minutes.

The focus group questions began by focusing on how the participants define and describe belonging, and in particular what it feels like to belong in their current campus environment. The questions then focused on the effect that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on their experience (e.g., "How has Covid-19 affected what you anticipated college would be like?" and "What has been challenging about being in college during Covid-19? Why?"). In addition, questions related to experiences with social connections, living in a residence hall, classroom learning, and mental health were explored.

There were 18 total participants. Of those 18, seven identified as men and 11 identified as women. The racial/ethnic composition of the focus groups provided a voice to historically underrepresented groups at the institution, with a higher percentage of BIPOC student voices represented in the focus groups than are reflected in campus demographics. While the recruitment was not targeted, this population responded with an interest in sharing their experiences on campus. Among the 18 participants were 11 White students, four Black/African American students, two Latinx students, and one Asian/Asian-American student. All 18 participants lived in on-campus housing.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using constant comparison analysis. Krueger and Casey (2015) noted that any approach to focus group data analysis must be systematic, verifiable, sequential, and continuous. Constant comparison analysis, developed by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was first used in grounded research theory but has a useful application to other qualitative data, such as that collected via focus groups. Strauss and Corbin (1998) identified three major stages in constant comparative analysis, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The coding process began immediately following the initial focus group, therefore establishing a process that Onwuegbuzie, et

al (2009) refer to as emergent-systematic focus group design, where the first group is used for exploratory purposes and subsequent groups are used for verification purposes. The progression through coding steps resulted in labeling three central themes that emerged.

Findings

Three themes emerged from the analysis: navigating uncertainty; seeking in-person connection; developing resilience. Each theme is described individually below, but the three themes collectively highlight the complex nature of identifying, seeking, and experiencing a sense of belonging during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Seeking In-person Connection

Participants were asked to describe what belonging meant to them and how they know when they belong. Participants noted that the expectations they held about college - that they would immediately meet friends, create social networks, and bond with others - were quickly dashed as they prepared to arrive at the institution in the fall. Social distancing expectations, limited opportunities for engagement in student organizations and campus programming, and limited visitors in residence halls create a dynamic that frustrated many participants. The inability to create in-person relationships - and the lack of depth that most in-person relationships that were formed - resulted in feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Ella, a Black woman, said, "Students made connections in small clusters and then shut it off to others. We were told to only have really small groups of close connections, which means we had to basically choose and prioritize who our friends could be." For example, three women in one focus group lived on the same residence hall floor, but were unaware of each other, including one who commented that it was the first time they had seen the others without masks on. The three women from the same residence hall floor expressed disbelief that

they could have gone an entire semester without engaging with one another, and quickly transitioned to feelings of embarrassment, disappointment, and even shame that they had not done more to engage with one another earlier in the year.

Participants expressed appreciation for efforts made by the institution to promote and implement virtual events (e.g., Zoom Bingo, scavenger hunts, live online performances by comedians, etc.), but said unequivocally that online social events were not an adequate substitution for in-person interactions. Elena, a Latinx woman, said "[The institution] really has tried hard to help us get connected and do fun social things, but it's just not the same when you can't experience something face to face with someone."

Masks and face coverings created a hurdle that significantly altered a sense of belonging and connectedness on campus for participants. Multiple participants who were students of color noted that not only did masks affect social connections but created a barrier for under-represented students on a predominantly White campus. Serena, a Black woman, said: "Being Black, I know what makes me stand out compared to most people here. There is comfort in seeing other Black students, but that's harder now because we can't get to know as many people because we're literally covering our faces all the time. There are a lot of things people assume about me because [I am Black], so I still stand out, but people don't get a chance to get to know me to really understand who I am. So they see me but they don't see me." Ella, a Black woman, felt similarly when she said, "Am I standing out? Am I blending in too much? It was like I was being seen but somehow unseen. They see me for what I am but not who I am."

The limited ability to create in-depth, in-person relationships created a disproportionate strain on students of color, highlighted when multiple participants articulated that an important part of social engagement for them was that White students needed

an opportunity to get to know them and get used to being around them in order for them to feel accepted and like they belong. Calvin, a black man, said: "I feel like people are missing the chance to... ease into being around people who are different than them. I feel like I need people to do that so they get to know who I really am rather than assuming, and it just can't happen right now. It makes me feel more 'different' than people already think I am." The notion of "feeling different" or out of place for many students can often be partially mitigated through immediately making social connections. The inability for students to engage – perhaps for the first time – in social interactions with students whose identities differ from their own during the first few weeks of college had negative social implications for majority and non-majority students on campus.

Navigating Uncertainty

The participants noted that the environment on campus at the start of the semester was not something that they had envisioned when they aspired to attend college. The institution created protocols and procedures in an attempt to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 while creating an opportunity for an in-person experience on campus. A majority of courses were delivered online for the first three weeks and some then transitioned to hybrid format, face masks had to be worn at all times, only two students per table in the cafeteria, etc. The protocols and procedures required to create a safe environment significantly altered the expectations and the daily reality for participants, creating a sense of uncertainty about how to navigate the social and academic experience.

Participants noted that the uncertainty around the Covid virus as well as behavioral expectations created a tension that affected students deeply. Oren, a White man, said: "I have this new-found anxiety about getting sick or messing it all up." The burden carried by Oren was shared by other participants, who noted the concern about a stig-

ma they felt was attached to testing positive for the virus or having to spend time in quarantine housing for being a close contact of a positive case. Constantly monitoring Covid-19 case rates on campus and waiting for announcements from campus leaders also caused a strain for participants. The uncertainty of whether virus rates would remain low enough to keep campus open for students created a sense of impermanence that hindered a sense of connection and belonging. Casper, a White man, said: "I made my mom leave the cardboard boxes [from move-in day] in my room just in case we have to close [campus]. Always being prepared to leave on short notice makes it tough to feel like this is real or permanent in any way."

The pandemic and subsequent adjustments to college life created or exacerbated mental health concerns for several participants. Participants noted that the uncertainty of whether the in-person college experience could continue negatively affected mood and motivation, both socially and academically. Serena, a Black woman, said: "You have moments of motivation but then times when you are like paralyzed and can't get things done. What if this all goes away? What if we can't stay here? It really messes with getting into a routine and into, like, a happy place."

Casper, a White man, articulated how the lack of interpersonal connection affected mental health when he said, "Talking to others is such a big coping mechanism, to open up to people and talk it through. We just can't right now, so you end up struggling more and more. But you find your outlets and your people that help, even if it's just a small group." And though campus resources were available to participants – and many participants acknowledged an awareness of how to access on-campus resources – the Covid-19-related protocols created a strain on how to use resources most effectively. Oren, a White man, said, "I feel so disconnected sometimes that I don't know if I know when I need help. Sometimes it's

like, 'Who is here to help me if I need it?' I feel like even when we know the names of offices to go to when we need help, it's one thing to know where to go and another to actually do it." The uncertainty about whether in-person options were available – or even how to navigate visiting offices given pandemic restrictions – created barriers to services for many students.

The concern over potentially contracting Covid-19 and spreading the virus to others created a new sense of anxiety for participants that negatively affected their mental health. Kristen, a Black woman, said "I have this fear of connecting with others because what if they are pulled away from me [if the college has to close]? Or what if I am the one who spreads [Covid-19] to my new friends? It's such a weird feeling to be scared to make friends; not because of some social anxiety but because of this other big thing that just hangs over us all the time." The strain of wanting to find connection but fearing the potential impermanence of the school year or, as Oren said, "messing it all up" created significant roadblocks for students as they sought belonging through social engagement.

Developing Resilience

A by-product of students experiencing college during a pandemic is that change and adaptation became the norm, and the shared experience of adversity created a connection to the institution and to peers. Participants discussed strategies they have adopted to cope with change and uncertainty, providing insight into the resilience skills they were (often unwittingly) developing. Participants discussed a willingness to alter expectations, finding comfort in a sense of hope, relying on creativity, developing patience, and coping with loss. The development of resilience led to a feeling of belonging for participants; that their ability to cope with challenges strengthened their connection to the institution and to one another. Jenny, a White woman, said "This idea that we have to kind of persevere and deal with

challenges and figure out how to do it together makes me proud of being a [student at this institution]. We have this connection to each other even before we met and we're kind of in this together."

Resilience was manifested through an acknowledgement that there was not a handbook or guide for how to manage being a student during a pandemic. Sarah, a White female varsity athlete, said, "[It is] so easy to think about how it's all going wrong, and you fall into a pit of sadness. You have to figure out on your own how to be grateful for the chance to do things, even if it's not ideal." Participants recognized that most of their peers were feeling similar stress and anxiety related to the pandemic and were also navigating the college experience for the first time. That notion seemed to spark an internal motivation to try to manage their attitude, mental health, and approach to their experiences on campus. Included in that self-motivation was a sense of appreciation for the opportunity to be in college, even if it meant that things were not what they anticipated.

The sense of loss was very real for participants - that opportunities for engagement and for what they imagined college to be were not realistic in the first few months of college. Andrea, a Latinx woman, put the loss into perspective when she said, "Our senior year [of high school] was messed up because of [Covid-19], so we missed out on some of the stuff that makes you who you are going into college. But we all have that in common, so I think it maybe gives us a perspective that helps us manage how we feel about it."

The first-year student participants missed out on many of the rites of passage that high school seniors in the United States experience as they venture off to college - no spring activities, no senior prom, perhaps no graduation ceremony, limited summer employment, modified summer orientation sessions, a muted college move-in day. The significant losses experienced in the spring and summer of 2020 created a sense of ac-

ceptance for many participants, and also was articulated as a point of pride.

And while the discussion of loss was vital to the focus group conversations, participants noted that their relatively recent arrival to campus - and acceptance of losses from high school - may have been a benefit. Anna, an Asian woman, said, "I think [first year students] deserve a little credit for dealing with all these changes. Everyone is worried about us starting at college, but I think the upper-class students struggled way more than we did. They knew what college was like before. We're just rolling with it because we're just happy we get to be here." Jacob, a White male, agreed when he said "Following [guidelines] with masks, staying six feet apart, stuff like that, has been tough, but it is what it is. We kind of know we have to do it and if it keeps us healthy then it's worth it."

Participants reflected on their first semester in college during the Covid-19 pandemic with a sense of resolve and rational acceptance. Izzy, a White woman, expressed her thoughts on the losses experienced during the first semester at college when she said, "The things that were taken away from us are the things that actually kept us here. Not being able to have friends visit, not easily being able to go to parties, not having sports... it sucked not to have that, but it's the reason we've been able to stay [on campus]."

Discussion

The analysis of participant conversations suggested that the challenges associated with finding belonging on campus during the Covid-19 pandemic are both seen and unseen. Students' descriptions of belonging were characterized by a keen awareness of what belonging felt like to them. It was evident that the participants' descriptions aligned with Strayhorn's (2019) concepts of belonging, most notably that "social identities intersect and affect college students' sense of belonging" and "sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes" (p 37).

Strayhorn (2019) also noted that the importance that students place on their sense of belonging varies based on context and time. The challenges associated with connection and interaction with peers during Covid-19 have greatly altered how students achieve belonging - their perception of what belonging should look like or how it should feel relative to their experience transitioning to college has been disrupted, and the disruption has created a stronger desire to feel connected.

Identities played a significant role in how students develop and perceive a sense of belonging on campus. For students with historically marginalized identities - particularly BIPOC students - a perceived sense of belonging is particularly wrapped up in identity, and participants in this study articulated the struggle they found when needing in-person experiences to feel connected to students who looked like them and to feel accepted by majority-identity students. Social restrictions based on Covid-19 safety protocols not only limited crucial opportunities for engagement for these students, but students were explicitly told not to try to connect in person in order to comply with safety guidelines.

The perceived weight of anxiety and stress related to being in college during the Covid-19 pandemic was articulated by many participants, and there was a palpable need to be resilient and roll with uncertainty. Duckworth (2013) noted that resilience is demonstrated in the form of optimism, confidence, and creativity. The participants in this study did not use the terms grit or resilience but were able to articulate the characteristics associated with both of those traits that were vital to their feeling of belonging on campus. Participants articulated what Dweck (2008) calls a growth mindset - that the ability to learn is not fixed and can change with effort. Participants described the challenges facing them as they transitioned to college and acknowledged that if they could just get through the difficult situation created by the pandemic, they

were confident that they could adapt and succeed. Participants faced the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic – and the related roadblocks that got in the way of what they anticipated their first semester of college would look like – with optimism, confidence, and creativity, Duckworth's (2013) cornerstones of resilience. Despite losing out on experiences to end high school and to start college, participants reflected on the value of the experiences they did have and how persisting through the current situation would ultimately lead to a better experience later.

Implications

Practice

The findings of this study inform several suggestions for practice for educators. As participants indicated, their sense of belonging is tied to their social identities, mattering to others, and was tied to other positive outcomes. Educators who work most closely with current first-year students should focus on creating environments that foster engagement. Acknowledging to students that strategies for engagement may be atypical during the pandemic is important, but because new students may not fully understand what engagement was like pre-pandemic, it is vital to emphasize the value of hybrid and digital modes of engagement. Some suggestions during the pandemic and moving forward include:

- Professionals in Residential Life could focus on roommate mediation skills knowing that students may not have opportunities for significant engagement beyond their room or floor and may be spending significantly more time with a smaller number of peers.
- Counseling Centers might share tips for managing social isolation, creating or sharing tools that students could use to negotiate loneliness, advice on negotiating evolving interpersonal relationships, and managing time spent on social media. In the spring of 2020

(prior to the Covid-19 pandemic), 41% of undergraduate students screened positive for moderate to serious psychological distress (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2020). A survey by The Healthy Minds Network & ACHA (2020) in the first few months of the pandemic demonstrated that student mental health continues to decline, with only half of students in a national survey reporting positive mental health. Browning et al. (2021) found that approximately 85% experienced elevated levels of distress during the pandemic. Focusing on college students' mental health related to the pandemic and its effects will be crucial.

- Campus Activities staff should create hybrid approaches to campus programming. Hybrid approaches increase likelihood of compliance with safety protocols, provide an opportunity for students who strongly desire in-person interaction, and allow students who prefer virtual events to participate.
- Leadership development and campus activities staff might consider small-group or individual peer mentor programs to fill the void of leadership opportunities created by the pandemic. Focused engagement allows for compliance with safety requirements as well as creates impactful moments for in-depth engagement around particular skills needed for future peer leadership opportunities.
- Health Service and Peer Education services should continue to educate by conducting social norming campaigns about on-going compliance around safety protocols. In addition, it will be important to continue to debunk myths about Covid-19 as the pandemic situation evolves.
- Faculty and instructors who work closely with first-year students might focus on the adjustment back into the classroom. For many institutions, a majority of course delivery occurred online

in synchronous or asynchronous ways, and many students spent much of their first year in college without acclimating to the expectations and norms of a college classroom.

Student affairs practitioners need to recognize that going back to normal may not mean much to those whose first year was spent on campus during the pandemic. For those students, safety guidelines and protocols like social distancing and masking are the only way they have experienced college, therefore limiting how they may interpret what possibilities exist without the pandemic. Change is difficult, and higher education institutions often operate in traditional frameworks that fall back on *the way we've always done it* as a way to emphasize a uniformity of experience for new students. A vital challenge might be refocusing acclimating and socialization efforts to include second year students who missed out on initial experiences due to the Covid-19 pandemic and are therefore experiencing transition well into their second year of college. Educational and social programming might include:

- Addressing the skill gap in developing in-person relationships. Students returning for their second year may not have had robust opportunities to develop in-person relationships, and that stunted growth may result in challenges typically associated with the transition into college for many students.
- Immerse these students in diverse environments. The lack of in-person connections may have resulted in fewer experiences with social and cultural difference for many students, negatively impacting cultural awareness and competency.
- Fill the involvement gap by developing creative approaches to engagement. Many first-year students are missing out on key leadership development opportunities - student organizations have been unable to recruit and meet, athletics may have been canceled, etc. - and

skills and experience in those settings has been lost. Creating peer leadership mentors, re-creating small orientation groups, and emphasizing marketing and publicity opportunities for student organizations are all potential solutions to fill this void.

The long-term effects of campus response to the Covid-19 pandemic should be a concern for all those who serve students. Will opportunities for remote/online learning create challenges for traditional brick-and-mortar institutions to either adapt or lose students? Will the first six weeks of college remain as significant for the transition to college or do practitioners need to rethink how to engage students even earlier? Many of the questions that institutions will need to ask are yet unknown, and future research will provide guidance on the long-term effects of pandemic response on the student experience.

Future Research

The significant shift in the delivery of the college experience to first-year students at many institutions as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic will create opportunities to view typical, traditional institutional practices through a new lens. The changes to traditional approaches to the college experience will require assessment and analysis, including a focus on meeting the expectations students have entering an institution. Research was conducted at a Predominantly White, small, residential, liberal arts institution in the midwestern United States and therefore represents one segment of the higher education landscape. Suggested future research includes focusing on shifting patterns of socialization, including whether students are more likely to engage on digital platforms than in-person in the "post-pandemic" world. Many student-focused services on campus have had to significantly alter the opportunities they provide and the methods by which they deliver services, which may have a lasting impact on how students value those services. Returning students will

be a rich area for future research; many of whom only know the college experience through the lens of the pandemic. Research focusing on the experience of students as they transition out of strict pandemic-related restrictions will be of particular value. In addition, research that focuses more deeply on the experiences of BIPOC and underrepresented students during the pandemic may shed light on the unique challenges faced by those students, including research regarding the lasting effects of pandemic disruption on BIPOC and other underrepresented campus populations (LGBTQ+, international students, etc.).

Challenge and Opportunity

The applearcort has been upset for traditional first-year student experiences, and the opportunities and challenges ahead - for all of higher education but in particular the new student experience - will be monumental. The Covid-19 pandemic has created a unique set of challenges for first-year students and for the institutions that serve them. Purposely creating and implementing opportunities for new students to move seamlessly between online and in-person activities will be vital to fostering a sense of belonging. The findings of this study indicate that educators are at a unique and critical moment in understanding belonging and have an opportunity to learn how to navigate alongside students in the evolving landscape of belonging during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

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