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Development and Validation of the Sense of Belonging among Counselor Education Students Survey (SOBACES)

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Abstract

Sense of belonging among students has been studied extensively (Gopalan & Brady, 2020), and has been shown to be a predictor of success, engagement, and well-being in college students. While studies have investigated a sense of belonging amongst specific marginalized groups within a university (e.g. Duran et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2021; Sims et al., 2020) there have been few studies that examine a sense of belonging among master students in counselor education programs. This paper will outline the development and validation of a new instrument, Sense of Belonging among Counselor Education Students (SOBACES).

Keywords: *belonging, counselor education, instrument design*

Sense of belonging among college students has predicted student engagement, success, and well-being (Freeman et al., 2007; Gillen-O'Neel, 2019). Belonging is defined as feelings of being accepted, valued, and supported by others (Willms, 2003). In addition to feelings of acceptance and support, a student's overall sense of fit within the university has been linked to creating a sense of belonging within the university (Wilson & Gore, 2013). Therefore, one can assume that a sense of belonging is a construct in itself but contains a variety of other constructs such as acceptance, support, and identity/connectedness with others that contribute to a student's sense of belonging at a university.

For the purposes of this paper, it is helpful to provide operational definitions for the constructs of this instrument: acceptance, support, and identity with others. Acceptance is defined as the extent to which students feel accepted for who they are by their colleagues, professors, and other members of the university (Freeman et al., 2007). Support is the extent to which students have positive relationships with others on campus (e.g., colleagues, professors, faculty members) as well as feeling valued, included, and respected by the student body, staff, faculty, and administration (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019). Identity with others can also be described as 'connectedness' to the university—which describes the students' perception of their overall fit within the university in terms of diversity among

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students and faculty and feelings of belonging and connection among students and faculty (Wilson & Gore, 2013).

The feeling of belonging has been studied extensively (Duran et al., 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2020), but there is a significant gap in feelings of belonging in counselor education students enrolled in a master's or doctoral-level program. The purpose of this study is to examine the constructs that relate to belongingness based on previous research and evaluate content items created for each construct in the Sense of Belonging among Counselor Education Students (SOBACES) instrument. As a result, the instrument can be revised and further administered to evaluate feelings of belonging in counselor education students in hopes of providing insight for program development and evaluation.

Literature Review

Sense of belonging in students has been studied in K-12 populations as well as college students. The literature provides insight into how feelings of belonging relate to student outcomes throughout their academic career. The more a student feels like they belong to the school or university, the more likely they are to succeed and complete their degree (Freeman et al., 2007; Gillen-O'Neel, 2019; Marksteiner & Kruger, 2016). Furthermore, a sense of belonging among students has contributed to a better sense of social-emotional well-being (Freeman et al., 2007). In order to best understand what creates a sense of belonging, I dove into the literature for related constructs pertaining to belonging in students.

Acceptance is broadly defined as a student's ability to be their authentic self and be accepted for who they are by their classmates, peers, and faculty (Freeman et al., 2007). Researchers suggested that acceptance by peers predicted a higher sense of belonging in a sample of school-aged students (Solomon et al., 1997) and was further supported by Freeman et al. (2007) when examining social acceptance in relation to a sense of belonging in a sample of college freshmen. Freeman et al. (2007) examined in depth what fostered a sense of belonging in college students and found that social acceptance was the most significant predictor of belonging. Furthermore, Freeman noted that belonging is in fact a multidimensional construct, not unidimensional as they previously thought, and requires more insight.

Freeman et al. (2007) described that students who perceived more support from peers and faculty felt a stronger sense of belonging and performed better than colleagues who did not. When investigating diversity and inclusion practices among college students enrolled at a historically black university, Booker and Campbell-Whatley (2019) found that perceived social support from peers and faculty at the university was significantly related to feelings of belonging in the college community. Wilson and Gore (2013) found similar results when investigating the sense of peer support, access to support services, and faculty support in relation to their overall sense of fit in the university.

A student's overall sense of fit in the university includes their perception of connectedness to the university. A student feels more connected when they see themselves (i.e., diversity, culture, interests) in the student body and faculty at the university (Wilson & Gore, 2013). Connectedness can also be termed as an individual's ability to identify with others.

A sense of identity in college students was significantly associated with high feelings of belonging and greater student success. Therefore, for this study, identity with others related to overall perceived fit in the university in relation to their sense of self (i.e., culture, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and interests).

After an extensive review of the literature, I developed the instrument items based on the three constructs outlined in previous research. As a result, I formed the Sense of Belonging among Counselor Education Students survey.

Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study is to conduct a content validation of a new instrument, Sense of Belonging among Counselor Education Students (SOBACES). Sense of belonging among students has been studied extensively (Gopalan & Brady, 2020) and has been shown to be a predictor for success, engagement, and well-being in college students. While studies have investigated a sense of belonging among specific marginalized groups within a university (e.g. Duran et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2021; Sims et al., 2020) there have been few studies outside of dissertations and theses that study a sense of belonging among counselor education students.

To examine feelings of belongingness among counselor education students, I developed the Sense of Belonging among Counselor Education Students (SOBACES) survey to administer to current graduate students enrolled in a master's or doctoral-level counselor education and supervision program. This survey will measure students' feelings and perceptions of acceptance, support, and identity with others. Results from this survey will provide further knowledge and understanding of feelings of belongingness among counselor education students and provide future guidance for research in the field.

For this study, the author poses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the psychometric properties of a new instrument, Sense of Belonging among Counselor Education Students?

RQ2: What are the practical applications of this new instrument for graduate students enrolled in counselor education programs across the United States?

Methods and Procedures

The SOBACES is geared toward counselor education students who are currently enrolled in a master's or doctoral program in the United States. The target population would be counselor education students enrolled in a CACREP-accredited program, who are completing the degree in person rather than online.

The first stage of development for creating the SOBACES included identifying constructs that could measure a sense of belonging. In order to develop the most accurate constructs, I referenced peer-reviewed articles that outlined constructs that were found to be associated with a sense of belonging. Belonging is a concept that has been studied extensively (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Lambert et al., 2013; Weiss, 2021), but I wanted to know what fostered a sense of belonging in students. For purposes of this survey, I separated belonging into three constructs: acceptance, support, and identity with oth-

ers. Previously, researchers referenced similar constructs (Gillen-O'Neel, 2019; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Strayhorn, 2019) when measuring the sense of belonging among students of various ages (i.e., college, K-12). Originally, I included a fourth construct, inclusion, but decided to omit the construct from the initial survey as the operational definition was very similar to support and acceptance. Therefore, I focused solely on the three constructs of acceptance, support, and identity with others.

Constructs

For purposes of this study, I developed the below operational definitions for the constructs based on previous research (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019; Freeman et al., 2007; Wilson & Gore, 2013).

Acceptance

Acceptance is the extent to which students feel accepted for who they are by their colleagues, professors, and other members of the university (Freeman et al., 2007).

Support

Support is the extent to which students have positive relationships with others on campus (e.g., colleagues, professors, faculty members) as well as feeling valued, included, and respected by the student body, staff, faculty, and administration (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019).

Identity with Others

Identity with others can also be described as 'connectedness' to the university—which describes the students' perception of their overall fit within the university in terms of diversity among students and faculty and feelings of belonging and connection among students and faculty (Wilson & Gore, 2013). Responses for the SOBACES are formatted as a 5-item Likert scale; responses range from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree (3=neither agree nor disagree). The survey was created and distributed for purposes of content validation to five expert evaluators enrolled at William & Mary in EDUC 663 Quantitative Research Design. Evaluators were required to match items to related constructs, and rate on a scale of 1-3 (1 measuring low and 3 measuring high) for feelings of certainty (i.e., certain they matched the item to the right construct) and relevancy (i.e., whether the item is relevant to the construct). In addition, evaluators provided comments and suggestions to aid in the revision of the survey.

Instrumentation

When developing items for the survey, I referenced previous research conducted on a sense of belonging in students to see what surveys were widely used in the field. I further sought existing scales that measured similar constructs of acceptance, support, and identity with others. As a result, I used a variety of surveys from the literature to develop my initial items for each construct and adjusted wording to fit my target population. I referenced Goodenow's (1993) original Psychological Sense of School Membership instrument and the Sense of Belonging instrument (Hoffman et al., 2002) as a base for my original items

and adjusted the phrasing to fit my target population and setting. The initial SOBACES scale consisted of 36 total items (12 items for acceptance, 13 items for support, and 11 items for identity with others).

Validity

A panel of experts evaluated the SOBACES for content validity. Each evaluator was asked to match the individual items to the construct based on operational definitions that were provided. Evaluators further assessed the items based on certainty (3-highly certain, 2-somewhat certain, 1-not at all certain) and relevance (3-highly relevant, 2-somewhat relevant, 1-not at all relevant). Originally, my survey was evaluated by five experts, but I omitted two of them because the form was not filled out completely. Therefore, the results of the content validity for SOBACES only included responses from three evaluators rather than the original five. In the future, researchers should consider adding more evaluators to the content validity process to ensure the best results.

I compiled the results from the content validity process and calculated the mean score and percentage for each item (Appendix A). Any item that did not score 100% for certainty, relevance, and category agreement was omitted from the survey due to inconsistent reliability and validity. As a result, the scale was shortened from 36 items to 16 items (See Table 2).

Acceptance

Acceptance had the best results of the content validity process. Originally, there were 12 items for this construct, and only five items were eliminated due to inconsistent agreement, confidence, and relevance scores. The remaining seven items received consistent scores of 3.00 (highly certain and highly relevant) for relevance and certainty, and 100% of the evaluators were able to currently match the item to the intended construct. Feedback from evaluators explained that the items of concern were clear and understandable, but not necessarily relevant to the construct. For instance, the items “I have felt discriminated against by others while at my institution,” and “I have experienced prejudice while enrolled at my institution” both received scores of 3.00 for certainty but a mean score of 2.67 for relevance. While research has found discrimination to be a predictor of feelings of acceptance and inclusion (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2019), I decided to omit these from the original survey because of inconsistent results, but future research might consider a construct for feelings of discrimination in relation to feelings of belongingness among counselor education students.

Support

The construct, support, originally had 13 items. After identifying items of concern, I omitted eight items due to inconsistent agreement, confidence, and relevance scores. Feedback from evaluators consisted of comments in regard to items lacking clarity and being perceived as respect rather than support. While the operational definition of support consisted of feelings of value, respect, and inclusion, I decided to focus more on the support from the faculty, students, and institution. The items that were omitted from the original

survey included items such as “I feel respected by my colleagues,” and “My professors value my contributions that I bring to class discussion.” These items were more consistent with feelings of respect and being valued by others rather than tangible support, and both items received inconsistent scores for agreement (66.667%) and confidence ($M=2.67$). Items that received consistent scores for agreement, confidence, and relevance were those that outlined tangible support or feelings of support for mental health specifically. For example, items such as “I feel that my professors care about my mental health,” and, “I feel there are supportive resources available to me at my institution” received consistent scores for agreement, confidence, and relevance. I found it interesting that items that outlined mental health support received better results than those that outlined support for physical health, “I feel that my professors care about my physical well-being.”

Future research might consider examining this relationship further, but for the purposes of this survey, I chose to eliminate the items that received inconsistent results and kept items that received consistent support. One item I kept that didn't have consistent feedback, however, was “People at my institution often check in with me to see if I need support.” The item was correctly matched to the intended construct by 100% of the evaluators and received a score of 3.00 for relevance, but the confidence score was not quite perfect ($M=2.67$). Feedback suggested that this item was ‘wordy’ and lacked clarity. As a result, I decided to reword the item to reflect more clarity and provide less confusion, “People at my institution will often check in with me.”

Identity with Others

Feedback from the content validation process provided valuable insight into the relevancy and certainty of the items I created for identity with others. Originally, I created this construct in hopes of researching feelings of ‘fit’ among students within a university. I stumbled upon the idea after discussing it with colleagues who felt like they did not belong at the university. Most of these colleagues were minority students who would discuss how most of the population for the colleges they attended were primarily white. Following the conversation, I decided to dive into the research more for feelings of belonging in students of color and how identity with others related to overall feelings of belonging. Unfortunately, when developing items for this construct, I struggled to come up with clear phrases that appropriately addressed the idea I was trying to achieve. As a result, many of my items were deemed unclear or not relevant to the construct and resulted in seven items being omitted due to inconsistent scores and results from content validation. Items 26-28 from the original survey were omitted due to feedback from evaluators saying the items lacked clarity. For example, one item “I feel like I belong at this university,” received inconsistent results (Agreement=66.667%, Confidence $M=2.33$, Relevance $M=2.67$) because the evaluators suggested this item could have fallen under any of the constructs, rather than one specifically. Another item, “I am involved with one or more social groups (i.e., Greek organizations, clubs, student organizations) at my institution,” was omitted after receiving feedback that this item is not relevant (Relevance $M=2.33$) because most graduate students

are not involved with student organizations as frequently as they were as undergraduates. As a result of content validation, only four of the 11 original items were kept.

Conclusion

A gap in the literature exists for measuring the sense of belonging among counselor education students. As indicated in the literature, a sense of belonging is a predictor for student success and well-being (Freeman et al., 2007; Gillen-O'Neel, 2019) and information from the SOBACES can be used for program insight and evaluation. Results of the content validity process revealed that original items lacked clarity and specificity. As a result, the wording of the items was adjusted and reworded to the intended constructs to reduce confusion among participants. A second phase of piloting the instrument would include a larger sample size of current master's and doctoral level students enrolled in a counselor education program to ensure the validity and reliability of the scale.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the valuable insight of the content validity process, there were limitations that the reader should be aware of that might affect the generalizability of this instrument. As mentioned previously, there were three evaluators for the survey rather than the original five due to incomplete forms. Furthermore, the content validity process was administered in a short period of time which may have caused the evaluators to rush their completion of the forms. Future researchers should consider a larger panel of experts with an appropriate amount of time to thoroughly review the instrument.

Another limitation of the SOBACES content validity process was that the panel of expert evaluators consisted of mostly counselor education students. These students also developed similar instruments for belonging and the definitions associated. Therefore, future researchers should consider evaluators who are not administering similar projects, research, or instruments to ensure understanding and clarity for all participants.

Future research on the SOBACES instrument would consist of administering the survey to larger sample populations through email listservs to local CACREP accredited counselor education programs in Virginia and through professional organization websites such as the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES). Administering the survey to a large sample size would allow for further insight to the validity and reliability of the instrument and feelings of belonging in counselor education students.

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Appendix A
SOBACES Content Validation

Construct	Item	Category Agreement %	Confidence Rating (M)	Relevance Rating (M)
Acceptance	I can be my authentic self when I am in class.	100%	3	3
Acceptance	Other students like me the way I am.	66.667%	2.67	3
Acceptance	My professors like me the way I am.	66.667%	2.67	2.67
Acceptance	I feel comfortable being myself at this institution.	100%	2.67	2.67
Acceptance	I have felt discriminated against by others while at my institution.	66.667%	3	2.67
Acceptance	I have experienced prejudice while enrolled at my institution.	100%	3	2.67
Acceptance	I feel comfortable expressing my sexual orientation at my institution.	100%	3	3
Acceptance	I feel comfortable expressing my gender identity at my institution.	100%	3	3
Acceptance	My culture is accepted at my institution.	100%	3	3
Acceptance	My ethnicity is accepted at my institution.	100%	3	3
Acceptance	My race is accepted at my institution.	100%	3	3
Acceptance	My institution values individual differences.	100%	3	3
Support	I am comfortable expressing my opinions to others in class.	33.333%	2.67	2.67
Support	My colleagues value my contributions that I bring to class discussions.	66.667%	2.67	3
Support	My professors value my contributions that I bring to class discussions.	66.667%	2.67	2.67
Support	I feel respected by my colleagues.	66.667%	2.67	3
Support	I feel respected by my professors.	66.667%	2.67	3
Support	I feel that my professors care about my mental health.	100%	3	3

Support	I feel that my professors care about my physical well-being.	100%	3	2.33
Support	When I have a bad day, I can go to my colleagues for support.	100%	3	3
Support	My institution is supportive of me.	100%	3	3
Support	I feel there are supportive resources available to me at my institution.	100%	3	3
Support	I feel valued as an individual at my institution.	0%	2	2.67
Support	People at my institution often check in with me to see if I need support.	100%	2.67	3
Support	If I have a problem, I know a person at my institution that I can go to for information.	66.667%	2.67	2.67
Identity with others	I feel like I belong at my university.	66.667%	2.33	2.67
Identity with others	I feel like part of the community at this institution.	66.667%	3	3
Identity with others	I feel a strong connection to the community at my institution.	100%	2.67	3
Identity with others	It is easy to find people at my institution with similar backgrounds as me.	100%	3	3
Identity with others	I frequently interact with people with similar backgrounds as me at my institution.	100%	3	3
Identity with others	It is easy to find people who understand me at my institution.	100%	3	3

Identity with others	I am involved with one or more social groups (i.e. Greek organization, clubs, student organizations) at my institution.	100%	2.67	2.33
Identity with others	At my institution, there are opportunities for me to connect with people from my cultural communities.	66.667%	2.67	2.67
Identity with others	I am able to identify with my professors at my institution.	100%	3	3
Identity with others	My professors are able to understand my individual and cultural differences.	66.667%	2.67	3
Identity with others	My colleagues are able to understand my individual and cultural differences.	66.667%	2.67	3

Appendix B
SOBACES Revised Items

Item #	Construct	Item
1	Acceptance	I can be my authentic self when I am in class.
2	Acceptance	I feel comfortable expressing my sexual orientation at my institution.
3	Acceptance	I feel comfortable expressing my gender identity at my institution.
4	Acceptance	My culture is accepted at my institution.
5	Acceptance	My ethnicity is accepted at my institution.
6	Acceptance	My race is accepted at my institution.
7	Acceptance	My institution values individual differences.
8	Support	I feel that my professors care about my mental health.
9	Support	When I have a bad day, I can go to my colleagues for support.
10	Support	My institution is supportive of me.
11	Support	I feel there are supportive resources available to me at my institution.
12	Support	People at my institution often check in with me to see if I need support.
13	Identity with others	It is easy to find people at my institution with similar backgrounds as me.
14	Identity with others	I frequently interact with people with similar backgrounds as me at my institution.

- | | | |
|----|----------------------|--|
| 15 | Identity with others | It is easy to find people who understand me at my institution. |
| 16 | Identity with others | I am able to identify with my professors at my institution. |