Reframing Higher Ed Spaces and Belonging:

Lessons from the COVID-19 Experience

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in changes to higher education, including how campus spaces are used and defined. Institutional pivots to meet health and safety protections impacted the way we think about public and private spaces in lasting ways. The end of the acute emergency presents an opportunity for colleges and universities to reflect about the physical and virtual student experience to cultivate a renewed sense of place and belonging. Campus spaces have historically been linked to students' sense of belonging, which correlates with student engagement and academic success. Over generations, higher education has been shaped by social factors, evolving to become more equitable and inclusive. Campus spaces are now physical and virtual, and the COVID-19 endemic period presents an opening for higher education to recenter a student's sense of belonging in community-based locations, physical campus spaces, and virtual learning environments.

KEYWORDS
space, belonging, COVID-19

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic redefined the boundaries of human experience worldwide. Although the state of emergency no longer exists, the future remains uncertain as public health questions linger. Dr. Jennifer Nuzzo from the Brown University School of Public Health cautioned:

(I)n my view, those tolls (of COVID-19) remain unacceptably high and really point to the need for continuing to work to reduce those tolls and also, crucially, to make sure we are never again left as vulnerable to a virus as this one made us (PBS Newshour, 2023, 3:50).

Now in the endemic phase, tentative mask restrictions remain along with harrowing accounts of lasting disability from Long COVID, disparities for students, staff, and faculty with medical risk, and ongoing reconsiderations of our sense of health and safety in public settings, factors linked to what has been called *a new normal*. Long COVID is a new chronic medical condition in which COVID-19 symptoms last three months or more (United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). The influence of the pandemic touched all aspects of the human experience, including higher education.

The Education Doctorate (EdD) provides a critical lens through which to consider the ongoing impacts on colleges and universities. For example, the EdD encourages focus on the implications of policy and practice changes related to the pandemic on students and their sense of belonging now that bonds to the physical campus spaces have proven tenuous, such as when public health crises arise. How has a sense of shared space on colleges and university campuses

been altered, and how have these alterations impacted the college student experience? How did COVID-related restructuring of space impact student belonging, and how might these alterations impact short and long-term institutional cultural norms? In this article, we discuss the influence of COVID-19 on higher education spaces, including academic and student services, and the potential impact on students' perceptions of space. Applying Bolman and Deal's (2021) four frames, as taught in an EdD curriculum, we offer suggestions to establish a stronger sense of belonging in redefined physical and virtual campus spaces.

Early in the pandemic, classrooms pivoted sharply to online platforms. Similarly, student affairs offices, including student engagement centers, campus resource hubs, clubs and organizations, and residence life programming also ventured online. In most instances, this was the first time campus departments operated in a completely virtual space, which resulted in varying degrees of success (Alexander et al., 2020; Reyes-Portillo, 2022). Traditionally accustomed to interfacing in-person and face-to-face, faculty and staff communicated with each other and students almost exclusively in virtual platforms. While connections existed and steps were taken to build rapport, human elements were missing (Lehfeldt, 2021). Research suggested that for many, virtual fatigue was a significant concern (Oducado et al., 2022). In fact, in her essay about the tangible value of campus spaces, Lehfeldt (2021) lamented the perpetual increased use of virtual spaces, "removing the serendipity" (para. 7) of bumping into someone unexpectedly on campus. In research conducted by Maietta and Gardner (2022), loss of

community and an inability to build professional relationships, especially serendipitous encounters, were noted detractors of connecting in virtual spaces. Connection is important because research shows that feelings of isolation are a major contributor to student attrition in online courses (Hart, 2012).

Yet, the return to campus was met with mixed reception. Proponents of virtual spaces celebrated the advancements in learning, working, and safety. However, early on, returning to in-person, face-to-face learning and working came with a price: social distancing, speaking from behind masks, plexiglass shields, and a series of vaccine requirements. Further, returning to campus highlighted long-experienced but lesser-recognized disparities among minoritized college community members (Engram, 2020; Reyes-Portillo, 2022). For example, those with an immunocompromised health status faced an ongoing and uncertain risk (Alexander et al., 2020). Reyes-Portillo (2022) found that students who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and their families experienced more significant mental health impacts from COVID-19. Additionally, Lehfeldt (2021) pointed out the severe consequences of COVID-19 on former foster youth for whom the campus was their primary home and how their housing security was significantly altered during the pandemic. Similarly, Engram (2020) highlighted the impact that a sudden loss of housing had on students without socioeconomic resources, such as those facing housing insecurity. Trawalter et al. (2021) conducted four studies that strongly linked students' use of space on college campuses and their sense of belonging, especially for students from low-income backgrounds. If space is linked with students' connection to the campus, how does the modification of spaces due to COVID-19 and any future variant impact students' sense of belonging, and subsequently, their academic success?

STUDENTS' NEED FOR BELONGING

A sense of belonging is a feeling of connectedness, a sense that one is important or matters to others (Strayhorn, 2019). Belonging is intrinsic to the human experience (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Samura, 2022). In higher education, a student's sense of belonging is essential to their overall connectedness to the campus community and has been linked to academic success and persistence to graduation, even serving as a protective factor when stressors emerge (Strayhorn, 2019). Belonging also contributes to students' intrinsic motivation to learn (Ferreira et al., 2011) and persist (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012) in educational endeavors. In addition, a strong sense of belonging assists with overall positive well-being, specifically for post-traditional learners, including adults, BIPOC populations, and students from low-income backgrounds (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Samura, 2022; Trawalter et al., 2021). However, before the pandemic, inclusivity had been elusive for minoritized students, slowly evolving over time toward more universal belonging.

Higher education institutions in the United States (US) were initially established for affluent White men to train as ministers, starting with Harvard College in 1636. However, through changes in policies and politics over the years, women and BIPOC students began enrolling, initially in women's colleges and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and eventually at institutions historically dominated by White men (Thelin, 2021; Valaitis, 2019). With broadening and diverse enrollment, colleges and universities slowly recognized the need for support as minoritized students faced

systems and structures designed for affluent White male students (Samura, 2022). These support services were delivered in many forms, including dedicated spaces serving minoritized populations. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, Women's Centers were established (Williams, 2021), which paved the way for spaces that served the needs of Veterans, Black and Brown students, Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), Latinx/a/o populations, first-generation college-goers, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ Centers (Jourian, 2022). These spaces have at least one main intention in common - to establish a sense of belonging (Samura, 2022).

Though belonging for minoritized students is particularly crucial for educational equity, a sense of belonging is essential for all students—Schlossberg's (1989) seminal work on mattering established the link between belonging and student success. Samura (2016) concurred, "Students are more likely to succeed if they feel that they belong," [with a correlation between their sense of belonging and] "engagement, academic achievement, persistence, mental health, and overall well-being" (p. 90). In a large, nationally representative sample, Gopalan and Brady (2020) found strong links between students' sense of belonging at their college or university and their persistence in specific classes, semester to semester, and graduation. Samura (2016) found that belonging varies among students, with a link between a student's ability to individualize spaces and their sense of connection to them, even for tiny spaces such as the corner of their residence hall room. This insight reveals the importance of student choice and ownership. Further, this connection extends to the rest of campus, in classrooms and student service centers, and anchors their sense of belonging to the institution (Samura, 2016). So, how have the lasting impacts of COVID-19 impacted belonging on college campuses? How have the impacts been experienced disproportionately among minoritized student populations? And, how does what we know about belonging to the physical campus translate to belonging in a virtual learning environment as we re-envision campuses and learning post-pandemic?

IMPACT ON BELONGING

The toll experience with the loss of shared physical space and human interaction was not anticipated when the pandemic forced most colleges and universities into a virtual learning environment in the spring of 2020. However, emerging research reveals the significant impacts this shift has had on students' developmental well-being (Reyes-Portillo et al., 2022). Necessity prioritized physical health, putting a long-term pause on athletic seasons, campus programming, and study abroad travel. Yet, belonging remained a fundamental human need (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Campuses tried to shift tutoring, awards ceremonies, affinity spaces, study groups, internships, student employment, and graduations to virtual environments when feasible. Social isolation remained, creating a greater need to connect once students, faculty, and staff could physically return to campus. In the classroom, Lehfeldt (2021) reported over one-third of students in a study of 2000 hoped their Zoom class experiences were over for good. "They – and we – are pining for contact, conversation, the free flow of ideas that don't have to be mediated by online platforms, and the chance to share our space with others" (Lehfeldt, 2021, para. 6). At the time of Lehfeldt's study, the educational world was primarily connecting remotely, and loss of in-person, interpersonal relationships in spaces outside of

homes were being deeply felt. Relatedly, research by Copeland et al. (2021) and work by Worcester Polytechnic Institute (2022) shows that overall, students mental and physical well-being, resiliency, academic success, and sense of belonging all suffered because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students struggled to cope and had increased anxiety, stress, depression, and sometimes suicidal ideations (Copeland et al., 2021; Reyes-Portillo et al., 2022; Worcester Polytechnic Institute, 2022). How have the vestiges of the pandemic's influence on teaching and learning remained a part of students' experiences of campus life?

Compounding the social impact of the pandemic, a massive social justice movement simultaneously erupted with the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers and, like COVID-19, revealed stark disparities and divisions within the American populace, including college campuses (Engram, 2020). Thousands of people across the country disobeyed public health restrictions to protest the persistent anti-Black racism that has been so deadly for Black individuals and families throughout US history (National Association for Multicultural Education, 2024). Engram (2020) noted the intersection of COVID-19 and socio-historical disparities, "The pandemic has proven that well-intentioned tap dancing around issues of racism must be eliminated and more direct approaches to problem-solving should be applied" (p. 21). Conversely, anti-woke initiatives by conservative politicians have waged attacks on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) efforts, including prohibitions about teaching the history of slavery and critical race theory (CRT) in schools, bans on women's healthcare, and blocked access to gender-affirming care for transgender students. Recently, campus protests in 46 colleges and universities across the US against the Israel-Hamas War have wedged relationships between college administrators and students, staff, and faculty (Foody, 2024). The upcoming 2024 election is only likely to intensify divisions. How do these socio-political factors and others compound social tensions post-COVID and further affect students' sense of belonging on college campuses, especially for minoritized populations?

Understanding and Responding to Change Using Frames

Education Doctorate programs incorporating organizational development principles are uniquely poised to build awareness for thoughtful consideration of space and belonging as higher education institutions navigate a post-COVID reality. The ubiquitous nature of changes ushered in by the pandemic impacted campus students, stakeholders, faculty, and staff in multiple life domains, and responses to these changes were met with varied acceptance and resistance. The seminal work of Bolman and Deal (2021) on organizational structure provides a guide in framing understanding of and response to change through four lenses: structural, human resource, symbolic, and political. Structural frames are the nuts and bolts - the foundational aspects of operations and change. Human resources reflect relational connections. Symbolic frames are abstract representations of institutional values and beliefs. Finally, politics refers to using power and influence to achieve goals.

Early in the pandemic, necessity prompted a focus through the structural lens with new protocols for campus safety (Pelletier et al., 2022). Political factors were temporarily halted as the impacts of the pandemic crossed campus constituencies. Historic symbols of campus life quietly awaited a return to normalcy. The value of human connection became more salient though strained in two dimensions.

Though the remnants of a prolonged structural response to COVID-19 lingers, the endemic period presents a time for colleges and universities to shift frames to consider the impact of the pandemic on campus spaces and intentionally renegotiate a culture of offerings that foster a sense of belonging for all students. In this way, higher education has an opportunity to redefine the use of space with a renewed focus on belonging at the heart of the student experience.

REFRAMING OUR SENSE OF BELONGING AND USE OF CAMPUS SPACE

Trawalter et al. (2021) declared, "Connection to space matters," illustrating this concept by referring to "iconic spaces" as campus landmarks that represent identity with and belonging to the campus community. Three of their four studies found that regular use of public, iconic spaces can increase a sense of belonging for students from low-income backgrounds. For example, a public, comprehensive college in the northeast promotes a giant golden anchor, a historical icon for generations, in the center of their campus square to draw students to gather, study, eat lunch, or meet up with peers. Connecting space to well-being promotes a culture of care, and if designed intentionally, offers an opportunity to create inclusive environments in all aspects of campus.

The redefinition of space can include virtual environments. For example, Moore and Shemberger (2019) promoted establishing a teaching presence in online courses to increase student engagement "beyond the cognitive connection between learner and instructor" (p. 36). Some examples include responses to individual journal reflections, active participation in discussion forums and blogs, and visuals and other multimedia depicting campus icons. They create a dialogue between educators and students that humanizes the digital learning experience and links to shared symbols.

Additionally, the physical, educational environment for in-person classes requires intentional classroom development to build warm and welcoming spaces, which significantly impacts learning (Knowles et al., 2020). Factors include accommodations for physical comfort, color schemes, spatial size and layout, furniture and furnishings, and the availability of learning resources. Also critical for multicultural teaching and learning is implicit and explicit anti-racist praxis (Utt & Tochluk, 2020) inside learning environments and throughout campus. Therefore, seizing the opportunity to recenter student belonging in the design of campus spaces is critically important for students and the future of higher education, calling for innovations from our experience with the pandemic. The following are examples of innovative ideas that are incorporated into community, campus, and virtual spaces.

Community Spaces

Politically, institutions of higher education can use their significant power and influence to develop coalitions to build a "placeful university," as coined by Norgard and Bengtsen (2016, p. 5) or what Temple (2018) describes as "(T)he university space and place – interlinked networks of creative people, with a shared sense of community, using congenial places, which may be complex and surprising, supported by high levels of social capital" (p. 142). For example, cultivating intentional events and opportunities for students, families, and local community members to safely come together in re-engineered physical spaces and/or virtual gathering sites, garnering a collective sense of shared campus identity. Similarly,

institutions may offer Saturday morning virtual coffee cafés where students and faculty enjoy a rotation of industry speakers for learning, networking, and social engagement or symposia generated from topics of community interest, supplying a hybrid experience of in-person and virtual participation.

Additionally, studies have documented the need for more support for parenting students and their families, specifically highlighting the need for campus childcare (Goings, 2018). In this way, higher education can cultivate a culture of intergenerational learning and belonging where parenting students and their children share a sense of educational place. Putnam (2019) documented multiple benefits to higher education institutions that provide childcare on campus, including increased engagement of students and their children in campus life and a sense of what she called "interpersonal acceptance" (p. 11). This acceptance might involve building relationships with mentors and role models through tutoring programs with college students and involvement in campus activities such as sporting events and summer camps.

Another way for higher education institutions to build belonging is to make the campus a home through family residency options where students can live with their children in campus housing. Based on data from the Campus Family Housing Database through the Wellesley Centers for Women (2022), only one institution in Rhode Island provides a family housing option, and seven colleges and universities in Massachusetts offer family residency options. There appears to be an opportunity for growth to expand this form of belonging. Some institutions have also incorporated retirement housing and living and learning, mixed-use, multi-generational communities, such as the Alfond Main Street Commons through Colby College in Maine (Abdulahi, 2023). Through innovative campus and community initiatives, such as developing an endowment for disaster relief for students and families (Engram (2020), the borders of institutional spaces expand and blend with the surrounding communities. This symbiotic bond, a positive outgrowth of a shared pandemic experience and a recentering of the human resource frame, can also enhance a sense of community on campus.

Campus Spaces

New construction and renovated physical locations can merge human connection and campus architecture if created with belonging in mind, as Alexander et al. (2020) encouraged. They noted permanent restrictions in occupancy and residence halls with larger common areas and smaller single bedrooms. As a resolution to the potential for isolation, Trawalter et al. (2021) suggested expanding the availability of inclusive, iconic public spaces and encouraging use of them. Symbolically, spaces can have exponential value for the student experience as places one passes daily convey a connotation of connection and home. Incentivizing the use of key spaces by providing resources such as food or special events in those places creates symbolism. For example, a first-generation college student office could host weekly community lunches or the wellness center could offer brief mindfulness meditation sessions in the campus center during exam week. Faculty can also be encouraged to use intentional spaces during their course experiences. For example, professors could offer office hours at locations and times to encourage student presence and connection in iconic spaces.

Going forward, Alexander et al. (2020) noted there will likely be broad architectural shifts in new campus construction due to the pandemic. They include larger spaces allowing for social distance as the lingering health threats emerge and vary for students, faculty, and staff. These architectural shifts include more prominent use of outdoor spaces where students and faculty are physically present on campus in active, open learning environments (Alexander et al., 2020; Pelletier et al., 2022).

In addition, Pelletier et al. (2022) promoted the need for improved hybrid technologies to blend physical and virtual spaces. With the new technologies comes the need for training to use them and deep consideration of how to embed them meaningfully within teaching and learning best practices. Blending options for in-person and virtual instruction, as well as capital projects that maximize indoor and outdoor gathering spaces, ushers in significant refocusing of resources for campus use of space – at a pace uncharacteristic of higher education (Goldstein, 2019). Further, campus boundaries are becoming more permeable and amorphous as they extend physically into surrounding communities and virtually into students' living spaces.

Virtual Spaces

Virtual campus spaces can also serve as symbols of belonging in myriad ways. For example, Bolman and Deal (2021) described symbolic frames as viewing the world more abstractly, allowing everyday encounters to take on more significant meaning. In this way, higher education can make resilience a symbol for itself in navigating the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic with its student body. Making shifts to best practices for explicit branding of remote programming with campus icons is a way colleges can bridge the connection between campus-based experiences and an online institutional presence.

We got a taste of virtual connecting through COVID-19, which has reshaped our vision of what is possible for accessibility and learning, such as for adult learners who have multiple competing priorities for their time (Gardner et al., 2022). In short, online learning is here to stay. Feelings of belonging can be fostered in online environments with practices that help to build a strong course community, such as assignments that require students to get acquainted with, respond to, and work with their peer learners (Nilson & Goodson, 2018; Petrin Lambert, 2024). Moore and Shemberger (2019) offered best practices for online teaching and learning that strengthen student engagement and social presence. They include developing connections between students through group problem-solving and promoting rich and frequent dialogue via video, audio, and narrative. For example, an introductory discussion forum can be designed to help students get to know each other at the very beginning of a course. Instructors can build upon this initial connection by creating pair and team assignments that require students to engage with each other regularly in real time. These personal interactions help students create a support network among their peers (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). Increasing belonging efforts also manifest in faculty outreach "as an extension of the institution and reflecting a message regarding the institution's commitment and belief in student success" (Roksa & Whitley, 2017, p. 335). For example, faculty can offer encouraging messages, timely constructive feedback, and mentorship in navigating college processes. Helms (2017) also urged White educators to explore implicit racial biases to decenter whiteness norms and avoid alienating BIPOC students. As higher education emerges from the hastened realities during the pandemic, there is an opportunity for a

renewed focus on conceptualizations of physical and virtual spaces that preserve and promote human connection and belonging.

CONCLUSION

The overarching advocacy of this article is to recenter belonging in higher education's use of space post-pandemic. This article is grounded in Bolman and Deal's (2021) frames of change, emphasizing the human resources frame: people, relationships, and by extension, belonging. Searle et al. (2021) extolled "(t)he interconnectedness and interrelationships between students, teachers, environment, and activities undertaken" (p. 342), which expands the notion of campus belonging as relational, beyond geography, into virtual realms and, most importantly, with each other.

Historically, colleges and universities have had to refashion themselves to meet social and environmental shifts to serve a more diverse student body. Temple (2018) documented the paradoxical relationship between higher education and its physical space, both actively shaping itself and being shaped by its students' needs and external demands. He, however, bemoaned the trend in higher education that what can effectively serve its students is often "not appreciated and not acted upon" (p. 135). On the other side of the pandemic, there is an opportunity to refashion physical and virtual space with belonging, and in turn, boost student success. As a result, many colleges are intentionally rethinking and reshaping the student experience. The goal is to make student connections on campus and virtually more engaging, worthwhile, and successful – while also helping colleges' persistence and completion rates. Only time will tell whether institutions will boldly and innovatively learn from the COVID-19 experience and reconsider their use of space to bolster a sense of belonging.

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