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**Feels Like Home:
On Campus Housing and Its Effect on Sense of Belonging**

Makenzie Joseph
Eastern Illinois University

ABSTRACT

There has been substantial research done on sense of belonging for college students. This study explored the on-campus experience of upperclassman on-campus residents at a mid-sized Midwestern university. This research was a qualitative study that examined the impact on-campus housing had on a student's sense of belonging and their intentions to reenroll in their institution. The findings of this study supported many of the previous findings in relation to on-campus housing and a sense of belonging, as well it presented new findings. Many different themes emerged such as the importance of faculty and staff relationships, institutional size, and personal and professional development. This research also saw the importance of connecting with others, convenience, and finding the right 'fit'.

Keywords: Sense of Belonging, On-Campus Housing, Connections, Convenience

DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to all the housing professionals who impact their students' lives by counseling, guiding, and educating them every day. You make a difference.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Chapter I

Introduction

“What is belonging?” we ask. She says, “Where loneliness ends.”

-Rivers Solomon, *The Deep*

Being able to discover one’s sense of belonging at their institution is a critical connection that can directly influence whether the student continues their enrollment at an institution, moves on to a different one or leaves higher education altogether. A sense of belonging, especially at college campuses, is a crucial part of the university experience (Staff, 2020). There is a significant positive change in the attitudes towards universities when students find their sense of belonging at their institutions (Bartle, Dorum & Pennington, 2010). “Understanding students’ sense of belonging to their campus communities represents yet another way to explore the influence of connectedness on their campus experience” (Johnson et al, 2007, p. 527). Finding what factors affect a sense of belonging will be beneficial for students and universities because not only will it allow students to feel connected with their campus, but it will also help the university with their overall culture and values by creating a positive environment for all its students (Cooper, 2009).

Recent budget challenges across the US have resulted in decreased revenue for many public institutions (Seltzer, 2017). Since its budget crisis in 2015, enrollment at most public institutions in Illinois have seen a decrease in the number of students that enroll every year (Seltzer, 2017). A student’s sense of belonging with their peers, academic, or campus is a critical aspect of their success at their institutions and their likeliness to reenroll (Strayhorn, 2018). This study will look at what students at a

midsized public university in Illinois perceive to be their sense of belonging and how it has affected their attitudes towards their university. This study will look at what insights participants have on the factors that go into their sense of belonging.

Students are able to find their sense of belonging in many ways during their time in college. On-campus housing often allows those students to find their sense of belonging through experiences with diverse peers (Supiano, 2020). These interactions have been linked to a positive correlation between their sense of belonging and their satisfaction with their institution (Supiano, 2020). On-campus housing also allows students access to many on-campus resources such as the library, dining areas, recreational facilities, and many more depending on the university (Johnston, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the role that on-campus housing has on a student's sense of belonging and if it affects their decision to reenroll at a midsize public university in the Midwest. The study will give more insight into what students believe contributes to one's sense of belonging and the students' perceptions of a sense of belonging and if on-campus housing contributes to how they develop a sense of belonging at their institution.

Research Questions

This qualitative study will look to identify the attitudes and perceptions of students in on-campus housing at a midsized institution and how these perceptions affect their desire to reenroll at their institution. The idea of how attitudes about their institution

affects a student's desire to remain at their institution will be investigated through the following research questions:

1. How do students develop a sense of belonging?
2. What factors impact a student's sense of belonging?
3. How does on-campus housing affect a student's sense of belonging?
4. How does a student's sense of belonging affect a student's intentions to stay enrolled at their institution?

Significance of the Study

This study is important as it will allow higher education professionals to more accurately assess their campus culture to determine if it is helping students develop a sense of belonging on the campus. While the departments that will most benefit from this study are Residence Life and the Admissions offices, other departments may also be positively affected by the study's findings. When universities understand how students create a sense of belonging, they can implement those strategies and see positive changes in the attitudes and culture of their school's population.

Limitations of Study

A potential limitation of this study is its generalizability. The study will use a small sample size of six participants and that sample may not be fully descriptive of all students' experiences. Another potential limitation may be the impact of external forces on students' perceptions. Each new entering class of students will define their sense of belonging in a unique way that may not necessarily share the same priorities as the sample group. Finally, there may be geographic factors relating to the expectations of the

students at the research site that are unique and different from other communities and parts of the county. While all of these potential limitations may impact the study's findings, there is still value in understanding this area of student belonging.

Definition of Terms

This section will define the following terms to provide a common understanding of terms that will be used throughout the research.

Sense of Belonging. “Belonging is a sense of fitting in or feeling like you are an important member of a group” (Belonging – Dictionary Definition, n.d.) In higher education, sense of belonging is when students feel respected, valued, accepted, cared for, included, and that they matter at their institution (Strayhorn, 2012)

On-Campus Housing. “Any student housing facility that is owned or controlled by the institution, or is located on property that is owned or controlled by the institution, and is within the reasonably contiguous geographic area that makes up the campus is considered an on-campus student housing facility” (US Department of Education, n.d.).

Summary

It is important for student affairs professionals to understand the impact of how a sense of belonging and the factors that impact how a student develops that sense of belonging affects the successful retention of students by an institution. By understanding the student's perspective, student affairs professionals can better design programs and strategies to be develop that connection with the institution to better support their students. Chapter II will provide a review of the relevant literature regarding sense of

belonging at universities, the factors that develop a sense of belonging, and how on-campus housing impacts a student's development of a sense of belonging.

Chapter II

Literature Review

It is a universal truth that every institution of higher education is different. Higher education institutions all have different missions, values, philosophies, programs, cultures, and those different elements impacts how students connect with, and succeed at, their chosen institution. This section explores the influences of on-campus housing, sense of belonging, campus involvement, and culture at universities in the United States. There is also a brief history of on-campus housing and its benefits to students in general.

History of On-Campus Housing

Before discussing on-campus housing, it is important to first understand the founding history of why there is on-campus housing and its purpose. Student housing began during the Renaissance when education became popularized (Bartlett, 2020). In 1452, Oxford University developed on campus housing known as “domus pauperum” for poorer students (Scholnick, 2013). In 1636, Harvard University started the first US residence hall system in the United States (Scholnick, 2013). The rest of the Ivy League soon followed suit (Scholnick, 2013) as did other colleges in the country as they were established.

The first universities in the United States were sponsored by Protestant denominations and were likely to be isolated in rural locations away from the city’s corrupting influence (Martin, 2019). Dormitories became necessary when local housing options lacked enough space for the numbers of students wanting to attend (Martin, 2019). According to Bliming (2020), “Residential facilities on college campuses expanded greatly following World War II with the enrollment of veterans, and in the

mid-1960s when the baby boomers began arriving on campuses.” College dorms become places that acted as an environment for young students to transition into adulthood (Martin, 2019). In America, universities, and the students themselves, have accepted that residence halls are an essential and integral part of the undergraduate experience (Martin, 2019).

In 1953, it became apparent that universities needed to increase funding to their on-campus housing (Scholnick, 2013). Many universities began to look for alternatives to increasing their housing capacity and some chose to convert hotels and trailer parks to be able to increase housing capacity (Scholnick, 2013). In 1972, universities gradually began transitioning residence halls into co-ed facilities and some institutions, namely Brown University, Stanford University, and the University of Pennsylvania, even offered unisex rooms and bathrooms as options for students (Scholnick, 2013).

There are many benefits to on-campus housing at universities. McCuskey (2018) finds that “...first year students living on campus reported higher quality interaction with other students when compared with off-campus students.” On-campus housing does not only benefit first year students, McCuskey (2018) states that seniors that live on campus were more engaged than their off-campus counterparts with advisors and faculty members. These high-quality interactions between students, their peers, and their faculty are linked to better learning engagement and ultimately more academic success (McCuskey, 2018).

Many universities have adopted a first year live on requirement for their students that require first year students attending college full time to live in on-campus housing with limited exceptions (Douglas-Gabriel, 2015). According to Douglas-Gabriel (2015),

“...colleges argue that living on campus is critical for students, especially freshmen, because it allows them to fully participate in all of a school’s activities, social networks, and academic support while fully immersing the student in the school’s culture” (page 1). Living on-campus also benefits students who are more likely to encounter issues on the academic and social front (Grove, 2019).

With on-campus housing, a student’s learning goes beyond the classroom. Residence halls provide a place to learn important life skills such as: resolving conflict with roommates, learning to live with people who are different than you, and building a living and learning community (Grove, 2019). Campus housing also allows easier access to beneficial facilities such as the campus library, recreation center, health center, and other campus resources (Grove, 2019). In one study (CB Experts, 2020) researchers found that living on campus for at least two years increases graduation rates and found that students were twice as likely to make the Dean’s List when they live on campus.

When it comes to housing and a sense of belonging, research on student development has found that students are more likely to succeed at their institution if they feel like they belong (Samura, 2016). According to Owolabi (2018), when a student finds their sense of belonging, they are more likely to be successful and this has a direct impact on retention rates. These researchers also suggested that in order for students to establish a sense of belonging in on-campus housing, it is important for residence halls to be inclusive of diverse backgrounds and to provide strong social support systems (Samura, 2016). “Moreover, the extent to which students who live in residence hall become socially integrated also serves as an indicator of student persistence” (Samura, 2016, p.1) Higher education professionals can intentionally address the need for a sense of

belonging within their residence halls by consciously developing traditions and rituals that promote values that are shared, and by curating collective identities among their residents to celebrate those values (Cooper, 2009). This collective identity within the residence hall will be able to strengthen student's affinity and affiliation with not only their hall but also their institution (Cooper, 2009).

Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging at higher education institutions is one of the most crucial factors in what makes students feel like they fit in with their campus (Strayhorn, 2018). A sense of belonging can be defined as the overall feeling of connectedness with a student's university (Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn (2012) states that connectedness can be measured through academic success, involvement, and school pride. At the end of the first year, students who report having a high sense of belonging do better academically than their counterparts (Staff, 2020).

Student involvement is one of the easiest ways a student can get a sense of belonging. Astin (1984) describes student involvement as the quality and quantity of physical and psychological energy a student devotes in their college experience. Astin (1984) stated, "The theory of involvement, on the other hand, emphasizes active participation of the student in the learning process" (522). Encouraging active involvement will therefore improve the likelihood that students will feel that sense of belonging with their campus and see the benefits of experiencing it.

Finally, another indicator of a sense of belonging is through expressions of school pride. "Every school administrator and teacher knows that school pride makes a school a

more positive environment....” (Meador, 2020, p.1). School pride can be something as simple wearing the institution’s t-shirt proudly, to showing up to a sporting event and cheering for your school. According to Varsity Bands (2017), “The research found that students with higher levels of school spirit also have higher average Grade Point Averages and are more likely to plan to further their education than students with lower school spirit” (p.1). A sense of school pride can be a significant factor in student retention rates.

Academic Achievement.

Ahn and Davis (2020) found that “Students’ sense of belonging is known to be strongly associated with academic achievement and a successful life at university.” Academic achievement can be measured by grade point average and overall happiness of courses offered at an institution. “It seems that sense of belonging to school may increase students’ expectations of academic success and academic responsibilities, which may increase students’ motivation to engage in academic activities. Academic success may be influenced by a competent level” (Abdollahi & Noltemeyer, 2018).

Academic success and a student’s sense of belonging often have reciprocal effects on each other. Greater academic success improves a student’s sense of belonging while students who had a better sense of belonging at their institution, had higher rates of academic success later in their college experiences (Staff, 2020). According to Laldin (2011) a sense of belonging is correlated to academic outcomes such as motivation, dropout rates, and academic performance. Faculty have a large role in creating a classroom environment where students can thrive and feel like they belong (Strayhorn, 2018). It is extremely important that faculty understand their role in retention because the

lack of faculty interaction has often been a reason for student withdrawal (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The ability to develop a sense of belonging at their institution plays a critical factor in affecting student retention (O’Keeffe, 2013).

Campus Involvement

On-campus involvement directly affects a student’s desire to continue their enrollment at an institution (Merritt, 2018). Involvement can benefit students in many ways and as long as students are not getting over-involved and participating in an appropriate amount of campus activities, students can develop leadership skills, increase personal and professional development, and even improve academic achievement (Yin & Lei, 2007).

There are many different types of organizational involvement on college campuses. The many different types include but are not limited to academic/professional, community service, multicultural, and many more (Florea, 2020). Academic involvement is the most common form of on-campus organizations across all college campuses (Florea, 2020).

Blau & Snell (2013), defined professional development engagement with undergraduate students as the level of their engagement with professional development opportunities. “It reflects career-related work preparation for ‘life after college’ and is a distinct, externally-focused component of student engagement” (Blau & Snell, 2013). A good example of this type of organization is one that allows networking opportunities and programs that allow students to workshop their professional skills.

Culture

Simplicio and Joseph (2012) state that a university's unique culture is cultivated through the institution's deep history and its traditions. This culture, however, is not static, but continues to develop and change through a variety of activities and actions that impact the institution. Simplicio and Joseph (2012) point out that

A university is like a living organism. At times it grows adding new programs, constructing new buildings, and hiring needed personnel. At other times it is forced to modify its focus by shedding obsolete policies, eliminating outdated curricula, and adjusting short term goals

Continuously evolving is the key to a university's success, because not only is the culture-changing, but the student and the technology are as well (Espinet & Maderer. n.d.).

Campus culture and tradition are important for students to create a sense of belonging to the institution (Simplicio & Joseph, 2012). One way to increase satisfaction with the educational experience is by having smaller student to faculty ratios and encouraging student/faculty relationships. Lee – St. John 2008, found that if a student is able to connect with their faculty and spend more time outside of the classroom with them, the student will be more satisfied with their institution and are more likely to become leaders on campus. Encouraging student and faculty relationships is one way to improve retention rates in higher education institutions.

Retention

Universities have been accustomed to investing in their student enrollment and recruitment. By improving retention rates and student success, higher education

institutions can generate financial benefits in more stable financial budgets (Sousa, 2017). According to Sousa (2017), “It is more cost effective to keep students who are already enrolled than to invest in recruitment efforts to drive up enrollment numbers” (p. 1). Retention efforts will not only improve the university financially, but also allow for flexibility to reinvest in student success programs that will allow for a higher return on investment (Sousa, 2017).

Many universities across the United States have conducted their own research with on-campus housing and its effects on retention. Bowling Green State University is one institution that has done so. According to Fischer (2019),

With the introduction of the new residence halls, Bowling Green saw a noteworthy increase in retention rates, from 69% in 2012 to 78% in 2015. While other changes also contributed to this rise in retention, campus leaders point to the new residence halls as a critical factor (p. 1).

While, these luxurious changes may have been a critical factor for some students, Bowling Green State University found that community-centric residence halls, rather than the new luxury ones, were just as important to retention when considering the needs and preferences of other students (Fischer, 2019). Finding out what unique factors of an institution affects students’ sense of belonging allows higher education professionals to improve campus communities to better support their students and their success at the institution.

According to a study done at Iowa State University, students indicated a stronger preference in returning to on-campus housing as opposed to off campus housing (Li,

Sheely, & Whalen, 2005). The study also found that student satisfaction with their residential experience has an impact on retention (Li, McCoy, Shelley, & Whalen, 2005). Residence halls provide more opportunities for students to take on leadership positions such as resident assistants, peer mentors, and hall government positions (Zeller, 2008). These types of positions, as well as other on-campus positions, tend to have positive results for students that include, but are not limited to, increase persistence at their university (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow (1943) examined the hierarchy of human needs and the priority of those needs in relation to one another. There are five levels in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and in order to focus on a higher level, a person must first meet the needs at the level below. The first, or foundational level is "physiological needs" which includes the basic needs necessary to stay alive such as clean air to breathe, food, water, clothing, and sleep (Maslow, 1943). The second level, "safety needs", focuses on protection from the elements, basic housing and shelter, and security, often associated structure, order, and control of their lives. Once this level is attained, a person can work on the third level, "love and belonging needs." These needs include those social relationships that include friendship, intimacy, and trust as well as the connections with others such as family or membership in groups or communities.

The fourth level of Maslow's Hierarchy (1943) is when individuals look for "esteem needs", those needs associated with one's dignity which includes achievement, independence, and mastery of skills as well as the need for the approval from others in the form of prestige or status. Once all of the needs at the lower levels of Maslow's

(1943) Hierarchy are met, individuals can then focus their attention on self-actualization. Self-actualization refers to the person's desire for self-fulfillment or for one to reach their full potential and be all that they can be.

Each person will have a unique meaning of what this might mean. In one case it might be a desire to be a parent, in another it might be expressed through athletics, and for another it might be painting pictures (Maslow, 1943). In a higher educational setting, it is imperative that a student has the foundational needs met in order to allow them to focus on the higher-level needs as they can affect their experience and success at their institution. This study will examine how a student's sense of belonging and their love and belonging needs intersect and how they assist students in working towards self-actualization.

Astin's Student Involvement Theory. In 1984, Alexander Astin studied the importance and impact of student involvement in the co-curricular life of the institution in their continued success in higher education. There are five basic assumptions that Astin (1984) found were key in looking at the impact of involvement. First, Astin argues that student involvement requires the investment of psychosocial and physical energy, meaning students have to put in their own effort to receive any benefit.

The second assumption is that involvement must be continuous, and that the amount of energy invested varies from person to person. While individuals may have different levels of energy in their involvements, the actual effort of making that investment is what is necessary for the student to gain from the involvement (Astin 1984). The third assumption of Astin's theory is that aspects of involvement may be either qualitative or quantitative. For example, involvement can be quantitatively measure

by the number of hours spent studying or qualitatively, such as does the student comprehend what they are gaining (Theory – Student Involvement, n.d.).

Fourth, what development a student gains from being involved is directly proportional to the extent to which a student is involved in the organization. The greater the investing into it, the greater the development they will achieve. And lastly, academic performance and student involvement are correlated (Astin, 1984). Students with greater levels of development see an increase in their academic performance in the classroom on multiple measures and in the primary objective of progression to graduation.

This theory is important for this study because higher education professionals play a very important role in making sure students are given the opportunities to partake in meaningful and developmental education practices in and out of the classrooms (Patton, Renn, Guido-DiBrito, & Quaye, 2016). The typical uninvolved student does not spend time on campus, does not partake in campus activities, neglects their studies, and has little connect with faculty members or their peers (Astin, 1984). While it may not be necessary for every individual student, creating the necessary sense of belonging provides a greater likelihood of that student's retention and academic success during their time at the institution.

Summary

In summary, it is important to look at all the factors that go into retention rates. Student affair professionals in particular need to be cognizant of these factors because it has a huge impact on their profession and because these professionals usually have direct contact with students they are able to improve the overall universities retention rates by

positively implementing these factors. Those factors include a student's sense of belonging, on-campus housing, involvement, and culture. Retention has been proven to improve the resource quality at higher education institutions which can lead to higher overall satisfaction for students. Retention is also a win-win economically for both the institution as well as the students. Chapter III will examine the methodology to be used in this study.

Chapter III

Methods

This qualitative study was designed to gain a better understanding of how undergraduate students perceive their sense of belonging at a mid-sized public institution of higher education. The study sought to identify the factors that go into those perceptions and the attitudes around undergraduates' sense of belonging and how much they attribute that to living in on-campus housing. This chapter describes the design of the study, sample, research site, the instrument used, data collection, data analysis, and the treatment of data.

Design of the Study

This study used qualitative methodology to gain rich information on how sense of belonging and retention connect for students through a series of one-on-one interviews with participants. The interviews were standardized as interview questions that are standardized helps to ensure that responses can be aggregated with consistency and that comparisons can be reasonably made among the responses from the participants (Christenbery, 2017). The study used a narrative analysis as it allowed for the explanation of what a sense of belonging means to the participants and how it affects the perceptions of their institution. Allen (2017) describes a narrative analysis as frames where the researcher can interpret stories that are being told or shared within the context of what is being researched.

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. With this type of interviewing, the interviewer will typically have a standardized interview guide with a set of questions but based on the tendency to wander from the guide, follow up questions can

be used to expand on participant responses (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). There are many benefits of semi-structured interviews and those include the participants being able to freely express their experiences on their own terms while also allowing a standard set of questions to be asked of all participants with the flexibility to ask follow up questions based on those responses (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Semi-structured interviews are also able to provide reliable, comparable qualitative data (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Research Site

The research site for this study was at a midsized university located in the rural Midwest of the United States. This institution enrolls approximately 7,800 students with roughly 4,600 female and 3,200 male students. Student racial demographics at this institution include approximately 61% white students, 14% black students, and 12% Hispanic or Latin while the remaining 13% make up other ethnicities. The institution has eleven residence halls, two apartment complexes, and a Greek housing complex with an on-campus population of approximately 2,000.

Participants

Six undergraduate students were selected to participate in this study. These students have all attended the institution for at least one year so they were able to speak about both their experiences with on-campus housing and with finding a sense of belonging or not. Participants were invited through an email sent to all upperclassman who currently live in on-campus housing. Once selected to participate, participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identity.

The first participant, Anna has lived on campus for two years, however, she is a junior by credits. Anna has a lot of involvement on campus; she is in a sorority, a desk assistant in one of the residence halls, and is involved in a housing organization.

The second participant, Emily has lived on campus for three years. She is a junior in college. She is involved in two organizations on campus: a religious organization and hall council.

Jack, the third participant, has also lived on campus for two years, however, is a junior by credits. Jack is involved in a housing organization, he is a desk assistant in one of the residence halls, and has a job with his major's department.

The fourth participant Kevin went to a community college and transferred to the research site. He is a senior. He was briefly involved with hall council; however, he is currently involved in Student Government.

Lucy, the fifth participant, is a junior. She has lived on campus for three years. She was previously involved in a religious student organization and she is currently a desk assistant in one of the residence halls and is involved in an honors fraternity.

The final participant, Max, has lived on campus for two years, and is a junior by credits. He is a hall council president in a residence hall.

Instrument

This study used semi-structured interviews to collect information as a way of talking and listening to others in a systematic fashion (Croix et al., 2018). Pre-thought out questions were used to help make the interview go smoother and allow there to be structure to the conversation while keeping flexibility and allowing the researcher to seek elaboration based on the participants' responses. Semi-structured interviews,

“...guarantee that the same topic is dealt with in each interview but leaves open space for personal interpretations and association from the interviewee” (Croix et al., 2018).

Interview questions can be found in the interview protocol in Appendix A.

In order to help guide the interview, this study used open-ended questions. These open-ended questions attempted to gain a better understanding of the participants' background and their personal experiences at the institution. This style of interview also allowed the participant to add additional comments to previous answers during the interview. Singer and Couper (2017) found that open-ended questions open up the opportunity to find a greater depth of responses from participants.

The Researcher as an Instrument

The researcher is one of the most important instruments in qualitative research (Roller2020). The researcher can be heavily responsible for the outcome of the interview process and it is crucial for the researcher to build a rapport with their participants to get accurate information from the interview. The researcher's role is to interpret the information provided and circumvent any possible bias during the data collecting (Roller & Says, 2020). To minimize any such bias, this study made sure that questions were posed in a fair, non-leading manner. Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews for accuracy as well as using triangulation of findings by verifying with existing data sources and check for alternative explanations (CampusLabs, n.d.).

Data Collection

The data was collected through a semi-structured interview with each participant. Each interview took approximately 45 to 60 minutes and were held through video

conferencing software. The interviews were audio recorded on two devices and a transcription made afterwards which was provided to the participant to review for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed, the data was coded. Coding is defined as the process of finding relationships and themes through organizing or labeling qualitative data (Medelyan, 2020). Coding these themes made sense of information gathered (Yi, 2018). Thematic coding involves identifying passages of text that may repeat a pattern or show a common theme to finding meaning in the participants' responses (Mountain & Marshall, 2019). The interview transcripts were analyzed through the lens of the theoretical framework to identify meaningful findings.

Treatment of Data

Data from the study is being kept private on a secure USB drive located in the researcher's possession in locked storage. The recordings were transcribed, and aliases provided for each participant and kept separate from the transcriptions and recordings to protect the identity and privacy of the participants. The data will be stored on two password protected USB drives for three years and then deleted in accordance with IRB policy.

Summary

The qualitative design was used to investigate the experiences of upperclassmen on their experiences with sense of belonging. This chapter outlined the design of the study including the instrument that was used, a description of the research site, and the selection of the participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each

participant and then transcribed. Once complete, transcriptions were coded and analyzed for themes around the research questions. Chapter four will present the finding from the participant interviews.

Chapter IV

Results

This chapter details the results of six semi-structured interviews that aimed to answer the research questions: How do students develop a sense of belonging, what factors impact a student's sense of belonging, how does on-campus housing affect a student's sense of belonging, and how does a student's sense of belonging affect a student's intentions to stay enrolled at their institution? The participant's answers to these questions will be analyzed for themes or significant findings throughout the chapter.

Research Question #1: How Do Students Develop a Sense of Belonging?

This research question examined how students develop a sense of belonging and what specifically students look for in their institution to develop that sense of belonging. When participants were asked about what they have done to develop their sense of belonging, their responses fell into two primary themes. The participants identified the value of making connections with faculty and staff members. The participants also identified how they experienced both personal and professional development from with these relationships.

Faculty and Staff Relationships. All of the participants shared that they had a positive relationship or interaction with at least one faculty or staff member at some point in their college career. Three of the participants had even mentioned having positive interactions during their on-campus tours prior to being enrolled at the research site, and one of those interactions was with the president of the university. Emily stated,

I spoke with President [Redacted], and he was so great. And so, I think that he was the cherry on top out of all it. I'm just like, okay, I think this is where I need to go. This is where I need to be.

Having a positive connection with faculty and staff can be impactful even for students prior to their enrollment with the institution. Emily also shared, "And so, I feel that coming in, I was already talking to some faculty, and I was already talking to the president of the university." She emphasized that "they all welcomed me."

This was important to Emily in finding a connection to the campus despite her outward projection of confidence. "I feel that even though I'm an extrovert, sometimes I can be a bit nervous because of coming up to certain people that I'm not really familiarized with, and well familiar with." She ended with "I feel that since day one, the faculty have all been like, 'hey, if you need us, we're here'. And 'we're welcoming', and 'don't be afraid'." Emily shared that it was a variety of individuals who helped shape her experiences including her religious organization, "So, I feel that the faculty here have all changed me from organizations with Pastor [Redacted]. And with the staff in the in the castle. I feel that they've all been helpful in many, many ways." The support and connections students were able to make with an institution's faculty or staff appeared to play a large role in the participant's ability to feel a sense of connectedness to their campus.

Max seemed to really have made a lot of faculty connections and shared how one professor made a real impact with how they interacted with the students,

He sends us motivation videos and messages us every day. And we have to meet him every couple weeks to sort of track our progress. And I think that there's a lot

of professors on campus that do that. And I just think that you wouldn't see that at a giant university, like U of I or Purdue or something like that. You just don't have that sense of connection.

These students really valued the connections they made with their faculty and can attribute those connections to their ability to find that sense of belonging. Jack expressed similar feelings about one of his professors,

Meeting him and connecting with him, once again, has helped me feel more comfortable in the department. Because I don't feel like a stranger in my own department... I feel like I belong, like I can walk into the history department office, and I go see Dr. [Redacted] and Dr. [Redacted] would be like "hey", or Dr. [Redacted] would be like, "hey", so I feel very homey, I guess, is the word.

Jack stressed a number of positive aspects about the staff and faculty he has connected with and how he believes they have helped him through his college experience.

Anna also was able to make a strong personal connection with a faculty member. She shared,

When I went on my tour, junior year, and it was one of the faculty in the psychology department, Dr. [Redacted], and he gave me a full tour of the psychology department... And then, second semester, my freshman year, I was in his bio psychology class, and he said that he had two more openings for research. And I had no qualifications for it, but I was 'what the heck' clearly no one else was super interested. He approved me doing research without asking any questions.

Later in the interview she shared “I think having that connection, being able to have that kind of experience, I don't think if I if I went to U of I or even ISU, that would have happened.” She shared that she believed that the size of the institution had a huge impact on her opportunities to grow as a student. She made a similar comment later in the interview,

You know, you don't get to meet people that way. I think that the fact that you can really make these connections, really get involved, and it's not overwhelming. I feel like at a bigger school you're just gonna get really lost just because you don't know where you're going, but you just feel like a dollar sign.

Emily however did not identify any connections to her specific faculty members, instead she talked about a similarly positive connection that she had with her academic advisor instead and how that relationship made it easier for her to feel connected.

The final participant, Kevin, did not discuss any particularly impactful faculty relationships though he did address them when asked about what he would suggest to do for someone who was thinking about leaving their institution. His suggestion was:

First off, I would talk to someone in the department, maybe your chair, or maybe the Dean of the College, that you're a part of, something like that. Because if someone's having troubles with a professor or in their classes, they should at least try to take certain avenues to see if they can get the help they need.

Kevin still emphasized that for those students who cannot connect with or learn from their professors, that they should still seek help from other faculty who may be able to assist the student.

Personal and Professional Development

Finally, the participants all talked about the developmental nature of the relationships that they had with faculty and staff members at the institution. Each of the participants was able to find a developmental aspect of their relationships with members of the university community. Jack had many examples of how he has either personally or professionally grown during his time at the institution. He spoke of one occasion where he was able to personally connect with a staff member in the housing department who encouraged him to grow as a student leader within his organizations. Jack shared,

...the faculty see things in you that I don't see myself. Like, I'll have a 30-minute meeting, where **[mentor]** tries to get me to do something, because she knows I can do it. But in my mind, I can't. And she knows that I'm not perfect. She wants to see me succeed. I think that's another thing that really is great about this about **[Institution]** is because nobody, I've not met a single faculty member, a single staff member who doesn't want to see you succeed.

Jack attributed his success and his happiness at the institution to his mentor and the connection he made with her. She was also able to push Jack into developing both personally in his life and professionally in his work as a student leader. Jack also mentioned that he felt connections through the organizations that he joined that helped him meet all kinds of different people. “And also, the connections in general, I'd say not just friend connections, but professional connections. And with my advisors and just people from different institutions, because of housing.”

Max had similar experiences with the connections that he made which have significantly impacted him. He shared,

I think those would probably be the most impactful faculty members I've met so far. I think [**Hall Director**] has been really, he's really sort of helped me along in the process, having our one-on-ones for Hall council, or whatever. Last year, like nine times out of 10, they weren't really about hall council for the most part.

We've sort of talked about all of those issues at the end, but he would always just make sure I was doing well and how classes were going and work and stuff like that. So, as I said, you just wouldn't see that much at a bigger college. So that's, yeah, those are people, the people that impacted me the most I think, so far.

Max also shared how the faculty and staff at his college had a lot to do with his personal development. Max spoke about a few specific programs where he was able to learn about social justice and diversity topics that aided in his personal development. He shared a stories about going to programs in his residence hall,

I attended the program about Martin Luther King and I had a very interesting discussion with [**RA 1**] and [**RA 2**], and a few of the other residents about systemic racism in America...when we had that program that [**RA 1**] hosted about the LGBT community, it was just something that I had never been subjected to coming from a small town of conservatives... So I really liked the informative programs, as opposed to the fun programs. I like being forced to think critically about stuff that I wouldn't in the past.

Max also talked about how the programs put on by student leaders in his residence hall made him grow and develop as an individual. He mentioned how these programs forced him to think critically and be exposed to new ideas relating to social justice and inclusion. He did not think he would get that type of exposure if he were to live off-campus.

Anna also was able to find a staff member who she identified as having a role in her personal development. She shared, “I know as well, because her **[Former RA]** and **[Current RA]** have all been the reason that I can pinpoint certain memories and each of them that have helped me grow as a leader.” Emily also mentioned how she was able to build a relationship with her RA and they were able to do activities like go to the library, the student recreation center, and even eat a few meals together.

Faculty and staff at the research site had a real impact on the development, both personally and professionally, of the participants. These professionals were able to build a relationship with the participants, which in turn, helped with the students’ overall sense of belonging and their connectedness to the campus. Many of the participants attributed this happening to the institution’s size, noting that they did not think they would have had the same opportunities at larger universities.

Research Question #2: What Factors Impact a Student’s Sense of Belonging?

This research question looked at the factors that impact a student’s ability to develop a sense of belonging. When the participants were asked what factors they believed allowed them to feel more connected with the campus, the common theme that the participants all identified was getting involved with organizations on campus. As a

result of making these connections, the participants shared that they felt that they had a better connection with the overall community on the campus.

Connecting with the On-Campus Community

Each participant spoke highly about their on-campus housing experience and the institution's campus community as a whole. Jack was a student who chose to live in on-campus housing because he did not feel like commuting every day even though he lived fairly close to where he chose to attend college. He shared:

Very soon after being on campus, I made friends. I made connections, and I just really loved it. And the sense of being close to people and I'm an extrovert, so being in a residence hall with people interacting with people on a daily basis is great to me.

Lucy shared similar sentiments about the benefits of living on-campus or with other students. She shared,

I just really love the environment of being on campus. It's less of a walk, don't have to drive. And again, it's just nice to have other college students surrounding you and not some townies that have no idea what you're going through.

Max agreed with the other participants about the benefits of living in on-campus housing and its ability to help make life better. For him, it was because it provided a variety of opportunities to connect with others, "it's honestly nice to have people around that I can interact with at random." He added:

I don't particularly enjoy being alone...And also, living on campus, I have access to the dining halls, the library is right next door. So, it's kind of the best spot to be on campus, because it really helps stay in tune with things that are going on on-campus. It's easier to get a hold of people. I can just go see a professor if I want to or if I have any problems, I can just tell the RA or the ARD and I don't have to address a landlord or something like that.

Max felt that living on-campus was beneficial in many ways but he emphasized the value of being part of a community. Max added how his roommate quickly became his best friend and how he was even able to find a girlfriend as a result of living in the residence hall.

Along with Max and Lucy, Anna and Kevin had nearly identical answers when they were asked if they gained anything from going to the programs presented in their residence halls. They agreed that they were able to meet new people they would not have met if they lived off campus. "I've met a lot of residents that I probably wouldn't have met otherwise. So, I think that's a great way to get to know different people", Anna shared. Kevin indicated that living on-campus provided "More of a sense of community. I felt I got to know people on that floor a lot more." The most important thing that stuck out to the both of them was that sense of community. Kevin stated that he was able to get to know everyone on his floor and know a thing or two about everyone.

All of the participants had been able to make connections while living on campus. When asked what has made their experience at the research site the most memorable, four of them all had similar responses. Jack simply replied, "The people. That's an easy question. Not just friends, but staff too. And faculty." Likewise, Kevin responded,

My relationships I've made with people, especially through Student Government, and such, because everything else has been pretty good, sometimes great, sometimes less than great. But the time I've spent in student government, it's not only opened my eyes to a lot of different perspectives, but it's also given me leadership opportunities. And I've made some incredible friends.

Max and Lucy also agreed that the connections they made with others made their time at the university the most memorable.

Overall, connecting with on-campus organizations and people was the biggest factor and impact in these participants sense of belonging. It made making friends and other connections much easier which made them feel connected to the campus as a whole. Many of the participants indicated that they believe that their on-campus involvement allowed them to meet people they would not have met otherwise and gave them a more positive perspective of being a member of the college community.

Research Question #3: How Does On-Campus Housing Affect Student's Sense of Belonging?

Looking at how on-campus housing affects the participant's sense of belonging, the major description that participants talked about was how students were able to have a feeling of 'home' in their residence hall in one form or another. While the participants were all able to gain this feeling, they did so in different ways but still achieved that sense of 'home' that made them feel that they belonged and were a part of the campus.

Feeling at “home”

One theme that came up repeatedly in the interviews were how participants either alluded to the institution feeling like ‘home’ or directly stated it. Lucy and Emily mentioned the institution feeling like home the most out of the participants. After the first interview question, Lucy shared, “I just felt really at home when I came to visit, and so [that feeling] was really my big decision winner there, I would say.” She later talked about how the organizations she was involved in on campus made her feel warm. “...I just I feel like they really want me to be there. Which is not something I’ve ever felt before.” She had similar thoughts when her RA encouraged her to go to in-hall programs. “It was nice to know that someone wanted me to be somewhere.”

Emily was enthusiastic about, and saw the value in, living on-campus because she lived back home during the last semester as a result of the COVID restrictions and she was very clear about how excited she was to be living back on-campus.

I feel like it's all worth it today because you get to create bonds that you're never gonna break after college. Like you create so many bonds and you meet so many new people through different races and different ethnicities and things such as that. So, I feel that I love being on campus.

Emily also talked about how the people she has met on campus and in her organizations have been a great support system while being away from friends and family. She explained, “they're all like a family away from home.”

Max had the following to say how his experience, “I didn't really have a solid support system growing up. So, it's nice to have one here.” Lucy described how now that

she has been able to find a sense of belonging at the institution, she goes home less frequently. And when she does return home for holiday breaks, how badly she wants to return to campus and see her friends. Anna believes that her on-campus living arrangement is what is best suited for her and what she wants from the college experience.

I chose [**Residence Hall**] because of the Honors College since it has the honors housing, and it was such a really relaxed environment. I actually really liked living in [**Residence Hall**], and I still do... And then, I'm now working as a DA, I've got a really good community in [**Residence Hall**]

Facilities for students appeared play a part in the student's ability to build a sense of belonging with their institution. Many of the participants noted that they did not think they would have had the opportunity to use as the facilities that on-campus offers if they were to live off-campus. Max especially stressed this point when he described how it is more affordable for him to live on-campus, as well as the advantage of being so close to on-campus facilities. "I have access to the dining halls [and] the library is right next door. It's kind of the best spot to be on campus, because it really helps stay in tune with things that are going on on-campus." He also enjoys living on-campus because if he has an issue with his living situation, he is able to speak with a Resident Assistant or a Hall Director instead of addressing a landlord. When asked what facility he uses most frequently, he didn't just have one. He listed the library, the recreation center, the technology support center, and the student success center as facilities that he regularly frequents. Max believes if he didn't live on campus, he wouldn't have access to these facilities.

Similarly, Kevin, had a lot to say about campus facilities as well. Kevin holds a position in student government and works on campus as well and he found that living on-campus would give him direct access to his office. For Kevin, he found that living on-campus was the overall best choice. He shared, "If I get an apartment, sure, it could be cheaper, but at the same time, I also have to worry about food and I don't really drive so it was more beneficial in my mind to do housing on-campus." When asked about what his favorite thing was about living on-campus, Kevin had two answers, "The fact I'm close to all my classes. That's what's really important, and internet access. At my permanent address, I don't have internet." Kevin's comments described how he really values the physical benefits to living on campus.

According to the rest of the participants, the library appeared to be the most frequently used or visited facility on campus. Emily thought that the library's resources are very beneficial to everyone because many students do not have functioning laptops, and the library and its many computer labs are able to provide students with the help they need. Emily shared,

Two days ago, I was trying to get into a quiz, but my laptop just started acting up out of nowhere. So, I went to library. And I feel that whenever you're having an inconvenience, especially with schoolwork, or your laptop or any type of technology issue, go to [the] library. I feel like the library is going to help you to stay focused, stay grounded. And well, for me personally, it helps me stay focused.

These participants were able to create that 'homey' feeling for themselves in many different ways. Whether they had different people who made their on-campus

living feel like home, or felt the resources and facilities provided them with that feeling, the participants all felt very strongly that they would have not felt that degree of support and connection if they had lived off campus.

Research Question #4: How Does a Student's Sense of Belonging Affect a Student's Intentions to Stay Enrolled at Their Institution?

Research question four investigated how the participants' sense of belonging affected their willingness to stay enrolled at their university. The consistent answer that was presented was how there was no real consideration about transferring, even if it did cross their mind a few times. One of the biggest reasons that all of the participants touched on as driving their decision to stay was the size of the institution and how much they attributed that to their happiness with the research site.

Transferring Schools

For many of the participants, transferring institutions was never a serious thought. While during difficult times, it may have crossed a few of their minds, none of the participants indicated that they gave it any real consideration. When asked if they had known anyone who either transferred or thought about transferring, all of them disclosed that they had known at least one person. Two of the participants shared that the reason for those that they knew who withdrew from their institution was due to personal reasons that did not have to do with the institution or their ability to find belonging.

Lucy however, did have a friend who transferred because of reasons relating to the research site. She stated, "I think it was, their whole purpose was just they didn't feel like they belonged here." When asked what the main difference between them and her

was, she shared that she believed the difference was due to the connections that she had made,

I think that I do have a handful of communities. Not only because of the organizations I'm in, but because of the connections I have made within my building [and] within other buildings. And yeah, I think the adjustment was a lot easier because of that.

This appeared to be a common sentiment among the participants that having multiple communities that they connected with helped them feel that they belonged.

Size

A second theme among the participants related to their impressions and thoughts about the size of their institution. Many of them noted the class size was a huge selling point in their decision to enroll at the research site and how they don't feel like "just a number" at their university. Jack shared how some of his friends who attend much larger schools have to buy a buzzer for classes and buzz in when they have an answer to the professor's question. Jack shares, "I'll raise my hand and they'll call my name. So, you're not a number here. You're an actual person. I think giving everyone that sense of individuality is great." Max also thinks having a smaller community is a strong factor in his ability to find a sense of belonging. "If I had to pick one positive thing, it would definitely be the amount of connections you're able to make at sort of a small community university. It's all community oriented."

When asked what about the institution that she is most proud of, Anna had a lot to say. She mostly attributed her fondness with her college to the smaller size of the

institution and she thought that its size positively affected her ability to find a sense of belonging.

Honestly, I think the fact that it's a smaller school is something I'm really proud of. Because even though we only have like 8000 students, it's a really close-knit community. You actually get to know your professors and they actually learn your name. My dad taught classes at [larger university] and he has like 100 students in one class. You know, you don't get to meet people that way. I think that the fact that you can really make these connections and really get involved and it's not overwhelming too. I feel like at a bigger school you're just gonna get really lost just because A) you don't know where you're going. But you just feel like a dollar sign...I feel like I'm actually a person here. I feel like I'm actually respected.

While these students did not ever seriously consider transferring colleges, they did see that having connections helped them to be happy and satisfied with their choice to enroll. A key factor in this was that they had selected an institution which was the right size for their personal needs and preferences. They were also able to give great comparisons to the experiences of friends and those they knew at larger schools and felt very strongly that they would not have gotten the same experience or be as involved if they went to a much larger school.

Summary

This chapter identified a number of important themes from all six of the participants regarding their ability to create a sense of belonging and their relationship

with on-campus housing. Research question one, identified the factors that attributed to their ability to develop a sense of belonging which included, creating faculty and staff relationships and the personal and professional development that came from these connections. Research question two looked at how the participants were able to create a sense of belonging, which primarily focused on connecting with on-campus community members. Research question three highlighted how living in on-campus housing affected the participant's ability to find a sense of belonging which was mainly the feeling of "home" and the use of other facilities on campus. Finally, the fourth research question identified how a sense of belonging affected their determination to continue their enrollment. These themes all centered around the connections that were made and the how the institution's size and approach to student contact made their educational experience what they were looking for.

Chapter Five will discuss the findings from this study and how student affairs professionals can use this information to better support college students. The chapter will also include implications for student affairs and higher education faculty and staff as well as recommendations for potential future research that can expand on the findings of this study.

Chapter V

Discussion, Recommendations, Conclusion

This qualitative research study used semi-structured interviews to look how students cultivate a sense of belonging with their institution by interviewing on-campus students at a mid-sized Midwestern public institution. The purpose of this study was to examine the different factors that attributed to a students' connectedness to their campus, as well as what factors went into their willingness to reenroll not only in the university, but in on-campus housing as well. There were six participants selected for this research study and interviewed with a set of questions (Appendix A) around the following research questions: (1) How do students develop a sense of belonging?; (2) What factors impact a student's sense of belonging?; (3) How does on-campus housing affect a student's sense of belonging?; (4) How does a student's sense of belonging affect a student's intentions to stay enrolled at their institution? This chapter discusses the findings of the study, recommendations for future student affairs professionals, and recommendation for future research.

Discussion

This research found many factors that play into a student's ability to develop a sense of belonging on their campus. Overall, it is clear that making connections with peers, faculty, and staff is a huge factor in the development of a student's sense of belonging. When students make connections, it allows them to develop personally and professionally and created that sense of community that made them not only enjoy their time at the institution but thrive in the educational environment. Additionally, students who develop a feeling of "home" find greater connections and the participants in this

study indicated that the fit of the intuition was a major factor in their decision to attend and remain at the university.

Connections with Others

The most important factor in developing a sense of belonging with a campus can be found in the connections that students are able to make with members of the campus community. These connections can begin as early as their first interactions with campus and include other students, administrative staff, housing professionals, and faculty. Believing that they can make these types of interactions are crucial to getting potential students to come to the institution, and for current students to continue their enrollment toward graduation. Being able to connect with others is a strong indicator of a student's ability to find a sense of belonging at college campuses (Lee-St. John, 2008). All of the participants in this study stressed the importance of these connections to their positive view of their 'fit' within the campus.

Making connections through involvement with campus organizations and offices, are some of the most valued connections and are very conducive in a student's ability to form a sense of belonging not only with the organization, but with the institution as well. Creating developmental opportunities through residential curriculum, clubs, and organizations offers a crucial element to a student's ability to create a positive sense of belonging. As described in Astin's involvement theory, the greater the investment into the source of their campus involvement, the greater the development they will achieve (Astin, 1984).

Convenience and Accessibility

Another theme that showed up was the research site was how the institution was able to provide ample conveniences to students living on-campus housing, something that was a major factor for the participants. This accessibility to facilities allowed the students to have all their needs met whether it be physical, academic, or recreational. Being in the heart of campus, students are able to have quick access to academic spaces, campus involvement, and other valuable resources that the university provides. This is important for institutions to cultivate because it ultimately was the deciding factor for students to persist their education.

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs shows that when the foundational needs are met, students are able to focus on higher level needs as they impact their experience at the institution. The students emphasized how they were able to get their basic physiological needs met while living on-campus, as well as to work on their love and belonging needs through involvement. This impacted their willingness to reenroll and continue to live on-campus. Students also clarified that the campus often provided better services, such as access to technology, that they did not get off campus so the benefits of staying on campus were even greater for the students.

Fit of the Institution

The ability to find fit at the research site seemed to be a big factor to many of the participants. Two of the participants initially attended because of its size, while others stayed because the size of the university was right for them. More than one participant stated how if they went to larger institutions, they were concerned that they would have

felt “like just a number” and would not have felt as valued or respected if they had attended a much larger school. Being able to find the right size institution for the student is imperative for their ability to enjoy their time at the institution and make the connections they want to make.

All of the participants made it known that they chose a midsized institution because it was the perfect size for them. While this may be true for them, it may not be true for others. Some students may prefer a much larger class size and ability to blend in with everyone else, while other students want to feel their importance and the value they bring to the university or classroom. Others may want something that is somewhere in the middle. That is why it is important for Admissions office to be descriptive on what incoming students can expect when it comes to institution size and class size and that might affect their learning, involvement, and experiences on the campus.

Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals

The findings in this research are important for student affairs professionals and housing departments to understand and be aware of in order to cultivate a sense of belonging in students primarily through their interactions with student directly and through the programs and services they provide. Based on the findings from this study, the following recommendations are made.

Understand their importance. It is crucial for faculty and staff to understand the importance of their role in connecting with their students. Each participant was able to identify at least one faculty or staff member that positively and significantly influenced their experience at the institution. Being able to understand how valuable that is and to

make efforts to connect with the students they interact with could ultimately make or break a student's experience.

Faculty relationships are one of keys to cultivate a student's sense of belonging. Institutions should also provide training to their faculty and staff on how to make positive connections with their students and how to make those interactions meaningful. It is imperative that professors are aware of the influence they have on a student's experience within the classroom and how it affects them.

Create developmental opportunities. One of the more common themes within this study was the participant's ability to grow and develop as adults. A recommendation with this discovery is for institutions to make sure there is a wide variety of clubs and other organizations for students to get involved with that promote some sort of personal development. Educational, professional, social, religious, and other groups are great types of organizations to meet this need. Participants were able to identify how each of their involvements had some sort of developmental aspect to them and how that was meaningful to them.

Facilities/Living On-Campus. In order to make their living space feel like home and create a sense of belonging, universities should create facilities that students are not able to get back home and to market how living on campus is more beneficial due to the greater accessibility to campus resources and the community it provides. Another recommendation is to make sure these facilities are up to date, usable, and to renovate old spaces in order to satisfy current on-campus students. These facilities can take advantage of the value of the spaces they provide, and offices such as Admissions and Housing can emphasize the benefits of on-campus housing. The proximity to classes, recreational

centers, dining options, and easy access to the library are all reasons students indicated were important in their decision to live in on-campus housing and they should be highlighted to potential students.

Recommendations for Future Research

This topic will definitely need to be continued to be researched in the future, as with every new generation, there comes new values and attitudes about what is important for the students to be successful. Future research ideas around this topic are based off the findings of this study and recommendations from the researcher. This study was qualitative so it may not represent the entire population researched. In addition, though not intentional, the participants in this were predominately white, with the exception of one person of color, who were also all highly to moderately involved with on-campus organizations. With this in mind, the following suggestions about potential future research topics are made:

A study specifically looking at the experiences of diverse students. This study could be expanded on by targeting students of color and looking at their perspective on their sense of belonging and their experiences with on-campus housing. This comparison will see how they differ from majority students and determine if there are different factors that should also be highlighted when helping students connect.

Involvement. Many of the participants had more than two student organizations that they were involved with. A study with participants who had little to no involvement and what motivates them to stay enrolled or live on-campus would enhance the literature on this topic.

Replicate the Study. This study could be conducted at other institutions as well. This would allow researchers to identify any differences for students at other types of institutions including large institutions, private institutions, and minority serving institutions. Do staff and faculty connections at those institutions hold the same degree of importance or are there other factors that are more important at these universities?

Conclusion

This study was intended to see how a student's sense of belonging was affected in relation to their decision to live in on-campus housing and to identify any other factors that assisted their ability to feel connected to their institution. The findings revealed that students highly value the personal connections they make when attending their institution, whether it be with faculty, staff, or their peers. This ability to connect was a major factor in finding the right fit for them. Students also value the convenience and accessibility to on campus resources that are provided to them through living in campus housing as it provides multiple avenues for creating connections that enable them to feel like they not only belong but are wanted and valued members of the campus community.

Providing opportunities and avenues for students to connect with one another, with faculty, and with staff members allows for the student to select different ways to find the best fit for their individual needs, a fit that reinforces that the institution appreciates and recognizes their uniqueness. Students who develop a clear sense that they do in fact belong to the campus or community tend to be more engaged, are more excited, and are more satisfied with their college experience (Strayhorn, 2018). By offering extensive programs and services that support students in their educational journey and by helping them make the connections to those resources, faculty, and staff members can be

a key factor in the student's ability to find the sense of belong that translates to success at the institution.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Looking back, when you were looking at where to go to college when you were in high school, can you describe to me the process you went through when you made your choice?
 - a. Did you consider other schools?
 - b. What was the factor or factors that made you decide to come here?
 - c. Would you have done things differently? If so, how?
 - d. What was your intended major?
 - i. Did that change? If so, why?
2. Students are required to live in on-campus housing their first year, but you continued living on-campus after that. Can you explain why you choose to stay in on-campus housing after your first year?
3. Have you gotten involved with any student organizations on campus?
 - a. What made you join this organization?
 - b. How would you describe your involvement in these organizations?
 - c. How do these organizations make you feel?
 - d. Have you ever been a part of an organization that you are no longer associated with? What was it that made you decide to end your involvement?
4. During your time here, have you ever considering transferring to another school or withdrawing from the institution?
 - a. Can you tell me about why you were considering this?

- b. What changed your mind?
5. Do you have friends who thought about leaving?
 - a. What do you think was the difference between their experience and yours?
 - b. What would you recommend to others who were thinking about leaving their institution?
6. Have you been able to personally connect with any of your faculty members?
 - a. Do you find this to be beneficial?
7. Have you had any academic struggles?
 - a. What helped you overcome these struggles?
 - b. What have you done to overcome these struggles?
8. Have you gone to any programs that were put on by your RA or Hall?
 - a. What was it that made you decide to attend?
 - b. What do you think you gained from going?
9. What is your favorite thing about living on campus?
 - a. What would you improve about on-campus living?
10. Have you been able to build a relationship with anyone in your residence hall?
11. Have you attended any sporting events on campus?
 - a. Looking back at it, do you think there was any value in going?
12. Is there anything about [Institution] that you are particularly proud of? If yes, what and why?
13. What facilities on campus have you had the opportunity to use?
 - a. Which ones do you use most frequently?
 - b. Do you think these facilities are necessary? Why?

14. If you had to identify a single factor or thing that most positively affected you in your time here at [Institution], what would you say that was?

Appendix B

Sample Recruitment Email

Dear Student,

My name is Makenzie Joseph, and I am a second-year graduate student in the College Student Affairs program here at EIU and I am conducting research for my Master's Thesis. I am looking for participants for my study that focus on how on-campus housing has effected your ability to find a sense of belonging. The only thing I need from you is that you have lived on campus for at least one full year and to have returned to on-campus housing. All those who participate in my study will be assigned a pseudonym to preserve your anonymity and protect your privacy. The study consists of an interview with me via video or voice call for approximately an hour. The interview will be recorded, and a copy of the transcript will be provided to you to ensure accuracy.

If you are interested in participating, or need any clarification, please do not hesitate to reach out to me at msjoseph@iu.edu to schedule a time for us to speak.

Thank you for your time!

Sincerely,

Makenzie Joseph

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH*On Campus Housing and its Effect on Sense of Belonging*

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Makenzie Joseph and Dr. Jon Coleman from the College of Student Affairs at Eastern Illinois University. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you have more than one full year of on-campus housing experience. There will be about four or five other participants in this study as well.

• PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study is designed to examine if on-campus housing and its facilities played a role in your ability to find a sense of belonging or a connectedness to your university.

• PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

Set up a virtual interview time with the researcher through Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or another online platform you are comfortable with. The interviews should take approximately an hour.

These interviews will be recorded. Your identity will be protected because I will change your name and any identifiers that may give away your identity.

One term you might see in this research is “sense of belonging”. That refers to when students feel respected, valued, accepted, cared for, included, and that they matter at their institution.

• POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Due to this interview being conducted online, I do not see any potential dangers to you, the participant. The only potential risk or discomfort I can foresee is being asked a question that may spark an unpleasant memory. None of my interview questions intend to do that, I feel they are all neutral in tone.

• POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

The benefits to this study are that you will help the next generation of college students. My findings in this research could help universities across the country to design their on-campus

housing and recruitment strategies to cater towards the students. Your perspective could help explain that.

• **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of changing your name and any identifiers. The recordings will be stored on two password protected USB drives to ensure your privacy.

• **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

• **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS NOTE:**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Principal Investigator: Makenzie Joseph

Email: msjoseph@eiu.edu

Phone: 217-581-2015

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Jon Coleman

Email: jcoleman@eiu.edu

• **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board
Eastern Illinois University
600 Lincoln Ave. Charleston, IL 61920
Telephone: (217) 581-8576
E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University 3 community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.