CREATING A CULTURE THAT INSTILLS STUDENTS’ SENSE OF BELONGING

YIELDS POSITIVE OUTCOMES

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the loving memory of my kind and gentle mother, Mary Christine MacDougall Flanagan, who taught me the importance of faith and family, and significantly, as it relates to this dissertation and my doctoral journey, the importance of education.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Dave, who has always guarded my dreams and visions. Dave and our children, Abby, Emily and Joey, provided the love and support that permitted me to complete this journey.
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Looking back, the coursework, reading, writing and research have become a blur. The indelible images seared in my memory are the professors who challenged and guided us, the members of my cohort whose intellectual curiosity drove the learning process, and the love and support I received from my family and friends. In the end, these were the greatest gifts.
ABSTRACT

CREATING A CULTURE THAT INSTILLS STUDENTS’ SENSE OF BELONGING YIELDS POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Elizabeth Cooner
Larry Moneta

Nine million students enroll in community colleges each year, but only about one fourth graduates in a timely fashion. Identifying factors associated with student success is of critical importance to students, colleges, and the nation. For this research, I examine factors associated with students’ sense of belonging that lead to student retention, an important indicator of success. Through the analysis of two sources of data—national findings from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement and qualitative research at three community colleges—I present a framework for understanding community college students’ sense of belonging. When defining belonging, students emphasize the importance of connecting with others and the comfort associated with fitting in, sharing experiences, and knowing others’ names. Students value communication with professors and peers and the commonalities of shared race, ethnicity or language. For some, belonging relates strictly to their commitment to secure a good education. More than demographic or academic attributes, students’ interactions with their peers and faculty are correlated with a strong sense of belonging. Students who frequently work with classmates on projects in or outside of class report high levels of belonging. Similarly, students with strong relationships with faculty or administrators have a strong sense of belonging. Faculty members can nurture students’ belonging
through a circular hub-and-spoke model, fostering inclusive environments among students, or through a linear model, mentoring individual students. By creating spaces that facilitate opportunities for students to gather, colleges can strengthen students’ sense of belonging. While the positive outcomes associated with building communities are abundant, assorted factors can function as detractors from belonging, including students’ competing priorities, in-group versus out-group animus, exclusivity, and some students’ reluctance to integrate into the college community. Students’ belonging is positively correlated with higher college satisfaction and with willingness to recommend their college to others. Once a sense of community is fostered, students collaborate with each other and with the faculty more often, spend more time engaged with the academic material, and achieve their educational goals more efficiently.
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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of Retention

With their reasonably priced tuition and open access policies, community colleges have opened doors of opportunity to higher education, yet program completion remains a significant challenge. Nine million students pursue higher education in the two-year, public sector each year, representing fully one third of all undergraduates (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019); however, only one quarter (25.4%) of first-time, full-time students graduates in a timely fashion, and less than 1.2 million degrees and certificates are awarded by two-year public colleges each year (NCES, 2019). Stated otherwise, millions of students embark upon the path of postsecondary studies in community colleges each year but fail to earn a credential. Although a fair share of community college students transfer to four-year colleges and universities, almost half (46.2%) of all students who initiate their studies in the two-year public colleges discontinue their studies without completing a credential (Shapiro et al., 2018).

As part of President Obama’s focus on renewing the American Dream, he identified college completion as a critical element in ensuring the global competitiveness of the United States (Ochoa, 2011). As community colleges strive to improve successful program completion among their students, retention rates (i.e., the proportion of students who continue their studies from the first to third semesters) provide a useful indicator of student success. After the first year of enrollment at public, two-year colleges, just over six in 10 students are retained (62.1%; NCES, 2019). Given the large share of students
served by community colleges, understanding factors associated with student retention and program completion is of critical importance to students, colleges, and the nation.

But student retention is a complex puzzle. Given the varied environments that produce students, they do not arrive at college as a tabula rasa (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). Some are better prepared academically or are more likely to believe that they can succeed. Others arrive at college with various challenges and then must untangle a web of confusing steps in a new environment to successfully navigate college. In terms of competencies, community college students often require remediation or developmental courses to pursue college-level work (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2016a). Additionally, many community college students have to balance work and/or family commitments with their studies, causing many to follow nontraditional enrollment patterns. Although external student commitments and insufficient academic preparation can create challenges for students, many of these student attributes are beyond the control of colleges, as they have only a limited means of responding to such challenges (Tinto, 1999).

Nonetheless, there are many aspects of students’ collegiate experience where colleges and universities have the ability to foster student success. Student engagement finds itself “at the intersection of student behaviors and institutional conditions” (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 8), and colleges are able to exercise control over the settings they create. Institutions of higher education can influence some of what transpires within classrooms, laboratories, and dormitories (Tinto, 1999). Four areas play a particularly important role in supporting retention: (a) information, (b) support, (c) involvement, and (d) learning.
Specifically, students need clear information to guide them in fulfilling academic requirements along a “road map to completion” (Tinto, 1999, p. 5). They also need support related to academic, social, and personal challenges. Support that integrates other aspects of the collegiate experience is correlated with student retention (Tinto, 1999). Similarly, student involvement is very important, since frequent, positive contact with faculty, staff, and other students leads to higher student persistence (Tinto, 1999).

The final and most important element that drives student retention is learning (Tinto, 1999). In this study, I sought to understand the ways in which learning communities foster positive student outcomes in community college students.

Building a sense of community can help students become integrated into the larger college community, which is particularly important for students at risk of feeling as though they do not belong. Of course, any student could suffer from feelings of isolation, but feelings of isolation are a particular risk for students who are the first in their family to attend college (i.e., first generation) and for those who commute to college, study part time, transfer into a college, are older, and/or have low socioeconomic status. Colleges and universities must find ways to integrate students into the larger college community to ensure that students with visions of becoming a college graduate are able to make that dream a reality.

Engagement Leads to Student Success

Extensive research has demonstrated the link between the degree to which students are actively involved in educational activities and successful student outcomes, including persistence in college and graduation (Astin, 1984; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Kuh
Trained as sociologists, Tinto (1975) and Spady (1970) formed retention theories grounded in social connections. According to Tinto’s theory, students must separate themselves from their precollege community, transition to college, and then integrate into two spheres of college life: (a) the academic realm, and (b) the social realm. The extent to which students integrate into college life serves as a predictor of student retention and graduation (Tinto, 1993). Students’ decisions to leave college are a function of their individual experiences and attributes as well as the academic and social environments of the college or university (Jessup-Anger, 2015; Tinto, 1993). This combination of academic and social integration serves to connect students to the college or university (Tinto, 1993).

Before Tinto’s (1975) integrationist theory, Spady (1970) worked from Durkheim’s theory of suicide to develop a theory related to student attrition focused on student attributes and institutional influences. He measured the impact of colleges by five variables influencing students’ decisions to depart higher education: (a) academic performance in terms of grades, (b) intellectual development, (c) support of peers/friends, (d) normative congruence, and (e) social engagement within the college community (Spady, 1970). The interplays between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation provided critical elements in understanding students’ academic engagement (Spady, 1970).

Student Involvement

In contrast to Tinto’s (1975) theory that relied on student departure from their former attachments, another theory of student engagement was built on the notion of
student involvement. This theory linked student involvement in college experiences to various positive outcomes, including retention (Astin, 1975, 1984; Pascarella, 1980; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980; Terenzini, Lorang, & Pascarella, 1981). Involvement was defined as the time students spent engaging in various activities and the quality of effort expended (Astin, 1984), or later, as the “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (Astin, 1999, p. 518). Serving as the founding director of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, Astin relied on longitudinal data from more than 20,000 students, focusing in particular on freshmen. With the emerging power of big data, this research focused on the impact of various types of institutions on students, concluding that students’ peers serve as the most influential factor in students’ development (Astin, 1993). As part of the report, Involvement in Learning (National Institute of Education, 1984), the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education recognized the importance of student involvement and collaboration with their peers in terms of educational attainment.

Others have developed the concepts presented in Astin’s (1984) theory of involvement and Tinto’s theory of integration (as cited in Berger & Milem, 1999). For example, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) collaborated over several decades to understand challenges confronting college students, particularly factors influencing student persistence. Although these two researchers evaluated several measurement scales, including students’ interactions with peers and with faculty, faculty members’ concern for teaching and students’ development, intellectual development, and
commitment to the institution and their goals, they emphasized the importance of student-faculty interactions on student retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). Ultimately, the greatest impact on student retention correlated with the total time students spent engaged in the college community, especially when such engagement was supported by student involvement in academic, interpersonal, and co-curricular activities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980).

These two professors reviewed more than 2,000 articles to develop their 800-page work, *How College Affects Students* (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). However, the ability to generalize their work to community colleges was cast in doubt, as “this vast landscape of papers and reports yield[ed] relatively few concrete insights . . . [on] institutional policies on community college retention and completion” (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005, p. 7). Significantly, even the authors noted that most of their work was premised upon a belief that students were relatively homogenous (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998, p. 162). Reflecting further, these authors pointed out that an assumption of homogeneity among college students was warranted up until the early 1970s, “when higher education shifted from meritocratic to egalitarian admissions policies” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998, p. 162).

The same assumptions about the homogeneity of the student population provided the foundation for Chickering’s pioneering student engagement research, which focused on young, middle-class, White males (Chickering, McDowell, & Campagna, 1969). Chickering and Gamson (1987) built on earlier student engagement work to identify seven high-impact practices in higher education: (a) student-faculty contact, (b) active
learning, (c) prompt feedback, (d) time on task, (e) high expectations, (f) respect for diverse learning styles, and (g) cooperation among students (Kuh, 2009). Kuh (2009) built upon this model to develop his list of 10 high-impact practices, which included first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning/community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects (Kuh, 2008). Kuh recently extended this list of initiatives to also include e-portfolios (Kuh, Gambino, Bresciani Ludvik, & O’Donnell, 2018).

The egalitarian policies spawned increases in diversity among the college student population, which led Tierney (1992, 1999) to question the validity of Tinto’s retention theory, particularly the notion that students had to discard their former cultural identity to integrate with students in the majority of campuses, suggesting that such assimilation would pose a particular challenge for students of color (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017). Other researchers (Attinasi, 1989; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992, 1999) similarly cast doubt on Tinto’s theory, suggesting that it failed to spell out processes for student persistence, particularly for students of color (Museus et al., 2017). Tierney (1992) questioned whether students should be expected to conform to college norms that could conflict with their own culture (Kuh et al., 2006). Other researchers focused on the varied withdrawal decisions for racially and ethnically diverse student populations and found that, although some variables differed, social engagement was also significant for the non-White student population (Nora & Cabrera, 1996).
Psychological Factors Influencing Student Attrition

Although Tinto approached the topic of student attrition from a sociological perspective, others considered the psychological factors influencing students’ decision to leave college (Bean & Eaton, 2000). Building on theories linking attitudes, beliefs, and behavior, psychological theories of departure suggest that students’ intention to leave college served as the strongest predictor of actual departure (Bean, 1983; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992). Some students may feel as though they fit in at an institution, even if they are not fully integrated academically or socially (Bean & Eaton, 2000). When compared with students who responded to stressors by engaging in academic “avoidance behaviors” (e.g., avoiding studying), those who actively used academic “approach behaviors” (e.g., asking questions in class) were more likely to become academically integrated in their college community (Bean & Eaton, 2000). Similarly, students who employed social approach behaviors, such as attending parties, were more likely to become socially integrated than were those who practiced “socially avoidant behaviors,” like working off campus or returning home on the weekends (Bean & Eaton, 2000).

Two salient psychological dimensions of attrition theories include students’ self-efficacy and locus of control. Some researchers focus on self-efficacy (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Olsen et al., 1998) as the most significant personality trait associated with student success (Kuh et al., 2006). Self-efficacy is a psychological theory that posits that individuals’ perceptions of their ability to successfully accomplish a particular outcome lead to greater self-confidence, thereby fostering subsequent goal achievement (Bandura,
In other words, like *The Little Engine That Could*, if you believe you can do something, you can in fact do it. Self-efficacy, which heightens students’ motivation to integrate, is positively correlated with student retention (Bean, 1983; Bean & Eaton, 2000).

Locus of control provides an alternative psychological approach to retention theories, linking internal attributes (e.g., personal aptitude) or external factors (i.e., those outside the control of the individual) as explanatory variables for particular outcomes (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Weiner, Heckhausen, & Meyer, 1972). Individuals with an internal locus of control believe that they hold the key to their personal success, while those with an external locus of control assign responsibility to factors beyond their control. These attribution models are directly linked to attrition, as some theories ascribe responsibility for college departure to students’ attributes (e.g., insufficient academic preparation), while other theories focus on factors beyond the students’ control.

**How Institutions of Higher Education Influence Student Retention**

Kuh (2009) defined student engagement as “the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (p. 683). Ultimately, “what [students] do during college—the activities in which they engage and the company they keep—can become the margin of difference as to whether they persist and realize their educational goals” (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 3).

In his recent work, Tinto (2015) shifted his focus from an institutional perspective (i.e., seeking to improve student retention and graduation rates) to that of students, who
do not want to be *retained* so much as to *persist* in their studies. The distinction for an educational institution is that retention reflects those individuals studying at the same institution, while persistence refers to students who continue pursuing higher education, although not necessarily at the same institution. Recent research has focused on the importance of measuring success from students’ perspectives (i.e., in reference to personal growth and the development of positive peer and familial relationships) rather than from institutional perspectives (i.e., program completion and achievement as measured by grades; Coates, Kelly, & Naylor, 2016; Naylor, 2017). Students who persist tend to be motivated—that is, they believe they are capable of achieving their goals and feel a sense of belonging within their educational community (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NAS], 2017).

**Students Vary in What They Bring to College**

Drawing on Kuh’s (2001) work, Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie (2009) suggested that student engagement consisted of two components: (a) the effort students expend in their studies and activities that result in positive outcomes, and (b) the method in which institutions structure learning opportunities to encourage student participation. Significantly, these authors found an association between higher levels of student engagement and student perceptions that institutions are “inclusive and affirming, and where expectations for performance are clearly communicated and set at reasonably high levels” (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, p. 413). O’Keeffe (2013) linked various engagement theories, noting that students’ interaction with faculty is associated with greater academic
achievement (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996), greater integration into the university (Milem & Berger, 1997), and an increased sense of affirmation (Kuh, 1995).

**Power of Collaboration/Building Community**

While assorted barriers to college completion exist, and many challenges may impede student program completion, the importance of cooperation among peers and contact between students and faculty dates back to Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) research on high-impact practices in higher education (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Long before this research, the value of interacting with others, and learning and reflecting as part of a community, was noted by Dewey (1916). This style of learning affords students the opportunity to provide and receive feedback from their peers (Kuh et al., 2018). Working or collaborating in small groups is an effective mechanism to build a network of support (Katz, Lazer, Arrow, & Contractor, 2004). Tinto (1997) explored the role of interactions within the classroom in influencing learning experiences among first-year students. In more recent research, Tinto (2015) advocated for institutions to provide a wide range of social groups so that students can find “at least one small community of students with whom they share a common bond” (p. 5). Improving students’ sense of belonging and connection has become a priority in institutional strategic plans. A case in point is Monash University in Australia, which created a program to increase students’ sense of belonging and connection (McFarlane, Spes-Skrbis, & Taib, 2017). Consistent with findings in research conducted by Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, and McKay (2012), this plan relied upon peer relationships to increase student engagement, participation, and inclusion, thereby improving students’ sense of belonging (McFarlane et al., 2017).
Engaging with other students in and outside the classroom has positive impacts on students’ persistence and on their motivation to learn.

Many researchers have documented the importance of college students’ relationships with peers, faculty, staff, family, and mentors in fostering positive outcomes in terms of their satisfaction and persistence (Astin, 1977, 1993; Kuh et al., 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Significantly, the benefits derived from participating in a cohort, a learning community, or some other group often provide social support, thus enabling students to more effectively deal with challenges they confront in their postsecondary studies, which ultimately leads to persistence and graduation (Tinto, 2015). Tinto (2015) linked students’ self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceptions of the curriculum to their long-term persistence, noting that social support is a critical element, particularly for first-generation, low-income, and part-time students, as well as for those who have additional responsibilities beyond the campus.

**Sense of Belonging**

The focus on a student’s sense of belonging as a critical factor in retention traces its roots to Chickering et al.’s research in 1969, when he studied issues of identity as they relate to higher education. Several researchers have linked the importance of students’ sense of belonging and student success (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; O’Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). Others have concluded that feeling disconnected is a critical factor in students’ decision to withdraw from an institution (O’Keeffe, 2013). At the First Year Experience program at Queensland University of Technology, O’Brien et al. found that assorted factors lead to students feeling disconnected from their college, such as studying
part time, working long hours, having family or other responsibilities, and online learning (as cited by O’Keeffe, 2013). Building a sense of belonging can help students become integrated into the larger college community, which is particularly important for students who perceive that they have challenges with assimilating.

Tinto (2015) addressed the forces that align to shape an individual’s sense of belonging, which is derived from both their past experiences and their sense of how others perceive them. Drawing on the work of assorted researchers (e.g., Boysen, 2012; Boysen, Vogel, Cope, & Hubbard, 2009; Chavous, 2005; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Stebleton et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2008, 2012), Tinto conveyed the importance of campus climate in shaping students’ perceptions about whether they feel out of place. Importantly, colleges and universities can foster a sense of belonging among their students by promoting shared academic and social experiences (Tinto, 2015). For example, institutions can create cohorts of students who co-register for two or more courses built around a theme or other forms of learning communities (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008a, 2008b). First-year seminars combined with learning communities can have a powerful effect on student outcomes, which extend beyond academic achievement and retention to include knowledge of diverse cultures and social responsibility (Chism Schmidt & Graziano, 2016). Administrators can also ensure that the institution has a sufficiently diverse faculty, administration, and staff that reflect the diversity of the student body, and that there are sufficient numbers of students in assorted subgroups so students can find a place where they belong (Tinto, 2015). Colleges and universities can encourage cooperative learning in the classroom and active learning strategies and can
promote diverse social groups and organizations so students can find one smaller community where they share a common bond (Tinto, 2015). By developing students’ sense of belonging—especially during the first year—colleges and universities can promote student engagement, which in turn encourages student development, learning, and completion (Tinto, 2015).

In addition to Tinto’s proposals, another student attrition model (Bean, 1983) focused on the impact of the institutions of higher education, holding that beliefs shape attitudes, attitudes shape behaviors, and behaviors signal intents. A student’s beliefs are affected by experiences with the institution, which then evolve into attitudes about the institution, which ultimately determine a student’s sense of belonging or “fit” with the institution. (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 13)

The way that students engage within the college community, as well as their perceived sense of belonging, can have lasting impacts on their academic success (Hurtado & Carter, 1996; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 2015).

A recent What Works? Student Retention & Success study commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England pointed to the critical role played by students’ sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012). Although this study set about to understand student retention and success, Thomas (2012) came to appreciate that “success’ means helping all students to become more engaged and more effective learners in higher education, thus improving their academic outcomes” (p. 10). Noting that efforts to improve student engagement are often focused on a narrow swath of students and housed outside of academic affairs, Thomas (2012) reviewed seven studies in the United Kingdom and concluded that belonging is a critical element in student retention and success.
Significantly, belonging can be defined from psychological and sociological perspectives (Thomas, 2012). The psychology of belonging relates to students’ sense of being connected to the institution, “feel[ing] personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the [school] social environment” (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). Belonging pertains to a sense that relationships are stable, ongoing and founded upon emotional concern (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In the educational arena, Goodenow described sense of belonging as:

students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual. (as cited in Thomas, 2012, p. 13)

**The Sociology of Belonging**

From a sociological perspective, the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) explored belonging through lenses focused on cultural capital and habitus. *Cultural capital* is class related, as it pertains to the ways in which individuals speak, behave, and interact as learned at home and at school. *Habitus* refers to individuals’ inclination to behave in ways that reflect their cultural capital (Thomas, 2012). Educational institutions also have a particular habitus that is based upon practices that influence their communities. As a result, students whose habitus is not aligned with their college or university may feel as though they do not fit in, which could lead to early withdrawal from their studies (Thomas, 2012).

Social class is strongly related to students’ sense of belonging, which has an impact on their “social and academic adjustment to college, quality of experience at
college, and academic performance” (Ostrove & Long, 2007, as cited in Soria & Stebleton, 2013, pp. 140). Campus climate can also have an impact on feelings of belonging experienced by students of color, particularly Latino (Hurtado & Carter, 1996) and African American students (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). In fact, sense of belonging is considered an essential component of student persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Although some students may experience “feelings that they don’t belong, feel rejected, and may not adjust to normal academic challenges associated with college life” (O’Keeffe, 2013, p. 606), with some students at particular risk—racial/ethnic minority students, students who are academically disadvantaged, have disabilities, are on probation, or have low socioeconomic status (Heisserer & Parette, 2002; O’Keeffe, 2013). Turner reported that there is the risk that students from racial/ethnic minority groups may “never achieve a sense of ownership or feeling like a full member of the academic community” (as cited in Kuh et al., 2006, p.14). Esien et al. noted that the “education system itself” (as cited in O’Keeffe, 2013, p. 605) may lead to students’ feelings of being disconnected. Nonetheless, there can be an association between institutions’ financial pressures, which lead them to increase class sizes, expand student-to-teacher ratios, and/or rely on online learning resources, and the resulting feelings of isolation or disconnection that students may feel (O’Keeffe, 2013).

Impact of Intrapersonal Competencies

With educational attainment in the United States lagging behind other countries, the NAS commissioned research in 2017 to understand the impact on student success attributable to intrapersonal competencies (e.g., self-management and regulation of
behavior and emotion) and interpersonal competencies (e.g., communicating with others). Examples of these competencies include “teamwork, communication skills, academic mindset, and grit” (NAS, 2017, p. 2). The NAS researchers did not find evidence of research focused on interpersonal competencies but identified several studies that addressed intrapersonal competencies related to student success. These competencies included conscientiousness, sense of belonging, growth mindset, utility goals and values (i.e., personal values linked to achieving desired goals), academic self-efficacy, intrinsic goals and interest, a desire to promote well-being among others, and a positive image of oneself in the future (NAS, 2017). They noted that cost-effective interventions targeted at developing sense of belonging, growth mindset, and utility goals and values have demonstrated some success for underrepresented minorities who are at particular risk of failing academically (NAS, 2017). Observing that self-reported assessments were the most common means to capture intrapersonal competencies, these authors cautioned about limitations associated with such research, including a respondent’s desire to present oneself in a more favorable light, to respond positively, to respond at the extreme end of a scale, or to compare oneself with peers (NAS, 2017). Nonetheless, they concluded that further research on this topic is warranted, particularly because most of the research on this topic has focused on the four-year sector: “Very little experimental evidence is available on the possible relationship between intra- and interpersonal competencies and students’ success in community colleges” (NAS, 2017, p. 4).
First-Year Programs

As students embark on their postsecondary journeys, they need to mount various hurdles to successfully complete their program of study. Not only must they master an understanding of administrative requirements, ranging from selecting courses to applying for financial aid and paying their tuition bills, they also need to develop a rhythm of life that balances their academic demands with their social, physical, and spiritual well-being. Without a proper balance in these realms of their lives, students can develop feelings of isolation that are detrimental to their long-term academic success. To help students transition to college life, many colleges and universities have adopted first-year experiences, including new student orientation, first-year seminars, and programming related to time and stress management. These first-year experiences permit students to strengthen academic and social bonds inside the classroom and beyond (Tinto, 1997).

Measures of Student Engagement

Various surveys of student engagement are administered to students at two- and four-year institutions. George Kuh, Chancellor’s Professor Emeritus of Higher Education at the Indiana University School of Education, served as the founding director of the Center for Postsecondary Research and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The success of the NSSE in understanding student engagement led to the University of Texas at Austin creating the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE, 2016a), which measures student engagement among students in the two-year, public sector (Community College Center for Student Engagement, 2016).
Researchers have relied on the results generated by the NSSE and the CCSSE to link student engagement and academic performance. For example, Carini, Kuh, and Klein (2006) found an association between student engagement and critical thinking outcomes, noting that certain institutions were more effective than others in converting the power of student engagement into positive learning outcomes. The CCSSE provides a rich database with responses from hundreds of thousands of community college students across the country, which is useful in understanding their academic experiences, their level of engagement, and their satisfaction with assorted aspects of their college experience.

**Conclusion**

Tinto (2006-2007) succinctly stated, “It is one thing to understand why students leave; it is another to know what institutions can do to help students stay and succeed” (p. 6). As Tinto (2006-2007) noted, “What is needed but . . . not yet available . . . is research that documents the common elements of successful program implementation in different institutional settings that lead to program institutionalization over time” (p. 10). There remains a void in the literature of precisely what aspects of college communities help to foster student retention. Given the importance of ensuring not only access to higher education, but also degree completion, research that strengthens the understanding of strategies that community colleges can implement to improve student retention have the capacity to improve outcomes for millions of students across the country each year.
CHAPTER 2 – METHODS

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand how communities improve academic and social success among community college students. To achieve a complete understanding of the complex issues surrounding student communities, this study takes a double-pronged approach. The first phase of the research relied upon the quantitative analysis of a national dataset, which includes three years (2014-2016) of student responses to the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). The quantitative research identifies demographic and academic traits associated with students’ sense of belonging, as reported in the CCSSE. Variables that are examined include gender, age, race/ethnicity, marital status, first-generation status, and enrollment in developmental courses at the institution.

The second phase of the research consisted of semi-structured interviews with 24 students and 12 members of the faculty, administration, and staff at three community colleges located in the Mid-Atlantic region: Riverside Community College, Canyon Community College, and Joshua County Community College. Pseudonyms have been assigned to protect the identity of the colleges—as requested by one of the colleges.

The research questions guiding this research are noted here:

1. How do community college students define “sense of belonging”?
2. Which community college students are more likely than others to report a sense of belonging, based upon demographic and academic attributes?
3. How do community college students’ interactions with other students, with faculty members, and with their academic subject material impact their sense of belonging?
4. How do students experience belonging in community colleges?
5. What factors detract from students’ sense of belonging?
Research Approach

This study relied on a mixed-methods approach to address these research questions. The quantitative phase of the research was based upon analyses of a national dataset of more than 106,000 records from the CCSSE to identify which community college students are most likely to develop a sense of belonging. Additionally, the CCSSE gathers a good deal of information on student engagement, academic performance, and demographic characteristics, which are analyzed in conjunction with the findings on students’ sense of belonging.

The qualitative inquiry complemented the quantitative findings, lending another perspective to the data. This phase of the research entailed interviews with 24 students and 12 administrators, faculty, and staff to gain a better understanding of students’ sense of belonging.

The triangulation of methods contextualized the phenomenon under study, thereby “enrich[ing] our understanding by allowing for new or deeper dimensions to emerge” (Jick, 1979, p. 604). Using careful procedures to gather reliable and valid qualitative data, I interpreted the data creatively and cautiously and reported findings in concise and transparent ways (Locke, Silverman, & Spirduso, 2009). For this phase of this research, institutional review boards provided their approval, and then interviews were conducted with 24 community college students, including a diverse sample of students, to gain a broad range of perspectives. Student participants signed informed consent forms to confirm their understanding of the voluntary nature of their participation (i.e., participants may choose whether or not to answer each question and may
discontinue the interview at any point), and the ability to assign pseudonyms, if they wanted to protect their identity. As an incentive, student participants were provided $20 gift cards. Personal interviews were also conducted with members of the faculty, administration, or staff at each college who shared their perspectives on students’ sense of belonging.

After recording all interviews electronically, Temi software was used to transcribe the interviews. The next step entailed uploading the transcripts to NVivo, where verbatim responses were reduced to codes to facilitate analysis of the findings.

In the research report, the quantitative and qualitative findings were analyzed thematically. The CCSSE results that speak to students’ sense of belonging are illuminated by references to belongingness that were made by students, faculty, and staff. This information is supplemented by verbatim responses from the interviews that address various aspects of student engagement and student/faculty interaction.

**Sample/Study Participants**

The quantitative phase of this research relies on analyses of secondary data drawn from the CCSSE. This dataset consists of more than 106,000 records from a national sample of community college students who have participated in the CCSSE over three years. The Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin provided permission to use this dataset, which was uploaded into SPSS, a statistical analysis software package, for analysis.

The qualitative research included one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with 24 community college students and 12 members of the administration, staff, and faculty
(whose names have been changed). At all three institutions, I provided student participants with a $20 gift card to incentivize their participation in this research effort.

**Data Collection**

I relied upon various strategies to ensure the internal validity and external reliability of my study. First, I created a data management plan to support the meaning-making process and to facilitate formative data analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). This plan was both structured and also fluid and flexible (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). I used a digital audio recorder to record the interviews with faculty and staff verbatim, supplementing these recordings with software, which permitted the direct transfer of spoken word to text. The goal of this technique was to ensure that all of the study participants’ verbatim responses were available for analysis.

From the outset of data collection, I developed codes for the categorization of data, which I updated regularly throughout the research process. I reflected on preliminary codes and refined the study protocols early on and throughout the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). Relying on axial coding, I clustered these codes into themes (Ravitch & Carl, 2015).

**Data Analysis**

I relied upon the quantitative research to extract from the CCSSE data descriptions of the students who reported the highest level of belonging. Specifically, I used SPSS to run statistical analyses on correlations between community college students’ reported sense of belonging and assorted demographic (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, and age) and academic variables (e.g., enrollment in developmental courses and
first-generation status). Relying on cross tabulations of the CCSSE results, correlations were noted between students who reported the highest level of belonging (i.e., a score of 7 on the 7-point scale) and their interactions with their peers and faculty and engagement with their academic studies.

In my analysis of the qualitative findings, I continually sought disconfirming evidence to ensure that I challenged the themes emerging from the data. Additionally, I periodically wrote memos reflecting on my research to maintain a record of assumptions I made and questions I clarified throughout the process (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). See Appendix C for the protocols for the qualitative interviews with faculty, administrators, staff, and students.

I incorporated thick description into my analysis of the qualitative data to set the context and perceptions of participants (Locke et al., 2009) and to capture the characteristics of the physical space and study participants with rich details (Creswell & Poth, 1997). This thorough and detailed account of the findings maintained fidelity to participants’ perspectives (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). Relying on dialogic engagement encouraged me to refine my analysis of the data, while taking care to minimize the intrusion of my assumptions in the analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). I was aware of power asymmetries in the data and careful about the risks of functioning as an interpretive authority on the data, given that study participants are the experts of their own lived experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). I juxtaposed the data to identify tensions that supported or challenged theories (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). As findings were linked and
themes were finalized, I continued this iterative process until the research reached a point of data saturation, when no new or relevant information emerged.

**Researcher Positionality**

How does my identity as a researcher impact the process? (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a researcher, I maintained an awareness of my role in the study to honor and respect the sites and participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To that end, I acknowledge that this research is premised upon my positive experiences of participating in a learning community as a student, my observations of several universities’ successes with learning community programs, and my awareness of the success resulting from community college students’ participation in communities. In the spirit of sharing my potential biases (Locke et al., 2009), I recognize that I entered this research effort with a strong belief in the power of communities to unite students and to empower them to reach their academic goals. I had very positive experiences participating in the Honors Program that functioned as a community at a four-year university. Similarly, as a college freshman, one of my daughters participated in a living-learning community at her four-year university where she forged positive relationships. I believe low-cost strategies can be used to develop learning communities in the community college sector.

Based upon my experience working in higher education, I initiated this study believing that students who participate in college programs that form smaller groups of students (e.g., honors programs, athletics, and academic programs that foster communities) are more likely than others to form bonds with other students and
successfully complete their studies. Building a sense of belonging within student communities is a critical element of student success.

**Limitations**

Because the CCSSE dataset does not identify specific institutions, this study was not able to link findings from the CCSSE data with National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data on graduation and retention rates. Nonetheless, the findings that emerged from the CCSSE data provided keen insights into community college students’ experiences. The results of this research highlight positive outcomes associated with student communities, thus enabling college leaders to forge a path toward greater success among the students they serve.
CHAPTER 3 – FINDINGS

When students feel they are part of a community, their college experience is enhanced, and they are more likely to achieve academic success. As part of the process of building community, students develop a strong sense of belonging that fosters their academic success. In this study, I examined the ways in which communities and belongingness nurture success at community colleges. Findings based upon the results of the national Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) were illuminated by insights derived from interviews with students and with many individuals who interact with students in community college settings. Collectively, these results help to inform community colleges about student experiences associated with increased belonging that can improve student outcomes.

Belongingness cannot be considered in the abstract. It is essential to have individual perspectives to appreciate student experiences. Accordingly, interviews were undertaken with various constituencies at community colleges. Chief among them were students. But, students do not operate in isolation; they work with faculty, administrators, and staff. They also dedicate a great deal of time to their studies. In this study, I examined the relationships students have with their peers; with faculty, administrators, and staff; and with the academic material they are studying—all within a community college context. By exploring these facets of students’ experiences, a greater understanding of the elements that contribute to community college student success can be achieved.

This chapter explores factors that influence community college students’ sense of belonging. This is achieved by first examining quantitative findings from the national
CCSSE research. These results lay out differences in students’ sense of belonging segmented by students’ demographic characteristics, academic attributes, and three critical facets of students’ sense of belonging, based upon students’ engagement with: (a) peers; (b) faculty, administrators, and staff; and (c) academics. In this chapter, I then turn to qualitative research, introducing the study participants and then seeking to understand their definitions of sense of belonging. The research findings are animated by an examination of the context for community college student experiences. Next is a focus on student experiences with insights gleaned from student interactions with peers and faculty, as well as insights on their engagement with academics. The chapter concludes with an assessment of various factors that influence and/or detract from students’ sense of belonging.

**Quantitative Results From National CCSSE Database**

The quantitative findings were drawn from a national sample of more than 106,000 student respondents to the CCSSE. These survey results are intended to shed light on aspects of community college students’ experiences that are correlated with their sense of belonging. This section focuses on the identification of which students reported a sense of belonging; the role of family and friends; students’ interactions with peers, faculty, administrators, and staff; their engagement with academic material; various forms of support provided by their college; and students’ overall assessments of their college experience.
Which Students Reported a Sense of Belonging?

As part of the CCSSE, more than 106,000 community college students across the country evaluated the quality of their relationships with other students at the college by providing a rating of 1 to 7, where the outer limits are defined as 1 = Unfriendly, unsupportive, sense of alienation to 7 = Friendly, supporting, sense of belonging (CCSSE 2016). The survey instrument does not use text descriptors to define the values of 2 to 6; those values are simply numeric. Just over one quarter of community college students (27.4%) rated the quality of their relationships with other students 7, the highest value on the scale. Slightly fewer (26.4%) provided a rating of 6; one fifth (21.3%) rated their relationships with other students a 5; 16.5% assigned a rating of 4, and fewer ascribed ratings of 3 (4.9%), 2 (2.4%) or 1 (1.1%; see Figure 1).

For the purpose of this analysis, comparisons were made between subsets of students who assigned ratings of 7 to the quality of their relationships with other students, representing the highest level of belongingness.

**Demographics.** To understand differences in students’ belongingness, this analysis focused on demographic segmentation of the findings. Based upon assorted demographic characteristics, there was little variance in belonging ratings between the groups. There are, however, a few minor exceptions: women were somewhat more likely than men to assign the highest belonging rating (29.7% vs. 24.3%), as were Native Hawaiian\(^1\) (37.7%) and Hispanic students (29.2%). Perhaps surprisingly, students who are married (33.9%), age 25 or older (33.5%), or first in their family to attend college

\(^1\) NOTE: The sample includes 265 Native Hawaiian students; exercise caution in interpreting this finding.
Figure 1. National CCSSE results: Students’ ratings of sense of belonging on 7-point scale. This figure illustrates students’ ratings of relationships with peers. Data used with permission from the Center for Community College Student Engagement, The Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2016, The University of Texas at Austin.

(30.8%) were somewhat more likely than others to report a sense of belonging.

International, non-native speakers and developmental students differed only marginally from their counterparts in terms of their sense of belonging (see Table 1).

**Role of friends and family.** As community college students pursue their academic careers, friends and family members have a strong influence on their experiences. Notably, students who perceive strong support from their family and friends are more likely than others to report high levels of belongingness at college. Specifically, almost four in 10 students (38.5%) whose friends are *extremely* supportive of their enrollment at college reported the highest level of belonging, compared with less than two in 10 students whose friends are *not very* supportive (12.8%), *somewhat* supportive (13.7%), or *quite* supportive (18.4%). Similarly, one third of students (32.8%) whose families are *extremely* supportive of their college enrollment assigned the highest belonging ratings, compared with less than two in 10 students *without* this level of
Table 1

Correlations Between Student Demographics and Strong Sense of Belonging

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Characteristics</th>
<th>Belonging Rating = 7</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Group Share of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
<td>44,097</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
<td>58,999</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>1,958</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>6,132</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
<td>12,615</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td>58,129</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
<td>18,289</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>4,622</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>67,428</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25+</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
<td>35,474</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Generation Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Generation</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>26,572</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>55,382</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Courses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>51,451</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1+ Developmental Course</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>51,415</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>17,245</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Married</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>85,909</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>86,571</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>16,629</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>5,930</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>96,666</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

31
support at home (16.1% to 18.9%). Fortunately, most study participants said their families (67%) and friends (50%) are extremely supportive of their attendance at the particular community college they attend (see Table 2).

**Students interacting with other students.** Students who frequently engage with other students—in the classroom or outside it—are more likely than others to report high levels of belonging, especially when compared with students who engage in these activities less often. Almost two in 10 students (17%) reported that they work very often with other students on projects in class. Importantly, among these students, four in 10 (42.0%) reported the highest belonging rating, compared with only two in 10 students who never (21.0%) or sometimes (22.2%) work on projects in class, and less than three in 10 students who often (27.9%) do.

Although few community college students work with other students on projects outside of class, those students who do collaborate outside of class were notably more likely than others to report a strong sense of belonging. Specifically, less than one tenth of students (8%) worked with their peers on projects outside of class. Among these students, almost half (47.6%) reported the highest level of belonging. Belongingness declines as the frequency of participating in group projects outside of class decreases.

Similarly, while few community college students participate in community service as part of their coursework, those who do this type of service are particularly inclined to have a strong sense of belonging. Notably, just 2% of survey participants work on class projects serving their community; however, almost half of these students
Table 2

**Correlations Between Support From Friends/Family and Strong Sense of Belonging**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Support</th>
<th>Belonging Rating = 7</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Group Share of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friends Support Enrollment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>4,089</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>18,471</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite a bit</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>28,769</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>51,828</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family Supports Enrollment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>2,990</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>10,709</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite a bit</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>19,850</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>69,256</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(48.4%) reported the highest level of belonging. Again, students’ belongingness declines with reductions in the frequency of such community service.

In a related vein, students who tutor other students reported high levels of belongingness, but few students provide such services on a frequent basis. Based upon the survey data, only 3% of students tutor their peers *very often*, yet more than four in 10 of these students (42.5%) reported the highest belonging ratings. Students who tutor their peers less often or not at all are less likely to report high levels of belonging. As evidenced by these findings, higher levels of student interaction with other students are correlated with increased levels of belongingness (see Table 3).

**Interactions with students of divergent race/ethnicity or beliefs.** The extent to which students interact with peers who differ from them—in terms of their beliefs or their race/ethnicity—correlates with belongingness. Students who frequently engage with peers whose religious, political, or personal beliefs diverge from their own tend to report
Table 3

*Correlations Between Interactions With Peers and Strong Belonging*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction With Peers</th>
<th>Belonging Rating = 7</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Group Share of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project w/ Students In Class</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td>12,352</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>38,848</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>35,175</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very often</td>
<td>42.0%</td>
<td>17,259</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project w/ Students Out Class</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>38,795</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>39,092</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>17,945</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very often</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
<td>8,143</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project Serving Community</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>77,186</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
<td>18,427</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>5,635</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very often</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
<td>2,510</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tutor Others</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>75,105</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>20,012</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
<td>5,975</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very often</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
<td>3,074</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Higher levels of belonging than students who do so less often or never. Specifically, among students who *very often* have serious talks with classmates with divergent views, almost four in 10 (38.6%) provided the highest sense of belonging rating (7). These belonging ratings are considerably higher than those reported by students who *never* (25.1%), *sometimes* (22.8%), or *often* (27.2%) have discussions with students holding opposing views (see Figure 2).
Figure 2. Belonging ratings of 7 by frequency of serious talks with students with different beliefs—religious, political, or personal. This figure illustrates correlations in belonging related to differences in students’ beliefs.

Similarly, students who frequently engage in serious conversations with peers whose race or ethnicity differs from their own were more likely to feel they belong at college. Among students who very often have serious talks with students of a different race or ethnicity, four in 10 (39.1%) provided the highest belonging rating. This proportion is notably higher than the belongingness reported by students who less often have such discussions; only about one quarter of them reported high levels of belonging (see Figure 3).

Students interacting with faculty. Students who frequently interact with faculty members reported higher levels of belonging than students with less frequent contact. This is particularly true when the students very often work with faculty on activities other than coursework (50.3% reported the highest level of belonging), or very often discuss class ideas (46.7%) or career plans (45.6%) with their instructors. Four in 10 students who very often receive prompt feedback from instructors or who very often work harder
than they thought they could to meet faculty expectations reported high levels of belonging (41.4% and 40.8%, respectively). Even something as innocuous as discussing grades with instructors is correlated with high levels of belongingness: Students who *very often* do so are twice as likely to report the highest level of belonging when compared with those who *never* discuss grades with instructors (39.3% vs. 20.6%; see Table 4).

Half of students who *very often* work with professors on activities other than coursework (50.3%) rated their sense of belonging a 7 ($R = 0.138$). The proportions of students with the highest sense of belonging ratings diminish as the frequency of working with professors decline: *often* (32.9%), *sometimes* (29.2%), and *never* (24.9%). Although students working with professors on activities other than coursework is positively associated with sense of belonging, only 3% of community college students *very often* do so, and another 8% *often* do (see Figure 4).
Table 4

*Correlations Between Interactions With Faculty and Strong Belonging*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction With Faculty</th>
<th>Belonging Rating = 7</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Group Share of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work w/ Instructors on Activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Not Coursework</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>24.9%</td>
<td>67,799</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
<td>23,217</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>8,361</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very often</td>
<td>50.3%</td>
<td>3,509</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss Class Ideas w/ Instructors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>45,354</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>38,291</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>13,736</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very often</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>6,283</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss Career Plan w/ Instructor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>9,015</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td>41,217</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
<td>32,295</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very often</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td>21,448</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prompt Feedback – Instructors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
<td>7,159</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td>33,557</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td>40,594</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very often</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
<td>22,516</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Hard – Meet Expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>9,770</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>37,150</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>37,274</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very often</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
<td>19,678</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss Grades w/ Instructors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>9,015</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>41,217</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
<td>32,295</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very often</td>
<td>39.3%</td>
<td>21,448</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Almost half of students who very often discuss ideas with professors outside of class (46.7%) reported high levels of belonging. These proportions decline as the frequency of such interactions lessen (see Figure 5).

Students’ relationships with instructors and administrators/staff. There is a positive correlation between students’ belongingness and their assessments of the quality of their relationships with instructors and administrators/staff. One third of students (33%) rated their relationships with instructors the highest. Of these students, more than half (56.9%) also provided the highest rating to their belonging with other students.

Similarly, there was a direct correlation between students’ relationships with administrators/staff and their sense of belonging with other students. Almost one quarter of students (23%) rated their relationships with faculty and administrators/staff a 7, the highest rating. Among these students, almost two thirds (63.0%) reported high levels of belongingness with other students. There is a strong connection between students’
Engagement with academic material. In addition to the importance of students’ interactions with their peers and various college agents, their belongingness can also be related to their focus on academics. For example, students who very often discuss ideas from class with family, friends, and coworkers were more likely than others to report high levels of belonging (40.1%). These belonging ratings decline with the frequency of such out-of-class discussions: often (28.7%), sometimes (22.4%), and never (19.8%; see Figure 6).

Students’ assessments of the degree to which they are challenged by their coursework are also correlated with their sense of belonging. Among students who provided the highest rating to the degree to which they are challenged to do their best

---

2 The scale ranges from 1, which is described as extremely easy to 7, which is extremely challenging.
work at college, almost half (45.9%) reported the highest belonging ratings. These proportions decline as the “challenge” ratings decline, until the two lowest points on the scale, where the belonging ratings start to increase (see Figure 7).

**College support of student success.** Students’ perceptions of college support are also highly related to students’ sense of belonging. Notably, more than half of students (54.1%) who reported that the college provides them with *very much* of the support they need to thrive socially assign belonging ratings of 7 ($R = 0.3000$). Among students who think their college provides *very little* of this type of support, less than two in 10 (17.1%) reported a strong sense of belonging (see Figure 8).

### Table 5

*Correlations Between Students’ Relationships and Strong Belonging*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating of Relationship</th>
<th>Belonging Rating = 7</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Group Share of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships w/ Instructors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>718</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>1,469</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>3,806</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>11,702</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>20,796</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>32,061</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
<td>34,150</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships w/ Admin &amp; Staff</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>3,297</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>4,626</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>7,951</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>19,314</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>21,976</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>23,577</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>63.0%</td>
<td>23,809</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 6. Belonging ratings of 7 by frequency of discussing class ideas with others outside of class. This figure illustrates correlations between students’ belonging and the frequency of their discussions of class ideas with others outside of class.

![Belonging Ratings of 7 by Frequency of Discussing Class Ideas w/Others Outside Class](image)

Pearson's $R = 0.174$; Significance = .000

Figure 7. Belonging ratings of 7 by extent challenged to do best work at college. This figure illustrates correlations between students’ belonging and the extent to which they feel challenged to do their best work at college.

![Belonging Ratings of 7 by Extent Challenged to Do Best Work at College](image)

Pearson's $R = 0.149$; Significance = .000
Figure 8. Belonging ratings of 7 by degree of support provided to help students thrive socially. This figure illustrates correlations between students’ belonging and the degree to which they feel supported by their college to help students thrive socially.

Similarly, among students who said their college provides very much help for them to cope with their nonacademic responsibilities of work and family, more than half (52.1%) felt a strong sense of belonging. This compares with less than one in five students (19.4%) who said that their college provides very little nonacademic support (see Figure 9).

Almost half of students (45.3%) who indicated that their college encourages very much contact among students who differ along economic, social, and racial/ethnic lines assigned the highest belonging ratings. This stands in stark contrast to students who perceived little encouragement of relationships among diverse groups of students. Specifically, among students who believed their college encourages very little or some contact among diverse students, less than two in 10 assigned the highest belonging ratings (16.8% and 19.4%, respectively; see Figure 10).
Figure 9. Belonging ratings of 7 by help coping with nonacademic responsibilities—work, family, etc. This figure illustrates correlations between students’ belonging and the frequency of receiving help coping with nonacademic responsibilities, such as work and family.

Figure 10. Belonging ratings of 7 by encouragement of contact among diverse students—economic, social, and racial/ethnic. This figure illustrates correlations between students’ belonging and their encouragement of contact among diverse students, based upon economic, social, and racial/ethnic differences.
Overall Assessments of College Experience

Students’ sense of belonging was also directly correlated with their likelihood of recommending the college and their overall satisfaction. More than nine in 10 community college students (93%) indicated they would recommend their college to someone else. Compared with students who would not recommend their college, those who would make a recommendation were twice as likely to report a strong sense of belonging (28.4% vs. 14.1%).

Students’ satisfaction with their college experience was also correlated with their sense of belonging. Significantly, almost half of students who considered their college experience to be excellent (46.4%) gave high marks to their sense of belonging, compared with just one tenth of students who said their college experience was poor (11.7%) or fair (12.9%) and two tenths of those who said their experience was good (20.6%). These findings point to the importance of fostering students’ sense of belonging, which was correlated with their willingness to recommend their college to other students and their overall assessment of their college experience (see Table 6).

Qualitative Research Results

The qualitative research was conducted with 24 students at three community colleges in the Mid-Atlantic region and with 12 members of the faculty, administration, and staff at those colleges. Some students were selected based upon their participation in an honors program or athletics, while others were randomly approached in various parts

Table 6

3 The names of the faculty, administrators, staff and students have been changed to pseudonyms to respect the request for anonymity made by one of the community colleges.
Correlations Between Overall College Experience and Strong Belonging

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ratings of College Experience</th>
<th>Belonging Rating = 7</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Group Share of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recommend the College</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>6,812</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>96,177</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction w/ Overall Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>1,660</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>14,815</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>54,649</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
<td>32,084</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of college campuses—in the commons, the library, or a seating area. This convenience sample was developed using personal requests to participate as well as snowball techniques, with an eye toward ensuring inclusion of students from various races, ethnicities, genders, and ages. The sample included students who were gathered with other students, as well as students who were sitting alone. Administrators and staff were invited to participate based upon their role in each institution. Specifically, faculty, administrators, and staff were targeted for inclusion in the sample if they had a role in facilitating student communities that foster a sense of belonging. These findings should be considered illustrative of experiences at community colleges, rather than representative of all students, faculty, administrators, and staff.

Introduction of Study Participants

The students interviewed as part of this study represent a diverse cross section of community college students in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Table 7 segments student participants based upon assorted characteristics. The largest numbers of
Table 7

Characteristics of Student Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Parent Education</th>
<th>Academic Major</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canyon County College</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalina</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>8th gr</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Basketball team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominga</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2+ Races</td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>Circle of friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emile</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Male Achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alejandro</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Married; Student Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paulette</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>Au pair; prayerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>11th gr</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Parents divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamira</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>Prefers Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua County Community College</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antilochus</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Coptic Orthodox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adhira</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>Sick dad; moving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camille</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Financial aid problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selena</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>9th gr</td>
<td>Astrophysics</td>
<td>Passion is physics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyleigh</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Culinary Arts</td>
<td>Mother of one child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudy</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Hispanic/Black</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Exercise Sci.</td>
<td>Plans to join military</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savanah</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>DK</td>
<td>DK</td>
<td>DK</td>
<td>DK</td>
<td>DK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverside Community College</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darren</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Resp. Therapy</td>
<td>Studying 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>7th gr</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>EOF; transferring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2+ Races</td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Honors Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jared</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>Nursing mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaitlin</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>Occ. Therapy</td>
<td>Honors program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandisa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>Muslim; two jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshall</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>Honors; online HS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mushir</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Honors program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearl</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Transgender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silveria</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>9th gr</td>
<td>Health Science</td>
<td>DACA student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. M = male; F = female; H = human; Parents’ Education = highest level reported; gr = grade; SC = some college
participants were drawn from Riverside Community College (10 students, representing 42% of the total); seven attended Joshua County Community College (29%), and seven attended Canyon County College (29%). Overall, eight student participants were male (33%), and 15 were female (63%), including one transgender student who identifies as female and one student identifies as “human” (4%). In terms of race/ethnicity, eight students were Hispanic or Latino (33%); seven were White (29%); three were Black (13%); three were Asian (13%); two students were two or more races (8%); and one was of unknown race/ethnicity (4%). Nine students were born in a foreign country (38%). Nine students were first-generation college students (38%), meaning their parents did not complete an associate’s or higher level college degree.

In terms of academic programs, six students were pursuing studies related to nursing (25%), and three were enrolled in other health-related fields (13%). Four students were enrolled in STEM programs (17%); three were in business programs (13%); three were studying psychology (13%); one was studying criminal justice (4%); one was in the culinary arts program (4%); and one’s program of study was unknown (4%).

The “Other” column in Table 7 captures pertinent elements of each study participant’s experiences, such as being a DACA student, serving on an athletic team, participating in the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) or in the Achievement Program for African American male students, or belonging to particular religions. These assorted characteristics provide insight into the backgrounds and experiences of the study participants (see Table 7).
**Canyon County College.** Canyon County College (CCC) is located in a county with a combination of relatively poor urban areas as well as wealthy suburban communities. The main campus is situated in a suburban town, with additional branch campuses across the county. Canyon Community College serves more than 15,000 students annually (NCES, 2019). No single race or ethnicity represents a majority: one third of students are Hispanic (35%); one quarter, Black (27%); and one fifth, White (18%; NCES, 2019). Six in 10 students are female (61%), and four in 10 are male (39%; NCES, 2019). Somewhat more students are enrolled part-time (56%) than full-time (44%; NCES, 2019).

In terms of student outcomes, CCC retains two thirds (68%) of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking (FTFT) students in their third semester (NCES, 2019). One quarter (24%) of FTFT students graduate within three years, and 8% transfer before graduating (NCES, 2019). Fifteen hundred students complete associate’s degrees or certificates each year (NCES, 2019).

**Students interviewed at CCC.** Catalina is a traditional-age, Hispanic, psychology student who was recruited to play on the women’s basketball team at CCC. Having grown up outside the county in which she now studies, Catalina arrived at college not knowing any other students and lacked the confidence to initiate conversations. Catalina reported that she is highly motivated and very capable of managing her time, yet she only feels she fits in *somewhat*, which she attributed to growing up in a town that reflects “a Spanish culture,” while the community college is “more multi-cultured.” Nonetheless, Catalina feels she belongs at the college *very much*, due largely to her participation in
athletics. Importantly, her coach’s requirement that she attend tutoring two hours per week has not only benefited Catalina academically, but also she noted that the “tutors become your friends.” Catalina feels as though the college has helped her to be successful—not only with her studies and with basketball, but also to become a better person. Still, she reflected that she needed more support during her first semester when she was not comfortable in class. Looking back, she wished someone had explained to her that what she was experiencing was “normal” and had advised her to relax. Catalina intends to transfer to a four-year university, which she expects her coach to identify.

Dominga is a friendly, multi-ethnic young woman who dons long eyeliner that extends to a peak beyond her eyes and sometimes suffers from anxiety. Her family resides in an economically depressed city, and she is very involved in the care of her two younger sisters. When Dominga first enrolled at CCC, she attended a branch campus within walking distance and returned home when classes ended, which limited her social circle. When she started taking classes on the main campus, she relaxed in the commons, a large atrium with comfortable chairs and soaring ceilings, where she connected with another student. Together, they established a multiethnic circle of 25 students who gather in that area every day. For Dominga, this common meeting space is critical to her sense of belonging. She appreciates the diverse culture of the college and offers assistance to others who are struggling.

Emile is a tall, Haitian student at CCC with a twinkle in his eyes and a passion for music. Emile acknowledged that sometimes he got in fights in high school and did not even want to go to college, but his parents insisted. He still contends with assorted
challenges, including the struggle to pay tuition. At first, he often missed class, getting caught up in a game of basketball or playing music with friends. As a participant in a mentoring program that targets African American male students, he developed a social circle of about 15 friends drawn from this cohort. They encourage each other to achieve their goals, but Emile feels somewhat isolated as the only one in his group of friends who is contending with academic probation.

Alejandro is a married, 20-something student who emigrated from Colombia in 2008. He is studying business and works in College Life at CCC. He is a kind-hearted soul with a thick accent who derives great satisfaction from providing community service. When he was younger, he contemplated a professional career in soccer, but does not play on the college’s soccer team in order to focus his attention on his studies. In his role in College Life, Alejandro helps develop programming to engage students and wishes more students would participate.

Paulette is an international, White, 30-something student from Belgium who works as an au pair and is completing a nursing degree at CCC. She is a hard-working student who loves her anatomy and physiology classes. She has relied on prayers and her faith to guide her along her educational journey. In Belgium, she might be considered a “vieille branche” or “old branch,” but in this program, she is surrounded by students who are about her age, which increases her sense of belonging.

Tia is a traditional-age, first-generation, Hispanic student who is in her first semester studying psychology at CCC. Her parents got divorced during Tia’s senior year of high school, which proved very challenging for her. She is very busy, working 30
hours each week in retail to cover her share of the family’s utility bills. She lights up when she talks about interacting with young children who come into the store where she works. Tia’s long time best friend attends CCC, but, generally, Tia has found it difficult to make friends.

Tamira is a traditional-age, female student at CCC who emigrated from the Philippines to the United States two years ago. Her mother decided she should enroll in nursing. Despite her mother’s intentions, Tamira indicated she does not envision herself as a nurse; she would prefer to teach biology one day. Tamira described herself as an introvert who generally opts out of student activities. Currently, she spends time outside of class with two older students from the Philippines who speak her native language, Tagalog, and are also in the nursing program.

Faculty/administrators/staff interviewed at CCC. Dan is the Associate Director of Advising at CCC and formerly served as an advisor in the Achievement Program for male students who are African American or Black. With long braided hair pulled neatly behind his head, Dan is a Black male who shared that he was born in Jamaica and raised in an urban area. He described the primary goals of the mentorship program as: (a) creating awareness of social programming available to students, (b) making students feel as though they belong at the college, (c) holding them accountable to complete their degree, (d) providing support tools, (e) encouraging the students to be successful, and (f) being relatable. On this last point, he believes that being “relatable” is a function of coming from the same area, experiencing the same struggles, and communicating in a way the students can appreciate.
Margaret serves as an academic affairs administrator for the Honors Program. When she considers which programs encourage student interaction, she focused on places, citing the importance of lounges that serve specific groups of students, including those for the Honors Program, the athletes, Phi Theta Kappa (the honor society), and the Student Government Association. Margaret believes many students are not willing to admit their academic struggles, which can lead them to drop classes. To address this issue, she encourages students to be patient with the learning curve, explore tutoring options, and visit professors during their office hours.

Melissa is a White, full-time professor in the psychology program who serves as an advisor to student government and Phi Theta Kappa, the international honor society. She invests heavily in her students, convincing them they can achieve their goals. She acknowledged the fine line that must be struck with students, encouraging their sense of belonging, but also “cutting our apron strings” and sending students on their path to a job or a four-year institution. Although she appreciates that honor societies encourage student interaction, she noted that such membership is exclusive, as it is extended only to those students with a particular grade point average. In the classroom, she tries to break down the power distance between students and professor, preferring to work as a team.

Paul is a Latino psychology professor who affirmed the importance of students feeling connected to the college. He pointed out some challenges at the college (e.g., the need to ensure that students who do not complete prerequisites are not permitted to progress to higher level courses and inconsistent advising of students). Nonetheless, he finds students take advantage of his office hours to connect with him. Aside from the
Honors Program, Paul thinks the college is “not too successful” at increasing students’ sense of belonging.

Robin is a White female who serves as the Dean of Student Success, overseeing advising and various other programs in Student Development, including the EOF program. She remarked that some students question whether they are “college material,” but interaction with faculty and administrators can foster positive feelings, assuring students they should be at the college and nurturing their sense of belonging. She distinguished between traditional-age students who desire a sense of belonging at college, and older students who tend to focus strictly on degree completion.

Ronald, Director of the EOF, is a Hispanic male. He remarked that many community college students must balance their time between class, work, and family responsibilities. Since the college has no common hour for meetings, he observes a difficulty in trying to arrange student activities or events at times that accommodate their schedules.

Tara is a White woman who, as the Dean of Student Life, is responsible for athletics and student activities. She shared that students’ participation in athletics creates “a sense of team . . . a sense of pride . . . a sense of belonging.” Importantly, this dean sets high standards and expectations for athletes, encouraging them to communicate with faculty and academic advisors. As a result, athletes learn the importance of working together, making sacrifices, and making commitments.

_Joshua County Community College_. Joshua County Community College (JCCC) is located in an urban area with tall buildings among busy streets, with no truly
distinct campus. What had been the student lounge is currently under construction, rendering the library (with its café) a prominent spot for students to gather. Joshua County Community College serves more than 12,000 students, most of whom are Hispanic (55%); smaller proportions are Black (14%) or White (12%; NCES, 2019). Six in 10 students are female (59%); most students (61%) are enrolled full-time (NCES, 2019).

In terms of student outcomes, JCCC retains almost six in 10 FTFT students (58%) in their third semester (NCES, 2019). One tenth of FTFT students (10%) graduate within three years; slightly more (12%) transfer without graduating (NCES, 2019). At JCCC, just over 1,000 degrees and certificates are conferred each year (NCES, 2019). Study participants from JCCC are described next.

**Students interviewed at JCCC.** Antilochus is a traditional age, Coptic Orthodox student from Egypt whose family moved to the United States two years ago so he and his brother could secure an education. He was accepted to New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT), and intended to enroll, even preparing his schedule and getting his student identification there before learning that he would not get any financial aid due to his lack of income tax documentation. He is currently studying engineering at JCCC. He has made friends with two other students, both of whom were also raised in Egypt and speak Arabic.

Adhira is a traditional-age student who was born in India and hopes to complete a degree in nursing. She noted that students with whom she studies are “hardworking, focused on studies, and go after their goals,” just like she does. She considered JCCC to
be her third choice, after Rutgers and Montclair State, but made an economic decision to attend the community college. Her father is sick, which is driving her family to move to a different part of the state to live with her uncle while her father convalesces. Adhira believes it is “perfect here,” and laments having to move.

Camilla is a Black, Hispanic young woman who was born in Cuba but is a U.S. citizen. She is a first-generation student studying homeland security at JCCC. She currently lives with just her mother, who has a high school education; her father completed eighth grade. Unaware that financial aid paperwork was incomplete until midway through the semester, she works 45 hours per week at two jobs to chip away at her tuition bill. Currently, she is unable to register for her next semester’s classes until she satisfies the outstanding balance for this semester’s tuition. At this point, she has doubts about her major because she is not fond of the professor teaching her criminal justice course.

Selena is a Latina, first-generation student at JCCC whose parents dropped out of school in fourth and ninth grades in El Salvador. She offered, “I’m really the only one in my family who’s going to be in college, and I’m shooting for a PhD [in astrophysics], which is crazy.” She explained that her parents “don’t really get it.” Her sense of isolation from her family is compounded in the classroom, as she finds very few Hispanics and women in STEM. Selena noted there is only one other female in her Physics class, but there is no one who shares her passion for the academic subject, about which she interjected, “I love it!” She only studies in groups occasionally because “boys fool around a lot.” Having already experienced “mistreatment just for being female in
"STEM," she expects her career will be “impossible.” In the face of these obstacles, Selena has overheard her parents misrepresenting to relatives that she is enrolled in the nursing program, because they do not understand her desire to study physics. Nonetheless, she likes that JCCC is near her home, and appreciates the “surprisingly amazing teachers.” She hopes to continue her studies at a four-year university, one with a great observatory.

Kyleigh is a 20-something, African American female who hails from Alabama, loves cooking, and is studying in the culinary arts program at JCCC. She has made close friendships with two students in her program—one gay man and one bisexual woman—with whom she gets together for meals and study breaks. She spoke highly of the security guards who directed her to a park where she can relax and unwind. She is the mother of one child and confronts childcare challenges, which leads her to advocate for a daycare center at the college. She participates in the Culinary Club, student activities at the library, and trips to museums, football games, and performing arts venues.

Rudy is a young, Black male student who participates in the EOF program and is studying exercise science at JCCC. After completing his studies at JCCC and then earning a bachelor’s degree, Rudy plans to follow in his parents’ footsteps and join the military. He feels like he belongs at Rutgers, even though he did not apply there. For Rudy, the American Dream is all about attending a college with a sprawling campus and open space, similar to what is in movies. At JCCC, he tries to strike up conversations with classmates who are flipping through their cell phones. Rudy works 25 hours per
week as a package handler and noted that his work schedule conflicts with many student activities he would like to attend.

Savanah is a student at JCCC who signed the informed consent and planned to participate in the study. But, finals and her work schedule got in the way, and she was never able to complete the interview. The lack of time Savanah had available to participate in this study reflects a very real challenge that community college students confront. The absence of her perspective speaks volumes about the reality of many students enrolled in community colleges who must forego opportunities associated with a college education due to competing priorities.

**Faculty/administrators/staff interviewed.** Valerie is the Director of Student Activities. She discussed the many benefits that accrue for students who participate in off-campus trips and the leadership honor society, which fosters students’ sense of belonging. The honor society creates networking teams of students who set goals and hold each other accountable for achieving them. Events that provide food and/or giveaways are popular among students, especially in light of the food insecurity some students experience. Given students’ hierarchy of needs, providing food satisfies basic nutritional needs and also fosters belongingness. Student involvement is compromised by demands competing for their time, finances, or other commitments. Joshua County Community College is exploring mechanisms for increasing nontraditional student engagement and renovating a space to serve as a student lounge.

**Riverside Community College.** Riverside Community College (RCC) is located on a sprawling campus in a suburban community, with several branch campuses
dispersed across the county. Riverside Community College serves more than 20,000 students, two thirds of whom are White, 14% Hispanic, and 9% Black (NCES, 2019). Students’ gender distribution is relatively equal (52% female; 48% male; NCES, 2019). Slightly more students are enrolled part-time (54%) than full-time (46%; NCES, 2019).

Riverside Community College boasts the highest retention, graduation, and transfer rates of the three colleges in this study. They retain seven out of 10 FTFT students (71%) in their third semester (NCES, 2019). Just over one quarter (27%) graduate within three years, and one sixth (16%) transfer before graduating (NCES, 2019). Two thousand students complete associate’s degrees or certificates each year (NCES, 2019). Study participants from RCC are described next.

_Students interviewed._ Darren is a White, 27-year-old student in the respiratory therapy program at Riverside who has been working toward his associate’s degree for 10 years. His progress has been delayed by one setback after another: an initial lack of focus followed by failed classes, missed deadlines, and physical injuries. At this point, he has degree completion in his sights. His approach is driven entirely by pragmatism: complete a degree and secure a well-paying job. As a result, he does not socialize with other students and prefers to study alone. Nonetheless, in his classes, Darren feels he is “the man”—able to answer questions and help students understand difficult topics.

Elena is a traditional-age, Hispanic student who speaks Spanish at home and is in the EOF program at RCC. Although neither of her parents completed more than an eighth-grade education in Mexico and Peru, Elena started college undecided about her program of study. But her EOF advisor observed that Elena had volunteered at the
hospital and advised her to pursue chemistry. Now Elena plans to become a doctor. She has been very involved in college, interacting with faculty and securing research internships. She lamented that “not many people are social” at this community college, which was her first choice. Unable to register for some courses, Elena feels like she was wasting time taking just two classes in a semester, so she is transferring to Stockton University next semester.

Jasmine is a biracial, 19-year-old college student at RCC who participates in the Honors Program, which she described as a “community of high achievers.” She is confident, poised, and articulate. She has high expectations for herself and can even come across as an elitist in her descriptions of others at the college. Dressed in a sweatshirt that announces her intention to attend Georgetown University, she attends community college for free as the result of a grant that covers her tuition. Jasmine indicated she would not have a sense of belonging at the college were it not for the Honors Program, from which most of her friends and study partners are drawn.

Jared is an African American, 30-year-old, male student studying nursing at RCC. He finished high school in 2007, started at the community college that fall semester, and has been taking courses on and off since that time. Jared has a strong sense of belonging within the nursing program and derives support from a professor who recommended that he apply for a scholarship for nurses of color.

Kaitlin is a traditional-age, White, first-year student enrolled in the Honors Program at RCC who plans to become an occupational therapist. She has her sights set on completing her bachelor’s degree and then furthering her education at the master’s degree
level. Although she has made some friends through the Honors Program, she reported that not many people spend time on campus, and that she would not feel much of a sense of belonging were it not for the Honors Program.

Mandisa is a 30-year-old, Muslim woman from Egypt who has been living in this country since 2005. Resolute and hard-working, Mandisa is handling a heavy burden, but does so with calm determination. In addition to her studies at RCC, she works 66 hours per week, holding down two jobs—one at a convenience store and another handling paperwork for a tax preparation company. She is also raising her 20-month-old niece and five-year-old nephew. Mandisa is committed to her religion, and prays five times a day. On campus, she worships in the library’s study rooms, but has confronted negative reactions from some students who suggest she remove her headscarf.

Marshall is a traditional-age student who took online courses to complete high school. He is studying in the Honors Program at RCC and dreams of attending Georgetown University one day. Marshall dresses very nicely, with short cropped hair and stud earrings in both ears. For now, he and his twin sister are attending RCC, which waives the cost of their tuition since their mother died on 9/11. He participates in an advocacy group for LGBTQ+ students and the History and Political Science Club. He shared his vulnerabilities and carefully articulated challenges he confronts studying at a community college.

Mushir is a traditional-age, Asian, Muslim student who is majoring in biology. Before he started at RCC, his greatest concern was whether he would be able to get his degree and move on. Now that he has spent some time at the college, his greatest
challenge has been maintaining his grade point average. His sense of belonging has been largely impacted by his participation in the Honors Program and the difficult science classes he has taken. He explained that the “bonding process involved in struggling alongside other people” has created an informal community of learners who have become friends. They support one another and plan their schedules around each other. This small group meets in the Honors lounge, which Mushir described as a “Spartan” space with four walls, electricity, and a mini refrigerator—which is all they need.

Pearl is a complex student whose intersectionality includes being of Eastern European descent, Jewish, and transgender. This student presents as a young male student with tousled brown hair and a flannel shirt, but revealed late in the interview, after a long pause, that she considers herself to be a “woman unless otherwise coerced.” Currently, she is “closeted trans” and has not shared that intimate detail with her parents. Pearl is pursuing her studies in her closeted status until she can be financially independent and assume her true identity. She dropped out of high school in the ninth grade and took several years off before returning to her studies. Due to this break, Pearl has “more educational energy than most people do.” After teaching video gaming to eager students, Pearl concluded that most people simply need to stop worrying about losing. With this revelation, Pearl enrolled in the psychology program at Riverside in 2017. Despite challenges that could accompany Pearl’s identity, she feels a sense of belonging at the college.

Silveria is a traditional-age, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals “DACA” student from Mexico who is in her first semester at Riverside. Her major is in the health
science program, and she hopes to become an emergency room nurse. She was awarded a scholarship by a nonprofit group that supports DACA students, which funds three quarters of her tuition bill. Neither of her parents completed more than a ninth grade education, so “they have financial challenges of their own.” As a result, Silveria works 25 hours per week as a dental assistant to cover the balance of her tuition bill. Her demanding schedule prohibits her from participating in extracurricular activities, but she hopes to get more involved next semester.

**Faculty/administrators/staff interviewed.** Karl is a White adjunct professor and a member of the Instructional Design staff. Karl explained that, in his role in the classroom, he does not give students group assignments but does encourage students to engage in group activities (e.g., games of Kahoot). Many years ago, he received mental health crisis training, which he needed to deploy for a student in crisis this past year.

Maggie is the Interim Dean of Humanities. She identified the Visiting Writers Series, the Honors Program, and the Women and Learning in Leadership program as the most effective programs at encouraging student-faculty interaction, while service-learning projects successfully encourage peer interaction. Acknowledging the challenges associated with the implementation of learning communities, Maggie expressed the need for creative energy and pointed to difficulties related to (a) getting advisors to understand what a learning community is, and (b) the time commitment required for faculty partnerships. Ultimately, Maggie acknowledged that the process was alternately “fun, intimidating, and threatening.”
Sam is a White instructional designer who initiated his own studies at a community college and has worked at several. He recognizes the inherent challenges in creating a sense of belonging for students who commute to campus. As Sam remarked, students come to take classes and then are “zipping away.” From his perspective, younger students are more interested in establishing a sense of belonging than older students, who may have already secured belonging with their family and friends. Sam suggested that mothers in their thirties are the demographic most commonly enrolled in distance education courses.

Yolanda, a Latina woman, is the Dean of a community college branch campus. She identified assorted programs that encourage interaction between students, including EOF, Career Services, the National Society of Leadership and Success, Phi Theta Kappa, Athletics, and the Honors Program. But, according to Yolanda, student involvement in extracurricular activities is a “luxury,” given their many time commitments. She emphasized the importance of gathering places, noting that “when you create spaces for students where they can connect to someone and they feel safe and they feel cared for, you can create a sense of belonging.”

**Defining Sense of Belonging**

When students feel like they belong to a community, they tend to have a greater sense of belonging. But, students differ in their interpretations of precisely what sense of belonging means to them. To gain a better understanding of this issue, I encouraged study participants to provide their own definition for sense of belonging in the interview. Their responses were analyzed and reduced to specific codes. These codes were categorized by
themes, all of which begin with the prefix of “com” or “con,” which pertain to various aspects of being together. These themes help to explain community college students’ interpretations of the notion of belonging: (a) Commitment to Education, (b) Community, (c) Comfort, (d) Communication, (e) Commonalities, and (f) Context.

**Commitment to Education.** Several students indicated that their primary purpose in attending college is strictly to complete their education. Most of these students focus on accomplishing their degree and then proceeding to a four-year university or career. Antilochus explained, “All I need from college is to study and get a good education.” Darren thinks a community college is not intended to provide entertainment or leisure. Instead, for him, college is encapsulated in finishing coursework to complete a degree. These students are typically highly engaged with their academic subject and think about belonging in the context of program completion.

Many students expanded their framework to think of belonging as more than simply completing their education. Pearl contemplated the meaning of belonging from various angles, noting that a college is more than a learning institution. She observed that people also socialize and connect with each other, requiring healthy social connections and positive interactions with their academic material as well. She labeled it a “misnomer” to perceive college strictly as a learning institution given the many additional dimensions.

**Community.** Many students link belonging to community. This theme includes students’ descriptions of a network of support, their connections with others, the presence of friendly or helpful people, and the ability to relate to others or a sense that experiences
are shared. Mushir depicted an “everybody is welcome” model, with a low barrier to entry and an ability to engage as much or as little as one desires. Elena indicated that her connections with professors help to alleviate any difficulties she confronts. Noting that someone is always willing to provide assistance, Elena linked sense of community at her college to belonging. Marshall expanded upon this thought, noting that “community” is the college’s middle name, and “that is what binds us.”

Darren spoke about getting to know his professors on a personal level, which sparks a welcoming feeling, as though he fits in. He characterized the respiratory therapy program as a “mini family of friends.” Similarly, Alejandro cited the role of student activities in getting students involved, which inspires feelings of belonging to “a family.” Jared believes that his belonging emanates from the same courses, “almost the same lives,” and many of the same experiences as other students in the nursing program. Without the Honors Program, Jasmine indicated she would not have “that sense of connection” that provides her sense of belonging. Catalina referenced her basketball team, which builds a community that promotes a feeling of belonging.

Some students defined belonging in the context of the friendly or helpful people they encounter. Camilla pointed to the friendly dispositions of the staff at her college. Alejandro observed that professors are always available to provide assistance. Kyleigh also cited the friendly faculty and staff, adding that “even the janitors are nice.” Mandisa values knowing that someone will be there to help her, should the need arise.

Faculty and staff also think about belonging in terms of building community. Karl pointed out that clubs and athletics, which attract the students to “hang out and stay at
Riverside a little bit longer,” have the greatest impact on building students’ sense of belonging. Similarly, Robin noted that athletic programs are a “super way for students to be connected and feel like they’re part of something.” Ronald, Director of EOF, remarked that the summer boot camps develop bonds that persist in the fall semester, nurtured by “community gatherings” that lend a feeling of “family” to the program. Sam, the Instructional Designer, reported that students start to build a community in the Distance Education classes during their first introductory discussion, where people share their hobbies and professions and begin to relate on a personal level.

Tara, the Dean of Student Life, explained that athletic programs create a sense of belonging by teaching students life lessons related to working together, making sacrifices, managing their time, and making a commitment. Margaret, an administrator in the Honors Program, relayed a story of a student who returned to the college and shared that the best thing he did at the community college was to “connect with other people who care,” spending time with other students who were really working hard. Building community is an essential component of many students’ belonging.

**Comfort.** This theme includes references to feeling comfortable, fitting in, belonging, and feeling welcome. Catalina defined belonging as “being comfortable.” Rudy also associated feeling comfortable with belonging. Antilochus shared this perspective, but refined it to reference needing the place where he studies to be comfortable. Alejandro focused on professors who make students feel comfortable in class, creating the sense that the college is his “home.”
Kyleigh described the importance of getting comfortable with the school and with the people, observing that her whole school has a “comfortable setting.” Camilla also mentioned the importance of feeling comfortable, which includes having the freedom to express her thoughts and to study what she desires. Selena questioned why she would attend a college if she did not feel comfortable there: “I would be so distracted because I would feel uncomfortable, and I would feel like I wouldn’t belong.” For Pearl, belonging is about connecting with friends and building long-term friendships.

Notions surrounding feeling welcomed were central to many students’ definitions of belonging. Adhira suggested that new students must be properly welcomed, as she was when she arrived. Tia explained how Welcome Week helped her to not feel so “brand new,” but instead, to feel welcomed. For Mushir, “the game is sort of everybody’s welcome.” Darren noted the importance of interacting with professors in helping him to feel more welcomed.

**Communication.** To understand what sense of belonging means, several students referenced the importance of various aspects of communication. Dominga described having people whom you can “genuinely talk to about personal problems,” including challenges at home, work, or school. Paulette shared that most of her professors inquire about her country of origin and generally take an interest in her, which increases her sense of belonging. Elena noted that she likes communicating with her professors and talking with new people. In fact, she feels that belonging can be enhanced by such conversations. Similarly, Camilla questioned who would want to go to a college where “nobody talks to you.” Camilla observed that, through conversations, students discern
whether other students are confronting challenges similar to their own. She also remarked that a key driver of belonging is the freedom to say what is on one’s mind.

As an athlete, Catalina remarked that the sports administration counselor, her teammates, and the coaching staff “always have something good to say,” but she appreciates even negative feedback, which demonstrates that they are taking an interest in her. Catalina also shared that, in the beginning, she did not have anyone with whom she could talk, and she was not tuned in to the importance of reaching out to professors and making friends in her classes. But, with encouragement from her coaching staff, she has established relationships with professors and students, which has improved her sense of belonging.

Negative communication can impact students’ sense of belonging as well. For Adhira, a student can achieve a sense of belonging when others do not say anything “bad” or “mean” to them. Having just emigrated from the Philippines two years ago, Tamira confided that sometimes she does not understand humor and current issues; this language barrier can negatively impact her sense of belonging. As a result of these challenges, Tamira has gravitated toward two other nursing students in her classes who also speak Tagalog. They are two decades older than Tamira, but their common language unites them, so they spend time together outside of class, thus increasing their belonging.

**Commonalities.** When some students contemplated sense of belonging, their thoughts turned to race, ethnicity, or international status, or whether others look or talk like they do. Tia thought about belonging in the context of seeing people who resemble her or whose lives are similar to hers, particularly those who are Hispanic.
Acknowledging her religious and ethnic backgrounds, Pearl advocated for inclusion of a broader world perspective at the college. She linked greater representation of other cultures and religions to increased belonging.

Shared experiences can have the effect of lending students a sense of belonging. For example, Paulette attributed her sense of belonging to her experience of returning to college after several years out of high school. She found that most other students have experienced similar situations and are roughly her age, which boosts her comfort level at the college. She was motivated to study in the United States because some students do not proceed straight from high school. She explained, “All of them stopped and worked for some years or had kids, got married, and they’re all like, almost the same age as I am.” In Belgium, she thinks she would be viewed as a “vieille branche,” or “old branch,” a French expression for “someone who is too old to do something,” but she does not feel that way in the United States. For her, age is an “absolutely critical” factor in her consideration of belonging. Camilla also noted that other students may be dealing with similar struggles; however, students who do not interact miss the opportunity to derive support from others who contend with the same types of burdens.

On the other hand, some students expressed a desire to interact with students who differ from them. Dominga appreciates opportunities to be exposed to people who reside in other towns or pursue various careers. Adhira linked belonging to “accepting everyone.” She further offered, “This college does not say, ‘No, we don’t need you here.’ Everyone is equal here: every student, every teacher, everyone that works here; we’re all equal.” Kyleigh values the diversity of JCCC reflected in race/ethnicity, religion, and
language spoken. To establish relationships with classmates, Kyleigh is taking steps to learn Spanish.

**Context: Activities, place, time.** Many students think about sense of belonging in the context of activities, place, or time. Marshall emphasized the importance of keeping students engaged in “interesting and fun” activities. Tia explained that Welcome Week events in the student commons effectively build students’ sense of belonging. Kyleigh counted student activities and tutoring services among the many ways that community colleges can inspire a sense of belonging. Mushir and Silveria also cited clubs as a means of fostering students’ sense of belonging.

Concepts related to place were interwoven in students’ reflections on the meaning of sense of belonging. Camilla described feeling this is “where I want to be” or “where I feel like I’m most loved.” Selena appreciates her college’s proximity to her home. Similarly, Alejandro interjected feeling that college is his home into his explanation of belonging, where you “feel like you belong to the class, to the environment.” As Darren reflected on sense of belonging, he noted that his college is a “great place.” Nonetheless, given the 10 years he has already spent at the community college, he would prefer to belong as a member of the faculty, rather than as a student.

Mushir neatly summarized his group’s basic needs as “a room with four walls, electricity, and a mini fridge.” From his perspective, although it is “spartan,” that room “is all that is necessary to bring us together.” Mandisa concluded by noting, “This is a place to be. This is where you can belong too.” She continued, “If you don’t feel that you belong somewhere, you won’t be able to do anything. You’re just going to leave.”
Time is another dimension embedded in students’ notions of belonging. Darren cannot address the concept of belonging without referencing the fact that he has been pursuing an associate’s degree for 10 years. For him, belonging means, “You could be at that 27-year-old age and nobody’s looking at you like it’s too late. You belong here just like anybody else. You’re doing what you gotta do at your own pace.” Selena knows some people 10 years older than she is who are getting their first degrees. She declared, “You have to give them time to . . . figure out what they want to do . . . because it’s their whole lives that we’re talking about.” Similarly, Silveria wove the notion of time into her concept of belonging, pointing out that her presence on campus five days per week drives her desire to feel as though she belongs.

**Challenges Community College Students Confront**

To understand experiences impacting community college student success, their academic experience must be placed in the context of the challenges they confront. Students who attend community colleges represent many races and ethnicities; they come from countries around the globe and speak assorted languages. What do they have in common? They all want to achieve the American Dream, a level of economic security they associate with higher education. Many see education as their ticket to economic security or prosperity, with a college degree serving as the gateway to a better life.

Given the high cost of attending four-year colleges and universities, community colleges provide a more affordable option. This is not to say that attendance is not without financial burdens, even for those with subsidized tuition. Many students come from economically disadvantaged communities, and many have broader family
responsibilities. They work to provide the basics of food, housing, and utilities. As a result, these students often struggle to balance the demands of their work lives with their studies and other competing priorities, such as the need to care for children and other dependents. This juggling results in students taking breaks from their education when other demands become too burdensome. Some of the challenges confronted by student participants in this research are detailed in the following sections.

All in the same boat. United by their common struggles, several students independently suggested that they are “all in the same boat.” In reference to financial challenges, Mandisa remarked, “We are all in the same boat.” Similarly, Darren believes he and his girlfriend are “in the same boat,” one marked by financial struggle. Silveria explained that she and her friends do not go out because “they’re in the same boat as I am,” balancing work and studies. Camilla observed, “We’re all in the same boat” trying to resolve assorted challenges. Paulette noted, “We're all in the same boat” trying to pass every class and struggling with exams, caring for children, or contending with other problems. Kaitlin described the challenges involved in planning her curriculum: “All of us are kind of in the same boat with college and are having the same issues with classes and, like, planning.”

Financial challenges. From an economic perspective, an education at a community college is a smart investment, especially considering the high cost of four-year colleges. Antilochus intended to enroll at NJIT, but his family’s recent arrival in the United States and their lack of income documentation led to complications with financial aid. To avoid the “huge sums” necessary to enroll at a four-year university, he opted to
enroll in the community college. Similarly, Tia explained that Montclair State was “like six grand, maybe pushing seven,” compared with $2,400 at the community college, making CCC the practical choice for her. Silveria applied to four other colleges before learning that her immigration status made her ineligible for financial aid: “Realizing that I had to pay over forty grand was not an option for me.” Although three quarters of her community college tuition is covered by a scholarship for DACA students, paying one quarter is still a burden. Kyleigh expressed concerns about out-of-county tuition rates, which increased her tuition by $2,000.

While some students do not have trouble paying their tuition, owing either to financial aid or family savings, many still encounter difficulties with other aspects of their educational expenses. Darren’s parents saved money for his college education, but school is expensive and other expenses are mounting. “I’m going broke . . . living paycheck to paycheck,” he lamented.

Selena feels a pinch with transportation expenses, noting that the bus costs $2.00 each way. She had to walk home because she could not afford the bus fare. Alejandro explained that books are very expensive, so he searches for them online or purchases used options. Similarly, Paulette sometimes opts not to buy nursing books, given their high price tag.

**Personal problems.** Not only do students struggle financially, but sickness, divorce, and other difficulties compound their challenges. Marshall’s father was recently diagnosed with prostate cancer, which adds a lot of stress—financially and logistically.
Marshall does not drive. He and his sister rely upon their father for transportation, but with his father unable to work, their family struggles on multiple fronts.

Tia detailed how her parents’ divorce impacted her: “Having them split up was just hard. . . . It just sucks, but it is what it is. . . . Since my father left, he’s drowning in his own bills.” Both of her parents worked for the same company, which collapsed. As a result of her parents’ financial distress, she has assumed responsibility for the insurance and phone bill, which amounts to almost $700 each month. These kinds of pressures exacerbate the many stresses that community college students experience as part of their academic life.

**Parental expectations.** Parental expectations and influence can have beneficial or detrimental effects on their children’s growth and self-actualization. In some cases, parental support can provide encouragement that leads their children to fulfill high expectations. Other times, parents’ input can be misguided or stifling, by stipulating specific programs of study and/or career paths, which may or may not align with their children’s visions for themselves. One example is Tamira’s mother, who decided Tamira should study nursing, even though she would rather teach biology one day.

Antilochus decided to enter the engineering program based upon guidance from his father, who has nurtured his love of math and physics by working on math problems and critical thinking skills since he was a child. Antilochus is committed to this professional goal, but he absolutely lights up when he discusses his role in a theatrical performance at his church. Despite his enthusiasm for acting, Antilochus is determined to
become an engineer and plans to embrace his passion for the performing arts in his leisure time.

Selena has met many people who do not have a clear direction and attend college simply to appease their parents. From her vantage point, more people should be studying what they want to pursue rather than trying to please others. As a first-generation college student, Selena also has to deal with challenges related to her parents who cannot understand her desire to study physics; instead, they tell relatives she is in the nursing program.

**Time management/time constraints.** Time is a limited resource, and community college students feel the strain of balancing competing priorities. Alejandro is an international student who works with College Life to prepare events for students on campus, only to be disappointed when students do not attend these activities. He attributed their lackluster participation to time constraints, driven by demanding work schedules. Additional evidence of students’ time constraints is provided in the following sections, along with the implications for the resulting lack of attention students devote to their schoolwork, student activities, and relationships.

Some community college students in this study expressed a desire to participate in student activities, but often cannot do so because of other obligations. For example, Mandisa does not participate in any extracurricular activities or athletics as a result of her many other responsibilities. Tia works six days a week, which leaves little time for fostering relationships with her peers or for joining student activities. She rightly anticipated that balancing the demands of work, school, and her social life would be the
hardest part of attending college. Rudy noted that his work conflicts with many student activities. Jared also identified time constraints as a major challenge. Silveria and her friends are so busy working and going to college that they are rarely able to synchronize their schedules. Pearl observed that many students are “simply burned out” and “exhausted from work.”

Given the priorities competing for students’ time, it is no wonder that time management is a common challenge. Darren offered insights on competing priorities, noting how natural it is to procrastinate until a deadline forces him to focus on the stark reality of having to complete his assignments. As much as he would like to proactively get a jumpstart on his work, he finds that he is usually completing one task after another, with an inability to relax and unwind between them. To accomplish all that needs to be done, Darren sacrifices his sleep, which he recognizes is not beneficial to his overall well-being.

Some students spoke about their need for extra time to satisfy their academic obligations. Mushir, who aspires to become a doctor, is one such student. Pointing to his many high-achieving peers who are working very hard, Mushir wishes the faculty would understand that sometimes they need more time to complete their assignments.

Antilochus, Adhira, and Selena also described time management as a challenge. Camilla struggles to balance two jobs while attending college and said that procrastination is her greatest challenge. She described a looming sense of dread that pervades her consciousness. Rudy shared that procrastination is also his greatest challenge. Silveria acknowledged that there are times when she procrastinates and lacks
focus. Even before she started at Riverside, she expected the workload and time management would be the hardest parts.

Emile attributed his poor class attendance to immaturity, holding on to “bad habits from high school, showing up to class late,” and not taking his academics seriously. He reported that he would simply elect to participate in other activities rather than going to class, such as playing basketball, going out with friends, or getting a bite to eat before class. Reflecting, he lamented how he let time slip away, which he regrets.

Marshall cited time management as his greatest challenge. He engages in many activities in college in addition to taking classes. Although balancing can be difficult, Marshall explained that he wants to engage in many activities to accrue new skills and enhance his transfer options. Although Pearl reported that she now manages her time better, it is still a challenge. She quipped, “I haven’t bitten off more than I can chew, but I’m starting to take my time with my bites now.” Kyleigh has a more positive spin on time management. She considers herself “pretty good” at time management, which she attributes to a college success course she took at JCCC. Insufficient time for socializing complicates students’ ability to nurture relationships at this stage of their lives.

**Transition from high school: Academic preparedness/motivation/focus.**

Several students noted the challenges that accompany the transition from high school to college, ranging from a lack of academic preparedness to poor motivation or focus. It is not uncommon to lack clarity about long-term goals. Without a clear path, these students are not even sure they want to attend college, let alone have a sense as to what they might study. This lack of direction contributes to some students meandering their way through
college curricula, uncertain of their end goal and accumulating unnecessary credits along the way.

With his parents’ encouragement, Emile initiated studies at CCC, but he acknowledged that, in the beginning, he would often play basketball with friends rather than attend class. Despite some challenges along the way, Emile’s parents provided the impetus that set him on a trajectory toward a postsecondary degree.

Darren also lacked direction, noting he “wasn’t always the best student.” Although his parents wanted him to attend college, his “motivation wasn’t there.” He arbitrarily decided to pursue studies in criminal justice, but quickly lost interest. Once he started working at the hospital, he could visualize a future that included working in respiratory therapy. Anxious about taking the entrance exam, he procrastinated just long enough to miss the deadline for admission, which set him back a year. In 2016, a broken ankle precluded clinical rotations, so he had to wait another year. Finally, he started in 2017 and can now see the finish line in 2019. By his own admission, Darren needed to formalize a goal for himself and then follow through to make it a reality.

Elena acknowledged the challenge of transitioning from high school, when everything in her schedule was blocked with designated times for each of the things that had to be accomplished. In college, students need to proactively manage their responsibilities. She found it difficult to balance the challenges associated with work, homework, and her social life, especially when she first started.

Adhira also reported that the transition from high school to college was challenging. In high school, assistance was always available. But, at JCCC, Adhira does
not see her professor for a week between classes. She is sympathetic to professors’ time constraints, but had difficulty adjusting to the cadence of higher education.

The challenges these students confront demonstrate the importance of providing guidance to acclimate them to the demands of higher education and to align their strengths and passions with an appropriate career or higher education goal.

**Factors That Contribute to Sense of Belonging**

Student success is enhanced by their engagement with any or all of three important elements of their college experience: (a) student communities, (b) faculty, and (c) their academic program of study. That is to say, students are more inclined to feel a sense of belonging at their community college if they nurture relationships in communities with other students, if they interact with faculty, administrators and staff, and/or if they engage with their academic program of study. Assorted manifestations of study participants’ experiences are detailed below.

**Student communities.** Students interact with each other in formal groups and informal settings. Some of these interactions are driven by the college, which creates various communities with the intention of uniting students. Examples include academic communities, athletics, honors programs, and student clubs and activities. Students increase their sense of belonging when they take advantage of these opportunities to interact with fellow students.

**Academic communities.** Students who participate in programs that foster a sense of community, like those in the allied health and culinary arts fields, reported a sense of belonging. For example, as part of the respiratory therapy program, Darren takes many
classes with the same students, which has the effect of building community among them. The students in the program wear hospital garb, and that uniform further unites the group. They bond further during conventions, where the students work as a team.

Students at each of the community colleges participate in the nursing program: Jared and Elena at Riverside; Paulette and Tamira at Canyon; and Adhira at Joshua. The schedule of classes is such that the students interact with each other on a regular basis. Paulette discussed the importance of clinical rotations, in which groups of students experience working with patients collectively. Jared explained how he gets to see “a lot of the same faces” in his nursing classes. Jared noted that the professors recommend that students form study groups and get to know other classmates, especially those in the same clinical courses, to support each other in mastering the subject matter. As Jared pointed out, eight to 10 students at particular hospital sites or nursing home facilities tend to get together and spend time studying and otherwise bonding. By working together, students in these academic programs form communities of support.

Kyleigh takes several classes with many of the same students in the culinary arts program. She appreciates the classes with more senior students who function as mentors, enlightening her to the college’s offerings. These more experienced students have taken her under their wing, providing insights concerning the library, student activities, and opportunities to bring children to campus, which is particularly relevant for Kyleigh, who is a mother. Within these academic communities, the more experienced students effectively function as mentors, helping newer students navigate college.
Athletics. Students in athletics programs also benefit from the sense of community that is forged in their sport, nurtured by other teammates, coaches and advisors. Catalina is an athlete on the women’s basketball team. She does not live in the county, as many students do. As a result, when she first started, she observed that other students already knew others from high school, but she felt she “had nobody.” In those early days, she would go to class without speaking with the professors or the other students. With guidance from her coach and her involvement on the team, Catalina now has a network of support in her teammates, whom she looks forward to seeing. Catalina feels that this encouragement has made her a better basketball player and a better person. Camilla lamented that her college does not offer athletics. She would love an opportunity to participate in a dance club or dance team, and believes that athletics would have the effect of uniting the college community. As she pointed out, “Who doesn’t like to go to a football game or a basketball game? . . . It gives you something to look forward to.” For many community college students, participation in athletics is not within the realm of possibility for them, either because their college does not offer athletic programs or other obligations take precedence.

Student activities. Most community college students in this study reported that they do not engage in extracurricular activities; however, students who do take advantage of these opportunities reported positive outcomes. Marshall values such involvement, noting that leading the History and Political Science Club has helped him to gain new skills. He pointed out that most students do not have “high levels of political efficacy,”
and this club provides an environment where he can discuss pertinent issues with peers who have similar interests.

Recognizing the sense of belonging that activities can instill, some administrators seek opportunities to gather students together; one strategy is to offer meals. Valerie, the Director of Student Activities, noted that many students suffer from food insecurity. This approach hits two birds with one stone. Similarly, Ronald, the Director of EOF, pointed out that food contributes to the community and sense of family that this program fosters. For students, the time and expense that would be occupied by procuring and preparing a meal can instead be spent enjoying a communal meal.

**Informal groups.** Alejandro observed that whenever other students ask him for assistance related to classwork, he always obliges. For classes where Alejandro thought he would need help, he proactively formed study groups. Since there is no way to gauge how other students have fared on their tests, Alejandro relied on class attendance and those who pay attention in class as his best indicators of successful students. These are the students he targeted for inclusion in study groups. Emile observed that students in psychology class collaborated to complete their assignments and got better grades by working together. Kyleigh similarly reported that students in the culinary arts program form study groups and gather in the library to prepare for examinations. As a result, Kyleigh has already made several friends in her first semester. Pearl also gathers students together to form study groups, which has resulted in other students embracing her identity.
For Mushir, part of belonging is driven by “the bonding process involved in struggling alongside other people.” As a result, he and some of his classmates organically formed a group. They plan their semesters collaboratively and study “in the same room as often as possible.” Within his circle of friends, they sometimes instruct each other and sometimes learn from each other, always reinforcing good study habits.

Informal groups can also be formed outside of class. Rudy strikes up conversations with other students between classes to combat what he perceives to be their problematic use of social media. These conversations have led to relationships with many of his peers. Antilochus explained that several students from his class work together as a team. If anyone in that group has a misunderstanding about a particular aspect of the subject matter, one representative from the group will explain the confusion to the professor, who clarifies the issue.

Although Dominga did not have much of a sense of belonging while she was taking classes on one of the satellite campuses, once she started taking classes on the main campus, and treated the commons as her anchor, she was able to establish a network of 25 friends who meet in that space virtually every day. Together, they study, eat meals, and celebrate each other’s birthdays. This informal cohort of students encourages each other, nurturing a sense of belonging. Now that Dominga has some college experience under her belt, she reaches out to new students who may be struggling. “Whenever I hear someone that’s new struggle, I just give them a little insight on what I know.”

**Student interactions with faculty/administrators.** Faculty members play a critical role in building students’ sense of belonging. The linkages between professors
and students tend to follow two different models: (a) a linear model directly between the professor and the student; or (b) a circular hub and spoke model, in which the professor aligns groups of students with each other. These connections with faculty members foster students’ sense of belonging.

**Some student-faculty relationships follow a linear model.** The linear model includes professors who invest in students individually or otherwise serve as mentors for students. Elena shared that her connections with professors have the greatest impact on increasing her sense of belonging. She described various professors alternately as “wonderful,” “a ball of sunshine” and “so animated.” By befriending the professors, she feels more comfortable asking questions during or after class. These relationships resulted in professors drafting laudatory letters of recommendations for internship opportunities, which she has successfully secured.

Paulette also reported that several of her professors are outstanding. In her words, one young professor who teaches Anatomy and Physiology was “amazing,” and another professor was “absolutely awesome.” Selena appreciates her “surprisingly amazing teachers,” who have exceeded her expectations for a community college, especially one professor, Pierce, who is very passionate about Calculus. She noted that her professors “actually care”—even more than her teachers in high school.

Marshall recounted how his “thorough, passionate and very genuine” speech professor helped him overcome his fear of public speaking. This led to a strong connection with the professor. Camilla also referenced a speech professor, whom she described as “really open,” noting that he overlooks students’ anxiety, focusing instead
on the content of their speeches. Dominga appreciates that her Western civilizations professor was the first professor who ever really made her want to go to class. Mushir noted that when his mind starts to wander, his professor gently draws him back into the discussion, which he appreciates. Mandisa feels that every professor has had an impact on her—being helpful and relating through their own stories. Similarly, Tia explained that one of her professors takes an interest in the students, inquiring about how they are doing and sharing details about her own family. Tia appreciates this interaction with her professor, and pointed out that this professor is also adept at creating meaningful assignments.

Darren shared a story about a professor whom he encountered in the hospital (his workplace), after not seeing her for several months. She took a great interest in his well-being, and expressed pride in his accomplishments. Darren recognizes the long-term value in fostering relationships with faculty with whom he will continue working on a professional basis.

In terms of mentoring, Jared pointed out that his nursing professor made him aware of scholarship opportunities for students of color. The nursing professors also communicate that working for pay more than 20 hours each week can interfere with students’ program completion. Catalina was mentored when her grades started slipping and she was not making satisfactory academic progress. With encouragement from her basketball coach, Catalina developed strong relationships with all her professors. Catalina looks forward to seeing them, and extends the same positive communication to people
whom she sees in the cafeteria, the Academic Learning Center, and the library. As a result, Catalina recognizes that many people on campus now know her name.

Catalina’s efforts to strike up conversations with her professors have had other positive benefits as well. She relayed a story about a professor who provided an opportunity for her to do an extra credit assignment, which Catalina attributed to the positive relationship she had already nurtured with the professor. Because the professor was aware that she was consistently working hard and applying herself, when Catalina encountered rough territory, he gave her the opportunity to complete extra credit. Tamira shared a similar experience with her poetry professor, who gave her a second chance when she failed to answer several questions on her exam.

Kyleigh felt nervous about her classes and professors before she started in the culinary arts program. But she observed that her professors are very helpful, standing behind students and aiding as necessary. Kyleigh described them as “strict,” but in a “tough love” sort of way, which keeps her on her toes. Additionally, Kyleigh explained that she drew a blank when it was time for her math placement test. But her math professor is “one of those ‘If you don’t give up on yourself, I’m not giving up on you’” types who offered to provide any assistance she requires.

These examples point to students whose professors are willing to take an interest in students, forge bonds, and put forth the effort necessary to ensure that students believe in themselves and progress academically.

*Other student-faculty relationships result from a circular hub and spoke model.*

The circular hub and spoke model occurs when professors build a sense of community
among students in the classroom or when administrators build a community of students, for example, in the Educational Opportunity Fund program or the Achievement Program. In Pearl’s sign language class, the professor created an inclusive environment where Pearl felt comfortable sharing her transgender identity. Catalina praised her child psychology professor for sharing stories about her personal trials and tribulations while growing up in a foreign country. This professor’s candor led all the students to be honest and open with each other, which fostered friendships among the students. Similarly, Adhira’s favorite class was psychology, where the professor formed groups of four students who did projects and assignments together. The formation of these groups served to unite the students; Adhira noted that the four students in her group are still friends.

Emile participates in the Achievement Program, in which African American male mentors support students in the same demographic. All 15 people in Emile’s circle of friends are drawn from this group. His friends encourage him to attend his classes and achieve high marks noting, “They’re . . . always watching over me.” Emile described the Achievement Program as follows:

It empowered me because I’m looking at men who’ve been in my shoes. Men who look like me come to school. It gives us guidance on how . . . to achieve our goals and how to become successful for tomorrow. . . . It’s very motivating.”

As a result of his participation in this program, Emile changed his manner of responding to hardships. Indeed, guidance that he received from these mentors has been transformative for him.
Administrators in Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) programs create a similar type of community among students. Elena (at RCC) and Selena (at JCCC) participate in these programs, which target low-income students, providing many services in addition to financial support. In Elena’s words, the people who work in the EOF program are “always trying to help you. . . . They really are putting that hand forth so you can kind of take it. And they guide you a lot.” Advisors provide support in course scheduling and addressing various challenges. Elena characterized one of the advisors as a mother. “She knows exactly what to say, even if it’s a little harsh. She’ll say it, but it helps.” In fact, Elena explained that she had no idea what she wanted to study when she entered college, but one of her EOF advisors took note of her interest in volunteering at the local hospital, and inquired whether she had ever contemplated studying science. Once she tried it, Elena has not looked back. Now, Elena envisions a future that includes medical school.

In addition to the supportive advisors, Elena noted that the EOF program schedules social activities that encourage students to interact with each other, building networks of support among their peers.

Before classes even begin in the fall, the EOF program offers boot-camp style classes in the summer, with professors providing instruction to improve students’ odds of passing their math and English course placement exams. Selena explained that she was able to increase her placement test score from a 30 to a 118, as a result of the summer refresher workshop provided by EOF. This propelled her directly into the college-level Calculus course. Helping students believe in their ability to accomplish their academic goals is directly linked to student success.
Student engagement with the academic subject. Another form of belonging is derived from students’ engagement with their academic material. Some students are driven to accomplish their goal and dedicate their time and attention to their studies. For example, Paulette declines social engagements during the weeks before and during her exams, opting to finish her exams first and then take a break. Reflecting on Anatomy and Physiology, her favorite class, Paulette expressed, “I love it!” Silveria shares this passion for learning about the human body, and noted that medical terminology is her favorite class, “I just like the learning about diseases and like to learn more about, like, the human body.” Similarly, Mushir enjoys learning new concepts and processes, especially in microbiology, noting how ubiquitous it is, “play[ing] out in the background of everything.”

Some students, like Tamira and Antilochus, expressed a disinclination to participate in student activities so that they could focus on their studies. Antilochus’ college experience is entirely wrapped up in accomplishing his goal of learning. He appreciates that his professors are willing to talk with him after class, ensuring that he learns any concepts he failed to grasp in class. Antilochus’ affinity for math and physics led him to focus his studies on engineering. He described how his whole family moved from Egypt to the United States so that he and his brother could get a better education. As a result, he takes his studies very seriously, even opting out of student activities to concentrate on his education. He explained, “All that I need from college is to study and get a good education.” Tamira pointed out that she is at college strictly to focus on academics, “Like, I just go here to study and not, like to get along with people.”
As a 27-year-old student, Darren is now focused on his education. He suggested that in the beginning of his program, the information he was learning lacked any rhyme or reason for him. But in the final semester, “It’s like a puzzle coming together.” He chooses not to participate in student activities, because his whole focus is on the respiratory therapy program. Given the direct pipeline to a very specific occupation, he cautioned that students need to be “110%” certain that respiratory therapy is the right field for them, because “you’re putting all your eggs in one basket.”

In this same vein, Kyleigh has been cooking since she was seven years old, and she was drawn to the culinary arts program by her passion. Pearl was working as a video game coach when she realized the significance of psychology in helping video game players succeed. With this lightbulb moment, she enrolled in the psychology program at Riverside. Mandisa also was drawn to psychology, given the degree to which she enjoys observing the way people think, noting, “A little thing can trigger anybody.”

Dominga described her passion for basketball, for which she has the height and the talent. But she elected not to participate on the team because she feared that it would detract from her ability to do well with her classes, particularly her science classes, which are quite challenging. Similarly, Alejandro opted out of joining the soccer team, even though he contemplated becoming a professional soccer player. He shared, “Right now, it is a low priority, because now my priorities are college and getting my degree.”

In response to a question about whether he wants to feel a sense of belonging at the college, Rudy said, “not so much,” and explained that his focus is simply on getting
his work completed: “My mindset was I’m going to college.” His plan is to complete his degree and transfer. He advised, “Get an education. You work hard. You get the grades.”

Despite the high praise Elena bestowed on several professors, her favorite course, chemistry, was taught by another professor, who was not as animated. This professor spends time explaining difficult topics after class. As Elena recalled, “She made it more enjoyable because the more I understood the subject, the more fun it was to me.” For Elena and many other students like her, unlocking the key to knowledge ignites an excitement about learning, propelling them along their educational journey.

Additional Factors Contribute to Students’ Sense of Belonging

Physical space. Colleges have the opportunity to structure spaces in ways that permit relationships between students to develop. Gathering spaces that allow students to connect with their peers—in circular tables or communal study spaces—enable communities to flourish. For example, Dominga meets with a group of approximately 25 students in the student commons on a daily basis. Together, these students study, eat, celebrate birthdays, and socialize. She pointed out that “everyone’s always in the commons, or going into the cafeteria, or the library even.” Significantly, Dominga realizes that the opportunities to “just bump into anyone” in the commons lay the foundation for student connections. Tia gravitates to the commons, even though she sits alone, scrolling through her cell phone. She believes the activities that take place in the commons increase her sense of belonging, especially during Welcome Week.

The library is another space on college campuses where students can connect. It allows students to stay focused, absent the distractions that often surface at home. Selena
has a particular affinity for the library. She loves that it is a quiet place where she can focus on her work alone or with friends. Although the college has another library closer to her home, she found that she can “breathe and relax” in the larger library, noting, “It just makes me feel comfortable.”

With his drive to complete his studies, Antilochus values having a comfortable place where he can study, which he finds in the quiet library. Adhira also enjoys the quiet library at Joshua, where “there’s no one to disturb you and [you can] get your work done.”

Riverside’s library is also relatively quiet, with study rooms where groups of students can work together. Jared found that by removing himself from the creature comforts of home, he is better able to stay focused on the tasks at hand (in the library). For Mandisa, the study rooms in the library provide the solitude necessary for her to satisfy her Muslim prayer ritual, which entails praying five times daily.

Meanwhile, the library at Canyon County College is a more boisterous space, with students occupying dozens of computer stations gathered in circles. Catalina’s friends know that they can find her working at the computers or meeting with the tutors in the library. When Dominga is in the library, she sometimes hears other students struggling with their work, which prompts her to share her insights. Dominga recognizes that these interactions forge bonds with the students whom she assists.

Students identify the Honors lounge as a critical gathering space for those in the Honors Program. Marshall pointed out that the Honors lounge is helpful for students who need to study or relax, where they will be sure to encounter familiar faces. Mushir
declared that a “room with walls and electricity and a mini fridge . . . is all we ever really needed . . . to bring us together.”

When Kyleigh considers what she enjoys about her college experience, she focuses on the “nice places and nice atmospheres” that the college has created. She appreciates the lounges, especially the Culinary Department’s “very relaxing” lounge—complete with a vending machine and cable—where students can “go chill.” Kyleigh also values the relaxing outdoors park, to which helpful security guards directed her. In reference to the study rooms in the library, Kyleigh pleasantly added in her Southern drawl, “Y’all can be as loud as you want to in here, ‘cuz ain’t nobody can hear you.” When students gather there, first they play games or music, and then they talk about class, finally getting down to the business of studying. Having recently moved from Alabama, Kyleigh had no expectation that she would make friends at college, but reality has defied her expectation, as she is “very comfortable here.” She and the other students who study together have become friends, talking to each other every day. Having a space where she and her classmates can work together has been a critical component nurturing Kyleigh’s sense of belonging.

Rudy’s vision of a college campus, which he recalls from movies while he was growing up—complete with rolling grass, green trees, water surrounding statues and residential dormitories spread across an open vista—does not match the reality at JCCC. In his mind’s eye, college entails “kids running out” onto the grass, living the dream. This vision is a departure from the urban community college he currently attends, where there is no campus and no grass, just streets separating tall buildings. Nonetheless, Rudy has
his sights set on completing a bachelor’s degree, where he hopes his vision will be realized.

As the Dean of a branch campus, Yolanda recognizes that students’ experiences can be enhanced by administrators’ attention to physical spaces. She referenced the value inherent in various places where groups of students gather on the college’s main campus including the Honors lounge, the “fish bowl” study rooms for Allied Health students, and the sofas and bar top tables by the fireplace in the Student Life Center. With an appreciation for the importance of gathering students comfortably, Yolanda works to create spaces where students can convene on her campus as well. She outfitted a small lounge with borrowed tables and chairs, supplemented with snacks for hungry students, ensuring that the furniture is comfortable and that students feel welcome and nourished.

**Religion and external support networks.** Some students’ derive support from their religion, which manifests in increased spirituality and/or in bonds within their group. For example, Mandisa conveyed the importance of honoring her Muslim rituals by reciting prayers five times each day, which she accomplishes in the library’s study rooms. Similarly, Antilochus spends all day on Sundays with his peers in the Coptic Orthodox church. They spend many hours writing, practicing and presenting plays, much to Antilochus’ delight. Pearl shares the significance of her faith, Ashkenazi Judaism, which has served as the foundation for several of the friendships she has forged at college. Paulette shared that she relies on prayers to “show [her] the way.”

Other external groups serve as a source of support, such as the foundation that provides scholarships and mentors for DACA students. Not only does this group offer
financial support, they also host meetings for scholarship recipients, where mentors encourage the DACA students’ involvement in the college community. According to Silveria, the DACA students motivate each other to persevere, and the program’s mentors are accessible by telephone or text.

**Technology and social media.** Social media can have positive or negative effects on students. Students stay in touch with classmates and friends by texting and contacting each other through other forms of social media. This communication tool is critical for students who otherwise would be separated by the demands of their work, family, and studies. On the other hand, Jasmine cited the virtual distance that occurs when peers walk through campus with earbuds or a headset attached to their ears, effectively shutting out the rest of the world to opportunities for communication. Tia’s use of her cell phone provides a welcome diversion during the bit of free time she enjoys, but also might dissuade students like Jasmine from approaching her.

**What’s in a name?** Students who have made efforts to engage with other members of their college community can rattle off long lists of people who know their names, from their professors to the security guards, and from the cafeteria workers to deans. Significantly, the students also know the names of faculty, administrators, and staff. Catalina reported that all of her professors know her name, as do the people in the lunchroom, in the Academic Learning Center, and in the library. It was only after her athletic advisor encouraged Catalina to make these connections that she developed relationships with her instructors and peers, which enhanced her college experience. When Emile contemplated what members of the college community know his name, he
thought first of the security guards. Several students emphasized the important role played by security guards, who welcome them onto the campus and into the community.

Some students who struggle with their sense of belonging are more likely to have difficulty naming other students whom they look forward to seeing. One student indicates, “For some reason, a name did not stick out to me.” Another student responded, “I know a lot of people, but . . . I don’t know their names.” A self-described “introverted” student suggested that she knows only two students’ names—those who speak her native language.

**Detractors From Students’ Sense of Belonging**

**Competing priorities.** Students identify the inherent challenge associated with forging bonds with students whose schedules are stacked with competing priorities. Elena explained the difficulty in making friends outside of class: “Everyone comes and goes. It’s like nobody really wants to stay and be a community . . . [which makes it] hard to make friends here.” She expects that these circumstances will not improve until she gets to a four-year institution where she will be “surrounded by people that won’t leave.” As a result, Elena has made arrangements to transfer to a four-year, public university next semester. Despite this plan to leave the community college, Elena pointed out that the EOF program functions like a community, rather than detaching as others do. She explained, “People come and go and it’s very difficult to get ahold of someone or form groups, study groups or anything that could help you in your academics.”

Insufficient time to satisfy all of students’ demands is a common refrain. Camilla acknowledged that she is one of those students who “come and go.” Similarly, Jasmine
lamented the tremendous pressures put on students in the Honors Program, where everyone is “so driven,” working, doing schoolwork, and/or internships. Jasmine distinguished that she feels a sense of belonging with the Honors Program, but not with the rest of the college. She described the gulf between students who are in the Honors Program and those who are not in this program as a “culture shock,” noting that other students “dress differently, act differently, and are different.”

Family obligations play a role in the many demands on students’ time. For example, Dominga balances her obligations to work and care for younger siblings with her desire to get more involved in college. Although she has formed a circle of friends, these other commitments force her to sacrifice opportunities to engage in some student activities of interest.

The need to focus on academics causes some students to forego opportunities to participate on team sports—even for students with incredible athletic abilities. Several students suggested that they enjoy participating in sports, but have been reluctant to join college teams, given their other obligations. For example, Kaitlin ran on the cross country team in high school and continues to run today, yet she believes it would be “too much” to participate on a team in college. Dominga, who is talented at basketball and would love to play with the team, worries about her ability to balance her schoolwork with college athletics, particularly given her need to earn money at a job. Alejandro shared that he plays soccer on weekends and has even considered a professional soccer career. Although his college offers a men’s soccer team, Alejandro believes that participating in sports would demand too much of his time. He prefers to focus on his studies. All these
competing priorities can create anxiety for students, and certainly impact their ability to participate fully in their college experience.

**In-group vs. out-group animus.** Some students suffer hostility from other students by virtue of their religion, gender identity or sexual orientation. Naturally, this animus detracts from students’ sense of belonging. One example is Mandisa, who is Muslim and wears a hijab. As she seeks solace to pray in one of the library’s study rooms, some students have made her feel unwelcome by telling her to “Pull this ugly thing off your head!” Mandisa is stoic, but their ridiculing comments are cruel. Repeated episodes can take a toll on a student’s sense of belonging.

Students who struggle with issues related to gender identity can also encounter prejudice. Pearl described her name as somewhat of a litmus test for relationships. She is not willing to nurture a relationship with anyone who does not respect her chosen name, which reflects her transgender status. For most students, acceptance of their name may be an insignificant occurrence. But even something as innocuous as a name can be fraught with tension for students dealing with gender identity challenges.

Citizenship is another issue that many students take for granted. But DACA students live in a world of uncertainty about their future. Silveria is a DACA student who lamented the fact that her college provides little guidance for students like herself, who are unsure how to proceed, given their tenuous status. Nonetheless, she has not made an effort to attend the Dreamers Club, where some of this type of information might be shared. Such students worry about how their DACA status could introduce legal challenges in the future.
Some students must contend with others’ lack of appreciation for their academic goals. Whether it is parents of first-generation students or others who do not understand students’ vision for themselves, a lack of empathy complicates students’ sense of belonging, and can have deleterious effects on the students’ ultimate achievement of their objective. Selena has had to contend with individuals who do not support her decision to study physics. First, her parents do not understand what she hopes to achieve, and therefore tell others that she is studying nursing. Plus, Selena reported that others have been less than supportive, saying things like, “Oh, I think that’s too hard for you,” or, “I wouldn’t see you as that type.” Such comments can chip away at students’ confidence, eroding their likelihood of achieving academic goals.

**Exclusivity.** By their very nature, some student groups exclude students, which can have the effect of reducing those students’ sense of belonging. For example, Jasmine reported that she does not talk with anyone who is not in the Honors Program. In fact, she seems to have an elitist attitude that pervades several of her thoughts: “It’s really hard to find people at community college who aren’t just there because 1) they can’t afford it; or 2) they can’t get in anywhere else academically.” From her perspective, all of the students in the Honors Program have the “same academic mindset,” which she described as a combination of high achievement and accomplishment. Contrasting herself from others at the college, Jasmine noted that she has “no piercings and no tattoos” and that she wears “a higher brand, more expensive clothes” than others, describing herself as “more natural.”
Similarly, Marshall remarked that some of the students who are not in the Honors Program “may not take their studies seriously.” Later in the interview, he pointed out that as a result of the open admission policy at the college, some students are “disgusting,” which he describes as “not gross, but irritated by—some people in life you don’t want to work with.” Meanwhile, rather than assuming an “us versus them” type of approach, Mushir bands together with other serious students, based upon a mutual need to support each other.

When Melissa, a faculty member, considers programs that encourage student interaction, she thinks of honor societies, but acknowledged that by their very nature, they exclude some students’ participation.

**Roadblocks: Advisement, cancelled classes.** Much like being thrown in the ocean with currents pulling in multiple directions, some community college students experience challenges navigating the college system. A lack of direction can prolong the timeline for program completion, resulting in higher costs. Jared explained that he started his studies in 2007, and that he has taken some breaks from his academic pursuits, “but not by choice.” Darren depicted similar challenges in getting through the respiratory therapy program. An inability to take a class or a missed deadline can result in missing a whole semester or year.

In a similar vein, students expressed concerns surrounding the cancellation of courses in which they are enrolled. This practice is particularly unnerving for students at the precipice of graduating, as unfulfilled requirements impede their progress. Marshall spoke of anxiety provoked by the threat of course cancellation for a required course with
low enrollment. For Elena, the inability to take more than two courses is what is driving her to transfer to a four-year university before she completes her associate’s degree. When students feel as though the college is not providing the type of support that they need, or is otherwise putting up roadblocks along their journey, their sense of belonging is compromised.

Similarly, a lack of awareness of available services can result in some students not accessing the support they need. For example, Selena tried to get assistance with calculus at the tutoring center, but found that she had to wait two weeks for an appointment. She was completely unaware of the concept of professors’ office hours, or even that her professor had an office. Many first-generation students lack the insight and the social capital to navigate many of the systems embedded in college cultures. Without this understanding, students swim against a tide of hurdles.

**Struggles to make connections.** Other students confront challenges in their attempts to become integrated in the college community. Marshall shared that he has trouble finding where he fits in and where he thinks he belongs. Acknowledging his feelings of being excluded, he believes that some of his peers may not be including him as much as he would like. When he escapes those negative thoughts, Marshall resumes a sense of belonging. Tamira attributes not fitting in to her introverted demeanor. She explained that some students simply prefer not to participate in school activities. Jasmine depicted a challenge related to students’ use of technology, noting how common it is to pass students who are walking around campus with earphones plugged into their ears.
She reported that she finds this type of behavior to be “rude.” Assorted challenges related to strained student interactions can reduce students’ sense of belonging.

**Departing the community college.** Beyond these limitations, some students intentionally avoid becoming too secure in their belonging at two-year colleges to minimize potential separation difficulties. With an understanding that he will only be at Canyon for two or three years, Emile reported not wanting to have too much of a sense of belonging at this college. At this point, he already has his sights set on the four-year university he plans to attend next, so he explained that he wants to avoid getting “too wrapped up in this school.”

Mushir articulated this challenge succinctly, describing community colleges as a “way station for people that are trying to get somewhere.” In effect, he believes that if community colleges are too successful in making students feel welcome, students might never successfully advance. As he explained, “Ultimately, it’s the moving on which is the success.” Essentially, it is by promoting students on to the next leg of their journey—whether to a four-year institution or a career—that community colleges are accomplishing their mission. Based upon this reasoning, community colleges need to make students feel welcome, but not so comfortable that they do not proceed along their educational and career journeys.

**Perceptions of inferiority.** Although most students expressed pride about the community college they are attending, some must contend with perceptions that community colleges are inferior. Camilla pointed out that some students do not like to admit that they attend JCCC “because they feel like it’s embarrassing.” Rudy observed
that some students perceive community colleges as a “downgrade” from universities. He explained, “They don’t know that it is the same here as the first and second years at four-year colleges.” At his internship, Rudy met a student from a four-year institution who regretted not starting at a community college, given the potential for cost savings. Similarly, Darren indicated that RCC is “not on the level” with four-year universities, yet countered that he does not need football games, dorms and parties. His college is convenient and affordable, and is preparing him for a career. He declared that he wears his RCC sweatshirt with pride.

Although Selena is extremely proud of her community college, she expressed surprise that her professors are so talented and “actually care,” noting that she “wouldn’t expect that from a community college.” Similarly, Kaitlin observed, “You kind of expect that community colleges can’t do as much, but they like kind of show you that you can do as much as like any other college.” Silveria mentioned a stereotype that there are “more people of lower class” in community colleges, but she appreciates the diversity she has found. In high school she believed that “you had to go to a four-year college if you wanted to be successful. But this is a great start for everyone. It saves you money and you get the same education as you would at a four-year.” Despite perceptions of inferiority, many students have found their community colleges to be excellent options for them.
Community colleges provide equitable access to higher education, opening doors of opportunity to millions of students each year. But the path to upward mobility requires successful program completion, and many community college students confront challenges along this journey. These challenges range from financial difficulties to time constraints, a lack of academic preparation to unclear goals. Community colleges have an opportunity to improve students’ sense of belonging—by fostering student communities, increasing interactions with faculty and staff, and increasing students’ engagement with their academic studies. By nurturing students’ sense of belonging, colleges can move the needle on student success. As part of this study, I examined ways in which students’ sense of belonging was correlated with their involvement in student communities, their interactions with faculty, and their engagement with their academic subject. Integrating the results of the quantitative and qualitative research in this chapter, I analyzed the findings based upon more than 106,000 community college students’ survey responses, and interviews with students, faculty, administrators, and staff. Collectively, these findings paint a picture framing community college students’ sense of belonging and the ways in which community colleges can promote students’ sense of belonging and ultimate academic success. This study is guided by five research questions:

1. How do community college students define “sense of belonging”?
2. Which community college students report a sense of belonging, based upon demographic and academic attributes?
3. How do community college students’ interactions with other students, with faculty members, and with their academic subject material impact their sense of belonging?
4. How do students experience belonging in community colleges?
5. How is sense of belonging correlated with students’ overall college experience and their willingness to recommend the college to others?

I address the findings associated with each of these research questions next.

**Research Question 1**

The first research question was: How do community college students define “sense of belonging”? As part of the qualitative interviews, students were invited to provide their own definition of what sense of belonging means to them. In this chapter, I first present a summary of themes, followed by a graphic displaying the relationships between the themes, and then specific responses associated with each of the themes.

When contemplating the definition of belonging, many students focused primarily on their *commitment to education*. For those pursuing technical or vocational studies, this element of belonging links directly to career aspirations. This aspect of belonging also provides the impetus for students’ educational pursuits, the rationale for their dedication to their studies, and the motivation for their efforts. Students’ innate proclivity to study particular academic subjects and their enthusiasm for learning are embedded in this aspect of belonging.

For some students, belonging conjured up thoughts related to *community*, like helpful professors and staff, or being a part of a team or an academic community. The community component of belonging drives students’ desire to invest more time and energy at college, rather than simply attending classes and departing. When students are part of a community, they report feeling more welcome, which promotes a sense that they belong at the college. Some students equated this aspect of belonging with feeling as though they are part of a family, noting that developing a sense of community is what
binds them. Given the low barrier to entry, anyone is welcome to attend a community college. Importantly, however, students who become engaged in their academic experience are more likely to achieve positive outcomes.

Some students defined belonging in the context of communication. This aspect of belonging can pertain to students’ comfort talking with other students, genuinely sharing what is on their mind, or it can relate to feedback received from professors, advisors and coaches. Students derive comfort from such communications, which enlighten and guide them along their educational journeys.

Belonging also relates to commonalities that students share with others. When students see other students who look like them, they develop a sense of belonging. Some students referenced race or ethnicity; others pointed to their country of origin or religion. Students also discussed their immigration status, or the language spoken in their home. The precise elements of commonalities that are linked to students’ belonging are as unique as each individual student. Nonetheless, when students are surrounded by others whom they perceive to be similar to themselves, their sense of belonging is strengthened.

For other students, belonging relates to the comfort associated with feeling welcomed, knowing individuals’ names and sharing experiences. As part of this theme, students discussed the importance of feeling comfortable in the space where they study. Professors can foster a comfortable environment in the classroom, and administrators can intentionally design spaces that nurture students’ comfort, thereby enhancing students’ sense of belonging and ultimate academic success.
All of these themes are linked by the context of time and place, as well as the activities in which students engage. These responses reflect the number of years students invest in their education, the days per week that students are on campus, and the importance of particular gathering spaces and activities like Welcome Week. I coded student participants’ responses and classified their responses into themes, which are presented graphically in Figure 11.

Students who are highly focused on their academic program of study are particularly likely to define sense of belonging in terms related to their commitment to education, noting, for example, that all they need is to “get a good education.” Students like Darren are not interested in football games or fraternity parties; they are strictly focused on completing their program of studies. Colleges are in the business of providing an education, and facilitating students’ success in this realm is critical.

For other students, sense of belonging is all about building a sense of community. This definition includes references to helpful staff and “connect[ing] with other people who care.” Clubs and programs that encourage students to spend more time on campus extend this sense of belonging. Programs that foster a sense that students belong to a family or are a part of something larger than themselves build a sense of community. Bootcamps, community gatherings, and shared meals also nurture students’ belonging. Colleges that are able to build communities within their student population are likely to nurture students’ sense of belonging, which in turn leads to improved student outcomes.

Many students defined belonging in terms related to feeling comfortable, which includes having a place where they feel comfortable to study, eat, relax, pray, and/or meet
Figure 11. Students’ definitions of “sense of belonging.” This figure illustrates assorted themes that depict students’ definitions of belonging.

with friends, as well as an intrinsic sense that they are welcome here. For some students, comfort relates to the places where they study or gather. For others, comfort pertains to the classroom atmosphere. For still others, the comfort associated with belonging includes freedom to express their thoughts or to pursue studies that appeal to them.

Community colleges’ open access policies reinforce the sense that everyone is welcome. Students who are comfortable in their college setting—in the classroom, the cafeteria, the library, and other gathering spaces—are more likely to be retained and successfully complete their studies.
Communication drives belonging for some students, and includes being able to talk with others and share feelings. Language barriers and negative communications can also impede belonging. Given the presence of large numbers of first-generation students at community colleges who may not receive guidance to navigate college, colleges must ensure that communications concerning processes, pointers, and opportunities are made abundantly clear to students.

Several students spoke about sense of belonging in terms related to their commonalities, including race/ethnicity, age, language, religion, and appearance. Students who see others who look like they do are more likely to feel a sense of belonging. Importantly, some students expressed a desire to interact with students who differ from them.

Lastly, students also defined belonging in relation to their context, including activities, place and time. Student activities can nurture students’ sense of belonging, as can proximity to students’ home. The importance of place cannot be overstated, as opportunities to gather students in common areas serve to connect them with each other, fostering a sense of belonging. Within a community college setting, some students pointed to the amount of time they spend at the college—in days out of the week or years of their life—as a critical aspect of belonging. Darren, who has been working toward his associate’s degree for 10 years, expressed his right to complete his education, regardless of age. Similarly, Paulette values the extent to which she feels welcome at CCC, despite being of non-traditional age. Community colleges serve students at all stages of their life.
Feeling welcomed to learn at any age is of critical importance to community college students’ belonging.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question was: Which community college students report a sense of belonging based upon demographic and academic attributes? Overall, just over one quarter of community college students reported the highest level of belonging (27.4% assign a rating of 7). Segmenting students based upon assorted demographic characteristics, only minor differences in belonging ratings emerge. Notably, students who are somewhat more likely than others to report a sense of belonging include those who are married (33.9%), older (33.5% of students aged 25 or older), first-generation (30.8%), female (29.7%), Native Hawaiian (37.7%) and/or Hispanic (29.2%). Despite literature suggesting that college students who are first-generation college students or members of minority groups are likely to experience lower levels of belonging, the results of this research suggest that—in a community college setting—first-generation and Hispanic students reported slightly higher levels of belonging than others. Importantly, greater differences were observed between groups of students based upon their engagement with student communities, faculty and staff, or their academic material. Additionally, the extent to which students perceived support from their college was also highly correlated with students’ sense of belonging, and distinguished differences in students’ belonging much more than demographic groupings. These issues are addressed in greater depth below.
Research Question 3

The third research question was: How do community college students’ interactions with other students, with faculty members, and with their academic subject material impact their sense of belonging? Results of this research demonstrated the importance of students’ interactions with (a) their peers; (b) their faculty, administrators, and staff; and/or (c) their academic subject material. As a byproduct of these connections, community college students were more likely to experience heightened levels of belonging at their college.

Student Communities

Students who frequently engage with their classmates reported high levels of belonging. Based upon CCSSE results from more than 106,000 students across the country, more than four in 10 students who work on class projects with their peers outside of class (47.9%) or in class (42.0%), or who work on projects serving their community (48.4%) experienced the highest level of belonging, compared with just over a quarter (27.4%) of all community college students. Similarly, four in 10 students who tutor their peers (42.5%) reported high levels of belonging. In a related vein, almost half of students who feel that their college very much encourages contact among diverse students (45.3%) had a strong sense of belonging. Four in 10 students who very often have serious talks with students who differ from them in terms of race/ethnicity (39.1%) or religious, political or personal beliefs (38.6%) experienced a high level of belonging. When students engage with their peers in the classroom or outside of it, they tend to report higher levels of belongingness.
The qualitative results illuminated these findings by providing examples of student interactions that help to instill a sense of belonging among students. For example, Dominque established a sense of belonging as a result of gathering with her friends who meet in the commons to eat, study, and celebrate each other’s birthdays. Similarly, Kyleigh’s network of support was an outgrowth of students who study together for their shared classes. Alejandro and Pearl took the initiative to form study groups within their classes, which spawned friendships. Outside of class, Rudy struck up conversations with other students, expanding his social network. These connections help students to forge a stronger sense of belonging.

Students’ sense of belonging can also develop as a result of the shared classes attended by students in such programs as nursing, respiratory care, culinary arts, and honors programs. Students appreciate seeing familiar faces and supporting each other along their common educational journey. Clinical rotations, which unite students in small groups, further strengthen such bonds. By virtue of the time spent in clinical rotations and/or shared courses, students form bonds with each other, which increase their sense of belonging.

When classes integrate new students and those with more advanced standing, mentoring occurs naturally. For example, the culinary arts program at JCCC structures their curriculum in such a way as to unite more senior students with first-year students. Effectively, the new students are guided by their more experienced peers. These connections permit new entrants to receive guidance in their navigation of the complex web of course selection, registration, and other processes ingrained in higher education.
Students, like Tia, who have already experienced the positive effects associated with mentoring relationships in high school, expressed a desire for similar support in college.

Beyond academic programs that forge communities among students, student development divisions foster the growth and integration of students through activities and programmatic offerings. Clubs like the History and Political Science Club at RCC provide venues for students to gather with peers who share their interests. Administrators at JCCC and CCC emphasized the value of providing food at such events. Regardless of whether students struggle with food insecurity or not, students appreciate getting a bite to eat. Further, communal meals contribute to a sense of community among students, fortifying their sense of belonging. The athletic programs at CCC build a sense of community among the athletes, who benefit from guidance provided by their coaches, advisors and teammates. Students who attend their college’s games also benefit from the camaraderie associated with supporting their team’s sports.

**Interactions With Faculty/Administrators/Staff**

Learning communities are not simply an outgrowth of structured curricula or grand planning schemes. Astute faculty members build a sense of community—within the confines of their classroom or outside it—laying the foundation for belongingness among students. The national CCSSE results demonstrated that students’ frequent interactions with faculty, administrators and staff are associated with increased belongingness. Students who work with their instructors on activities other than coursework, who explore course-related topics with their instructors outside of class, or who discuss career plans with their instructors were particularly likely to report a strong
sense of belonging. Specifically, half of students who very often work with faculty on activities other than coursework (50.3%) or who very often discuss class ideas (46.7%) or career plans (45.6%) with their instructors reported high levels of belongingness. Four in 10 students who very often receive prompt feedback from instructors (41.4%), who very often work harder than they thought they could to meet instructors’ expectations (40.8%), or very often discuss grades with instructors (39.3%) reported high levels of belongingness.

Notably, students who ascribed the highest ratings to their relationships with instructors (56.9%) or with administrators and staff (63.0%) were particularly likely to feel a strong sense of belonging. These findings pointed to the importance of faculty, administrators and staff interacting with students. Such interactions could include discussing ideas from class, broaching career considerations, and communicating high expectations for students. Simply knowing students’ names is an important step in making students feel as though they belong.

Following a circular hub and spoke framework, some professors encourage students to form study groups to master their subject matter. When professors urge students to work together in small groups—in class or outside of class—relationships are forged, and students develop a sense of belonging. As students collaborate on group assignments, they are united by their common struggle, which builds a sense of community and belonging.

Some professors are gifted storytellers, who share some aspect of their life’s stories in such a way as to build a sense of community among their students. Pearl’s sign
language professor created an inclusive environment where Pearl felt comfortable revealing her transgender identity. Catalina developed a sense of belonging in her psychology class, where the professor shared authentic stories about trials and tribulations from her youth. By fostering a sense of community within their classes, these professors forge a sense of belonging among students.

Following a linear model, professors can serve as mentors for their students, increasing their sense of belonging by nurturing a connection directly with individual students. For example, Jared received guidance from a nursing professor who directed him to scholarship opportunities for students of color. Despite being a male student in a program that consists largely of females, and a member of a racial/ethnic minority group, Jared reported a strong sense of belonging. Similarly, Marshall’s speech professor helped him overcome anxiety surrounding public speaking. Mushir’s professor had a gentle manner of drawing him back into class discussions when his mind started to wander. The efforts expended by professors who mentor students, set high expectations, help to reduce their anxiety, and/or integrate them in the classroom cannot be discounted. All of these findings pointed to the important role that faculty play in nurturing students’ sense of belonging.

**Engagement With Academic Material**

Students who are highly engaged with their academic studies were more likely than others to report a strong sense of belonging. Specifically, almost half of students who find their coursework extremely challenging (45.9%) experienced high levels of belonging, as did four in 10 students who very often discuss ideas from class with family,
friends and/or co-workers (40.1%). In interviews with students, they expressed their love of particular courses, their passion for particular vocations, and their quest to complete their program of study. With a laser-like focus on their coursework and challenging material, students develop a strong sense of belonging.

**Research Question 4**

The fourth research question was: How is students’ sense of belonging correlated with their overall college experience and their willingness to recommend the college to others? Students who reported high levels of support from their college or who provided high ratings of their overall college experience were particularly likely to report high levels of belonging. Among students who reported that their college provides very much support to help them thrive socially (54.1%) or to help them cope with non-academic responsibilities, such as work and family (52.1%), more than half reported a strong sense of belonging. Among students who rated their overall experience excellent, almost half (46.4%) assigned the highest rating to their sense of belonging.

Students who regarded their college positively were more likely than others to report a strong sense of belonging. The vast majority of community college students (93%) would recommend their college to prospective students, leaving just seven percent who would not. Notably, students who would recommend their college were twice as likely as those who would not to feel a strong sense of belonging (28.4% vs. 14.1%, respectively).
Research Question 5

The fifth research question was: How do students experience belonging in community colleges? Students at community colleges are often balancing the demands of work, family and friends with the demands of their college experience. Understanding the context surrounding students’ experiences is essential to truly appreciate factors influencing their sense of belonging. Many students referenced that they are “all in the same boat,” one marked by financial struggles, personal problems, and time constraints. Some students are encouraged by their parents, while others have to contend with misguided or stifling parental expectations (e.g., emanating from parents who did not attend college). Many students reported that they experienced difficulties transitioning from high school to college, which can be a function of poor academic preparation or a lack of direction. Others simply do not have the social capital to understand the processes involved in navigating college, or the insight to know how and where to access support services.

When students interact with their peers, in formal or informal communities, their sense of belonging is strengthened. Allied health programs are structured to encourage students to take many of the same classes and to collaborate in clinical rotations. The same can be said for culinary arts programs. These experiences nurture students’ sense of belonging, and should serve as models for other academic programs. Similarly, the community-building that occurs in athletics, student government associations, and honors societies leads students to have greater engagement with their peers, which also fosters their sense of belonging. In a similar fashion, informal student communities (e.g., study
groups that students create to support each other with difficult classes) result in greater student interactions, which nurture students’ sense of belonging.

Linear models of student-faculty interactions occur when instructors serve as mentors to individual students. These instructors invest heavily in individual students, spurring their academic success. One example transpired for Jared, who shared that his nursing professor encouraged him to apply for scholarships for students of color. Similarly, Kyleigh was bolstered by her math professor who assured her that he would provide the support she needed to complete her course.

Circular hub and spoke models of student-faculty interactions develop in classrooms where instructors foster a sense of community among their students. By way of example, Adhira’s psychology professor formed groups of students who were required to work with each other to complete assignments. The formation of these groups fostered enduring friendships among the students, which increase students’ sense of belonging.

Many community college students focus exclusively on their academic pursuits, electing to engage fully with their academic program of study. Antilochus and Tamira were disinclined to participate in student activities, opting to direct their attention to their studies. Similarly, Rudy was driven to complete his work and finalize his degree, without much interest in anything else. These students’ sense of belonging was derived from their focus on academics.

Several other factors contribute to students’ sense of belonging, including the physical space, which can welcome students into circles of support with their peers. Students referenced the importance of spaces where they can study comfortably, meet
with friends, pray, and eat. Colleges have countless opportunities to structure students’ experiences to build communities and foster students’ sense of belonging. By forming circles of tables or dedicating spaces where groups of students are encouraged to gather, colleges can lay the groundwork for students to form relationships and encourage each other. Such dynamics unfold in the commons at CCC, in the library at JCCC, and in the honors lounge at RCC. By forming circles of desks equipped with computers, CCC fosters a sense of community among students that is palpable the moment one enters the library. JCC encourages group dynamics by restricting study rooms to groups of at least three or more students. With comfortable overstuffed chairs clustered in groups, the commons at CCC also provides a space where students can gather with their peers, forging communities of belonging. At JCCC, the student lounge is currently under construction, leaving students fewer opportunities for gathering, which negatively impacts students’ sense of belonging. When designed with the intention of uniting students, physical spaces have the capacity to enhance students’ sense of belonging.

Religion and external support networks provide some students with a foundation of support through their increased spirituality and/or the bonds they forge within these communities. Several students conveyed the importance of their faith, and the need to honor rituals associated with their faith traditions. Others pointed to guidance they receive as a result of their prayers. Silveria derived support from the generous work of a foundation that provides mentors and financial support for DACA students. These external support networks serve to bolster students, increasing their odds of success.
Technology and social media can serve as enablers or detractors of sense of belonging. For students who work many hours off-campus, social media provides opportunities for them to connect with their peers. But the use of cell phones can be a detractor, as some students with headphones in their ears may seem inaccessible to others. Depending upon whether students use technology and social media to connect with others or to disengage from the world around them, the resultant effects can positively or negatively impact their sense of belonging.

Students enrolled in distance education (i.e., online courses) also need to feel a sense of belonging at their college. An instructional designer interviewed for this research suggested that this can be achieved with a personal touch beginning with the introductory discussion. As part of a course’s first online forum, students have the opportunity to share ideas with each other and should be encouraged to develop a sense of community by replying to other students and to the faculty, sharing details about themselves, including where they come from, why they are pursuing their studies, and what they hope to achieve. Such tactics would enhance professors’ efforts to nurture a sense of belonging in distance education courses.

Students who are highly engaged with their campus community tend to interact regularly with their peers, faculty, and administrators/staff. As a result, these students know the names of their instructors, other students, and staff, and members of the college community know the students’ names as well. Learning others’ names can lead to greater feelings of connection. When faculty, administrators, and staff learn students’ names, those students develop a greater sense of belonging at the college. Several students
highlighted the warm welcome they received from security guards, who tended to know their names. This level of familiarity extends students’ sense of belonging.

Some students identified detractors to their sense of belonging, including students’ competing priorities, which lead students to spend less time on campus. As a result, these students have fewer opportunities to nurture a sense of belonging at their college. Despite colleges’ efforts to integrate students into the academic and extracurricular worlds of higher education, some external factors can impede these efforts. Detractors to student belonging can take many forms, including competing priorities, in-group versus out-group animus, exclusivity, roadblocks, struggles to make connections, a reluctance to integrate in the college community, and/or perceptions of inferiority. Any of these challenges can impede students’ sense of belonging, placing the odds of their successful program completion at risk.

Community college students must balance competing priorities with their academic pursuits. These priorities often include employment, but may also extend to the need to care for family members, internships, and other obligations. Given the prevalence of employment among community college students, many had the sense that their peers “come and go,” showing up for classes and swiftly departing. Such a fleeting presence on the college campus impedes students’ ability to nurture a sense of belonging.

Students’ competing priorities can also translate into insufficient time for students to become integrated in the college community. Community college students sacrifice opportunities to participate in clubs, activities and athletics as a result of the limited time
they have to dedicate to their college experience. Compromising such opportunities diminishes occasions that might otherwise foster students’ sense of belonging.

In-group versus out-group animus serves as another detractor of students’ sense of belonging. For example, some students experience animosity from other students in response to their religion or gender orientation. One shocking example was shared by Mandisa, who explained that some students passed by the library study room where she prays and hollered for her to remove her “ugly” headscarf. Other students are transgender or other members of the LGBTQ community, and may struggle with their gender identity. These students described the need to be accepted—in terms of their chosen name and/or other aspects of their identity—which further compounds challenges associated with their integration into the college community. For these students, belonging in the college community was complicated by their need to belong more universally. All students need to feel as though they have a right to pursue higher education, and that they belong in the college community, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual identity, or religion.

Some negativity can also emanate from the very communities designed to nurture belongingness. For example, some honors students expressed elitist attitudes, which could impact other students’ sense of belonging. Similarly, one faculty member relayed concerns about the exclusive nature of honors societies, which by their very nature exclude students whose grade point averages are too low.

Students also expressed concerns about inconsistent advising and cancelled classes, which evoke anxiety that compromises their sense of belonging. In the weeks
leading up to a semester, some community colleges cancel classes with insufficient enrollment—in response to fiscal pressures. Students who were enrolled in the courses that were subsequently cut from the schedule were left scrambling to schedule new classes. As they seek to balance their academic schedules with assorted competing priorities, several students referenced the challenges associated with navigating cancelled courses. Others spoke about the difficulties that result from inconsistent academic advising, which can lead to the accumulation of unnecessary credits. Such impediments can extend the time for students’ program completion, which frustrates students and detracts from their sense of belonging.

Some students struggle to make connections with other students, owing to their introverted nature or sensitivities. Further, several students expressed a concern about establishing a sense of belonging at the community college, given their plan to transfer to a four-year institution. Students shared concerns surrounding others’ perceptions of the inferiority of community colleges. Despite these views, most community college students are proud to be attending their college and would recommend it to others. In fact, many community college students praised their outstanding professors and the smart financial choice of attending a public community college.

College students need to feel as though they belong at college. This is especially true at community colleges, where doors of opportunity have swung open to welcome all students. Based upon the survey research data and the qualitative interviews, there was ample evidence of the importance of students’ engagement with their peers, faculty, and/or their academic subject material in increasing community college students’ sense of
belonging. Community colleges must ensure that all students feel welcomed into the college community.
Community college student retention and program completion are important issues to address, especially given the greater probability of minority, low-income, and first-generation students beginning their studies in this sector. Many students confront challenges related to competing priorities and limited resources—particularly time and money. Most community college students need to work at a paying job while attending college, which leaves little time to engage fully with their college experience. Students see education as their ticket to a better life, but may lack clarity about what program of study they would like to pursue. As a result, some students meander through the college curriculum, accumulating excess college credits and additional debt; others drop out. Given the high proportion of students from marginalized communities who begin their studies in the two-year, public sector, it is a matter of social equity that higher education leaders forge a clear path to success for community college students. The foundation of that path to success is built upon students’ strong sense of belonging. The results of this research demonstrated the importance of encouraging students to engage with other students, with faculty, and with their academic program of study. Doing so increases their sense of belonging, which is linked to successful program completion.

Students who feel a strong sense of belonging develop a connection to their studies and their college. In fact, students who feel a strong sense of belonging at college gain confidence that they are not alone in their struggles, and are more likely to successfully achieve their goals. Given the inextricable link between students’ successful college program completion and their economic security, higher education leaders must
ensure that potentially marginalized students are fortified in believing that they belong in
college. This can be achieved by detailing specific steps that students can take to increase
their sense of belonging.

Based upon the perspectives shared by students, belongingness is a function of
various elements of students’ experiences. This includes their sense of community,
feelings of comfort, communication, commitment to education, and commonalities—all
within the context of the students’ lived experiences. Each of these areas deserves
attention. Faculty members who spark students’ love for their academic subject foster
their sense of belonging. Creating spaces where students feel welcome and comfortable
advances their sense of belonging. Talking with students—about their lives, their grades,
their long-term plans—helps to foster their sense of belonging. By forming groups of
students who can work together in or outside of class, professors naturally forge
relationships among students, nurturing their sense of belonging. When these groups
integrate students in their second or third year of studies with new students, mentoring
transpires. When diverse groups of students work together, students gain an appreciation
for others’ perspectives, which increases their sense of belonging. By focusing attention
on these aspects of community college students’ educational journey, faculty members
and administrators can improve students’ sense of belonging, which is a critical
component of academic success.

To improve students’ sense of belonging, colleges must provide various forms of
support, including boot camps, orientation, mentors, and tutors. Based upon the
experiences of students who participated in this study, it is not uncommon for test anxiety
and time lapses since they studied particular subjects to impede their success in math and English placement tests. Relatively short-term refresher courses and boot camps can increase the likelihood of success for students taking placement exams by moderating the inadequate academic preparation and/or test anxiety that some students experience.

Other forms of support can also bolster students’ sense of belonging. By ensuring that orientation programs clarify many of the processes involved in higher education and demystify the language necessary to navigate a college education, students gain a clearer understanding about how to belong, which increases their likelihood of success. Peer mentors can answer questions and provide insights about the educational journey. Mentoring programs permit students to learn from more experienced students and adults who have walked the same journey. Peer tutoring programs allow more experienced students to teach academic material to their peers, and have the added benefit of fostering relationships between the students. Community colleges can increase students’ sense of belonging by encouraging them to speak with professors, to make friends in classes, and to recognize that seeking support is a sign of strength, not of weakness. By encouraging students to work with each other to complete assignments—in and outside of the classroom—students have greater opportunities to interact with their peers. Collaborating with peers holding divergent beliefs can serve to bridge potential differences. When students share academic challenges, they often develop relationships that bolster their odds of success.

Students’ belonging is also enhanced when faculty members communicate with them, inquiring about their well-being or their long-term educational and career goals.
Simple conversations between faculty members and students foster student belongingness; the same is true of conversations between administrators/staff and students. By taking an interest in students, college faculty, administrators, and staff strengthen students’ sense of belonging, increasing the likelihood of their successful program completion.

Challenges navigating college can cause pressure, impeding students’ ability to proceed with their academic goals. Students need guidance to chart their collegiate journey. Guided Pathways-style programs provide a framework aligning students’ passions and strengths with their program of study. By exposing students to career and educational outcomes data, they are better able to make informed decisions about their intended program of study. Clear advisement is essential to help students overcome potential hurdles to their successful program completion. These types of support are particularly important in a community college setting, where many first-generation students may lack an understanding of the policies, procedures, and pitfalls common in higher education.

Financial challenges can also impede progress for many students. Creative solutions for addressing students’ lack of funds must be explored, including partnering with public transit providers, raising funds for scholarships, and finding substitutes for expensive books. Financial aid officers must ensure that students and their families understand the whole process involved in applying for aid. Students with incomplete applications must be assisted, so that all students can access the financial aid that is
appropriate and available to them. Shoring up the processes involved in higher education minimizes the risk that students falter along their educational journey.

All members of the college community must understand the importance of their role in advancing student success. Many study participants appreciate security guards who welcome them and know their name. By adopting this same welcoming spirit, all members of the faculty, administration, and staff contribute to students’ sense of belonging.

Although it would be virtually impossible to eliminate all of the impediments that college students confront, colleges can take steps to minimize many of students’ challenges. For example, by increasing the number of on-campus employment opportunities, students would be able to earn money while also being mentored by campus employees. Creating the master academic schedule with one block of time reserved for student meetings would minimize some of the potential conflicts between student activities and classes.

Educational leaders must be intentional about designing physical spaces where students’ relationships can flourish. Students need areas where they can convene with friends and classmates, and where new relationships can be established. This objective can be realized by creating welcoming spaces that facilitate opportunities to nurture relationships—in the library, the commons, study lounges, and the cafeteria.

Strategic information campaigns can incentivize students to engage in their college experience. By spelling out the greater likelihood of students’ completing their program of studies when they are engaged and develop a sense of belonging, colleges can
facilitate student success. Similarly, academic advisors and counselors must ensure that students understand that becoming engaged in their college experience is more than a boost to their social life; it actually impacts their academic success as well. Developing relationships with other students, faculty members, administrators, and staff pays dividends, as students increase the likelihood of completing their degree and progressing toward their life goals.

**Limitations**

This research examined students’ sense of belonging in a community college context. Although the national results of the CCSSE provided tremendous insights into community college students’ perspectives based upon more than 106,000 students’ survey responses, these findings could not be aligned with actual retention and graduation data, given that the CCSSE data do not identify specific institutions of higher education where the survey was administered. Further research could explore the extent to which students’ reported sense of belonging correlated with increased student retention and program completion. Additionally, results are only as reliable as the veracity of the survey respondents; any departure from accurate portrayals of experiences and beliefs would skew the results.

Limitations associated with the interviews of students include biases introduced by sample selection. The small sample of students selected for inclusion in the qualitative part of this study was not a random sample, and cannot be assumed to be representative of all community college students. Individual students vary tremendously in their experiences, and larger samples provide greater insights. Nonetheless, the students who
participated in this research effort generously shared their lived experiences, which contribute to a greater understanding of the rewards and challenges associated with attending college in this sector.

The interviews conducted with faculty, administrators, and staff were restricted by some community colleges that prohibited research to be conducted on their campuses. Additionally, individuals who elected not to participate deprive academia from the opportunity to learn from their experiences. Fortunately, many individuals generously shared their time and insights.

**Implications for Future Research**

From a higher education management perspective, it is essential that researchers capture the nuances of community college students’ experiences, rather than assuming that their experiences mirror those of students at four-year colleges and universities. Understanding the implications associated with drivers and detractors of students’ sense of belonging will permit colleges to facilitate student success. Given the large numbers of students served by two-year, public colleges across the country, more in-depth research of community college students would help to facilitate the successful program completion of larger shares of these students.
APPENDICES

Appendix A

Characteristics of Community Colleges That Served as Interview Sites

*Figure A1.* Student demographics. This figure illustrates student demographics at community college sites where interviews were conducted. All data are based upon IPEDS reports (NCES, 2019).

*Figure A2.* Metrics of success. This figure illustrates student metrics of success at community colleges where interviews were conducted. All data are based upon IPEDS reports (NCES, 2019).
Figure A3. Tuition and financial aid. This figure illustrates average annual tuition and financial aid at community colleges were interviews were conducted. All data are based upon IPEDS reports (NCES, 2019).
Appendix B
Informed Consent Forms

Factors That Foster Community College Student Success
University of Pennsylvania

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

**Purpose of the research study:**
The purpose of this study is to understand how specific programs improve academic and social success among community college students.

**What you will be asked to do in the study:**
You will be asked to answer a series of questions related to your learning environment at the community college you currently attend. The interview will be completed in less than 60 minutes. At any point in the interview, you may skip questions you would prefer not to answer.

**Risks and benefits:**
There are no risks associated with participation in this study. The potential benefits of the study include the possibility of improving student retention and program completion at community colleges. If you are younger than 18, you will be excluded from the study.

Are you 18 years of age or older?

_____ Yes

_____ No (You are not eligible to participate in this study.)

**Voluntary participation:**
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you elect to discontinue participation, any information already collected will be discarded. There is no penalty or loss of benefit for choosing not to participate.

**Right to withdraw from the study:**
You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence or penalty.

**Incentive or compensation:**
As a token of appreciation for your participation in this research, you will be given a $20 gift card at the conclusion of the interview. Aside from foregoing this gift card, you will not be adversely affected in any way if you choose not to participate.

**Confidentiality:**
If you would like your identity to be kept confidential, you will be assigned a pseudonym which will be used in the interview and report of findings. The consent form which
includes your name will be locked in a cabinet, and destroyed at the conclusion of this research project. If you elect to use a pseudonym, your name will not be used in any report or publication.

If you would prefer to be identified by a pseudonym, please indicate what name you would like to be referred by:

(Print) ______________________________________________

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:
You may contact Dr. Diane Eynon at eynond@gse.upenn.edu or 215-573-8072 if you have questions about this study.

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you may contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs with any question, concerns or complaints at the University of Pennsylvania by calling (215) 898-2614 or irb@pobox.upenn.edu. Additional contact information is available at https://irb.upenn.edu

Agreement:
If you wish to participate in this study, please sign the form below. A signature will indicate agreement to participate.

Participant’s Name: (Print) ________________________________________________

Signature ______________________________________ (Date) __________________
FACTORS THAT FOSTER COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT SUCCESS
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA: Faculty/Administrators/Staff

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study:
The purpose of this study is to understand how community colleges improve academic and social success among community college students.

What you will be asked to do in the study:
You will be asked to answer a series of questions related to student engagement and belonging at the college where you work. The interview will be completed in about 20 to 30 minutes. At any point in the interview, you may skip questions you would prefer not to answer.

Risks and benefits:
There are no risks associated with participation in this study. The potential benefits of the study include the possibility of improving student retention and program completion at community colleges.

Voluntary participation:
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you elect to discontinue participation, any information already collected will be discarded. There is no penalty or loss of benefit for choosing not to participate.

Right to withdraw from the study:
You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence or penalty.

Confidentiality:
If you would like your identity to be kept confidential, you will be assigned a pseudonym which will be used in the interview and report of findings. The consent form which includes your name will be locked in a cabinet, and destroyed at the conclusion of this research project. If you elect to use a pseudonym, your name will not be used in any report or publication.

If you would prefer to be identified by a pseudonym, please indicate what name you would like to be referred by:

(Print) ____________________________________________

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:
You may contact Dr. Diane Eynon at eynond@gse.upenn.edu or 215-573-8072 if you have questions about this study.
If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you may contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs with any question, concerns or complaints at the University of Pennsylvania by calling (215) 898-2614 or irb@pobox.upenn.edu. Additional contact information is available at https://irb.upenn.edu.

**Agreement:**
If you wish to participate in this study, please sign the form below. A signature will indicate agreement to participate.

Participant’s Name: (Print) ____________________________________________

Signature ____________________________  (Date) ____________________
Appendix C

Protocol for Interviews With Students

Thank you for participating in this interview. Please be assured that your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may choose to answer or not answer whichever questions you would like. Responses will be analyzed in aggregate form, and your name will not be associated with any of your responses.

Introduction/General Views:
1. When did you first enroll at this college? (Semester, Year)
2. What are you studying? (OE)\(^4\)
3. Did you attend any other college before this one? (Yes/No)
4. Are you studying full-time (12 or more credits/semester) or part-time?
5. What credential or degree are you working toward?
6. When do you plan to graduate?

Sense of Belonging:
7. To what extent do you feel as though you (… X) at this college – very much, somewhat, not too much or not at all?
   a. Are academically prepared for your studies?
   b. Can do what it takes to be successful?
   c. Are actually learning?
   d. Fit in?
   e. Are motivated to achieve your goals?
   f. Are supported by others?
   g. Can manage your time?
   h. Are challenged by your studies?
   i. Belong?
   j. See people who look like you?
   k. Work hard at your studies?
   l. Have made friends?
   m. Are respected?
   n. See people who have the same kinds of challenges that you do?
   o. Are proud to be studying here?
   p. Would recommend others to study?

Belongingness:
8. Before you arrived at this college, what did you think you would be the hardest part about attending college here? (OE)
9. Now that you have spent some time at this college, what have you found to be your greatest challenge? (OE)

\(^4\) OE = open-ended question
10. At this college, what student activities, athletics or other programs do you participate in?
11. What program or experience at this college increases your sense of belonging the most?
12. What would you say were the best parts of this program/impact? (OE)
13. What would you say were the worst parts of this program/impact? (OE)
14. How did you decide which program you would participate in? (OE)
15. Would you recommend this program to a student who was considering participating? (OE)
16. What made this program (better/worse) than other college experiences? (OE)
17. About how many students participate in this program?
18. About how many of those students’ names did you learn?

**Relationships With Faculty/Staff/Administrators:**

19. Is there **anyone who works at this college** who:
   a. You look forward to seeing? Yes/No (Who?)
   b. Knows your name? Yes/No (Who?)
   c. Has ever asked how you were doing? Yes/No (Who?)
   d. Could help you plan your next semester’s classes? Yes/No (Who?)
   e. You could turn to for advice or guidance? Yes/No (Who?)
   f. Could help you if you had a problem? Yes/No (Who?)

**Relationships With Other Students:**

20. Is there any **student** at this college who:
   a. You look forward to seeing? Yes/No
   b. Knows your name? Yes/No
   c. Has ever asked how you were doing? Yes/No
   d. You study with? Yes/No
   e. You like to spend time with? Yes/No
   f. Helps you figure out what needs to get done at college? Yes/No
   g. You could turn to for advice or guidance? Yes/No
   h. You could help you if you had a problem? Yes/No
   i. Has to deal with the same kinds of challenges that you do? Yes/No
   j. Is supportive of the challenges that you confront? Yes/No N/A
   k. How are these students like you or different than you?

**Academic Experiences:**

21. Of all the courses you have taken at this college, what course(s) have you enjoyed the most? (OE)
   a. What about this course did you enjoy? (OE)
      **Probe:** Was there anything about the (…X) that you particularly enjoyed?
      i. …Faculty?
ii. …Subject material?

iii. …Other students?

**Support Services:**
22. In what ways has the college provided support to help you to be successful?
23. What are some areas where you could have used more support?
24. Earlier, you mentioned the extent that you feel a sense of belonging at this college. What does having a “sense of belonging” mean to you?
25. In what ways has the college made you feel as though you belong?
26. What are some ways in which the college could do a better job of helping you feel like you belong?
27. Do you want to feel a sense of belonging at this college? Please explain:
28. Could you describe any examples of experiences you have had at this college that have reduced your sense of belonging?
29. College can be expensive. To what extent do you have difficulty paying for:
   
   Very much Somewhat Not Much Not at All
   
   a. Your tuition bill?
   b. Your books?
   c. Social outings with friends?
   d. Transportation?
30. How often do you (…X) at your college? (Often, sometimes, rarely, never)
   a. Use tutoring services?
   b. Go to academic advising sessions?
   c. Participate in clubs or activities?
   d. Participate in athletics?
31. How often do you work with other students in a group? (Often, sometimes, rarely, never)
   a. Could you describe how these students might be like you, or different than you?
32. How often do you study or complete homework assignments with other students?
   a. Could you describe how these students might be like you, or different than you?
33. How often do you get a bite to eat with other students?
   a. Could you describe how these students might be like you, or different than you?
34. How often do you socialize with other students?
   a. Could you describe how these students might be like you, or different than you?
35. Do you ever meet with any of your instructors outside of class? (Y/N)
   a. Please describe some of the out-of-class experiences you have had with the instructors/faculty. (OE)
36. When you were selecting a college, what number choice was this college?
37. In terms of your long-term goals, …
   a. What profession would you like to pursue?
b. What four-year college or university would you like to transfer to (if any)?

**Academics and Demographics:**
38. Have you ever taken developmental courses, for example in math or reading? Y/N
39. Are you currently employed?
   a. If yes, how many jobs do you have?
   b. If yes, how many hours do you work in a typical week?
   c. If yes, what kind of work do you do?
40. Including you, how many people live in your household?
41. Is your household income
   a. Less than $25,000
   b. $25,001 to $50,000
   c. $51,000 to $75,000
   d. $75,001 to $150,000
   e. More than $150,000
42. Approximately what percent of your tuition bill do you pay with:
   a. Loans?
   b. Grants or scholarships?
   c. Your own or your family’s earnings or savings?
43. Have you ever received a Pell Grant? Yes/No
44. Have you ever taken a semester off from your studies?
   a. If yes, for how long?
   b. Why did you take that break?
45. Did your father complete: Eighth grade? High school? Some college? What degree?
46. Did your mother complete: Eighth grade? High school? Some college? What degree?
47. What category best describes your current grade point average?
   3.5 to 4.0  3.0 to 3.4  2.5 to 2.9  2.0 to 2.4  lower than 2.0
48. Are you Hispanic or Latino, or not? Yes, Hispanic/Latino  No
49. Would you describe your race as: (Select all that apply)
   a. American Indian or Alaska Native
   b. Asian
   c. Black or African American
   d. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
   e. White
50. Where were you born?
51. In what year were you born?
52. What is your gender?
53. What language(s) do you speak at home?
54. Do you have any children? Yes/No (If yes, how many?)
55. Are you single or do you have a partner or spouse?
56. Could you share any final thoughts about how community colleges can improve students’ sense of belonging?
57. Recommend other students?

Name:

Phone #:

Thank you for your time. Your insights will be very helpful in understanding how colleges can help students be successful. I wish you success in your studies.
Protocol for Interviews With Faculty and Staff

Thank you for participating in this interview. Be assured that your participation is voluntary. You may choose to answer or not answer whichever questions you would like. Responses will be analyzed in aggregate form, and your name will not be associated with your responses.

1. What is your role at this college?
2. How long have you worked here?
3. Are any programs at your college particularly effective at encouraging interaction among students? Which ones?
   a. What kinds of challenges do you confront in your attempts to get students involved?
4. Are any programs at your college particularly effective at encouraging student-faculty interaction? Which ones?
   a. What kinds of challenges do you confront in your attempts to encourage student-faculty interaction?
5. What aspects of the programs you mentioned have the greatest impact on increasing students’ sense of belonging at this college? (OE)
6. What are the greatest challenges to building students’ sense of belonging at your college? (OE)
7. I’d like to focus on the program with the greatest impact on increasing students’ sense of belonging. What program is that?
8. What benefits would you say accrue to students as a result of their participation in this program? (OE)
9. Approximately how many students participate in this program?
10. How many faculty members or instructors are involved in this program?
11. How many administrators and/or staff are involved in these programs?
12. Do any advisors, mentors or tutors support students in these programs?
   a. If so, what types of services do they provide?
   b. Could you describe:
      i. Number of mentors?
      ii. Number of tutors?
      iii. Who functions as the mentors/tutors? (Students? Faculty? Administrators? Student Development Advisors?)
13. What time(s) of day (morning, afternoon, evening, weekend) are these programs offered?
14. What is the typical duration of this program (one semester, two semesters, more)?
15. Are students in this program provided with any financial support? (OE)
   a. For example, do these students receive funds to support costs associated with transportation, books, etc.?
   b. If so, which students receive this type of financial support?
   c. Approximately what percentage of these students receives this type of financial support?
d. What is the average amount of funding that these students receive?

16. If you think back to when your college first developed this program, what was the hardest part about forming it? (OE)

17. What types of students tend to get involved in these programs?

18. To what extent do you think students want to have a sense of belonging at this college? (OE)

19. How do you assess students’ sense of belonging at this college?

20. Compared with students who do not participate in this program, do you think that the students in this program spend more time on your college campus, less time, or about the same amount of time?

21. What are some things you know now that you wish you had known when you were first developing this program (to increase students’ sense of belonging)? (OE)

22. What are some examples of the types of activities in which students engage with faculty outside the classroom? (For example, do these students eat meals with faculty?)
   a. Do you have any institutional research data providing evidence of academic outcomes (e.g., GPA, average credits earned, retention, graduation rates) for students who participate in these programs (and those who do not)?
      i. If yes, would you be willing to share it with me?
   b. Do you have any survey research data (e.g., CCSSE or SSI) for students who participate in this/these programs (and those who do not)?
      i. If yes, would you be willing to share it with me?

23. Could you describe any strategies you have in place to facilitate student collaboration with instructors?

24. How does this strategy improve students’ academic development? (OE)

25. How does this strategy improve students’ social development? (OE)

26. How does this strategy improve students’ love of learning? (OE)

27. How does this strategy increase students’ connection to the college? (OE)

28. To what extent would you say that your college’s programs intended to increase students’ sense of belonging are successful – very, somewhat, not too much or not at all?

29. What can this college do to improve students’ sense of belonging? (OE)

30. What other programs does your college offer to improve student retention and graduation? (OE)
   a. Among these programs, which one(s) would you say are most effective at improving student retention and/or graduation?
   b. What aspects of these programs contribute to the improved outcomes? Please explain: (OE)

Thank you for your time. Your insights will be very helpful in understanding programs available to students at community colleges. I hope your program continues to promote student success.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2016a). *The Community College Survey of Student Engagement* [Data file and code book]. The University of Texas at Austin.


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