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**(RE)DESCRIBING BELONGING: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF MINORITIZED
STUDENTS AND THEIR SENSE OF BELONGING WHILE ATTENDING A
PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION DURING COVID-19**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how minoritized undergraduate students described their sense of belonging during COVID-19 at Rural Valley University (RVU), a large research one, historically and predominately White institution (PWI) located in the rural town in the eastern region of the United States. A sense of belonging is not guaranteed for minoritized undergraduate college students attending predominately White institutions. This study utilized narrative inquiry and Terrell Strayhorn's (2019) theoretical framework of belonging, interviewing 10 participants to describe their experience of belonging at a PWI while living in the time of COVID-19 and the summer of racialized activism.

The participants did not feel a sense of belonging at RVU (pre-pandemic) and their racial identities and social contexts influenced their belonging during a "two pandemic world." Additionally, the need to belong drove their behaviors in ways that may benefit and deter academic achievement. With some students satisfying their need to belong through external sources (technology, friends, family) with little association with RVU. The study ends by sharing implications for practitioners and leadership at PWIs to analyze and address their campus climate and culture by visualizing student belonging through an organizational lens and second order change to campus climate and culture at PWIs in advocating for justice and equity for minoritized students.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|------|
| LIST OF FIGURES | vii |
| LIST OF TABLES | viii |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | ix |
| DEDICATION | xv |
| Chapter 1: Introduction | 1 |
| Context of Higher Education during COVID-19 | 4 |
| Student Faced Barriers..... | 5 |
| Racism during COVID-19..... | 7 |
| Statement of the Problem | 8 |
| Purpose of the Study..... | 10 |
| Research Questions..... | 12 |
| Significance..... | 12 |
| Chapter 2: Literature Review | 15 |
| Historical Context on the Sense of Belonging..... | 16 |
| Context of Belonging(ness)..... | 16 |
| Belonging as Perceived Cohesion of Groups..... | 17 |
| Relationship between Individual and Setting..... | 18 |
| Interpersonal Interactions..... | 108 |
| College Students' Sense of Belonging..... | 20 |
| Belonging in Online Spaces | 21 |
| Online Participation v. Interaction..... | 21 |
| Online Community for Online Learners..... | 22 |
| College Student Identity | 23 |
| Identity in Online Settings..... | 24 |
| Online Experiences of Racial Discrimination..... | 26 |
| Higher Education Responses to Disruptions from Natural Disasters and Epidemics | 31 |
| Institutional Responses to COVID-19 | 31 |
| Higher Education Responses to Racial Events..... | 34 |
| Freedom of Speech and Diversity Initiatives..... | 34 |
| Language of Dominant Culture and Oppression..... | 35 |
| Limited Progress to Address Campus Climate and Culture..... | 36 |
| Minoritized Experiences at Predominately White Institutions..... | 38 |
| Perceptions of Campus Climate..... | 39 |
| Transformational Change in Institutions..... | 40 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| | v |
| Relevant Studies on Belonging | 41 |
| Theoretical Framework: Strayhorn’s (2019) College Student’s Sense of Belonging..... | 43 |
| Summary of Literature Review and Next Steps..... | 45 |
| Chapter 3: Methodology | 47 |
| Research Questions | 47 |
| Methodological Tradition and Theoretical Framework | 47 |
| Epistemology | 47 |
| Qualitative Research Methods and Culture..... | 49 |
| Narrative Inquiry | 49 |
| Theoretical Framework: The Sense of Belonging | 51 |
| Research Site and Participants..... | 51 |
| Site Location..... | 51 |
| Sampling Method..... | 52 |
| Background of Participants | 53 |
| Data Collection and Analysis..... | 55 |
| Data Collection..... | 55 |
| Interview Protocol | 57 |
| Data Analysis..... | 57 |
| Ethics, Pilot Study, Trustworthiness and Positionality | 59 |
| Ethics | 59 |
| Pilot Study | 60 |
| Trustworthiness | 60 |
| Analytic Memos..... | 60 |
| Member Checking..... | 61 |
| Positionality..... | 61 |
| Summary of Methodology..... | 63 |
| Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings | 65 |
| Finding 1: Baseline of Belonging (Pre-pandemic): Lack of Belonging at RVU and Relying on Representation to Belong | 66 |
| Campus Racial Culture and Cultural Dissonance at RVU..... | 67 |
| Navigating College Academically and Socially: Seeking a Sense of Belonging | 70 |
| Groups/Programs for Minoritized Students..... | 73 |
| Multicultural Centers | 75 |
| Spring 2020 Campus Closure: Navigating Spaces for Belonging..... | 77 |
| Summary | 78 |
| Chapter 4b: Identity, Context, and Temporal Moments Influence Sense of Belonging during a “Two Pandemic World” year | 80 |
| Identity as a Student of Color | 80 |
| Ongoing Racial Discrimination and Stereotypes..... | 83 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| | vi |
| Belonging is Context-Specific | 85 |
| Belonging during COVID-19, Black Lives Matter and the 2020 Presidential Election | 87 |
| Questioning the Future of Racism and Belonging | 90 |
| Chapter 4c: The Need to Belong Drove Students' Behavior that Benefit or Deter Academic Achievement | 92 |
| Discomfort, Disconnection, and Disengagement | 94 |
| Negotiating and Compartmentalizing Identity | 97 |
| Summary..... | 100 |
| Chapter 4d: Belonging Away from Campus: FOMO, Deprivation, Technology, and Disassociating from RVU | 101 |
| Deprivation of Belonging..... | 101 |
| Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)..... | 104 |
| Renavigating Belonging During the Pandemic..... | 105 |
| Relying of Technology and Media for Connection | 106 |
| External Communities for Belonging..... | 108 |
| Friends, Family, and Staff Support..... | 110 |
| Limited Belonging with RVU..... | 111 |
| Questioning Cultural Change at RVU | 112 |
| We Are All We Got at RVU | 114 |
| Lack of Perceived Support from RVU Leadership | 116 |
| Summary | 118 |
| Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusion..... | 120 |
| Overview of Study..... | 120 |
| Overview of Findings | 121 |
| Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research..... | 127 |
| Implications for Theory | 130 |
| Implications for Practice and Leadership..... | 133 |
| Conclusion | 137 |
| REFERENCES | 138 |
| APPENDIX A Verbal Consent Script | 164 |
| APPENDIX B Student Interview Protocol: Interview 1 | 166 |
| APPENDIX C Student Interview Protocol: Interview 2&3 | 169 |
| APPENDIX D Participant Care Protocol | 173 |
| APPENDIX E Participant Bio's | 174 |
| APPENDIX F Interview 1: Describing and Defining Belonging..... | 177 |
| APPENDIX G Interview 2: Describing and Defining Belonging | 179 |
| APPENDIX H Interview3: Describing and Defining Belonging..... | 181 |

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1-1: Strayhorn’s (2019) revised model of college students’ sense of belonging 44

Figure 2-1: Organizational Model of Belonging for College Students132

LIST OF TABLES

Table **1-1**: Participant demographics54

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Feeling a sense of belonging is crucial for individuals to thrive as it motivates and drives behavior (Maslow, 1954). Feeling a sense of belonging involves being connected within a community and feeling valued, respected, and accepted among others (Anant, 1966; Strayhorn, 2019). Whether these connections are within social groups, family, culture, and educational settings, belonging plays a part in an individual's life through their day-to-day interactions within their environment and social settings. Belonging takes on many forms and has been defined in various ways. For example, Anant (1966) defined belonging as "a person's perceived belief of indispensability within a system" where Osterman (2000, p.324) defined belonging as "a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together." Although the definition of belonging can carry multitude meanings, the term is rooted to acknowledge the individual's experience and how they assess their interaction within various groups.

The sense of belonging carries similar characteristics when looking at college students and how scholars in higher education define belonging. Tovar and Simon (2010, p. 200) defined belonging as "an individual's sense of identification or positioning in relation to a group or to the college community, which may yield an effective response" where Hurtado and Carter (1997) referred belonging to a "student's psychological sense of connection to their community." College students' sense of belonging relates to how they feel connected while attending college which impacts their levels of engagement and development. Tinto's (1993) model of students' persistence highlights the importance of

college students' engagement and involvement and how the academic experience can impact the student's outcome (departure decision- graduate, transfer, dropout). Student's sense of belonging relies heavily on the connection that a student feels with their institutional setting and how they feel connected with their peers. Astin's (1984) theory of Student Involvement explains how desirable outcomes for institutions are viewed in relation to how students develop in result to their involvement. He created five assumptions about student involvement: involvement requires an investment of psychological and physical energy, is continuous and the amount of energy invested varies from student to student, aspects of involvement may be qualitative and quantitative, what a student gains from being involved is directly proportional to the extent to which were involved, and that academic performance is correlated with student involvement. While Astin's (1984) theory of Student Involvement argues that involvement requires an investment of energy, it is essential to note that the investment must also come from the educational environment (including staff and faculty) in order for students to feel a sense of belonging.

The sense of belonging in the context of higher education, relates to the formal and informal interactions students have with their teachers, peers, and other school personnel (Ma, 2003; Johnson, Strayhorn, Parler, 2020) and the connections they make while attending college. This relationship between the student, the educational environment, and those involved in this setting must correlate with one another in order for students to feel that they belong. However, when students do not feel invested by the educational environment, their involvement may decrease leading to low academic performance as well as limited sense of belonging. Students who do not feel invested

from their college may feel a sense of alienation during their college experience and encounter isolation, marginality, and loneliness (Staryhorn, 2019, p. 2).

The relationship between the college setting and student can impact the level of belonging student's feel, especially if their holistic identity is not represented. This can be seen when looking at the level of belonging minoritized students feel when attending predominately White institutions. It is important to note that the sense of belonging is not guaranteed for college students of color, especially while attending a PWI. Caroline Sotello Viernes Turner (1994) described this feeling as being a guest in someone else's house, where students of color in the university climate have no history in the house they occupy; no reflection of their image and lack representation. Being a "guest" while attending college impacts the persistence of college students of color and continues to marginalize communities of color. This aligns with the views of Vincent Tinto (1987) and that a student will remain in college when they feel connected, involved, and served and that retention and success relies on the quality of the student/institution match and the quality of that connection (Brewer, 1990).

Belonging for minoritized students is more than just physically attending college. It is the psychological experiences, and the subjective evaluation of the level of integration an individual has within a group, in particular with their college. Minoritized students often perceive their campus climate more negatively than do their White counterparts. Their college experience oftentimes include racism and microaggression, which impacts how connected they feel to their college environment. Although PWIs have progressed on initiatives addressing equity, justice and inclusion, much work is needed to address the campus culture and how it impacts the level of belonging for

minoritized students. Transformative change to a campus' climate is essential to create deep change as well as improving in the psychological and behavioral aspects of campus environments (Hurtado & Carter,1996). With the lack of change to the campus culture, minoritized students attending PWIs may still feel as if they are a guest in someone else's house, which impacts their sense of belonging and possibly their outcome of college. This draws more attention to understanding the sense of belonging for students of color while attending a PWI during COVID-19.

As minoritized students cannot guarantee a sense of belonging when attending college, their sense of belonging is unknown during the unique functionality of universities during pandemics. To better understand how the pandemic has impacted higher education, the next section will provide an overview of how higher education has functioned throughout the pandemic of COVID-19.

Context of Higher Education during COVID-19

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) defines the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) as a respiratory illness, (like the flu) with symptoms of coughing, fevers, while impacting the respiratory system with difficulty of breathing. Health professionals have highly suggested practicing *social distancing*, which involves maintaining six feet of distance from others. The pandemic caused colleges and institutions to work remotely and transitioned to online or hybrid (online and on-campus) learning for students. Although remote operation is an essential way to effectively practice social distancing,

students became disconnected from their educational environment causing a disruption to their college experience and access to on-campus resources.

Student Faced Barriers

Most students directed to leave their colleges and/or institutions, encounter other challenges aside from being far from campus resources. For example, some students faced limited access to technology and internet, leaving them to rely heavily on their phones with limited data plans to conduct their coursework and attend online lectures (Amour, 2020). While most universities adjusted their grading policies by providing students with “pass/no pass” options, some students opted out to this, fearing it would impact their acceptance to graduate or medical school (Burke, 2020). While this grading option provided some relief during the earlier stages of COVID-19, students felt financially stressed as the pandemic continued.

Students encountered various financial barriers, relating to the cost of their basic needs and educated related expenses. Many students lost part-time jobs while businesses were led to closure, leaving students with little to no income to afford their basic needs. This led to noticeable trends of lower enrollments rates highly impacting low-income students to continue college. Students from families with an income of \$75,000 or lower were twice as likely to “cancel all plans” to take classes in comparison to families with incomes over \$100,000 (Long & Douglas-Gabriel, 2020). Many colleges and universities attempted to support students by creating emergency funds while also informing students of other sources such as the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic, Security (CARES) Act, which allotted \$14 billion of the \$2.2 trillion to support postsecondary education (U.S Department of Education, 2021). While these resources provided some financial

relief, disproportionate burdens of housing and finances still existed for vulnerable student populations such as low-income and international students.

Moving away from campus brought high concerns for students who did not easily have these capabilities. These closures impacted low-income students to afford and plan their travels. For example, Harvard Primus, a student group that supports first-generation and low-income students compiled a list of resources relating to applying for reimbursement for travel costs and options for storage of personal belongings (Redden, 2020) in order for students to fund their plans. Many students struggled to afford moving while also verifying if their campus allowed students to stay and live on campus. These challenges also impacted international students and not knowing if and when they would return to campus. In July 2020, the U.S Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)'S Students and exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) announced that it would no longer provide exemptions for international students taking online classes due to the pandemic. This announcement caused many international students to worry about their living status as well as their status as students attending U.S. colleges and universities. However, this was quickly reverted after the Trump administration received lawsuits from Harvard and MIT. Although these restrictions were uplifted, students have continued to face many barriers from the new guidelines colleges and universities implemented during COVID-19. These barriers show how some students relied heavily on the resources and services at their institutions, and questions how students have navigated their sources of support during COVID-19.

Studying students' sense of belonging during COVID-19 relates to how students felt safe and cared for during a time of much stress. Son et al. (2020) revealed that

students experienced increased stress and anxiety during COVID-19 which related to worrying about their health and of loved one, difficulty concentrating, disruptions to sleep patterns, decreased social interactions, and concerns on academic performance. While these stressors impacted students during COVID-19 it is important to note how these stressors may appear when looking at communities of color.

Racism during COVID-19

Stigmatization, stereotyping, and discrimination towards Asian American and Asian immigrants have become more prevalent during the pandemic as the president of the United State characterized COVID-19 as “Kung flu” and the “Chinese Virus” (Chen et al., 2020; Harper, 2020). Tessler et al. (2020) showed that racial threats towards the Asian community pose mental health and anxiety for this population. Multiple communities of color were negatively impacted during COVID-19 as it related to their racial/ethnic identity. During this time of COVID-19, anti-Black racism came into clear view with the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Ahmaud Arbery. Activism and protests organized against police brutality on the Black community and White supremacy was a focal point of the summer of 2020. This leads to questioning how minoritized students of racial/ethnic backgrounds felt during this time of a global health pandemic as well as the racism that gathered media and political attention during this period. Based on the continuous challenges the pandemic brought to students and communities of color, this leads to studying how minoritized students describe their sense of belonging during COVID-19.

Statement of the Problem

The sense of belonging is not guaranteed for students of color who attend predominately White institutions (PWI). Rather, students of color are positioned to navigate and find a sense of belonging independently while adapting and/or assimilating into their college setting. This causes students of color to take sole responsibility for their belonging and questioning if institutions reciprocate this responsibility with the student. There have been increased enrollments of minoritized students at PWIs. However, minoritized students attending predominately White institutions tend to perceive the campus climate differently than their White counterparts (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005). While PWIs have become more numerically more racially inclusive, the issue remains: how inclusive is the campus culture?

When minoritized students attend PWIs and perceive the lack of feeling a sense of value, respect, and care, they may encounter feelings of isolation and alienation within these settings. These experiences of feeling unwelcome and unsupported has been associated with negative outcomes such as poor academic performance, greater stress, and poor mental health problems (Worthington et al.,2008; Smith et al., 2007). Therefore, negative perception and experiences could also have implications for retention of minoritized students (Rodgers & Summers, 2008).

The lack of belonging can impact the academic and social integration for minoritized students which may lead to encountering discrimination and bias (Hussain & Jones, 2019). Ongoing experiences of discrimination has consequences for student of color, their sense of belonging on campus (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Levin, Van Laar, &

Foote, 2006; Nuñez, 2009; Walton & Cohen, 2011) and reduces their levels of participating in campus activities and social engagement and questioning the support from a predominately White institution.

This perception of not being supported can create detrimental effects to belonging at PWIs (Rodriguez et al., 2000). Additionally, the lack of belonging can negatively impact the well-being of students of color as they may encounter experiences of racial microaggressions, causing racial battle fatigue. Racial microaggressions whether intended or not, present a specific message that students of color are not welcomed on college campuses and can occur in all types of higher education institutions (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). When universities operate from a historically dominant White perspective, Whiteness and White privilege are embedded in the climate and culture resulting in continual racial microaggressions that accumulates overtime (Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014). This accumulation creates physical and emotional drain, leading towards racial battle fatigue. Rather focusing on their academics, students of color may extend their energy to cope with the stress responses caused by microaggressions (Harrell, 2000; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2007).

While much literature on the experience of students of color attending PWIs looks is centered on their on-campus experience, there is still a gap to examine how students of color describe their college experience and their belonging during COVID-19. COVID-19 has brought much distress due to the unexpected changes and restrictions. Individuals were forced to stay safe in isolation during long-term lockdowns, which may have caused increased levels of isolation. Although many education settings adjust to online-learning, students show a negative perception of online learning behavior (Rohman et al., 2020)

which may relate to psychological distress. This is not surprising as many students encountered feelings of the unknown future, disconnection with family and friends, and adapting to online learning. Although it is evident that COVID-19 brought distress on students and their academic experience, little has yet to focus on the experience of students of color attending PWIs during this time.

The experiences of students of color during COVID-19 is essential to understand how they felt supportive during this time while questioning their pre-pandemic levels of support and belonging from their institution. Understanding the sense of belonging for students of color is crucial based on the historical events that took place in 2020.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how minoritized students describe their sense of belonging during the global health pandemic of COVID-19. While universities are slowly transitioning for students to return to campus, this study focused on what students of color experiences during COVID-19. Additionally, this study aimed to explore the stories of students of color, how they described belonging during COVID-19, their level of belonging as the pandemic progressed, and how they satisfied their sense of belonging. To better understand these experiences, I conducted three in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews with undergraduates who self-identified as students of color at RVU, a predominately white institution. The purpose of conducting three interviews (once a month) was to examine how the sense of belonging progressed for

students of color as they continued to experience the effects of the pandemic intermittently.

This study recognizes that the sense of belonging can be defined in a multitude of ways as well as in the field of higher education. Therefore, I utilized Terrell Strayhorn's (2019) theoretical framework of college student's sense of belonging to understand and make meaning of how students of color described their sense of belonging during COVID-19. The methodology will be further discussed in chapter three.

Additionally, the purpose of this study was to bring awareness of the stories shared by students of color and to state the importance of effective institutional change when creating future initiatives on equity, justice, and inclusion. Higher education is in a position to retransform and to evolve towards a "new norm" in its organizational structure of campus climate. This dissertation shares 10 individual stories of students of color in order to provide an understanding of their experience during the pandemic and how they described their relationship with RVU as it related to how they described their sense of belonging.

Research Questions

The following question guides this study: How do undergraduate students of color describe their sense of belonging during the global health pandemic of COVID-19?

To further examine this topic, the following sub-questions were used to guide this study:

- How does the sense of belonging during a global pandemic differ when compared to their previous experiences of belonging while attending college on campus?
- Who and what are essential elements for undergraduate students of color to satisfy their sense of belonging during COVID-19?
- How does the sense of belonging of undergraduate students of color progress overtime during the pandemic?

Significance

Research within higher education has shown that students who are involved with their campus environment grow and develop in their socialization and academics (Astin,1977; Pascarella & Terenzini,1991,2005; Tinto,1993). Many higher education researchers and practitioners are aware of the importance of positive relationships between the student and the college environment. Data collected by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute demonstrates that America's colleges and universities continue to increase in the enrollment of diverse student populations. "While half (50%)

of college students identify as White, more than one in ten identify as Asian (11.7%), Black (10.1%), or Latina/o/x (11.3%), and 0.3% as Native American (Bara Stolzenberg et al., 2009). The data also described how lifelong learning behaviors associated with academic success are declining among incoming freshmen and how this is relevant when studying students of color and first-generation students. Although the racial diversity of colleges is increasing, the teaching practices, student support services, and the overall campus environments have not evolved with the changes in student diversity (Taylor, 1989). Therefore, this questions the priority of organizational change in relation to campus climate and calls for cultural change.

Much literature in higher education demonstrates that the educational environment relates to identity development (Jones & Abes, 2013) and how peer culture might influence college student development (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Dalton (1989) suggested that “the values college students’ development is strongly influenced by the *extent* and *intensity* of involvement with college peer culture and the values which are prized in that culture” (P.180). Although literature in higher education addresses the value of the “student and college” relationship, little research has yet to be written about how this relationship looks like for students of color while studying virtually during COVID-19. This dissertation study seeks to address this gap while better understanding the sense of belonging students of color felt while studying virtually during COVID-19.

Higher education has an opportunity to assess the operation of learning and support for their students due to the impact of COVID-19. Although some colleges and institutions adapted to conduct hybrid models of learning (online and in person), there is no exact answer to when universities will resume back to on campus learning. This study

assessed how students of color experienced college during COVID-19 by examining how their racial/ethnic identity was associated with their virtual college experience. Much research explains the experience of microaggression and racism that students of color face on campus, but much work is needed to understand how forms of discrimination are encountered while studying online during COVID-19. Li and Baker (2018) studied the presence of race and gender biases among online classes attended by postsecondary students and found that instructors were 94 percent more likely to respond to a discussion forum post by White male students than by other students. While attending college online and on campus is an option for the post-traditional student, it is essential to understand how students of color feel connected and a sense of belonging in their online settings while also coping with the impact of the pandemic.

Understanding the sense of belonging of students of color is crucial during this time as they are adjusting to a “new norm” of education in a virtual space that may not guarantee a sense of belonging. The results of this dissertation are significant as it shares stories of students of color and how they described their sense of belonging during COVID-19. These stories provide insight on the experiences that students of color have experienced and how they navigated to find a sense of belonging as well as navigating their own personal lives.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Reviewing the current literature on college students' sense of belonging is important as it shows the historical context of belonging, the current research, and the gaps within the literature. Although the current literature on college students' sense of belonging is developing, there are still gaps in understanding belonging during the time of COVID-19. Therefore, this literature review is organized to first highlight the historical context and development of the sense of belonging, and serve as an overview, explaining the evolution of the sense of belonging and components related to belonging. Next, I will review how students experience belonging on campus and in online spaces, how belonging can influence identity development (online and in-person), and explain the racial discrimination that can occur in online spaces. The chapter continues by providing an overview of how university leadership have responded to other epidemics and pandemics, while sharing the trends in how they have responded to COVID-19. Additionally, the chapter provides an overview of how university leadership have responded to ongoing racial incidents on campus and how this impacts the college experience of minoritized students attending predominately White institutions. The chapter ends by sharing the theoretical framework that was implemented for this study, a synthesis of the current literature, addressing the gaps in the research and presenting the reason for this study.

Historical Context on the Sense of Belonging

Context of Belonging(ness)

As there are many ways that scholars define the sense of belonging, earlier scholars have related belonging to the concept of *love and belongingness* and relating to an individual's basic need (Maslow, 1954). Abraham Maslow's (1943) theory of motivation relates to how individual's behaviors are driven to satisfy various needs and how such needs are arranged in a hierarchical manner. Maslow (1962) later created a model of hierarchy of needs, where love and belongingness is listed as a human basic need. Maslow (1970) defines love and belongingness in relation to feeling affection and keenly, where individuals hunger for affectionate relations with people, for a place in a group setting, and will strive to achieve this goal. It is emphasized that love and belongingness first begins with the individualistic feelings of affection of the self, which leads to feeling affection from others. Based on Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs, the model explains the importance for individuals to satisfy their need of belongingness before self-actualization can occur where individuals reach their full potential. In addition to understanding the concept of love and belongingness, it is also critical to understand that Maslow's (1954) model of basic needs also relates to how individuals strive to achieve this basic need which drives their behavior and actions.

Other scholars such as Gross (1954) linked belongingness to group membership and how it fulfills an individual's need to feel a sense of belonging. As the concept of love and belongingness evolved, Anant (1966) then used the term *belonging* and defined it as "a sense of personal involvement in a social system so that persons feel themselves to be an indispensable and integral part of the system." Although Maslow (1954)

emphasized on love and belongingness as a basic need, Anant (1966) looked at an individual's involvement within a system/group and how they feel part of the system/group. Later scholars analyzed how the sense of belonging can be used as a guide for living (Mathes, 1981). In the perspective of viewing the sense of belonging as a guide for living, Mathes (1981) suggested a revision of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs to focus on three essential levels- physiological, belongingness, and self-actualization. Although others may still rely on utilizing Maslow's (1954) model of hierarchy of needs, it is important to note the value of belongingness as a basic need and a guide for living, which draws attention to an individual's belongingness within a system/group setting.

Belonging as Perceived Cohesion of Groups

Although belonging is seen as a human basic need, there are multiple elements that influence individuals to feel a sense of belonging. The sense of belonging has been viewed as a human basic need, the *feeling* of being part of a system/group, and a guide of living, which draws attention to the link between the relationship an individual has within a system and how this relationship impacts their involvement within a system/group. Scholars have looked at the sense of belonging to analyze this relationship between individual and system, which led to the sense of belonging relating to the *cohesion* of a group. As some scholars have studied group cohesion through group task performance (Bakeman & Helmreich, 1975), interpersonal communication within groups (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950), Bollen and Hoyle (1990) look at the perceived cohesion of a group in two dimensions (1) the sense of belonging and (2) feelings of morale. When individuals do not perceived themselves as a group member, the cohesion of the group is imbalance in relation to the group norms, values, and characteristics (Bollen & Hoyle,

1990). The lack of cohesion may impact the group identification, the feelings of being included in a group, which can deter individuals from participating and engaging within the group. As this relates to Maslow's (1943) theory of motivation, scholars such as Hagerty et al. (1992) studied the sense of belonging and its connection to an individual's experience within a system or environment in relation to their involvement.

Relationship between Individual and Setting

Hagerty et al. (1992) emphasized the importance of the individual's experience within a system or environment in relation to their sense of belonging. Hagerty et al. (1992) emphasized that belonging has two dimensions (1) valued involvement: the experience of feeling valued, needed, accepted, and (2) fit: the person's perception that his or her characteristics articulate with or complement the system or environment. Although the work of Hagerty et al (1992) has been used within the field of psychology, these findings have become essential to better understand the components related to the sense of belonging and the relationship between individuals and the group/system. While belonging relates to the level of involvement an individual has within their group setting, the type of involvement influences belonging as it connects to the type of interactions they have within their group (Hagerty, 1992).

Interpersonal Interactions

Feeling a sense of belonging involves the interconnectedness with others, the perceptions individuals have on those relationships and how it influences health (Anant,1966; Cohen & Wills,1985; Hagerty,1996; Sargent et al., 2002). These relationships involve the level of interpersonal interactions individuals have within their group/system, which influences the level of their belonging. Interpersonal interactions

play an essential part of the physical and mental health of others as it guides the growth and development of individuals (Hagerty et al., 1996). For example, when individuals do not engage in positive interactions within a group, they may feel disconnected from the group. Interpersonal interactions carry value to how individuals feel a sense of belonging and satisfying this basic need. These interpersonal interactions play a role in how individuals create community, social networks, and find support from others. These connections within various groups and communities support positive health outcomes physically and mentally for individuals (Cohen & Syme, 1985; Ganster & Victor, 1988; Coyne & Downey, 1991). To some extent, these interactions lead to the creation of social support which operationalize as perceived resources and structural integration for individuals (Cohen & Wills, 1985). This connects to how belonging is created within groups/systems that an individual interacts in and can be related to how minoritized students feel a sense of belonging at PWIs. When minoritized students have positive interactions with their peers, staff, and faculty, their sense of belonging may be positively influenced due to the connection within each support group. As the definition of the sense of belonging incorporates a multitude of components, it is evident to see how the sense of belonging is intertwined with basic human needs, the perception of an individual's involvement and relationship within a group, and interpersonal interactions. These factors can be seen when looking at how college students experience belonging within their campus environment. The next section will review how college students feel a sense of belonging on campus and compare this to the sense of belonging in online settings.

College Students' Sense of Belonging

The concept of belonging has become an essential component for college students and a positive college experience. For example, McMillan and Chavis (1986) used belonging to explain the sense of community and “a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group” where the needs of everyone are met through joint commitment. The feeling of mattering within a group connects to the student’s perception and identity within a group and/or system. Hurtado and Carter (1996) share this idea by addressing how campus racial climates can influence the belonging for minoritized students. For example, if a student does not “fit” within their campus environment, students will encounter feelings of alienation and isolation. These negative feelings can lead towards negative outcomes in a student’s academic and social settings. Astin (1993) suggested that education outcomes are directly affected by the environment within colleges and must be built with students’ identities in mind. However, when institutions are not structured to include the student’s identity, minoritized students find it harder to belong on campus and navigate to find comfort and individuals (staff, faculty and peers) to satisfy their “belonging appetite.” Minoritized students rely on positive interactions within campus to establish meaningful relationships and strong support systems (Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007). These interactions positively influence student development, academic achievement, retention, and persistence (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Rhee, 2008). While these studies examined belonging when students are attending college physically, there is still much to understand about how college students’ belonging looks like in virtual spaces and during global pandemics.

Belonging in Online Spaces

Online learning has grown to meet student demands for flexible and equitable study options for students who are unable to attend on-campus (White, 2003; Kelly & Stevens, 2009). While some colleges and institutions implement online learning as a cost-effective solution, many scholars identified challenges in online learning in relation to student retention (Moody, 2004), student satisfaction (Swan, 2001; Stein, et al., 2005), and levels of participation (Coffin, et al., 2005; Exter et al., 2009; Tsai, 2011). While some students may face some of these challenges, scholars also address how the sense of isolation is a common experience by distance learners (White, 2003; Barlett, 2008; Huijser et al., 2008; Kwon et al., 2010). One key factor that may influence this isolation is the physical and geographical location of the student, instructor, and institution (Hull & Saxon, 2009). This places responsibility on instructors to create engaging virtual spaces where students can participate and interact in meaningful ways. Although technology has progressed to enhance engagement by including chat/discussion boards, video and chat features, there is still much to understand about the difference between online participation and interaction and how this impacts a student's sense of belonging.

Online Participation v. Interaction

Students require participation in dialogue to learn regardless of the format that learning takes place (Vygotsky, 1980; Alexander, 2008). This calls attention and focus on enhancing pedagogical innovation (Salmon, 2005, p.205) by examining online participation and interaction. Delahunty et al., (2014) make a clear distinction between participation and interaction in terms of online learning. For example, *participation* is evident through text-based artefacts such as online post. While this is a public display of

participation, the level of *interaction* that a student engages in may differ. Interaction can be identified through social exchanges driven by dialect between individual and collective understandings (Mercer & Howe, 2012). Therefore, interaction is based on how students involve themselves in the conversation which determines their engagement in meaningful dialogue. While there is a clear distinction between participation and interaction in the online realm of learning, this leads to understanding how the level of interaction can influence the foundation of engagement and feeling part of the online community.

Online Community for Online Learners

The level of community in online spaces is influenced by the meaningful interactions between students. For example, some online courses take the format of asynchronous which may impact the level of community as students work independently and lack the opportunity to interact with others. Online interaction must involve a sound social space, creating a network of social relationships among group members and embeds strong group cohesiveness, trust, respect and belonging, satisfaction, and a strong sense of community (Kirschner et al., 2004). These elements relate to belonging and how an individual feels part of the group in their online settings. Owens et al. (2009) found that multiple external factors such as, course content, teaching staff, technology and course delivery support, and the type of communication engaged in or expected may impact the sense of community in online settings. For example, when there are limited options to interact meaningfully in online settings, students may feel disconnected from their virtual community. The lack of building support from peers and faculty when attending online can impact the perception of support that online students may feel. The

extent of interaction between group members can directly impact the sense of community in online spaces. In a comparative study, Exter et al. (2009) found that only a quarter of online students regularly interacted while most on-campus students engaged in multiple interactions. The level of interaction influences the level of community and also how individuals are perceived in the group. However, when online students do not have the opportunity to interact and build a strong relationship with their peers and instructors, students may not feel fully seen or feel supported. With the lack of a strong online community, students may not perceive their belonging to be satisfied. The lack of satisfying their belonging may also question if they are seen holistically based on their social identities.

College Student Identity

Identity is shaped by the context that revolves oneself (Erikson, 1959). Within the field of higher education, identity is commonly understood as one's personally held beliefs about the self in relation to social groups (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation) and the ways one expresses that relationship. Identity is viewed as being socially constructed and can occur in different contexts in campus such as how student organizations are created. Various theories such as Critical Race theory and Queer theory contribute to understanding identity and identity development in various lenses. While these theories focus on identity within its own lens such as race and sexuality, these theories centralize the influence of identity by focusing on the individual, their social context, the influence of social groups, and the dimensions of identity (race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation) (Torres et al., 2009). This draws attention to how identity is not a linear phenomenon which may involve reconstruction. Additionally, this draws on

how identity continues to develop throughout colleges based on the experiences college students engage in. Identity is multidimensional and intersectional and is influenced by the changes made in the campus environment. The interaction within the college environment influences the behaviors and attitudes of students (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which impacts student development. This emphasizes how the college environment plays a role in student development and the type of relationships that are made throughout college. However, when students may not feel their social identities represented within the college setting, their connection between the college environment may not be as stable. This connects to how various types of campus settings such as online and PWIs may impact the sense of belonging and feeling accepted for minoritized students. While much work examines the relation between student identity and the on-campus environment, there is still much to understand about identity and identity development within online educational settings.

Identity in Online Settings

The evolution of technology has provided many people to interact in a variety of ways. As most interactions with technology began with telephone calls and online chatting, technology has progressed for us to interact through social media applications such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and many more. While the use of these applications allows us to connect, network, and build online communities, this also allows the user to customize/personalize their profile and how they would like to be portrayed. For example, people use symbolic markers such as pictures, avatars, icons, nicknames, fonts, music, and videos to personalize their identity online (Papacharissi, 2002). Just as postmodern identity theorists argue that people construct “face-to-face”

identity through consumer goods and fashion, online profiles allow people to use media to express themselves while creating their online presence (Perkel, 2008).

While previous applications provided flexibility for users to customize their profile (Myspace) other platforms come with existing templates where user customization is restricted primarily to filling out predefined fields like favorite books, music, and films. These “taste performance” (Liu, 2007) categories are chosen as symbolic markers based on how others will view them. It is clear to see that the way people present themselves, even online, relates to the context and audience (Goffman, 1959) which can play a part in how users want to be identified and how they build a sense of belonging in online settings. Therefore, if users misrepresent themselves on the given platform, their reputation and social status may drop accordingly (Donath, 2008). This connects to how parts of an individual's identity could be negotiated within their environment if virtual or in person.

Our identity can be seen through the concept of intersectionality and there are many social identities that an individual can identify with. The term intersectionality is used to describe multiple overlapping facets of identity and how they affect experiences of power and privilege (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality demonstrates how forms of structural oppression like sexism and racism are intertwined. While social media can be used as a powerful tool to express solidarity and engaging in activism, it can also be used to further oppression such as white supremacy or sexism (Herring 2000; Daniels, 2009). This shows how intersectionality of identities can be portrayed while interacting in online settings. For example, Lisa Nakamura (1995) examined different representations of Asian and Asian-Americans online and found that various video games and website discourse

displayed racial stereotypes such as the geisha girl or martial artist. From these findings, Nakamura (1995) argues that some symbolic markers (emojis, icons, avatars, etc.) are structured in a heteronormative and normatively white lens where structural oppression continues to exist in the online setting. This outcome shows how communities of color may be susceptible to face racial discrimination in virtual settings based on their racial/ethnic identity as the online climate and structure is seen through a lens of privilege. While this provides us to see how identity may be viewed and oppressed online, it also serves as a lens to help us understand the experiences of minoritized students attending online classes during COVID-19. This shows how belonging in person and online involves how others may perceive them and also shows the impact of dominant cultural spaces (online and in-person).

Online Experiences of Racial Discrimination

Many scholars have addressed the covert ways in which racism exists such as aversive racism (Dovidio et al., 2005), color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2017), and racial microaggression (Pierce, 1995; Sue, 2010). While these forms of racism continue to exist, other scholars have examined how racial discrimination is presented in online settings and how it impacts minoritized students. Recent trends in social media and internet-based racial-discourse reveal how common racial expressions are in some online environments (Eschmann, 2019). For example, public racial slurs on Twitter have become common and used in a derogatory manner (Bartlett et al., 2014), the presence of White nationalism through “Alt-Right” rebranding (Ganim, Welch, & Meyersohn, 2017) has taken place in online spaces, and the 45th president of the United States has been known to follow and repost comments by social media users with White supremacist ties (Kharkh & Primack,

2016). During this day and age, racial discrimination has revealed itself more in online spaces and described as being *unmasked* through racial discourse. There are several characteristics that can influence racial discourse in online settings such as anonymity, text-based and less moderated communication, and having fewer perceived social consequences (Eschmann, 2020). Anonymity in online communication refers to both technical anonymity, where there is not identifying information in interactions of posts, and social anonymity that refers to situations when users perceived anonymity but can be identified through usernames, email addresses, or their social networks (Christopherson, 2007).

Anonymity is one way that individuals can begin to feel as if there are no real-world consequences in their actions and feel more comfortable to express taboo racial ideas without public social sanction (Christopherson, 2007). The level of anonymity helps the user to perceive more freedom from societal standards and allows them to communicate in a more aggressive and hostile manner (online disinhibition) (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). Therefore, these questions if minoritized students may encounter “unmasked” racial discourse from their White peers due to attending classes online during COVID-19. This form of communication can negatively impact communities of color and their level of belonging. For example, West and Tahkore (2013) studied a group of Black and White online users to examine online cohesion and online racial discrimination. West and Tahkore (2013) found that both communities reported positive outcomes, until users who identified as Black mentioned their racial identity. After three months without any incidents, Black users encountered exclusion from group discussions and activities. Minoritized students studying online has also encountered overt forms on

racial discrimination in online settings. Eschmann (2019) studied how minoritized students would respond to internet-based discourse that focused on non-politically correct discussions related to race. Eschmann (2019) found that minoritized students perceive direct connections between online racial messages and campus racial climate, interracial relationships, or institutional support. This *unmasking* of racism made minoritized students question their connection with their (White) peers and how they “fit in” on campus. With the recent rise in overt racism and hate crimes impacting communities of color, it is important to understand how racism in online settings can also impact minoritized students during this time of the pandemic and its effects on their belonging.

The literature review shows that minoritized students may not feel an immediate sense of belonging while attending PWIs in-person and are open to experiencing racial discrimination in online settings. Based on this review, it is essential to understand not only the experience of minoritized students (online and in-person), but to also understand how institutional organizations have addressed the issues of racism and other epidemics.

Higher Education Responses to Disruptions from Natural Disasters and Pandemics

The COVID-19 pandemic is not the first health disruption that higher education has faced, but little amount of literature exists focusing on the responses from institutions. Although there is little work that analyzes this area, some scholars have provided an overview of how institutions have responded towards various disruptions. One of the earliest epidemics dates back to the late seventeenth century during the outbreak of Yellow fever. During this time, health officials addressed concerns of the spread through quarantine procedures due to the high visibility of deaths. States such as

Mississippi enforced quarantines, where those traveling within the state were highly recommended to quarantine for 10 days (Thomas & Foster, 2020). Student travel and expectations of social contact impacted how colleges responded where some did not have a protocol in place. However, as an attempt to monitor the spread of the disease and the wellness of students, institutions responded to “shotgun” quarantines to ensure safety (Thomas & Foster, 2020). Although some institutions delayed the start of the fall term, institutions still took some time to recover due to the lost time, students, and facilities. While this was one of the earlier epidemics that colleges faced, institutions learned from this experience which influenced the response of the Influenza outbreak in 1918.

The 1918 influenza pandemic impacted colleges and universities which required them to respond comprehensively. The flu did not follow normal mortality rates which placed danger on students living on campus (Thomas & Foster, 2020). Additionally, colleges during this time hosted soldier training for military services during WWI which forced colleges to be more responsive. On July 22, 1918, the Department of Public Health issued its first bulletin regarding the spread of influenza. This led to the closure of schools, churches, theaters, and other public settings. A slow reopening took place in October 1918 where the influenza made its second wave which questioned when a “normal return” will come. Health boards and government entities influenced how institutions would respond to the pandemic (Thomas & Foster, 2020). For example, the federal government-initiated policies to minimize the spread by modifying working hours for government employees. Additionally, some colleges were turned into military training centers where most state schools converted into Student Army Training Corps (SATC) bases. This sheds some light to how public cooperation in complying with infection

control measures can disrupt the traditional functions of higher education. For example, Seale et al. (2012) examined the attitudes and practice of domestic and international university students towards seasonal and pandemic influenza and found that some participants were skeptical about the impact of disease. Some participants felt the disease was “promoted” as being serious by the government and media which influenced their belief of not being at high risk. Seale et al. (2012) found that the implementation of infection control behaviors depends on environmental (time, energy, availability of facilities, social norms), and motivational (social responsibility, social relationships, selfishness) factors. Some participants did not practice wearing masks or effective hygiene behavior, or social distancing because it challenged the social norms and tradition.

A more contemporary example of a major disruption to the functioning of higher education would be Hurricane Katrina’s impact on New Orleans’ area universities in 2005. Hurricane Katrina was known to be one of the worst natural disasters to occur in the United States. Nearly 2,000 people lost their lives due to Katrina which also impacted how institutions functioned. Many colleges and institutions were destroyed or severely damaged. For example, 11 buildings on the main campus of Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO) were flooded by four to 11 feet of water, forcing cancellation of all classes for the fall 2005 semester (Phillips & Herlihy, 2009). During this time, SUNO and other colleges worked with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to make hotel arrangements and secure rooms for staff and students. SUNO decided to begin the spring 2006 semester at an elementary school where they later relocated to a temporary trailer site. The impact of Hurricane Katrina impacted college student

enrollment and budget cuts. 19 of SUNO's academic programs were eliminated and 40% of faculty members were furloughed (Fogg et al., 2006). Although SUNO is only one example of many colleges and institutions that were impacted by Hurricane Katrina, it is an example of how colleges and institutions were impacted by the natural disaster and how to continue functioning as a college/institution.

This provides some insight to what factors may have been involved for institutions to respond to the pandemic of COVID-19. Based on previous epidemics, pandemics, and natural disasters, the relationship between institutions and public health departments play a role in decision making processes on how educational systems will function during unexpected times. Although there is little work that has studied how institutions responded during COVID-19, we can rely on newsletters to better understand the day-to-day responses institutions made throughout COVID-19.

Institutional Responses to COVID-19

Little work has been done to examine how institutions respond to epidemics and pandemics. However, educational news sources such as *Inside Higher Ed* provide news and opinions about the impact of higher education during COVID-19. This literature will include most of its sources from articles and opinion pieces from *Inside Higher ED* to understand the historical events that institutions experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is clear to see that many colleges and institutions were faced with uncertainty in how they would respond to COVID-19. During this time, some students were on spring break which caused some universities to respond differently. Some colleges announced a shift to online instruction after spring break where other colleges like Harvard and

Amherst asked students not to return to campus after break and to complete their classes remotely (Redden, 2020). In attempts to control the spread, most colleges decided students to depart from campus, conduct self-isolation practices and asked students, staff, and faculty to cancel personal travel or to track their travels. While some students had the capabilities to go home, colleges like Berea College made accommodations for students to live on campus and continued to pay student workers until the end of the semester. A number of colleges announced closures of transitions to online learning one after the other. The California State University system instructed leaders of its 23 campuses to consider shifting the delivery of in-person to remote learning.

The rapid shift to online learning raised some concerns among faculty. Although shifting to online learning kept students, staff, and faculty safe, these decisions were made without adequate faculty involvement, which challenged faculty to figure out how to teach certain subjects online that have traditionally been taught in person. This placed a lot of responsibility for instructors to not only teach online, but to also learn *how* to set up online courses for their students. For example, 70 percent of humanities departments did not offer an online course since 2017 (Flaherty, 2020). This new transition to remote learning also questioned if institutions had access to the appropriate technology and services to make the online transition smoother.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant point to learn how institutions and their leadership respond to crisis. From their decisions, students were sent home or tried to find stability in housing, faculty learned how to rapidly adapt to online learning while meeting student demands, which questions how higher education will evolve from this pandemic. Higher education has experienced other forms of epidemics and

pandemics where COVID-19 has been one that heavily impacted higher education.

However, this pandemic is also a learning opportunity for leadership to prepare for future pandemics and how they will respond. Goldie Blumenstyk (2020) mentions how this pandemic is the “black swan” in higher education. This moment is an opportunity for higher education leadership to rethink their operational function, to stop the distinction between online and classroom programs and to develop programs that could be offered during good times and during crises. While there is much to learn about the future of higher education, some colleges have progressed to offer students to learn in hybrid models (online and in-person), require students to take a COVID19 test prior to coming back to campus, create on campus testing sites for COVID-19, and to bring students back to campus while following COVID-19 guidelines. Although these are some strategies to re-transition back to college, university leadership are positioned to learn from this pandemic and to create effective protocols in times of crisis. A crisis does not have to be related to health but can be viewed at how leadership responds to events that impact the student population. This leads to understanding how university leadership have responded to the racial events that have previously occurred and incidents that continue to negatively impact minoritized students and their belonging. The next section will provide an overview of the patterns and ways that leadership have responded to racial events and how this impacts transformative change to their campus climate. While this study looks at the belonging of minoritized students during COVID-19, it is important to learn how university leadership have responded to racial acts on campus while they continue to occur and intertwine with the pandemic.

Higher Education Responses to Racial Events

The year 2020 was a time of uncertainty for many students. Students were alarmed of their institutions closing while trying to adjust to online learning. While some students felt the emotional stress of COVID-19, students also felt the pain of the ongoing racial incidents that occurred during this time. The lack of justice from the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor (and many more) impacted minoritized students, creating another reason to feel a sense of fear. This emotional stress of racism is not new when looking at how minoritized students feel while attending predominately White institutions. However, it is also important to address how leadership at predominately White institutions have responded to racial injustice on their campus and questioning if their efforts are enough or effective.

Freedom of Speech and Diversity Initiatives

In the wake of the Black Lives Matters' protest and racial incidents against the Asian community, many college presidents and administrators sent emailed statements addressing these hateful acts and called for the need of prioritizing efforts related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. For example, Michigan State's president, Samuel Stanley called for "building an inclusive environment" where Harvard's president, Lawrence Bacow mentioned his beliefs in the separate powers, the first amendment right to free press and the American dream. These, even though are only a couple of examples, show how university presidents address the topic of racism by mentioning the freedom of speech or initiatives on diversity. *Inside Higher Ed* article by Walter Kimbrough (2020) shares how these are common patterns in university statements about race and

discrimination. Rather addressing the bigger issues of campus racial climate, the conversation is directed to address freedom of speech and calling the need for diversity initiatives. However, upholding free speech does not excuse administrators from acknowledging the existence of institutional racism. Rather, these responses connect to the larger issue of foundational principles of White property rights and racist ideologies of privilege that remain uninterrogated (Harris, 1993; Patel, 2015).

Responses that affirm the commitment to diversity could also transmit symbolic imagery of civility that does not require structural transformation (Jones, 2019). Framing these responses to focus on freedom of speech and diversity dismisses the effects of racism and maintains the safekeeping of the dominant group as the normative standard within the PWI racial hierarchy (Gusa, 2010). Therefore, these responses influence the disconnection minoritized students may feel attending predominately White spaces which impacts their perception to feel cared about and mattering.

Language of Dominant Culture and Oppression

University officials who hold power make the judgment in representing various cultural, political, and social associations within their discourse (Jones, 2019). Therefore, when university officials function under the idea that free speech allows them to remain objective to racist speech, this form of language portrays the higher status and power of the dominant group (Johnstone, 2008). Jones (2019) studied how university administrators respond to racial acts and found various patterns in their discourse. The results from the study found how university responses often reinforce racism by downplaying the existence of racism or defining it through the lens of privilege or colorblind ideology. After reviewing various university statements, Jones (2019) reveal

how some institutions utilized colorblind discourse which creates the illusion of inclusion and progressive racial change which can also stall racial progress (Moore & Bell, 2011). This use of this language continues the barrier that minoritized students face and feeling separated from the system/campus environment. Although these responses may portray unity and inclusion, they lack to address their campus climate.

Limited Progress to Address Campus Climate and Culture

The lack of change in a campus culture continues the ongoing cycle of racial acts and the oppression of minoritized students and their belonging. It places the responsibility on students to navigate spaces to find belonging and to address the injustice on their campus in various ways. For example, the escalated racial tension at the University of Missouri ultimately contributed to the departure of the university president and chancellor. The student activist group, Concerned Student 1950, protested and conducted hunger strikes against the racial acts on their campus, stated demands to their college president Tim Wolfe, including his resignation (Addo, 2015a). The case of the University of Missouri is an example of how the lack of campus culture and communication could impact minoritized students from feeling a sense of belonging and addressing the need for transformative change.

The absence of meaningful dialogue can be perceived to be a lack of awareness of the racial concerns that exist at university campuses (Fortunato et al., 2017). This has been seen throughout higher education and how leadership has framed to address racial acts on campus. For example, President James Wagner of Emory University praised the constitution's three-fifths compromise as a model for how people who disagree can work

together for a “common goal” (Jaschik, 2013). After receiving criticism on these remarks, President Wagner publicly apologized for “clumsiness and insensitivity.” Although the president apologized for these statements, leadership still lacked to address the campus climate and lack of transformative change of the dominant culture. The lack of awareness creates the ongoing barriers for minoritized students to still feel like the minority and feelings of “being a guest in someone else’s home” (Turner, 1994). Using this metaphor, minoritized students are the “guest” that must follow the rule of the household, keep out of certain spaces and be on their best behavior. The lack of leadership addressing the actual campus climate at predominately White institutions continues the disconnection and oppression of students and their racial/ethnic background. For example, after hearing of a Facebook post that included White students dressed in costumes that stereotyped Mexicans, President Robert Zimmer and Provost Eric Isaac issued a statement saying how these posts are “unacceptable and violates core values” of the university (Jones,2019). Although Zimmer and Isaac acknowledged these acts are unacceptable, the statement failed to challenge systemic racist practices within the actual campus. When there is no acknowledgement of the actual issue of racism at college campuses, the racial acts will potentially happen again and create a barrier for minoritized students and their sense of belonging. Although these are only a few examples of how leadership has responded to racial climate on campus, these examples help us to understand how language used in leadership responses can impact the progress to change the campus climate at predominately White institutions. The lack of addressing the central issue feeds into the sense of isolation minoritized students feel while attending predominately White institutions.

Minoritized Experiences at Predominately White Institutions

The literature on minoritized students attending predominately White institutions has not been positive (Feagin et al., 1996; Gregory, 2000; Hurtado et al., 1999; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Redden, 2002). For example, Turner (1994) found that minoritized students described their campus climate as unwelcoming and lonely. The findings also showed how minoritized students relied on cultural centers as a safe space for emotional support while attending predominately White institutions. Although cultural centers were historically created to support the academic and social development of Black students (Jones et. al, 2002), universities expanded to create other cultural centers to support the needs of other cultural groups (Stennis-Williams et al., 1988). While cultural centers serve as a counter space (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p.70) for minoritized students, students are still positioned to navigate spaces without an immediate sense of belonging. These experiences of isolation could lead to feeling the need to assimilate to the dominant culture in order to avoid alienation. This places minoritized students to alter their college experience and development. For example, students who do assimilate may be viewed as “acting White” abandoning their own cultural heritage to attain success (Banks & Banks, 2007; Cross, 1991; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Helms, 1990; Nieto, 2004). These feelings of assimilation and “fitting in” lie in the heart of their identity development during college while also coping with experiences of racism, prejudice, and discrimination (Morrison, 2007). Minoritized students attending predominately White institutions face ongoing experiences of racial microaggressions. Racial microaggressions can be both subtle and overt where the attacks become recurrent indignities and irritations that can lead to stigmatization, hyper-surveillance, low expectation, and attacks one’s well-being (Clark

et al., 2011; Essed,1991; Corbin et al., 2018). “Racial battle fatigue could result from the toxic and persistent gendered-racialized microaggression with their subsequent negative health sequelae or marginalized and oppressed people (Smith, 2004, 2010, 2016).

Perceptions of Campus Climate

These negative experiences ties into how minoritized students feel the lack of belonging and perceive their campus as an unwelcoming space. These perceptions influence how minoritized students view their campus climate. For example, Rankin and Reason (2005) found that 33 percent of minoritized students encounter more experiences of harassment than their White peers. The study also found that minoritized students viewed their campus climate as racist, hostile, and disrespectful as compared to White students. With the heightened awareness of the campus racial climate, minoritized students become more aware of how they are perceived based on their skin color, speech, nonverbal communication, and appearance (Douglass, 2000).

The campus climate has become an identifying factor as it relates to how minoritized students feel a sense of belonging at predominately White institutions. The lack of representation leads minoritized students to feel a sense of isolation, alienation and may influence the need to adapt and assimilate (Strayhorn, 2019). This is no surprise as the historical structure of predominately White institutions embed in the culture of a historically segregated environment (Hurtado et al.,1998). Therefore, when trying to understand minoritized students’ sense of belonging, it is important to look at how they perceive their support and the relationship they have with their campus. This also leads to addressing how transformational change can occur in order to address the racial climate within college settings.

Transformational Change in Institutions

Transformational or deep change refers to a change process that alters the operating systems, underlying values, and culture of an organization or system (Kezar, 2013, p.62). This form of change takes a deeper look at how institutions function and require new forms of sense making and learning (Kezar, 2013, p.64). This form of change could be essential when looking at how university leadership could progress in effective change to address COVID-19, racial acts on campus, and their racial climate on campus. Hurtado et al. (1998) mentions how most institutions tend to focus on increasing the numbers of racial/ethnic students when considering diversity on campus. However, Hurtado et al. (1998) shares four dimensions that require attention when creating transformational change. These dimensions include, an institution's historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion of various racial/ethnic groups, its structural diversity in terms of numerical representation of various racial/ethnic groups, the psychological climate of perceptions and attitudes between and among groups, and the behavioral climate dimension, characterized by intergroup relations on campus (Hurtado et al., 1998). This form of change could be seen as transformational as it looks deeply into the institution's behaviors and culture. Kezar and Eckel (2002) suggest that academic leaders have to rethink how college works in order to implement transformational change to their campus, including change to their culture. This often includes a change and new development of language and concepts that an institution can implement (Eckel and Kezar, 2003b). To create this form of change, institutions have to look at their organizational defenses such as policies, practices, or actions that prevent deeper change

to the organization (March 1991). While transformational change has been used as a blueprint for organizational change, there is much work to learn how this form of change could be implemented during pandemics. For example, Hurtado and Carter (1996) suggest that racial climates on campus can influence psychological processes, intergroup relations and group cohesion. Based on such findings, it is vital to understand how a student's identity plays a key role to how they perceive their campus environment in order to feel a sense of belonging. The work of Hurtado and Carter (1996) relates to the various ways the sense of belonging has been defined as it is associated with the individual's perception and identity within a group and/or system.

Relevant Studies on Belonging

Other studies have utilized the theoretical framework of the sense of belonging to look at the sense of belonging among international and domestic graduate students (Curtin et al., 2013). By examining the advisor support international and graduate students received, Curtin et al. (2013) found that international graduate students reported a stronger sense of belonging and placed higher value on research related and other academic experiences than domestic graduate students. In addition to these findings, Curtin et al. (2013) also found that academic support was associated with a stronger sense of belonging and academic concept for both groups of students.

The findings are not surprising when looking at the value the sense of belonging holds when analyzing the relationship between college students and the educational environment. When analyzing student development, the educational environment relates to positive influences on academic achievement, retention, and persistence (Hausmann et

al., 2007 2007; Rhee,2008). Other scholars such as Astin (1993) suggested that educational outcomes are directly affected by the environment within colleges which must be built with students' identities in mind. However, when institutions may not "fit" a student who carries multiple social identities, students may find it challenging to gain a sense of belonging which may lead to isolation and alienation Strayhorn (2019). The sense of belonging plays a significant role within the educational environment as it relates to students' social and academic integration to college (Tinto, 1986). While some students may feel a lack of "fit" within their educational environment, students identifying within underrepresented populations, may rely on finding positive interactions within their campus to establish meaningful relationships and strong support systems (Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007).

As these studies show that students have faced many challenges to find a sense of belonging while physically attending college, there is much to learn about students' sense of belonging during COVID-19. Bronfenbrenner (1979) noted that a person's development is affected by everything in their surrounding environment which gives reason to study how minoritized students describe their sense of belonging during COVID-19. As the pandemic of COVID-19 impacted the operation of many colleges and universities, there is much work to do to understand how students are currently experiencing a sense of belonging during this uncertain time. Therefore, to examine how minoritized students feel a sense of belonging during this time, this study utilized Terrell Strayhorn's (2019) theoretical framework of college students' sense of belonging.

Theoretical Framework: Strayhorn's (2019) College Student's Sense of Belonging

While belonging has been described in various ways, this study utilized Terrell Strayhorn's (2019) theoretical framework of college students' sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2019) frames the sense of belonging as a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior. In terms of college, Strayhorn (2019) defines sense of belonging as, "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers." This definition of belonging centers on the social cognitive perspective while addressing the psychological needs of college students.

Strayhorn (2019) incorporates Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs to emphasize that belonging is a human basic need that must be satisfied before any other higher-order needs (esteem and self-actualization) (see Figure 1-1). Within the model, Strayhorn connects belonging to the fulfillment of institutional missions stating that "educational missions rest, in part, on making sure that students (and faculty/staff who teach them) feel a sense of belonging in college. Therefore, Strayhorn (2019, p.30) identifies seven core elements of belonging, stating that it is (1) a basic human need (2) a fundamental motive sufficient to drive behavior (3) takes on heightened importance, in context (4) relates to mattering (5) is influenced by one's identities (6) leads to positive outcome and success, and (7) must be satisfied as conditions change.



Figure 1-1. Strayhorn's (2019) revised model of college students' sense of belonging

Strayhorn's (2019) framework connects to how belonging consists of the cognitive and affective elements (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) where individuals assess their position in a relation to the group which results in a response, behavior, or outcome. The framework focuses on how students perceive their sense of belonging which connects to the relationship they have with the campus environment. While stating that social identities could also influence college students' sense of belonging, Strayhorn (2019) acknowledges how belonging is not guaranteed for minoritized students and may seek shelter from racial battle fatigue. Therefore, Strayhorn's (2019) model addresses that negative outcomes of alienation and isolation can occur when students do not satisfy their sense of belonging. This also suggests that belonging is related to other variables like social class and student engagement (Astin, 1993; Johnson et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2005; Ostrove & Long, 2007).

Strayhorn's (2019) framework focuses on how belonging takes on heightened importance in certain spaces and contexts, time and among certain populations. Some

students have to navigate, negotiate, and traverse multiple spaces and context during college, where needs and motivations emerge and can lead to positive outcomes. This connects to the sense of belonging minoritized students (do not) feel while attending predominately White institutions as it is not a guarantee. Their belonging may take on heightened importance which can emerge certain motivations and outcomes. This framework carries essential components when attempting to study how minoritized students describe their sense of belonging while attending a PWI during COVID-19. As this time has carried much stress for communities of color, this framework could assist in understanding the heightened importance of belonging for minoritized students. Additionally, this framework could help future scholars to understand the need for institutional change by relating belonging to the education mission of colleges and universities. Using Strayhorn's (2019) framework of college students' sense of belonging emphasizes the importance of understanding the narratives of minoritized students attending a PWI during a pandemic and a time of heightened racism to address how institutions can create effective change in their campus climate and responses to events of crisis. By looking at the relationship between students and the campus (virtual and in-person), this framework helps us to see how minoritized students navigate their spaces to satisfy their belonging and in what ways they satisfy them.

Summary of Literature Review and Next Steps

This chapter presented literature on the historical context of belonging while looking at the belonging of college students attending college in person, online and at predominately white institutions. The literature also reviewed the impact of identity while studying online and how this may differ to identity development when attending college

in person. Although limited, the literature review included snippets of ways that colleges and university administrators responded during times of epidemics and pandemic, as well as how they respond to racial events occurring on campus. This review sets the stage for this study by highlighting the elements relating to the sense of belonging while identifying gaps within the literature. Based on the literature, the sense of belonging may look different depending on environment type and student demographic and population. Therefore, it is important to review the literature to identify what has been done and how to expand on the literature. Strayhorn's (2019) theoretical framework provides a lens to view how the sense of belonging is a basic human need, while also seeing the connection of institutional missions to create spaces of belonging. To understand how minoritized students describe their sense of belonging while attending a PWI during COVID-19, this study will include narratives of minoritized students in order to understand their experience. The next chapter will explain the methodology for this study while explaining why narrative inquiry was used for this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological tradition and framework utilized for this study. I will discuss the setting of the study, how participants were selected, the data collection process and data analysis for this study. The last section will include the ethics, and trustworthiness of this study, as well as my positionality for this study.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how undergraduate college students of color describe their sense of belonging during the pandemic of COVID-19?

The guiding questions for this study are:

- How does the sense of belonging during a global pandemic differ when compared to their previous experiences of belonging while attending college on campus?
- Who and what are essential elements for undergraduate students of color to satisfy their sense of belonging during COVID-19?
- How does the sense of belonging of undergraduate students of color progress overtime during the pandemic?

Methodological Tradition & Theoretical Framework

Epistemology

Epistemology can be defined as a theory of knowledge, which influences the method and methodology of a study (Carter & Little, 2007). This study is positioned

in a critical manner as it seeks to understand how students of color make meaning of their sense of belonging based on the interactions they encounter and may engage in. “Critical epistemology often is concerned with knowledge that is subjective and grounded in personal and professional sociohistorical processes. The epistemology of Critical theory is oriented towards investigating issues such as asymmetrical power relations, distorted communication, and false consciousness (Lee et al., 2011). Its aim is to diagnose the problems of modern society and to identify the nature of the social changes necessary to create a just society (Layder, 1994). This aligns with the study and research questions as it seeks to understand how minoritized students describe their sense of belonging during COVID-19, while attending a predominately White institution. Therefore, it is essential to utilize the language of justice, equity and inclusion to progress transformative efforts. *Social Justice* is “the conceptual framework guiding the enactments of specific policies and practices to promote diversity and equity where *equity* refers to the enactments of specific policies and practices that ensure equitable access and opportunities for success for everyone *inclusively* (Rodriguez & Morrison, 2019). These terms seek to address the need of systemic change and to address issues of equity and diversity by addressing the issues of social justice within the system.

Therefore, this study is lensed to address social justice, equity and inclusion by understanding how minoritized students make meaning to their belonging during a global health pandemic. To address the research questions, this study was conducted as a Narrative Inquiry to capture the narratives of each participant and how they described their sense of belonging throughout the study.

Qualitative Research Methods and Culture

Qualitative research has been defined as an inquiry that usually involves the researcher to report how people talk about things, how they describe things, and how they see the world (Creswell & Báez, 2020). Therefore, a qualitative researcher will usually incorporate such practices to study the interaction and interpretation an individual has within their set environment. As this practice has been rooted in Western perspectives, the practice of qualitative study should also understand the impact of culture and to view it more than an individual's background. Bhattacharya (2017, p. 8) mentioned that culture should evoke ideas such as shared values, beliefs, rituals, language, and clothing, among other things that may associate membership within the group. Therefore, this study implements qualitative research by embracing culture and understanding the value and beliefs of how undergraduate college students of color described their sense of belonging during the pandemic, throughout a series of interviews. In-depth interviews were used to learn more about the experiences of belonging during a global health pandemic as told by students of color. To better understand these experiences, each interview was guided by narrative inquiry.

Narrative Inquiry

A narrative is both a phenomenon and method. Narrative names the structured quality of the experience to be studied and the pattern of inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Kim (2015) described narrative inquiry as a storytelling methodology in which a story(ies) of a research participant is researched as a way of knowing. Bhattacharya, (2017, p.93) implemented this definition to explain that narrative inquiry is a framework that helps researchers explore, discover, understand, and construct stories based on the

participant's recounting of their experiences. Therefore, narrative inquiry allows researchers to understand the live experience of participants. Through narrative inquiry, researchers enter the portal of the lives of their participants to better understand how they interpret and make meaning of their experiences. This is crucial when attempting to understand the lived experiences of students of color and their sense of belonging during COVID-19 because their narrative is founded on their perception and interpretation of their belonging. Therefore, it was essential to emerge myself into the participant's shared story to understand how they perceived their sense of belonging.

Narrative inquiry is rooted from John Dewey's theory of experience and is a way of understanding experience. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) drew from Dewey's two criteria: interaction and continuity to explain that "people are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context" (p.2). Narrative inquiry is a collaboration between researcher and participants, where the researcher studies the participant's experience in the world and seeks ways to transform that experience. Narratives carry a sense of empowerment as it allows participants to "construct who they are and how they want to be known" (Reissman, 2008).

I chose narrative inquiry for this study because it created a way to hear the stories of the participants and how they described their sense of belonging during COVID-19. To explore these experiences, I interviewed 10 participants, who self-identified as a student of color for the duration of three months (one interview per month). Although this study included 10, I was able to interview students who intersected in race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Interviewing participants once a month provided the opportunity to learn

about how they described their sense of belonging prior to COVID-19, who they gained support from, and how they defined belonging throughout three months of this study. These interviews helped to understand the progress of the participant's belonging as this was the intended goal for this study.

Theoretical Framework: The Sense of Belonging

Narrative inquiry connects with the sense of belonging by focusing attention on how undergraduate students of color describe their sense of belonging during the pandemic. This methodology provided a gateway to understand the progress students of color made in satisfying their need to belong as it related to their feelings of mattering, value, respect, and support. Additionally, the utilization of a three staged interview provided the opportunity for students of color to share their experience and progress of belonging throughout the pandemic. Narrative stories allowed participants to share their experience during the time of a major health crisis while transitioning to a virtual college setting. Narrative interviews also allowed participants to share and reflect on their personal experience, while creating a space of vulnerable conversations. Creating a virtual space of vulnerability provided the opportunity to bond and empathize with the participants and to actively listen about their lived experience. To understand the lived experiences of participants, I implemented Terrell Stayhorn's (2019) theoretical framework of belonging as the lens for analyzing the data collected from this study.

Research Site & Participants

Site Location

This study will be conducted virtually while focusing on the main campus of Rural Valley University (RVU), which is located in a rural area in the north. RVU is

nationally ranked as a R1 university with multiple campuses located geographically throughout the state (RVU, 2020). RVU is also a predominately white institution (PWI). In the Fall of 2020, there were a total of 39,809 enrolled undergraduate students, where 25,839 (64.9%) identify as White (RVU, 2020). Additionally, the demographic of full-time staff and faculty at RVU identify is predominately White, with a total of 15,982 (76%).

This site was selected based on its classification as a PWI as well as being known as a diverse land-grant institution. In addition to these classifications, the site was also selected as the university agreed to function remotely while providing students the opportunity to learn remote, on campus, and a hybrid of both methods of learning. Since RVU functioned remotely, the site was an ideal location to study how students of color describe their sense of belonging at a PWI prior to and during the pandemic.

Sampling Method

This study incorporated a purposeful sampling method. Since my study focused on undergraduate college students of color and their sense of belonging during the pandemic of COVID-19, it was required that participants met certain criteria. The criteria for this study included the following: participants were currently enrolled at the designated university, enrolled in their third or fourth year, be traditionally aged 18-24 years old, transitioned to remote courses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and self-identified as a student of color. The participant sample consisted of a blend of students within their third and fourth year who identified with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Students were recruited (see recruitment scripts in Appendix A) through email listservs (i.e., student organizations and the cultural resource center on campus) and through social media outlets that advertised the study. Using these methods to recruit participants helped to verify that the student sample met the criteria of the study and included an array of diverse student backgrounds. Once students completed all three interviews, they were compensated with a 40-dollar electronic gift card.

This chapter begins by restating the research questions and purpose of this dissertation, followed by an overview of the data analysis that led to the primary findings. The findings are further analyzed through the lens of Strayhorn's (2019) framework of the sense of belonging.

Background of Participants

Table 1-1 illustrates a summary of each participant including their age, year, major, self-identified race/ethnicity, and form of learning during COVID-19. Seven of the participants are women and three are men. Nine of the participants attending courses online and one participant attended courses in a hybrid form of both online and on campus. Of the 10 participants, six lived off campus and four continued to live on campus. All participants identified as either a junior or senior in college and attended RVU right after high school and were between the ages of 20 to 22 years old. All the participants identified as being currently enrolled at RVU, who transitioned to remote courses due to COVID-19. Each participant identified as a domestic student and ranged with a variety of majors such as education, political science, African American studies,

psychology, behavioral health, and majors in STEM. Six participants lived off campus, where one of the six went back home, and four participants who lived on campus. Eight participants attended courses online and two attended classes both on campus and online. However, one of the participants decided to attend their on-campus course online later in the semester.

Table1-1 Participant demographics

| Name | Gender | Age | Year | Major | Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity | Form of Learning | Living Status |
|-----------------|--------|-----|--------|--|--|----------------------|---------------|
| Aaliyah | Woman | 19 | junior | Political Science and African American studies; minor in Chinese | Black/African American | Online | Off Campus |
| Angel | Woman | 20 | junior | Behavioral Health | African American and African Caribbean | Online | Off Campus |
| Autumn | Woman | 20 | junior | Biology | African American | Online | On Campus |
| Mahogany | Woman | 20 | junior | Information Science and Technology | Black/African American | Online | On Campus |
| Malik | Man | 22 | senior | Psychology | White and Navajo | Online | Off Campus |
| Nathan | Man | 20 | junior | Secondary Education | Black/African American | Online and On Campus | On Campus |
| Niklaus | Man | 21 | senior | Cybersecurity, Analytics and Operations | Black/African American | Online and On Campus | On Campus |
| Olivia | Woman | 21 | senior | Engineering Science | Hispanic and Black/African American | Online | Off Campus |
| Veronica | Woman | 20 | senior | Institutional Science and Technology | Puerto Rican | Online | Off Campus |
| Zara | Woman | 21 | senior | Biochemistry and Molecular Biology | Indian | Online | Off Campus |

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

Narrative interviews were utilized as the data source for this study. Students who expressed interest to participate in the study contacted me via email after seeing my study advertised through listservs and social media outlets. I contacted potential student participants by email and inquired about their background and availability to participate in my research. If students met the criteria and agreed to participate in my study, I scheduled the date, time, and virtual meeting for us to conduct our interviews. A total of 47 students expressed interest in participating in the study, 17 students began their participation, but only 10 participants completed the three interviews successfully. Four of the 17 participants were not eligible to continue due to disclosing they were not born in the United States, which impacted the eligibility criteria. One of the 17 participants did not complete the three interviews, and two of the 17 participants were not included in the study because the study reached saturation. Interviews took place virtually through Zoom where each interview had a designated zoom link. After students agreed to participate, I explained the purpose of the study and reviewed the IRB consent guidelines and confidentiality precautions.

Three interview protocols were created for this study which included open-ended questions for participants to answer during the interview. The first protocol focused on the participant's: background and identity as a student of color, their experience of belongingness before the pandemic, their experience during the immediate shift to remote learning from RVU, and an overview of their current sense of belonging. The second protocol deeply focused on students' progress of belonging in relation to their online

experience and their identity as a student of color. The last protocol focused on how students came to understand their sense of belonging as students of color, while also reflecting on their responses through the first and second interview. (see Appendix B). The goal of the three semi-structured interviews was to provide participants the opportunity to describe and reflect on their sense of belonging when arriving at RVU and during a three-month time frame. The structure of three interviews (once a month for three months) allowed participants to share their experience to understand the progression of their belonging. To ensure the safety of each participant, I created a care protocol to check the wellness of the student prior to conducting any recorded interviews. The care protocol included questions that asked how participants were feeling, if they needed to reschedule their interview and/or continue participating, how participants were supporting their well-being, if they needed a moment to re-center (involving a minute of silence and/or deep breathing), and how I can continue to support their well-being. After answering these questions, participants also received information regarding university resources such as Counseling and Psychological Services and university resources that were specific to the pandemic. After the care protocol was conducted, I again asked for consent to continue the study and to begin recording.

Interviews were conducted virtually, and participants had the option to turn their camera on or off. Interviews were conducted from September to November of Fall 2020, where students were interviewed once a month. After each interview, I wrote analytic memos to record personal reflections of the emerging themes that arose from the interview. All 30 interviews were transcribed and analyzed, where I utilized a form of member-checking by sharing a summary of the data to each participant. The summary of

the data included direct quotes and paraphrased words I used in my dissertation from the participant's interview. This allowed participants the opportunity to clarify and/or elaborate on areas discussed during their interviews.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol and model were created based on the literature of belongingness with essential focus to the theoretical framework of Strayhorn's (2019) sense of belonging. The first interview focused on their sense of belonging when first arriving at RVU as a freshman to understand their level of support and engagement prior to the pandemic beginning. Secondly, the first interview protocol asked questions regarding their experience when being notified of RVU'S virtual transition, and their current state of belonging. The protocol did include reflection questions that were asked if there was still enough time during the interview.

The second and third interview protocol focused on participants' level of belonging as it related to their racial and ethnic identity. The protocol included questions that related to how they feel a sense of connectedness, mattering and cared about, respected and valued, and their involvement. The last interview focused on the level of belonging while reflecting on the past three months and their experience. This structure of the protocol allowed participants to share their experience throughout the past three months and to reflect on these experiences as it relates to their sense of belonging.

Data Analysis

The interviews from each participant were transcribed with the support of Zoom's automatic transcribing feature and were reviewed for accuracy. The data analysis

followed Riessman's (2008) and Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) suggestions for narrative analysis. I first began to analyze the data through open coding by reading the transcriptions line by line, while looking for how participants described belonging, their level of belonging, as well as how they described their experience and individuals of support. This follows Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) approach in letting data guide the process while consolidating the data based on the research questions. I continued to conduct open coding for each of the interview transcriptions within the same month the interview was conducted. I used a qualitative software to help organize and code the transcribed data. I comb through each of the interview transcriptions to aggregate the codes in a codebook within the software. After I created the codes and codebook, I looked for overarching thematic categories that connected with the codes. Four themes were identified and created as they answered the research questions and described the lived experiences of participants and their sense of belonging. The four themes were: pre-pandemic college experience, seeking comfort, sense of disconnection and discomfort, and centrality of race and belonging. These overarching themes connected to how students navigated to satisfy their sense of belonging during the pandemic in accordance with Strayhorn's (2019) theoretical framework of belonging.

Once the overarching themes were identified, I extracted quotes from each of the interviews that connected with the listed themes. I analyzed the data to find common patterns, meanings, and the differences that participants had from their stories. I compared how participants from various race/ethnic backgrounds described their experience, and how these experiences varied based on how participant's attended college (online v. in-person v. hybrid). After organizing the data, I reanalyzed the data

through the lens of Strayhorn's (2019) framework of belonging and looked for moments where participants defined belonging in relation to feeling cared about, mattering and how this also connected to their racial/ethnic identity and their experience attending a PWI during COVID-19. This led to the following findings: identity, context, and temporal moments influence sense of belonging during a "two pandemic world", the need to belong can drive students' behavior to or against academic achievement and satisfying the need to belong as conditions changed. In addition to elaborating on these findings in the next chapter, I will also include a section that explains how participants described their sense of belonging prior to the pandemic as a prologue to the findings.

Ethics, Pilot Study, Trustworthiness, & Positionality

Ethics

Prior to collecting data, I first gained approval from RVU'S Institutional Review Board (IRB) to begin my research. In addition to gaining IRB approval, I implemented various methods to protect the safety and confidentiality of the participants. I created a master list that includes the name of the participants and their pseudonyms and was the sole individual who had access to this information. To ensure the participant's identity was confidential, I used their pseudonyms in the data analysis and analytic memos. Before recording the interviews, I explained the purpose of the study and the IRB guidelines with each participant to gain their consent for participating. I created a Care protocol which was conducted before interviewing participants. The Care protocol was utilized as a quick assessment of the participant's wellness and how they were feeling. Participants had the option to reschedule or withdraw from the study if needed. After

assessing their wellness, I shared campus information that related to applying for student Emergency funds and the contact information for RVU's counseling services.

Pilot Study

During the immediate shift to online learning (Spring 2020), I conducted a pilot study that explored how students felt and described belonging. I was able to conduct five 90-minute interviews and found the following emerging themes: University is the central part of students' life, feelings of heartbrokenness, sense of uncertainty, reliability on technology for connections, lack of university support, and lack of motivation.

The pilot study helped me understand how some students defined their sense of belonging during the immediate transition to online learning and to be aware of the possible emerging themes that may arise from my dissertation study. The pilot study also helped me to adjust my interview protocols and the methodology for my dissertation study.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a crucial part of qualitative studies in order to ensure the validation and credibility for the study and findings. To ensure the validation and trustworthiness for this study, I incorporated analytic memos and member checking for accuracy purposes. Positionality also allows the researcher to reflect on their position in relation to the study.

Analytic Memos. "An analytic memo is a brief or extended narrative that documents the researcher's reflections and thinking process about the data" (Miles et al., 2014). I utilized analytic memos after each interview to summarize the participant's narrative and make note of any emerging themes or thoughts that came from each interview. These

memos were used as a source of record keeping and a way to connect the data throughout each interview.

Member Checking. To minimize error, I conducted a member check with each participant. Member checking provided the opportunity for participants to clarify, add, and/or edit the information they provided throughout each interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed automatically and were reviewed again to ensure accuracy. After listening and reviewing the audio interviews and transcripts, I created 10 Word documents that included summarized data that each participant shared. The majority of participants who responded confirmed that the data was accurate and gave their consent to use for this study.

Positionality. There were many moments of empathy and connectedness that came from this dissertation study. The stories that each participant shared reminded me of my own experience as a graduate student of color and navigating to find a sense of belonging. Identifying as a Mexican and South Korean first-generation woman, I have struggled to feel a sense of belonging within the realms of my racial/ethnic identity. Sometimes I would not feel enough of one identity and encounter questions like, “Where are you from?” “What are you more of?” “What are you?” and comments of being “so exotic” and “exciting”. Throughout the years, I have learned to embrace my identity with pride and realized that my racial/ethnic identity and my identity as a first-generation student have been the most salient throughout my experience. During my undergraduate studies, I had a couple of mentors who helped me apply to graduate school and motivated me to go towards a doctoral degree. I decided to attend RVU’s graduate program but was scared to be far away from family. I remember trying to save up money that summer while taking

three six-week courses to complete my undergraduate degree. I did not have the funds to afford a plane ticket, shipping my belongings, and did not have an assistantship guaranteed. My family and friends planned a graduation party for me, where we had a raffle to raise funds (everyone called it Lee's Big Raffle) and created a GoFundMe page to help with the cost.

I remember leaving my family and the emotions I felt going onto the next stage of my education. Arriving at RVU, I stayed in a motel because on campus housing did not allow me to move in a day early. I was assigned an advisor who was on sabbatical and had to switch advisors. I remember coming to RVU, a PWI and felt the definition of minority on my skin and did not feel an immediate sense of belonging the same feeling that most participants shared. I sat in classes where I noticed I was the only Mexican and South Korean student. I relied on friends, family, and mentors back home for support during moments of loneliness my first year. I had to navigate my own belonging by trying to get involved while navigating internal feelings of anger and isolation attending a PWI. There were moments when I missed speaking Spanish and was excited to meet anyone who I can speak the language with. I relied on spaces such as the on campus multicultural centers to find a space for me to feel comfort. Without an assistantship, I worked downtown to afford the cost of living and encountered food insecurity.

After attending classes and work, I would go home, research every building and the location of student support services, print my resume, and go door to door seeking for an assistantship. I later found an assistantship to afford graduate school and am very grateful for the friends, mentors, and family that I have gained from this journey.

My personal experience of attending (a PWI) graduate school as a student of color led me to study a sense of belonging for students of color because our stories carry value and importance in order to create effective change at every institution. College has always been described as a time to discover yourself, but what happens when you are not invited to be who you are? From my own path, I have come to embrace who I am, the barriers I have faced, and own my position as a researcher and advocate for students of color and their experiences. Thinking back on my experience, I empathize with the participants and their experiences, especially during the pandemic. My experience is what led me to study belonging for students of color and to provide new knowledge in the study of higher education in order to create spaces of belonging. Students of color carry intersected identities that deserve recognition and carry a sense of resilience from the barriers that we face. My positionality as a first-generation graduate student of color helped to create a vulnerable space and relationship with each participant. During each interview, I would explain to participants that this is a conversation where I want to get to know you and your experience. Participants felt a sense of comfort to talk about their experience where we both were vulnerable. There were moments when I shared my experience, we would laugh, and even became teary-eyed about certain topics. I am truly thankful and honored to hear their stories and to share them to progress change for communities of color.

Summary of Methodology

Narrative inquiry was the methodological approach used to answer the study's research question and guiding questions. Ten students participated in this study and were

interviewed once a month for three months to describe their sense of belonging. The data collected from the recorded (virtual) interviews was analyzed, which led to four findings. These findings are presented in the following chapter which includes quotes from participants who shared their experience and how they described their sense of belonging

Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

This dissertation study was designed to explore how undergraduate students of color describe their sense of belonging during the pandemic of the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19). This chapter begins by presenting the first finding of the study where each finding will be presented in their own sub-chapter. Each chapter will include an in-depth review of each of the findings while connecting to Strayhorn's (2019) theoretical framework of the sense of belonging. After interviewing participants in a three months' time frame, the study discovered the following findings:

- Finding 1: Baseline of Belonging (Pre-pandemic): Lack of belonging at RVU and relying on representation to belong.
- Finding 2: Identity, context, and temporal moments influence students' sense of belonging during the "two pandemic world" year
- Finding 3: The need to belong drives students' behavior in that were beneficial and detrimental to their academic achievement
- Finding 4: Belonging away from RVU influenced, FOMO, deprivation, technology and disassociating from RVU

The findings demonstrate that participants did not initially feel a sense of belonging (pre-pandemic) experienced a renavigation process to find spaces, people, and other ways to satisfy their belonging. These findings also show how racial/ethnic identity influenced their sense of belonging as it related to the temporal events that occurred during this time such as COVID-19, Black Lives Matters and the presidential election of

2020. Additionally, participants shared how they still felt disconnected from the university and how they did not feel support from RVU leadership. Participants questioned how they would feel supported after the pandemic, the election, while living in a time of heightened racism existing. The findings point to how the dominant culture existing at predominantly White institutions continues to exist regardless of the educational setting (online v in-person) as participants shared their stories of experiencing alienation and isolation during this time. These findings call for the need for organizational change and reassessing the organization's value and mission, culture, functioning process, and structure to prioritize campus climate as a second-order or transformational change.

Finding 1: Baseline of Belonging (Pre-pandemic): Lack of Belonging at RVU and Relying on Representation to Belong

Understanding participant's sense of belonging (pre-pandemic) served as a foundation to understand participant's belonging entirely at RVU. After arriving at RVU many participants became aware of the racial culture at RVU which led them to feel imposter syndrome and "feeling like a minority" for the first time. Participants shared how they navigated to find a place to belong and relied on centers and programs that supported their racial/ethnic identity. Participants later shared their immediate experience of RVU's transition to remote learning in relation to their level of support and belonging at RVU.

Campus Racial Culture and Cultural Dissonance at RVU

Upon arriving at RVU, participants shared how they encountered the feelings of culture shock, imposter syndrome, and felt misled about the actual diversity climate at RVU. These feelings led to participants to “feel like a minority” on campus. For example, Niklaus shared his experience participating in one of RVU’s summer bridge programs prior to his first year. Participating in the program made him feel connected with his peers as they reflected similar social identities and backgrounds as him, but he noticed the difference in RVU’s racial diversity starting during his first year. Niklaus explained:

Basically, everyone I was around, was kinda similar to me. Everyone there [Summer Bridge program] was like low income or, you know, they were the same color or another person of color, like we could relate on that. Freshman year was kind of like a shock but I kind of realized, “Oh I was in a bubble.” This is what it really looks like up here so it kind of took a little adjusting. -*Niklaus (Black/African American, Man)*

After starting classes, Niklaus encountered cultural dissonance after noticing the difference in the culture of RVU and his home culture in relation to socioeconomic status among his peers.

We didn’t have a lot of money growing up like at all. So coming up here, it’s still like a very, very huge adjustment where it’s like...even simple things like for example one year, I remember I didn’t have a pillow and it sounds silly and irrelevant but I was like, “Oh I don’t have a pillow. It’s fine.” Like if I have a pillow, I’ll use it but like I don’t have one. I don’t need it. And I remember someone coming in and asked “Don’t you have a pillow? How do you sleep without a pillow?” I’m just like, to me, that’s not a necessity but to them, they went out and bought me a pillow, because they were like, this is a necessity. – *Niklaus (Black/ African, Man)*

These snippets of Niklaus' experience demonstrate how he felt a sense of discomfort arriving at RVU as a student of color. He realized how comfortable he felt when attending the summer bridge program and being around peers of similar class background and race/ethnic origin. However, his perception changed after starting his first year at RVU while interacting with his White peers, who were from different class backgrounds. While the example of the pillow was a micro-interaction, it is a good illustration of the large chasm that existed between low-income minoritized students and their high-income White peers.

Niklaus did not know that he needed to bring his own pillow to college with him, and then once he arrived, he did not have the means to buy a pillow. A White student, trying to be helpful, bought him a pillow. However, in doing so, highlighted the chasm of difference between the two students. The White student had the knowledge (you bring your own pillow to college) and the economic means to buy the pillow. While Nicklaus downplays the importance of the pillow (suggesting that he does not need a pillow to sleep comfortably) the interaction was salient enough to him for him to recount it when asked about his transition to college. While Niklaus does not make the link directly, it is not hard to see how repeated interactions like this can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation which can prevent feeling a sense of belonging.

Similar to Niklaus, Autumn attended a summer bridge program at RVU that is specifically for STEM majors. She shared how she too found a sense of community within the program and felt comfort among peers who identified racially/ethnically similar to her. However, she was shocked by how few students of color were in her

courses once the semester started and declined again by the second semester. Autumn shared that most of her peers switched their major and were no longer on the pre-med track which decreased the number of students of color she would see in her courses. She described how she felt isolated when being the only woman of color in her classes.

I'm just seeing the number of us go down, down, down. I'm worried that like my senior year I'm going to be like the only one and it's just kind of discouraging because it's just- like why are people giving up on it and is something being done? Sometimes I feel like people look at me like in my smaller classes. Like I'll notice a lot of them look at me like, I don't know if it's like a consciousness thing but I thought they kind of looked at me like they're surprised that I'm in the class.
-Autumn (*Black/African American, Woman*)

Autumn experienced culture shock because she was the only Black/African American woman in her science classes. The lack of student racial/ethnic representation leads to feeling isolation, alienation, and the need to prove their intellectual abilities among their White peers. In both Niklaus and Autumn's experience, they initially started to feel a sense of discomfort, leading to feelings of isolation which impacted them from feeling an automatic sense of belonging at RVU. When predominately White institutions lack to integrate the culture and values of communities of color, minoritized students can feel an incongruence between both campus culture and their own. This leads minoritized students to navigate their college environment without automatically feeling a sense of belonging and trying to find spaces where they "fit in" while risking the possibility of disconnection in academic and social settings.

Navigating College Academically and Socially: Seeking a Sense of Belonging

Participants shared how they had to navigate the social and academic aspects of college. Participants described their experience being in spaces where they did not see themselves reflected within the classroom settings which made them feel disconnected. For example, Aaliyah shared how her sophomore year was the worst. She shared how the (lack of) interaction in her Chinese and Economics courses left her feeling isolated. Aaliyah, being the only Black/African American woman in her Chinese class, felt unseen due to the lack of interaction she felt from her peers and professor.

Um, there were a lot of times where I felt like she [professor] didn't call on me and certain times she would act like I was invisible in class and it was obvious. Even one student said, "*Why don't you ever call on her?*" so it was just kind of like that and I definitely felt like it hindered my growth in the class. I definitely feel like I'm behind than my peers, because I didn't get to practice as much as everybody else... because I don't get the opportunity to practice as much as everybody else. And then on top of that, I don't have people to speak Chinese with. It's just me so it's difficult. -Aaliyah (*Black/African American, Woman*)

Aaliyah's experience shows how the sense of belonging is a function of perceived support from one's teachers (Hoffman et al., 2002-2003; Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008) and a relationship between student, staff, faculty, and peers. However, when minoritized students do not feel this connection, they can encounter feelings of alienation within their educational settings. Similar to Aaliyah, Nathan shared how he continues to battle imposter syndrome while being in classes where the majority of his peers are White. He would visually scan the classroom to analyze if there were any students of color present to feel some form of connection. While being in dominantly White spaces,

Nathan would have to remind himself of who he is and affirm that he belonged in those spaces.

I just have to have a talk with myself really and say, “Nathan, you belong. You’ve worked hard to get here just like everyone else has worked hard to get here.” I’m still learning because there are sometimes where I still just sit in silence because I don’t know if my input matters or if it will be received, but it’s just really moving beyond that hesitation. -*Nathan (Black/African American, Man)*

Similar to Nathan’s experience, Malik also shared how he felt navigating classroom spaces where the majority were White students. Malik shared his experience of when he would traditionally introduce himself in class and how peers would romanticize his cultural traditions.

We have a traditional way of introducing ourselves that involves our unique cleanse that I would incorporate into a lot of my classes and stuff, because that’s just what you do on the reservation to everybody, because it tells people who you are, who your family is, where you’re coming from, and just makes you a representation of your community. And I just felt like there are some people who are like, “Oh that’s so cool!” and there are others that kind of like didn’t care, and then there were even others that would like, romanticize Native Americans almost and I just felt very disconnected and felt like I couldn’t say anything like that. I can’t even tell people where I’m from without people coming up with different assumptions. -*Malik (Navajo and White, Man)*

These experiences show what minoritized students may encounter when navigating to find spaces of belonging at predominately White institutions. Participants shared how they had to remind themselves of their belonging but noticed how the dominant culture attending a PWI created the feelings of imposter syndrome within their academic settings. Participants encounter the same experience when trying to socially engage with their peers at RVU (pre-pandemic). Autumn attended a party with her friend and described how she felt being one of a few Black/African American women at the

party. This negative experience influenced Autumn to disconnect from various social settings at RVU. She explained how she tried to attend parties because she thought this was the “college experience.” However, she realized that this was impacting her academics. Autumn continued to discuss how she tried to find a sense of belonging by adapting to the RVU culture, which included, but not limited to parties, going out daily, and attending football games.

When they hear RVU they assume like this is some big party school like football games and I feel like that’s kind of what being at RVU is and I definitely experienced that the most my freshman year. My first semester I was on probation with all of my scholarships because I was just enjoying what I thought was the college experience, which is like going out every weekend Thursday Friday, Saturday. Games every weekend when you’re there like all day. like when you hear RVU you like I didn’t think about the academics. I was like, “Oh this is going to be like high school. I had all A’s. This will be easy and focus more on being social and going out and just having a lot of friends” was what I thought, but that was my misconception of what RVU would be for me. -Autumn
(Black/African American, Woman)

Autumn’s experience sheds light on the gamble some minoritized students may encounter when trying to “fit in” and adapt to the dominant culture at PWIs. Autumn tried to adapt to RVU’s social culture but risk her academic progress. After reflecting this, Autumn began to focus on her academics but risked “fitting in” at RVU. Similar to Autumn’s experience, Niklaus shared his first-year experience, trying to find clubs and organizations that would be a place of belonging and to build friendship. He attempted to join a religious based student organization and did not find a sense of belonging after engaging with the group. Niklaus shared,

I think a good example is I tried to join one of the Christian clubs on campus. I go there and one of the first kind of conversations I had was out in the lawn and they ice cream. But this White woman walks up to me and she asked me, “You mind if

I ask you a question?" I said, "Um sure" she says, "How do you feel about the results of the election as a Black man?" and then like a bunch of other people around me were like, "Yeah, I'd really like to know that" And like, "Yeah, I voted for Trump. I'm kind of curious what you have to say." And like I don't know, I just felt like I was instantly targeted for being different, like that is what that was like. -*Niklaus (Black/African American, Man)*

Niklaus also shared how these types of interactions made him feel like a "science experiment" being targeted as a Black/African American man. He realized this may be the first time his White peers are interacting with someone who is not White where they would ask questions relating to his racial/ethnic identity. Niklaus encountered conversations where he was positioned to assume the role as a "native informant." (Hooks, 1994). For example, when the class reads a novel written by a Korean American author, White students may turn to the one student from a Korean background to explain what they do not understand. Although these are snippets of stories that participant's shared, these conversations show the type of experiences they encounter when trying to find spaces of belonging at RVU. These experiences led participants to rely heavily on groups/organizations and cultural centers that supported their racial/ethnic identity as well as other social identities.

Groups/Programs for Minoritized Students

Many participants explained how attending a PWI like RVU felt overwhelming and at times felt alienation within their academic and social settings. These experiences led participants towards groups and services that represented and supported their identity. For example, Zara found a sense of connection at RVU by being involved in programs that her college had that were specifically for students of color.

Zara explained,

I think getting involved with groups on campus that has minority dominant demographics like, minorities in pre-med and things like minorities in engineering, as well as making friends that were also students of color and so I got to meet so many people from so many diverse backgrounds and I think that went a long way in improving my sense of belonging at RVU. In that student of color minority group setting, I felt like I belonged because there were so many people that had similar stories of immigrant parents or parenting styles or, you know, emphasis on education to get a better life, that sort of mentality. - *Zara (South Asian, Woman)*

In this quote, Zara shared how racial/ethnic representation positively impacted her sense of belonging. Like Zara, Mahogany found value in participating in programs that supported her as a Black/African American woman of color studying STEM. She shared how she switched her major during her first- year in order to be in a college where she felt supported. This led her to find programs and organizations that supported her holistic identity. Both Zara and Mahogany found a sense of belonging in spaces that reflected their intersected identities, serving as a valuable support mechanism and social outlet for their campus involvement (Hurtado et al., 1997). When these spaces are unavailable and/or nonexistent, minoritized students may continue to face alienation while trying to find spaces to belong to.

For example, Malik tried to find spaces that reflected his Navajo identity but realized that RVU lacked the representation for Native Americans on campus. Although there were some on campus spaces to interact with Native American students, Malik spoke about the connection he felt when attending an off-campus conference for Native Americans which his mentor invited him to attend. He shared how this experience uplifted him during his first- year. He shared how this experience influenced his

advocacy for the need of spaces supporting Native Americans and helped create the Indigenous peoples' Student Association at RVU. He explained how he met another Native American student who drove three hours to attend a social event for their group and realized the value of belonging for him and his peers.

I didn't realize that he drove three hours just to be with other Natives because he's like, "I haven't seen anybody since I've been here" and you know, that experience and seeing there are others or even knowing some others who have dropped out of RVU who Native were because they didn't feel accepted. Just knowing that and being able to positively influence the future is really compelling- *Malik (Navajo and White, Man)*

The experience from the conference helped Malik to build relationships with his mentor, staff from the multicultural center, and to begin initiatives to support Indigenous students on campus by creating a student organization on campus. This is an example of how students feel connected when they see a representation of themselves and how their perceived sense of support and value can positively impact their belonging. These factors influence belonging and show the important role that peer interaction, faculty support, and campus climate play in sustaining students' feeling of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002-2003).

Multicultural Centers

Participants shared how they relied on Multicultural centers to feel a sense of comfort and belonging. For example, Nathan shared how he was involved with the Multicultural Center and how the staff and space provided him support as a student of color and as a first-generation student.

That was another thing when moving into college, you know, campus life, finding those organizations that work for you. I found the amazing Multicultural Center, the leadership council there, and the campus ministry that I'm a part of. So those things, you know, really helped build that community because if you don't have those other things in place, you can really get lost in this [university]. -*Nathan (Black/African American, Man)*

Like Nathan, Angel mentioned how grateful she was to learn about the multicultural centers on campus. She explained a time when someone randomly invited her to the center during her first year at RVU and was thankful for that invitation as her transition was challenging. Similar to Nathan, Angel shared how participating in the mentorship programs hosted by the multicultural center provided her with community while enhancing her leadership skills. Angel mentioned,

It was very helpful because I had a mentor who had already been on campus for like four years and they were able to give you resources. I was able to be around like-minded people, being around people who are like me, just being able to talk and feel comfortable without feeling like I have to censor myself. It was very helpful especially transitioning to a big school like this. - *Angel (Black/African American, Woman)*

These examples show that minoritized students feel a sense of belonging when their racial/ethnic identity are validated and supported. When the culture of predominantly White institutions do not include the racial/ethnic identities of others, minoritized students rely on multicultural centers to feel connected. While these centers served as a space of community for participants, they also shared how they felt disconnected from these spaces during the remote transition of RVU. During these immediate changes, participants did not have access to reliable resources and were positioned to renavigate RVU all over again and to find belonging.

Spring 2020 Campus Closure: Renavigating Spaces for Belonging

Participants shared how they felt scared, anxious, and feared the unknown when being notified of RVU shifting to remote function and learning. Many participants experienced stress while trying to get their belongings, affording their way home, and trying to figure out how they will complete their classes now being online. This new transition also meant that participants did not have physical access to certain clubs/organizations and spaces that provided them comfort and belonging. For example, Mahogany shared how she felt while being notified of the news. She relied on spaces such as multicultural centers and organizations to feel a sense of belonging. She described how she felt when these spaces were no longer available for her to attend.

I remember feeling like it was less of a needing belonging less and more like I had less spaces to belong to. I felt like there wasn't really a place anymore for me to be rejected or accepted. Campus was closed and most of the other organizations stopped meeting after that as well. -*Mahogany (Black/African American, Woman)*

Mahogany explained how the cancellation of these programs impacted her belonging and support while transitioning to remote learning. She shared how she felt scared of the unknown and what will come of this online experience. These feelings resonate with how other participants felt after being notified of being away from RVU. While this caused many participants to feel stress, other participants felt a form of relief being away from RVU and not having to constantly navigate predominately White spaces. For example, Aaliyah shared how she was home during spring break when she heard of RVU's transition. She shared her frustration because she did not have all of her

course materials but was excited to stay at home. When trying to understand why,

Aaliyah mentioned,

For the most part, I don't enjoy being at RVU. Like if I could go back in time, I would not choose this school.... It's mentally draining like constantly being around White people, like the toxic energy, like it's suffocating like, White culture. It's suffocating being here. Not being able to truly be myself in situations where I'm not surrounded by other Black people which happens. Constantly having to explain racism, you know? Over and over again. It's mentally draining. I don't want to do it. Other things like someone trying to touch my hair like, quit. I don't think RVU deserves its Black students. I don't see a place here for us. - *Aaliyah (Black/African American, Woman)*

Summary

These experiences are not surprising for minoritized students. Because most participants did not come to RVU feeling a sense of belonging, the thought of being at home serves as a safe space and to decrease the level of racial battle fatigue they have encountered while attending RVU. This shows how the campus climate at RVU impacted participant's connection with RVU. The lack of campus culture at predominately White institutions can negatively impact the experience of minoritized students and their sense of belonging. From these narratives, participants shared how they did not feel a sense of belonging upon arriving at RVU and struggled to feel connected in their academic and social settings. They described this as "feeling like a minority for the first time" and did not see themselves reflected in certain settings at RVU. Participants relied heavily on clubs/organizations and spaces where they saw their racial/ethnic identity represented, driving them to interact in multicultural centers and programs made to support students of color. This connects to Strayhorn's (2019) theoretical framework where belonging is a universal basic need and how it is influenced by one's identity. Additionally, these

narratives also show the negative impact minoritized students face when these spaces are no longer accessible, especially during times of urgency and pandemics. While some participants felt disheartened by remote learning, some participants felt a sense of relief of not having to navigate predominately White spaces. Although participants did not have to navigate White spaces, they still encountered experiences of discrimination and became aware of their racial/ethnic identity during this time. The next sub-chapter will explain how identity, context, and temporal moments influenced participant's sense of belonging.

Ch.4b: Identity, Context, and Temporal Moments Influence Sense of Belonging during a “Two Pandemic World” year

The timeframe of this study was conducted during a time of national events. The nation was negatively impacted by the effects of COVID-19 as well as the heightened acts of racism. Participants shared their fear of their health and as minoritized students due to the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, and the racial references of COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” and the “Wuhan Virus.” Many participants expressed these feelings as living in a “two-pandemic world” which impacted their sense of belonging inside and out of their virtual settings. Participants did not know where to belong and shared how being a person of color impacted their overall belonging. These feelings transferred to their virtual experience at RVU which revealed how identity, context, and temporal moments impact the belonging of minoritized students.

Identity Influences of Belonging

Many participants expressed how their racial identity was a central element when seeking a sense of belonging during COVID-19, and that it was not only difficult to attend classes online but challenging feel a sense of belonging as a student of color during a time of racism and the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. For example, Angel expressed her feelings of living in a “two pandemic world” and shared her frustration on trying to learn online and coping with the ongoing racism she sees.

Angel shared,

I just feel overwhelmed and a lot of anxiety during this time. Because of the virus of course, because it's like, I kind of put myself in more danger of getting it because I'm up here and it's different up here, I feel like nobody's listening. And overwhelmed because everything's online and I don't- I guess I really don't learn well like this, it's better for me to go in person. -Angel (*Black/African American, Female*)

Angel shared the anxiety she felt about adapting to a new form of learning and feared of catching the virus when she would go outside. Angel also shared how she felt as a Black/African American woman living during a time of elevated awareness of racism.

I will say it's, like traumatic, constantly seeing what's happening. Yeah, like constantly seeing like Black death and what's going on. It's, it is very heavy on the heart especially as a Black person. It's very heavy and yeah, there's constantly on like it's all what I think about every day...is just racism, systematic racism and everything. -Angel (*Black/African American, Female*)

The heightened forms of racism during this time made Angel feel discomfort as a student and as a Black/ African American woman. She felt impacted by learning online, the fear of COVID-19, and the trauma of being Black. Angel experienced forms of alienation in various settings and became aware of how her racial/ethnic identity influenced her feelings of belonging. This relates to the core elements of Strayhorn's (2019) framework of belonging and how social identities intersect and affect college students' sense of belonging, and takes on heightened importance in certain contexts, times, and populations. When participants did not feel their identity represented and supported, they began to feel a sense of alienation, isolation, and in need for their identity to be seen.

Similar to Angel, Mahogany shared how she felt frustrated regarding the misinformation about Black/African Americans in relation to COVID-19. During her summer internship, she encountered a White woman whose daughter was married to a Black man. The woman shared with Mahogany how she worried about her son-in-law because of his lungs due to his identity as a Black man. This shows how the sense of belonging can take on heightened importance among certain populations, especially those who are marginalized or inclined to feel that way (Goodenow & Grady ,1993). Nathan also shared how he felt attending classes and having to explain the trauma and experiences as a Black/African American man.

So, this is a challenge as the need for me as a person of color to have to explain the trauma that people of color are experiencing. In this day and age and trying to prove that it is a trauma, and I said this in class earlier today, that me trying to prove that what we are experiencing is a trauma, so me having to explain to someone to make them see you know, the injustices of this world and of the people and higher places that they are you know operating in injustice ways and just some in wickedness, you know, THAT'S A TRAUMA all by itself, because it's like, how can't you see what we see that has been a challenge.- *Nathan (Black/African American, Man)*

Nathan's experience shows how his identity as a Black/African American man influenced his connection and experience during a "two pandemic world." Many participants shared how these experiences led to feeling racial battle fatigue. For example, Olivia shared how she felt living in a "two-pandemic world" and how this made her feel unsafe and cautious about various settings.

Being a student of color during the pandemic like, I feel the stress of both of those, and then also like I don't know if you've heard but like two days ago there was an anti LGBTQ protest and anti-Black Lives Matter protest nearby which was very scary to see videos. It's like now all of this, being a person of color during the pandemic being a student during the pandemic and then having

people coming in and having those types of demonstrations here. It just puts so much stress to be able to focus on school or to focus on life and stuff like that.-
Olivia (Hispanic and Black/African American, Woman)

This experience is an example of how the pandemic and heightened racism impacted participant's well-being in relation to their racial/ethnic identity. Participants lacked to feel a strong sense of belonging and instead, dealt with racial battle fatigue while trying to feel safe during this time. Some participants shared how their sense of belonging was no different than if they were attending classes in-person and felt "faceless" and unseen. For example, Mahogany talked about the value of being seen and how the lack of representation impacted her as a minoritized student.

Yeah, strange to think about because even in a big lecture hall you still feel faceless. It's like your professor isn't going to remember you, even though you see it so it's just like... if I really wanted to recreate the experience, I would leave my camera on because in either case, my professor will not remember who I am. -*Mahogany (Black/African American, Woman)*

The lack of representation in classes impacted students to feel supported and connected based on their racial/ethnic identity. Similarly, Nathan shared how he would scroll through Zoom to see if there were any other students who racially/ethnically identified similar to him. While participant's racial/ethnic identity influenced their belonging, participants shared how they continued to face racial discrimination and stereotypes during this time.

Ongoing Racial Discrimination and Stereotypes

Participants shared how racism and discrimination continued to occur during this time and how these experiences impacted their sense of belonging during the pandemic. For example, Niklaus held a Residential Assistant (RA) position at RVU and lived on

campus during RVU's transition and mentioned how he tried to make friends with those around him since his friends left. While making new friends, Niklaus shared a time where he and his peers played a game called, "Never had I ever" and experienced a racial encounter from his White peer.

It was a girl. We were all playing "Never have I ever", and she wanted to get me out. And then she was like, "Never have I ever had hair that didn't need to be brushed" and then I'm like, looking around, and she's like Niklaus put your finger down. And so, she didn't know that Black people brush their hair and I'm like, yeah, we brush our hair. - *Niklaus (Black/ African American, Man)*

Niklaus was a bit surprised by the girl's belief and tried to look at this situation as a learning opportunity. He encountered other experiences that related to him as a Black/African American man and shared about a time he confronted a (White) student due to an alcohol violation and was called a n****r. Similarly, Zara encountered an experience related to her racial identity while attending classes during the pandemic. She talked about her identity as being Asian and how that related to the stereotypes her peers made which involved academic success.

I guess it's like identifying as Asian, there's definitely a sense of pressure put on you that you have to like- at least in classes and things like, that you're probably smart and all of that. And like I know people have messaged me this year as well like people that I've never talked to like "Hey do you want to start a study group together?" and sometimes I wonder, did you randomly pick me or did you pick me because of the person you thought I was? - *Zara (South Asian, Woman)*

Both Niklaus and Zara shared how their racial/ethnic identity influenced how they were going to belong in person and online. This also shows how mattering as a student of color influences belonging. In both narratives, Niklaus and Zara were not recognized in positive ways which negatively influenced their belonging among their peers. Most

participants shared how their racial/ethnic identity was present when renavigating spaces to belong to. Although participants shared how their identity impacted their belonging, it was also impacted by the context of studying online during COVID-19.

Belonging is Context-Specific

“Belonging takes on importance in certain contexts such as being a newcomer to an otherwise established group” (Strayhorn, 2019, p.34). Although participants had experience as a RVU student, they were seen as newcomers to attending online classes while dealing with COVID-19 and the heightened events of racism. This led participants to seek environments that were congruent with their own expectation, values, attitudes and positioning (Strayhorn, 2019). For example, Nathan who shared about the trauma of sharing his experience in class, explained the difference he felt when virtually attending the multicultural center and one of his (virtual) classes on the same day after hearing the verdict of the case of Breonna Taylor.

I remember correctly of the verdict for Breonna Taylor was given, or the day after. I had two meetings: one with the multicultural group and one with the majority of the people [White/Caucasian]. So in the multicultural meeting, they ask how are you feeling, and everybody's like “tired” “You know this is crazy” you know, everyone was expressing how they were feeling and it was a topic, you know? We are bringing the realities of our world into our academic setting. But when I entered the org[anization] where the majority are White people, in like two minutes, I switch over and the meeting is like, “How's everyone's day going?” and everyone said, “ Oh it was so good. I'm doing this and doing that. Life is so great.” and then they get to me and so I'm just saying, “Yeah...life is great” because I don't have the time nor energy to try to bring up something that should have already been addressed if we are coming together as a group of people. -
Nathan (Black/African American, Man)

Nathan shares how he felt comfortable expressing himself within the multicultural center on campus because he felt seen and understood during a time of impact for him as a Black/African American man. This shows how being a “newcomer” in certain spaces can impact the level of belonging students of color may feel. Nathan was not a newcomer in spaces like the multicultural center and felt a sense of belonging and support to vent about Breonna Taylor’s verdict. In comparison, Nathan felt like a newcomer in his virtual classes which prevented him to fully be himself and to feel supported. Other participants felt similar ways where they preferred to be in spaces that connected with their values. For example, Veronica shared a bit more about the difference between taking classes online and on campus, which related to her comfort levels of expressing herself and participating.

I’m almost always in a group with White men and it’s kind of hard to find common ground and feel listened to, because you’re always kind of conscious of coming off as too bossy, but you also know that if you’re not like assertive enough, you’re definitely going to get drowned out. But I usually have my webcam off when I’m in these classes, so I just talk when I want to.- *Veronica (Puerto Rican. Woman)*

This shows how Veronica felt as a newcomer in taking online classes as a student of color. From her experience of in person classes, she was aware of how her identity may be portrayed when still being in spaces (virtual and in person) that are White dominant. This shows how the experience of belonging is context-dependent and has the greatest influence on outcomes in that area (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 34). For example, Veronica resolved her belonging in virtual White dominant spaces by turning her camera off which provided some comfort. Although she resolved the issue of belonging, this also shows how other minoritized students may also resolve attending virtual White dominant

spaces by the lack of their “physical-virtual” presence. Participants shared how their identity and context influenced their sense of belonging while attending college as students of color during COVID-19. Participants also shared how temporal moments throughout the three months influenced their belonging as it related to historical events such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the presidential election.

Belonging during COVID-19, Black Lives Matter and 2020 Presidential Election

Many participants shared how specific temporal moments such as Black Lives Matters, and the presidential election of Trump influenced their sense of belonging during COVID-19. Additionally, participants and their sense of belonging were positively impacted by the results of the election of the 46th President and Vice President of the United States, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. During the first two months, participants shared their stories about seeking some form of comfort and a place to belong to, while reflecting on their identity as a student of color. Within the third interview, some participants still struggled to feel satisfied with their belonging but were influenced positively by the outcome of the presidential election. participants felt that the election represented hope and healing from the events that impacted the lives of communities of color and felt represented from the election results. When talking about the current events with Olivia, she shared how significant it was for her to vote during this time. This was Olivia’s first time voting since 2018. Olivia expressed how this moment in history played a significant role in her life in relation to supporting that Black Lives Matter.

When I went to the first protest in June, it just felt like really really good to go. I don’t know, and then just like a lot of people were there and I never met them

before, but then we would exchange phone numbers and I still talk to them now. A lot of them are organizing stuff now and I helped with organizing without going there. I wouldn't have met those people and then obviously they're fighting for the same cause I'm fighting for. Like if I could go more than I could have more of those experiences and feel even more connected with people that are in the community and a lot of them aren't even students. -*Olivia (Hispanic & Black/ African American, Woman)*

Olivia's sense of belonging was of heightened importance. Olivia participated in these events as her way of achieving a sense of belonging. Olivia participated in the election and protested as a way to find a sense of connection during this time. The deaths of many Black lives impacted her which led her to advocate for the injustice of Black lives.

Some participants also shared their feelings leading up to the presidential election and how this impacted their sense of belonging. For example, Veronica felt anxious during the process of the electoral decision and later felt some comfort from the results of the election. She was surprised how certain states became blue and that it felt comforting to see this. She realized that she felt tense during the time leading up to the election results and felt happier afterwards.

It was more like I had this feeling of doom, where it was like none of this really matters. You know, like why am I- should I just be focusing on like passing classes, instead of trying to get like my A's and stuff. But now I realized how much the election was a part of that because now I feel so much more like happier. I guess about striving for, like higher quality of my work and more interested in studying because I don't have like that feeling of doom in my mind. -*Veronica (Puerto Rican, Woman)*

Veronica shared how the results of the election impacted her level of belonging when she realized that the state that RVU was located was a blue state. She said that she felt more optimistic about RVU's environment and felt that RVU was a more supportive

community. This shows that belonging is not only malleable but can also be positively impacted when students feel a sense of support, cared about, and mattering.

Similar to Veronica, Autumn felt nervous about the election results and felt better after learning the results of the election. Autumn explained how she did not feel as comfortable living on campus because of the different views her residence portrayed which caused her to stress. She explained how the semester was challenging, especially trying to stay connected virtually to organizations that supported her as a student of color. Autumn also explained a time when she walked around the floor where her dorm was located and saw resident's express their opposing views by publicly displaying banners of their political views. Although Autumn still struggled to find a sense of belonging, she mentioned how she felt more comfortable to attend classes in person when the pandemic is more in control. She missed being around her peers and felt the need for person-to-person interaction.

I don't feel like it would be as much of a struggle being a woman of color in person as much as it was before. Only because now, I just feel like I've grown so much, and I learned not to let certain things impact me that once did. I learned a lot from being in this pandemic and especially like the new VP Kamala Harris in office ...and just knowing there are people who are supportive like, I thought a lot of people wouldn't be for it because it's a woman and she's African American. I thought people would look down upon her but knowing that there's a lot of people who are on my side and if she can do it, like I can do it.- *Autumn (Black/African American, Woman)*

Both Autumn and Veronica felt supported and represented as women of color. Additionally, this shows how temporal moments can influence belonging and how it takes on heightened importance in certain times. Belonging provides a sense of security, where people strive to be accepted by others valued, and respected as qualified

individuals worthy of membership. Participants felt more of a sense of belonging during this temporal moment because they were able to feel represented and supported from their college environment and those who work within these settings.

The temporal moment of the election results symbolized change and healing for participants who did not initially feel a sense of belonging from the beginning. When thinking back on the stories of participants, most of them did not feel a sense of belonging when arriving RVU and navigated their way to find a sense of belonging throughout college. Participant's sense of belonging took on heightened importance during this time as they were navigating a two-pandemic world in addition to navigating a new educational space. The sense of belonging was relevant during this time as participants were not fully satisfied.

Questioning the Future of Racism and Belonging

Although the temporal moment of the election results provided some form of comfort and influence participants' belonging, some participants started to think about the future and how change will look like on their campus and in society. For example, Aaliyah shared in her last interview that she continued to feel the same throughout the past three months and was getting used to her online courses but wanted to go back in person. While she talked about going back, she stated a comment that connected to going back to how things used to be in society and "normal racism." After asking what Aaliyah meant by this, she expressed how she still encountered challenges to feel connected to her Chinese course. She did not feel like she belonged in the course as her peers' cameras

were off when in break-out rooms with her and saw how some of her peers would have their cameras on when a White student was present. She wanted to engage with them but still felt disconnected. She shared how her identity as a Black woman connects with these temporal moments and made her more aware of the existence of racism. Although she became more aware of this during this time, she also felt disconnected and preferred attending college in person.

I prefer in person and that just me because I just know racism is not going to go away because we're behind the camera screen you know. We're going to eventually have to go back in person. I'm going to eventually have to deal with this so like I rather just take the benefits of being in person. Because I like I've dealt with racism since I came to RVU, and I'm going to have deal with racism as I leave RVU. Like me hiding behind you, hiding away from it is not going to do anything. I hate to say like I've learned to accept it but like, you know you kind of do at a certain extent. -Aaliyah (*Black/African American, Woman*)

Aaliyah's response was very insightful as she began to think about how race and racism will look beyond these temporal moments. Although she did not experience a sense of connection within her virtual courses and is aware that she may encounter racism in person, Aaliyah preferred to be in person to feel some form of connection. Aaliyah is aware that racism will not vanish and would prefer to attend college in person in order to regain a sense of acceptance, support and inclusion. From these examples, we can see how temporal moments can impact minoritized students and their sense of belonging at any point in time since belonging is malleable. Participants were ongoingly navigating the malleability of their belonging intermittently with the current events of Black Lives Matters, racism, and COVID-19. Participants were navigating their belonging in a two pandemic world where they encountered some forms of alienation and satisfaction to their belonging.

Chapter 4c: Belonging Drove Students' Behavior that Benefit or Deter Academic Achievement

In many of the participant's stories, students behaved in certain ways to feel comfortable in their virtual and on campus settings. Participants behaved in ways where they negotiate or compartmentalize their racial identity to feel comfortable and satisfy their belonging in these spaces. This aligns with the general concept that belonging is a motive that can affect human behavior(s), and compels individuals to act (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 32). Because participants sought spaces to belong to, they acted in certain ways to satisfy their sense of belonging. However, it should be noted that these behaviors can work towards or against participants' academic achievement.

For example, some participants preferred to keep their cameras off to not fully show themselves. Some participants described this as the "zoom" or "the default" identity and would negotiate their own identity within online settings. While negotiating parts of their identity, students also expressed how their sense of motivation fluctuated while navigating the college and their racial identity during the pandemic. Additionally, some students also sought support from counseling services in order to seek comfort and validation during his time, as comfort became an essential need to satisfy participants' belonging.

Throughout the interviews, comfort continued to be a theme in how students defined belonging and became a transparent need while taking classes. For example,

Veronica explained how belonging is essential in all (virtual and physical) spaces and shared her level of comfort and belonging while attending classes online.

So, in some ways, it feels easier to fit into like my groups as like a woman of color in tech because there's no-they're not seeing you and you're not seeing them. So, it's definitely a lot easier to talk to people and just kind of shoot the breeze more. Whereas in person, I feel a lot more tense and aware of how I come off. -*Veronica (Puerto Rican, Woman)*

In this quote, Veronica is comparing her in-class experience to her virtual experience and explains that being online provided comfort to participate in her discussions and released the pressure of being seen based on her physical appearance. Many participants shared similar experiences and how attending courses online became a comfortable environment for them to attend class. For example, Autumn took online courses and an in-person lab during the pandemic. She explained how being online provided her comfort and the autonomy to show herself on camera or not. She compares these feelings with her in-person class and how her racial/ethnic identity is more salient and impacts her sense of belonging.

I feel like since everything is online, you don't really deal with as much judgement to say the least. Just because people can't really see you or like what you look like or anything, and like I don't really turn my camera on for any of my classes to tell you the truth, like I kind of sit there and just stay in the class so you don't really deal with the judgement like other people that are in your classes. Normally, in most of my classes, I'm the only African American mainly and I think in my in-person class, I'm the only one, and in my lab I'm definitely the only one because there's only eight of us, but in terms of like online, it's like not as prevalent, but I do feel like I'm also missing out.- *Autumn (Black/African American, Woman)*

Autumn felt more comfortable in her online class than attending in-person classes.

In this example, Autumn depended on comfort in order to feel a sense of belonging in the

spaces she was in and behaved in certain ways to satisfy her belonging. Participants shared how having cameras off related to how they would be perceived being in their own personal setting. Mahogany explained how having her camera off allowed her to not feel the sense of anyone watching her and felt more relaxed in her personal space. Many participants felt some form of comfort when having their cameras off which satisfied their sense of belonging while attending online classes that would usually cause discomfort if classes were in-person. Although participants shared how having their cameras off provided some comfort, this also created some form of disconnection with their peers, professors, and disengagement.

Discomfort, Disconnection, and Disengagement

Some participants shared how having their camera off in their virtual classes brought some discomfort and disconnection. For example, Angel shared how being online impacted her sense of belonging within her classes and in her social life. She shared how it felt different attending student organizations/club meetings and events virtually, which led her to feeling disconnected and little belonging.

It feels- I keep saying different but that's just how it is. I guess it's just different not going to class in person but it also feels, I don't know. Sometimes it feels...it's easy for me to get distracted. Let's just say when I'm working online, because when I'm in person I don't look at my phone because you know professor doesn't let you to be on there. But being online, It's like people have their cameras off, you know teachers kind of talking to themselves and were all just kind of learning like that. It's not really engaging I would say learning online, but in terms of like outside of the classroom, in terms of like orgs and stuff, I still like it but like I said, not everyone wants to participate in it so...- *Angel*
(*Black/African American, Woman*)

Angel shared how her online experience had little engagement which impacted her feeling a sense of belonging. Just like Angel, Mahogany shared her experience of alienation and how this impacted her to feel engaged in her courses.

It's uh, it's kind of alienating. Um, it kind of feels like I'm not really there. So, it feels like there's not really anything to belong to. I feel like there's just not the same sustenance and it's not the same. First of all, there is no physical space to belong to which is different already in that aspect. But additionally, it just kind of feels so abstract and so so unreal that you don't necessarily feel grounded. And if you don't feel grounded, then you don't feel comfortable. If you're not comfortable then you're not grounded so yeah, I guess my belonging, my feelings of belonging have decreased since the pandemic. -*Mahogany (Black/African American, Woman)*

This shows how belonging relates to mattering and community. McMillan and Chavis (1986, p.9) define belonging by using the phrase “sense of community” and refer this to the feeling that members have of belonging and the feeling that members matter to one another and in a group. When students, particular minoritized students do not feel a sense of community and belonging, they may experience feelings of isolation and uncertainty of where they fit in. Mahogany shared how she did not know where to fit in virtually which also impacted her level of motivation and engagement in the class. While speaking to Mahogany about her online courses, she spoke about how her motivation started to decline and felt little drive to submit her assignments but did not know why. She tried to keep up her motivation to do her schoolwork, but it was challenging. Similar to Mahogany, Zara felt her motivation decrease. During her last interview, she shared how she had zero motivation, and how it was related to the current issues of the pandemic and the issues around race.

I think for me, who is normally kind of like a little neurotic about like getting assignments done and stuff like that, I just have completely lost that this semester because I was like, well, these things don't matter. Obviously, they're bigger things to focus on like myself. -Zara (*South Asian, Woman*)

This experience relates to how belonging can drive students' behavior to or against academic norms (Strayhorn, 2019, p.32) Other participants shared how the lack of motivation also connected to the sense of feeling zoom fatigue during this time. For example, Aaliyah began the semester by feeling tired and realized she was "zoom fatigued" due to everything being online. She did not realize that she was feeling zoom fatigued but realized this when her friend mentioned this to her.

I just sit in front of a computer screen all day; it actually does make me very angry like very irritable. Like I take a lot of naps, naturally but I definitely feel like I'm napping more so, that definitely impacted my college experience. - Aaliyah (*Black/African American*)

Aaliyah mentioned how zoom fatigue impacted her engagement in her classes which also related to her level of belonging in virtual academic settings. These narratives express how participants were impacted by the online setting as it relates to participants' sense of belonging and connection in their online courses. This also shows some of the outcomes that came from feeling a sense of discomfort, disconnection, and disengagement. Although participants felt comfort by having their cameras off in classes, participants also expressed how this deterred them from feeling connected in the class. While participants had their cameras off in class to provide some comfort, this also positioned them to not be fully present and negotiating/compartimentalizing their identity.

Negotiating and Compartmentalizing Identity

While participants felt more comfortable having their cameras off, they also realized how this also negotiated and/or compartmentalized their identity. For example, Aliyah shared how having her camera off relieved the pressure of her White peers to see her racial/ethnic identity. Aaliyah explained,

Like when I want to say something now, it's not like I'm as nervous as I was before. I think it's kind of like equal like you don't have to look at them. You know like when I will have to raise my hand in class they were all sitting around me like I could see their faces and stuff but like here, I can honestly turn all their faces off. I don't even have to look at them. -*Aaliyah (Black/African American, Woman)*

Aaliyah's experience shows how belonging in various settings intersect with her social identities. As mentioned earlier, participants did not feel a sense of belonging when first arriving at RVU. They shared how this was their initial experience as a student of color attending a predominantly White institution. It was also evident how racial/ethnic identity played a role for minoritized students attending predominately White institutions virtually. Participants felt more comfort when their racial/ethnic identity was not physically in the forefront in White dominant spaces. For example, Veronica explained how she kept her camera off and felt that it was easier to fit into groups as a woman of color studying technology. Veronica continued to share that she would navigate how she presented herself in classes that did require her to keep her camera on. She was aware of the stereotypes about Latinas and would try to prevent any opportunity for discrimination.

I'm very aware of what kind of stereotypes they might associate with that. If they're saying like "Oh, she's got all these bright colors and she's got like chickens randomly singing in the background in the middle of the day for some reason" so like I do get it. It makes me feel a little out of place. – *Veronica (Puerto Rican, Woman)*

Veronica shared how she would move her desk for her peers to see her blue curtain as her zoom background when she needed to turn her camera on. This aligns with Strayhorn's (2019) elements of belonging and how belonging is influenced by one's identity. Participants became aware of how salient their racial/ethnic identity could be presented on zoom and avoided showing themselves to protect them from any form of discrimination.

Like Veronica, Nathan shared how attending online classes with his camera off alleviated the pressure he felt when walking into a classroom and being the only Black male in class. However, he shared how he was used to being the only one and how his racial identity was salient in his course when he would turn his camera on. Nathan shared an example of attending class in-person and online, and how he navigated to not fully show himself. This example relates to a time when he negotiated his identity by not showing his hair unbraided.

Usually, my hair is braided but it's not because you know I haven't had time to do it. So, I'm like, all snap, I don't want an identity crisis. I was like, oh my gosh, my hair is half right, and you know I just throw it into like a rubber band around it, let it puff out. I was like I don't know if I can, I don't know if I can do that. Going into an in-person class. How people are going to look at me. That might be too much Black for them. So, I threw on this hat again and covered it up. – *Nathan (Black/African American, Man)*

Nathan shared how he attended his online class by having his hat on and not showing his hair. He did not feel comfortable showing his hair unbraided and negotiated

how he would present himself in-person and online. While negotiating and/or compartmentalizing parts of their identity was a driven behavior to satisfy belonging, students were driven towards this behavior to feel safe and comfortable as a student of color. Olivia also thought about how her racial/ethnic identity would be more salient while online. She shared how she would think about the zoom features such as sharing emojis and wondered if she should change the emoji feature to represent her skin tone. She shared how she felt comfortable with the “default” identity that zoom had for these emojis.

I was messing in group chats like using emojis that are changing the color of your skin, you know and normally I don't do that, but then like sometimes I'm like, “should I do that or should I just keep it as a default ?” you know, and just, I guess, even the second guessing of it is kind of like, it gets me thinking like, should I let them know my identity, or should I, should I not.- *Olivia (Hispanic & Biracial, Female)*

These narratives show how social identities intersect with students' sense of belonging and how belonging is not guaranteed or appear equally. Participants shared how their racial/ethnic identity was salient while taking online courses as well as attending in-person classes. Participants still showed how they were not guaranteed a sense of belonging while attending a predominately White institution virtually, which relates to their initial belonging at RVU. Needing to belong is a fundamental motive that drives human behavior. Therefore, individuals are in position to act/not to act in ways that are prosocial or productive (Strayhorn, 2019, p.32).

Summary

Participants described belonging as comfort and behaved in certain ways to feel a sense of comfort within their online and in-person settings. From these behaviors, participants became aware of how they started to compartmentalize and negotiate parts of their identity and how their full self was not present in class. This connects to how social identities interconnect with feelings of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). Many participants did not see themselves reflected in either (online and in-person) setting causing them to feel disconnected and tailoring their behaviors and identity to “fit” in such spaces. This shows how the lack of racial culture continued to exist at RVU even while being online. While participants felt exhaustion from the effects of pandemic, racism, and navigating their courses, they also felt the negative impacts of negotiating and compartmentalizing their identity in order to belong. Because belonging is a basic human need, participants behaved in ways to feel connected which led to these outcomes. However, participants also navigated their belonging with little reliance on RVU. The next sub-chapter will explain how participants satisfied their belonging away from campus and what they encountered during this journey.

Chapter 4d. Belonging Away from Campus: FOMO, Deprivation, Technology and Disassociating from RVU

This study showed how participants' sense of belonging fluctuated throughout the three months being interviewed. Although their sense of belonging shifted throughout this time, most participants were able to satisfy their sense of belonging as these conditions changed. Although participants were able to satisfy some of their belonging needs, the process to find a sense of belonging was not easy.

Participants still encountered issues that related to their race/ethnicity while trying to make new friends and relied on various support groups to satisfy their sense of belonging. For example, some participants reverted to rely on family members, outside organizations, and social media to stay connected and find a space of belonging. This navigation process shows how participants navigated to find belonging as the conditions of their environment and society continued to change. Throughout the process of re-navigating their belonging, participants shared how they felt when deprived of belonging and how the pandemic and current events of racism impacted this navigation process. Participants shared the psychological impact of not feeling connected with others while being quarantined.

Deprivation of Belonging

Participants demonstrated how they were deprived of belonging while adjusting to a new normal of quarantining during COVID-19. For example, some participants who lived on campus felt deprived of the social connection they had with friends and family.

Although they utilized technology to stay connected, they were still deprived of the person-to-person connection that relates to having membership in a group. For example, Autumn lived on campus and worked as a Residential Assistant (RA) at RVU. She explained how she missed being around her friends and was unsure where to find support. She shared how being in her room brought a sense of anxiety and relied on her mother to help her.

I would have like breakdowns like full blown breakdowns. Like there will just be days where I'm just like crying. My mom is like, "What's wrong?" and I'm like "I don't know." I just can't live like this. Like I can't be locked in my room all day every day like, this isn't good for my mental health. Like this isn't who I am. I'm not a person who's inside. I can't watch TV all day. I can't, I can't. I was just saying, I can't do this. – *Autumn (Black/African American, Woman)*

Similarly, Mahogany held an RA position and lived on campus. During her interview she shared how she tried to build community within her residence halls and found it challenging. She shared how she also felt the struggle of feeling community and engagement in her own social groups while being online

So, it's like yeah, I'm seeing everyone but I'm not seeing your face. Your face is in a box on my computer. I don't know that you're real, I can't verify your proof that it's really you, I can't touch you, I can't smell you. I can't perceive you. So, it's kind of like I don't know why, it's just – it doesn't feel real. So that definitely affects socializing. - *Mahogany (Black/African American, Woman)*

Both Mahogany and Autumn felt the negative impact of not having person to person contact during the pandemic and shared the need for in-person contact. This shows how belonging connects with feeling part of a community and decreases when community is not present. Zara also shared similar feelings of missing person to person

interactions. During our second interview, Zara described her level of belonging as below average. When I asked why she responded,

I suppose it's like a bunch of things like I guess the pandemic for one, not being able to communicate as freely with people like even in a grocery store and things like that. There's this sense of anxiousness around my actions, even in my own room where I'm like did I clean everything enough? So, I don't really feel a sense of comfort like I saw before. Like even being in my own bedroom sometimes, and I guess not seeing friends or family for extended periods, because of isolation/quarantine period and all. -Zara (*South Asian, Woman*)

Belonging can be satisfied through bonds of support that cue attention, dependence, and importance (Strayhorn, 2019, p.39) where Zara felt deprived from these bonds while being quarantined. Some participants also shared how they felt deprived of belonging as it related to their racial/ethnic identity. Nathan shared how he felt attending classes in person during the pandemic while having conversations about race. He shared how being the only Black/African American male in his class deprived him from feeling a sense of belonging.

Even today, I'm still the only African American male in class. Even yesterday, I had a moment where I looked around and it was like you know, wow, I wasn't the only male, but I'm the only African American man. I'm the only Black person and now it's especially hard. Before the pandemic, it wasn't as hard because we weren't really dealing with those topics like race and social justice and all the injustice in the world with police brutality and all that stuff. But now in every class, the topic is raised, you know, inequality, inequity and all those things. And at times as a Black person, you can feel the pressure of the room. You have to be the representative of the whole African American person or color community. - Nathan (*Black/African American, Man*)

This not only shows how social identities intersect with students' belonging but also shows how minoritized students can feel deprived of their belonging when positioned to be the native informant, especially during the time of 2020 with heightened

occurrences of racism. The pandemic caused participants to feel a lack of their belonging while being in quarantine and/or being in spaces where they felt their racial identity was salient. This lack of belonging progressed students to feel disconnected and missing out from events that would have been tangible if the pandemic did not occur.

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

While participants shared how they felt deprived of belonging while being quarantined, participants also shared how these feelings led to the “fear of missing out” (FOMO). For example, Veronica described how she felt FOMO when she returned home and was away from her friends due to the immediate remote transition. She shared how this impacted her social identities and how she was unable to express her sexual identity while being at home in comparison to being on campus.

I kind of felt -I did kind of feel like I was missing out on exploring my identity more and just like talking to people. I guess like the LGBT community was kind of like, you know. I can't date women or anything like that, so it's definitely something that I feel like I'm missing out on by being here and it kind of makes me anxious to move out already. -*Veronica (Puerto Rican, Woman)*

Similar to Veronica, Angel felt disappointed that she would miss out on certain events that RVU was supposed to have that were specifically for Black students. She was looking forward to certain events and gatherings because she did not have this opportunity as a freshman.

Like for example, the Black Student Union hosts an award show called Black Women Rock. It's like recognizing some of the Black women here at RVU and I was nominated for an award. I mean I wasn't expecting a nominee. I just wanted to go because I didn't go freshman year, so I was like okay, this is my time to go and support Black Student Union and everything, but it was cancelled. -*Angel (Black/African American, Woman)*

This demonstrates how students' belonging derives from engaging with their peers in extracurricular and educational activities. When there is a lack of engagement, participants felt that they were missing out on the events that could have occurred if the pandemic did not happen. Zara felt similar ways as a senior finishing her last year virtually. Zara shared how she felt like she was missing out on certain things that she was anticipating for her senior year.

I actually was talking to a friend about this the other night, but we were both saying that it really feels like- I mean as a senior, it really feels like a year and a half, like my college experience has literally been stolen from beneath my feet and there's a very valid reason, obviously, but it's hard not to feel frustrated about it. -Zara (*South Asian, Woman*)

Zara shared how she missed moments of going out with her friends and being spontaneous. She shared how she felt limited in the ways of being social during quarantine. The feelings of FOMO impacted some participants to fully feel engaged while adjusting to a new norm of the pandemic. Participants were in position to find new ways to satisfy their belonging.

Renavigating Belonging During the Pandemic

Many participants began their journey at RVU without feeling fully connected to RVU. However, they were able to navigate and sustain their belonging by their involvement with groups and associating themselves with peers that related to their values and interests. However, when RVU shifted to remote learning, participants found themselves renavigating their belonging all over again. Some participants continued their studies at home, some lived on campus while their friends were no longer there.

Participants shared how this time for them was challenging because of the immediate changes to learn during the pandemic, as well as the impact of racial issues during this time. Although participants renavigated their belonging, they were able to stabilize their belonging by relying heavily on technology, recreating friend groups, and staying connected with family.

Relying on Technology and Media for Connection

Although many participants felt zoom fatigued, they still relied heavily on technology as a source to create communities of belonging. For example, Olivia shared how learning online was a challenge to overcome. It was not the form of learning that she was used to and missed being in person to get the support she needed for her classes. She started to feel unmotivated and had to find a way to overcome this. Olivia then started to use zoom as a way to build community with her peers. Olivia shared how it was difficult to not have the in-person connection during this time but was able to adapt to the virtual community. She utilized apps such as GroupMe to stay connected with friends and organizations/clubs she was involved in and attended virtual events. Olivia was beginning to satisfy her sense of belonging, while adapting to the conditions of being virtual during COVID-19.

Maybe at the beginning, we really didn't know what to do or how to connect with other people, but I think as the semester progressed, we started getting a little bit more creative or like having more yearning to connect with people more. And so, there is more opportunity. So people created it to connect with others truly and I think that wasn't there at the beginning of the semester. There's only a very few events that were going on in September and then at the end of September, there's like study nights, game nights, we are even connecting with people from different campuses that were part of like same organizations. So I think that's what kind of

changed since we were more ambitious at getting connected with each other. -
Olivia (Hispanic and Black/African American, Woman)

Olivia found ways to create a community through her virtual setting by attending virtual game nights and study sessions in order to feel a sense of belonging at a distance. This demonstrates how participants satisfied their sense of belonging as the conditions of COVID-19 continued to change. Veronica also shared how she relied on technology to find a place of belonging. Veronica lived at home during this time and mentioned how being away from friends impacted her social involvement. To engage in some form of social interaction, Veronica would play video games to find social engagement. She would also try to stay connected with friends by doing frequent check in text messages.

Technology became a way for participants to satisfy their belonging in the virtual setting. As this was a time when person-to-person engagement was not available, participants implemented technology to feel connected. For example, Zara shared how she began to feel a loss of motivation and her sense of belonging decreasing. However, she shared that certain television shows would help her stay motivated and stay organized with her work.

I have been watching a lot of Korean language dramas. I've been like sort of teaching myself Korean and that's been sort of cool. Um, so that's like definitely kept me a little bit motivated where I'm like okay, I'm still learning something new. I'm still like doing things.

This shows how students need to feel some form of engagement to feel a sense of belonging and motivation. Zara shared how she did not feel as engaged in her classes, where watching Korean dramas and learning Korean helped her stay engaged. Although she missed the human interaction, this was her way of trying to stay engaged during the

pandemic. While some participants relied on technology to find a community to belong to, other participants recreated communities to satisfy their belonging during COVID-19.

External Communities for Belonging

Some participants shared how they recreated community to satisfy their sense of belonging during COVID-19. For example, Malik lived at home, attended courses online, while working for an internship to support the Navajo community. Although Malik was far from RVU, he found community through his internship. He shared how the pandemic has been very challenging for him, his family and the Navajo and Native American community. He found a strong connection to support his community through his internship which gave his purpose and belonging.

So, I guess what I'm trying to say there is that I feel a greater sense of purpose being here. And you know, although it's been very tough, the purpose has been what's really driving me and what's really encouraging me because I've been able to see a lot of positive change happen in the last few months. I find it interesting because before the pandemic, I think if I was to talk about some of the accomplishments and things that I've gotten done during this pandemic, I think I'd be like really proud of it and almost stopped short because I'm really proud of some of the things that I've done. Because it's in the pandemic and in the context of my purpose and being able to do a lot to help people. – *Malik (Navajo and White, Male)*

Malik felt accomplished in the work that he was doing to support the Navajo and Native American community back at home and found community through his work. From this example, Malik was derived to find community and belonging that related to his values and passion. This shows how belonging can drive behavior and how it can be satisfied when students feel appreciated, respected, and valued. Malik also shared how he felt some form of community during his role as a Teacher's Assistant (TA). He shared how

he enjoyed being a TA and bringing support to other students. During his first interview, he shared how he did not enter RVU feeling that he belonged. Although this was a tough semester for him, Malik was able to find places that aligned with his values and to feel that he and his work matters. This is essential when students try to find a sense of belonging as students will feel that they belong when they feel a sense of mattering and importance (Strayhorn,2019).

Similar to Malik, Niklaus found a community with his peers that lived on the same floor as he did. Niklaus mentioned how most of his friends were not on campus and had to make new friendships with those around him. He shared how he encountered racial experiences and tried to find ways to connect with others. Niklaus' primary source of belonging was by playing a game called Dance Dance Revolution (DDR). Throughout his time at RVU, he continued to play this with friends and even became the president of the DDR club. Although most of his friends were not on campus, he still found a few friends to play DDR with and to build community.

I guess the biggest thing that really helps me is and I think it always sounds silly because it helps me in like all different areas like both academically, socially, but it's honestly the DDR club. I think that's like what keeps me sane. Because even if something happens, it's kind of like I can always go there. I feel like that group of people is, and I think they're usually pretty open-minded people, like I can talk to them about what I don't like. I think it's like a judgement free zone. I guess because everyone's like their own, so it's like a merry band of misfits. So, it's kind of nice to be able to go there and belong with a group of people who don't belong. - *Niklaus (Black/African American, Man)*

Niklaus shared how the DDR club was a community that he relied heavily on during his time at RVU and during the pandemic. He had to find new friends to join him and play DDR but found a sense of belonging within that group. This shows how membership of a

group plays an essential role in belonging. When students perceive their value in a group, students' sense of belonging begins to progress. This also demonstrates how individuals have a need to satisfy their belonging and membership in groups, including friends and family.

Friends, Family, and Staff Support

Participants relied on their friends and family to feel support and to satisfy their sense of belonging. For example, Angel lived off campus and stayed at her apartment during the time of the pandemic. She mentioned how she would try to attend virtual events that interested her and relied heavily on her roommates for support. She felt supported since all of them were going through this pandemic together.

My friends like my housemates, I love them. Because we're kind of all going through the same things. We all like to go to each other when we are feeling stressed and everything. My mom and stuff have been a support system because she knows it's difficult. -Angel (*Black/African American*)

Her family and housemates are a consistent support system for Angel, but she mentioned how she began to utilize RVU'S counseling center as another sense of support. She shared how she started to utilize the counseling services due to the stressors of the pandemic and the deaths within the Black community. This form of support was a space where Angel perceived feelings of being cared for and valued while facing multiple stressors during this time. She relied on external support as a way to feel a sense of belonging.

Similar to Angel, Aaliyah relied on her family and friends for support while dealing with the pandemic and deaths within the Black community. Aaliyah would also talk to her sister, an alumna of RVU to feel a sense of comfort and support.

I'm a political science major so I'm dealing with a bunch of White people that think that they know everything about that topic. So, I definitely experience a lot more in that sense. My friends are like people I talk to the most because they're the people who can understand it the most. It's most relevant to them. I have a sister who went here so she kind of gets it, but isn't as passionate about ritual topics as me. -Aaliyah (*Black/African American, Woman*)

Aaliyah also shared how she felt supported by RVU staff and professors in the African American Studies department. Aaliyah shared how they understood her, provided resources to her, and how she felt a sense of comfort in not having to explain herself and her experiences as a Black/African American woman. This shows how representation of diverse staff and faculty can positively influence the belonging for minoritized students. This also shows how staff and faculty of color influence the success and college experience for minoritized students by serving as mentors and their ability to offer diverse perspectives on teaching and learning (Smith, 1989).

Although participants were able to navigate and find some form of belonging, many participants shared how they still felt disassociated from RVU. Although participants shared and appreciated the support from RVU staff and faculty, they viewed RVU in terms of those in leadership and did not feel connected and/or part of RVU.

Limited Belonging with RVU

As mentioned earlier, most participants from this study did not feel a sense of belonging when arriving at RVU, where little change was evident during this study.

Although some participants shared that they received support from RVU staff and faculty, participants interpreted the phrase “support from the university” in relation to RVU leadership. Most participants shared how they felt regarding their connection with the university and how it seemed limited or nonexistent. This next section will share quotes from participants who felt limited support and connection with the university, with a central focus on RVU leadership.

Questioning Cultural Change at RVU

Throughout the three months of interviews, participants shared how they did not feel connected with the university or supported from RVU leadership. During the beginning of the interview phase, participants shared how they felt regarding RVU’s response to the pandemic and the issues of racism. For example, Veronica found it hard to believe that certain gestures from the university were genuine in support for her. She was aware of her own biases towards the university, which impacted her to feel cared for by the university itself.

Honestly, any gesture they try to do, a lot of times feel to me like a symbol more than anything else, you know, kind of like, “Oh, we’re doing this to like just kind of- for example, when the riots were happening like anything RVU could have done to address Black Live Matters, honestly, anything was just to save face. I guess it’s hard to think of gestures from the university as genuine unless I see that the actual person doing it is a person of color. - *Veronica (Puerto Rican, Woman)*

Veronica shared how the lack of people of color in leadership impacted her sense of trust with the university. She wished RVU could have been more supportive during the time of the deaths of Black communities and wished she could have seen more representation from the university.

This leads to how the lack of representation and racial campus climate impacts minoritized students even during the time of COVID-19. Although some participants felt the lack of racial diversity prior to the pandemic, participants questioned the racial climate even more as COVID-19 brought much more than health issues. The pandemic occurred during the time of heightened acts of racism where participants shared how various forms of racism continued to occur at RVU during COVID-19. This led participants to question the action RVU leadership would take on RVU students who participated in these acts of racism. For example, Mahogany had many questions on how RVU leadership was planning to address various racial issues that occurred during the pandemic.

I really want to know what the university's plan is for addressing students who have proven to be dangerous to the inclusive space on campus. For example, we have two students: one student- the girl who had the Swastika drawn on her and posted it on social media and stuff, and the guy that drove through a crowd of protesters and screamed the n-word at them. Did anything happen to them? I know he [RVU president] probably can't tell me that but what has RVU's done to address these issues like that in the future? How are you planning to comfort your minoritized students? What platforms and spaces are you giving them? Are you funding Black organizations on campus like Black Caucus who post those types of organizations and events? What are you doing to stop extreme groups from meeting up like there's so many secret extremist groups on campus? What are you doing about them? What are you doing about anything? -*Mahogany (Black/African American)*

Both Veronica and Mahogany shared how the lack of racial diversity impacted the trust from RVU leadership. This shows how racial campus climate was present in virtual settings during COVID-19. Many participants shared how they were negatively impacted during COVID-19 and how they lacked to feel effective progress from RVU leadership to address the ongoing issues while being remote. For example, Nathan expressed his frustration about RVU'S racial campus climate. Nathan shared how if he had the

opportunity to speak with leadership, he would ask questions about the type of environment they are creating for their minoritized students.

My first question would be are we creating an environment where everyone feels like they belong? And I would ask that question because just speaking of the RVU culture, the promotion is, you belong here, you belong here, you belong here. But the question really becomes you know, do I belong here? And we've been you know working through that definition of what belonging means, so it's like do I really belong here or am I just being tolerated here? Because you see the people who belong here in universities emphasize or validate their belonging but when we move into or when issues per se arise. You know that belonging begins to become a question when someone's identity becomes unsafe you know? -*Nathan (Black/African/American)*

Nathan shared how his concern with RVU related to how the university is creating a safe space for all students, including students of color. These narratives demonstrate how the historical climate at RVU (PWI) was present for students of color attending courses during COVID-19. As mentioned earlier, participants expressed the stress they felt while navigating their sense of belonging during a two-pandemic world. With the lack of support from RVU leadership, participants did not rely on RVU as a space for belonging even in the virtual space.

We Are All We Got at RVU

Participants shared how the lack of support from RVU leadership guided them to disassociate from RVU. Although participants shared how they did not initially feel a sense of belonging coming to RVU, participants continued to disassociate themselves from RVU in comparison to students who may carry a sense of RVU pride. For example, Veronica shared how she felt angry with RVU and did not rely on RVU for any validation.

I mean, I feel mattered and like cared about among my friends and my family. Um, so like with that I think it's easy to well-like if you're around people that love you and you love, then you're going to get that feeling usually. In terms of institutions, like I don't feel cared about or mattered too but I also don't expect it from like the government or from like RVU you know. I feel like if I did think about it, I would just be more frustrated and more angry, so I'm not going to seek validation from institutions that historically have not cared about me and I know they don't. - *Veronica (Puerto Rican, Woman)*

Veronica shared how she did not feel cared for or mattered by RVU which relates to her feelings about how RVU addressed issues regarding the pandemic and race. This addresses how meaningful and essential campus climate is to students of color. Similar to Veronica, Mahogany did not feel a form of connection with RVU based upon how RVU makes decisions. She felt disassociated and not represented in the decisions that RVU would make.

I'm not feeling super connected to the university at this time. Mostly because I'm really angry with it. This university makes so many decisions, but I feel like I just feel so far removed from the decision making because I am. Most students are unless you're maybe in, you know, student government or like a presidential leadership academy then you're probably very very firm in any of the decision-making processes. And that's a problem outside of the pandemic, especially magnified now. Just seeing the university make so many decisions based off of a very, very small, very not average group of students. Just provokes me in a certain type of way, especially since our student government is notoriously white. It's just like I sometimes I'm just genuinely curious. To know if there was a single nonwhite student, a part of the process. Like, even when they are including students which they already don't do typically they're not, They're not representative of me. So, the more decisions they make that I feel like are not good for the student population, the more the less, the less and less connected I feel to the university because I kind (sigh) it just rubs me the wrong way and I would not like to be connected so Yeah. - *Mahogany (Black/African American, Woman)*

These narratives show the impact students of color face when the foundation of predominately White institutions does not represent the student body as a whole. Campus

racial culture carries various values, beliefs, and norms that evolve the institutions history and mission.

Lack of Perceived Support from RVU Leadership

Participants also shared how they did not perceive support from RVU as it related to academic resources, and the retention of students of color. For example, Aaliyah shared her concerns about the retention of Black students as well as the lack or representation at RVU.

I think RVU has a race issue like undoubtedly, they have one. So that's something that just needs to be addressed as well, like the retention of Black students. You know Black students are leaving like flies, dropping like flies and like that's something that needs to be talked about, especially like online like I almost didn't come back. So, it's just things like that. Why are students of color so unhappy here? You know, like why do they hate it? I guess in its current page, Black at RVU, why do we have to make a whole Instagram page you know, that has thousands of interviews like what has to be done here. -Aaliyah (*Hispanic and Black/African American, Woman*)

Aaliyah shared her frustration with RVU leadership and how to retain their Black students attending RVU. She expressed how she did not feel supported which impacted her trust and belonging at RVU. This highlights the progress of support from RVU within the Black/African American community. In Fall 2019, 1,720 Black/African American students enrolled at RVU, where only 1,626 Black/African American students enrolled for the Fall 2020. Other participants shared how they felt from RVU's decision of limited access to resources during COVID-19. For example, Olivia shared how she did not understand why RVU decided to stay open during the pandemic as it's related to her safety. She shared how she felt betrayed from RVU and that she did not matter to them.

Olivia also mentioned how she felt from receiving emails from RVU's president and how they lacked meaning.

And in some ways, it kind of didn't get better because it sounds like they're saying a lot of empty words, like we get these emails from like the president or from our dean of the college or something and it's like saying all these nice words but the action really isn't there. -*Olivia (Hispanic and Black/African American, Woman)*

Similar to Olivia, Zara shared how she did not feel supported by RVU. She felt that RVU could progress on initiatives to support students of color and hoped that change could come.

I would say coming to RVU, I had a lot of expectations and most of them didn't come through. I think being a student of color at this school means that you need to sacrifice certain things to be comfortable on this campus. Otherwise, you risk ostracizing yourself from the community at large. Whether that community is in the classroom or whether you know it's beyond RVU. Yeah, I think RVU falls short when it comes to helping just marginalized groups in general feel like they belong here. - *Zara (South Asian, Woman)*

Zara felt that there would be a connection with RVU and the environment but did not feel that during this time. She shared how the racial issues in society and within RVU made her feel a sense of disconnection and even more so with the lack of visual change from RVU as a whole. Although participants were able to navigate their sense of belonging, these stories show how important the college environment and its climate is for students of color if studying online and/or in-person.

Negative racial climate can negatively influence the interactions of students of color with other members of the campus community. Although these findings are disheartening to address the experience and belonging for minoritized students during this time, these findings provide a platform to address how racial campus climate can

impact students of color and their belonging during COVID-19. Based on the theoretical framework used in this study, Strayhorn (2019) defines belonging as, “student’s perceived social support on campus, feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). When students of color do not perceive support, they are positioned to navigate their belonging in order to satisfy this basic human need. During this time, participants shared how they again were positioned to renavigate their belonging while dealing with the impact of COVID-19 and racism.

Summary

The findings presented in this subchapter show how the journey to find belonging included moments of FOMO and deprivation, and depending on technology, alternative clubs/organizations, and initial support groups (family, friend, and staff) to satisfy a sense of belonging. While participants were able to satisfy their sense of belonging, these findings show how most participants did not rely on RVU for belonging. Although participants felt supported by faculty and staff, they made a clear distinction from feeling a sense of mattering and cared for from RVU leadership. Participants questioned what leadership plans to do regarding the racist incidents that occurred at RVU and how they would support students through the pandemic. This led participants to disassociate from RVU even more so than compared to their pre-pandemic experience at RVU.

These four findings carry a theme of the importance of representation while questioning the dominant culture at predominately White institutions during the pandemic. It is clearly presented that most students of color do not automatically feel connected nor belonging when arriving at PWIs (pre-pandemic) and how the dominant culture of Eurocentric values at RVU still transitioned to present itself even while functioning remotely. Participants did not initially feel welcomed upon arriving at RVU, navigated to find belonging in various settings, and relied on mentors and spaces that showed representation of their racial/ethnic identity. The pandemic placed students of color in a more vulnerable position, facing fear of their health, their livelihood as students of color, and seeking comfort while transitioning to online learning. Participants became more aware of how their racial identity was present in their online and in-person settings during a time of heightened racism towards communities of color. Although the outcome of the presidential election provided some hope for participants, we cannot belittle the experiences they felt and encountered while trying to find a sense of belonging during this time. Participants encountered situations to negotiate and compartmentalize their identity and experienced discomfort, disengagement, and lack of motivation in their courses. Their belonging fluctuated in waves where they felt deprived of belonging due to being quarantined and limited in-person interaction. However, participants renavigated their belonging by relying on technology and social media, finding other groups and communities, and reverting to the support of friends, family, and staff. Although participants satisfied their sense of belonging, the findings show how participants disassociated from RVU. Many participants did not rely on RVU support from leadership and drew a clear line between staff and faculty v. RVU leadership. Participants

questioned what RVU will plan to do to support them, and students of color based on the racial incidents at RVU and the impact of the pandemic. These findings show the importance of cultural change at RVU as well as questioning the campus culture at other predominately White institutions. There still seems to be a cultural incongruence even when students of color attended a PWI virtually. As some influences may be due to the pandemic and the heightened levels of racism, these findings also show that students of color did not feel fully supportive even during times at their most vulnerable. From these findings, the next chapter will provide implications on how to move forward in supporting students of color, their sense of belonging, while stating recommendations for higher education as they transition back to function in-person.

Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusion

Overview of Study

This chapter starts with an overview of the study, followed by an overview of the findings, the limitations, and recommendations for future research, and ends with implications for research, practitioners, and university leadership. This dissertation study was conducted to better understand how undergraduate students of color described their sense of belonging while attending a predominately White institution during COVID-19. This study aimed to draw attention and advocate for the voices of students of color as they shared their narrative and story regarding their sense of belonging during this time. Participant stories were collected by utilizing narrative inquiry as a guide for collecting

and analyzing the data. Riessman's (2008) thematic analysis was used to create the four overarching themes which answered the research questions,

The purpose of this study was to understand how undergraduate college students of color describe their sense of belonging during the pandemic of COVID-19? The following sub-questions helped to analyze this topic:

- How does the sense of belonging during a global pandemic differ when compared to their previous experiences of belonging while attending college on campus?
- Who and what are essential elements for undergraduate students of color to satisfy their sense of belonging during COVID-19?
- How does the sense of belonging of undergraduate students of color progress overtime during the pandemic?

Overview of Findings

The findings were organized as their own chapter to thoroughly review each finding and how they connect to the research question. Chapter four began with explaining the baseline of how participants described their sense of belonging prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter explained how participants experienced the phenomenon of "minority" which involved culture shock and incongruence with their own culture and racial/ethnic identity. The lack of representation influenced participants to not feel an immediate sense of belonging but rather, navigating to find their sense of

belonging at RVU. Participants relied on clubs/organizations and multicultural centers because they saw a representation of their holistic identity, shared similar backgrounds, experiences, and interest (Quaye et al., 2019, p.20) which satisfied their sense of belonging. This finding affirms that belonging, although universal, is not presented for all people equally when considering individual's social identities and how they intersect (Strayhorn, 2019). As much literature has shown that most minoritized students do not feel a sense of belonging upon arriving to PWIs (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hussain & Jones, 2019; Turner, 1994), it was important to understand how participants experienced belonging at RVU (pre-pandemic) to establish a baseline of belonging in order to assess how their belonging would evolve throughout this study. Astin's (1993a) Input-Environment-Output (IEO) model described students as entering college with inputs or characteristics that are shaped by the college environment which includes programs, policy, faculty, peers, and education experiences. These inputs shape the college experience and produce outputs of students after exposure to the environment. Additionally, the intersection of identities shape individuals and their experience (Shield, 2008) where participants did not feel accepted or seen while attending RVU. These feelings are common when most predominately White institutions are deeply founded in Eurocentric values, beliefs, and assumptions that influence the norms and behaviors of faculty, staff, and students on campus (Museus & Jayakumar, 2012; Museus et al., 2012). The racial climate at predominately White institutions can negatively impact minoritized students, their connection on campus, lead them to feel a cultural dissonance which results in culture shock, anxiety, frustration and helplessness (Museus et al., 2008). The feeling of being one of the students if a racial/ethnic identity showed how the

racial climate at predominately White institutions influenced the climate in classroom settings (Guiffrida, 2006; Guiffrida et al., 2012; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). This lack of belonging influenced participants to seek a sense of belonging while navigating the academic and social aspects of college. While academic and social integration relates to student persistence and retention (Tinto, 1986), these integrations may look different for minoritized students attending predominately White institutions. Integration has been used to describe student's assimilation into college, creating cultural bias and placing unfair expectations on students of color to assimilate to the dominant culture of predominately White institutions (Attinasi, 1989; Tierney, 1992). These experiences can position minoritized students to assume the role as a native informant because they are the only person of color in the classroom. In this role, minoritized students are objectified by others and places unfair responsibility to speak on behalf of their entire racial or ethnic group (Hooks, 1994, p.43).

This led to the second finding that identity, context, and temporal moments influence belonging during a “two pandemic world.” Participants described this time as living in a “two-pandemic world” as it related to COVID-19, the heightened acts of racism and the presidential election. Participants shared how they still encountered experiences of racism and discrimination while being online during COVID-19. From this study, belonging became an essential need and importance during the “two pandemic world” as it would provide them a sense of security and acceptance. Their belonging took on heightened importance due to the context of transitioning to remote learning, while feeling the negative impacts of current events and lived experiences the pandemic and

racism have caused. This connects with how belonging takes on heightened importance in certain context, times, and among certain populations (Strayhorn, 2019, p.34) and how social identities converge and intersect in ways that simultaneously influenced their sense of belonging (Strayhorn,2019, p.37). Due to the current times of heightened racism, participants became more aware of the salience of their racial/ethnic identity, the lack of representation in their courses (in-person and online) and lacked to feel highly valued, cared for, and of importance. Although participants felt this way living in a “two pandemic world”, participants began to feel some comfort based on the outcome of the presidential election. They saw this as a moment of representation by having a woman of color as Vice President. This feeling of comfort is the root of Strayhorn’s (2019) theoretical framework of belonging. When students can perceive the support from campus and feel the sensation of mattering, feeling cared about, respected, valued, and important to a group, students will feel a sense of belonging. When students of color feel and can see that they are supported, their sense of belonging can increase. However, when they may not see their social identities represented or included, their sense of belonging can decrease as belonging is ongoingly changing.

Although the election outcomes created positive impacts for participants and their belonging, participants encountered negative experiences throughout the three months and how they described and renavigated their sense of belonging (see Appendix F, G &H). This led to participants towards behaviors that helped or deter their academic achievement. Participants felt discomfort, lack of motivation in their classes, and negotiated and/or compartmentalized parts of their identity to “fit in” their virtual class

settings. This shows how the sense of belonging is malleable and susceptible to influence in positive and negative directions (Goodenow, 1993b). Participants had their cameras off during class, assessing their zoom class to verify if there were peers who racially/ethnically identified similar to them. This showed how participants became more aware of their racial/ethnic identity and behaved in ways to “fit in” while being in virtual spaces with their White peers in order to feel a sense of belonging. However, attending classes with their cameras off brought some form of alienation in the (virtual) academic setting, which diminished their motivation and became disengaged (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This showed how the sense of belonging “stimulates goal-directed activity designed to satisfy it” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p.500).

The last finding expressed how participants felt trying to find their belonging during this time. Although their behaviors helped them to adjust and feel some comfort in virtual spaces, participants experienced the fear of missing out (FOMO), impacting their wellbeing from time to time. Because their sense of belonging was of high importance, participants re navigated their way to satisfy their sense of belonging. This represents how belonging is a basic human need (Maslow, 1962; Strayhorn, 2019, p. 29) and must be satisfied as conditions change. Participants re navigated their sense of belonging through technology and social media, alternative clubs/organizations, and reverting to their initial support groups (friends, family, and staff).

While some participants were not fully satisfied, they were able to sustain some form of belonging through these methods/practices. This shows how students’ sense of belonging tends to stabilize overtime by having a valued place in a particular social

context (Strayhorn, 2019, p.39) However, participants did not rely on RVU for support or validating their belonging. Rather, participants renavigated away from RVU and created a clear distinction between RVU leadership and staff and faculty

Participants shared how staff and faculty tried to help them during this time but did not feel strongly supported from RVU leadership. This reveals how race shapes the culture of postsecondary institutions and the experiences of students of color within these cultures (Guiffrida, 2006; Guiffrida et al.,2012; Museus & Jayakumar, 2012). Participants could not rely on leadership to feel a sense of belonging or support based on their experiences (pre- and post- COVID-19). Participants questioned what RVU planned to do to keep them safe during the pandemic and during a time of heightened racism, even at RVU. This finding reveals how an institution's racial campus climate is created by internal and external forces and the immediate attention for campus culture to be a second order change. This study found that the campus culture and climate, if negative and not set as a priority can impact minoritized students from feeling a sense of belonging while attending a PWI during a pandemic. While this study revealed how students of color described their sense of belonging during COVID-19, it should be noted that there were some limitations to this study and room for future research to expand on the literature of belonging. The following section will share some of the limitations this study had while noting recommendations for future research.

Limitations & Recommendations for Future Research

The limitations and recommendations for future research are presented in four areas: diversity in sample, campus type, duration of study, and research protocol.

Although the study included narratives of diverse students, the study could be expanded by being more diverse in the sample. For example, this study included one participant who identified as Indian and had no representation of East Asian and Pacific Island students. While this study did address how students of color described their sense of belonging during this time, future studies can progress in a stronger representation of students in the Asian and Pacific Island community.

While many participants shared how racism against Black lives negatively impacted them and their belongings, it would be interesting to hear the narratives of Asian students as the Asian community was also impacted during this time of racism as some referred COVID-19 as the “China virus” and/or the “Wuhan virus.” Future studies should include how Asian students describe belonging as it relates to their experience during the pandemic while attending a predominately White institution. Despite attempts to seek participants by asking if they were interested and through advertisement of social media and listservs, this study was unable to include more representation of the Asian community as some declined to participate or did not respond. Therefore, future studies could attempt to study the narratives of Asian students to assure their narratives are essential and important. Additionally, future research could also shed light on how intersections of identity can influence the belonging of students of color. For example,

future studies could study women of color in STEM, adult learners of color, resident assistants of color, and first-year students of color. While some participants shared how their sexuality and gender influenced their sense of belonging, this study focused on participant's racial/ethnic identity in relation to their sense of belonging.

A second limitation is the campus type that was utilized for the study. This study included participants from a single university identifying as a PWI and a Research I university. While this study showed how students of color described their sense of belonging at PWI, future studies could elaborate on the work of belonging by conducting by examining other forms of colleges and universities (community colleges, HBCUs, small liberal art institutions). Additionally, future studies could conduct a comparative study between two PWIs to examine how students of color described their sense of belonging and if these descriptions share common themes. Conducting a comparative study between two PWIs would be interesting to learn what other ways do students of color navigate to find a sense of belonging. Additionally, this study could progress in looking at how online students describe their sense of belonging. Participants from this study had to transition to a new form of learning, where it would be interesting to see how online students were impacted by the pandemic and the heightened acts of racism.

A third limitation for this study looks at the time the study was conducted. This study was conducted during COVID-19 which was a unique and once in a lifetime moment. Although this study sheds light on the immediate feelings that students of color expressed and how they navigated their sense of belonging during this time, future research should conduct studies on how students of color describe their sense of belonging while re-transitioning back to campus. While many colleges and universities

plan to retransition from COVID-19, it is important to continue these conversations. This study showed how the dominant culture of predominately White institutions existed while being online where students of color still had to (re)navigate to find a sense of belonging. Future studies should continue to learn how students of color feel when coming back to campus and if there is any change to their belonging. Additionally, this study could also extend to include the narratives of staff and faculty, and university leadership at PWIs and examine how they perceived the belonging of students of color. By conducting this study, more knowledge would be shared by understanding the perception leadership holds in order to understand the order of change that campus culture takes at PWIs.

The last limitation to this study connects to the guiding questions in the protocol. In the second and third protocol, participants were asked to share their thoughts on the current events that are occurring regarding race. While many participants shared their feelings about the ongoing racism targeting the Black community, little to no participants shared their thoughts on the racist acts against the Asian community. To assure the voices of all communities of color are advocated for, future studies can be sure to specify the questions if it regards to specific communities of color. For example, future studies could include questions on how students feel about the racial slurs against the Asian community in relation to COVID-19. By specifying the questions, students of color could share their insight and feelings about specific racial acts while providing information to the researcher about how this influence belonging. Additionally, the study could expand by conducting focus groups instead of one-on-one interviews. Many participants had had shared experiences when initially arriving at RVU which would be interesting to see how

participants would talk about their belonging if discussed in a group setting. This could also provide the opportunity for communities of color to learn about the different types of encounters and experiences that occur among communities of color. Although interviews from this study focused on the individual's story, it would be interesting to learn how belonging is described among a group of students of color and to learn what themes arise and what phenomenon are shared among communities of color at PWIs.

Although this study may have some limitations, this study expands on the literature of belonging as shed insight to how students of color renavigated to find belonging during COVID-19 and a time of heightened racism. This study also adds to the literature of belonging and the possibilities of how the theoretical framework of college students' sense of belonging can be used to understand the experiences of belonging for students of color.

Implications for Theory

Utilizing Strayhorn's (2019) framework on college student's sense of belonging helped to understand how minoritized students described their sense of belonging during COVID-19. While Strayhorn's (2019) model incorporates Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs within his model of college students' sense of belonging, I propose an additional model for belonging that looks at college students' sense of belonging, centering on the organizational system of colleges and universities. Although Strayhorn's (2019) model was created to focus on students' sense of belonging, this study provided evidence that minoritized students were able to satisfy their belonging while not fully relying on the university. While it is true that students' physiological needs (food, shelter, sleep) must be satisfied in order for love and belonging to emerge, the question leads to *where*

minoritized students will find love and belonging in order to reach self-actualization. Participants from this study shared how they did not feel a sense of belonging pre-pandemic and throughout the pandemic. Rather, participants satisfied their belonging in alternative ways away from the university.

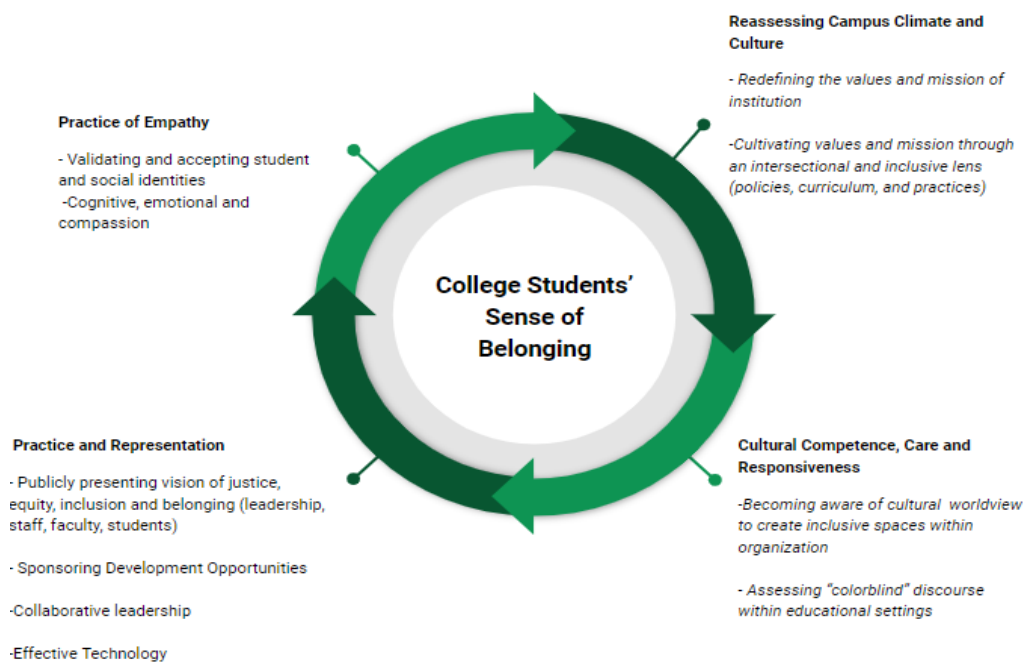
This shows that minoritized students take on the responsibility to repeatedly navigate to find their sense of belonging, causing emotional exhaustion, especially when their holistic identity is not taken into account. Therefore, colleges and universities must take on the responsibility to create transformational change in order for minoritized students to perceive they are automatically welcomed and belong.

The model I propose resembles a cycle to show that the reflection of the institution's mission and vision to create a campus of belonging is ongoingly (see Figure 2). The model is lensed through creating transformational or second-order change (Kezar, 2013) and begins with establishing a baseline on institutions to reflect on their campus climate by reassessing and re-defining the organization's values, mission, policies and language used with these areas. Many PWIs attempt to address issues of racism by focusing on freedom of speech and diversity initiatives, which dismisses the effects of racism and maintains the normative standard of the dominant culture instead of creating a space of belonging for all student populations. By focusing on the campus climate and culture, organizations can identify the defenses that may impede on change on their campus.

Secondly, the model proceeds to suggest the need for cultural competence, care and responsiveness. This section focuses on the need for ongoing conversations between leadership, staff, faculty, and students relating to justice, equity, and inclusion on their

campus. This also connects with campus leaders to become aware of the campus culture and addressing the colorblind discourse within academic and social settings on campus. The model then leads to addressing community practice and representation of reassessed values and mission throughout their campus environment. By doing so, organizations can publicly present their vision of justice, equity, inclusion and belonging. While some colleges and institutions may assess their campus climate through various surveys, this could be a way to show *how* assessment outcomes are being used, in order to create transformative change to a campus of belonging. Lastly, the model ends by addressing the need for practicing empathy within the college academic and social settings, as well as in departments and leadership. The practice of empathy aligns with validation, acceptance, and advocating for those who are involved within the educational setting.

Figure 2-1. Organizational Model of Belonging for College Students



Although this model focuses on the needs of the organization to create a sense of belonging, it should be noted that students' essential basic needs (shelter, safety, and security) must be satisfied in order for organizations to progress creating a campus space of belonging. The model I propose solely addressing the needs of the organizational system to create an environment of belonging based on the findings of this study. To enhance the progress of belonging for minoritized students, Maslow's (1954) model of hierarchy of needs should be included in order to assure the safety of the student and satisfying their basic needs.

Strayhorn's (2019) model was created to show how students perceive their sense of belonging and what is essential for students in order to belong. However, models of belonging could expand at assessing what organizational systems need in order for students of color to initially feel a sense of belonging instead of being placed in positions to navigate belonging independently. The study showed how students felt misled about the level of racial diversity at RVU which led to the lack of validation from the university. This shows that navigating belonging could have negative effects if it is not reciprocated by both groups (students and college). Therefore, this model suggests the need to look at belonging through an organizational lens by addressing how students of color can feel connected, trust, and comfort while attending predominately White institutions, as well as feeling ongoing support through pandemics.

Implications for Practice and Leadership

It is important to note that participants in this study understood that this was a time of transition not only for students, but for staff and faculty. While it is a rare

occasion for pandemics to occur, it is common for minoritized students to attend PWIs without feeling a sense of belonging, and how their lack of belonging could impact their college experience during unprecedented times. This study showed how essential a welcoming campus is for minoritized students regardless of the setting (in person and virtual). While many colleges and institutions are planning to retransition back to campus, these implications are meant to focus on creating a transition of care and belonging for minoritized students who have been impacted by COVID-19, racism, and the emotional and physical trauma they have encountered. Students cannot transition back to a space where they did not feel like they belonged, or the cycle of isolation and alienation will continue, impacting their college experience, retention, and persistence.

To address this issue, leadership should utilize the model above to reflect on creating transformational change at PWIs. Leadership must acknowledge the underlying dominant value system that exists and reassess these values to align in an inclusive manner. This is done through the examination of operating systems in leadership while examining the culture of the organization. For example, leadership could continue to implement alternative grading and temporary change of campus as an option during the transition phase back to campus. Although some students have the opportunity to come back to campus, some students do not have the capabilities due to the outcomes of parental/guardian employment which impacts their ability to pay for tuition. These policies should be taken into consideration and to continue throughout the transition phase and how these policies can be implemented ongoingly as options for students who may need support throughout their academic experience. These policy adjustments to student academic could also address the retention and persistence of students as many

universities retransition during a post-COVID era. Leadership could also see how to continue the access of laptop rentals for students to provide support for students with their technology needs.

Transformational change can be created by leadership assessing the climate culture of their campus and acknowledging the trauma that minoritized students had and continue to face on a daily basis. To create a campus of belonging, leadership must acknowledge how the events of 2020 have negatively impacted minoritized students and how this calls for a time of healing. Leadership should recognize the level of trust and belonging minoritized students may have with the university. For example, leadership could create a pre-pandemic survey, focusing on the challenges and barriers students have faced, where they felt belonging during this time, and how the university can create a campus of belonging and care through resources and policy change. This survey could help universities like PWIs understand their students' needs as well as the needs from staff and faculty.

As these are some implications for leadership, practitioners could also create welcoming spaces by assessing the culture within their office and reviewing the language used within programming and resources to assure it is inclusive to all students. Additionally, practitioners could continue to collaborate with other programs and services. Participants from this study shared how they relied on certain services in an individualistic way rather than seeing these services as a team of support. Therefore, practitioners can progress in efforts to collaborate with other services to support minoritized students while re-transitioning back to campus. This could involve working with staff from multicultural centers, career services, counseling, advising, and residence

life. These efforts will be essential as students transition to come back to campus after a year of isolation. Students of color will need support to work through the stressors they have faced during the “two pandemic world.”

As colleges and institutions make these transitions, it is important to understand the stress that minoritized students faced due to racism and worries of the pandemic and their loved ones. Some participants shared how they encountered racial battle fatigue during this time and may need support in overcoming the trauma they faced throughout the year, and ongoing trauma that they may face from ongoing racism. Practitioners could support minoritized students by engaging in conversations around topics of healing in collaboration with counselors. The “two world pandemic” can carry much weight on students of color as they may have encountered the pain of racism, the effects of isolation/quarantine, and caring for their loved ones and their health. Practitioners should acknowledge that this is a time for healing. A time that students of color need to see that they can trust their institution. To support students of color, practitioners could create open discussion sessions in collaboration with the campus counseling center to learn how to learn of effective strategies to assist students who have encountered trauma and how to create vulnerable spaces of care and empathy for their students.

While it is important for minoritized students to have spaces of support, it is also important for practitioners to continue their knowledge and awareness on racial issues that occur on campus and outside of campus. As this study found that identity, context, and temporal moments influence belonging, it is important for practitioners to stay up to date with current events and to acknowledge how this may impact students of color. For example, many participants shared how emails from RVU did not seem validating to

them. Therefore, practitioners can progress in their efforts by not only sending an acknowledgement through email, but also utilizing other platforms where students can visibly see they are supported such as social media outlets (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter). Belonging relates to how students perceive forms of support and their feelings of being cared about and mattered. While sending an email may be one form of supporting students, it is important for students to publicly see how they are supported in ways that connect to them.

Conclusion

This study showed how minoritized students described their sense of belonging during a three months' time living through COVID-19, heightened racism, and the 2020 presidential election. Although participants found ways to satisfy their belonging, they did not rely on the institution to feel a sense of support, care, or belonging. This showed the lack of trust and support minoritized students feel while attending PWIs regardless of the way an institution may function. It addresses how the dominant Eurocentric culture seeps into virtual spaces and in-person settings, giving no place for minoritized students to belong to. The findings from this study calls for action from leadership to perceive student belonging and a central lens to create transformational change. This can be done by assessing language in policies, mission, and visions at PWIs. Although this is one study that was conducted to understand minoritized students' sense of belonging during this time, much work is still needed to create a foundation of belonging for higher education systems.

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APPENDIX A: Verbal Consent Script

Location:

Department: The College of Education: Higher Education

Researcher: Lee Juarez

This study will consist of three stages of interviews current students who transitioned to attend remotely due to the university disruption at the designated institution of study. We are asking you to be part of this research as you have self-identified as a student who has transitioned to attend classes remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic who also meets the following criteria:

- Currently enrolled as an undergraduate student at the designated university
- Currently in their junior or senior year of college
- Between the ages of 18-24
- Transitioned to remote courses due to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Identify as a student of color who may also identify within other social identities of underrepresented student populations

Purpose of the Study

This research seeks to better understand how underrepresented college students describe their sense of belonging during a global health pandemic.

Participants will be invited to participate in three, 90-minute interviews that will be conducted online during a day and time that is convenient for the participant and researcher.

During the first interview, the student will be asked questions about:

- Background and social identities
- Student's experience of belonging before facing the pandemic
- Students experience of belonging during the pandemic
- Student reflection of their belonging based on what they have shared
 - (The interview will end by providing students with resources to support their well-being during this time as well, in addition to serving as an outlet of support)

During the second and third interview the student will be asked questions about their progress on experiencing a sense of belonging during the pandemic which involves:

- How students perceive their social support while learning remotely due to COVID-19
- How students experience the sensation of connectedness, mattering, feeling cared about, respected, and valued by

- How students feel important to the campus community and individuals involved (peers and faculty)
- Reflecting on their progression of feeling a sense of belonging during COVID-19

Participant Withdrawal from Study

Participants are not required to answer any questions, and if at any point would prefer to not answer a question, can skip, and/or deny answering the question.

Participants will receive a copy of their interview transcript and be invited to make any changes or corrections on the transcript. When necessary, the participant may be invited back to participate in a follow up interview to clarify answers or ask additional questions.

If at any point the participant may feel uncomfortable, you as the participant, may discontinue your participation either temporarily or permanently without consequences.

Respecting Your Privacy and Your Story

Upon completion of the interviews, each interview will be transcribed and coded. Once transcribed, each interviewee will be assigned a pseudonym. A list that matches your name with your pseudonym will be kept under password protection on the researcher's computer. No other identifying information will be maintained. In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may decide to stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to. In agreeing to participate in this study, you verify you are 18 years or older. You also verify that you are comfortable with the interview being recorded and transcribed for the sole purpose of this study. To compensate for your time, you will receive one \$40 electronic gift card.

Please inform the researcher your decision to participate in this study. Yes/ No

APPENDIX B: Student Interview Protocol: Interview 1

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Interview # | |
| Interviewer | |
| Interviewee | |
| Date and Location | |

Instructions: This interview will be conducted virtually location and will be recorded with consent from the interviewee. All interviewee's will be given a pseudonym due to confidentiality purposes of this study. The interviewer should contact the interviewee by phone and email to remind the participant of their scheduled interview.

The interviews will be scheduled based on the availability of the interviewee and with consent. A consent form will be reviewed between the interviewer and interviewee, where that interviewee must provide verbal consent to participate in the study before the interview begins.

The interview questions below are divided into 4 categories and are meant to serve as an outline to gain more knowledge of the participant's experience in relation to the topic of study.

Life history/background and Social Identities

1. Tell me about yourself (interest, age, hometown, cultural background, etc.)
2. Can you tell me about your personal background?
 - a. Demographic and social identifiers (first generation, gender, sexuality, religion, race/ethnicity, etc.)
3. Can you tell me a little more about your academic background?
 - a. What year are you?
 - b. What program are you in?
 - c. Did you attend college right after high school or transfer?

Pre-Closure Experience of Belonging

4. How do you define belonging?

What elements are needed to feel a sense belonging?

5. Can you tell me a little more about your college experience prior to COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a. How did you feel connected to the university throughout your college experience (on campus)?
 - b. How would you describe your involvement while attending college?
 - c. How would you describe your support system while attending college?
 - d. Where did you find support while attending on campus?
 - e. Who are your main support systems?
 - f. How would you describe your sense of belonging while attending college?
6. What does it mean to belong at Penn State?
 - a. How do your social identities influence your sense of belonging at Penn State?
7. Can you give me some examples of what it is like to be a student of color at Penn State?
8. Were there any experiences or people that influenced your sense of belonging (positively/negatively)?

Post Closure Experience

1. Can you describe to me how you felt after realizing the university was moving remotely?
 - a. Where did you decide to stay? (home, State College, with friends, etc.)
 - b. What emotions did you feel from this disruption?
 - c. Where do you think these emotions were towards? (pandemic, university, distant from friends and family?)
 - d. What were the first initial “worries” during this time?
2. How would you describe the sense of support you felt from the university during that time?
 - a. Who was your main source of support? (friends, family, university)
 - b. How did you find support during this time?
 - c. How did gaining/ not gaining support made you feel?
 - d. What elements are essential for you to feel supported?
3. What are some of the challenges that you are currently facing?
4. What does it mean to be a student of color?

Experience of Belonging during Pandemic

5. During this time of PVU operating remotely how would you describe your sense of belonging?
 - a. How would you describe your social support from the university as you are studying remotely?
 - b. How would you describe your feelings of connectedness during this time?
 - c. How would you describe feeling cared about?

- d. How would you describe feeling accepted from the university during this time?
 - e. How would you describe feeling valued from the university during this time?
 - f. How would you describe your sense of mattering from the university during this time?
6. What elements are essential for you to feel connected to the university?
 7. Who has been a big support for you during this time?
 - a. How have they expressed/showed you support during this time?
 8. How do you continue to stay connected with others during this time?
 - a. Who do you essentially stay connected with and why?
 9. As of now, how would you describe your connectedness with the university?
 - a. How is your sense of belonging different compared to being on campus?

Reflection

1. How important is it to feel a sense of belonging while facing this issue throughout your college experience?
2. How does attending college remotely impact your sense of belonging connectedness from college? Explain.
3. During this time, can you think of any examples of a when you felt like you belonged within the campus community?
4. How has the issue of shifting remotely impacted your college experience?
5. Can you identify anything that the campus community and members of the community have done to provide support throughout this experience?
6. How have you felt connected with the campus community as of now?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share from your interview, or anything you would like to include?

APPENDIX C: Student Interview Protocol: Interviews 2&3

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Interview # | |
| Interviewer | |
| Interviewee | |
| Date and Location | |

Instructions: This interview will be conducted virtually and will be recorded with consent from the interviewee. All interviewee's will be given a pseudonym due to confidentiality purposes of this study. The interviewer should contact the interviewee by phone and email to remind the participant of their scheduled interview.

The interviews will be scheduled based on the availability of the interviewee and with consent. A consent form will be reviewed between the interviewer and interviewee, where that interviewee must provide verbal consent to participate in the study before the interview begins.

Student's Sense of Belonging (progression of)

Define belonging

1. How would you describe your level of belongingness during this time?
2. As we are still functioning remotely, can you tell me about your online experience?
 - a. What are some challenges/ benefits to this method of learning?
 - b. How does this method of learning impact your sense of belonging?
 - c. How does this impact your sense of belonging while identifying as a student of color?
 - d. Who are your main outlets of support during this time?
 - e. How do they make you feel supported?
 - f. In what ways have you felt supported /unsupported from the university during this time?

Race and Culture

3. During this time being online, can you tell me how does your sense of belonging look like as a student of color?
4. What are some challenges that you may face during this time as it relates to identifying as a student of color?

5. During this time, is your identity as a student of color salient while attending college online?
6. What part of your identity is most salient during this time?
7. Are there identities that are not recognized while attending college virtually/
 - a. How does that impact your sense of belonging?
8. How important is it for your identity of a student of color to be recognized while taking courses online?
9. How has the pandemic impacted you as a student of color?
10. Can you define diversity equity and inclusion?
11. How important is representation during this time?
12. What parts of your identity do you feel are more salient to you now?
13. Do you feel you have to compartmentalize parts of your identity while interacting online?
14. What are your thoughts on the current events that are occurring regarding race?
15. In what ways does race play a role in your day to day experience?
16. In what ways does race play a role in your online courses?
17. Are there any other identities that play a role during your online experience?
18. How does your identity as a (insert identity) influence your sense of belonging during this time?

Sensation of Connectedness

19. Can you describe to me how you feel connected with the university during this time?
 - a. How has this feeling changed/ transitioned from the last time we interviewed?
 - b. Who, from your support system makes you feel connected to the university?
 - c. How does this form of connectedness differ from how you felt before the pandemic (on campus experience)?
 - d. How are you staying connected to your community during this time?

Sensation of Mattering and Cared About

20. Can you describe to me how you feel a sense of mattering and cared about during this time?
 - a. Who do you feel this sensation from the most? Can you provide an example?
 - b. How important is it for you to feel cared about during this time?
 - c. How does this form of mattering and feeling cared about differ in comparison to when you were on campus?
 - d. How has your feelings of belonging changed/transitioned from the last time we interviewed?

Respected and Valued

21. How do you feel respected and valued during this time of the pandemic?
 - a. How important is it for you to feel respected and valued?
 - b. Who, from your social support, provides you with respect and feelings of value?
 - c. Can you provide me an example of when you felt respected and valued during this time of the pandemic?
 - d. How does this feeling of respect and value differ when thinking about your on campus college experience?
 - e. How has your feelings of feeling respected and valued changed/transitioned from our last interview?

Sense of Importance to Campus Community

22. During this time, how would you describe your involvement with the campus community?
 - a. How does this differ compared to your on campus experience?
 - b. What would you say has impacted your involvement with the campus community?
 - c. What do you wish to gain from your campus community that you are not currently receiving?
 - d. What does the campus community provide to you during this time of the pandemic?
 - e. What has the campus community provided to you during your on campus experience?

Reflection of Student's Sense of Belonging

23. Aside from the components that we spoke about during this interview, what are other essential elements for you to feel a sense of belonging during this time?
24. How do you define a sense of belonging as of now?
 - a. Has your definition shifted throughout this time?
 - b. What has caused your definition to shift or not shift?
25. Are there current resources that you had to reach out to during this time due to the pandemic?
 - a. How did reaching out/ not reaching out impact your current situation?
 - b. How has reaching out/ not reaching out impact your sense of belonging?
 - c. What may have prevented me from seeking support/help from the university?
 - d. What inclined you to seek support/help from the university?
26. How does feeling a sense of belonging impact your college experience?
 - a. What would you say has impacted your sense of belonging during this time?
 - i. How does this compare to your on-campus college experience?

27. If you could express the importance of belonging to any higher educational leadership (ex: president of the university), what would you say to them?
28. Could you tell me about your thoughts on WE ARE.?

APPENDIX D: Participant Care Protocol

Because this study is centered on understanding your personal experience of belonging during the pandemic of COVID-19, it is highly important to be aware of the institutional resources available to you at this time to support your well-being. Listed below are university resources that are available to you as your well being as an individual is a priority. To practice the value of wellness, I will first begin our conversation by conducting a wellness check to reassure that you feel safe to share your story and to stay informed of the resources available that will support your well-being.

Additionally, please keep in mind that your participation is voluntary, and you may decide to stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to.

Wellness Check

1. How are you feeling today?
2. How are you supporting your well-being during this time?
3. Would you like to participate in this interview today? (yes/reschedule/no)
4. Prior to beginning our interview, do you need a few minutes to re-center? (deep breathing/ moment of silence)
5. As a staff member of the university, how may I provide support for your well-being during this time?

Helpful Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services

- **Virtual CAPS Services:** <https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/counseling/wellness-services/virtual-caps-services>

In Crisis or need immediate support

1. Call CAPS (M-F, 8-5): 814-863-0395
2. Call the Penn State Crisis Line 24/7: 1-877-229-6400
3. Use the Crisis Text Line 24/7: Text "LIONS" to 741741
4. Faculty and Staff – check out the [Red Folder](#) - a guide to help you recognize, respond, and refer students to the right resources

Student Care and Advocacy

- **Student Care and Advocacy website:** <https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/studentcare>
- **COVID-19 Resources:** <https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/covid-19-resources>

Student Emergency Fund Application:

<https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=RY30fNs9iUOpwcEVUm61LrTmOgJ3kYZDmzMV3Lm2n7JUNjZCMklCSUczREdDSk5GN05BUEZPSIFHNy4>

APPENDIX E: Participant Bio's

Aaliyah

Aaliyah is a junior at RVU majoring in Political Science and African American Studies with a minor in Chinese studies and identifies as a Black/African American woman. Aaliyah shared how she grew up in a predominately Black community and attended predominately Black schools and was used to seeing peers who racially/ethnically identified similar to her. She shared how she felt a sense of culture shock after arriving at RVU and how this impacted her and her feelings of imposter syndrome.

Angel

Angel is a junior at RVU majoring in Biobehavioral Health. She identifies as an African American and African Caribbean. She grew up in an African American household where her father identifies as Trinidad and Tobago and her mother identifies as African American. She shared how she never had to question her racial/ethnic identity due to her upbringing and grew up with a sense of empowerment of being Black and grew up around others who looked like her and felt culture shock when arriving at RVU and started to feel like a minority within a predominately White space.

Autumn

Autumn is at RVU majoring in Biology and on a pre-med track and is pursuing her path towards medical school. Her father immigrated to the U.S from Jamaica and her mother is from the U.S. Autumn identifies as African American and was brought up in a caring household with her parents and brother. She attended Christian school up until high school and then attended Catholic school for high school. She shared how she felt sheltered by not attending public school as her class size was very small.

Mahogany

Mahogany is a junior at RVU majoring in Information Science and Technology. She identifies as Black/African American and shared how she grew up in a Black household. She shared her family's education background and how her father did not finish college and her mom went to technical school. Mahogany shared that she was lightly involved at RVU before the pandemic but strayed away from extracurriculars due to the lack of representation.

Malik

Malik is a senior at RVU studying Psychology. He identifies as White and Navajo and shared that his upbringing was predominately Christians (non denominational). He transitioned to public school in the fourth grade and started to learn a lot about Navajo culture. Growing up, his father would speak Navajo to him where Malik grew up learning the Navajo traditional practices. He grew up in a community where the majority identified as Native American (Navajo). He shared how his racial/ethnic identity impacted how he was perceived by others in his community due to his identity as White and Navajo. However, he shared how this perception changed after attending RVU where his peers solely saw him as a student of color.

Nathan

Nathan is a junior majoring in Secondary Education at RVU. Nathan identifies as a Black/African American man and a first-generation student. Nathan was raised by his grandparents and still carries a relationship with his mother. He was raised in a Christian household and learning the importance of God and going to church. His sense of community is centered around his grandma's father (pastor) and grew up around people who racially/ethnically identified like him. Nathan found a passion in education after seeing the difference in township school districts and Center City school districts. As he pursues his degree in secondary education, Nathan plans to pursue a career as an English teacher.

Niklaus

Niklaus is a senior at RVU majoring in Cybersecurity Analytics and Operations and is a first-generation student. He shared how he grew up in a low-income family and how his upbringing differed compared to his peers at RVU. Niklaus shared how he grew up moving around a lot which caused him to attend different schools. Niklaus identifies as a Black/African American man and shared how he grew up around those who identified similar to his racial/ethnic identity. He grew up closely with female figures like his mom, aunt, sister, and grandma.

Olivia

Olivia is a senior at RVU studying engineering science and mechanics. She identifies as a Hispanic and Black woman. She shared how she has a stronger influence in Black culture due to living with her mother most of the time. She shared how her socioeconomic status was a big part of growing up and how she would read books often due to the lack of

having electronics growing up. Olivia shared how she grew up with a strong connection in the Black community and how she also plans to attend graduate school after college.

Veronica

Veronica is a senior at RVU and identifies as a Puerto Rican woman. She began majoring in Animal Science but switched to Information Science and Technology. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Veronica was studying online in Puerto Rico after RVU decided to function remotely. Her upbringing was Americanized as her parents wanted her to learn English and become aware of American pop culture by watching American shows. She shared how attending RVU was a big step to move away from her family and did not realize how dominantly White the campus and community was upon arriving at RVU. She shared how she was able to relate more to students who identified as multiethnic and international students.

Zara

Zara is a senior at RVU majoring in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology with a minor in Bioethics and plans to attend medical school after college. She identifies as Indian where her parents emigrated from India and was born in America. She shared how navigating RVU her first year was challenging and switched majors to find a more inclusive space. She shared how she felt lonely her first year at RVU and tried to get involved to find a sense of belonging.

APPENDIX F: Interview 1: Describing and Defining Belonging

During each interview, participants were asked how they describe belonging. Listed below are the descriptions that participants shared to define belonging throughout the three months of being interviewed.

Veronica

“I feel like because I'm home, I think ethnically doing really well, you know, like, I'm not really thinking so much about how my identity plays when I'm doing coursework and stuff like that.”

Angel

“Oh, it feels very disconnected right now.”

Mahogany

“Feeling welcomed in the space that you're in. I think you also need to be okay with being yourself, for others to be able to accept that, and there can't be like competition or so with the space that you're in. If you're going to feel like you belong there can't be a place where it's like some people feel worth more or less than others.”

Autumn

“Being in a comfortable setting like when I feel comfortable, I feel like I belong somewhere. If I don't feel comfortable and I feel like there's pre-judgment or there's people who are not really interested in getting to know anyone in the room, that's when I don't feel like I belong.”

Nathan

“I define belonging as love. Yes, I believe that you feel you belong when you feel that you are loved.”

Aaliyah

“Like included and actually meant to be here. Feeling like you're meant to be here.”

Niklaus

“It's kind of like feeling comfortable without having to try to feel comfortable. I feel like... If you're with a group of people when you feel like you have that sense of belonging and you kind of feel comfortable, you kind of feel like you're able to talk to those people on different levels of course, but you're not afraid to talk to the people.”

Olivia

“Feeling like you can fit in with the people that you also identify with and that they also accept you as well. Do you know what I mean? And that you feel comfortable being around people that do not necessarily have to look like you or identify with you, but that they accept the way that you identify.”

Zara

“I guess I would define it as a sense of comfort, um, where you don't have to question things about yourself or question your actions you can just kind of exist in that environment and not have to have any anxiety or stress related to that environment.”

Malik

“I feel is something that you can't really separate from the true you. I feel that any sort of manipulation like it or at least initially, any sort of manipulation of yourself and the things that you truly enjoy and you truly like feel in order to be accepted by a group or another person is not belonging.”

APPENDIX G: Interview 2: Describing and Defining Belonging

Veronica

“When you don't feel out of place somewhere like you have a clear sense of purpose of where you're at, like, not necessarily physical, but even in like an online community.”

Angel

“Belonging is feeling included in whatever community you're in. It's also like feeling your voice matters, too.”

Mahogany

“Belonging as being able to exist comfortably as yourself in a space.”

Autumn

“Being a part of something like, when you feel you have a community around you that kind of just works together and is accepted is what I relate to being belong, like it's really being accepted in your environment.”

Nathan

“Belonging means to me is feeling safe but more than feeling safe is feeling love. So, whether that is belonging to an individual, with people or just having a sense of belonging within myself.”

Aaliyah

“Belonging is being included in a space and wanted, being cared about in a space. Your thoughts, your feelings, just your culture in general- just you.”

Niklaus

“It's feeling comfortable in a space I'm in. Feeling like you're not alone, feeling like you are able to speak feeling like your views are valued. As feeling like a part of wherever you are yeah, I guess like whenever you belong, it's kind of like I shouldn't really have to think about it too much, but you kind of fit in.”

Olivia

“Being where you feel like you should be, and also the people around you feel that you should be there as well. Like you feel comfortable where you are, also accepted by the people around you that are in this community and that you belong in.”

Zara

“I guess for me belonging is a sense of comfort. I guess that feeling that you don't have to think too hard or, you know, feel anxious in the space where you exist whether that's like with your friends or like you know in your bedroom.”

Malik

“Belonging is just your level of comfort, your level of comfort in doing pretty much whatever you feel the need to do as a person. And I guess like you feel like your patterns of behavior or the conversation topics that you enjoy actually fit into the environment that you're or I should say that I'm trying to be in. And so like I think like these topics, the topics that I'm referencing, they don't necessarily have to fit into a conversation or like people don't necessarily have to understand the topics completely, but like if they fit in and I feel like I'm there well integrated and able to be compared, and contrast at least with other people's topics.”

APPENDIX H: Interview 3: Describing and Defining Belonging

Veronica

“So in regards to belonging, I did kind of talk a little bit about how it made me feel a little bit more like involved in my in the community for my major because I'm not looking at people. So it's not as striking to see like a completely almost completely White male room. So in terms of that, that's helped that's been better. I've been able to talk more, take more charge for projects and stuff, because I don't feel like intimidated. I don't feel like I'm sticking out in any way.”

Angel

“It felt the same. I don't know. Yeah, I'm not really sure how to answer it.”

Mahogany

“I am just feeling like... I feel like there's less of a place to belong to. I said that before but it's still true. I feel like there's less, there's less of it to belong to. I just feel like the university has become like this transparent figure during this past year and it's like, how can you belong to a space that's kind of nebulous?”

Autumn

“I feel more belonging in terms of my community than I feel belong to because I'm personally not there and just because the environment at school is so different than the environment at home.”

Nathan

“I mean, considering everything that's happening with the election. Realizing I'm a minority not just on campus, but in the overall college community.”

Aaliyah

“I think they're pretty much the same.”

Niklaus

“Like, I guess I'm kind of content. I don't know if I feel like I belong, because I kind of earned being able to belong. Like if, in terms of like RVU itself and the community, I'd still say that the communities kind of I don't know...like I tell you that communities, kind of like putting up something different that I like don't align with, I guess. And I think the community, not really like looking for something different, I guess. Yeah, I guess like overall like I'm, I'm kind of content where I'm at, but not exactly.”

Olivia

“I mean even since the second interview was more than the first. But even now more as it's been getting easier to feel a sense of belonging.”

Zara

“I know in the past I've described it as comfort. I guess this time I would add to that definition and say that like belonging's like there's a sense of I think love as well. When you belong, I think there's a sense of like, you know, community there as well and like trust reliance. There's a network that will, you know, that will keep you afloat and there is love for all of that for everyone in that network.”

Malik

“I heard Brené Brown once say the people that have a higher sense of self-worth are the people who believe that they're worth it and believe in themselves. I think that's something I struggled with for a long time but I'm, you know, I've really surrounded myself with mentors who are very supportive and who helped me see the places that I can make real differences in the world and encouraged me to do that even, even when it's tough. And so as far as my belonging, you know, I see. I see the ways that a lot of my experiences in life have come together and given me the perspectives that can solve these complex problems that are plaguing my community and the greater Native American community and society as a whole..... because I see that vision, it doesn't really matter how much I belong somewhere because I know where I'm going.”

Curriculum Vitae for Lee Francine Juarez

Education

| | |
|---|------|
| Doctor of Philosophy, Higher Education | 2021 |
| <i>Pennsylvania State University, College of Education, University Park, Pennsylvania</i> | |
| Dual Master of Education in Higher Education and Comparative International Education | 2017 |
| <i>Pennsylvania State University, College of Education, University Park, Pennsylvania</i> | |
| Bachelor of Science, Cognitive Science with Psychology minor | 2015 |
| <i>University of California, Merced</i> | |
| Certificate in American Sign Language | 2013 |
| Associate of Science, Interdisciplinary Studies of Math and Science | |
| Associate of Arts, Interdisciplinary Teacher Education Preparation | |
| <i>San Joaquin Delta College, Stockton, CA</i> | |

Selected Professional Experience

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|---|-----------|
| Student Success Coach of Penn State's Student Success Center | 2020 |
| <i>The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA</i> | |
| Multicultural Counselor of Penn State's Multicultural Resource Center | 2019-2020 |
| <i>The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA</i> | |
| Student Advocate of Academic Enrollment Support Services | 2017-2019 |
| <i>The Pennsylvania State University, World Campus, PA</i> | |

Selected Teaching Experience

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|--|-----------|
| Instructor: Undergraduate First Year Seminar | 2019-2020 |
| <i>The Pennsylvania State University</i> | |

Language & Certifications

- Trilingual (Spanish, English, American Sign Language)
- Penn State Graduate Online Teaching Certificate

Selected Professional Presentations

“Integrating Sociocultural and Career Theories to Conceptualize Marginalized Groups’ Careers.” Roundtable presentation at *The National Career Development Association (NCDA)*

“The Impact of Mentorship for Diverse Populations.” Presenter at *The College of Education: Diversity in Education Conference*

“Supporting our Asian Students and their Holistic Development.” Presenter at *The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA)*

Selected Professional Involvement and Associations

American Journal of Education: *Student Board Member*
National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)
Penn State World Campus All-In Committee: *Committee Member*
American Association of University Women (AAUW): *State College Chapter*
Higher Education Student Association (HESA): *Vice President*
International Education Student Association (IEAS): *Treasurer*