



Rethinking Sense of Belonging After the Pandemic: The Perspectives of Senior Housing Directors

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CREATING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND BELONGING for students is a desired outcome for residence life staff. This qualitative study explored how campus housing directors defined a sense of belonging and how they implemented curriculum, programs, and services to enhance residents' sense of connection and community. Utilizing semi-structured interviews, we found that, for 10 senior housing directors, belonging was a significant outcome of community building, choice of space design, and housing live-on requirements and that this sense of belonging mattered greatly in creating community and changing staffing patterns. We offer implications for staff attempting to create, establish, and maintain community and students' sense of belonging.

This study explored the perspectives of housing directors on the sense of belonging in campus housing, particularly how they define this concept and implement strategies to cultivate a supportive and inclusive community for residents. The study also investigated specifically how sense of belonging and the strategies employed by housing directors have evolved in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has dramatically altered the landscape of campus housing and student life.

SENSE OF BELONGING AND PROGRAMMING MODELS

Belonging has been extensively studied in a variety of contexts (e.g., Brunsting et al., 2019; Masika & Jones, 2016; Rainey et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019; Tinto, 2012; Wallace et al., 2012; Wolf et al., 2017). Sense of belonging can generally be understood as the extent to which individuals feel accepted and valued within a community and specifically refers to “students’ perceived social support on campus, a 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)” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). For purposes of this study, we chose not to confine ourselves to a singular definition of the term and instead asked participants to define this within the context of their work. Their perspectives provided a critical context to further analyze the efforts to encourage and foster a sense of belonging among residential students.

ACUHO-I annually conducts the Campus Housing Index (CHI) survey, asking institutions to indicate the type of cocurricular learning model being used for residential programming. Participants can select from a student development theory model, a curricular model, a holistic model, some other model, or more than one model. Results from the 156 institutions submitting data for the most recent CHI report showed that 116 of them reported utilizing some type of residential programming model, reflecting

that 74.4% of participating institutions used a residential programming model in the 2023-24 academic year (ACUHO-I, 2025). For those who reported using a residential programming model, 7.8% used student development theory, 51.7% used a curriculum model, 15.5% used a holistic model, 20.1% used some other model, and 4.3% used more than one model.

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CAMPUS HOUSING AND EVOLVING STRATEGIES

The COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing responsibilities for resident assistants (RAs) after the pandemic (Besst, 2024) have posed unprecedented challenges to campus housing and residential life, significantly impacting how housing directors and residence life personnel implement programs and services to foster a sense of belonging in students. Social distancing measures, remote learning, and reduced campus activities have disrupted and continue to disrupt traditional methods of community building (Hernández et al., 2022), and housing directors have had to adapt by developing virtual programming, enhancing communication strategies, and rethinking the use of physical spaces. Despite these challenges, the pandemic has also highlighted the resilience of campus housing and residence life personnel and the importance of students' connection to the community in times of crisis (Fassett et al., 2021).

Before the pandemic, strategies to enhance sense of belonging focused primarily on in-person interactions and community-building activities within residence halls. Programs such as residential college systems, thematic housing, and on-campus events were central to fostering connections among students (Samura, 2016), but the pandemic caused a significant shift towards utilizing technology and virtual platforms to maintain community engagement (Hernández et al., 2022). This evolution reflects a broader trend in higher education towards hybrid models of student engagement, combining both in-person and virtual elements to create flexible and inclusive residential experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a basic qualitative research design examining housing directors' perspectives on sense of belonging in campus housing, specifically how they define sense of belonging and implement curriculum, programs, and services to enhance residents' feeling of being part of a community. Particular attention was paid to understanding how the sense of belonging might differ before and after the pandemic. Because we were interested in participants' perspectives, basic qualitative research was selected as our methodology, as it allows for "understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved. . . . how people interpret their experiences [and] how they construct their worlds" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). To this end, semi-structured interviews were held with 10 housing directors in the summer of 2024 so they could share their perspectives and make meaning of these experiences. Interviews were

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held remotely, recorded, and then analyzed for themes and patterns. As confirmed by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a basic qualitative research design is appropriate for identifying patterns that emerge from data collection.

Participants

To ensure a robust group of participants, we employed purposeful sampling, which provides an opportunity for intentionally selecting participants based on their characteristics, knowledge, experiences, or some other criteria (Patton, 2015). The criteria used for our study were that participants serve as the chief housing officer and represent one of the nine geographic regions as defined by ACUHO-I. Since all three authors began their professional careers in campus housing, we were able to rely on our professional network to identify potential participants. The authors brainstormed a list of approximately 30 potential participants, initially identifying five and then adding more, resulting in a pool of 10 (Optimal Workshop, 2019). In selecting participants, we were cognizant of institutional type, campus size, and housing capacity. We divided the final list of participants, each author sending an initial email explaining the study and requesting the person's participation. Once all of them had agreed, a follow-up email was sent to schedule the interview, obtain consent, and share interview questions.

Of those who responded to our initial email, 10 expressed a willingness to participate in the study. The final list of participants represented six of the geographic regions as defined by ACUHO-I, served as senior housing officers, represented both public and private institutions, and worked in housing anywhere from 15 to 35 years, with an average service to campus housing being 23.7 years. Table 1 (*page 18*) provides an overview of the participants, their institutions, and housing department.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study was guided by the nine-step qualitative process identified by Jain (2023). The authors began the study by identifying research questions, determining the research design, and developing a research protocol. From there, participants were identified, and data was collected and analyzed. Finally, the data was interpreted, and implications were identified. Prior to data collection, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval at each researcher's institution was obtained.

Using purposeful sampling, senior housing officers were sent an email requesting participation in this study. A total of 10 senior housing officers agreed to share their perspectives and experience related to a sense of belonging in campus housing. Utilizing a sample of 10 was acceptable given Patton's (2015) assertion that there are

TABLE 1

Senior Housing Officer Participants

Pseudonym	Years in residence life	Region	On-campus housing size	Educational model
Scotty	19	SEAHO	6,700 (suite-style, traditional, apartments)	Programming
Matt	31	UMR-ACUHO	5,000 (suite-style, pods, apartments)	Programming
Dan	33	UMR-ACUHO	6,000 (suite-style, pods)	Programming/LLCs
Lisa	15	NWACUHO	9,100 (apartments, family housing, traditional, new buildings)	Programming
Morgan	20	NEACUHO	7,800 (variety, suite-style, flats)	Residential Curriculum
Dolly	19	UMR-ACUHO	6,800 (community and suite-style)	Residential Curriculum in Fall 2024
Olivia	35	GLACUHO	11,000 (pod, traditional, suite-style–grad & professional)	Residential Curriculum
Harmony	17	NWACUHO	2,400 (residential communities, P3s, family housing)	Programming to Residential Curriculum
Alice	22	SWACUHO	6,000 (traditional, suite-style, pods, apartments)	Residential Curriculum
Cathy	26	SEAHO	6,700 (suite- and apartment-style)	Residential Curriculum

no specific rules or guidelines when determining sample size and that even with small samples, collecting in-depth information yields useful knowledge, insights, and value. Once participants expressed interest, a second email was sent to them with information related to the IRB process, a participation consent form, sample interview questions, and times for scheduling a Zoom interview.

A one-hour Zoom session was scheduled with each participant. The interviews began with introductions and a reminder of the purpose of the study, and then participants were able to select a pseudonym. Researchers facilitated these interviews using the questions shared with participants and follow-up questions generated during the interview. These interviews ranged from 40 to 60 minutes (an average of 46 minutes), with each interview being audio- and video-recorded in order to generate transcripts. These were coded using a mechanism identified by Charmaz (2014) that allowed data collection and analysis to take place simultaneously. After each interview, the authors discussed emerging themes and patterns, incorporating Bogdan and Biklen's (2011) suggestions to analyze data as it was being collected, recording detailed observation notes, reflecting possible themes back to participants seeking feedback, and utilizing memos throughout data collection.

After the interviews were transcribed, the authors reviewed the transcripts and assigned codes, known as open coding, and then assigned analytical codes to each of the open codes to construct themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Identifying open codes subsequently allows for the construction of categories, or axial coding (Charmaz, 2014), which allowed researchers to do more than describe data; they could also interpret and make meaning of it. The codes allowed researchers to identify patterns and themes across all participant interviews. Throughout the full coding process, attention was paid to the data that related to the research questions that were the focus of the study.

FINDINGS

Four main themes were constructed from our interviews with the senior housing officers in this study. We have organized them according to how they tie into the following research questions: *How do campus housing directors define sense of belonging? Do space and policy matter in creating communities? How do housing directors implement curriculum and enhance community and sense of belonging? How do staffing patterns matter?* The associated themes were as follows: Belonging is an outcome of community building; design space and policy matter in creating community; engagement opportunities reflect the idea of being “alone, but together”; and staffing patterns should enhance mental health and well-being.

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How Housing Directors Define a Sense of Belonging: Belonging Is an Outcome of Community Building

The following theme emerging from the data answers the first research question: Belonging is an outcome of community building. Participants initially indicated that it was difficult to define a sense of belonging as there is no precise way to measure it. Three of the 10 senior housing officers worked in states where diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislation has banned or restricted mandatory DEI training, diversity statements in hiring and admissions, and DEI offices and staff. As higher education institutions are navigating the effects of this legislation, participants in these regions explained that they often use the word “community” versus “belonging,” as some states associate the latter word with diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The consensus among our senior housing officers was that a sense of belonging was a desired outcome of community building. Matt, for example, described efforts to create a sense of belonging in residents as a way to help them “be engaged and supported . . . they’re able to find their place in their community here.” The housing officers described community engagement not just in terms of residence halls but also in terms of the larger campus and surrounding area. As Lisa noted, “How we define a sense of belonging is really a connection for students, connection to each other, the campus, and then the surrounding area as well.”

Senior housing officers reported various strategies for building community, which included a combination of programming, one-on-one interactions, and campus-community partnerships. These strategies depended on the type of educational model each campus had in place. Morgan described the changing role of student staff on her campus, as the department had shifted away from the traditional resident assistant model to a community-centered one that allows more one-on-one intentional conversations.

We don't have the traditional RA model anymore here. We just got through the first year of not having RAs any longer. We shifted the entire student staffing model. We do have student staff. They just are not that traditional role. We broke up all the roles to be smaller.

Implementing a community-centered model provided more opportunities to foster a sense of belonging among residents and staff. Some participants noted a shift away from having RAs responsible for so many activities—handling lockouts, conducting health and safety checks, and creating programming—and giving them more responsibility for enhancing students’ sense of belonging. Scotty explained the Resident Staff Program that had been implemented on his campus to fulfill this new goal:

The Resident Staff Program has usually a chair or a coach [and both are] students that are selected by their peers, and essentially, for all intents and purposes, they supervise the program with me. So they supervise all of our senior residents who really live in-hall. There are live-in hall directors. We don't have any professionals that live on. And then they supervised their RA staffs, which are anywhere from 4 to 15.

Overall, the senior housing officers specified a combination of models and activities that are used to build community, including one-on-one interactions with students, programming, and peer-to-peer mentoring opportunities. They also mentioned campus partnerships with dining services and university recreation as well as a variety of campus activities that student staff encourage their peers to attend. Olivia noted that “the value of the support staff and service staff in the residential communities cannot be overstated” as the building service workers and facilities staff check in on students and provide another level of support and service that sometimes goes unacknowledged.

How Housing Directors Perceive the Importance of Residential Spaces: Space and Live-on Policies Matter

Participants described a variety of residential designs and live-on requirements for their campus. For example, some institutions had a first-year or first- and second-year student live-on requirement. One institution did not have any live-on requirement for students, though many of them chose to return to campus housing after their first year. Cathy, a senior housing officer in the SEAHO region, explained why they have no first-year live-on requirement.

About 85% of the freshman class chooses to live with us without a live-on [requirement]. You won't get any higher percentage if you require live-on because you'll have to give exceptions, and then it'll get more contentious where they're not choosing to live on.

The design of a campus's physical environment has a significant impact on interactions between individuals (Strange & Banning, 2015). The design of residence hall spaces (e.g. traditional, suites, apartments, or pods) and shared common areas also has an impact, and participants recognized that it was generally easier to build a community in halls that had shared spaces (e.g., lounges or bathrooms). As Scott explained,

Our apartment communities, I think, are much more challenging. We have some of the outdoor style apartments and . . . that's probably the most challenging because you have to get those people out of their apartment to a central space.

For those campuses that have apartment-style designs, building a community is more challenging as residents do not necessarily want to leave their apartments to engage in larger settings.

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How Housing Directors Implement Curriculum to Enhance Sense of Belonging: Engagement Opportunities Reflect the Idea of Being “Alone but Together”

The pandemic altered social interactions among college and university students, and it's important to recognize that many incoming students spent their high school years online and were encouraged not to interact too closely with others. Several were reluctant to attend large group gatherings unless they knew someone else who was attending. As Morgan recalled, “We've just gotten away from it, because during COVID, it was like everybody, stay[ed] away from each other. Nobody goes into the residence halls, you know. Now we have to get our feet again on that front.” Students' communication and conflict management skills were challenged, and they felt a pervasive sense of loneliness. Harmony mentioned that many of her peers felt a sense of comparison, as if they were being judged for failing to make connections with others in the community. Senior housing officers tried to ensure that common spaces were available for gaming or fitness sessions or as maker spaces, and Lisa particularly appreciated the chance to participate in these activities. “So the community center has, like, video games, ping pong, pool. There's a sound studio in there, music and practice studio, those kinds of things. We're building a content creation lab.” Introducing students to these spaces during orientation, hall tours, and focused programming helped drive engagement in the community.

How Housing Directors Evaluate Changing Staffing Patterns: A Focus on Mental Health and Well-Being

Participants were proactive in their focus on students' mental health and well-being and partnered with other on-campus organizations to provide resources in the residence halls. Some of them even had counselors and social workers working inside the halls. As Olivia explained,

We've created space for embedded counselors within the residential experience and have found that those counselors have been an integral part of the success in those buildings where they're located, and we are looking to expand the number that we have into the future.

Participants also mentioned concern for their staff's well-being due to the long hours, the problems of duty rotation, and their responsibility for responding to crises. Cathy mentioned working to change crisis response protocols among live-in staff:

We started doing this just in the last few years, where, if anything happens throughout the day or evening in a building that's of a crisis nature that needs attention from a coordinator, full-time staff member, it goes through an on-call process, and the coordinator of that building may or may not ever touch it.

Participants noticed that many current student staff and entry-level staff felt that the 24/7 nature of residence life and the burden of crisis response are not consistent with their desire for a healthy work/life balance. Changing duty and on-call rotations

Overall, the senior housing officers specified a combination of models and activities that are used to build community, including one-on-one interactions with students, programming, and peer-to-peer mentoring opportunities.

and redesigning roles and responsibilities can promote mental health and well-being among live-in staff so that they can respond more effectively to students.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this study. First, the researchers did not provide participants with a common definition of community or belonging, but instead allowed them to interpret and make meaning of these terms from their own perspectives. Providing a common definition might have resulted in different data and, subsequently, the identification of different themes. In addition, while we tried to ensure that all ACUHO-I regions were represented, the final list of participants represented only six of the nine regions. Future studies should explore regional differences in creating a sense of belonging.

Another limitation is that all the participants identified as White. Although racial and gender diversity was not the focus of the study, previous research has demonstrated that the pandemic disproportionately impacted housing staff identifying as people of color (Scales, 2022). As such, we did hear from housing staff who identified the voices of people of color in establishing community and a sense of belonging. Further iterations of this study should include participants with non-White identities.

Finally, we did not collect information about institutional type and how it might impact belonging. Almost all participants were at either large public or small private institutions, and one had been at their institution for less than three years. None represented other Carnegie classifications such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities, religiously affiliated institutions, community colleges, or Tribal colleges and universities. Given that our results clearly illustrate that the environment impacts the ability to create a sense of belonging, subsequent studies should explore differences due to institutional types.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This qualitative study sought to gather the perspectives of senior housing directors about creating a sense of belonging for their residents. Specifically, the researchers investigated how housing directors implemented curricula, programs, and services to enhance the feelings of connection. It is clear, however, that how a sense of belonging is defined and measured differs from one institution to another. Strayhorn's (2012) assertion that sense of belonging can generally be understood as the extent to which individuals feel accepted and valued within a community provided a good foundation for our study, but it was clear that participants often used the words "community" and "sense of belonging" interchangeably; in places where DEI efforts are being scrutinized, "community" is becoming a more acceptable word.

Belonging as an Outcome of Community Building

Housing professionals must be clear about the definition of belonging that frames their initiatives and programs, and they must grapple with what a sense of belonging and community will look like if achieved. Having a common definition that all staff can articulate will result in more purposeful programming and improved staff training.

The shift away from residential curriculum and programming models and learning communities does not reflect what is reported by data in the most recent Campus Housing Index results (ACUHO-I, 2025). In recent years, campus housing professionals have seen great growth in residential curriculum models and numerous efforts to create and sustain learning communities (Eidum & Lomicka, 2023; Inkleas et al., 2024; Lichterman & Bloom, 2019; Pernotto, 2021). However, our participants' comments suggest that there is now less reliance on traditional curriculum or programming models, as many programs are going back to basics in terms of fostering communication and events to increase community building.

Changing Staffing Patterns to Focus on Mental Health and Well-Being

The pandemic dramatically changed the nature of the student housing experience and the work being performed by housing staff. Currently, staff are managing an increasing number of student and staff mental health issues, student problems with the transition to college, and students' psychological needs and safety and security concerns. RAs function as front-line staff (Besst, 2024), but the increasing number of residents' mental health needs has significantly changed the RA position, making it difficult to develop and sustain the sense of community that they are trying to create and that their residents desire. Attending to these concerns requires significant energy and time, and if students' basic needs cannot be met, then planning activities to help them achieve self-actualization (Maslow, 1943) is futile. We are not advocating that staff abandon the role they play in student success by creating an out-of-class experience based on theory (i.e., learning, student development, counseling, etc.) but simply that they reevaluate what contributes the most to student success.

A second implication is that it is possible to re-imagine traditional resident assistant and live-in staff responsibilities for creating individual relationships and promoting the well-being of students. This implication is supported by results from the 2023-2024 Campus Housing Index (ACUHO-I, 2025). Many of the participating institutions reported a shift in the roles of traditional resident assistants/advisors that could help increase interest in the position and make the job less stressful. Many institutions have already begun this transformation. For example, Texas Christian focuses less on discipline, The University of Texas Arlington focuses on community engagement, the University of Central Arkansas dissects the traditional RA job into

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function-centered positions, and Clemson University utilizes what they call residential community mentors, whose primary task is to establish personal relations and build community (Perlman & Negash, 2023)

How Campus Space and Live-on Policies Contribute to Creating Community

The design of campus spaces contributes to a sense of belonging for students and has a significant impact on their learning, as well as their success and outcomes (Cabrera et al., 1999; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado et al., 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strange & Banning, 2015). Residence hall design in particular has an important impact on the student experience (Brandon et al., 2008; Bronkema & Bowman, 2017). In fact, many participants commented that creating community was much easier in traditional-style halls than in apartments, a finding consistent with that of Williams (2005).

Kistler (2024) identified five trends impacting student housing, and the one participants connected most with is the use of outside spaces such as courtyards, picnic areas, and rooftops as areas for learning, relaxing, and community building. For this reason, campuses should conduct an audit to identify spaces and environments that are most appropriate for large- and small-group community development. Housing professionals must also stretch themselves to think outside the box and get out of their silos by forming partnerships that can help to develop these communities.

How Housing Directors Implement Curriculum and Enhance Community

Participants reported varying conceptualizations of community and sense of belonging and different insights about who is responsible for these goals. Some perceived the creation of community as a process, while for others it was an outcome and for some it was both. The bottom line, though, is that students know and feel a sense of community when they witness and experience it.

Participants were quick to add that creating community and sense of belonging should be a campus initiative, not simply a housing one. Many campuses have residential communities, but with the shift to remote learning and extended online learning, they must make more of an effort to ensure that all students feel engaged and involved.

CONCLUSION

Ensuring that all residential students feel a sense of belonging and mattering will continue to be a priority for campus housing. This study adds to the discussion and understanding of how sense of belonging is perceived and what programs and initiatives should be utilized to create community, a goal that is both a process and an outcome. All in all, participants were able to think proactively about how housing design and type, changing staffing patterns, and shifting student preferences impact their ability to create community. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The authors chose to empower participants to use their own definition of sense of belonging. How do you define students' sense of belonging? How do others on your campus (including your students) define this term? Can a dialogue be fostered campus wide to come to a joint definition of this term? How could this dialogue impact outcomes of community building, design space, policy, and students' sense of belonging?
2. The authors suggest that belonging needs to be the responsibility of staff across campus. What are some ways that belonging can be fostered outside of residential life? What partners do you have across your campus who work to develop a greater sense of belonging among students? How can you collaborate effectively with them?
3. If your campus has changed staffing patterns for housing staff, what were the challenges in implementing them? How do you think your current model successfully supports students?
4. What are some of the barriers to moving a revised staffing model forward on your campus? What is working well about your current staffing model in fostering students' sense of belonging?
5. What assessment do you have in place on your campus to understand students' sense of belonging in their residential communities or in their classrooms? How would you define the baseline of what students' sense of belonging looks like on your campus and to assess change over time?
6. Since the pandemic, has "alone together" programming been implemented or considered on your campus? If so, how successful has it been in supporting students' sense of belonging?

Discussion questions were developed by Erin Elizabeth Cody, Binghamton University in New York.