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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

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Like all people, college students have a pervasive desire to develop and maintain positive, meaningful, and deep interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). They also have a basic human need to belong (Maslow, 1954). College students face a number of sometimes difficult transitions, such as adapting to new living environments, making new friendships, adjusting to new academic challenges, and learning to have greater independence and responsibilities. The keys to a successful transition are engaging in positive interpersonal relationships and experiencing a sense of belonging (Pittman & Richmond, 2008).

In the field of higher education, there has been a high level of interest in understanding how college students experience, connect to, and are affected by their campus environments. Spady (1971) studied how academic and social integration impacted students and posited that the interaction between student attributes (background characteristics, interests, skills, abilities) and college academic and social systems was directly correlated with retention. Tinto (1975) further developed this work by creating a theoretical model that considered the role of peer-group associations, extracurricular activities, and faculty interactions in students' social integration and institutional commitment.

In response to some criticism of previous models and how they applied to marginalized groups of students, researchers introduced new concepts to better explain students' collegiate experiences (Schlossberg, 1989). Additionally, higher education researchers applied the sociological and psychological concepts of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Maslow, 1954) to replace those of social integration and institutional commitment (Tinto, 1975). Schlossberg (1989) introduced the concepts of marginality and mattering to help enhance the understanding of a student's experiences during their transition to college and its importance to their feelings of involvement. Sociologists Bollen and Hoyle (1990) described belonging as a part of perceived group cohesion, containing both affective and cognitive elements.

Sense of belonging has been found to be directly related to student outcomes such as grade point average, academic self-efficacy, and intention to persist. It has also been linked to students' mental and physical health.

Others have contributed to an understanding of belonging as having aspects of both mattering and sense of community (e.g., Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012).

Sense of belonging has been found to be directly related to student outcomes such as grade point average (Strayhorn, 2018; Todd, 2016), academic self-efficacy (Freeman et al., 2007; Wilson & Liss, 2020), and intention to persist (Hausmann et al., 2007; Oxendine, 2015). It has also been linked to students' mental and physical health (Gum-madam et al., 2016; Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Stebleton et al., 2014).

In light of the pandemic, it is now more important than ever to explore sense of belonging. The pandemic had devastating health consequences and significantly impacted higher education, disrupting how colleges and universities conducted business, how classes were taught, and how students, staff, and faculty engaged with one another. Informed by health guidelines or local, state, or federal regulations, institutions put in place a number of restrictions that limited in-person gatherings, required or promoted social distancing, and relied on online platforms. Similarly, students made decisions based on how they interpreted these guidelines and their personal levels of comfort. Operational and programmatic initiatives that would have traditionally offered students pathways to meet and connect with one another (i.e., find belonging) were limited during the pandemic.

Residence life has a critical role to play in fostering residential students' sense of belonging. From an environmental lens, residence halls have a direct impact on a student's campus experience (Astin, 1984). A sense of belonging can be fostered or thwarted because of the climate within a particular space, including residence halls (Gano, 2021; Means & Pyne, 2017). This impact can often be related to the people present in the space and the messages sent explicitly or implicitly to students (Blackmon, 2018). For many, living on campus is a formative experience, with more positive, supportive environments leading to greater success. Residence life departments and practitioners play an important role in fostering sense of belonging and helping students make connections (Garvey et al., 2017; Gonyo, 2016). The extant literature on college students' sense of belonging indicates the importance of the residential experience and how residence life staff play a part in fostering this feeling among students (Blackmon, 2018; Garvey et al., 2017; Gonyo, 2016).

The five articles in this special issue provide a variety of perspectives on the role of residential life and on-campus housing in developing and supporting residential

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students' sense of belonging. Together they provide valuable insight into the roles that residence life and residence life staff play in students' sense of belonging and provide suggestions for improving residence life practice to enhance community building and sense of belonging.

The issue begins with viewpoints from housing directors. Tony Cawthon, Dena Kniess, and R. Bradley Johnson present the perspectives of housing directors on the role that residence life plays in students' sense of belonging. They focused on two broad questions: how campus housing directors define sense of belonging and how they implement programs, policies, and services to enhance residents' sense of connection and community. The wide-ranging discussions include staffing patterns, the use of physical spaces, new patterns of engagement, and belonging as an outcome of community building.

The following two articles focus on student staff and ancillary staff, who play a critical role in building community. But how successful can they be if they themselves are feeling isolated? Morgan Murray and Ryan Miller used photovoice methodology and interviews to understand the experiences of Black RAs at Historically White Institutions. Their article highlights Black RAs' feelings of isolation and the tension between these feelings and their role in creating a welcoming and inclusive community. We are challenged to create processes and environments that foster sense of belonging in Black RAs and allow them to thrive. Ancillary staff can also play an important role in developing students' sense of community, as illustrated in the article by Cynthia Aranda Cervantes and Susana Hernández. They focus on the role of custodians in fostering a sense of belonging as surrogate family members for Latine students. Utilizing a *pláticas* methodology that emphasizes informal conversations and recognizing the cultural value of *familismo* in promoting community support, the study reveals how custodians can serve as important cultural connectors.

The impact of pandemic restrictions, particularly in campus housing, and the role of friends in students' sense of belonging is the focus of the article by Paola Mignone. Her interviews with residential students during and after implementation of COVID-19 restrictions revealed how the pandemic impacted interpersonal relationships and how the strong connection students make between belonging and friendships is so critical.

Finally, Craig Davis Allen presents a relationship-based housing model and discusses its impact on students' residential experiences. Allen's findings reflect those presented by Murray and Miller, Aranda Cervantes and Hernández, and Mignone on the important role of friendships in creating a sense of belonging.

Each of the articles in this special issue presents suggestions for changes in residence life that can further support residents' sense of belonging. The suggestions

include areas such as hiring and staffing, policies, residential spaces, training, and fostering opportunities for students to connect with one another. All the authors expressed the need for residence life departments to have a clear definition of sense of belonging and to be intentional about prioritizing efforts that foster this in residents.

As a collection, these five articles provide further evidence of the immense impact that housing and residence life has on a college student's sense of belonging to their campus community. By examining housing and residence life through the lens of sense of belonging, we are inherently using an asset-based approach to understanding its impact on college students. When we find that students possess a sense of belonging, we explore what elements are present for that to happen. Additionally, when a sense of belonging is lacking, we ask why and what could be changed for students to feel that sense of connection. It is our hope that practitioners and researchers are inspired by this collection of articles to explore their own campuses, talk about sense of belonging with their students and staff, and implement changes that will create the environments where sense of belonging may thrive for all. ■

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