



Sense of Belonging in the Time of COVID-19: Examining the Role of Friendships

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COLLEGE STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING was significantly affected in many ways by the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study was to examine its specific impact by examining responses to two research questions: "What role do friendships have on students' sense of belonging?" and "How has students' sense of belonging changed since pandemic-related restrictions have been lifted?" A pilot study conducted in the fall of 2020 pointed to friendships as key to belonging. Four students in their senior year of college who had been living on campus as first-year students when the pandemic began and had participated in the pilot study as sophomores were interviewed for this study in the fall of 2022. Study findings reveal that students' concerns about the virus, pandemic restrictions, and changes to social support and interactions with peers had lasting impacts on students' sense of belonging. Participants discussed positive interactions, feeling that they mattered and were accepted and heard, and reciprocity in friendships as important factors in alleviating this sense of disconnection. One of the major characteristics of friendships that supported their sense of belonging was authenticity. Close friendships that were supportive, non-judgmental, and allowed students to be their authentic selves were essential to their feeling part of the residential and campus communities.

College students have a pervasive desire to develop and maintain positive, meaningful, and deep interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) in addition to the basic human need to belong (Maslow, 1954). These students face a number of significant transitions—adapting to new living environments, making new friendships, and adjusting to new academic challenges—that can be compromised when they feel isolated or disconnected (Pittman & Richmond, 2008).

Many of the students who remained on campus during the pandemic reported increased apprehension about in-person interactions and conflicts about policy enforcement (Salkin & Ko, 2020). Since in-person programs were reduced and most classes were being offered online, they had fewer opportunities to socialize and establish friendships. Other restrictions—related to having guests, engaging in extracurricular activities, and connecting with others in shared spaces such as dining halls and lounges—contributed to their isolation (American College Health Association, 2020).

SENSE OF BELONGING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Sense of belonging plays a vital role in academic success and retention; some students drop out, often because their family background, interests, skills, and abilities conflict with college academic and social systems (Spady, 1971). Others are simply unable to

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integrate academically and socially and never feel they are part of their residential or campus communities, which has a direct impact on institutional commitment and ultimately degree attainment (Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Several studies have examined student outcomes through the lens of their sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2008; Tinto, 2015). This has been described in many ways: "the individual's view of whether he or she feels included in the college community" (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 327); "the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community" (Hausmann et al., 2007, p. 804); and being "respected, valued, accepted, and needed by a defined group" (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 87).

The need to belong is an essential pillar of mattering (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which can be defined as the feeling of having some significance to others; for college students in particular, it refers to how students perceive their presence in college as being of some significance or value to other students, staff, and faculty (Schlossberg, 1989). Transitions such as entering college or moving into a residence hall can make many students feel unable to fit in (Schlossberg, 1989), which can have a larger negative impact than other factors such as institutional quality, location, or cost (Nora, 2004).

Students' sense of belonging can be positively associated with several factors, including living in the residence halls, being involved in extracurricular activities, and participating in learning communities (Berger, 1997; Elkins et al., 2011; Pike et al., 2011; Spanierman et al., 2013). Social acceptance, solid support systems, and close friends are also important factors (Hausmann et al., 2007; Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Wilcox et al., 2005), particularly for students marginalized because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008).

DESIGN AND METHODS

A pilot study was conducted to explore college students' sense of belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pilot took place in the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021 at a midsize R1 public university in New York with an enrollment of approximately 14,000 undergraduate and 4,000 graduate students. The university requires first-year students to live on campus and had a residential population of 6,100 students in the fall of 2020 and 7,300 in the spring of 2022. Approximately two-fifths of the undergraduate population self-identified as students of color, and about half were women. In this pilot, 16 undergraduate students living on campus who expressed interest in participating were interviewed between the fall of 2020 and spring of 2022. The fall 2020 semester was particularly challenging as students transitioned back to in-person learning and worked through all the restrictions and uncertainties associated with the

pandemic in a time when testing for COVID-19 was still limited, vaccinations were not available, most classes remained online or hybrid, and students felt increasingly lonely and disconnected from the community.

Preliminary findings from the pilot study showed that friendships were a key component in students' sense of belonging. With this new understanding, an interview case study was conducted in the fall of 2022 to explore the relationship between friendships and sense of belonging in college students and the impact of COVID-19, if any. The research questions for this study were as follows:

1. *What role do friendships have on students' sense of belonging?*
2. *How has students' sense of belonging changed since pandemic-related restrictions have been lifted?*

Data Collection

From the participants in the pilot study and on the same campus, four seniors who were sophomores at the time of their fall 2020 interview were selected for this study. All of them had a relatively normal first-year student experience living on campus, until March of 2020 when the pandemic shutdown interrupted everything. Interview questions based on previous research about sense of belonging included "What is your definition of sense of belonging?" "Where do you feel you belong?" and "Has your sense of belonging changed since the start of the pandemic? If so, how?"

I conducted individual interviews so that I could give my full attention to each participant's story (Brinkmann, 2013), could be free to touch upon more sensitive topics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), and could promote confidentiality and trust building (Brinkmann, 2013). I used a semi-structured interview approach because the open-endedness allowed me to focus the conversation on issues I found relevant to the research topic (Brinkmann, 2013). All interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were recorded via Zoom Cloud. I assigned all participants an alias using an online randomizer. Throughout the research process, I noted any observations, statements that stood out, research decisions, and rationales, as it can be difficult to reconstruct them correctly in hindsight (Brinkmann, 2013; Yin, 2015). Following each interview, I verified Zoom transcriptions and wrote memos summarizing the interview and noting observations.

Data Analysis and Report

Throughout the interviews and during the transcription review, I recorded themes and observations as they emerged, and, during data analysis, I tracked thematic patterns that represent a core level of meaning, called codes (Galletta & Cross, 2013). I used the Dedoose web-based application for coding and noted the frequency of each code. If there were outliers in the data, I kept them but noted them as outliers to ensure that I remained focused on the research questions (Galletta & Cross, 2013).

Participants

All four residential students who were interviewed in the pilot study as sophomores agreed to be interviewed for this study in their senior year. Table 1 provides the gender, race/ethnicity, age, major, GPA, and housing status of each participant at the time of their interviews conducted in the months of November and December 2022.

TABLE 1
Fall 2022 Participant Information

Alias	Gender	Race	Age*	Major	GPA	Housing
Brittney	Female	White	21	Finance	3.32	Off campus
Jason	Male	White	21	Industrial Engineering	3.61	On campus
Phoebe	Female	White	21	Biomedical Anthropology	3.87	Off campus
Yury	Female	White	21	Psychology	3.90	Off campus

*Age at time of final study

At the time of the pilot interview in the fall of 2020, Brittney was a sophomore studying finance. She had been a member of a living-learning community focused on public service but had chosen to move out of the community at the beginning of the pandemic. As a result, she was lonely and did not have close friends. Though she lamented the fact that her classes and activities were all online, her primary complaint was that residents kept their doors closed and hallways were much quieter than before.

Jason was a sophomore studying industrial engineering during the pilot study. Although he was considered a “local student,” he had chosen to reside on campus. During the pandemic, his participation in activities began to decrease considerably; he quit the pep band and the residentially based theatre production club he had been a member of because attending virtual meetings felt like a “chore.” Jason had one close friend on campus, but the new pandemic-related rules prevented them from visiting each other, and he acknowledged feeling very lonely and homesick.

During the pilot, Phoebe was a sophomore studying biomedical anthropology. Since her freshman year, she had been a member of a selective, four-year honors program, but she no longer identified as an honors student and had few close friends in

the program. She described her personality as “fun, energetic, and bubbly” and was surprised that it had become so hard to make friends. During her sophomore year, she took the positive step of moving to a new residence hall and joining the Ultimate Frisbee team.

Yury was a sophomore studying psychology at the time of the pilot. Although all her classes were online, she had chosen to return and to live on campus because she wanted to have “as much of a normal college experience” as she could. Several friends from her hometown also attended the university, but she had chosen not to live with them so she could meet people more easily. She also joined the Ultimate Frisbee team to make friends.

FINDINGS

Although most students defined sense of belonging as a feeling of “community,” some spoke specifically about how much personal friendships contributed to their feelings of belonging. They also made a distinction between superficial relationships and close friendships and attributed belonging to the more deep, trusting, and meaningful relationships.

Brittney noted that feelings of loneliness after the pandemic began led her to take a semester off. By her senior year, she was living off campus with friends and spent most of her spare time at the commuter lounge and the LGBTQ center to meet people. Although she was glad she had more friends than she did at the beginning of the pandemic, she was disappointed that she didn’t have more close ones.

Jason explained that he took a semester off because he was feeling “socially deprived” and was having “a very rough time.” When he returned to school, he was offered the opportunity to become a resident assistant (RA) in a community where he had never lived before. Although his RA peers were some of the closest friends he made in college, he never really felt that he belonged on campus quite as strongly as he felt he belonged with his family.

Although she was still a member of the honors program, Phoebe distanced herself more from the friends she had made in that program as the years passed. She felt the strongest sense of belonging when she was a senior and with her friends from the Ultimate Frisbee team, who she now lived with off campus.

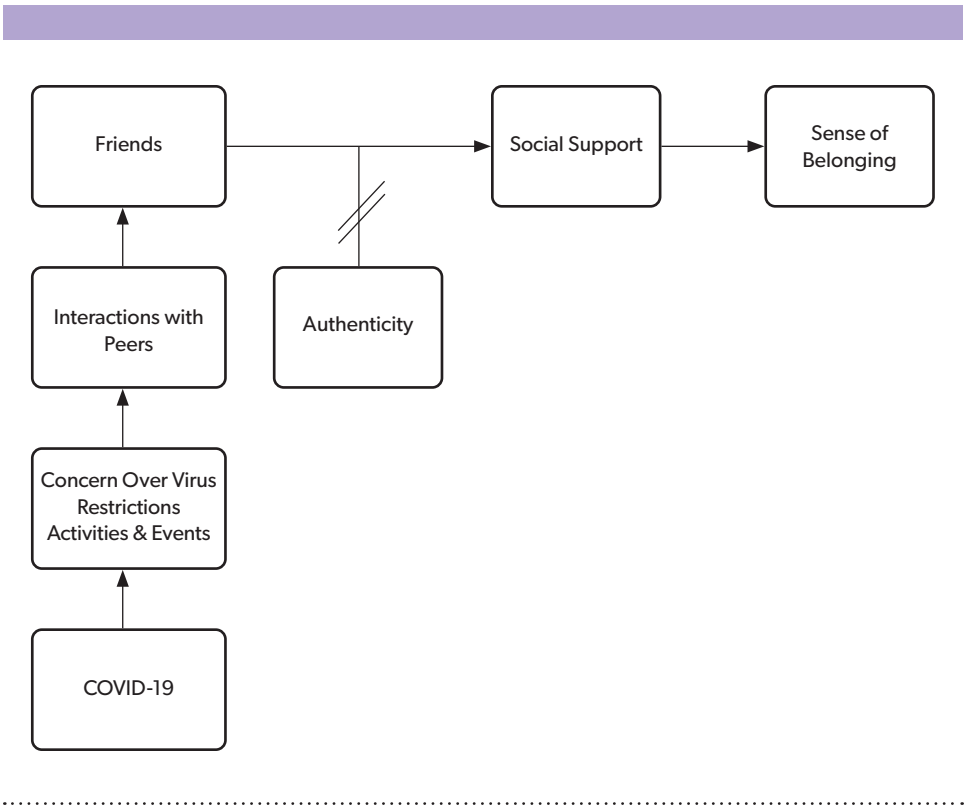
Yury recalled several major life events that had impacted her life negatively. In late fall of 2020, after breaking her clavicle while playing Ultimate Frisbee, she was forced to complete the semester at home. Shortly after, her mother passed away from complications of a prior health condition after getting COVID-19. Once again, Yury

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returned home to complete the semester. When she finally returned to campus, her boyfriend broke up with her, and she lost several friendships after the breakup. She decided to move off campus and live with friends from the Ultimate Frisbee team for her senior year.

The pandemic negatively impacted students’ sense of belonging by disrupting friendships, and several interrelated factors—pandemic-related restrictions, students’ concerns over the virus, and changes to activities and events—reduced opportunities to meet and interact with others (*Figure 1*). Friends were a major source of social support, and students increasingly relied on them to meet their interpersonal and emotional needs. However, because their social circles were smaller, they either did not meet people with whom they could develop close friendships or were afraid to overburden their already small group of friends. Without the connection of deep personal ties, they were unable to be authentic in relationships and struggled to form the kind of interpersonal relationships that contribute to a sense of belonging.

FIGURE 1
How the Pandemic Impacted Students’ Opportunities for Interaction



Friendships as a Defining Factor in Belonging

Participants used words such as “community” and “home” to describe a sense of belonging, and they linked friendships directly to this kind of connection. As Brittney realized, “Essentially, I feel like I belong where my friends are” and Phoebe agreed: “Home is where the people are . . . and then what follows from that phrase is friends is where your sense of belonging is because it’s the people you belong with.” Phoebe acknowledged that friendships are “the main factor to belonging” and that “it’s the people you belong with.” And one of the most important factors in her feeling of connection was the ease and comfort of having close friends. “A sense of belonging is when you’re around people that make you super comfortable, and with which you can fully be yourself and not be worried about being judged.” Ultimately, participants recognized that friendships marked by feelings of closeness, safety, and comfort helped foster belonging.

Ongoing Impact of Concerns About the COVID-19 Virus

The reduction in social activities due to concerns about COVID-19 had a dramatic impact on participants’ willingness to socialize. Brittney wanted to avoid overly crowded spaces. “That still kind of freaks me out . . . If there’s a lot of people there, I don’t handle that very well . . . I have this really irrational fear of crowded spaces now.” Brittney kept her social gatherings small and avoided public transportation, causing her to miss out on many social opportunities. Yury shared similar concerns about the virus, particularly after her mother passed:

I wouldn’t even say that it’s . . . just COVID in particular. If I’m spending a weekend with a bunch of people and one person just has a common cold or has a stomach virus, I don’t want to bring that back to my family, no matter what it is. I don’t think I would have thought like that before the pandemic.

Students’ levels of ongoing concern about the virus differed from individual to individual. As testing and vaccinations became available, they widened their social circles but were still dealing with the setbacks to interpersonal relationships.

Impact of Pandemic Restrictions

At the beginning of the pandemic, restrictions imposed by the campus and local and federal authorities significantly changed how students interacted and limited their ability not only to make friends but also to develop existing friendships. Brittney had a difficult time staying in touch with friends from her former learning community, and even after the restrictions were lifted, these friendships seemed to lack the closeness and depth they once had.

Jason also expressed frustration about the restrictions and blamed them for his feelings of loneliness.

I was definitely getting very, very frustrated with the restrictions just because I was feeling very lonely and very lost, and it was really affecting me. But I definitely became more frustrated [with the restrictions]. . . after the vaccine started to come out.

Friendships made them feel more tied to a community and also helped them cope with stress, loneliness, and anxiety. For many, friends were critical as mitigators for loneliness.

When he became an RA, he had to enforce visitation rules, which further hindered his ability to foster friendships. “It was kind of tough because you were tasked with enforcing COVID rules, which is a whole challenging issue to making friends.” As an RA, he could no longer break the rules to visit his one close friend who lived in a different building because he was afraid of losing his job. “The pandemic was not very conducive to making new friends,” he reflected. Phoebe had a similar experience when she became an RA and moved to a new residence hall. In general, campus restrictions interrupted students’ ability to make new friends and develop existing friendships. Even after the restrictions eased, the long-term negative impact on friendships persisted.

Involvement and Group Membership

At the beginning of the pandemic, students had limited opportunities to connect with others socially. At the time of this study, most activities had returned to those of pre-pandemic times, and students were able to have a more normal college experience, though some still noted lower levels of involvement. Belonging to clubs and organizations “seemed like a lot of work . . . and less fun than it was before” (Jason), and though most events had returned to in-person ones, “it felt too late to join” (Brittney). Participants also talked about the challenges of becoming involved in clubs at a time when students “don’t remember what they used to be before the pandemic” (Brittney) and there was a “brain drain, so the energy was just not there” (Jason). For others, the discontinuation of their involvement in activities they had once participated in translated to a loss of friends early in their college career.

Despite these setbacks, many participants became involved in social activities that strengthened their feelings of connection. Phoebe and Yury had strong feelings of belonging during the pandemic, which they attributed to joining the Ultimate Frisbee team. As Phoebe said, “I’m always doing something with my friends [from Ultimate Frisbee] because there is always something going on. It’s gonna be hard not to spend all of this time with these people here [after graduation].” Yury appreciated how important it was to be the member of a team.

Our [Ultimate Frisbee team] goal is to make sure every single person feels excited to be a team member. The whole entire point of the sport is for people to feel spirited. There’s so much positivity and such a great team to be in. I’m very glad that I have this club! I don’t think I’d be the same person without it.

Interactions with Peers

The pandemic changed how students interacted with one another. At the beginning of the pandemic, most peer interactions took place online. Even as campus life returned to normal, many students admitted feeling uncomfortable with in-person interactions.

Jason remarked that the pandemic “took away any possibility that friendships would last. . . . Anyone who wasn’t already a very close friend wasn’t worth the mental time and effort for both of us to actively reach out to each other.” Phoebe recognized that, before the pandemic, “these social interactions would have happened on their own” and Yuri acknowledged that “making new friends . . . takes effort.” At the height of the pandemic, students described an environment in which they had limited opportunities for social interactions, and even after the worst of it, they still felt uncomfortable socializing.

Social Support

After undergoing all the complex changes involved in transitioning to college, students were faced with the abrupt and drastic changes brought about by the pandemic, which made connections with others even more important. Friendships made them feel more tied to a community and also helped them cope with stress, loneliness, and anxiety. For many, friends were critical as mitigators for loneliness. As Phoebe explained, “I’m glad I joined the Ultimate Frisbee team. I would have been lonely otherwise,” adding that “COVID kind of gave me a new awareness for how important spending time with others was, and I was very eager to have those friendships because it was so isolating.”

The uncertainties of the pandemic caused students to rely more heavily on their support systems, and they worried about placing too much of a burden on their friends. When Yuri’s mom passed, she decided to tell only two of her close friends but rarely spoke to them about her grief because she didn’t “want to burden them with [my] problems.” Jason recalled being afraid of straining his relationship with his one close friend by overwhelming her with his need for emotional support and companionship.

[She] was pretty much my only source of interaction. . . . I was relying on her more than she needed to rely on me. So that did cause us a lot of tension . . . it definitely caused a degradation in the friendship for a while.

Jason also noted that, immediately following his initial interview, this friend began having mental health issues and started to rely on him heavily for support. Since he had also been struggling with his own mental well-being, that relationship became strained and “unproductive.” He began spending less time with his friend, which made him feel even lonelier and became the primary reason he chose to take a semester off and return home. Phoebe was also hesitant to place too much of a burden on her friends, though the dependence was mutual. “As bad as I was overbearing to them [her friends], they were overbearing me. . . . We were relying on each other for support, so I mean it wasn’t over burdening. . . . It was relying on each other for support.” Friends served to meet students’ social and emotional needs and thus became a major source of social support.

Authenticity

The findings of this study suggest that friendships promoting a sense of belonging were deep interpersonal relationships that made students feel cared for and supported. As Brittney revealed, “I feel a sense of belonging when I’m around people who know

me and who make me feel good about myself.” Phoebe recognized how much these connections contributed to her sense of self (“My friends are who I’m most comfortable around, where I feel myself the most”) and how important it was not to feel judged (“If you make a mistake, it shouldn’t be the end of the world”), a sentiment echoed by Brittney: “They do not make me question myself.”

Feelings of mattering were also critical for students. Phoebe noted the importance of being perceived as having value within her social world:

You will only feel like you belong somewhere if you feel like you matter and you are important. I belong with groups of people that are important to me and that are supportive of me and my identity and whatever I do. . . . The best part about having supportive friends and having a sense of belonging is being around people who you know specifically like you and your qualities.

Some students admitted that they could not be their authentic selves even with their closest friends. Jason, for instance, felt that he could only truly be himself around his family. “Every time I go home and I see my immediate and extended family, I feel like I can [finally] let my guard down.” Yury had similar feelings after her mom passed and at times felt “a little out of place” among her teammates; she attributed this feeling to the fact that they were not going through the same experiences she was and “would not understand” her. “This loss is a really big part of my life, and I don’t think you’ll know me completely until you know that this happened to me.”

The ability and opportunity to be authentic stood out as a consistent characteristic of the close friendships that contributed so much to a sense of belonging. Relationships that were “nonjudgmental” and “comfortable” and that made students feel “accepted” and “understood” were the kinds of friendships that fostered this connection.

DISCUSSION

The pandemic significantly impacted all aspects of the collegiate experience, particularly interpersonal relationships. Preliminary findings from the pilot study revealed that friendships were a key component to feeling a sense of belonging, and results showed that campus restrictions, concern about the virus, and changes to involvement and group membership made it difficult for students to maintain or make new friends. The pandemic changed how students interacted with one another and the degree to which they relied on each other for social support.

Given their fear of contracting the virus and its negative impact on their friendships, students knew they had to prioritize, at least temporarily, the need for safety and security over their need for belonging.

The Importance of Friendships in Creating a Sense of Belonging

Findings from this study showed that students' definition of belonging differed from those often used in the literature on belonging within the realm of higher education (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019). Students tied their sense of belonging directly to the satisfaction they felt with the quantity and quality of their friendships. Specifically, they focused on the people or group of people that made them feel welcomed and comfortable, not judged. Frequent interactions, similar interests, and a shared identity had a positive impact on students' sense of belonging, and enjoying each other's company, feeling supported, and having the freedom to be authentic were also essential outcomes of these experiences. Ultimately, students attributed feelings of belonging to being around people with whom they could be their authentic selves and who made them feel like they mattered; lack of close friends led to loneliness and feelings of disconnection.

These findings are in line with those of several studies showing that students' perceptions of social acceptance and friendships are linked to their sense of belonging (Pittman & Richmond, 2008) and that interventions to help first-year students forge social ties have positive effects on their adjustment to college (Folger et al., 2004; Lamothe et al., 2009). These findings are also in line with those of Read and colleagues (2020) and support the notion that friendships are critical in developing a sense of belonging for college students.

Restrictions Caused by Concerns About the COVID-19 Virus

At the beginning of the pandemic, participants experienced an initial reduction in their involvement and interactions with peers, but as concerns about the virus lessened, they began to open their social circles. This makes sense in terms of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, which posits that physiological and safety needs must be met prior to meeting any other higher need, such as belonging and self-actualization; only once an individual's basic needs are met are they able to consider their social needs (McLeod, 2007). Given their fear of contracting the virus and its negative impact on their friendships, students knew they had to prioritize, at least temporarily, the need for safety and security over their need for belonging.

Barriers Created by Pandemic Restrictions

Failure to feel incorporated in the social life of the institution is one of the primary factors contributing to students dropping out of college (Tinto, 1993). Though pandemic restrictions were intended to keep students safe, they also acted as barriers to socialization, interfering with the mechanisms they normally depended on to make friends—so they had to find alternative ways to make these connections. However, most of them were not able to maintain pre-pandemic friendships, even after the restrictions eased. Some students went home frequently because they felt so lonely; those who failed to make friends or spent too much time with former friends or family at home were more likely to be homesick and then more likely to go home frequently, thereby perpetuating the pattern of social isolation (MacKie, 2001).

The freedom to be authentic stood out as a consistent characteristic of the close friendships that helped students feel a sense of belonging.

Involvement and Group Membership

Results of this study show that students who remained involved in activities, particularly in-person events, developed a stronger sense of belonging. These findings are in line with those of Bohnert and colleagues (2007), who showed that involvement in activities helped students form new, high-quality friendships. The decrease in student involvement after the pandemic began resulted in fewer personal connections and interfered with the natural development of friendships into more mature, close relationships.

Interactions with Peers

This study found that student interactions were negatively impacted in many ways by the pandemic. When they returned to campus after the shutdown, they had limited opportunities to interact with others, even existing friends and especially in person. Participants revealed that social interactions felt uncomfortable, and they experienced an increasing number of negative interactions with peers and grieved not being able to spend time with one another in more organic ways. These findings are consistent with the conclusions of emerging literature that close interpersonal relationships with peers are central to college students' sense of belonging (Anistranski & Brown, 2021; Gano, 2021).

The Impact of Social Support

Friends were a major source of social support. They helped participants cope with feelings of stress, loneliness, and anxiety and served to meet both their social and emotional needs (Wilcox et al., 2005). Students also relied on social support services, which were effective mitigators for stress related to the pandemic (Szkody et al., 2021).

The Need for Authenticity

The freedom to be authentic stood out as a consistent characteristic of the close friendships that helped students feel a sense of belonging. Relationships that were referred to as “nonjudgmental” and “comfortable” and that made them feel “accepted” and “understood” were the kinds of friendships that allowed students to be themselves. Although feelings of mattering and reciprocity were important characteristics of friendships, they were not necessarily enough to support a sense of belonging. However, what they thought of as “belonging friendships” had a significant positive impact on sense of belonging because these relationships were supportive and allowed students to let their guards down and be their authentic selves. These findings are in line with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) assertion that belonging occurs through deep, meaningful interpersonal relationships with a select few people: relationships characterized by frequent and affectively pleasant interactions that are stable and enduring and involve a reciprocal concern for each other's welfare.

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

One limitation of this study is that causal relationships are difficult to establish via qualitative research. Generalizability is also challenging, particularly with a small sample size. These limitations were alleviated to some extent because the study was well structured and the research process was transparent. Self-selection bias, response bias, and recall bias were also possible. It is also possible that important non-verbal cues were missed or that rapport with participants suffered because interviews were conducted over Zoom. Also, since the interviews were being recorded for transcription purposes, participants may have shied away from sensitive topics.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE IN HOUSING AND RESIDENTIAL LIFE

Several years after the pandemic began, students are still feeling the effects of the drastic changes institutions implemented in the name of safety. Some of these decisions kept students apart instead of bringing them together, and the physical isolation translated to social isolation.

The pandemic clearly revealed how critical friendships are for developing feelings of belonging. Practitioners need to be intentional about removing barriers for students so they can rebuild social connections, gain the skills to make friends, and take advantage of ample opportunities to do so. Staff need to proactively identify those who have not successfully become involved, though the harder task will be to determine what interventions would be appropriate for each student.

During the pandemic, the role of residence life professionals shifted to focus on policy enforcement and safety, but now it is important for them to be intentional about re-prioritizing community-building efforts, with special attention paid to first-year and transfer students in the initial weeks of college. Pre-college events, such as admissions and orientation, provide opportunities for students to get to know one another, and being part of a residential community can help them forge friendships that are likely to deepen and continue. Residence life staff can create sub-communities (at the building level, floor level, in learning communities, etc.) to make the goal of meeting friends, becoming involved, and developing a sense of belonging more attainable. This is particularly important at larger institutions where some students can feel lost in larger residence halls and may feel overwhelmed when navigating myriad campus opportunities and resources. Staff should continue to take an active role in providing programs that appeal to students with varying interests.

When planning capital projects, colleges and universities should invest in creating spaces where students can congregate that are versatile enough to serve several purposes: spaces for study groups and social gatherings, as well as larger ones for performances and outdoor fields for sports. Staff who are responsible for budgets, assessment, programming, operations, and campus partnerships should understand the importance of helping students make connections. Residence life should assess whether the strategies and practices implemented are effective in fostering belonging; learning communities,

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for example, play an important role in engaging students in learning activities while increasing their sense of connection. Finally, housing officers should consider how practices on their individual campuses—such as room selection, roommate pairing, and guest policies—either support or hinder friendships. For example, though some institutions have moved away from allowing students to choose their roommates (on the assumption that living with others from different cultures or backgrounds is a valuable experience), some students, particularly students of color, perceive a more supportive campus environment when allowed to make their own choice (Hurtado et al., 2019).

Residence life often relies on resident assistants to be the first point of contact for students. Living in the residence halls with peers and sharing a living space (and perhaps classes or group affiliations) allows RAs to have a significant influence on their residents (Blimling, 2015). Given how much time RAs spend with residents, residence life professionals should consider an innovative and drastic approach to their staffing and programming models because old models may no longer adequately address the challenges and needs students now face.

Residence life professionals should create an explicit vision statement about student belonging so that practices throughout the organization can line up with these expectations. They should be prepared to set the bar high, take risks, and develop a sense of urgency and commitment to student success. Sometimes, residence life professionals get swallowed up by all the meetings, administrative tasks, and urgent student-related needs that are part of their jobs. It is the role of leadership to create mechanisms that allow these professionals time and energy to devote to the endeavors of promoting friendships and fostering belonging in their residents.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the central factors that contribute to a sense of belonging in college students and to examine the impact of the pandemic on their social lives. The pandemic interrupted students' collegiate experiences, which impacted their friendships and ultimately their sense of belonging; when they returned to campus, they could not easily bounce back to previous friendships. Friends were the major source of social support for students, but because their social circles were smaller, they either did not meet people with whom they could develop close friendships or were afraid to overburden their already small group of friends. They were, therefore, unable to be authentic in those relationships and struggled to form the deep interpersonal relationships that could contribute most to their sense of belonging. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Students' sense of belonging was dramatically disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected their ability to form genuine friendships. How do you perceive this finding in relation to your own campus environment?
2. What strategies could higher education institutions implement to enhance students' ability to build stronger social networks? In what ways might these strategies vary depending on the institution's type or size?
3. The pandemic had widespread effects on students at various educational levels from K-12 through college. What considerations should institutions keep in mind for each student cohort over the next few years? What long-term impacts might the isolation experienced during the pandemic have on student development, mental health, and campus engagement?
4. Do the changes in students' sense of belonging after the pandemic have lasting effects on future generations of students? If so, in what ways?
5. How would you distinguish between belonging and merely fitting in? Do you think the pandemic has amplified or clarified this distinction?
6. The author suggests that further research is needed on this subject. Based on the findings, what follow-up study would you design? What additional questions would you seek to explore?

Discussion questions were developed by Taylor Graham and Alexandriana Butka, Binghamton University in New York.