



Exploring the Relationship Between Residential Affinity Efforts and Sense of Belonging

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COLLEGE STUDENTS SEEK TO BELONG, and higher education institutions seek to cultivate belonging. Though many studies have examined sense of belonging in higher education institutions in general and living-learning communities in particular, we have focused on how students are impacted by the efforts of campus housing staff to increase this sense of affinity in particular residential environments. We operationalized a positivist paradigm to conduct a descriptive, correlational study involving cross-sectional survey data in order to understand which residential affinity efforts correlate with feeling as though one belongs to a collegiate residential community. A number of residential affinity efforts—such as community council participation, personal interactions with the residential community director, and personal interactions with the faculty-in-residence—proved to be statistically significant and positive in their relationship to various aspects of the sense of belonging, while affinity efforts involving the residential community social media, webpages, and weekly newsletters were negatively related. Recommendations are made for residence life and student housing professionals' practice and future research.

Community and belonging have been a longstanding emphasis of housing and residence life staff and are part of the unique benefits received by students living on campus (Cheng, 2004; Elkins et al., 2011; Hurtado et al., 2019; Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996). Though residents may experience community differently, the resulting feeling should be the same: a sense of belonging, which Hagerty and colleagues (1992) defined as “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be integral” (p. 173). Because many institutions have residential requirements for students, it is important for residence life and student housing professionals to understand how their efforts may contribute to or detract from students' sense of belonging. While much research has been conducted about the sense of belonging in living-learning communities (Sax et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2019) and more generally within institutions of higher learning (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Burke, 2019; Davis et al., 2019), no research to our knowledge focuses on the sense of belonging in terms of a particular residential environment or its relationship to efforts made by collegiate residence life and student housing staff to increase this sense of affinity. Because student success is often dependent on belonging, understanding the sense of belonging to subsystems or smaller environments within a college or university may also cultivate a more general feeling of affinity to a student's institution.

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DEFINING SENSE OF BELONGING AND COMMUNITY

Within higher education, collegians seek to belong, and institutions seek to cultivate belonging. Belonging has been defined in different ways over the years. While Hagerty and colleagues (1992) defined it in terms of a feeling of personal involvement, Sarason (1974) defined it in terms of a psychological sense of community (PSC), an important factor in human flourishing that has been connected to student success (Sriram et al., 2020). McMillan and Chavis (1986) delineated four elements integral for a sense of community:

The first element is membership. Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. The second element is influence, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. The third element is reinforcement: integration and fulfillment of needs. This is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. The last element is shared emotional connection, the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences. (p. 9)

More recently, Osterman (2000) used the concept of belongingness to define sense of community, analyzing and describing its impact on and importance in education. One of the conclusions drawn by Osterman was that a student's feeling of belonging to a school community can impact their self-image and naturally affects how they engage with the community. Students who lack a sense of community can isolate themselves from peers or teachers, which can lead to a disconnect from their community and also likely the university. Because residence hall staff and student-leader volunteers work to build community within residential buildings on campus, understanding what belonging to the community involves may help inform student engagement, programming, and other benefits of collegiate housing.

BELONGING AND PRACTICE

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1990) understood belonging in the broader scope of community and identified the principles that define community within higher education.

Six principles are presented that provide a formula for day-to-day decision making on the campus and define the kind of community every college and university should strive to be: (1) a purposeful community, (2) an open community, (3) a just community, (4) a disciplined community, (5) a caring community, and (6) a celebrative community. (p. 2)

The foundation promoted the use of improvement science as an approach to research that supports system reform, like developing professional learning communities to address needed educational reforms. Since then, others have studied belonging

at higher education institutions, indicating that belonging matters on a college or university campus. The feeling of not belonging indicates that students lack connection and engagement (Strayhorn, 2019), but a strong sense of belonging has been shown to correlate strongly with student success and a university's success as a whole (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Burke, 2019; Davis et al., 2019; Freeman et al., 2007; Osterman, 2000; Strayhorn, 2019). Housing and residence life professionals should be mindful of this correlation as they work to support the institution's academic mission. Gopalan and Brady (2019) found a positive relationship between an increased sense of belonging and higher persistence, engagement with on-campus resources, and mental health benefits for students enrolled at 4-year institutions, demonstrating the need for higher education to cultivate belonging on campus. Masika and Jones (2016) revealed that focus group students in their study viewed sense of belonging as being important for retention, which is often used to assess a university's success. Freeman and colleagues (2007) paralleled the sense of belonging with academic motivation, specifically looking at an instructor's impact on this feeling of personal involvement, and found that faculty encouragement of participation and interaction was most closely associated with a sense of belonging. Thus, belonging is of importance to the entire higher education community: faculty, staff, students, and administrators alike. Finally, Strayhorn (2019) called belonging a "critical dimension of success" (p. i), one that leads to elevated happiness, well-being, achievement, and more.

Ostrove and Long (2007) reported that the sense of belonging has crucial implications for the overall college experience and suggested that belongingness mediates a positive relationship between social class background and college adjustment. Thus, the power of belonging relative to students' social identities (Duran et al., 2020) and academic success is an important dynamic to explore. Museus and colleagues (2017) investigated the impact of a culturally engaging campus environment on sense of belonging and suggested that several dimensions of this kind of environment positively correlated with sense of belonging, including cultural validation and holistic support.

Involvement can help build students' sense of community (Noel-Elkins et al., 2019), and student affairs professionals, including campus housing professionals, can use programming as a way to get students more involved. Knekta and colleagues (2020) looked specifically at belonging within one academic department in terms of three factors: "involvement, sense of belonging: valued competence, and sense of belonging: social acceptance" (para. 41). And Strayhorn (2019) concluded that the sense of belonging is relational; the more colleges and universities can create smaller, more intimate communities (e.g., academic departments, clubs, organizations, learning communities) within the larger campus population, the more they will be able to strengthen students' relationships and their sense of belonging. One way to break down the larger campus community is to begin within residential environments.

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BELONGING AND RESIDENTIAL ENVIRONMENTS

Sense of belonging has been identified as an important gauge of students' well-being (Shalka & Leal, 2020). But where on a college campus do students feel they belong? Residence halls are the most obvious answer. As early as 1996, Lounsbury and DeNeui conducted a study of students' psychological sense of community and found that living on campus has a positive correlation with higher collegiate PSC scores. Cheng (2004) emphasized a connection between one's residential community and belonging, finding that students' sense of belonging was strongly impacted by their perception of care by the institution and their communities, as well as by loneliness and socializing opportunities on campus, which makes it clear that classrooms alone cannot create community and that student affairs professionals must find other avenues through which to create communities.

Students' residential experience proves to be critical in influencing their sense of campus community, positively or negatively . . . Students still call for a residential environment that is conducive to cultural, intellectual, and social interactions with their peers. One important lesson learned . . . is that students considered residence halls the place where academic, social, and cultural aspects of their college life could be integrated, with a sense of community ensued. (Cheng, 2004, pp. 228–229)

Cheng plainly identified the residential community as an area of focus when it comes to students' sense of belonging and reinforced this thought in a follow-up study, stating that "residence halls are the most important place for them to create a sense of community" (2005, p. 4). Even more recently, Spanierman and colleagues (2013) pointed out the potential role played by residence halls, especially living-learning communities, in contributing to students' sense of belonging and in fostering community connections, and they addressed activities and programs within residence halls as key factors.

Other scholars have contributed to knowledge concerning the connection between belongingness and residential spaces. For example, Inkelas and colleagues (2007) reported that students who live in residential environments integrating academic and social supports interact with peers and faculty at higher rates and experience a greater overall sense of belonging relative to other students living on campus. Similarly, Jehangir (2010) studied multicultural learning communities and found that combining academic and social engagements within a residential environment increases student involvement. Duran and colleagues (2020) presented a more critical quantitative analysis of sense of belonging for underrepresented communities within various collegiate environments and found that White students reported a higher sense of belonging than did first-generation and African American/Black students. Finally, Pittman and Richmond (2007) concluded that, when properly offered, residence hall programs positively contribute to the sense of belonging among residential students. These findings also demonstrate that merely living on campus does not foster belongingness; the

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residential space as well as the programming and efforts of staff and volunteers are also important factors.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RELEVANCE

All of these studies reinforce the need for our study and highlight a gap in specifically analyzing sense of belonging within a residential community that is not a living-learning community. Our study applied scales established by Hoffman and colleagues (2002) and Leach and colleagues (2008) to analyze sense of belonging in this way. Our intent was to understand residence life staff and student-leader volunteer efforts within the campus housing model that contribute to students' sense of belonging. These different elements can inform programming within residential communities and can contribute to student success and belonging at an institution. The two research questions for the present study were as follows:

- (a) Which residential affinity effort (RAE) contributes to students' perceived sense of belonging to their residential community?*
- (b) What is the relationship between RAEs and students' perceived sense of belonging to their residential community as measured by quantitative scales?*

We hypothesized a moderate positive relationship between RAEs and students' perceived sense of belonging.

METHODS

The research site was a mid-sized private liberal arts university in the southern United States with almost 12,000 students, including graduate and undergraduate students. The university is a predominately White institution composed of 56% undergraduates located near a major metropolitan city (Southern Methodist University [SMU], 2021). The research site enforces a 2-year live-on policy and operationalizes a residential college model (SMU, 2021). The research study and protocol were approved by the research site's institutional review board.

Design

We operationalized a positivist paradigm (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) to conduct a descriptive, correlational study involving cross-sectional survey data (Lau, 2017). The present study, as part of a larger longitudinal study examining students' sense of belonging to collegiate residential communities, sought to understand which RAEs correlate with this feeling of connectedness.

Instrument

The 41-item, researcher-developed survey was designed to understand the relationship between RAEs and sense of belonging to a collegiate residential community. The instrument sections can best be conceptualized as on-campus living satisfaction, sense-of-belonging scales (SOBSs), residential affinity efforts, and demographic questions. The researcher-developed instrument was evaluated for face and content validities (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) by a panel of experts consisting of higher education faculty, administrators, and undergraduate and graduate researchers. The six-person panel was provided with the intended purpose of the survey and asked to evaluate the instrument for clarity and purpose. Modifications were made to on-campus satisfaction and RAE items. No modifications were made to the adapted sense of belonging scales during this validation procedure.

After receiving participant consent, on-campus living satisfaction items were posed to respondents. Survey items invited respondents to share their level of satisfaction with living on campus, using a 5-point Likert scale. Additionally, a 10-point net promoter score item inquired about the respondent's likelihood to recommend their residential community to another student.

The second section contained SOBSs, which were constructed from two previously developed measures—Hoffman and colleagues' (2002) revised SOBS and Leach and colleagues' (2008) group-level self-definition and self-investment scale—which have been determined as valid and reliable for a college student population. Hoffman and colleagues' primary objective was to “develop, test, and further refine a ‘sense of belonging’ instrument that could be used to more fully understand why students persist in, or withdraw from, college” (p. 230). The scales were perceived peer support (eight items; $\alpha = 0.94$); perceived faculty support/classroom comfort containing six items, two of which were relevant to the study's purpose (two items; $\alpha = 0.80$); and perceived isolation (four items; $\alpha = 0.92$). Perceived classroom comfort and empathetic faculty understanding were omitted from the present study as they were determined to be irrelevant to the residential environment of the research site. Items were measured using a Likert-type scale from 1 = *completely untrue* to 5 = *completely true*. Higher scores on the SOBS indicated higher sense of belonging, except for perceived isolation, for which higher scores indicated lower isolation. For definitions of each subscale, see Hoffman and colleagues.

Leach and colleagues (2008) implemented a two-part hierarchical model encompassing five subscales to aid with “specifying the components of in-group identification” and to “enable fine-grained examinations of how one's particular form of identification with an in-group affects how one experiences and reacts to a specific group and intergroup contexts” (p. 163). To state it another way, the scale could help higher education administrators understand how an individual identifies with a group (in this case, their residential community) and to recognize the intergroup experiences associated with the identification (e.g., similarity with or difference from the group). Specifically, the model includes “self-definition (individual self-stereotyping, in-group

homogeneity) and self-investment (solidarity, satisfaction, and centrality) dimensions” (Leach et al., 2008, p. 144). In the present study, self-definition subscales included solidarity (three items; $\alpha = 0.95$); satisfaction (four items; $\alpha = 0.97$); and centrality (three items; $\alpha = 0.95$). Self-investment subscales included individual self-stereotyping (two items, $\alpha = 0.95$) and in-group homogeneity (two items, $\alpha = 0.94$). For definitions of each subscale, see Leach and colleagues.

Both established scales were adapted to measure participants’ sense of belonging to the residential community. For instance, one perceived isolation item (Hoffman et al., 2002) was modified from “It is difficult to meet other students in class” to “It is difficult to meet other students in my [residential community].” Additionally, one centrality item (Leach et al., 2008) was adapted from “I often think about the fact that I am [in a group]” to “I often think about the fact that I am part of my [residential community].”

The third section of the researcher-developed instrument encompassed RAEs, which were operationalized as passive and active programming, staff and faculty efforts, and other residentially based offerings (e.g., spaces) designed to bolster engagement with and a sense of belonging to a particular residential community. Table 1 (see pages 82-83) presents the RAEs for which respondents were asked to “select up to five factors that have most improved your sense of belonging to [residential community].”

Following the listed RAEs, an open-ended survey item asked respondents, “If there are additional factors (not listed above) that improved your sense of belonging to [residential community], please list them here.” Survey data were connected to institutional data to gather demographic information, including gender, race, academic classification, first-generation status, and transfer student status, to name a few.

Recruitment and Data Collection

We utilized a roster method, and all 2,504 students currently residing in university-operated undergraduate housing were invited to participate (Marsden, 1990) via their university email, following tailored recruitment methods (e.g., use of first name, residential community, and incentives relevant to the population) to bolster the response rate (Dillman et al., 2014). Nonrespondents received up to three reminders. A raffle was advertised for respondents to win one of seven potential prizes such as retail gift cards. The survey was administered in April 2021 and connected to a faculty-in-residence (FIR) student satisfaction assessment. A total of 734 students started the survey, resulting in a 29% response rate, with 198 students completing the survey. Table 2 (see page 84) presents the population and sample demographics to ensure appropriate representation.

The feeling of not belonging indicates that students lack connection and engagement, but a strong sense of belonging has been shown to correlate strongly with student success and a university’s success as a whole. Housing and residence life professionals should be mindful of this correlation as they work to support the institution’s academic mission.

TABLE 1**RAEs and Descriptions**

RAE	Description
Residential governing board events	Campus-wide events open to all on-campus residents to provide a common experience by a representative student-leader team.
Residential governing board	Governing board for residence halls that provides feedback, advocacy, and funding to individual residential communities.
Residential community events	Events open to a particular residential community or floor for the building. Events are often facilitated by the RA, community council, hall director, or FIR.
Swag	Branded items like hats, shirts, polos, and sweaters with the community's name, slogan, crest, or other identifying icons.
Residential community weekly newsletter	Weekly email correspondence containing safety information, upcoming program details, advice, reminders, campus resource overviews, and general updates for the specific residential community.
Residential community webpage	Unique webpage on the residence life departmental website featuring programs and specific community information.
Community council participation	Participation as a nonvoting or voting member of the community council within the residence hall. This may include active members or elected leadership on the council.
Personal interactions with RA	One-on-one, small-group, virtual, or in-person interactions with one's RA as defined by respondents.
Personal interactions with residential community director	One-on-one, small-group, virtual, or in-person interactions with one's residential community director—a full-time staff member living in the residential community—as defined by the respondent.
Personal interactions with FIR	One-on-one, small-group, virtual, or in-person interactions with the FIR—a live-in faculty member who offers a weekly program and advising to building residents—as defined by the respondent.
Opening convocation	A traditional welcome event soon after residence hall opening. Residents gather by the residential community and are led in a procession around campus by the community director, FIR, and community council president. Event ends with a welcoming speaker and ceremony kicking off the academic year.

Table 1 continues on page 83

TABLE 1 (continued)

RAEs and Descriptions

RAE	Description
Community spaces	Physical lounge and study spaces within the residential environment.
Residential community introduction program	A standardized program near the beginning of each semester designed to introduce residents to community leaders, logos, slogans, signature events, and other community-specific elements.
Residential community-specific orientation	During orientation, residents are grouped by their residential communities and participate in events together. Orientation leaders are also paired with residents where they currently live or formerly lived.
Residential community dinners	Quarterly meals hosted by the residence hall leadership team to promote community among the residents.
Other residents	Other students living in one's room, suite, hall, or building.
Residential community social media	Branded community social media page used to share highlights, program updates, and general information.

We acknowledge the overrepresentation of women and underrepresentation of sophomores within our sample and advise caution when interpreting the results in terms of these student demographic groups; however, other demographic characteristics in terms of ethnicity, Pell Grant eligibility, and first-generation status are proportional.

Data Analysis

To answer the first research question of this descriptive, correlational study, we used descriptive statistics and two correlational statistical tests. Specifically, in order to determine which RAE contributed most to a student's perceived sense of belonging to their residential community, we noted the frequencies and percentages of respondents' selection of the top five contributors to their sense of belonging.

To answer the second research question on the relationship between RAEs (independent variable) and students' perceived sense of belonging (dependent variable) to their residential community, we conducted point-biserial correlation when equal variances were present and Kendall rank correlation when equal variances were not present in the sample or outliers existed when examining a boxplot. Perceived sense of belonging was operationalized by the nine total subscales (Hoffman et al., 2002; Leach et al., 2008) discussed earlier. Statistical significance for all tests was set at $p < 0.05$.

TABLE 2
Population and Sample Demographics

Demographic	Population		Sample	
	<i>n</i>	percentage	<i>n</i>	percentage
<i>Ethnicity</i>				
American Indian/Alaska Native	4	.01%	0	0%
Asian	178	7%	11	6%
Black or African American	168	7%	11	6%
Hispanic of any race	339	14%	30	15%
Nonresident (any race)	65	3%	4	2%
Unknown	39	2%	4	2%
Two or more races	123	5%	15	8%
White	1,587	63%	123	62%
<i>Sex</i>				
Female	1,272	51%	130	66%
Male	1,232	49%	68	34%
<i>Other</i>				
Pell Grant recipient	309	12%	25	13%
First-generation college student	136	5%	13	7%
<i>Citizenship</i>				
U.S.	2,417	97%	194	98%
Outside the U.S.	87	3%	4	2%
<i>Admit type</i>				
First-year	2,257	90%	184	93%
Transfer	247	10%	14	7%
<i>Year (by admit term)</i>				
First-year	1,481	59%	99	50%
Sophomore	782	31%	43	22%
Junior	166	7%	40	20%
Senior	73	3%	16	8%

RESULTS

The first research question sought to understand which RAEs contribute to students' perceived sense of belonging to their residential community. Table 3 shows the number and percentage of students who chose each of the RAEs as a top-five factor contributing to their sense of belonging. The items chosen the most frequently were residential community events (59%), swag (50%), personal interactions with the FIR (46%), and personal interactions with the RA (36%).

For the second research question, we sought to understand the relationship between RAEs and students' perceived sense of belonging to their residential community. We ran Levene's test for equality of variances and ran either a Kendall's tau-b correlation if homogeneity of variances was not met or a Pearson point-biserial correlation if homogeneity of variances was met. Table 4 (*see page 86*) indicates the relationships between RAEs and SOBSs, with asterisks indicating significance. Of note, the residential community introduction program was removed as an RAE because the sample size was insignificant ($n = 3$). All other RAEs are listed in Table 4, but only the statistically significant relationships are described in the following paragraphs.

TABLE 3
Descriptive Statistics of Selected RAEs

RAE	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Residential governing board events	26	13%
Residential community events	116	59%
Swag	99	50%
Residential community weekly newsletter	24	12%
Residential community webpage	7	4%
Community council participation	36	18%
Personal interactions with RA	71	36%
Personal interactions with residential community director	55	28%
Personal interactions with FIR	91	46%
Opening convocation	11	6%
Community spaces	47	14%
Residential community introduction program	3	2%
Residential community-specific orientation	24	12%
Residential community dinners	24	12%
Other residents	54	12%
Residential community social media	14	7%

TABLE 4

Correlation Coefficients Between RAEs and Sense of Belonging

	Governing board events	Community events	Swag	Weekly newsletter	Webpage	Council participation	RA interactions	Community director interactions	FIR interactions	Opening convocation	Community spaces	Community orientation	Community dinners	Other residents	Community social media
<i>Leach et al. (2008)</i>															
Centrality	.142*	.120	.054	-.129	-.019	.198**	.103	.284**	.149	-.107	-.057	.055	.056	-.109	-.104
Satisfaction	.082	.132	-.002	-.114	-.112	.248**	.169*	.245**	.194**	-.104	.049	.078	-.002	-.058	-.205**
Solidarity	.109	.155*	-.029	-.113	-.086	.258**	.144*	.229**	.198**	-.118	.034	.077	-.056	-.044	-.129
In-group homogeneity	.116	.103	-.066	-.160	.049	.094	.005	.244**	.108	-.073	.100	-.063	.079	.028	-.043
Individual self-stereotyping	.145	.109	-.041	-.139	.032	.181**	.027	.229**	.137	-.079	.035	.004	.04	.005	-.150
Identification	.177*	.180*	.008	-.135	-.090	.216**	.102	.254**	.161*	-.091	.053	.097	-.014	-.048	-.140*
<i>Hoffman et al. (2002)</i>															
Perceived faculty support	.023	.056	.009	-.168*	-.211**	.113	.190**	.261**	.427**	-.178*	-.013	.028	-.061	.021	-.185*
Perceived peer support	0	-.008	.578	-.096	-.093	.194**	.203**	.244**	.172*	-.117	.133	-.009	-.080	.093	-.203*
Perceived isolation	-.154*	-.06	.155	0.044	.098	-.210**	-.059	-.098	-.166*	.190*	-.037	-.033	.037	-.083	.075

Note: Asterisks indicate significance. Items with one asterisk indicate $p < 0.05$ and items with two asterisks indicate $p < 0.01$. If the data included outliers or if homogeneity of variances was not met, we ran a Kendall's tau-b correlation. If there were no outliers and homogeneity of variances was met, we utilized a Pearson's point-biserial correlation.

Involvement can help build students' sense of community, and student affairs professionals, including campus housing professionals, can use programming as a way to get students more involved.

Residential Community Governing Board Events

A Kendall's tau-b correlation was run to determine the relationship between events hosted by the residential community governing board and students' feeling of centrality. There was a weak positive association between governing board events and student centrality that was statistically significant ($\tau_b = 0.142, p = 0.038$).

A point-biserial correlation was run between governing board events and students' feeling of identification. Data are mean $\pm$ standard deviation unless otherwise stated. Preliminary analysis showed (a) no outliers as assessed by boxplot; (b) normally distributed identification as determined by q-q plot; and (c) homogeneity of variances as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances. There was a statistically significant correlation between governing board event attendance and identification [$r_{pb}(151) = 0.177, p = 0.028$], with students who listed governing board events ($M = 5.04, SD = 1.41$) as a contributing factor having higher levels of identification than those who did not ($M = 4.80, SD = 1.75$). Governing board events accounted for 3.13% of identification.

A Kendall's tau-b correlation was run to determine the relationship between governing board events and students' perceived isolation. There was a weak negative association between governing board events and perceived isolation that was statistically significant ($\tau_b = -0.154, p = 0.025$).

Residential Community Events

A Kendall's tau-b correlation was run to determine the relationship between events hosted by the residential community and students' sense of solidarity. There was a weak positive association between residential community events and solidarity that was statistically significant ($\tau_b = 0.155, p = 0.027$).

A point-biserial correlation was run between residential community events and students' feeling of identification. Data are mean $\pm$ standard deviation unless otherwise stated. Preliminary analysis showed (a) no outliers as assessed by boxplot and (b) homogeneity of variances as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances. There was a statistically significant correlation between residential community event attendance and identification [$r_{pb}(151) = 0.180, p = 0.026$], with those who reported residential community events as a contributing factor ($M = 5.11, SD = 1.63$) having higher identification scores than those who did not ($M = 4.39, SD = 1.87$). Residential community events accounted for 3.24% of identification scores.

Residential Community Weekly Newsletter

A Kendall's tau-b correlation was run to determine the relationship between residential community weekly newsletters and students' perceived faculty support. There was

a weak negative correlation between community weekly newsletters and perceived faculty support ($\tau_b = -0.168, p = 0.020$).

Residential Community Webpage

A Kendall's tau-b correlation was run to determine the relationship between the residential community webpage and students' perceived faculty support. There was a weak negative correlation between the residential community webpage and perceived faculty support that was statistically significant ($\tau_b = -0.211, p = 0.004$).

Community Council Participation

A Kendall's tau-b association was run to determine the relationship between community council participation and students' sense of centrality, satisfaction, solidarity, individual self-stereotyping, identification, perceived peer support, and perceived isolation. There was a weak positive association between community council participation and the following SOBSs that was statistically significant:

- centrality ($\tau_b = 0.198, p = 0.004$)
- satisfaction ($\tau_b = 0.248, p < 0.0005$)
- solidarity ($\tau_b = 0.258, p < 0.0005$)
- individual self-stereotyping ($\tau_b = 0.181, p = 0.009$)
- identification ($\tau_b = 0.216, p = 0.001$)
- perceived peer support ($\tau_b = 0.194, p = 0.006$).

There was, however a weak negative association with perceived isolation that was statistically significant ($\tau_b = -0.210, p = 0.002$).

Personal Interactions with Resident Advisor

A Kendall's tau-b test was run to determine the relationship between personal interactions with the resident advisor (RA) and all of the SOBSs, of which we report the statistically significant results (satisfaction, solidarity, perceived faculty support, and perceived peer support). There was a weak positive association between personal interactions with the RA and the following SOBSs that was statistically significant:

- satisfaction ($\tau_b = 0.169, p = 0.016$)
- solidarity ($\tau_b = 0.144, p = 0.040$)
- perceived faculty support ($\tau_b = 0.190, p = 0.009$)
- perceived peer support ($\tau_b = 0.203, p = 0.004$).

Personal Interactions with Residential Community Director

A point-biserial correlation was run between personal interactions with the residential community director and students' feeling of centrality. Data are mean $\pm$ standard

deviation unless otherwise stated. Preliminary analyses showed (a) no outliers as assessed by boxplot; (b) normally distributed centrality as determined by q-q plot; and (c) homogeneity of variances, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances. There was a statistically significant correlation between personal interactions with the director and resident centrality [$r_{pb}(151) = 0.284$, $p < 0.0005$], with those who reported personal interactions with their director as a contributing factor ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.93$) having higher levels of centrality than those who did not ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 2.03$). Personal interactions with the director accounted for 8.07% of centrality scores.

A Kendall's tau-b correlation was run to determine the relationship between personal interactions with the residential community director and resident satisfaction and resident solidarity. There was a weak positive correlation that was statistically significant: personal interactions with the director and resident satisfaction ($\tau_b = 0.245$, $p = 0.001$) and personal interactions with the director and resident solidarity ($\tau_b = 0.229$, $p = 0.001$).

A point-biserial correlation was run between personal interactions with the director and in-group homogeneity. Data are mean $\pm$ standard deviation unless otherwise stated. Preliminary analyses showed (a) no outliers as assessed by boxplot; (b) normally distributed in-group homogeneity as determined by q-q plot; and (c) homogeneity of variances as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances. There was a statistically significant correlation between personal interactions with the residential community director and in-group homogeneity [$r_{pb}(151) = 0.244$, $p = 0.002$], with those who listed personal interactions with the director as a factor ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.53$) having higher in-group homogeneity scores than those who did not ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.66$). Personal interactions with the director accounted for 5.95% of in-group homogeneity scores.

A point-biserial correlation was run between personal interactions with the residential community director and individual self-stereotyping. Data are mean $\pm$ standard deviation unless otherwise stated. Preliminary analyses showed (a) no outliers as assessed by boxplot; (b) normally distributed individual self-stereotyping as determined by q-q plot; and (c) homogeneity of variances as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances. There was a statistically significant correlation between personal interactions with the director and individual self-stereotyping [$r_{pb}(151) = 0.229$, $p = 0.004$], with those listing personal interactions with the director ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.74$) having higher individual self-stereotyping scores than those who did not ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.93$). Personal interactions with the community director accounted for 3.28% of individual self-stereotyping scores.

... a student's feeling of belonging to a school community can impact their self-image and naturally affects how they engage with the community. Students who lack a sense of community can isolate themselves from peers or teachers, which can lead to a disconnect from their community and also likely the university.

A Kendall's tau-b correlation was run to determine the relationship between personal interactions with the residential community director and identification, perceived faculty support, and perceived peer support. There was a weak positive correlation between personal interactions with the community director and the following SOBSs that was statistically significant:

- identification ($\tau_b = 0.254, p < 0.0005$)
- perceived faculty support ($\tau_b = 0.261, p < 0.0005$)
- perceived peer support ($\tau_b = 0.244, p = 0.001$).

Personal Interactions with Faculty-in-Residence

A Kendall's tau-b test was run to determine the relationship between personal interactions with the faculty-in-residence and all of the SOBSs, of which we report the statistically significant results (i.e., satisfaction, solidarity, identification, perceived peer support, and perceived faculty support). There was a weak positive correlation between personal interactions with the FIR and the following SOBSs that was statistically significant:

- satisfaction ($\tau_b = 0.194, p = 0.006$)
- solidarity ($\tau_b = 0.198, p = 0.005$)
- identification ($\tau_b = 0.161, p = 0.017$)
- perceived peer support ($\tau_b = 0.172, p = 0.014$).

There was, however, a moderate positive correlation between personal interactions with the FIR and perceived faculty support that was statistically significant ($\tau_b = 0.427, p < 0.0005$).

A point-biserial correlation was run between personal interactions with the FIR and perceived isolation. Data are mean $\pm$ standard deviation unless otherwise stated. Preliminary analyses showed (a) no outliers as assessed by boxplot; (b) normally distributed perceived isolation as determined by q-q plot; and (c) homogeneity of variances as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances. There was a statistically significant correlation between personal interactions with the FIR and perceived isolation [$r_{pb}(151) = -0.166, p = 0.041$], with those who listed personal interactions with the FIR ($M = 2.34, SD = 1.22$) having lower isolation levels than those who did not ($M = 2.74, SD = 1.15$). Personal interactions with the FIR accounted for 2.76% of perceived isolation scores.

Opening Convocation

A Kendall's tau-b correlation was run to determine the relationship between the opening convocation in the residential community and perceived faculty support. There was a weak negative association between the opening convocation and perceived faculty support that was statistically significant ($\tau_b = -0.178, p = 0.014$).

The weak but positive correlations between interactions with student staff and professional staff and multiple SOBSs highlight the importance of live-in faculty, professional staff, and student staff.

A point-biserial correlation was run between the opening convocation and perceived isolation. Data are mean $\pm$ standard deviation unless otherwise stated. Preliminary analyses showed (a) no outliers as assessed by boxplot; (b) normally distributed perceived isolation as determined by q-q plot; and (c) homogeneity of variances, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances. There was a statistically significant correlation between the opening convocation and perceived isolation [$r_{pb}(151) = 0.190$, $p = 0.019$], with those who listed the opening convocation as a contributing factor ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.31$) reporting higher isolation levels than those who did not ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.17$). The opening convocation accounted for 3.61% of perceived isolation scores.

Residential Community Social Media

A Kendall's tau-b test was run to determine the relationship between residential community social media and satisfaction, identification, perceived faculty support, and perceived peer support. There was a weak negative association between residential community social media and the following SOBSs that was statistically significant:

- satisfaction ($\tau_b = -0.205$, $p = 0.004$)
- identification ($\tau_b = -0.140$, $p = 0.039$)
- perceived faculty support ($\tau_b = -0.185$, $p = 0.011$)
- perceived peer support ($\tau_b = -0.203$, $p = 0.004$).

DISCUSSION

We sought to understand the relationship between RAEs and the sense of belonging to a collegiate residential community by combining and adapting two SOBSs (Hoffman et al., 2002; Leach et al., 2008). Combining two scales extends existing higher education literature and opens up possibilities for housing and residence life professionals. The results for our first research question—what RAEs students perceived as most important—are depicted in Table 3. Of the RAEs listed for students to choose from, respondents selected residential community events (59%; $n = 116$), swag (50%; $n = 99$), personal interactions with the FIR (46%; $n = 91$), and personal interactions with resident advisors (36%; $n = 71$) as contributing most to their sense of belonging to their residential community. However, residential community events were discovered to have a statistically significant positive correlation with two SOBSs (solidarity and identification), while swag did not result in a statistically significant result with any of the SOBSs. Personal interactions with the FIR resulted in statistically significant correlations in all subscales except centrality, in-group homogeneity, and individual self-stereotyping. Personal interactions with RAs led to statistically significant correlations with satisfaction, solidarity, perceived faculty support, and perceived peer support.

These results reveal a divergence between self-reported utilization of RAEs by students and the results of the statistical correlation tests on the quantitative measures. Respondents selected the residential community introduction program least frequently (only 2% of the time) as contributing to sense of belonging. Residential community webpages, weekly newsletters, and residential social media resulted in solely negative correlations with SOBSs; these were identified by respondents as contributing to their sense of belonging to their residential community 12% or less of the time. Regardless of the respondents' reporting frequency, understanding student perceptions of RAEs is important to guiding the positional responsibilities of residence life staff. Therefore, this study is novel in reporting both student perceptions of RAEs that contribute to sense of belonging and quantitative statistical correlations. Much of the research on belonging has discussed climate, culture, or belonging to a program (Duran et al., 2020), but it is important to understand institutional agents' actions and efforts, in particular, to cultivate belonging. This research begins to highlight more and less meaningful efforts that institutional agents, specifically collegiate housing professionals, can make in cultivating residential sense of belonging.

Next, related to the second research question where we hypothesized a moderate positive relationship between RAEs and student sense of belonging, we must reject the alternative hypothesis in favor of the null, as the results varied by RAE and SOBS. Furthermore, correlations indicated both positive and negative directions, with most demonstrating weak strength levels. To illustrate, each SOBS had a positive correlation with at least one RAE. The subscale with the most positive correlations was solidarity, with four positive correlations to RAEs. Centrality, satisfaction, perceived peer support, and perceived faculty support each correlated with three RAEs. These results show that residence life and housing professionals have the greatest ability to positively influence residential sense of belonging via interactions of residents with the RA, community director, and FIR, which reiterates the importance of faculty, staff, and peer-leader interactions in the residential experience.

Perceived isolation was negatively correlated with three RAEs. It is important to note that while reviewing the correlation scores within results, the higher end of the Likert scale for perceived isolation indicates a greater level of perceived isolation by respondents. It is likely that the perceived isolation scores were higher than what would be assumed, given the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mucci-Ferris et al., 2021) on the research site at the time of this study when quarantining and social-distancing practices were still in effect. Our expectation is that as COVID-19 protocols are discontinued, perceived isolation scores will go down and sense of belonging will improve. Future research should monitor changes in perceived isolation as we emerge into a new normal after the height of the pandemic.

Our research supports Strayhorn's (2019) conclusions that embedded staff and faculty positively contribute to students' sense of belonging and also extends them to include a residence hall community rather than a more specific program. The weak but positive correlations between interactions with student staff and professional staff and multiple SOBSs highlight the importance of live-in faculty, professional staff, and stu-

dent staff. It is commonly understood in the field that residence life programs should invest in their staff and leadership teams (Strayhorn, 2019) by continuing to employ live-in faculty, professional staff, and student staff and by being mindful of the ratio of staff to students and/or the number of buildings they oversee. Some housing operations have one live-in staff member serving multiple buildings; this is not the case at this research site, with more than three-quarters of buildings having one residence life staff member and one live-in faculty member.

Residential programming and events continue to cultivate a sense of belonging among students, as highlighted by the correlations between residential community governing board events and centrality, identification, and perceived isolation. These findings support the earlier work of Spanierman and colleagues (2013), who determined that residential programming and events cultivate belonging. Additionally, decreased perceived isolation is related to decreased loneliness, as discovered by Cheng's (2004) research on students' perceptions of the campus community. Unlike the current literature, our study differentiated governing board events from other residential programming and events occurring within the building. Residential community governing board events at the research site are distinct as they foster inter-residential community competitions and campus-wide connections. For this reason, residence life programs should invest in residential community governing board events and campus-wide programming to support the development of students' sense of belonging to collegiate residence life.

We suggest that residence hall staff discontinue or revise various RAEs that are not contributing to, or may be detracting from, the cultivation of belonging. Residential community dinners and community-specific orientation experiences were not shown to contribute significantly to any of the SOBSs. Efforts surrounding these RAEs should focus on utilizing the experiences to create more opportunities for personal interactions with the RA, residential community director, and FIR, all of which were shown to have a positive, significant correlation with sense of belonging. While residential college environments often incorporate dining experiences, they may not positively influence students' residential sense of belonging as much as expected. This connection between dining and housing can be further explored.

Weekly newsletters and perceived faculty support produced a weak negative correlation that was statistically significant. We recommend that a section of the newsletter be devoted to FIRs or other live-in academic professionals who can offer words of wisdom, academic reminders, and other helpful hints to be digitally present for students within the residential community. This may improve the perception of live-in faculty and improve scores within this SOBS.

Our results indicate that the greatest impact on belonging is experiences with people (e.g., FIRs, RAs, residential community directors) rather than more indirect efforts like community orientations or weekly newsletters.

Finally, social media had only a negative, statistically significant correlation across the subscales of satisfaction, identification, perceived faculty support, and perceived peer support. Although some literature has suggested that social media contribute to belonging (Vincent, 2016), our study suggests that they may actually detract from some aspects of belonging like satisfaction, identification, perceived faculty support, and perceived peer support. Future research should further explore the impact of social media and belonging to a residential community. It is recommended that housing and residence life efforts deemphasize social media in their efforts to increase a sense of belonging, limiting them to business or operational communications.

LIMITATIONS

While we believe this study to be sound, we note three limitations. First, a correlation study does not equate to causation. We encourage further research on RAEs at other institution types employing a myriad of housing operation types (e.g., traditional, apartments, living-learning communities, and residential colleges). Second, because the fidelity of RAEs varies year by year, longitudinal studies should explore how the quality and impact of such efforts change. For instance, do programmatic changes in orientation or the quality of community council advisors impact the sense of belonging associated with these RAEs? Finally, we acknowledge a limitation in the scale reliability of the modified Hoffman and colleagues' (2002) SOBS. Specifically, we decreased the existing scales of perceived faculty support from six items to the two that were relevant to the purpose of the study. We also removed the subscales "empathetic faculty understanding" and "perceived classroom comfort," as the items were not relevant to the study's purpose. These modifications threaten the reliability of the instrument; however, we used Cronbach's alpha to report the adapted scales' reliability. Future researchers should develop and validate SOBSs for use in the collegiate residence life context.

CONCLUSION

The value of students feeling that they belong cannot be understated. The results of our study show that efforts by residential community professional staff, faculty, and volunteer student-leaders vary in their contributions to sense of belonging, ranging from weak but consistent positive correlations with most if not all subscales (i.e., personal interactions with the residential community director) to only weak negative correlations (i.e., residential community social media) with some subscales. Our results indicate that the greatest impact on belonging is experiences with people (e.g., FIRs, RAs, residential community directors) rather than more indirect efforts like community orientations or weekly newsletters. To cultivate residential sense of belonging, events should emphasize opportunities for interaction between faculty/staff and students. While our results parallel those of previous research, future research should be conducted on sense of belonging in the collegiate residence life context. In particular, scholars should continue to study RAEs and their contributions to sense of belonging and overall student success. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do your department's social media goals include an increased sense of belonging? If so, analyze the current content to determine if it negatively contributes to (or simply does not include) anything that relates to belongingness. What can be improved? What kind of content can be added that may help viewers feel a human connection?
2. If your campus is not one of the more than 225 campuses with a Residence Hall Association, consider if instituting a hall council is worth exploring as a way to increase a sense of belonging. The authors mention campus-wide programming and competitions. What do you suspect are the characteristics of RHA events that contribute to belongingness?
3. How can community events with food be changed to ensure that there is increased human interaction?
4. Interpersonal interactions are key for students to develop a sense of belonging, including both one-on-one and small group interactions. How can staff creatively alter daily work to include more interactions without adding to the task list and also staying within budget? If staff interactions increase, what strategies can introverted staff utilize to recharge at the end of the day?

Discussion questions developed by Amy Paciej-Woodruff, Marywood University