

**The Influence of Ethnicity and Employment Status in Sense of Belonging
in Undergraduate Students**

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of ethnicity and employment on sense of belonging in undergraduate students using a Sense of Belonging survey that is formatted using a 5-point Likert Scale. Previous research suggests that there is an interaction with one's sense of belonging from employment status and ethnicity. The financial obligation to be employed and racial factors such as stigmatization while finding a place of belonging is a long-observed struggle that many students encounter in their undergraduate career. This study involves 211 participants and will investigate the definition and impact of sense of belonging on an individual who experiences work and minority ethnicity.

Keywords

sense of belonging, undergraduate students, ethnicity, employment

The Influence of Ethnicity and Employment Status in Sense of Belonging in Undergraduate Students

Research suggests that an undergraduate student's ethnicity and employment factor into their sense of belonging while attending university. Financial stability and the affordability of higher education is both a growing concern and an underrepresented research topic. With the rising costs of higher education, students who identify as first-generation college student (FGCS) or a student from low-income families may feel it is necessary to obtain employment during their undergraduate studies. Employment parttime and full-time, may inhibit the required social bonding within a university environment by requiring a FGCS to prioritize their work schedule differently than a student who is financially privileged. Previous research demonstrates that sense of belonging will predict favorable outcomes such as academic achievement and academic motivation (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Students who identify as low-income or FGCS are more likely to miss more social opportunities that would develop connections with university peers, faculty, and the university (Nguyen & Herron, 2021).

Representation of ethnicity at a university has significant impact on a student's perception of belonging on campus. An under-represented ethnicity may influence a student's feelings of loneliness and alienation which negatively influences academic achievement, motivation, and self-esteem (Walton & Cohen, 2007 & Fong et al, 2021). Decreased self-esteem inhibits an individual's outreach to peers and will increase feelings of loneliness, thus negatively impact self-efficacy (an individual's belief that they possess the capability to execute and control in a specific environment).

In this study, we will expand the investigation of the interaction and influence that ethnicity and employment on sense of belonging in undergraduate students.

Literature

The cost of higher education has increased in recent years that require many students to find employment to financially support their undergraduate studies or use employment to supplement their tuition costs after student loans. Students who identify as first-generation or a low-income individual who receives grants such as Pell will often feel behind in persistence, completion, and belongingness as opportunities of developing relationships with university peers and faculty are reduced as the need for employment rises (Nguyen & Herron, 2021). The study that Nguyen & Herron referenced in their study states that in 2014-2017 there were more than 80% of student's identifying as low-income who were employed while in their undergraduate studies and more than 30% of those students were working more than 40 hours per week in addition to their time in the classroom (Nguyen & Herron, 2021). Among first-year and first-time college students, Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, and Ditzfield reported in their study of the retention in first-generation college students that financial concerns remained consistent with previous research amongst first-year students and that first-generation students were more likely to hold at least a part-time position during their undergraduate studies which impacted their social lives on campus due to school and working schedule (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditsfield, 2019). In the Fall semester, an online survey was distributed to all first-year and transfer students. The study did not show a significance in solely the first-generation students but revealed that they are experiencing similar effects as other students and upperclassmen. As all students arrive on campus, financial security is a common experience that with increased work schedule to afford education and dedicated time for schoolwork, there will likely be a lower level of student involvement observed (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfield).

Undergraduate students who identify with an underrepresented group during their time at university may have a significantly less sense of belonging compared to the group majority. A study conducted by Walton and Cohen suggest that sense of belonging in minority groups may be due to stigmatization and be targeted by negative stereotypes (Walton & Cohen, 2007) which would then impact a student psychologically by means of

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their self-esteem and sense of belonging at the institution. Walton and Cohen's study consisted of two experiments measuring threats to social belongingness through experimental manipulation or naturally occurring social adversity. The first experiment requested that one group to present eight friends who fit well in the field (Walton & Cohen, 2007) and a second group to instead present two friends. The group to recall eight friends demonstrated difficulty when compared to the recall two friends group, but it did not differ among races. Experiment two involved normalizing doubts about a minority student's social belongingness to improve their academic motivation (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Both studies were given a pilot test. The second experiment showed that the Black people who received the affirmation treatment were significantly higher than any other group as well as the Black control group.

A study involving the cultural development and academic achievement of Indigenous students in 2021 also explored how stigmatization affects sense of belonging amongst Indigenous students as their cultural perspective is central to their sense of self (Fong, Owens, Segovia, et al., 2021). This study explored the relationship between institutional support and culture to academic success of indigenous students their impact on sense of belonging. Using a 4-point Likert Scale sense of belonging survey, data from 22 tribal colleges were collected. The results demonstrated that as sense of belonging increased, grade-point average increased (Fong, Segovia, et al., 2021). The researchers mentioned in their future directions to use a fuller scale and using an institutional difference as a comparison.

An individual's development and satisfaction of interpersonal relationships by means of self and perceived acceptance and the value that others perceive of the individual is what creates sense of belonging. A study conducted by Joy, Ninitha, & Nimy analyzed Abraham Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* to determine if sense of belonging along with self-esteem and grit satisfied higher needs such as self-actualization and determined that belongingness does have a role in self-actualization (Joy, Ninitha, & Nimy, 2020). Sense of belonging is labeled as the third basic needs once safety and the physical self in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and

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this need of belonging is a basic need when searching for community (Joy, Ninitha, Nimy, & 2020). In a separate study conducted by Chrysikos, Ahmed, & Ward, the researchers use a reformatted version of Vincent Tinto's 1993 model of the student integration theory (See Figure 1) which examines student academic and social integration and how the student will reexamine their commitments and goals from the academic institutions. Nora et. al's 2004 model of student persistence and degree attainment (See figure 2) was used to include factors, but not limited to financial needs, commute, and family support that would affect minority students, low-income students, and non-traditional students (Chang, Sharkness, Hurtado, et al, 2014). This study will investigate more into sense of belonging in undergraduate students under the influence of employment and ethnicity.

Methods

Participants

Researchers collected a total of 226 undergraduate participants between the ages of 18 to 26+, and all participants are undergraduates at Old Dominion University (ODU). Each researcher was responsible for collecting five participants. The majority of the participants were between the ages of 21-25 (47.2%) and participants in the minority were students reporting 26 and older (8.3%). The ethnic majority collected in the sample identified as White (36.4%). The ethnic minority collected in the sample identified as Bi- or Multi-racial (34.1%). There is no ethics approval as this study is performed under the guidance of a psychology professor and for academic use only. Participants were recruited by class researchers and were made aware that there was no compensation for their participation.

Materials

The purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between ethnicity and employment and their effect on an individual's sense of belonging during their undergraduate studies. Each participant receives a digital code or access link from a class researcher to access the survey on either their mobile device or desktop and responses are documented through

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Qualtrics®. A codebook was used to translate the qualitative data to qualitative data to allow the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program to interpret and analyze the variables.

Procedure

The Sense of Belonging Survey (SOB; Hoffman et al., 2003) was used to measure sense of belonging in the sample of undergraduate students at Old Dominion University. Each researcher collected five participants for a total of 226 participants. When requesting participation, the researcher then informs the potential participant that there is no compensation for their participation and that their responses are strictly used for research purposes and identities are protected. The survey was made accessible to the participants through a QR code and a link to the online survey developed through Qualtrics® (www.qualtrics.com). The survey is un-timed to allow the participant to complete in their personal time in a non-stressful presentation.

The survey requested voluntary, preliminary information that categorized them into the independent variables to be used by class researchers such as age, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, major, employment status, commute to campus, and time spent on campus outside their academic schedule. The survey (See Figure 3) is formatted in a Likert Scale after preliminary questions are completed and range from 1 (completely untrue) to 5 (completely true).

Participants answered 26 statements with a bubble response under the number that most represented their feelings towards each statement. The duration of the survey was between eight and ten minutes. Once a participant submits their answers, they are no longer obligated to the study and the data is then submitted to a data pool. After collection, the data is encoded using a code manual to be used into SPSS to analyze and interpret the results to determine the relationship of employment and ethnicity in sense of belonging.

Results

Descriptive statistics and frequency distributions were calculated to examine the collected data [Table 1]. The descriptive statistic of the sense of belonging was not kurtotic (.23) nor skewed (-0.27) as both of the values are less than the absolute value of 2 which indicated that the sense of belonging scores are normally distributed ($M = 3.26, SD = .47$).

The ANOVA analysis examined ethnicity and sense of belonging in undergraduate students. Results of the ANOVA showed as insignificant between ethnicities self-identified as White ($n = 76, M = 3.34, SD = .43$), Black ($n = 63, M = 3.20, SD = .51$), and Other ($n = 73, M = 3.24, SD = .47$) and sense of belonging; $F(2, 211) = 1.57, p = .21$.

An additional ANOVA showed that there was no significance between employment statuses of Not Employed ($n = 35, M = 3.27, SD = .52$), Parttime ($n = 98, M = 3.30, SD = .44$), and Full-time ($n = 35, M = 3.27, SD = .46$) with sense of belonging; $F(2, 11) = .617, p = .54$.

Discussion

In the data collected from the sample of undergraduate students, there was no significant evidence to imply that a student's employment status and ethnic identity impacted sense of belonging. The study allowed the researcher to investigate the effects that ethnicity and employment on sense of belonging in undergraduate students. Though previous research suggested that there are significant effects from employment and ethnicity on sense of belonging, the data from the sample does not support the alternative hypothesis that suggests there is an effect.

Limitations and Future Study

The study had a few limitations. Though we had a medium sized sample that allowed the researchers to determine interactions amongst each variable's effect on sense of belonging, to have a large sample would be preferable to observe significances in the data. 211 students

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out of the thousands of undergraduates that attend on-campus classes may not represent the population fairly as the researchers distributed the survey through peers. There were participants who did not complete every question in the survey which led to lost data that may have shown significance if recorded correctly. As studies mentioned previous had used surveys only as a way to collect data, it could be beneficial to select a sample of the population sample to an in-person interview to allow an open-question forum about an individual's sense of belonging as was successful in Nguyen's study. For the convenience of the student participants, to distribute a comprehensible survey and submit during their leisure time is essential to quality responses in the study.

Conclusion

More investigation is required to make the direct connection that an undergraduate student's ethnicity and employment status affect their sense of belonging in their institution. Though results from previous research studies who utilized similar methods of data collection reported significant results, this collected sample did not demonstrate significant results. Researching sense of belonging in undergraduate students increases methods of improving self-efficacy and achieve self-actualization while in one's studies to have a successful academic career and build positive social connections and overall sense of belongingness for satisfaction at their institution.

Tables and Figures

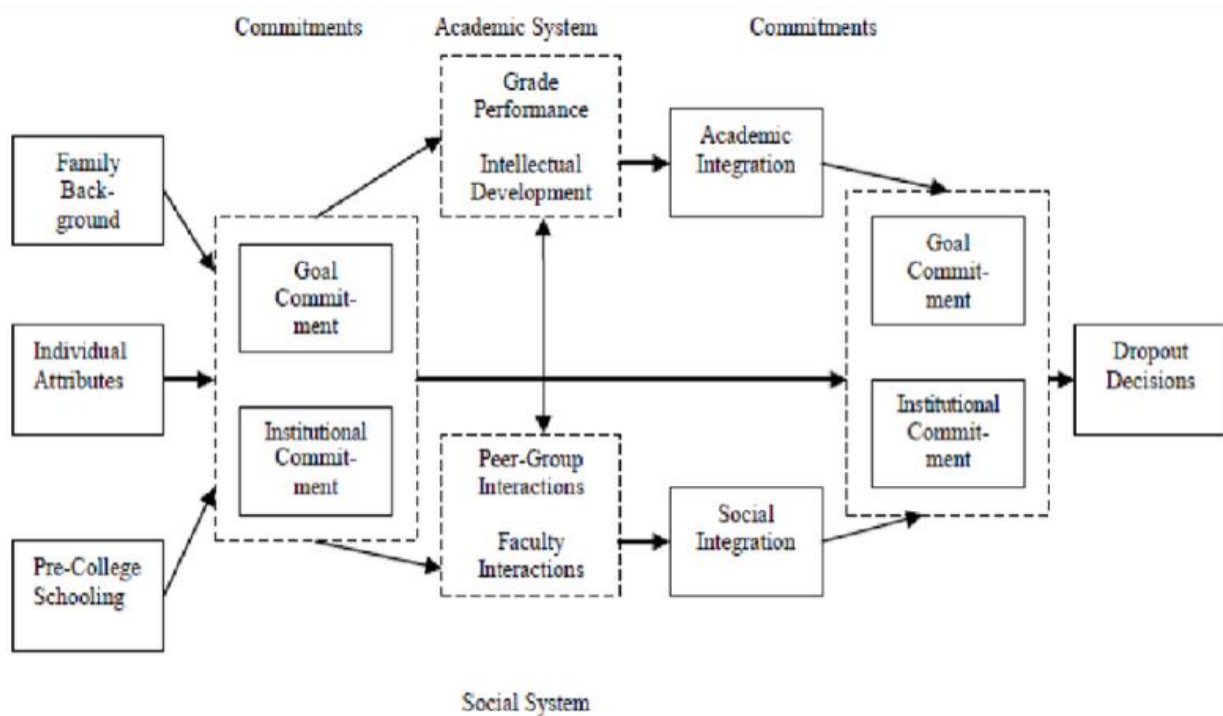


Figure 1: Tinto's 1993 Student Integration Model

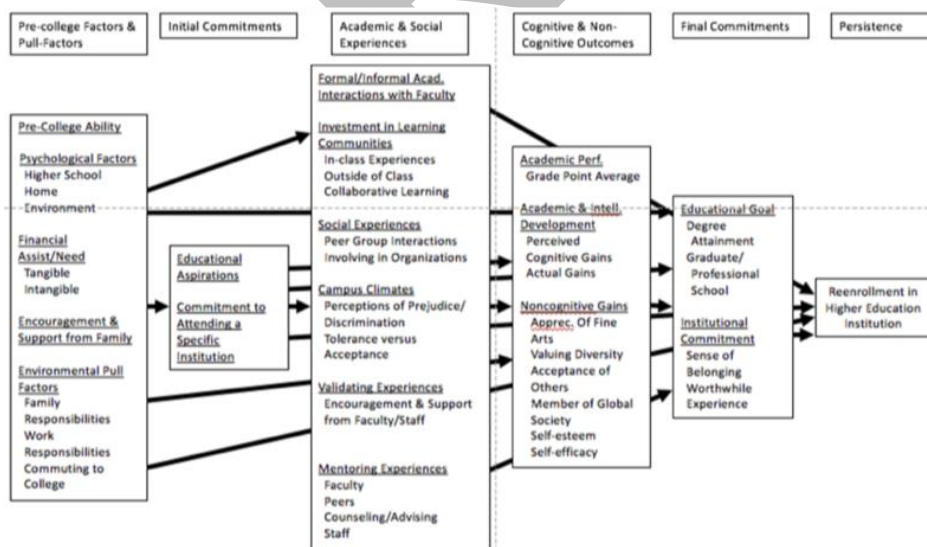


Figure 2: Nora's 2004 Conceptual Model of Student Engagement

Figure 3

SENSE OF BELONGING SCALE

The following questions are in regard to how you feel in your classes in general, not this class in particular. Please answer the questions honestly. Your responses are confidential. Participants' responses will be aggregated and reported in a grouped format. Thank you in advance for completing the survey.

Please use the following rating scale to answer each question.

	Completely Untrue	Mostly Untrue	Equally True and Untrue	Mostly True	Completely True
	1	2	3	4	5
1.	I have met with classmates outside of class to study for an exam				

2.	If I miss a class, I know students who I could get notes from				

3.	I discuss events which happened outside of class with my classmates				

4.	I have discussed personal matters with students who I met in class				

5.	I could contact another student from class if I had a question				

6.	Other students are helpful in reminding me when assignments are due or when tests are approaching				

7.	I have developed personal relationships with other students in class				

8.	I invite people I know from class to do things socially				

9.	I feel comfortable contributing to class discussions				

10.	I feel comfortable asking a question in class				

11.	I feel comfortable volunteering ideas or opinions in class				

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12. Speaking in class is easy because I feel comfortable

13. It is difficult to meet other students in class

14. No one in my classes knows anything personal about me

15. I rarely talk to other students in my class

16. I know very few people in my class

17. I feel comfortable talking about a problem with faculty

18. I feel comfortable asking a teacher for help if I do not understand course-related material

19. I feel that a faculty member would be sensitive to my difficulties if I shared them

20. I feel comfortable socializing with a faculty member outside of class

21. I feel that a faculty member would be sympathetic if I was upset

22. I feel that a faculty member would take the time to talk to me if I needed help

23. If I had a reason, I would feel comfortable seeking help from a faculty member outside of class time (office hours, etc.)

24. I feel comfortable seeking help from a teacher before or after class

25. I feel that a faculty member really tried to understand my problem when I talked about it

26. I feel comfortable asking a teacher for help with a personal problem

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