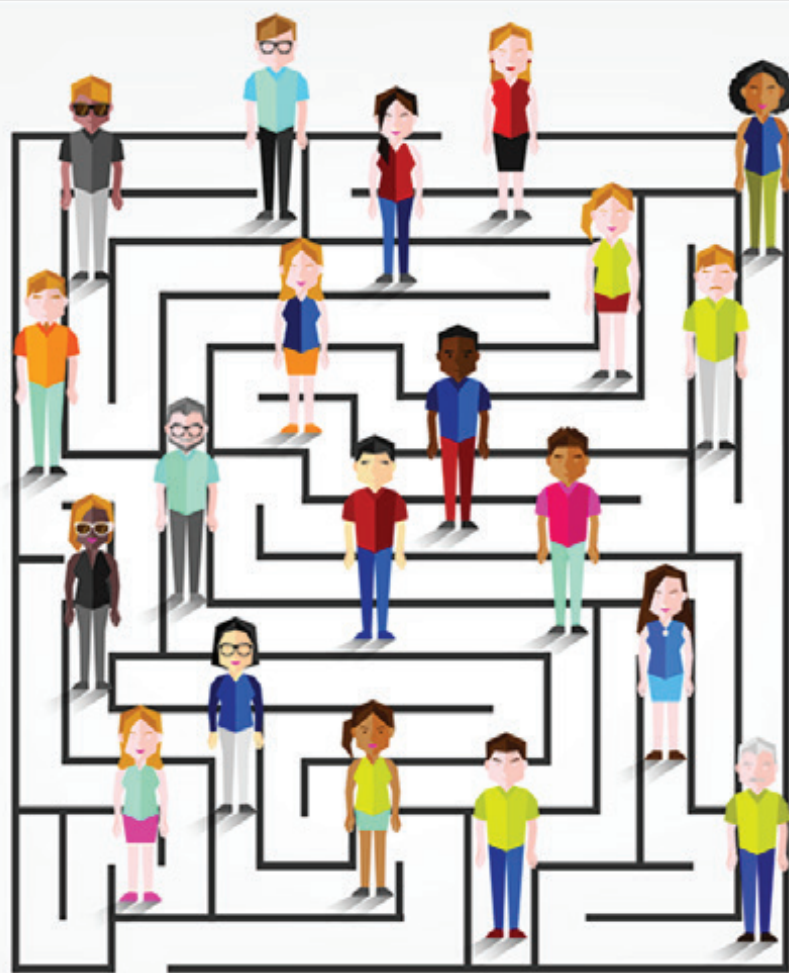


SECOND EDITION

COLLEGE STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING

A Key to Educational Success for All Students



Terrell L. Strayhorn

ROUTLEDGE

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A KEY TO EDUCATIONAL
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Introduction

If both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, then there will emerge love and affection and belongingness needs, and the whole cycle already described will repeat itself with this new centre. Now the person will feel keenly.

(Abraham Maslow)

This is a book about sense of belonging. Say this: “I belong here.” Now, turn to someone near you and say it again: “I belong here.” If you’re alone, grab your cell phone and text someone: “I belong here.” What’s their reaction? What’s yours? If you receive affirming nods in agreement or feel a sense of warmth, then pause and connect with the moment. That’s your mind (cognitive), body (behavioral), and soul (affective) converging on the sentiment that you are important, that you matter to others around you, and you belong. If your declaration is met with blank stares, disagreement, dismissive laughter, or the all-too-familiar text reply (?! ☺) then take a moment to sense your feelings. Channel them toward your mind. What are you thinking? What do you want to do now? What meaning do you make of the entire exchange? Connect with those emotions before moving on. All of this is the essence of sense of belonging, a phenomenon that we will talk about over the course of this entire volume.

BACKGROUND

On September 8, 2009, former President Barack Obama delivered a widely televised, though hotly contested, “Back-to-School Address” at Wakefield

2 INTRODUCTION

High School in Arlington, Virginia. Thousands of students across the country, from kindergarten to 12th grade and beyond, tuned in as the then President offered encouragement and inspiration to America's future about their potential. During his 15-minute address, the country's first Black President recalled his experience as a child raised by a single mother who struggled at times to make ends meet. "There were times when I was lonely and felt like I didn't fit in." He went on to explain how important it is for students to feel safe and have a sense of belonging in educational settings. His comments implied that safety and belonging were correlated with success in school. And his comments certainly align with the evidence base presented in this book, namely the link between social isolation, loneliness, perceived fit, and belonging.

If we know anything at all, we know that belongingness is a basic human motivation and all people share a strong need to belong (Maslow, 1962). As Maslow explained in the quote that opens this chapter, "If both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, then there will emerge ... belongingness needs." Many definitions of belongingness abound. **Sense of belonging generally refers to a feeling of connectedness, that one is important or matters to others** (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).¹ The absence of a sense of belonging typically is described as a "sense of alienation," rejection, social isolation, loneliness, or "marginality," which has been linked to negative proximal and long-term outcomes such as dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, depression, substance abuse, and suicide (Hagerty, Williams, & Oe, 2002). Lack of a sense of belonging can undermine academic performance (Walton & Cohen, 2007) and even one's plans to stay in college (Berger, 1997). Students who do not feel like they belong rarely stay in college. In fact, students "who do not have a sense of belonging complain that their college experience is like 'stopping by the mall' to get what they need on the way to somewhere else" (Jacoby & Garland, 2004–2005, p. 65).

We've also learned from dozens of studies that posit sense of belonging as a function of perceived support from one's peers, teachers, and family members (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002–2003; Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008a). For instance, scholars have documented that students' sense of belonging is greater if and when they socialize with peers whose backgrounds may differ from their own² (Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008c). For college students, peers play an important and powerful role in facilitating sense of belonging, as it is the peer group that provides the feedback and support necessary for the achievement of this need (White & Cones, 1999). And since we know that peer interactions can produce or inhibit sense of belonging, it is critical for college student educators to encourage positive interactions among students through conditions that *really* matter in college, ranging from advising networks to cocurricular involvement, from learning communities to peer mentoring,

to name a few (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). I will say this many times in different ways: positive interpersonal, peer interactions increase students' sense of belonging and sense of belonging leads to student success so those charged with increasing college student success should think just as much about campus climate and policies governing social interactions as they do about predictive analytics, intrusive advising, curricular alignment, and early alert systems. It all *really* matters.

Although a good deal is known about sense of belonging as a basic human motivation, factors that influence students' sense of belonging, and the influence of sense of belonging on important outcomes such as achievement, adjustment, and plans to stay in college, comparatively little is known about differences that exist in terms of college students' sense of belonging, as well as social identities and campus environments that create a sense of belonging for such students. And, more recently, researchers and policymakers have called for a change in the focus of educational research from "research for research's sake" to purposeful examinations that lead to empirically based recommendations for institutional transformation by improving educational practices, policies, and programs, given that in the past "the results of scholarly research on teaching and learning [were] rarely translated into practice" (US Department of Education, 2006). With this in mind, the second edition of *College Students' Sense of Belonging* was designed to achieve these larger objectives as well.

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

The book has several main purposes. First, the Introduction and leading chapters will offer a substantive review of the extant literature on sense of belonging and critique that literature in light of new and emerging scientific discoveries. Second, the book's review of literature will lead to a synthesis of several theoretical threads and conceptual components that represents the book's overarching organizing framework. The resultant model will be outlined generally, defined explicitly, and illustrated graphically, mostly in Chapter 3.

Third, the book presents new and recent research findings from quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies conducted by the author and many other scholars across various fields/disciplines throughout the country. As was mentioned in the Preface, the second edition includes studies published since the previous edition too. And, finally, *College Students' Sense of Belonging* offers college student educators what's really needed by translating research into practice—practical recommendations for improving educational environments, practices, policies, and programs in ways that facilitate students' sense of belonging on campus. Before proceeding with a

4 INTRODUCTION

critical review of existing literature and theory, let's establish a "working definition" for sense of belonging that will level our understanding of this concept.

A WORKING DEFINITION

Quite often, before scholars can mine an idea for its empirical worth, it is necessary to attend to basic definitions and concerns. For the purposes of this book, sense of belonging is framed as a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior.

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers.

It is a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an affective and/or behavioral response.

Sense of belonging is relational, and thus there's a reciprocal quality to relationships that provide a sense of belonging. Each member benefits from the group and the group, in a sense (no pun intended), benefits from the contributions of each member. It is the proverbial "I am we and we are each" phenomenon. Under optimal conditions, members feel that the group is important to them and that they are important to the group. Consider the student who is a member of a collegiate sorority—she likely feels important as a member and the group serves an important role in her life, partly because it satisfies one of her fundamental needs and that is to belong. By the same token, the sorority means nothing without members who constitute its very existence. The group satisfies the belongingness needs of the individual—in exchange for membership, members will be cared for and supported. The group needs its members, however, to exist and the members yearn to be part of the group as it also gives meaning and purpose to their existence. So, in essence, **sense of belonging is a "feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together"** (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). (Question: Do you think college students today feel like their institutions need them to exist and vice versa?)

Let's consider another example that illustrates these points in a college environment. Meet James. James is a first-year student from a rural

neighborhood in southwest Virginia. New to college, and first in his family to attend beyond high school, James spends a lot of time contemplating questions about his future. *Will I make friends? Will other students like me? Will I “fit in” in my residence hall? And, can I do it?* During summer orientation, he learns that the university offers a freshman living-learning community called “Explorations” for students who are interested in science careers. Despite his relatively modest upbringing in poorly resourced public schools, James has always done well in science and had given considerable thought to becoming a scientist or engineer someday. Notwithstanding initial uncertainties, he moved quickly to sign up for the living-learning community without consulting his parents, academic advisor, or friends.

Why would a first-year, first-generation college student from a rural community make such a hasty decision without seeking further advice? Simply put, the “Explorations” learning community seemed to meet one of James’ most basic needs: a sense of belonging, of being around and accepted by others who may share common interests. Recall that definitions of **sense of belonging generally refer to “an individual’s sense of identification or positioning in relation to a group or to the college community, which may yield an affective response”** (Tovar & Simon, 2010, p. 200). By participating in the “Explorations” learning community, by engaging peers who likely share common interests, and by living in a university space sanctioned for those interested in science or engineering careers, James reduced his worries about making suitable friends, satisfied his need to connect with others on campus, and increased the likelihood that he would feel a sense of belonging in a space that was otherwise foreign, unfamiliar, lonely, and unwelcoming. This example not only reflects key elements of sense of belonging such as involvement or mattering, but in part, reveals my approach to examining this important dimension of students’ experiences in college. There are many decisions that students make that trace back to their basic belonging needs.

Conceptually, my approach reflects a social cognitive perspective on achievement motivation. That is, sense of belonging, as I explain it here, is part of a larger motivational framework. Such a framework maintains that individuals have psychological needs; satisfaction of such needs affects behaviors and perceptions, and characteristics of the social context influence how well these needs are met. In this book, I frame sense of belonging as a basic human need that takes on heightened importance in *certain* social contexts where *some* individuals are prone to feeling unsupported, unwelcomed, or lonely, or in *some* social contexts where *certain* individuals are more likely to feel that way. Recall that James worried about making friends and feeling accepted—his need to belong was heightened as a first-generation, first-year student in an unfamiliar college environment where he expected to stand out, stick out, or even feel lonely and left out. Given the importance of belonging, he moved quickly, even without advice, to join a

learning community where his need to belong and matter could be satisfied. Illustration of my approach to this topic leads to an important question, which is addressed below.

WHY WRITE THIS BOOK?

I decided to write this book for at least three reasons. First, over the years, I have conducted a number of large-scale research projects examining the experiences of college students in various contexts. Viewed as a social scientist whose primary interests center on the academic study of students in postsecondary and higher education, I have several lines of work that focus on student access and achievement, issues of equity and diversity, as well as student learning and development. Whether studying the role that summer bridge programs play on low-income racial/ethnic minorities' preparation for college, the academic supports that enable the success of minority men in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, or the meaning-making processes of gay men of color, I have uncovered a preponderance of evidence suggesting the importance of community, support, membership, and acceptance, all core elements of the book's central topic, *sense of belonging*. So, I wrote this book because data from my research, over the years, suggested the need for it.

It's not only the number of times that sense of belonging has been identified in my research as an important factor in the success of college students that demonstrates the compelling need for this book, although I think that certainly deserves mention. Rather, it's the nature in which students talk about sense of belonging that underscores its significance to the college student experience. As you'll see in the next chapters, college students stress the importance of social acceptance, support, community, connections, and respect to their own identity, development, mental health, wellbeing, and academic success. When I started thinking seriously about writing a book on college students' sense of belonging, I was working with members of my research team to complete a wave of interviews for a mixed-methods project. Following one of the interviews, a participant asked, "What will you do with this information?" As usual, I shared that aggregated information would be published in journal articles and presentations (you know, the usual "IRB 101" stuff), but I also added that I was contemplating a book on sense of belonging. The participant's eyes lit up and she proclaimed, "YES [emphasis added], you've got to ... Sense of belonging is so important. It can literally be a matter of life or death for some students, like me." So, I wrote this book because my informants over the years encouraged it. The book's topic is important, weighty, and has gravity for students' success in college—I wrote it to help all students succeed.

There is a third reason why I wrote this book. In graduate school, my doctoral advisor, Don Creamer, would say to students, “It’s hard to write a paper when you have nothing to say.” Simple, yet profound wisdom. And if it’s hard to write a paper without something to say, imagine trying to fill enough pages to constitute a book! I firmly believe that reading should usually precede writing, jump-starting one’s impulse to write. And, for me, I began (this book) by reading (other people’s work), which led to writing (and thinking) my own ideas, and more reading, which, in turn, led to more writing (and thinking) on a topic about which I feel strongly. I didn’t start writing this book because I *wanted to*; rather, I had to. The more I read about campus environments, the more I wrote about community and vice versa. I wrote this book because, simply put, I felt like I had something to say about the topic. Sense of belonging is a topic about which I feel strongly; those feelings compelled me to begin writing and sustained me as I completed the previous edition of this book. Surprisingly, similar convictions and feelings fueled my work on the present (second) edition of the book too.

Before concluding this chapter, I should mention one other aspect of the book’s design that relates to *why* and *how* I wrote it. You will notice that each substantive chapter begins with at least one quotation, some preserved from the first edition and some new to this second edition. Quotes were drawn from participants in my previous studies or were spoken by politicians, philosophers, educators, and entertainers. I found this a useful way to jump-start my thinking about sense of belonging in particular arenas. In other cases, I thought the quote was appropriate as it captures the essence of sense of belonging as I am framing it in this book. Where possible, I attempt to use the quotation to launch a discussion of sense of belonging in terms of the chapter’s specific focus, but I also strive to return to the quote at the chapter’s end as a way of “circling back” to the thoughts that initiated our conversation in the first place. For instance, in this chapter, we will return to the words of former President Barack Obama before moving on to the next chapter.

CONCLUSION

Echoing the words of Barack Obama that began this chapter, I, too, recall times growing up when I did not belong. I was in grade school—a rising fourth grader—when one of the assistant principals decided that I would make a good addition to the “football gang,” as it was called, which of course is fundamentally problematic in so many ways. The “football gang” consisted of mostly young Black men who attended the predominantly White elementary school where I was enrolled. They were known amongst teachers, staff, and some students as “brutes,” “thugs,” “jocks,” and even

“monsters” mostly because they were taller, bigger, stronger than most of our peers. Standing at nearly under 4 feet and so small that I was often mistaken as a third grader, I’m not sure why the assistant principal thought that I would *find community* in this group (except for obvious and *racist* reasons). Looking back, it’s clear that *race mattered* even in fourth grade at my award-winning, highly ranked elementary school that boasted very large numbers of veteran teachers with master’s degrees and hundreds of graduates who scored highest on standardized assessments. Regardless of what we shared in phenotype—mostly boys of color, ranging from chocolate brown to caramel yellow in skin tone—I knew that I would stick out like a sore thumb. They wanted to skip class and I wanted to get there early so I could sit up front near the teacher. They wanted to throw food in the cafeteria as a way of inciting a riot and I wanted to eat my food quickly (including my dessert) so I could be dismissed early and spend time working alone in the computer lab. They wanted to play football, tackle each other, and make touchdowns—I wanted none of this. Just because we looked alike to some people, we actually shared very little in common. I did not belong. I felt like I didn’t matter. And I was rejected many times over once they all learned that I knew very little about football (and didn’t care to), had no intention of ever being tackled, and would drop the ball before I would ever let one of them drop me. I was always one of the very last to be “chosen” by team leaders and usually that moment was met with pregnant pause, rolling eyes, and something like: “Shucks, we got Terrell.” Not exactly the most welcoming refrain. My time with the “football gang” was lonely; though surrounded by dozens, I felt alone.

Although it is clear that I shared very little in common with members of the “football gang,” there was hardly a time when I felt unsafe (with the exception of a few times that someone came close to tackling me). Generally speaking, I felt safe and secure at school, which according to Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs brought my love and belonging needs to the fore. I can recall times in high school when I did not belong and my safety was threatened. For instance, I ran for office in the Student Government Association (SGA). I ran on a strong platform arguing to give more visibility to students, their needs, and wishes. My campaign slogan was upbeat and optimistic, but I also championed issues of diversity in my campaign speech. I remember it like it was yesterday—my speech closed with a cadence as I rhythmically recited the words etched on my paper about creating community, unifying bands of students, and strengthening the bonds of *personhood* in the school. Just as I reached the last paragraph, I crossed over into my best imitation of “Kermit The Frog” and declared: “It’s not easy being green.” I sang the entire song in that disguised voice. It was a metaphor, hinting lightly at what it was like for students of color (like me) in the predominantly White, highly selective high school that I attended.

Everyone rose in ovation at the end and my music teacher was so impressed that she was crying in the corner of the stage. The next day, I arrived at school and found that dozens of my campaign flyers had been defaced with the word “Nigger” written across my photo. I was devastated. I was hurt. I felt lonely. I was afraid. I felt unsafe. Quickly, I worked with my team and school personnel to remove the flyers and produce new ones. News spread fast and pretty soon I was getting help from people who I had never even met. That support, outpouring of love and care brought light to a dark situation and restored my faith in our school spirit. I won the election and people cheered. I felt a strong sense of connection to that school, the people ... like I was there on purpose and I belonged.

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it many times again: sense of belonging is a basic human need, a fundamental motivation, sufficient to drive behaviors and perceptions. Its satisfaction leads to positive gains such as happiness, elation, wellbeing, achievement, and optimal functioning. Given its significance in various social contexts, as well as its consistent association with positive health, and social and psychological outcomes, I think its importance cannot be stressed enough. Much of what we do, we do to establish and maintain a sense of belonging in the contexts and fields that constitute our ecology, our lives, our world. In many public talks and lectures across the globe, I point out for audiences that humans go to almost any length to *feel* as if they belong or to “find their people,” “their village,” or “mi gente,” as one Latino undergraduate told me years ago. People will change their style of dress, buy a new car, build a brand-new home, change academic majors, join a fraternity or sorority—even despite expensive membership dues—cut their hair or dye their hair blue to gain acceptance, to experience community, or to feel a sense of belonging. It’s crucial, important, and related to student success in college. Until the next chapter ...

NOTES

- 1 The first edition of this book included a reference to “fitting in” as a feature of belonging. However, since that time, I have come to disagree with my previous point. True belonging is not about fitting in; it’s about being authentically oneself, flaws and all. I’ll say more about this later in the book.
- 2 Even though conventional wisdom may lead one to believe that homophily—being amongst one’s own kind—is a precondition for belonging.