

Examining Higher Education Campus Climates and Student Sense of Belongingness

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Abstract: *The purpose of this research was to explore how individual students within different forms of higher education campuses experience their campus climate and hold different levels of belongingness and thriving, and to examine the relationship between thriving and belongingness. The Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT) and the General Belongingness Scale (GBS) were utilized to examine students' psychological well-being, achieved sense of belongingness, and level of thriving attained in their higher education campus climate. Purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit participants. Online surveys were distributed for data collection. Correlational analyses were run to explore the relationship between thriving and belongingness, and additional analyses were run on the individual dimensions described within the CIT to explore the relationship between each dimension and the GBS. The results of this research are suggestive of the dimensions of Mastery and Meaning having a direct impact on student belongingness in higher education.*

Keywords: Thriving, Belongingness, Higher Education

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The desire to belong is a core human characteristic. There is a lack of understanding of what implications an individual sense of belonging can have for a student. The *General Belongingness Scale* (GBS) was developed by a team of researchers to assist with research in the field of belongingness (Malone, Pillow, & Osman, 2012). It is important to note that this scale is intended to measure whether one has an achieved sense of belonging in their environment, rather than simply if one holds a need or desire to belong. The finalized scale included 6 statements intended to measure acceptance/inclusion, and 6 statements relating to rejection/exclusion. For the purposes of this research, participants answered the statements in connection to their campus environment. The topics of school belongingness have a fair amount of developed research published including a handful of scales and assessments such as the *Simple School Belonging Scale* (Vaz, et. al., 2015) and the *Sense of Belonging to School Scale* (Akar-Vural, Yilmaz, Çengel, & Gömleksiz, 2013). School belongingness has been suggested to be an indicative factor in adolescent physical health and psychological well-being, however, this research is often not generalizable to students in higher education due to gaps and variations in age and environment (Vaz, et. al., 2015).

Thriving, as a psychological construct, has been underdeveloped in connection to school environments, specifically higher education campuses. The *Thriving at Work* model was developed by a team of researchers in the early 2000s, allowing for the construct to be explored in connection with workplace environments, and in relation to other variables (Spreitzer, 2006). The *Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving* (CIT) is intended to measure psychological well-being within individuals using seven different subcategories including subjective well-being, supportive and enriching relationships, interest, and engagement, meaning and purpose in life, a sense of mastery and accomplishment, feelings of control and autonomy, and finally, optimism (Rong, Tay, & Diener, 2014).

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Overall, analyses of an individual's sense of belongingness relating to school campus environments within the realm of research have been primarily conducted on K-12 programs, and rather sparsely at that. There are extremely limited studies focusing specifically on high school-age students, and even fewer that focus on the constructs of belongingness and thriving together in education environments. Although few studies have examined thriving and belongingness simultaneously, belongingness has been suggested to play a mediating role in the relationship between thriving and disruptive environment-specific factors (Gkorezis, Kalampouka, & Petridou, 2013).

Furthermore, relevant literature has suggested that lowered sense of belongingness could be responsible for barriers to long-term goal accomplishment by hindering the self-regulation of socially appropriate behaviors in the student experience (Blackhart, Baumeister, & Twenge, 2006). It has also been suggested that a sense of belonging in students fluctuates uniquely within genders and across environments (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). In this instance, gender exemplifies how a sense of belonging varies among students from separate groups, and that a variety of factors or perceptions are potential consequences of how much they feel they belong. There are unlimited and unknown factors that could be influential to a student's sense of belongingness, and these factors could fluctuate based on the individual group, or which grades of school are being considered.

METHODOLOGY

The specific research question addressed in this study was "What is the relationship between a student's perception of campus climate and their sense of belongingness on their campus?" It was hypothesized that students who have higher scores on the CIT, the instrument used to measure individuals' perceptions related to campus experiences, will also have higher scores on the GBS. The population sampled for this study included individuals who currently attend any form of higher education including a university, college, community college, or a vocational/trade/technical school. A combination of purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling was used to find participants through flyers posted on college campuses and online recruitment via social media. Upon obtaining informed consent from individuals, participants responded to demographic questions and completed the CIT and GBS. The instructions directed participants to relate each item to their individual campus experiences. The participants were directed to a link for student mental health services after their survey to provide them with potential emotional support resources. Data were coded using SPSS, and correlation analyses were completed to examine relationships and trends between students' thriving and their sense of

belongingness in connection to their respective campus environment. Correlational analyses of the CIT dimensions of *Mastery* and *Meaning* have been analyzed individually in relation to the GBS.

RESULTS

The participants of this study completed a broad set of demographic questions, concluding that of the participants 77% were Female, 74% were white, 32% were LGBTQIA+, 51% were Christian, 37% were first-generation college students, 65% attend/attended 4-year university, 84% English primary language, 13% Veterans, and 39% grew up in working-class households. A correlational analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between the GBS and *Meaning* subscale of the CIT ($r = .301, p = .03$). A similar relationship was identified between *Mastery* and the CIT ($r = .295, p = .036$). Additionally, the mean score for the GBS was 4.03 out of 7.0, with an equal mean of 3.0 overall on the respective questions for the subsections *Rejection/Exclusion* and *Acceptance/Inclusion*.

DISCUSSION

Furthering research related to student belongingness and thriving in different learning environments and institutions strengthens the research in the field by diversifying the literature. Continuing to expand this field could reveal valuable implications into how an achieved sense of belongingness or a higher level of thriving can be used as a predictor of student success. Additionally, exploring the relationship between the CIT and GBS could prove to be useful to examine what dimensions of psychological well-being a campus climate should focus on producing for students, to produce higher achieved belongingness. The results of this research are suggestive of the dimensions of *Mastery* and *Meaning* having a direct impact on student belongingness in higher education. This means higher education environments that focus on fostering skills, proficiency, and merit in the student experience will produce students with a higher achieved sense of belongingness.

To obtain a cohesive understanding of these constructs in higher education, it is essential to include perspectives from students in all forms of higher education. A notable limitation of this study is the sparse number of participants from various forms of higher education. Participant representation from both vocational/technical schools and community colleges is lacking. Obtaining participants from vocational/technical schools has proven to be particularly difficult, and one identifiable barrier has been the young age of their students, as many of them are not yet eighteen and are still in high school. Expanding all demographic aspects of research in this field would be beneficial to the field, as it would broaden the scope and understanding.

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APPENDIX A

General Belongingness Scale

Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements below in relation to your college campus experience using this scale:

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Somewhat disagree
- 4 Neither agree nor disagree
- 5 Somewhat agree
- 6 Agree
- 7 Strongly Agree

Acceptance/Inclusion

1. When I am with other people, I feel included.
2. I have close bonds with family and friends.
5. I feel accepted by others.
8. I have a sense of belonging.
10. I have a place at the table with others.
11. I feel connected with others.

Rejection/Exclusion (Items are reverse scored)

3. I feel like an outsider.
4. I feel as if people do not care about me.
6. Because I do not belong, I feel distant during the holiday season.
7. I feel isolated from the rest of the world.

9. When I am with other people, I feel like a stranger.
12. Friends and family do not involve me in their plans.

APPENDIX B

Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving

Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements below in relation to your college campus experience using this scale:

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 4 Agree
- 5 Strongly Agree

I. Relationship

Support

1. There are people I can depend on to help me
2. There are people who give me support and encouragement
3. There are people who appreciate me as a person

Community

1. I pitch in to help when my local community needs something done
2. I invite my neighbors to my home
3. I look for ways to help my neighbors when they are in need

Trust

1. I can trust people in my society
2. People in my neighborhood can be trusted
3. Most people I meet are honest

Respect

1. People respect me
2. People are polite to me
3. I am treated with the same amount of respect as others

Loneliness

1. I feel lonely
2. I often feel left out
3. There is no one I feel close to

Belonging

1. I feel a sense of belonging in my community
2. I feel a sense of belonging in my state or province
3. I feel a sense of belonging in my country

II. Engagement

Engagement

1. I get fully absorbed in activities I do
2. In most activities I do, I feel energized
3. I get excited when I work on something

III. Mastery

Skills

1. I use my skills a lot in my everyday life
2. I frequently use my talents

3. I get to do what I am good at every day

Learning

1. I learned something new yesterday
2. Learning new things is important to me
3. I always learn something every day

Accomplishment

1. I am achieving most of my goals
2. I am fulfilling my ambitions
3. I am on track to reach my dreams

Self-Efficacy

1. I can succeed if I put my mind to it
2. I am confident that I can deal with unexpected events
3. I believe that I am capable in most things

Self-Worth

1. What I do in life is valuable and worthwhile
2. The things I do contribute to society
3. The work I do is important for other people

IV. Autonomy

Control

1. Other people decide most of my life decisions (R)
2. The life choices I make are not really mine (R)
3. Other people decide what I can and cannot do (R)

V. Meaning

Meaning and Purpose

1. My life has a clear sense of purpose
2. I have found a satisfactory meaning in life
3. I know what gives meaning to my life

VI. Optimism

Optimism

1. I am optimistic about my future
2. I have a positive outlook on life
3. I expect more good things in my life than bad

VII. Subjective Well-Being

Life satisfaction

1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal
2. I am satisfied with my life
3. My life is going well

Positive feelings

1. I feel positive most of the time
2. I feel happy most of the time
3. I feel good most of the time

Negative feelings

1. I feel negative most of the time (R)
2. I experience unhappy feelings most of the time (R)
3. I feel bad most of the time (R)

Note. Reversely scored items are noted with an (R). Dimension names and subscale titles are presented for clarification purposes and were removed during data collection.