



Social Belonging among College Students: A Case Study in Wisconsin

Research Problem

A typical mission for institutions of higher education emphasizes engagement, involvement, and connection within campus and across local and regional communities. Paramount to achieving this initially is ensuring a sense of (social) belonging to said communities. Rarely is this intentionally and empirically evaluated.

This project examines a sense of social belonging to three distinct communities at one medium-size, midwestern state university: a student's home department/unit, university campus in general, and the community writ large.

Nuances across social demographics, program modality, and contextual environments are assessed to better understand the realities of student experiences.

Background

Some previous work has been done, which emphasizes the importance of carefully and intentionally monitoring student belonging in educational environments. Specifically, this work identifies:

1. The nuance of social belonging across program modality (e.g., in-person vs. online) (DiGiacomo et al., 2023)
2. The importance of social belonging for student retention (Walton, 2023)
3. The reality that non-belonging is experienced by a majority of Americans across society, and is determinate by demographics (American Immigration Council)

Concepts

Belongingness Hypothesis: people have an innate motivational drive to form and maintain interpersonal bonds with other people (Allen et al., 2021). But not just about social connection/identity, also about situational context. Environments of 'fit' allow us to pursue our goals, and belonging is fundamentally connected to goal pursuit. Science (Belonging Barometer, American Immigration Council) of belonging 'uncertainty' identify nuance that illustrate the complexity and depth.

Methods

Students at a medium-size, midwestern state university were invited to participate in an online/anonymously survey on social belonging. The survey instrument included three batteries of the barometer (see below), one for each respective community: student department/unit, university campus, and community writ large. Demographics and items measuring student life and engagement were also included. The survey was completed by 549 students. Univariate and bivariate analyses were conducted to evaluate statistical patterns and correlations. Principal components analysis was conducted with barometer items to establish correlated factor scores.

Table 1. Correlation between Social Demographics and Social Belonging Composite Scores

	Department	University	Community
Age	-.089*		
Gender (female)	-.126**	-.103**	-.090*
Race (Black)		-.092*	-.106*
Political orientation (cons)		.103*	.088*
Religiosity	.100*	.132**	.152**
SES			
Class standing	.170**		
Employment		.114**	
Student org.	.114**	.210**	
Community org.			.225**
Residence		.166**	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 2. Correlation between Attitudes toward Social Change and Social Belonging Composite Scores

	Department	University	Community
Important to make positive impact	.110*	.119**	.134**
Likelihood of positive impact	.284**	.313**	.255**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Findings

Connections and Demographics

Initial analysis present two significant findings.

- First, a correlation exists between belonging to a students' department/unit, the campus in general, and their community writ large. In other words, if social belonging is high in one type of environment, it is likely to be high in the others, and vice versa.
- Second, a specific profile emerges as social and experiential demographics are considered. Conservative and religious male identifying students express a higher level of social belonging than any other group. Participation in student and community organizations, campus or community employment, and place of residence are also associated with higher social belonging.

Contextual Environments

The survey was active for one week before and after the 2024 US Presidential Election. This provided an opportunity to gauge what impact the changing political landscape may have on social belonging. Indeed, data collected before the election did not demonstrate a significant association between political orientation and social belonging. Only after the election does this association surface (positive correlation with conservative participants).

This contextual impact offers a future consideration as well. Generally, social belonging is associated with the importance to make a positive impact on society and the likelihood that positive impact may occur. Furthermore, these attitudes toward positive impact tend to be stronger for liberal-leaning participants. However, the 'liberal effect' is lost for likelihood of future positive impact after the election. How institutions consider social belonging of their students, impact of contextual environments should be considered and inform thoughtful response in accordance.

Table 3. Correlation between Political Orientation and Attitude toward Social Change (Before/After Presidential Election)

	Before Election		After Election	
	Important	Likelihood	Important	Likelihood
Political (cons)	-.115*	-.184**	-.249*	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

What Do We Do?