

College Belonging: How First-Year and First-Generation Students Navigate Campus Life

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Sense of belonging is considered an important element in college student success (Kuh et al., 2010; Mayhew et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2018). Thus, many institutions have invested in programs such as orientation, first-year seminars, and learning communities to increase belongingness. Despite the proliferation of discussions on belonging, there is no single definition of belonging. In *College Belonging: How First-Year and First-Generation Students Navigate Campus Life*, Lisa M. Nunn (2021) delves into what it means for college students “to belong.” Through student interviews during their first two years of college, Nunn explores students’ definitions of belonging and the nuances of the different ways and spaces in which students experience belonging. Nunn’s ability to highlight student voices, synthesize themes, and integrate previous research makes *College Belonging* an accessible and valuable contribution to our understanding of this concept.

Nunn interviewed 56 college students at three different times during their first two years of college life. With the knowledge that demographics play a significant role in belonging (Mayhew et al., 2016), Nunn intentionally selected an equal representation of first-generation and continuing-generation students, racial majority and racially minoritized students, and male and female-identifying students. Students were selected from two different institutional types: a large, public, highly selective research-intensive university and a small, private, moderately selective, religiously affiliated liberal arts university. These different institutional contexts afforded the opportunity to see commonalities across the student experience as well as to

disentangle the role of institutional context within belonging. Throughout the book, Nunn contextualizes her findings within the broader research of college student belonging. These references not only serve to legitimize the findings of Nunn's study but also provide an excellent resource on the previous research related to this topic.

Nunn identifies three unique aspects of belonging for college students through her interviews: social belonging, campus-community belonging, and academic belonging. Dividing belonging into these three perspectives is a useful lens for viewing how students feel part of the campus community. Each aspect of belonging is independent of the other two, and belonging in one area does not necessarily influence belonging in the others. This approach of defining belonging in distinct aspects rather than one nebulous definition provides a more comprehensive and nuanced view of belonging that, consequently, can assist institutional leaders in better aligning practices and policies that address each aspect of belonging. Further, Nunn theorizes that these three aspects of belonging must be offered to a student by the institution and are not something that a student can attain independently. This nuanced approach to belonging is a reminder that promoting belonging in the academic, social, and campus-community domains will require collaboration among faculty, administrators, and student affairs practitioners. In other words, belonging is the responsibility of the entire campus.

New students are constantly bombarded with messages encouraging them to get involved, explore their new homes, and become part of the campus community. Colleges and universities often offer passive programming to increase a sense of belonging—especially for new students. Nunn advocates for intentional, personalized interventions and activities that work toward “validating individuals for who they are, showing them that what they bring to the larger community is valued, and communicating that they are wanted and that they matter to the group” (Nunn, 2021, p. 159). These interventions should be designed outside of campus silos— incorporating multiple aspects of students' lives (i.e., residential, curricular, extracurricular) to create a holistic, integrated student experience.

Nunn's findings also demonstrate that belonging is not static. Different aspects of belonging become more salient for students at different parts of their education. For example, social belonging may be a top priority for students in the first college year, but academic belonging may be more important in the second year. As such, belonging interventions and activities should extend beyond the first year, offering students highly integrated experiences throughout their collegiate careers.

In Chapters 1–4, Nunn analyzes the different aspects of belonging (i.e., social belonging, campus-community belonging, and academic belonging) and provides rich examples of these differences and their relationships. These chapters also include comparisons of the two universities where the students were enrolled, offering insights into how institutional contexts influence belonging. Chapter 5 focuses on aspects of belonging for non-White identifying students; Chapter 6 analyzes belonging for White or White* students (i.e., multiracial students who “...acknowledge their multiracial heritage while at the same time claiming an entirely White identity”; Nunn, 2021, p. 142). Chapter 7 concludes the book by offering nine recommendations to college campuses to help foster a sense of belonging for students—with specific strategies aimed at supporting first-year and first-generation students.

Nunn offers many recommendations for campuses to increase a sense of belonging, but several of these recommendations are already standard practice for student support offices and personnel. Student affairs professionals, especially those working in orientation and transition programs, may be disappointed in Nunn’s failure to recognize their current work in creating a sense of belonging for their students. Nunn acknowledges the critical contribution of out-of-class experiences and interactions with individual faculty members to belonging but does not explicitly identify the important role of student affairs staff. Practitioners in residence life may react negatively to Nunn’s discussion of “dorm life” and “dormitories.” Staff in orientation or student transition programs may not find the recommendations—such as “offer welcoming messages,” “offer co-curricular programs that address inequities,” “being intentional,” and “reach out and reach in”—particularly new or insightful. Although she often overlooks the valuable work of current student affairs practitioners, she does highlight their value. Thus, this text can be a powerful tool in promoting the importance of orientation and transition programs to administrators, faculty, students, and their families.

In surveying students from two very different institutions, Nunn captured the experiences of students representing institutions similar to hundreds of others in North America: predominantly White public and private institutions with a range of selectivity. However, students in other institutional contexts, such as historically black colleges and universities or community colleges, may experience belonging differently, and these institutional contexts may also vary in their approach to belonging. Thus, the relevance and applicability of the study’s findings must be considered within these institutional contexts.

The book’s title is a bit deceptive. *College Belonging* provides a rich description of students’ experiences and perceptions of belonging, but we gain few insights into how they actually navigate campus life. Although the information provided is valuable and

important, those looking for a book that illustrates an actual navigation process or experience may be left wanting more. Nunn focuses on first-year and first-generation students, but readers will also gain insights into continuing-generation students' experiences. Nunn intentionally sought a racially diverse group of students and allowed students to self-identify. For example, one participant notes, "I don't limit myself to one of my ethnicities. I'm Puerto Rican, African American and Ecuadorian. I'm very proud of all those." (Nunn, 2021, p. 19). This approach is aligned with her focus on belonging and serves as a good reminder for institutions of the importance of allowing students to define themselves rather than confining them to our narrow demographic checkboxes (i.e., Hispanic, Black, multiracial, White).

Nunn's research was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the assumption of an in-person residential collegiate experience is embedded in the work. The pandemic significantly influenced how students experience belonging on college and university campuses and challenged institutions to rethink how they work to create belonging. Given the increase in virtual experiences and disruptions in campus life, readers will need to creatively consider Nunn's work in light of this new reality. Although some of the recommendations may need to be adapted, the critical need to establish environments where students feel a sense of belonging is even more timely and, therefore, worth the read.

Through Nunn's analysis, we gain a deeper understanding of what it means for students to belong, the different ways students feel belonging, how belonging changes over time, and the influence of their prior backgrounds and identities on belonging. Nunn's ability to synthesize students' experiences and couch her findings within the broader higher education research offers a useful guide for new professionals, faculty, and staff unfamiliar with the topic. For those already familiar with this literature, it provides an excellent go-to compilation of scholarship in this area. Nunn provides a useful refresher of practices widely embraced and celebrated within the college student affairs community by offering a concise, well-organized argument for belonging and practical strategies for increasing all types of belonging within our institutions.

References

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