YOU BELONG HERE: AN ANALYSIS OF BELONGING IN THE BLACK STUDENT POPULATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Alexis Allen

TC 66H
Plan II Honors Program
University of Texas at Austin

May 10, 2019

_____
Dr. Richard Reddick
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy
Supervising Professor

_____
Dr. Shannon Cavanagh
Department of Sociology
Second Reader

ABSTRACT

Author: Alexis Allen

Title: You Belong Here: An Analysis Of Belonging In The Black Student Population at The University Of Texas at Austin

Supervising Professor: Dr. Richard Reddick

The implications of belonging in the study of college students and student success is becoming increasingly important in understanding students success. In fact, research has shown findings that a sense of belonging is integral to most all learning environments. Yet, with the ongoing impacts of increasing diversity and tumultuous campus climates, belonging among students, particularly black students, is vulnerable. Therefore, this thesis further analyzes black experiences within regard to sense of belonging as an underrepresented population at a predominantly white institution.

In spaces of higher learning, a sense of belonging can become an important factor in student success academically, socially, and emotionally. In actuality, for African-American students at a predominantly white institution like the University of Texas at Austin, in which the number of people that look like you is less than 5% of the overall student population, it becomes crucial. In collecting data to better understand the experiences of black students at the University of Texas at Austin, I will explore into the key threats to sense of belonging on this campus, the implications of different levels of belonging, and how this information should be used in order to advance the progress of diversity on this campus.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I cannot express enough gratitude to my supervisors, Dr. Reddick and Dr. Cavanagh, who have guided and supported me endlessly throughout this process. From the beginning of my college experience, both of my professors have helped me to realize how capable I am. For this too, I am so grateful.

My completion of this thesis could not have been achieved without their support, nor the love and generosity of my family and friends throughout my four years in college. To my mother especially, thank you for all that you have done for me in getting me to this very point. I love you.

I am so appreciative of the Plan II Honors Program for challenging me and developing my intellectual curiosities. I have grown into a better student because of the encouragement from this program. I am thankful to soon be a Plan II graduate.

And finally, thank you to this university for molding me into the leader and agent of change I am today.

I'm done!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

What does it mean to belong? To feel like you are part of a community and feel important to a group of people is one type of belonging. But on a college campus or university, students' sense of belonging can take on a different role. In determining student success by way of its positive and negative implications, belongingness can impact graduation rates, desire to persist, or even personal and mental health. Sense of belonging can be a fundamental part of the college experience for most students, especially students of color.

The concept of belonging, particularly in settings of education, has increasingly received attention in the study of student populations within higher education (Osterman, 2000). While there are a plethora of definitions for the term *belonging*, in this thesis, I will use Strayhorn's definition that gets at "student's perception of affiliation and identification within the community," or the degree to which they feel like they are integral to the university as a whole (2012).

Although numbers alone do not determine the degree to which students feel a sense of belonging, with a population of less than 2,000 black undergraduate students at the University of Texas at Austin, approximately 4.8% of the undergraduate population, spread thinly across majors, classrooms, organizations, and so on, representation tend to be sparse ("Facts & Figures", 2018). This limited representation, in turn, can affect black student's sense of belonging on campus.

In the context of my own college experience, my perception of belonging varied as I often struggled against a fear of not belonging, or fitting in, at the University of Texas at Austin. At the beginning of my college experience, I rarely questioned if I was meant to be

at the University of Texas at Austin. In fact, I felt right at home, particularly within the essentially off-sectioned black community. Despite some instances of microaggressions or feelings of isolation in classrooms that lacked diversity, or where I was sometimes the only person of color, my overall sense of belonging appeared to be favorable. But as I sought to be involved in more communities, my sense of belonging wavered. I began to realize I was the only black person in most of my classes and my organizations. I felt alone. Then that overall feeling of belonging chipped away more with an onset of incidences that unfolded across my second year of college. Racially charged events amidst an icy political climate concocted a recipe for my dwindling sense of belonging. Many a time, I remember the question rolling across my mind, "should I even be here?" Especially at a predominantly white institution, with issues of campus climate and culture, my sense of belonging was threatened.

My sense of belonging was contingent on the broader political and social environment of this campus, but what other factors improve and threaten a sense of belonging of students on campus? How are issues of diversity and campus climate affecting belonging among black students? Do black students actually feel like they belong on this campus? In this thesis, I will explore these questions and the patterns of belonging among black students at the University of Texas at Austin. Based on these insights, I will also explore how can we increase sense of belonging among black students at the University of Texas at Austin.

History of Integration at the University of Texas

Brown v. Board of Education altered the fabric of the public education system across the United States. The culmination of years of challenging the 'separate, but equal clause paved the way for integration— giving black people[1] the same access to education as all Americans for the first time (Shabazz, 2004). However, as much as the era of desegregation in public schools has been venerated for providing equal access to public education and higher education, Southerners were not prepared for this shift. The Supreme Court's decision simply imposed these shared learning spaces on their schools. In fact, the tumultuous transition away from segregation made it more apparent that there was disagreement with the decision. Such a monumental ruling had a strong impact on the University of Texas at Austin as the largest public university in Texas.

On July 8, 1955, a historic decision was made by the University of Texas Board of Regents. With a unanimous vote, African-American undergraduate students were allowed to be admitted for the first time— altering the future of access to higher education for young black people across the state of Texas. Following the Brown v. Board of Education decision of 1954, this policy was crafted by the University of Texas:

> "By adoption of this recommendation, it would become the expressed intention of The University of Texas to formulate a policy of selective admissions, based on merit and applied equally to all regardless of racial origin, and to institute this policy beginning with the academic year 1956-57." (Shabazz, 102)

Yet, the battle did not begin at Brown v. Board of Education. In 1946, Heman Marion Sweatt presented his transcript in the hope of being accepted into the University of Texas School of

---

[1] I will use the term "black" in this thesis to refer to anyone who identifies with African, Afro-Caribbean, or black descendant from the African diaspora.

Law. Despite having all of the acceptable credentials, Sweatt was denied entry solely on the basis of race. Consequently, he took his case to court in 1950— initiating the discussion of admitting black students into higher education and professional programs. In the United States Supreme Court decision in Sweatt v. Painter, desegregation was ruled out— forcing the integration of the University of Texas' graduate and professional programs. With the support of the National Association for the Advance of Colored People in one of the first challenges to the University of Texas School of Law, Sweatt's case changed the educational opportunities for black intellectuals seeking further education (Vincent, Cumberbatch, & Blair, 2017; Goldstone, 2006). The 1950 Supreme Court case challenged the "separate but equal" clause, which up until the successful overturn upheld segregation. His case was influential in the monumental case of Brown v. Board of Education in 1954. As a result, the University of Texas became the first higher education institution in the South to require that discrimination on the basis of race not be factored into the admissions decision (Goldstone, 2006).

With the precedent of segregation and the uproar behind the Sweatt v. Painter decision, it was evident that black students were unwanted at these institutions of higher education. Educational segregation was preserved in the state of Texas at nearly any costs (Shabazz, 2004). At the first challenge for equal access to education, the state established black colleges and universities in order to create a so-called equal program in order to mute the issue of integration. If the state did not have an institution with an adequate professional program for black people, these universities would be forced to accept those black students that met the credentials. Therefore, when the state was found to not have certain professional programs for black students, the state legislature established a fund

for out of state scholarships to continue excluding black people from attending institutions made for white people in Texas. And finally, in a last attempt to preserve segregation in programs of higher education, Texas built a make-shift law school that was supposed to be more comparable to UT Law because the all-black institutions of the law were clearly not equal (Vincent, Cumberbatch, & Blair, 2017). Yet, it was overturned by the Supreme Court as substandard and Hemann Marion Sweatt along with four other black men was admitted into the University of Texas School of Law.

These precedents led to the tumultuous desegregation of the University of Texas at Austin as a whole. In the fall of 1956, the first class of black undergraduate students, "The Precursors," began classes at UT Austin. Nonetheless, their acceptance into the institution did not directly translate into acceptance in the classroom or even on campus more generally. After a momentous win for black higher education, the small population of black students was faced with inequity and often outright racism from their peers and professors (Goldstone, 2006). It was clearly displayed that the University of Texas faculty and students did not desire to share their classrooms or campus with black students. Their presence on campus was the beginning of isolation and a direct challenge to the belonging of black students. But despite their opposition, it became evident that the desegregation was imminent.

After the integration of the University of Texas, the Board of Regents did not put policies in place to include these first black students in the 'Longhorn experience.' Instead, the Board of Regents emphasized the total integration of the academic processes alone. Essentially, the only thing that integration promised was that black students could attend classes. There were no policies that ensured their fair treatment, nor their inclusion in

housing, campus activities, or the college experience (Vincent, Cumberbatch, & Blair, 2017). Outside of the classroom, there was a disregard for the social and extracurricular integration of African-American students into the university community— systematically threatening newly enrolled black students' sense of belonging (Goldstone, 2006). From the integration of the University of Texas School of Law to the undergraduate programs, the African Americans endured in a difficult environment. Without support or mitigation of the racial climate on campus, black students generally felt uncomfortable and unwelcome in the pursuit of higher education at UT by design.

More broadly, at the onset of integration at the University of Texas School of Law and then the university as a whole, there was discontentment among the students, parents, and often faculty. Although it was a relatively quiet transition to integration in comparison to other universities across the south, this seemingly smooth integration eventually had repercussions. While other schools, for example, Ole Miss and the University of Alabama, endured an outrage over the admission of black students, many observed that unlike the UT Austin, these schools eventually were able to move past some issues of racism that caused problems with the inclusion of black students in university life (Goldstone, 2006). However, at the University of Texas, the Board of Regents' policy of gradualism left an outstanding dearth on the complete integration of black students on campus. According to Goldstone, as early as 1957, black students had to engage in debates, marches, and civil disobedience in an effort to challenge the lack of initiative for inclusion of black students outside of the classroom (Goldstone, 2006). But racial progression after the enrollment of African-American students at both the graduate and undergraduate levels continued to be slow. In truth, the racist history of the university is still largely overshadowed today.

In fact, after 1957, just a year following their admittance, many of these black students began dropping out. Options for housing were limited, minstrel shows continued on in traditional campus organizations, and facilities like the business center remained segregated (Duren, 1979). There were also incidences that stemmed from the exclusion of blacks from parts of campus and those adjacent to campus. For example, until 1959, the Drag—the area of shops and restaurants near campus for students— was only open to white patrons (Vincent, Cumberbatch, & Blair, 2017). Exclusion from areas that were connected to campus could have been a contributing factor to the distancing of the first black students from a sense of belonging on a predominantly white campus. It is likely that a majority of drop-out cases had some relation to this negative racial environment.

Moreover, in Overcoming, the experiences of several students reveal the foundation for what was the still contentious relationship of blacks at the university. As the stories of "the Precursors" time on campus detailed throughout several historical accounts, the level of exclusion was clear. Black students were excluded from extracurriculars like drama productions, the marching band, and a variety of athletic teams. For instance, after Barbara Smith Conrad, a UT student who went on to become a world-renowned opera singer was selected for a lead role alongside a white student in the play, Aeneas, all hell broke loose (Vincent, Cumberbatch, & Blair, 2017). Throughout the university and beyond the campus itself, the issue of Barbara Smith singing across from a white boy became a widespread issue resulting in threats, angered Texas legislators, and an angrier Texas public. With outside pressures and continued tense discussions, President Wilson made the decision to withdraw her from the play. Consequently, Smith would not perform in the production

because Texas was not ready to see a black woman sing opposite a white man (Duren, 1979).

Through these accounts of the early experiences of black students, it is evident that the support and attention of an institution to its student population is important for the overall well-being of the student to retention rates and educational success. In the first years of his experience, Leon Holland was told that no black man would ever make more than C in his professor's class (Vincent, Cumberbatch, & Blair, 2017). A majority of professors failed to support the new black students. In fact, there were also no black faculty members until Ervin Perry received the appointment of assistant professor in 1961 (Duren, 1979).

Yet, throughout these incidences and those to come, Mama Almetris Duren acted as the support system for the black community. In her words, "students need 'more than an opportunity to attend classes" (Duren, 1979). Where the university did not provide support, she did. She was the house mother of the university co-op designated only for black girls and a faculty member in the office of Minority Student Services. It is evident that Mama Duren was needed because the university, in many ways, failed to address the concerns of new black undergraduates. Mama Duren was their support system; she was their reminder that they must persist because they belonged.

Nonetheless, the small number of black students on campus still felt largely unsupported and targeted by the university. Looking at the history of what some of the first black students at UT withstood, it is apparent that the message of exclusion was palpable. With relatively low numbers of black student enrollment, the component of belonging on campus was already threatened (Goldstone, 2006). Before they even stepped on campus,

the Precursors' feeling of belonging was threatened at an institution that was not

necessarily built for people who looked like them. For many black students at UT today,

those same sentiments are familiar. In many ways, the narrative of contemporary students

at the University of Texas at Austin echoes those of the earliest students admitted.

As seen since the beginning of integration nearly sixty-five years ago, campus

climate can alter the experiences of students on campus, especially marginalized students

(Campbell & Carter-Sowell, 2019). With the incorporation of new diversity initiatives and

efforts, the question still remains with respect to the advancement of the black community.

Overcoming details the limited housing resources that the early black students of UT had as

options. The handful of far off housing options were "separate but unequal"— lacking basic

resources that white dormitories were given. In fact, it became an issue of contention that

led to a rise in dropout rates for the first black students at the university (Duren, 1979).

Affordable and conveniently located housing continues to be a major difficulty for black

students on campus today.

It is clear that the decision to desegregate did not necessarily equate to the full

integration of black students. In fact, the university would make little effort to include, or

even prevent the exclusion of black students. The era prior to monumental steps of

integration like Brown v. Board of Education "created a foundation [that denoted] black

people don't belong in these rooms of higher education, nor do they deserve to learn

alongside white counterparts" (Heilig & Reddick, 2011). Consequently, cases like Sweatt v.

Painter may have upended segregation in higher education at universities like UT Austin;

however, they did not uproot the foundation that Plessy v. Ferguson put into place. Feeling

this lack of belonging and a sense that black people are lesser still plague Black students at

UT. Yet, black students like the precursors still push through and attempted to make a space for themselves on these campuses while furthering their education.

In conclusion, the events that affected the new wave of black students on campus set the foundation for the sentiments and experiences of black students today. The environment at UT Austin for contemporary black students has not yet fully changed in a way that distinguishes it from the qualms at the time of the Precursors (Shabazz, 2004). Many of the issues faced in the years flowing integration still persist today. Among students of color, black students are greatly affected by the campus climate and actions of the university regarding the support of black students.

Current Students & Campus Climate

Sixty-two years following the integration of the undergraduate program at UT in 2018, the black population is less than 5% of the total undergraduate population (Stone, 2018). After policies like affirmative action and the Top Ten Percent Policy were set in place in order to increase diversity and use race as a positive factor in the admissions process, diversity has increased at UT. However, the black student population still remains disproportionately lower than the state population of black people of 12% (Satija, 2016). Consequently, this small number of black students experiences an unsettling lack of representation. But even after an increase in numbers since the beginning of integration, the early problems of the 1960s have only morphed into more covert, nuanced forms of exclusion and discrimination. With a fluctuating campus climate, underrepresentation of students and faculty of color, and everyday microaggressions or racial attitudes, the issues

that diminish a strong sense of belonging among Black students persist (Campbell &

Carter-Sowell, 2019).

For over 65 years, being a black student at UT has come with challenges through

positive and negative experiences. For instance, the first cohorts of black students on

campus were bombarded with racism in the classroom and outside. Not only by students

and members of the UT community, but also due to the institution's contentious racial

history that contributed to the racial climate and feeling of being a student on campus.

From the Eyes of Texas performed first in minstrelsy to the Confederate soldiers that

adorned the West mall, it was difficult for some people of color to engage in traditions and

feel included on a campus that celebrated its intertwined history with the institution of

slavery and Jim Crow era laws without acknowledgment of the complicated history

(Vincent, Cumberbatch, & Blair, 2017). In turn, these issues generated negative campus

environment for some students.

Campus climate is an integral factor in the experience on college campuses. In Susan

Rankin's study at Pennsylvania State University, campus climate is defined as "the current

attitudes, behaviors, and standards of faculty, staff, administrators, and students

concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential." According to

the study, the ways students experience their campus environments can directly affect

their learning outcomes and success, particularly in instances of discrimination (Rankin,

2014).

While there have been some shifts in a positive direction in regard to campus

climate at UT Austin, the year 2016 reveal just how much work has yet to be done. In the

fall of 2016, exactly sixty years following the enrollment of the Precursors, the campus was

marked by a charged racial climate. The Daily Texan ran numerous stories on campus

climate incidents that revealed negative racial sentiments on campus. There was an

incident where the derogatory word, n*****, was spray painted on a concrete slab in West

campus, bottles were thrown from an apartment balcony at a black student accompanied

by the words, "f**k you, n*****" (Jaramillo & Cannizzo, 2016). Furthermore, there were

more coded events that left a similar impact on students. A bake sale led by the Young

Conservatives of Texas diminished the value of racial and ethnic groups on campus to

anything between two dollars and a quarter in retaliation of the affirmative action policies

at UT. These incidences not only affected students on campus but also applicants looking to

see if UT was the right place for them to pursue higher education (Nguyen, 2016).

Interestingly, these events that negatively affected the climate on campus occurred

within a year of the 2016 ruling of Fisher v. The University of Texas. As the University of

Texas became the headlining case for affirmative action, sentiments were reflected on

campus. And as racially charged campus incidents surfaced across campus, there was an

increased frequency of an adverse racial environment.

In discussing campus climate, it is also important to address how racism works

differently for students of color in comparison to students who identify or are perceived as

black. As less than 4% of the student population, it is difficult for the concerns of black

students to be addressed in a context outside of the student of color experience.

In fact, in most instances, students of color bear the brunt of the work involving advocacy

and protests on campus because these are typically issues that disproportionately affect

them. However, black students often do much emotional labor involved by coordinating

and educating other students on the issues. Following the YCT event in 2016, the Black

Student Alliance led the coordination of an event along with other organizations like the University Democrats and Division of Diversity and Community Engagement (Nguyen, 2016). In addition, findings support this idea in revealing that in addressing the problem of campus climate at different universities, people of color are looked to explain the issue at hand and how it affects them personally (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000).

In a contextual setting, the University of Texas at Austin is one of many institutions with an onset of reports related to racial/ethnic harassment, violence, and overall negative campus racial climate. With the elimination of de jure segregation in the ruling of Brown v. Board of Education, it is not surprising that incidences of racial conflict arose as black and white students were forced into the same spaces like never before (Hurtado, 1992). In 1956, 104 black students were admitted to undergraduate, specialty, and graduate programs across UT. However, the steep increase of black enrollment created a potential for increased racial conflict.

In *Campus Racial Climate: Contexts of Conflict*, two important factors were both positively associated with student conflict with campus racial policy are applicable to the UT campus: institutional selectivity and size. However, in examining the two interpretations involving this finding, Hurtado reveals that the source of the conflict is largely connected to the individual or the institution as a whole (Hurtado, 1992). In the instance of the University of Texas at Austin, it is not clear which is the case. While the type of students UT attracts tend to be socially and politically engaged in addition to being prone to use designated free speech zones as places to hold protests, many instances escalate as a result of the administration's distance from the individual student. Furthermore, the failure to adequately address racial conflicts on campus and involving UT students sets a standard

that UT condones a negative racially-charged environment (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). For example, following the incident involving the student targeted with beer bottles in West Campus that involved a slow investigation of the event, in the Daily Texan, President Fenves "announced he wants to deal with such incidents of 'hateful and violent behavior' more quickly (Jaramillo & Cannizzo, 2016). However, for the students experiencing the climate after the event, it may feel like a failure of the institution to protect its students. Though the experiences of African-American students may vary, these racially charged events often prompt black students to question their safety and place on a predominantly white campus like UT Austin.

Through a lens of critical race theory, racial microaggressions, both verbal and non-verbal language, assumptions, and stereotypes generate a tense atmosphere for students of color. Microaggressions play a role in both the classroom and social environments. Generally, psychiatrist Chris Pierce notes racial microaggressions as one of the most important, yet under-researched social problems within the United States. Disproportionately, African-Americans are subjected to the rhetoric of microaggressions. Within the classroom, the findings in the *Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students* reveal that microaggressions in the academic and social spaces impact these populations affected and often result in counter spaces (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2009). In fact, racial microaggressions in the academic setting or faculty-student interaction can bring about psychological changes in black students. The power dynamic between faculty and a student has the potential to build up a more detrimental outcome than student-student interactions. In using racial microaggressions, whether intentional or not, faculty have the

power to influence a student (Endo, 1982). As an already underrepresented group, racial microaggressions further isolate black students and can cause personal devaluation (Hurtado, 1992). In many ways, it adds to the scrutiny of black students at a predominantly white institution feel because they are hyper-visible.

The evidence of the effects of this hostility goes far beyond just the classroom and academics. In findings, it is shown that racial microaggressions perpetuate a feeling of isolation (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Komarraju & Bhattacharya, 2010). Therefore, it is important to question how this also, in turn, affects a sense of belonging. As an African-American female student notes in their study, there is a feeling of invisibility. She notes, "I think that when the professors see that there's fewer of you, they're less likely to address your concerns." This statement can also reveal a bigger image of the that is not only apparent in the classroom but often also at the universities as a whole. With black students at UT, in particular, the low representation among the greater population has held constant since the integration of the university (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). On the other hand, there is the issue of hypervisibility. As one of the few black students in a classroom, black students are "susceptible to levels of scrutiny, evaluation, criticism, and accountability not afforded to their privileged peers (Wright, 2008).

Over time, the black community at the University of Texas at Austin has endured the ebb and flow of campus racial climate. As a result, nuanced feelings regularly challenge the developing sense of belonging for marginalized students, which can hinder their ability to excel. Although there are many barriers to marginalized students feeling 'at home' on at this university, the cultivation of this belonging cannot be overlooked because it can act as a defining factor of the college experience (Strayhorn, 2012). While campus environments

are complex atmospheres that vary for individuals from different social groups within the college community, the efforts of a university to foster an inclusive environment can address issues that unfold into a racially charged campus climate (Rankin, 2014).

Despite the efforts of higher public education institutions working on policies, initiatives, and recruitment techniques, there is a critical missing element to the experience of many college students, especially among marginalized students of color. A sense of belonging is crucial in the college environment (Strayhorn, 2012). Belonging in the classroom, among peer groups, or on campus enables a student to feel more secure in his or her learning development and literal position within the classroom (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Yet despite the victory over de jure segregation, elements of campus climate, racial microaggressions, and instances that negatively affect the college students' feeling of belonging diminish educational equity that was put in motion. Some would say that the negative campus climate incidences near sixty years later that mirror those of the 1960s show how far we need to go as an institution in supporting students of color and particularly black students (Vincent, Cumberbatch, Blair, 2017). Despite the increasing recruitment and diversity initiatives, for some, the feeling of being in the right place is a question throughout their college experience due to racial campus climate, microaggressions, and the impacts of these experiences.

Belonging

All people share a strong need to belong (Strayhorn, 2012). It is a basic human emotion that drives most of our relationships. However, within the environments of higher education, belonging can be a crucial component for obtaining a degree. Throughout the college experience, whether consciously or subconsciously, students are affected by their

level of belonging in various ways. However, students of color who attend predominantly white institution disproportionately encounter the positive and negative effects of a sense of belonging or the lack thereof (Museus & Saelua, 2018).

Belonging among college students at higher education institutions has increasingly become a study of focus (Fisher, 2019). However, the key issue that persists is answering the question, 'what is a sense of belonging?'. According to Webster's dictionary, belonging is defined as having the right qualifications or characteristics or being properly placed among a group. And in defining attributes of belongingness, synonyms coincided with this definition—extending the definition above to words such as connectedness, membership, and identification to school (St-Amand, 2017). The definitions of belonging vary from study to study depending on its focus. From the lens of social psychology, a sense of belonging stems from an emotional attachment, about feeling at 'home'— resulting often in an individual's need to conform to the general group out the fear of potential exclusion (Osterman, 2000). Nonetheless, there are two important definitions of belonging in this thesis. The first is a broad definition of belonging that reveals the social component of its necessity: "sense of belonging is a basic need that leads people to build social bonds and to affiliate with members of a group (Hagerty et al, 1996).

In understanding the definition of belonging, it is evident that it is a human need that is integral to both the psychological development of a person and the social connections that people build. Some researchers have referred to it as the innate tendency to form and maintain social bonds and relationships as a human means for survival (Lambert, 2013). The *need to belong* as Lambert suggests is connected to both the desire to form positive relationships and the feeling that one is fully accepted. As a result, there is an

innate quest for group affiliation, relationships, or membership (Lambert, 2013). However, it is important to note that membership is not solely about being a part of a group, but also personal identification to that group— in other words, inclusion. Researchers have found that people commonly associate social relationships with meaning in their life, which is why Lambert makes the claim that "to belong is to matter." This claim holds weight in the idea of belonging because a central component of belongingness is the one's own perception that they are integral to the group, or in other words that their contributions or presence *matters.*

Secondly, in a definition that extensively relates to the topics of this thesis, sense of belonging can also be analyzed as significant to a theoretical framework. In terms of higher education environment, Strayhorn defines a sense of belonging as "the student's perception of affiliation and identification within the community" (Strayhorn, 2012). An important distinguishing factor in this definition is the attention the social psychology that belonging entails. Ultimately, the sense of belonging from student to student depends highly on their own perceptions in relation to the university or college atmosphere. Nonetheless, the importance of a sense of belonging is that it becomes "a key to a person's sense of self and the feeling that his or her efforts are valued" (Strayhorn, 2012). As a consequence of the level of one's sense of belonging, both factors, student persistence, and success in college, can be affected negatively or positively.

On university campuses, the definition of belonging takes on a different meaning and often, more significance. In Strayhorn's definition of belonging, it is significant to note that in "identification within the community," it is extended to also mean the degree to which you feel like you are integral to the university as a whole (Strayhorn, 2012). In this

thesis, I use Strayhorn's definition of belonging as the central reference to belongingness in higher education and the analysis of students at the University of Texas at Austin. Sense of belonging has been researched more and more to better understand its importance in educational settings. Osterman has studied the importance of belonging, or maintaining a school community as a factor in student success. Research suggests that student belonging is important at all levels from adolescence in pre-school through college education (Osterman, 2000). In fact, most research regarding belonging has been used to promote campus community and improvement of belonging among minority students.

Particularly, in higher education, the study of belongingness as an important factor in the success of students is evident through multiple studies. From various vantage points, belonging can be understood. Belonging is largely a psychological phenomenon in addition to sociological. Strayhorn's definition emphasizes the *perception* of one's position within a community determines one's sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). In St-Amand's study, four attributes were distinguished as impacting belonging: positive emotions, maintenance of positive relations with peers and professors, willingness to get involved, and lastly adjustment to situations by changing personal aspects (St-Amand et al, 2017). For this analysis, let's first frame the sense of belonging as the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community—whether that be in class, social settings, or more generally on campus.

In studies of belonging, research finds that the experience and feeling of connectedness is important at all ages and levels from pre-school to higher education. As a basic human need, Maslow's hierarchy points out the factors of physiological necessities, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization that are attached to belonging and

therefore, lead to outcomes that can create positive or negative experiences (Taormina, 2013). As an integral component linked to these factors are social spaces and the college environment. In particular, membership or lack thereof within these spaces of learning in college are connected to student behavior, sense of belonging, and success (Walton & Cohen, 2011). According to Osterman, without satisfying these needs, the experience of membership in a community (even a supportive one) can be undermined. In sense of belonging, both territorial and relational factors hold importance. The relational factor refers to the character of human relationships including membership, integration, shared emotional connectedness, and fulfillment of one's needs (Osterman, 2000). These relationships create a community that exists-- enabling its members to experience a degree of belongingness. But, in terms of the quality of the community, how do students currently experience an educational community? And, how do schools influence this community and belongingness? Furthermore, the territorial factor extends the questions of how is belonging important to educational setting? Does it extend beyond the classroom to living spaces and communal areas?

As a result of Osterman's study to test the student's need for belonging in school community, it was shown that there are positive correlations between sense of belonging to a community and student motivation (2000). With an increased sense of belonging students tend to be more motivated in comparison to students with a low sense of belonging (Zumbrunn & Buhs, 2014). According to Strayhorn, the concept of belonging becomes the key to a person's sense of self and the feeling that his or her efforts are valued, both of which in turn impact student persistence and success in college. On the other hand, a lack of belonging is linked to a range of behavioral problems that typically stem from

negative emotions of feeling rejected, ignored, or excluded which often contributes to decreasing intrinsic motivation, anxiety, loneliness, and depression (Hausmann, 2009). Yet, the identity narratives ultimately play a large role in framing the implications of belongingness in underrepresented or minority groups.

Why is this important?

Sense of belonging is important because of its particular effect on underrepresented student populations, including the black students on campuses like the University of Texas. It is significant to note that sense of belonging can take on a heightened importance not only in certain times and spaces, but also among certain populations (Strayhorn, 2012). For students of color, particularly on predominantly white campuses, it has been shown that belonging operates distinctly for students of color than their white peers. Hurtado and Carter explain for students of color, "sense of belonging is particularly meaningful to those who "perceive themselves as marginal to the mainstream of life [and of college]" (Hurtado and Carter, 1997).

As black students are underrepresented within student populations at most colleges and affected by negative stereotypes surrounding academic success, there is heightened potential for a decreased sense of belonging. While rates of persistence and degree completion are substantially lower for black students than for their white peers, could this be partly attributed to a lack of belonging? With often culturally insensitive and unreceptive campus environments, do these numbers reflect students of color lack of belonging? In a study of Latino students, it was found that hostile campus climates were negatively associated with these students' sense of belonging after controlling for several

factors (Hurtado, 1997). Thus, if this extends to also affect black students, these students could be impacted on campus like UT Austin as its campus climate peaks and drops.

On average in a number of studies comparing white students and students of color, it has been found that white students reported a higher sense of belonging. But that makes sense because it is a major system. On the contrary, for students of color, "being an outsider—being a minority—in an environment that was designed by and for the majority" has repercussions (Fischer, 2019). Consequently, students of color are then put at a disadvantage when it comes to academic, social, and overall success in their college experiences.

Specifically, in studies of school students, belonging among white students were comparably higher to that of black and brown students at the same age. In this study, school belongingness was measured to be associated with the areas of low connectedness, teacher support, and inclusion in the classroom (Osterman, 2000). Failure to have a connection to community or a sense of belonging at a university can be detrimental not only to mental health, but also academic performative, behavior, and academic motivation (Museus & Saelua, 2017). Consequently, factors that affect belonging must be identified and the negative influences on those factors mitigated.

Factors

Social

Building relationships and finding a community is an important aspect of the college experience. According to an early study, three components—academic performance, institutional fit, and institutional commitment— were said to have the high likelihood of impacting one's socialization within a student persistence model was based on sense of

belonging (Tinto, 2005). Institutional fit is an interesting component of this study because in whole, it relies on the psychological state of the student. In effect, it depends on the feeling of the student in relation to their belongingness. In one way, institutional fit is similar to belonging in that it is determined by the perception of the student. Specifically, for minority students, the academic setting can be particularly threatening for one's sense of belonging if it proves to be a negative environment. In fact, "socially stigmatized groups, such as African Americans, may be relatively more uncertain about their social belonging in mainstream institutions like school" or higher education (Walton and Cohen, 2011). This tendency may also be a predictor for a low sense of belonging for black students at institutions like a university or college.

Within the social component of belongingness, students' precollege experiences also may become a factor. For those students who attended or primarily lived in homogenous areas, the transition to college can be difficult. Cultural familiarity acts as a factor that eases the transition into college. Yet, because the dominant culture at predominantly white institutions is not that which students of color typically identify with, the issue arises primarily for these students (Museus, 2018). Moreover, the "importance of cultural familiarity is that it provides students— especially students of color— with validation that people from their communities and backgrounds are valued by their respective campuses."

Lastly, as a component of social psychology, "has been dedicated to studying individuals' need to conform to the groups they belong to out of fear of exclusion, and the ways individuals' interpersonal relationships are deeply affected by their membership or lack of membership in particular groups" (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The implications of feeling

the need to conform or effectively being excluded from a community have implications for the academic success of a student.

Academic

Although there is a focus on belongingness socially and on the campus more broadly, the academic setting is a large component of a student's college experience. As Strayhorn argues in "College students' sense of belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students," the classroom is often the center of the college experience. But for negatively stereotyped students, like black students, academic settings can be threatening. Specifically, in forming the perception of their belonging, their sense of belonging is vulnerable to the potentially harmful concern of confirming negative stereotypes about the intellectual ability of their group (Shnabel, 2013). Lack of academic preparation, a lower self-assessment of capabilities, societal stereotypes, a lack of role models among practitioners, family, and peers, as well as the influence of the cultural environment are potentially diminishing factors in one's sense of belonging.

Belongingness is interconnected with students' feeling of acceptance by faculty and their peers. The relationships that students form with their peers in the classroom and group settings can play a role in retention and success. In an education institutional setting, "Langevine stressed the importance of reciprocal relationships between students and adults," or faculty (St-Amand, 2017). Yet, for students from negatively stereotyped identities, this acceptance and in turn, belonging, can be crucial to positive academic performance and maintaining academic motivation (Freeman, 2007). Still, in increasing student belonging, most research maintains the idea that support from peers, but faculty in particular, is crucial. In fact, a study with undergraduates "indicate[s] that supportive

messages from instructors may, in turn, bolster students' self-efficacy beliefs" (McKinney, 2006). Students who voluntarily withdrew from universities experience high interaction with faculty who failed to have high student development and teaching. Thus, a professor's ability to work with students and enable them to develop inside the classroom is integral to the student's success (Ingrahama & Yonge, 2018).

The implications of a low sense of belonging generally can be tied to persistence to complete one's education, connectedness on campus, student involvement and academic experiences. As a result, Strayhorn argues it is important for educators to create conditions that foster belongingness in the classroom because students spend a large portion of their time in college in the classroom. Not only those supporting students, but also the spaces, can factor into belongingness.

Environment

Early research on belonging provides evidence for the influence of environments on belonging in college (Hausmann et al, 2007). According to Museus, the cultural relevance and responsiveness of campus environments also potentially facilitate or thwart sense of belonging among students (Museus & Saelua, 2018). Therefore, campus climate and the environment of a university can influence the course of success of its students.

In Hausmann's research, four cultural environmental factors indicate an impact on belonging particularly amidst the experiences of marginalized students. Firstly, "cultural relevance" describes the relevance of students' learning environments to their identity and ethnic backgrounds. Within cultural relevance, cultural familiarity and culturally validating environments are two factors that hold weight in effecting the experiences of

underrepresented students. First, cultural familiarity refers to the opportunity students have to connect to professors, faculty, and staff who understand their backgrounds and experiences as a student of color. Secondly, culturally validating environments is the extent to which the campus values cultural knowledge, backgrounds, and identities. Both of these factors primarily influence the experiences of students of color. An additional indicator is cultural responsiveness, or the degree to which "campus support systems effectively respond to the needs of culturally diverse student populations" (Hausmann, 2007). These factors are important in understanding campus environments that can enable higher levels of belonging among students of color.

In addition, creating some sort of connection or place on campus, whether that be through a committee, campus job, playing a sport (intramural or collegiate) or organization, sense of belonging is often increased. In Strayhorn's study, he used social spaces as a probable determinant of belonging. Moreover, "Maslow's hierarchy point[s] out that students' fundamental needs and motivations—physiological necessities, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization—depend on social spaces and the college environment, which in turn lead to outcomes that can manifest into either positive or negative experiences" (Strayhorn, 2012).

Positive Implications

In looking at the implications of belongingness on college experiences and success more broadly, belonging and acceptance are positively linked with student success, motivation, and self-esteem. Each of these, in turn, can enable students to succeed academically (Osterman, 358).

As research shows in observing the outcomes associated with belonging, the positive relationship is evident. Increased participation in classroom activities, prosocial behaviors, investment in extracurricular activities, and reduction in school absences were all indicated to be effects of positive belonging and positive social relations in the spaces of education. Not only is the development of a positive sense of belonging beneficial for student motivation, but also mental health. In predicting the mental health of college students, Fink specifies that students' sense of belonging as well as a supportive college campus are indicators of positive mental health. The severity and prevalence of mental health issues in college environments have recently led to increased rates of related academic failure in higher education. In the social transition to college, students with a higher sense of belonging experienced more ease with the experience of college. In this study, sense of belonging positively predicted favorable mental health outcome scores. The strong findings in the study support the idea that supportive and inclusive campus environments that positively effect belongingness help increase the positive mental health of student (Fink, 2014).

Furthermore, belonging also often gives students social networks. These social networks can be avenues for academic success, career opportunities, and connections. As McCabe details in the experiences of Valerie, a student at a Michigan University, a large public four-year university, "college students use their friends for academic motivation." For example, "friendship networks provided a sense of home as a minority on a predominantly white campus" (McCabe, 2016). This finding is reinforced by studies that show peer acceptance and friendship consistently are correlated with higher achievement.

When students are able to achieve a high sense of belonging, various factors come together: self-esteem, self-actualization, and feelings of safety. Being "accepted, included, or welcomed" leads to positive emotions, yet if feelings of "rejection, exclusions, or being ignored" culminate, intense negative feelings are often a resulting factor (Osterman, 2000)

Negative Implications

As stated, sense of belonging is a basic human need. Therefore, the inability to develop a sense of belonging at one's college or university can have detrimental effects on students who fall into this category. This low sense of belonging has implications not only for one's college experience, but also personally.

In general, "lack of belonging is associated with the incidence of mental and physical illness and a broad range of behavioral problems ranging from traffic accidents to criminality and suicide" (Osterman, 2000). In a college setting, overwhelming negative feelings as a result of a low sense of belonging can also result in mental health problems and failure to persist in college. Thus, belonging can impact the trajectory of one's academic career— influencing achievement, retention, and persistence.

In Hausmann's work on belonging, a study was conducted to see if an intention to persist through college could be predicted by the sense of belonging among those students. In relation to the study of belonging, student persistence has been an underdeveloped topic, especially on college campuses. However, the concept itself is not all that new. A widely known model of student persistence by Tinto in the late 1980s that built upon even earlier work theorized that the integration of students into their social and academic environment was crucial to predicting whether that student would remain in college or not

(Hausmann, 2007). Nonetheless, some models of student persistence do not center around integration but instead student involvement. Astin's alternative model relies on student involvement because it relays actual student behavior as opposed to perceptions of belonging (Fink, 2014). Yet, some students who are highly integrated into spaces of leadership still feel out of place due to the lack of inclusion in those spaces. For example, homogenous spaces of leadership that do can lead to feelings of isolation for those on the outside of the dominant representation.

Furthermore, because sense of belonging is intertwined with the perception of feeling accepted and "a major factor that contributes positively to an individual's psychological development," there can be a profound negative impact on mental health (Allen and Bowles, 2012). Consequences like this reveal that implications of a low sense of belonging can be partly tied to persistence to complete one's education, connectedness on campus, student involvement and academic experiences. As a result, Strayhorn argues it is important for educators to create conditions that foster belongingness in the classroom for their students. Because a sense of belonging relies on academic and social integration, is important to analyze both settings because of the varied effects on connectedness.

Moreover, Maslow's model suggests that individuals "must adapt and adjust by changing personal aspects to align with any situations or people that would warrant such an adaptation" (Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn also discusses the dilemma of students of color committing "cultural suicide" (Strayhorn, 2012). In order to better assimilate and blend into the campus community, some students of color feel the need to sever themselves from their cultural heritage. So, what happens when you must adapt and change nearly all of your personal aspects to fit your college atmosphere? Perhaps, this is one of the negative

implications that differentiates sense of belonging for students of color and that of white students.

With the disproportionate effect of these outcomes of the environment on student belonging, particularly students of color, I looked to further understand the impact on students at UT Austin. Moreover, at less than 5% of the student population, I found it important to explore levels of student belonging among black students at the University of Texas at Austin in relation to the impacts of certain events and issues of campus climate.

Methods

In conducting research on belonging among African-American students at the University of Texas, at Austin, I utilized two sources of data. The first source of data was a series of three focus groups comprised of black students from different majors and involvement on campus that were divided up by year. The second source of data was a survey that was distributed through networks of students at UT. Both sources of data were analyzed in the context of black students at the University of Texas at Austin.

Focus Groups

Design & Materials

The design of this study was configured to get a varied amount of experiences from African-American students at the University of Texas at Austin. The questions along with the decision for grouping by year was important for the flow of shared experiences recounted throughout the focus group sessions. The focus groups were configured by selection and voluntary participation. The design of the questions was set up for the participating students to think about their experiences at UT in order to answer the final

questions: How would you rate your sense of belonging on a scale from 1 to 5? The series of questions included their academic, social, and broader campus experiences and were intentionally ordered in a progression to best understand the students experience as they thought about each answer. Furthermore, within the group environment, students can better relate and feel comfortable in sharing their experiences, so the focus group was configured in this manner.

Procedure

In order to carry out these focus groups, I submitted a formal proposal to the Institutional Review Board. The purpose of my research, interview questions, and adesign of my original data collection were all reviewed and vetted by the IRB.

During the interview portion of the study, I used a power point of question slides to guide participants to think about their overall experience on campus to ultimately shape their idea of sense of belonging at the University of Texas, at Austin more generally. Before beginning the question section of the focus groups, I introduced the participants of the purpose of this research and the context in which it is being studied. Lastly, I let the participants know that their response was recorded.

There were five questions in total that were asked over the span of thirty minutes per grouping. After being prompted with each question, student participants had the opportunity to answer if they so choose. Each participant also responded to the questions under an alias in order to protect their confidentiality. Once the question was asked, the students were to discuss the topic amongst themselves and recount their experiences. At the end of the session, each person was asked to rate their sense of belonging on campus

generally on a scale from 1 to 5. These answers were essential to the overall analysis of their answers.

Participants

The design of my research is focused on understanding the perspectives of black students at UT Austin. I employed two methods in selecting students to participate in the focus group. First, I used self-selection by soliciting participants through a survey and social media outlets. This allowed me to acquire a number of students who were genuinely interested in participating in the study. Secondly, I contacted students at UT Austin who I know, am acquainted with, or have met in passing. These students comprised the majority of the focus group participants. The population from which these students were drawn from was the black student population at the University of Texas, at Austin. Primarily, the students selected and self-selected are involved members of the community at UT and frequent campus for more than simply day to day classes. In selecting participants, I included both male and female students, different socioeconomic backgrounds, and age. Students were assigned to groups based on the number of years they have been at the University of Texas, at Austin with one exception. A student, who is a third-year, participated in the age group below. Additionally, freshmen and sophomores were combined in an underclassmen category because of their limited experiences at UT Austin in one to two years. Nothing within the focus groups was randomized, although it could have yielded different results if that was possible.

Survey

Design & Procedure

Using the UT Qualtrics Survey Tool, I was able to collect information about sense of belonging from students across various backgrounds that attend the University of Texas at Austin. The survey was distributed during some organization meetings on campus, but it was primarily distributed through electronic and social media outlets, such as GroupMe and Facebook.

First, at the beginning of the survey, the purpose of the data collection to the individuals who choose to participate voluntarily in the survey. Secondly, the survey gathered student information through a series of preliminary questions to identify race/ethnicity and year in college of the participant in order to ensure that the survey was limited only to UT students. Lastly, the survey prompted the participant to answer a series of questions about the academic and social components of their college experience in order to get a representative assessment that is comparable to the focus group. Ultimately, after the definition for the term sense of belonging, participants were asked to "rate your overall sense of belonging at the University of Texas at Austin." The survey was designed to emulate the focus group participants' process of thinking through their experiences in different settings during their time at the UT.

Participants

The participants in this data collection were voluntarily completing the survey. Before beginning the survey, each participant was prompted with a question that assured their agreement to participate in the study. In this study, participants were students at the University of Texas, at Austin from various ethnic groups and years. In total, there were

170 participants. The breakdown for the report by race and/or ethnicity was 69 White students, 40 Black students, 17 Latinx students, 31 Asian students, and 11 students who selected other. As a result, the breakdown of participants by racial grouping was 40.6% Caucasian or white, 23.5% African-American or black, 10% Latinx, 18.2% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 6.4% Other. Although the representation of identities is not fully reflective of the racial groupings on UT's campus, the survey was used to better understand students' views on belonging.

Analysis of Black Students Belonging

A major component of belonging is feeling wanted and accepted by the community on your college campus. Within certain majors and classes, as beforementioned, diversity tends to be sparse. Black students are often one or one of few students who identify as African-American in their classes. In turn, it was evident in the personal discussions of the focus group that this low representation in their classes affects students' sense of belonging.

In conducting a focus group with a selected group of African-American students at the University of Texas at Austin, I was able to further analyze the concept of belonging among blacks students in higher education. At a predominantly white institution like UT, the black population makes up one of the most underrepresented demographics on campus. Once again, the black student population is just nearly reaching 5% of the total student population. Consequently, in discussions among the focus groups assembled for research in this thesis, issues of lack of representation within their major, microaggressions, and isolation were discussed broadly. After analyzing the information

collected during these focus groups, three themes emerged. Among these black students, they detailed accounts of isolation within academia, separation from campus, and questioning of belonging. More broadly, a disconnectedness between their black experience and the broader UT experience revealed some important issues that may reflect the feelings that most black students encounter. Each of these themes was identified throughout the three groups of students interviewed from the fourth year seniors to first years at UT Austin.

Isolation in Academia

As Zumbrumm explores in "Support, belonging, motivation, and engagement in the college classroom: a mixed method study," it is argued that students spend the majority of their college experience in the classroom—making it a crucial part of their experience and often sense of belonging. Through research and studies carried out in the context of belonging, the academic circumstance shapes a large portion of one's college encounters (Strayhorn, 2012). However, participants within this study conveyed a feeling of isolation within their respective majors and academic environments. As expected, the lack of representation across majors and honors programs proved to be an issue that was discussed among the participants.

During the focus groups, participants detailed the feeling of being the only black student in the classroom— a feeling that the majority of them had experienced. To provide context, at a university with over 40,804 students, core classes tend to be large in size ("Facts & Figures", 2018). Jacob, a second year African and African Diasporas studies major, shared that during his first year, he remembered "being in a really big class and there were

not many people in there [who] were black in a class of two or three-hundred [students]."

For him, it was a point of realization that their experience at UT would be greatly impacted

because of their identity. As Michael Estevez quotes the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People, "your aloneness makes you visible" (Estevez, 2019).

Therefore, within the academic experience, there is a feeling a hypervisibility among

students of color, particularly black students, in these spaces due to the incredibly low

representation in the student population. In fact, many black students feel the added

pressure of being the "ideal student." In a sense, due to the small black population at

predominantly white institutions like UT, black students are positioned within a hyper

level of visibility as well as accountability (Ray, 2012). For instance, if a black student

misses class, there is a higher likelihood that their absence will catch the professor's

attention, especially if there is only a small set of black students in that class—sometimes,

placing more pressure on black students to 'always be on.'

Yet, this experience of being isolated as a racial minority occurs in smaller sized

classes and majors as well. With small numbers and a lack of representation across majors,

particularly honors programs and smaller schools like architecture, participants discussed

the added pressure to "stay on top of their game" or "come correct" as one of the only black

students in the classroom. *Sarah, a Business Honors and Plan II Honors* double major, spoke

about her struggle with being the only black woman in her cohort of 150 students in the

Business Honors program. In fact, she contemplated dropping out of the program because

it began to take a toll on her mental health and grades. She further explained, "I didn't

realize it would get to me until that moment when I was the only one," the only black

woman. Additionally, two students spoke about their experience as architecture students

where they are both one of four black students in their cohorts. Therefore, throughout the discussion, it became evident that the demographics of the distribution of black students at the university within the respective majors and programs also play a role in affecting students' sense of belonging.

Furthermore, the focus groups revealed a lack of connection to faculty in their academic experiences. For the majority of the participants, some lacked a faculty connection in all and others lacked one specifically in their major. Faculty support is a component of academic motivation that is often overlooked. Though the relationships between students and their peers cultivate belonging, faculty interactions provide an additional layer of academic support (Rod, 2013). Nonetheless, students discussed the feelings nervousness and their tendency to avoid speaking with their professors, especially their "older, white male" professors and those that they perceive would not share similar experiences with them. According to Komarruju in "The Role of Student-Faculty Interactions in Developing College Students' Academic Self-Concept, Motivation, and Achievement, the takeaways from student-faculty relationships can be beneficial to enhancing their success and drive in college (2010). The presence of relationships, formal or informal, outside of the instructional and classroom settings, provide the opportunity for students to feel supported in an academic-related or personal interaction (Komarruju, 2010). It has been revealed that students with a high sense of belonging tend to be well connected with faculty and professors within their academic pursuit of interest (St-Amand, 2017).

An interesting finding within the discussion of student-faculty connections was the prevailing importance of identity, whether intentionally or unintentionally. For the

students who do have a faculty connection or valuable experience with a professor, in each case, it was a younger faculty member or a person of color. Anna, a third-year architecture major said, "I do feel connected to two professors within my major, but coincidently they are also minorities, one is a black man within the school of architecture and the other professor is a Hispanic woman that I go to for mentorship." Additionally, Michael, a fourth-year senior within the Moody College of Communications, recounted an experience where he felt supported by a professor, who is also a woman of color, consistently checked in on him and discussed his coping with being the only black student in the classroom. These comments along with other emphasize the need for representation and diversity not only in the student population, but also within the faculty and staff. Because as Nettles found "the ease of developing relationships with faculty was one of four factors that led to academic integration for African American students" (Nettles, 1991).

Here, representation of students in a course can be crucial because, in some instances, it is an easing factor in students' engagement in the classroom. Yet, speaking up in class can often be a double-edged sword. David, a fourth-year Corporate Communications major, shared "I feel like if I am one of the only black people in the class, I feel like other people need to hear [my perspective]." Sometimes, he mentioned, other students live in a world without people of color or hearing their experiences, so it is important for him and students like him to speak up. However, he mentioned how that is something he felt he learned over the course of his four years. Sarah echoed his comments, in explaining "you feel like you are one of the only and first representations" of black people or people of color more broadly, "so I felt all of this responsibility to speak eloquently and intelligently...because you can never change that first impression of what a

black woman is in their mind." Consequently, students don't only feel this unwanted-ness, but also the discomfort and burden of representing others when they are the only black person or person of colors in the room.

Questioning of Belonging

A major component of belonging is feeling wanted and accepted by the community on your college campus. Black students are often one or one of the few students who identify as African-American in their classes. Therefore, often a lack representation itself, as students discussed, makes them feel out of place. However, there is also an issue with the campus climate and other issues that permeate— decreasing sense of belonging for black students in particular. In the focus groups, participants discussed issues of racist incidents on campus, tokenization in organizations, and lack of belonging in their major.

It is important to note that the political climate of the country more generally also impacts students time at UT. Alyssa, a fourth year, spoke about an experience when she and a friend were walking to the library on campus and she was called the N-word following the Trump election. For students in the discussion, it was clear that incidences like these threaten their belonging on campus. "You already feel kind of out of place on campus," Kimberly, a fourth year architecture major relayed, but she explained that when racist happenings occur on campus and target her, she feels less and less safe and connected to the campus.

Furthermore, there is the issue of tokenization. Because many organizations at UT do lack diversity, some students discussed the feeling of not belonging or only being selected to be in these spaces because of the color of their skin. For example, Anna, a third

year, discussed her experience in a spirit group at UT. For reference, a spirit group at UT is generally a group of students who serve the community and hold various social events for their organization. A majority of spirit groups also have a long application process. Her first semester, Anna decided to join a spirit group to make more friends in college. She says, "when she did join, it was very odd…[there] was only four black girls and that is something you notice…[immediately]." However, her experience with the lack of diversity in the group worsened as she got involved in the selection process for her organization. She discusses how her already low sense of belonging within the organization decreased, "that experience [showed me] a lot of girls in the organization were letting people in who looked like them…and when I tried to bring it to the [executive] board's awareness, they tried to implement inclusivity and 'let in more girls who are unique' without addressing the issue of race clearly." After this incident, she grappled with the wonder if she only got in because she fits this category of "unique." She has also since gone inactive in the organization because of the feeling the organization is not as inclusive as it appears.

Lastly, Kimberly, a fourth year architecture major, talks about her inner struggle with being a black student in her major. "I wasn't Top 7%, but when [the representation of black students in my major] was two black girls and two black guys in my year and two black girls and two black guys in the year before…" and so on, it made her uncertain about her place within a prestigious school like the UT School of Architecture. She goes on to say, "alright, well this looks like a quota and am I really supposed to be here or was I one of the few black girls in Texas to have applied to the architecture school…and that affected me second guessing myself and how much I belonged here." These external factors of representation in her major led to her to question her belonging in all. As a figment of

perception, belonging not only depends on exterior environment but also one's internal feeling.

Students of color often struggle internally with a sense of belonging aside from different exterior factors as a consequence of imposter syndrome. The imposter syndrome phenomenon "refers to an internal feeling of intellectual phoniness that is often experienced." In a study done at the University of Texas, it was shown that due to the high incidence of perceived discrimination, African-American students, in particular, feel levels of imposter syndrome differently (UT News, 2017). Among students of colors, especially Latinx and African-American students, "imposterism" is usually racialized largely due to stereotypes around the intelligence of certain racial groups (Peteet & Weekes, 2015). In turn, these feelings of imposter syndrome can lead to higher levels of anxiety and depression, which have an effect on academic performance and the college experience.

Furthermore, students discussed interactions with their peers that made them feel like they don't belong. These interactions in which their belonging or whether they deserved to be a student at UT was questioned, only furthered this internal doubt of belonging. Within these discussions, the topic of affirmative action was mentioned. Alyssa shared how the conversations around affirmative action can potentially cause African-American students to feel imposter syndrome or this feeling of am I actually supposed to be here. Alyssa, a fourth-year Neuroscience major shared, "that doesn't even include when people blatantly question your ability, or whether or not you deserve to be here." It can even lead black students to question if they are really supposed to be at UT or not— especially as they look around and do not see a lot of people who look like them in their classes. Although students may be aware of their skill sets and abilities as a student, other

students questioning if they are *supposed* to be in these spaces can further threaten belonging.

With the sentiment that they do not belong at this university being perpetuated by some of their peers, some black students feel like they do not have the chance to fail outwardly—leading them to shy away from asking for help. For example, Jacob discussed his freshman year and how he initially struggled, but he "didn't use the resources to deal with situations where" he felt discomfort. Instead, he felt the need to "fak[e] that everything was going okay" because of his pride and the perception that people around him were already expecting him to fail. Thus, not only is there an increased likelihood for black students to question themselves as they navigate predominantly white spaces, but also an aggregate effect when their environment emphasizes their differences.

Separation from Campus

Throughout the focus group, it became evident that there are various separating factors between the black student population and UT Austin. As many noted, the black community at times feels like a "separate world" from the campus at large. Subsequently, this has implications for student identity, involvement, as well as sense of belonging.

When asked to rate their sense of belonging, many participants struggled because their sense of belonging in the black community at times was higher than the campus as a whole because they did not feel integral to the campus. Katherine, a fourth-year Public health major said, "I feel like there are multiple facets…I don't know why I cannot mush [my rate of belonging in the black community and UT more generally] together, but in each space, I feel different." Among the participants, there was a consensus that in some the

black community feels largely disconnected from the UT community and sometimes, the Longhorn experience. Therefore, for those who joined other organizations and got involved outside of the 'black community' tended to be on the outskirts of what is the black community and others became increasingly entrenched in it. Because there is only so much time in every day that a student can spend in different compartments—academic, social, personal life— there is a struggle to successfully straddle both worlds.

For students who have been involved in other spaces across campus, they tended to feel disconnected from the black community. Katherine, a public health major detailed that her feeling of belonging in the black community is lower than that of UT more generally. Also, Sarah in her third-year at UT, said "I have always felt on the fringes of the black community…I don't feel super connected to the black community on campus." She continued to explain, "the things I was interested weren't always the things that other black people were interested in," Sarah shared, which made her feel like she had to often choose between her interests and being in the black community. Moreover, it reveals this separation between campus involvement more broadly and involvement within one's own community. Emily, a second-year History major, also talked about how not being involved in the black community did weigh on her at the beginning of her college career. She struggled with the feeling of not being "black enough" for the community and not "white enough" in other communities. As their sense of belonging declined on campus generally or on the outskirts of the black community at UT, some participants discussed their decision to join a spirit group or other social organizations. Emily discussed that she joined and was looking to meet more people on campus, but even in this space, she felt underrepresented

in her identity. Therefore, it became obvious that the black community is not very represented in these spaces of whiteness on campus.

On the other hand, black students who choose to become more embedded and involved in the social aspects of the black community ended up feeling like an outsider in their academic circles. Kimberly said, "I always felt on the outskirts of what is sort of the architecture community, but I would say a lot of it was my own doing because when they were having an event, I would think 'oh, I am going to be hanging out with my black friends'." Part of this feeling is due to homophily and racial cohesion. Homophily is a phenomenon in which "friends share similarities due to individual tendencies to befriend like-others and because the initial similarity tends to get stronger over time through successive interactions." (Syed & Juan, 2011). In fact, it is argued to serve as an identity-related support mechanism for college students. As peers are a typically important source of support for college students, finding "friendship homophily" provides comfort in the need not to explain the similar part of one's identity and contributes to their racial cohesion. This affiliation with groups of racially or culturally similar people combats pejorative stereotypes and racism (Wright, 2008).

Moreover, beyond the social component of belonging, there appeared to be a trade-off that black students faced between their identity and other priorities. In other words, their blackness often took a back seat. Kimberly also stated, "I feel like, during my first two years, I felt very connected, especially to what was…the black community…, but now I am more disconnected…because I am more focused on school." In fact, Katherine felt this way as well. As a fourth-year Public health major, she spoke about how when you are trying to get more serious, it gets a lot harder to stay involved in the black community. In fact, she

began to feel closer to her science community as she studied and worked towards her academic goals. However, now she does not feel as connected to the black community. Because black students often do not see people that look like them in their classes, it is as if part of their identity is absent from their academic and outside pursuits. Thus, they must outsource and seek that connection to their identity, unlike most students. This is only one example of the sacrifices or trade-offs that some black students are found to be faced with.

The spatial disconnect was another interesting trade-off. In the "freshman year, black UT was strong in the Jester dormitory," communications senior Micheal noted. However, for him and other students living in West Campus—closer in proximity to UT's campus— they felt separated from those who lived in Riverside. Students in West Campus opted to spend more money to live closer to campus while others were constrained financially and so had to live further away, which had implications for their campus involvement. For example, Riverside creates distance between those students and the campus more broadly. The spatial separation makes it difficult for students living in Riverside, which disproportionately affects Black and Latinx students, to get involved and stay connected on campus. In fact, the system of transportation and commuting for these students worsens this issue.

Lastly, Alyssa, a fourth-year student talked about how working off campus has limited the amount of time she gets to spend on campus. "Because I'm not on campus as often and I am not around my community, my sense of belonging or connection to UT, in general, is pretty low." Her time spent at work and other obligations, as she reflected, did not allow her to allot time for organization meetings and spending time within the community.

There is a multitude of separating factors that students experience. Students only have a finite amount of time to spread thinly between academics, involvement, work, and other priorities. Consequently, some students more than others are driven to sacrifice their sense of belonging at UT because of this.

Sense of Belonging for black students at UT

In understanding sense of belonging for the students within the focus group, it was crucial for them to think about their academic, social, and general campus experiences. Overall within the focus group, the average sense of belonging was directly in between the lowest and highest ratings of belonging. As a black student, campus climate, racial incidents, classroom experience, and other issues become potential threats to the students' sense of belonging as they expressed; however, some interesting points of view were shared about other positive and negative impacts on their belonging.

Nonetheless, within the groups of participants, there were a few outliers with a higher sense of belonging in the 4 to 5 range. Specifically, for these participants, each conveyed a strong sense of integration into their community, both socially and academically. For example, one of these participants mentioned the importance of New Black Student Weekend to their acclimation to the university and feeling a sense of community at a large university like UT. For context, New Black Student Weekend is a program put on through the Multicultural Engagement center that welcomes self-identifying African-American students to the university and focuses on providing these students with both general information about the college experience as well as information that is unique to their identity as a black student on a predominantly white campus.

Furthermore, Katherine, fourth-year Public Health major discussed their academic program specifically geared towards women in natural sciences (*WINS*) as a crucial factor in their academic success. Unlike many students, Katherine mentioned she did not have to navigate the College of Natural Sciences on their own or experience discouraging advisors. But what about those students who do not find programs to help guide them through their college experience? They typically have a lower sense of belonging. On average, students that tended to have a higher sense of belonging on the scale actively sought out places of belonging. Sarah, a third year, recounted that after she felt very out of place in her major, she got involved in student government, joined a spirit group, and took on a leadership role in a black student organization. These roles enabled her to redefine a unique UT experience for herself.

Within the focus group, there was a great amount of disconnectedness or lack of belonging to the university as a whole. In the classroom, social settings, and the campus more broadly, the focus group of black students had an average overall sense of belonging of 3.1 on a scale from one to five. In order to better understand this average, I will describe the trend of belonging over the average four-year college experience. As a freshman, Faith recounted her experiences thus far—most of which have been fairly positive. To better contextualize her experience, throughout the 2018 – 2019 school year, there have not been many climatic or racially charged incidences on campus aside from the Brett Kavanagh protest. Faith, a first-year Art and Entertainment Technologies major, said she feels connected within the black community, which makes her feel like she belongs at UT more generally. However, she noted that she does not feel particularly connected to the campus at large. If you analyze most first-year experiences, they are relatively positive if they found

a sense of community within the first year of being on campus. Yet, there are some students who struggle significantly in their first year, like Sarah as mentioned previously. In these focus groups, there was not a freshman who had that experience. Next, the sophomore and juniors tended to rate their sense of belonging in no discrete pattern. Between their second and third years, students are faced with other obstacles, harder classes, and sometimes more involvement. Lastly, the seniors tended to have a higher sense of belonging for various set of reasons. Potentially, this is an effect of looking back on the college experience as a whole with feelings of nostalgia before they graduate from the university.

An interesting feeling that students have experienced was the disconnect between their academic interests, social interactions, and being involved in the black community. Although a majority of students felt connected to other black students or the black community in some form at the beginning of their college experience, most discussed a problem in having to choose between their involvement in the community and the involvement that related to their academic careers and outside interests. For this reason, most sacrificed their connection to the black community for areas of academic interest.

Unlike most groups of students because of the size of the black community, black students have to seek out belonging in the black community as well as campus more broadly. Katherine, who is a fourth-year Public health major and also involved in organizations like student government and the Black Health Professionals Organization, commented. "I don't think my white peers have to think about reaching out of their racial networks."

Although Kimberly felt very connected to the black community at first while on the outskirts of the architecture school and community, the tables turned once she became

more and more focused on school. However, the question is, is it possible to be socially and academically connected at the same time while balancing other priorities? "As you get more serious [in school]…, it gets a lot harder to stay involved in the black community, Katherine echoed. It was evident that often there was a need to also choose between the friends made in academic settings and the black community because they often do not overlap.

Mentorship is an important factor for black students and the positive development of a sense of belonging. Kimberly discussed how being able to reach out to older black students in the school of Architecture made her feel supported. Furthermore, Alyssa shared how the Black Health Professionals organization is a space where "[she] can go to with welcoming arms and [knows] they are going in a similar direction," in terms of career. It is also a space where there is an exchange of information on networks, what courses or professors to take, and other factors relating to career and academic progression. For Alyssa, she explained it is where "the black community and science meets" in her eyes. These networks of communication with those who have similar experiences as the younger students provided support.

In all sense of belonging as a measurable factor enables a better understanding of their experiences on campus. This is crucial in defining their place within the broader student population in order to address the needs of all students on campus.

Results of the Survey

To better contextualize the analysis of the experiences of the black students who served as participants in previously discussed focus groups, a survey was administered to

the larger UT student body. While the focus group showed a subset of black students'

experiences with belongingness, the survey brings new information about a wider subset

of students at UT Austin. In fact, the information collected further emphasizes the need to

address belonging within the black community and provides a background for the

information gathered about black students in the focus groups.

In this survey, the responses were analyzed through the lens of ethnic and racial

groups that the participants indicated on the survey. In looking at the distribution of sense

of belonging a scale from 1 to 5 (5 being the highest), it is evident that black students are

disproportionately experiencing a lack of belonging compared to other racial groups at UT.

47.36% of those participants who identify as African-American or black indicated a low

sense of belonging, i.e. a rating of 2 or below. No other group indicated such a high overall

low sense of belonging. Furthermore, the black participant group did not have any

indication among the participants of a 5, or a very high sense of belonging. Yet, all other

racial/ethnic groups had at least 9.83% of participants deem that they had a 5, or a very

high sense of belonging.

Nonetheless, the survey also shed light on the issue of belonging at the University of

Texas more broadly. In the survey results, it is clear that within every group of participants

regardless of race or ethnicity, there are students who struggle with a low sense of

belonging. In fact, any defined group of students has at the very least 15.63% of

participants that feel a low sense of belonging. Therefore, belonging needs to continue to be

studied on a larger scale across campus.

White (Caucasian)

7.46%
14.93%
37.31%
28.36%
11.94%

Black (African-American or of African Descent)

7.89%
39.47%
39.47%
13.16%

Latinx

12.50%
12.50%
12.50%
37.50%
25.00%
12.50%

Asian or Pacific Islander

3.13%
12.50%
25.00%
50.00%
9.38%

Native American

NO DATA

Other

9.09%
45.45%
27.27%
18.18%

■ 1 (Low)   ■ 2   ■ 3   ■ 4   ■ 5 (High)

Proposal

As these findings suggest, black students at UT still struggle to find a place.

Following a legacy of exclusion from segregated higher education institutions, there is still

progress to be made. As a result, this proposal will identify the issues that black students

can face and provide insight and solutions from the perspective of the student experience.

At the University of Texas at Austin, one of the long-discussed actions has been the need to increase numbers. This research reinforce that need—this is, in fact, a numbers game to some extent. Yet, before steps are taken to further increase the number of black students on campus, UT must also work on issues related to changes in faculty representation, the campus environment, and the integration of black students into the Longhorn experience.

At our peer public institutions like the University of California at Berkeley, there are concentrated efforts that demonstrate a commitment to building a diverse and culturally inclusive campus. In this proposal, I will use UC Berkeley's diversity, equity, and inclusion report among other similar university initiatives to construct a proposal for the University of Texas at Austin.

Proposed Changes in the Academy

A cross-cutting theme in the focus group interviews is that what happens in the classroom is a cornerstone of students' sense of belonging in majors, colleges, and in the classroom. "Existing research indicates that, although the attributes of students themselves are difficult to change, institutions can intentionally shape learning environments" (Hausmann, 2007). Thus, how can we work to make the academic environment at UT supportive?

First, faculty representation and diversity are crucial. As noted above, black students often feel most connected and comfortable with faculty of color. However, UT faculty is 75.4% is white. In many ways, the state of diversity within the faculty at UT is worse than the student population. Meanwhile, faculty of color are reduced to 23.5% and

black faculty, less than 4% ("Spotlight on Data", 2018). Now, in analyzing these numbers and their impact on the student population, it is important to consider how thinly spread faculty of color are across not only different colleges but also the undergraduate and graduate levels. Consequently, students have limited, or no opportunity taught or mentored by professors of color if they attend one of the top state schools in the world.

Not only is race an issue, but also gender. One the one hand, about half of all faculty is female (48.4 versus 51.6%) but these women are not equally distributed across the university ("Spotlight on Data", 2018). This means that many female undergraduates have limited opportunity to engage with professionals who have likely had experiences more similar to theirs than any male counterpart. As a student within the government department, I have seen the overwhelming presence of male faculty in comparison to female. In fact, I have had to scour syllabi and course schedules to find one female professor in my own major.

It is apparent that students of color look to interact with professors who relate to their experiences in addition to the majority population of professors. As a consequence of the lack of diversity within the faculty teaching at the University of Texas, the small number of professors from diverse backgrounds are inundated with students who want mentorship and guidance and help with the progression of their careers. With many students and so few professors, the important aspect of mentorship because it is time-consuming labor beyond the curriculum of the classroom is diminished.

Moreover, the academic environment that is shaped by professors and students is equally important. In order to cultivate a learning environment that values the experiences of all students, faculty diversity training is a critical step that peer institutions have taken.

These trainings also could work to abate student encounters with culturally insensitive or threatening comments made by their superiors in classrooms and faculty-student interactions.

There must also be an effort to deconstruct elitist or privileged conventions within these academic spaces. Not all students come from backgrounds of understanding the college experience as a first-year and thus, that experience must be normalized by changing some language or furthering explanations in discussions of academia. There are ideas of elitism that often favor homogeneity over diversity and unequal distribution of resources. These elitist attitudes at work contest student belonging in making spaces of academia less accessible (Hurtado, 1992). For example, institutions often limit curriculum that is 'too radical' or challenges the status quo from the perspective of marginalized groups. Furthermore, the curriculum could combat this environment by instituting new undergraduate curriculum that centers around building and understanding the language and ability to carry out dialogue in a diverse society that includes interactions with people who are different from one another.

As low rates of student persistence and degree completion persist as a major concern at universities across the United States, UT is not immune to this issue (Strayhorn, 2012). However, in improving the environment, it is important to look for factors within academia that can worsen or improve belonging in addressing these concerns.

Proposed Changes in Cultural integration

In order to improve diversity and inclusivity on UT's campus, there must be steps made towards actual cultural integration. Campus environment and the lack of cultural integration can influence marginalized students, who by simply attending a predominantly

white institution develop can develop feelings of isolation, a lack of belonging, or perceived racial discrimination. Today's students must deal with less overt methods of racism, discrimination, and microaggressions, but why is that? And the bigger question is, how do change that?

While spaces like the Multicultural Engagement Center and the Malcolm X Lounge are positive additions to the campus for black students, the campus itself should be an inclusive and safe space for black students. There need to be more than two spaces for black students to feel a sense of belonging. Because students must navigate numerous spaces and contexts throughout their college experience, the university should make an effort to mitigate negative encounters with cultural insensitivity and racial microaggressions. There is an opportunity to do this and cultivate belongingness among diverse and marginalized students like the black student population by implementing a culturally engaging campus environment model (Museus, 2014).

With attention to cultural relevance of the campus and cultural responsiveness by the institution, students of color might feel more supported by an institution like UT. In improving campus climate, there must be a level of cultural relevance, or the degree to which cultural factors are integrated into the university, that is upheld. In addition, it is arguably more important that cultural responsiveness is institutionalized at UT. On such a large campus with vocal students, it is inevitable that issues of campus climate or racialized incidents will occur. Therefore, as a university, it is imperative that there are efforts to properly address these incidents with cultural sensitivity when necessary. Especially in the incidence of racially charged issues, there must be a focus on managing the event without

erasing the importance of difficult, but critical discussions that surround the issue of race as it pertains to the events.

Creating an affirming campus climate is only possible if all members of the university community—faculty, students, and staff—are committed to it and held to the same standards of accountability in upholding it (Jones, 2001). And "to create a more positive campus racial climate, diversity and inclusion as well as social justice and anti-blackness must be integrated into the campus environment and culture" (Mwangi, 2018). Institutions like UC Berkeley have advance campus climate for its students through research, reports, and an action-based effort of cultural integration and inclusion.

In making strides towards improving the campus climate of UT, the university needs to institutionalize its efforts of diversity and inclusion. A university-wide survey should be administered to better assess the ever-changing needs and experiences of students, faculty, and staff. Every 2 to 4 years, this survey could work as a tracker of the beginning and end of one's experience in their four- or five-year college career. UT's peer institution of UC Berkeley collected data through its campus climate survey to evaluate factors such as exclusion, respect, and general campus climate. With this data, the university identified gaps in campus climate to address from its important stakeholders—students and faculty. Although there is a current report and Campus Climate Response Team at UT Austin, it falls short in thoroughly surveying the student and faculty populations with targeted questions. Or perhaps the information is simply not presented in a clear and accessible manner. Further, reporting the findings in a public report is important in holding the university and administration accountable to the progress of diversity and representation.

UT still has progress to make in creating a culturally and socially integrated experience for its students, especially those students of color. Although the campus is no longer a majority white institution with a Caucasian population of 41.1%, it still operates in this way. In actuality, as the diversity of the student population continues to expand among some racial/ethnic groups, it is beginning to develop into a multicultural student body. Yet, the campus itself does not adequately support these minority groups. 59% of the undergraduate student population is not white, yet this majority made up of Latinx students, Black students, Muslim students, LGBTQ+ students, students with disabilities, and more diverse populations still gets lost in the bureaucracy of an institution that serves its white students first through inaccurate faculty representation, a lack of social acclimatization for students of color, and insufficient support.

Once again, numbers and representation play a major role in facilitating this integration. As black students are underrepresented across campus in their respective organizations, majors, interests, and so on, it can be difficult to navigate these spaces in which more often than not they are one of few. However, aside from the evident solution of increasing numbers, how can the university facilitate a more effective cultural integration?

One feasible way is the expansion of the definition of what it means to be a Longhorn to better include marginalized groups and cultures. It is not a new idea that membership is not only about being in or out of a group, but also the development of personal identification and a social identity with that group or community (Muccielli, 1980). In further increasing black student identification with the Longhorn experience, there must be a space for them to fit in without having to forgo all parts of their identity. In effect, there needs to be a transition from black students holding the idea of their college

experience as just getting their education unscathed, as David framed it, to having an experience in which these students can and believe they can thrive.

The university can achieve this goal by reinforcing and implementing some of the following examples. Increasing access to resources and information for minority students bridges the gap of higher education. In a way, this also works to deconstruct elitist structures that are built into the college experience in assuming that every student is aware of the resources to be successful in college. Establishing resources for students looks like "structured diversity programming targeting students in the first year (Hu & Kuh, 2003). In addition, programs like these also connect students with others outside of their own race, which is key for intellectual development around race" (Hurtado, 2013). Moreover, there should be an effort to aligning resources with the needs of Black students to ensure their success. This includes administrators acknowledging the role the institutions played in reifying racial inequity and racist structures (Mwangi, 2018). These efforts build the resources and support for black students, which, in turn, can increase the sense of belonging among black students.

At a premier institution like UT Austin, we have problem solvers and thinkers who are also stakeholders in shaping campus climate. Therefore, diversity, representation, and cultural integration cannot be looked at as a problem too big to solve. At other universities, there are campus funds and grants for improving campus climate that construct innovative action plans to address exclusion and social integration in order to move towards a more inclusive and welcoming campus. Therefore, if we as a university are truly dedicated to fostering a caring university community that provides leadership for constructive participation in a diverse, multicultural world, there must be adequate financial backing.

The university itself has to not only acknowledge the areas where change would be influential,but actively make effort to creating that change.

While the blueprint for a perfect approach to diversity and marginalized group belonging on college campuses likely does not exist, these suggestions act as a way of improving the University of Texas at Austin to better fit the needs of its students. As an institution, there must be an effort to find the commonalities among students of all backgrounds.

Limitations

Although there were limitations in the original data collected, it provides a closer and deeper look into the experiences of black students at the University of Texas at Austin. Still, I want to note the limitations of the study. The focus groups included selected members of the black community by a mutual connection; therefore, the participants were primarily those heavily involved in the black community or on campus more broadly with the exception of two participants. Consequently, the results of the focus groups overrepresent the experiences of the students who are involved and connected on campus to various networks thus likely skewing their sense of belonging upwards. Additionally, the sample included 14 selected participants. While there was an intentional attempt to select participants that represented different majors, involvement in different communities, and leadership roles, the selection process was not random and thus, every identity within the black student population was not represented. Nonetheless, cross-cutting issues in relation to belonging were revealed through the research conducted.

Conclusion

The concluding ideas of this thesis demonstrate that belonging is a crucial area of study to improve the experiences of underrepresented students, like the 5% blacks student population at the University of Texas at Austin. And it is crucial in showing black students that they *do* belong here.

I sought out to gather information and data regarding belongingness and blackness at a large predominantly white institution. My objective was to uncover the key factors impacting black student belonging and how that sense of belonging fits into the broader scheme of the UT undergraduate student population. With the cross-cutting themes of faculty influence on black student persistence, campus environment affecting their experiences, and the need for a stronger sense of belonging among black students, I have been able to identify areas and issues that need to be addressed in an effort to look to where we go from here.

From a review of the history of black students at the University of Texas at Austin since integration in 1956, it is evident that we have progressed, but how far? Black students in the late 1950s endured blatant racism and exclusion from students, staff, faculty, and administration. While current students are not faced with nearly as outright racially charged incidents, they must overcome microaggressions, exclusionary environments, and a continued lack of representation.

As a social psychological phenomenon, a better understanding of belonging initiatives could greatly benefit black students at universities across the nation, including the University of Texas at Austin, as it impacts student motivation and behavior. Findings are clear that "students who experience acceptance are more highly motivated and

engaged in learning and more committed to school" (Osterman, 2000). Further, the findings of this thesis demonstrate that what the University of Texas at Austin is currently doing is still not enough.

For me, in looking at the experiences of black students, the study was significant in documenting the personal perspectives about the UT experience beyond the statistics. For the advancement of the black student population, I felt the importance of obtaining real stories about struggles and achievements. Furthermore, these narratives around belonging provided constructive information about the social, academic, and cultural trials of being an African-American student on UT Austin's campus.

With the information provided, it is undeniable that action in diversity initiatives is the next step. While numbers are important in addressing the lack of diversity in the student population at UT, inclusion is a necessary step in making space for students to come.

Works Cited

Advancing Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education Key Data Highlights Focusing on Race and
Ethnicity and Promising Practices. (2016). *Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy
Development: U.S. Department of Education*, 2-95. Retrieved from
http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/advancing-diversity-inclusion.pdf

Campbell, S. D., Carter-Sowell, A. R., & Battle, J. S. (2019). Campus climate comparisons in academic
pursuits: How race still matters for african american college students. *Group & Intergroup
Relations*, *22*(3). Retrieved from SAGE Journals Online database.

D'Augelli, A. R., & Hershberger, S. L. (1993). African american undergraduates on a predominantly
white campus: Academic factors, social networks, and campus climate. *The Journal of Negro
Education*, *62*(1), 67-81. Retrieved from JSTOR database.

Duren, A. M., & Iscoe, L. (n.d.). *Overcoming: A history of black integration at the university of texas at
austin*.

Endo, J. J., & Harpel, R. L. (1982). The Effect of Student-Faculty Interaction on Students Educational
Outcomes. *Research in Higher Education*, *16*(2). Retrieved from JSTOR database.

Facts & Figures [Fact sheet]. (2019, April 2). Retrieved from The University of Texas at Austin
website: https://www.utexas.edu/about/facts-and-figures

Fink, J. (2014). Flourishing: exploring predictors of mental health within the college environment.
Journal of American College Health, *62*(6), 380-388. Retrieved from
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24779485

Freeman, T. M., Anderman, L. H., & Jensen, J. M. (2007). Sense of Belonging in College Freshmen at
the Classroom and Campus Levels. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, *75*(3), 203-220.
Retrieved from JSTOR database.

Goldstone, D. (2005). "To exclude as many negro students as possible": Brown v. board of

    education and the university of texas at austin. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on*

    Race, 209-226. Retrieved from Cambridge University Press database.

Goldstone, D. (2006). *Integrating the 40 acres: The 50-Year struggle for racial equality at the*

    university of texas. Retrieved from

    https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=xrDHAgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=rel

    ated:Mff0y2QKI1EJ:scholar.google.com/&ots=QouuTXqp7Z&sig=BWe4HL8klDksma6cIzrjK

    LJiYbY#v=onepage&q&f=false

Gonzalez, C. (2018, April 17). Mapping the gaps: Why do smart students fail and how do social

    systems influence their success? *The Michigan Engineers News Center*. Retrieved from

    https://news.engin.umich.edu/features/creating-better-engineers/

Guerrero, M., & Rod, A. B. (2013). Engaging in Office Hours: A Study of Stud. *Journal of Political*

    Science Education, 403-416. Retrieved from Taylor & Francis Online database.

Hausmann, L.R.M., Schofield, J.W. & Woods, R.L. Res High Educ (2007) 48: 803. https://doi-

    org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/10.1007/s11162-007-9052-9

Hausmann, L., Ye, F., Woods, R. L., & Schofield, J. W. (2009). Sense of Belonging and Persistence in

    White and African American First-Year Students. *Research in Higher Education*, *50*(7), 649-

    669. Retrieved from https://link.springer.com/article/

Hausmann, L. R. (2007). Sense of belonging as a predictor of intentions to persist among african

    american and white first-year college students. *Research in Higher Education*, *48*(7).

    Retrieved from Springer Link database.

Heilig, J. V., & Reddick, R. J. (2011). Actuating equity: Historical and contemporary analyses of

    african american access to selective higher education from sweatt to the top 10 percent

law. *Harvard Journal of American Public Policy*. Retrieved from Gale Virtual Reference

   Library database.

Hurtado, S. (1992). The campus racial climate: Contexts of conflict. *The Journal of Higher*

   Education, *63*. Retrieved from JSTOR database.

Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of College Transition and Perceptions of the Campus

   Racial Climate on Latino: College Students' Sense of Belonging. *Sociology of Education*,

   70(4), 324-345. Retrieved from JSTOR database.

Hurtado, S., Ph.D., & Guillermo-Wann, C., Ph.D. (2013). *Diverse Learning Environments: Assessing*

   and Creating Conditions for Student Success. Retrieved from Higher Education Research

   Institute website: http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/

Impostor Feelings Fuel Negative Mental Health Outcomes for Minority Students, Study. (2017,

   April 5). Retrieved from UT News website:

   file:///Users/alexisallen/Desktop/Senior%20Year/THESIS/Sources/Impostor%20Feeling

   s%20Fuel%20Negative%20Mental%20Health%20Outcomes%20for%20Minority%20Stud

   ents,%20Study%20-%20UT%20News%20-%20UT%20N.webarchive

Ingrahama, K. C., Davidson, S. J., & Yonge, O. (2018). Student-faculty relationships and its impact on

   academic outcomes. *Nurse Education Today*, *71*, 17-21. Retrieved from ScienceDirect

   database.

Jaramillo, C., & Cannizzo, M. (2016, March 29). UT students in racially motivated assault appeal

   university disciplinary process. *The Daily Texan*.

The JBHE Foundation, Inc. (1998). The overstatement of black student self-segregation on college

   campuses. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, *18*. Retrieved from JSTOR database.

Jones, L. (2001). *Retaining african americans in higher education: Challenging paradigms for retaining students, faculty, and administrators.* Retrieved from https://books.google.com/books

Karkouti, I. M. (2016). Black Students' Educational Experiences in Predominantly White Universities: A Review of the Related Literature. *College Student Journal*, *50*(1), 59-70. Retrieved from EBSCO eBook Collection database.

Komarraju, M., Musulkin, S., & Bhattacharya, G. (2010). Role of Student–Faculty Interactions in Developing College Students' Academic Self-Concept, Motivation, and Achievement. *Journal of College Student Development*, *51*(3), 332-342. Retrieved from Project MUSE database.

Lambert, N. M., & Stillman, T. F. (2013). To Belong Is to Matter: Sense of Belonging Enhances Meaning in Life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *39*(11). Retrieved from SAGE Journals Online database.

Lipson, D. N. (2007). Embracing Diversity: The Institutionalization of Affirmative Action as Diversity Management at UC-Berkeley, UT-Austin, and UW-Madison. *Law & Social Inquiry*, *32*(4), 985-1026. Retrieved from Wiley Online Library database.

M, S., & MJ, J. (2011). Birds of an ethnic feather? Ethnic identity homophily among college-age friends. *Journal of Adolescence*, *35*(6). Retrieved from PubMedicine database.

Maramba, D. C., & Museus, S. D. (2013). Examining the Effects of Campus Climate, Ethnic Group Cohesion, and Cross-Cultural Interaction on Filipino American Students' Sense of Belonging in College. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, & Practice*, *14*(4). Retrieved from SAGE Journals Online database.

McCabe, J. (2016, October 31). Friends with academic benefits. *Contexts Magazine*. Retrieved from https://contexts.org/articles/friends-with-academic-benefits/

Moore-Southall, B. (n.d.). "Do you even see me?" A sense of school belonging of african americans in elite, predominately white independent schools. *ProQuest Dissertations Journal*. Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database.

Museus, S. D., Yi, V., & Saelua, N. (2017). E impact of culturally engaging campus environments on sense of belonging. *The Review of Higher Education*, *40*(2), 187-215. Retrieved from Project MUSE database.

Mwangi, C. A. G. M. A. G., Thelamour, B., Ezeofor, I., & Carpenter, A. (2018). "Black elephant in the room": Black students contextualizing campus racial climate within US racial climate. *Journal of College Student Development*, *59*(4). Retrieved from Project MUSE database.

Nguyen, V. (2016, October 26). Anti-affirmative action bake sale causes protest, sparks discussion. *The Daily Texan*. Retrieved from http://www.dailytexanonline.com/2016/10/26/anti-affirmative-action-bake-sale-causes-protest-sparks-discussion

Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research*, *70*(3). Retrieved from JSTOR database.

Patterson Silver Wolf, D. A., Perkins, J., Butler-Barnes, S. T., & Walker, T. A., Jr. (2017). Social Belonging and College Retention: Results From a Quasi-Experimental Pilot Study. *Journal of College Student Development*, *58*(5), 777-782. Retrieved from Project MUSE database.

Peteet, B. J., Montgomery, L., & Weekes, J. C. (2015). Predictors of Imposter Phenomenon among Talented Ethnic Minority Undergraduate Students. *Journal of Negro Education*, *84*(2), 175-186. Retrieved from JSTOR database.

Rankin & Associates. (2013). *University of california, berkley: Campus climate project report*. Retrieved from http://campusclimate.ucop.edu/.

Satija, N. (2016, June 23). Race and ut-austin admissions: A snapshot of the past five years.

Retrieved from The Texas Tribune website:

https://www.texastribune.org/2016/06/23/race-and-admissions-ut-austin-last-five-

years/

Sense of Belonging at School: Defining Attributes, Determinants, and Sustaining Strategies. (2017).

Journal of Education, *5*(2). Retrieved from https://iafor.org/journal/iafor-journal-of-

education/

Shabazz, A. (2004). *Advancing democracy*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.

Shnabel, N., Purdie-Vaughns, V., & Cook, J. E. (2013). Demystifying Values-Affirmation

Interventions: Writing About Social Belonging Is a Key to Buffering Against Identity Threat.

Society for Personality and Social Psychology, *39*(5), 663-676. Retrieved from SAGE Journals

Online database.

Solorzano, D., & Ceja, M. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial

climate: The experiences of african american college students. *The Journal of Negro*

Education, Knocking at Freedom's Door: Race, Equity, and Affirmative Action in U.S. Higher

Education, *69*. Retrieved from JSTOR database.

Spotlight on data. (2008, October). Retrieved from The University of Texas at Austin: Institutional

Reporting, Research, and Information Systems website:

https://reports.utexas.edu/spotlight-data

Stone, B. (2018, February 28). The 5 percent: UT lacks black representation. *The Daily Texan*.

Retrieved from http://dailytexanonline.com/2018/02/20/the-5-percent-ut-lacks-black-

representation

Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students. *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students*, *54*(6).

Student Experience in the Research University (University of Minnesota, Comp.). (2016). Retrieved from https://utexas.app.box.com/s/m0vs7mq7yjcgkzlrxfhh2vxr02rd2x8x

Thomas, M. K., & Colombus, M. A. (2009). African American Identity and a Theory For Primary Cultural Instructional Design. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, *38*(1). Retrieved from SAGE Journals Online database.

Villalpando, O. (2003). Challenging Cultures? Student Conceptions of 'Belonging' and 'Isolation' at a Post-1992 University. *nternational Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *16*(5), 619-646. Retrieved from PsycINFO database.

Vincent, G. J., Cumberbatch, V. A., & Blair, L. A. (2017). *Tower Books Imprint: As we saw it: The story of the integration at the university of texas at austin*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2011, March 18). A Brief Social-Belonging Intervention Improves Academic and Health Outcomes of Minority Student. *Science*, *331*(6023), 1447-1451. Retrieved from https://science.sciencemag.org/content/331/6023/1447

Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice*, *40*(3). Retrieved from EBSCOhost database.

Zumbrunn, S., McKim, C., Buhs, E., & Hawley, L. R. (2014). Support, belonging, motivation, and engagement in the college classroom: a mixed method study. *Instructional Science*, *42*(5). Retrieved from JSTOR database.

BIOGRAPHY

Alexis M. Allen was born on October 10, 1996 in Houston, Texas. She enrolled in the Plan II Honors program at the University of Texas at Austin in 2015. In college, worked towards creating a more inclusive campus through diversity advocacy and initiatives through many leadership positions including President & Co-Founder of the Black Honors Student Association, Class of 2019 Representative for Plan II Director's Student Advisory Council, Director of Diversity & Inclusion Agency for Student Government and the External director in the Multicultural Engagement Center. She is also a member of the University of Texas at Austin Friar's Society, Texas Orange Jackets, and a member of the Alpha chapter of Pi Sigma Alpha, the National Political Science Honor Society. In 2016,, she was also selected as 2nd place winner of the Plan II Honors Roger & Ann Worthington Essay Contest. In addition to her Plan II Honors degree, Alexis will earn a Bachelor's of Arts in Government with a minor in African & African Diaspora Studies & Business. Upon graduating, Ms. Allen plans to work as an Analyst for Goldman Sachs Inc. before attending law school in the fall of 2020.