



# Who Worries About Belonging?

## Investigating First-Year Students' Belonging and Engagement in College

Kaitlyn Stevens, Joslyn Porter, Xiao-Yin Chen, & Ellen L. Usher (PhD)



### SENSE OF BELONGING

#### Sense of Belonging (Time 1)

Since you've arrived, how much do you feel that you...

- How well do you ...
- Fit in at [University]?
- Belong at [University]?
- Feel at home at [University]?

1	2	3	4
Not at all	Somewhat	Quite a bit	A lot

#### MEASURES

- Class Absences (Time 2)**  
*How often did you miss class meetings this semester in all your classes combined?*
- Extracurricular Involvement (Time 2)**  
*About how many hours per week did you participate in extracurricular organizations or clubs this semester (e.g., Greek life, scholars' programs, student government, community programs, sports, hobby clubs)?*
- Measures of **Academic Preparedness** (combination of high school GPA and SAT/ACT scores), **Distance from Home** (miles), and **Cumulative First-Year GPA** were gathered from institutional data with students' consent (Time 3).

#### BACKGROUND

- Many students often face a low sense of belonging when transitioning to college (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2012)
- When students have a strong sense of belonging, they experience more positive outcomes while in college (Yeager et al., 2016)
- Little is known about how students' worries about their belonging prior to entering college (i.e., belonging uncertainty) might differ from their belonging once in college

#### PURPOSE & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- To explore the demographic factors that might exacerbate worries about belonging
- To examine relationships between worries about belonging, sense of belonging, and students' academic engagement in college

#### RQ 1

Do students' reports of belonging or belonging uncertainty depend on demographic factors?

#### RQ 2

What is the relationship between belonging, belonging uncertainty, and student engagement (e.g., class absences, EC involvement)?

### BELONGING UNCERTAINTY

#### Belonging Uncertainty (Time 1)

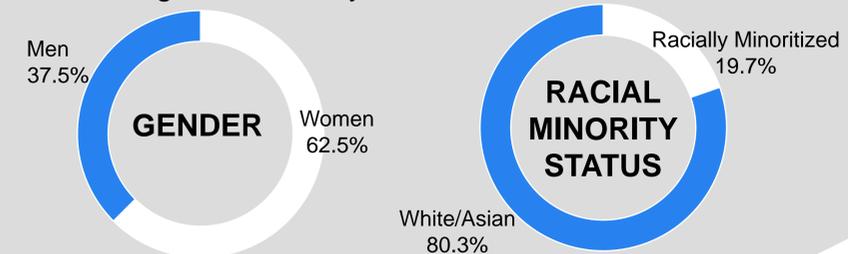
Select the answer that best represents your beliefs and experience.

- I am anxious that I will not fit in at college.
- Sometimes I worry that I will not belong in college.
- I feel confident that I will belong in college.
- While in high school, I sometimes wondered if I would really fit in when I got to college.

1	2	3	4
Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree

#### PARTICIPANTS

1,337 first-year college students from a large, public land-grant university in the southeastern U.S.



Baseline Survey (Time 1)

End-of-Term Survey (Time 2)

End-of-Year Survey (Time 3)

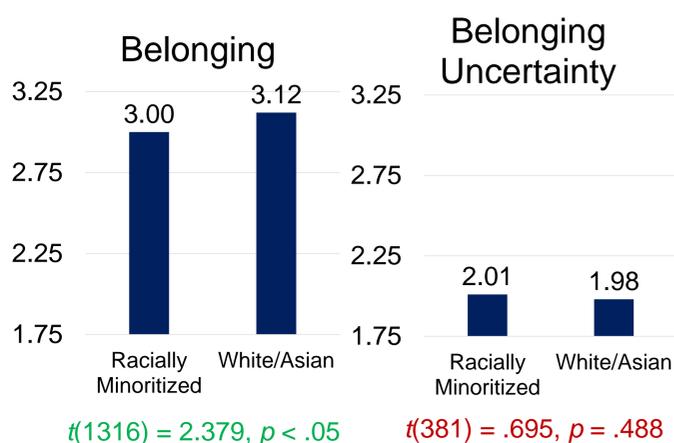
August

December

April

#### RESULTS

##### BY RACIAL MINORITY STATUS



##### BY GENDER

- Men ( $M = 3.07, SD = .73$ ) and women ( $M = 3.12, SD = .71$ ) also reported similar levels of belonging.
- Men ( $M = 1.95, SD = .73$ ) and women ( $M = 2.01, SD = .75$ ) reported similar levels of belonging uncertainty.

##### BY FIRST-GENERATION STATUS

- First-generation (FG) college students reported similar levels of belonging ( $M = 3.12, SD = .74$ ) compared to continuing-generation (CG) college students ( $M = 3.09, SD = .71$ ).
- No statistically significant differences in belonging uncertainty were found between FG ( $M = 1.98, SD = .76$ ) and CG ( $M = 1.99, SD = .74$ ) students.

Table 1

Correlation Matrix for Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Belonging						
2. Belonging Uncertainty	<b>-.44</b>					
3. Distance from Home (miles)	-.02	.04				
4. Academic Preparedness	-.05	.01	-.07			
5. Class Absences	.02	.04	-.05	-.02		
6. EC Involvement (hrs/week)	-.09	<b>.18</b>	.06	<b>.15</b>	-.06	
7. First-Year GPA	-.03	-.00	<b>.06</b>	<b>.49</b>	.02	<b>.17</b>

Note. **Bold** designates statistical significance at  $p < .05$ . EC = Extracurricular.

#### DISCUSSION

- Belonging and belonging uncertainty, although negatively correlated, may represent different psychological mechanisms.
- Students from demographic groups historically underrepresented in college campuses felt a lower sense of belonging. Fortunately, they reported similar levels of uncertainty about belonging in the future. Universities should continue to help promote a climate in which all students feel a sense of belonging.
- Future research should refine and expand belonging uncertainty measures to gain a greater understanding of its effects on college students.

For more information, please visit our website at [www.p20motivationlab.org](http://www.p20motivationlab.org) or contact Xiao-Yin Chen at [xch235@g.uky.edu](mailto:xch235@g.uky.edu)

