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Belonging
on BYU Campus

An Overview of a Mixed-Methods Study

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INTRODUCTION

In February of 2021, the BYU Committee on Race, Equity, and Belonging (CoREB) released their first report which clearly documented that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, or People of Color) students at BYU feel "the sting of racism" along with a distinct lack of safety and equality while on BYU campus.

The CoREB report provided a firm basis for beginning to understand the experiences of exclusion and belonging of students on BYU campus. However, the data did not include a comparison group and relied primarily on self-report of events of belonging or exclusion well after they occurred. This study employs an experiential sampling method along with periodic interviews and focus groups to limit memory-based inaccuracies. This mixed-methods structure provided a contextually rich description of how students of different demographic groups experience belonging and exclusion. In addition to considering belonging among low-income, first-generation, and BIPOC students, this study involves a comparison group of White, middle, and upper-middle class students to both compare how belonging is experienced in various demographic groups.

Our research questions for this research were:

1. *What are the processes involved in students' experiences of belonging or exclusion on BYU campus?*
2. *What environments or structures on BYU campus encourage or discourage a sense of exclusion or belonging for low income, first generation, BIPOC students?*

DEFINITION OF BELONGING

Definitions of belonging vary widely in literature. In this research, belonging is defined as: the sense that any enrolled student is a valued participant in the campus community and is accepted, connected, and supported by administration, faculty, and their peers.

BACKGROUND

Exclusion on College Campuses

Racial minorities are enrolling in predominantly white institutions (PWIs)—institutions with more than 50% White enrollment—at an increasing rate.[1] While access to higher education for minority demographics has increased in recent decades, degree attainment and retention has remained relatively the same.[2] Universities have a financial and reputational impetus to cultivate a campus environment that is conducive to academic success, physical safety, and mental well-being for all enrolled students. However, students from minority demographics face barriers to success at college, beyond academic demands.[3] Studies find that racial/ethnic minorities report worse psychological well-being,[4] higher rates of racial/ethnic-based harassment,[5] more financial constraints,[6] and weaker social connections and support than their White peers.[7] Racial minorities at PWIs are also more likely to be low-income and first-generation, consequently facing multiple barriers to education at once.[8]

Importance of Belonging

College students experience belonging differently, depending on their demographic background. Multiple studies indicate that continuing-generation White students at predominantly White institutions have a higher rate of belonging than any other demographic.[9] One study found that while White and students of color both recognize racial harassment on their campus, students of color are more likely to report that they find the campus racist and uninviting.[10] Museus et al find that racial and ethnic minorities often feel pressure to dissociate from their cultural heritage and assimilate to the dominant culture on campus. Such pressures are detrimental to belonging.[11] Other minorities on campus, including low-income, first-generation, and LGBTQ+ students also report a lower sense of connection to their college campus and their peers, putting college campuses at a higher risk of losing their minority students than their majority students.[12]

In addition to its integral role in college retention, belonging is attributed to psychological well-being, academic self-confidence, higher achievement, and increased academic engagement.[13] A sense of belonging hinges upon a complex interplay of environmental, social, and cognitive factors that nurture students' feelings of connection with their university.[14] A student's sense of connection to the social atmosphere of their campus is more important than their academic achievements.[15] A student's ability to relate to and feel accepted by their peers is an even greater indicator of a sense of belonging than interactions with faculty or campus administrators. As such, living environments (i.e. home life) and social contexts also play a significant role in shaping the student experience.[16]

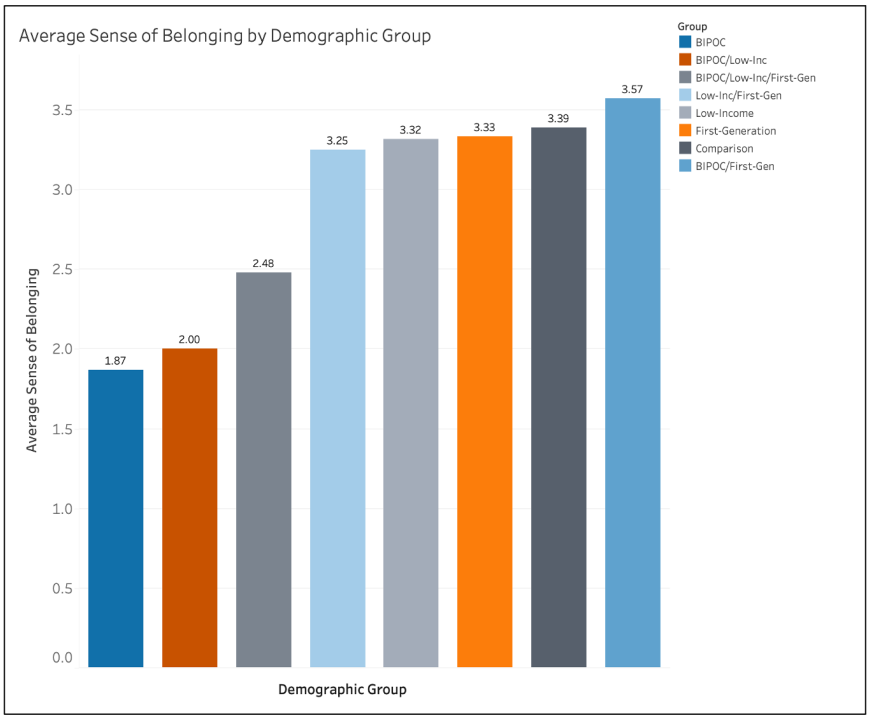


Figure 3: Average Belonging by Demographic

METHODS

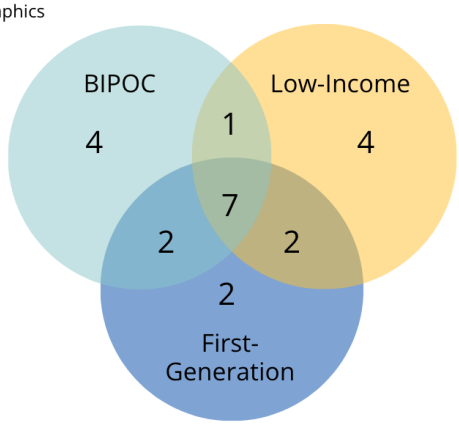
This is a mixed-methods study that uses a convergent design. Across Fall semester of 2022, we collected 1,132 survey responses from a participant group of 42 individuals of various demographics. Concurrently, we conducted 64 semi-structured interviews and 4 focus groups with the same sample. Quantitative and qualitative findings were analyzed separately, then integrated to examine findings that emerge across both datasets.

Participants

A total of 42 participants were recruited for this research from the College of Family Home and Social Science (FHSS). Participants came from a variety of majors and years of study within FHSS. Out of the total 42 participants, 15 participants were White, middle/upper-middle class non-first-generation students. These students acted as a comparison group. The remaining 22 participants represented minority demographics on campus. A total of 5 participants opted out of the research partway through the semester. Of the main group, many participants belonged to more than one target demographic (Figure 1).

In this research, "first-generation" students are students whose parents have not completed a higher education degree; "low-income" are students who qualify for Pell Grant funding now or before they were married.

Figure 1. Venn Diagram of Main Group showing overlapping demographics



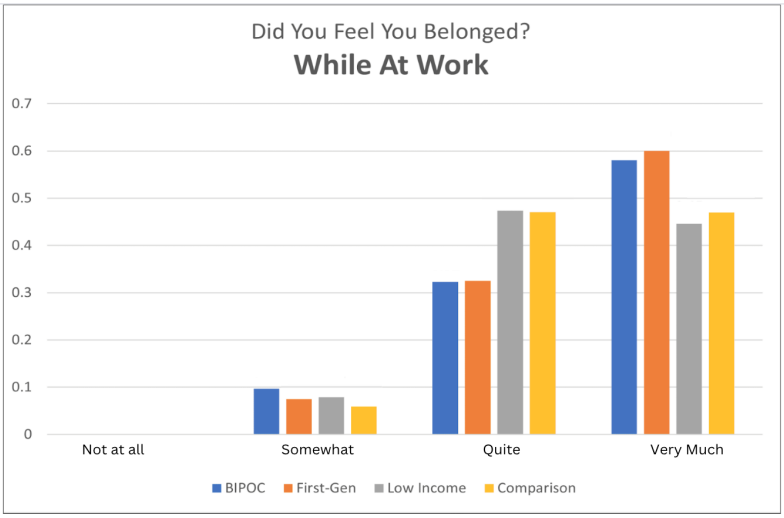


Figure 4: Belonging While at Work

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Quantitative analysis of the longitudinal survey consistently found a significant association between being BIPOC, BIPOC/Low-Income, and BIPOC/Low-Income/First-Generation and feeling less belonging than the comparison group (Figure 3). Being a BIPOC person is associated with a decrease in the odds of feeling belonging by approximately 49.5% compared to non-BIPOC individuals in the study, holding all other variables constant. Minority students reported lower rates of belonging while with faculty (Figure 2). BIPOC students reported low rates of belonging while at home with roommates, but high rates of belonging while at work (Figure 4). While the coefficients in OLS regressions for low-income and low-income/first-generation students and sense of belonging were both negative, p-values were not significant.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

The following sections will provide brief overviews of 64 interviews of how each demographic in the study experienced belonging and exclusion.

All students:

The BYU Stereotype

The homogenous makeup of BYU likely contributes to what was repeatedly heard in interviews with students, and what we call the "BYU stereotype."

Understanding the BYU stereotype is crucial for comprehending belonging within the

BYU community. For both the comparison group and the main group, one's sense of belonging was often tied, sometimes explicitly, to the extent to which one's own personal characteristics aligned with their perception of the BYU stereotype. The BYU stereotype seems pervasive; it is integrated into BYU classroom rhetoric, the subject of jokes among friends, extending itself even beyond the realm of BYU campus to the communities of potential BYU applicants.

Of course, in our participants' responses, descriptions of the BYU stereotype ranged in complexity. Some descriptions are simple as, "White, members of the Church." Others described the stereotypical BYU student as, "Smart and charismatic and intellectual and responsible, athletic, and musical and capable in every single facet of life." A consensus emerged from the interviews that the foundational elements of the BYU stereotype were being White, highly intelligent, belonging to the upper-middle class, and actively practicing members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Beyond these fundamental pillars, participants noted additional layers, including serving an LDS mission and marrying within the Church, as integral components of the stereotype.

The BYU stereotype is exclusionary for several reasons. First, the stereotype reinforces tangible in-groups and out-groups at BYU. One White comparison participant remarked, "I feel like I belong at BYU because I fit the mold." In contrast, the minority students in this study regularly feel like they are excluded because they cannot conform to the intangible model of what a BYU student should be.

A second concern with the BYU stereotype is its visual aspects. For those marginalized groups on campus whose physical appearance, such as students of

color, deviates from the BYU stereotype, belonging to the in-group is impossible.

White Comparison Students

On average, the White comparison group felt a higher sense of belonging than their minority counterparts across various settings and company. However, they, like the other demographics, experienced moments of exclusion at BYU instigated by a perceived inability to fulfill the BYU stereotype. The most frequently mentioned sources of exclusion for the comparison group were:

1. **Academic achievement**: Intelligence, considered a fundamental element of the BYU stereotype, played a role in shaping participants' sense of belonging at BYU as they compared their academic achievements to their peers. For example, Jasmine is a White student who mentioned moments in her classes when, "I just feel like I'm not getting what everyone else is getting from the readings." This makes her question whether she is "smart enough to be here."

2. **Political affiliation**: Among elite universities, BYU is one of the most politically diverse.[17] However, there is a perception that BYU students are predominantly politically conservative. Allen is a White student from a more liberal area. In one of his surveys, he remarked, "I am White and blonde, so I look like I fit, but politically I feel very different." According to him and several other participants in the study, being conservative at BYU seems expected, especially among male students.

3. **Religiosity**: Students with religious beliefs that deviated from the norm at BYU often felt isolated from their peers. One female student remarked "I feel a bit isolated spiritually. I am not comfortable sharing how I really feel about the church because I am at a religious university." Several other students commented that they were struggling religiously and felt that BYU did not provide adequate support to those navigating faith challenges.

Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC)

Our interviews with 14 students of color concurred with what was found in the 2018 Diversity Report—students of color feel the "sting of racism" on BYU campus (BYU, 2021).

Emily

Emily is a first-generation Latina student from southern California. She came to BYU for the spiritual draw of attending an institution that aligned with her religious views. Emily's experience at SOAR solidified her desire to attend BYU.

Emily experienced frequent stereotyping her first year at Helaman Halls. She often heard people say things like, "Oh, you're Latina. You must be spicy; you must be feisty." She related that she went through a phase of rejecting her Latina heritage to "*tr[y] to be part of the in group.*" Yet despite her efforts, she never felt included. *"I didn't go on very many dates my freshman year,"* she said. *"I was very aware that it was because I don't look like most people."*

On-sight exclusion: On-sight exclusion is exclusion based on visible attributes. Students of color who are not White-passing fall, upon sight, beyond the BYU stereotype's bounds. On-sight exclusion functions with the BYU stereotype as a mechanism of instant othering, whether inherent or purposeful. This affects the interactions between BIPOC and White BYU students both inside and outside of the classroom. As students gravitate towards the perceived "normal," on campus, those who are BIPOC are left isolated.

Jia Li

Jia Li, an Asian-American student, grew up in one of the more diverse towns in the United States. Being on BYU's homogenous campus was jarring for her, particularly in her first year when she lived in Heritage Halls, BYU's on-campus housing. Jia Li had a difficult

first year. She said, *"I remember trying really hard"* to be a part of the BYU community. *"I changed the way I dress, changed the way I talked."* Despite her efforts, *"it just felt like no matter what I did, I was still treated as Other."* Jia Li found a social community to which she felt like she belonged after her first year. Yet she, too, struggles to feel belonging in the classroom, where she often feels like she is not the *"intended audience."*

White students with outwardly "unique" characteristics can also face on-site exclusion. For example, Helen is a White student with a sleeve of tattoos. She reports that students often stare at her, and she has the sense that students see her as *"unclean"* because of her tattoos--- to the point that some even physically avoid her.

Here we simply note one key difference between Emily's and Helen's experiences of on-site exclusion: whereas Emily's exclusion comes from her being Latina, Helen's comes from her choice to engage in a practice proscribed by the Church. No matter how Emily chooses to present herself, the color of her skin acts as a barrier to inclusion.

The consequences of on-sight exclusion are not just social isolation. In a school that is 81% White, BIPOC students often receive unsolicited attention and comments from their White peers. In one extreme case, one Asian participant was called racial slurs and had eggs thrown at her. Many of our participants of color had more indirect experiences where White students made comments to them such as, *"[BYU] wants more diversity, that's why like you're here,"* or, *"you're just in that program because you're Hispanic."* Regardless of the intentions of the speaker, these statements communicate to students of color at BYU that others do not consider them to belong naturally in BYU's student body. Rather, it implies that they were admitted to BYU solely through artificial methods, whether it be through "affirmative action" programs or arbitrary race, or gender biases introduced by the admissions office.

The experiences of on-sight exclusion were poignant in every BIPOC participant's memory, easy to recollect and laden with feelings of rejection and disillusionment. One student said, *"being in a group full of White people makes you feel like you're an imposter. And it makes you feel like you're not good enough."* Jia Li echoed this comment, saying about her experience with White classmates, *"As much as I become friends, there's still a part of me that's like, I don't look the part."*

Low-Income Students

Unlike the participants of color, our White low-income participants did not experience on-sight exclusion. Rather, their experiences of exclusion came from assumptions on both a systemic and interpersonal level that disregarded the significant burden of being low-income.

Tyson

Tyson is a White male from a low-income household in southern Utah. He is also a first-generation student. He says,

"In a lot of circumstances, as I'm working with colleagues, they all tend to assume that I'm in the majority in all factors, just because I am [the majority] gender-wise and racial-wise."

When only 1.8% of students belong to the bottom socioeconomic quintile, the assumption among most students is that everyone is middle or upper class. Based on appearance, Tyson fits into the BYU stereotype. Yet, he is what we call an invisible minority on campus. *"I wouldn't be able to pick out any other low-income students,"* He admits. *"Which definitely makes you feel lonely."*

Invisible Minority: A minority that can pass (visually) as the majority to peers. While there are several clubs on campus dedicated to minority student groups– Black Student Union, Women in Economics, Hispanos Unidos–there is no club on campus for being low-income. Being White and low-income on BYU campus can be an invisible, unacknowledged struggle that is different from the difficulties of being a visible minority.

Laurie
Laurie is White and low-income. Since her first year, Laurie has worked multiple jobs while also taking a full class load in order to make ends meet. Laurie said, *"If I could make enough money with one job, I'd love to work one job. But because wages are low on campus, which are the most easily accessible jobs, I can't just have one."* Her combined work and class schedule make it difficult to find time to take tests in the testing center or attend clubs, office hours, and other extracurricular events. Last summer, Laurie attended the Jerusalem study-abroad. Even though she had positive experience, attending the study abroad strained her finances during the school year:

"*Going into this year, I was really, really stressed, dipping into all my savings, just watching it go so fast and only spending it on necessities and trying to decide: how much food was I going to need for this week? How can I spread it out? Is there a way I can drink more water and eat less so that it lasts longer? Stuff like that."*

Laurie and others also lamented the fact that their burdensome schedules limit their ability to authentically connect to campus events and opportunities. The balance between the financial and social aspect of college is one that most BYU students can navigate, if not with ease, then with a substantial safety net. Low-income students do not have this luxury. Indeed, they feel that they miss out on the *"regular college experience"* because they *"need money to live."* Going out to eat with roommates, seeing a movie, ticketed BYU events–these cost money that low-income students don't have. One low-income student commented about her social expenses, *"How do you balance that while also trying to pay for living as a person?"* Participants remarked that navigating this balance between their social life and limited budget was *"isolating," "disheartening"* and frequently made them feel *"out of place"* in the BYU social sphere.

When asked if they feel that BYU administration understands the burden of being low-income, the answer was unequivocally "no." The presumption that all students at BYU possess a financial safety net results in inadequate support structures for low-income students on campus. This assumption further contributes to situations where low-income students feel reluctant to draw attention to the specific challenges associated with their economic status, both within the classroom and in their social circles.

Cross-demographic Relationships

The White comparison group recognized that their demographic makes up the large majority of BYU, often citing it as an anchor to their sense of belonging. One comparison student put in a survey response, *"I feel like I got into the average demographic at BYU by being White and from Utah."* Again, for White students, the BYU stereotype functions as a mechanism to indicate a sense of belonging.

At the same time, many also recognized the reverse effect that being BIPOC would have. One White student stated, *"There's been a stereotypical image created of what a BYU student should look like. I think that if people perceive that they don't fit that mold, that can cause them to feel like they're not a part of it [BYU community]."* Another student spoke about a student of color in her otherwise all White class, *"She probably feels so out of place."* The White students we spoke with generally recognized that the BYU stereotype presents a challenge for inclusion for minority students.

White Anxiety

Consequently, a common worry among comparison participants was that through actions, attitudes, or words, they would unintentionally support and solidify barriers to inclusion for minority students. White students often described encounters where they felt unsure, even paralyzed, about how to act in a way that would foster the inclusion of minority students around them. For example, Jasmine is a White, middle-class student. In one interview, she spoke about her experiences talking to students of color during class discussions. She said,

"I think my fear is that I don't know what the best course of action is. And so, I kind of get paralyzed and worry about choosing the wrong one...But because it's such an

important question right now, I sometimes fear that I'm going to say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing. And then I'm [afraid] of doing nothing because I'm scared it's worse than doing the wrong thing. And so, I just get confused about what I should do."

Many comparison group students expressed a genuine desire to have diverse relationships. Scarcity, however, creates a *"another level of caution. You don't want to be subconsciously picking up a friend, or treating someone differently because of where they're from or what they look like,"* said Zach. White students worry that befriending students of color will come across as disingenuous, or even as an act of tokenization. *"I don't want it to be perceived that I'm doing it with bad intentions,"* said one student.

Permeating through the interviews with comparison students was a sense of guilt for their less diverse social groups, and uncertainty about how they can be more inclusive. In particular, White students worried over racial homogeneity in their social circles and the right way to create relationships with other races. *"Sometimes you're just scared of offending somebody,"* said Tyson. *"And so, you don't want to reach out and somehow hurt their feelings."*

Many of the comparison students recognize their demographic majority as a source of their personal belonging, yet they are equally conscious of the reverse effect it may have on minority students. The fear of unintentionally reinforcing barriers to inclusion and the struggle to navigate interactions with students of color underscore the pervasive influence of White anxiety on campus. The scarcity of minority representation at BYU amplifies this anxiety, leading to feelings of guilt, uncertainty, and tentative searches for the right approach to foster inclusivity. Interviews with White students highlight a need for tools and resources to help majority students at BYU confront and navigate the complexities of racial dynamics.

CONCLUSION

Our data indicate that all groups had moments of exclusion at BYU. White comparison students, however, tend to feel that BYU is meant for someone like them. Minority students did not. Extensive qualitative data revealed that BIPOC students experienced frequent **on-sight exclusion**, in which their inability to visually assimilate to the BYU stereotype of Whiteness led to discrimination and racialization. Low-income students at BYU are the **invisible minority**; they conform to the visual BYU stereotype, but their socioeconomic status limits their ability to participate in the same activities, events, resources, and college experiences as their more affluent peers. Unlike the comparison group, students from the minority groups felt more exclusion on BYU campus.

This study also considered the alternate side of the belonging process by examining how the majority demographic on campus interacts with the minority. White students feel uncertainty about the role of racialization in social interactions, especially within predominantly White spaces. They also face difficulties in determining when and how to acknowledge race and navigate racial classifications with their BIPOC classmates. Their evasion may be well-intentioned, or a form of self-preservation. Yet minority students often perceive it as direct exclusion. However, anxiety can be addressed; tools can be devised to contemplate how cross-demographic interactions might improve.

As BYU contemplates ways to foster a stronger community on campus, it is crucial to examine how the 80% interacts with the 20%; the deficiency may reside in the majority rather than the minority. Initiatives aimed at equipping students with resources, rhetoric, and training that directly addresses White anxiety could enhance White students' ability to interact with minority demographics on campus. While this approach may not entirely eliminate the BYU stereotype, it has the potential to create isolated moments that sharply contrast with the prevailing messages embedded in the stereotype of who belongs at BYU and who does not.

WHAT IS WORKING?

Underrepresented students in this identified several environments of belonging on campus. These environments should be expanded and maintained. The following are places that students have identified as loci of belonging on BYU campus:

1. **Clubs and events**: Students mentioned groups such as Habitat for Humanity, Luau, KPop Club, and Knights of the Y as safe spaces–places where their interests and other identities are more likely to supersede their appearance. *"I go to the Kpop Club, but everybody's crazy about Kpop there and nobody cares what color you are. We just have fun,"* said one Asian student.

2. **On-campus jobs**: Students of color remarked that on-campus jobs anchored them in the BYU experience, helping them to develop relationships with their peers. For example, one student said, *"Working every day at Exploration Point in the advisement center has increased my sense of belonging not only socially but academically as well."*

3. **Faculty-Student Interactions**: When asked in their survey if there were any moments where they felt belonged, several students made comments such as *"I felt seen by my professor today,"* or *"I feel like I belong when I work with my professors and TA's "* Students from all demographics reported that interactions with faculty in which they felt acknowledged and appreciated helped them to feel belonging at BYU. Encouraging interactions between faculty and students who may feel marginalized can foster a greater sense of connection to the BYU community.

SUGGESTIONS

1. **Campus Jobs with Competitive Pay**: Across all demographics, students reported that on-campus jobs connected them to other BYU students and employees. Low-income students, however, often work more than one campus job to have sufficient money to pay for college. On-campus jobs with competitive pay will allow students to have belonging experiences through their employment *and* opportunities to attend additional belonging experiences such as office hours, extracurriculars, and campus events.

2. **Micro-Belonging Scholarships**: Students often reported a need for small scholarships to fund belonging experiences such as paying for a ROC pass or attending ticketed BYU events/concerts. BYU could solve this issue by offering micro belonging scholarships to those in need.

3. **Help Students Join Clubs**: Students may feel intimidated by the prospect of joining a club. They may also find that club's conflict with their work schedule. We recommend that BYU offers resources or mentoring to help joining a club feel more accessible to underrepresented students.

4. **Revisit the CoREB Report**: Our findings align closely to the suggestions put forward by the CoREB report. We encourage BYU to return to the report for ideas about how to improve the experiences of belonging for underrepresented students on BYU campus. In particular, we add our support to the report's recommendation that BYU administrators conduct stringent, frequent evaluation of belonging on campus using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

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