

Broadening the Belonging Conversation: A Mixed-Methods Examination of Faculty Experiences of and Beliefs About Belonging

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Introduction

A great deal of attention has been devoted in recent years to college student belonging and to the ways in which faculty and other mentors can facilitate student belonging (Allen et al., 2024). Less central to this conversation has been a consideration of how faculty belonging may affect student belonging. To the extent that a faculty member who belongs signals to others that belonging is valuable and behaves in ways that facilitate belonging for others, we should expect faculty belonging to positively affect student belonging (Shields & McGinn, 2011).

However, we should also expect heterogeneity in the extent to which faculty members feel like they belong, are motivated to belong, and believe it an essential part of their job to facilitate student belonging. **The current mixed-methods study examines faculty experiences of and beliefs about belonging at an elite, predominantly White, liberal arts college, with the aim of identifying patterns and indicators of heterogeneity.**

Methods

Participants: $N = 41$
University of Richmond
faculty members

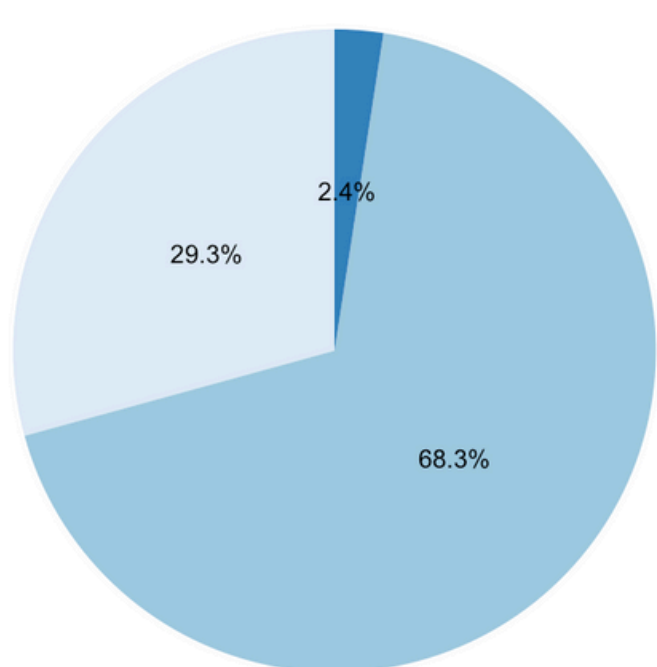
“Do you identify as a member of one or more historically or currently marginalized groups?”

“How many years have you been a faculty member at the University of Richmond?”

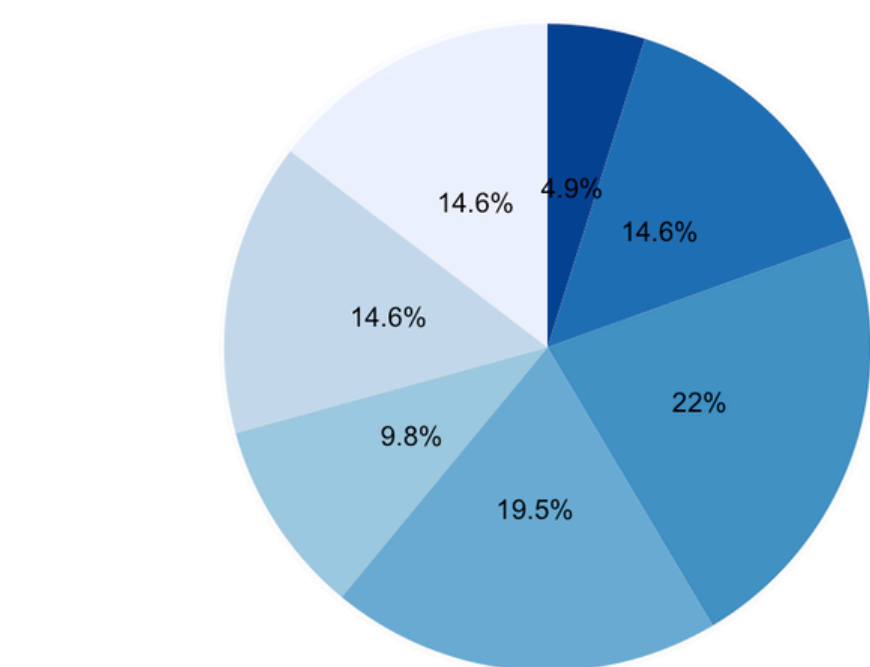
“Do you identify as someone who currently has significant caregiving responsibilities?”



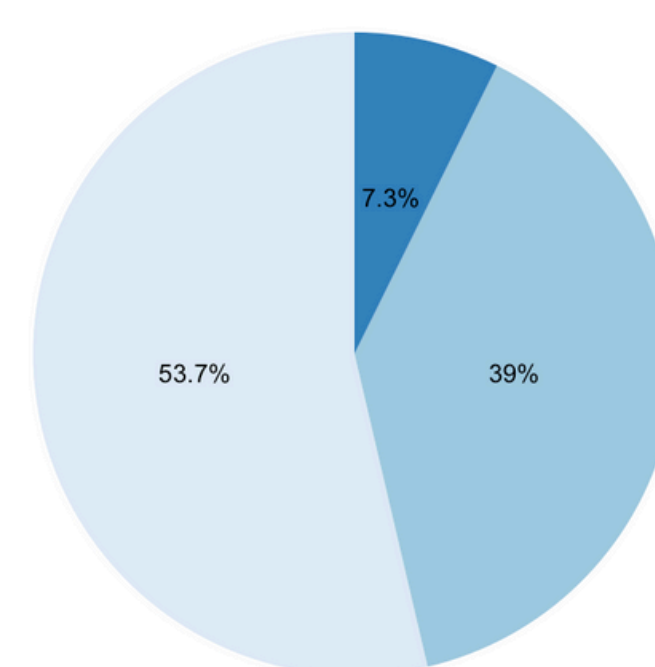
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No Yes Prefer not to answer



Less than a year 1-3 years 4-7 years 8-12 years 13-17 years 18+ years Prefer not to answer



Not Significant Significant Prefer not to answer

Measures:

Sense of Belonging Sub-scales: Measured sense of belonging at three levels: University Affiliation (14 items, $\alpha = .95$; e.g., “I feel appreciated by [the university]”), Connection with Students (8 items, $\alpha = .88$; e.g., “Many of my students care about me”), Connection to Department (8 items, $\alpha = .98$; e.g., “I feel like I can be myself in my department”).

Motivation to Belong Sub-scales: Parallel to Sense of Belonging sub-scales, with “It is important to me...” before each item, e.g., “It is important to me that I feel appreciated by [the university]”; University Motivation (9 items, $\alpha = .94$), Student Motivation (8 items, $\alpha = .91$), Department Motivation (8 items, $\alpha = .93$).

Belonging as a Priority Scale: 9 items, $\alpha = .92$, e.g., “[The university] focuses too much on belonging and not enough on academic rigor” (reverse-scored)

Burnout Scale: 9 items, $\alpha = .88$; e.g., “Sometimes I feel sickened by my work tasks”

Intention to Leave Scale: 8 items, $\alpha = .91$; e.g., “I am likely to leave [the university] in the next two years”

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Results

Sense of Belonging

Faculty members who feel lesser belonging at the university, department, and/or classroom/student level:

- Are less likely to see belonging as an institutional and professional priority ($|rs| = .40-.61$);
- Experience higher levels of burnout ($|rs| = .34-.61$); and
- Report a stronger intention to leave the university ($|rs| = .22-.72$).

“Faculty are often spread too thin, with very limited work-life balance, leaving us exhausted and stressed, and with the inability to achieve responsibilities to the best of our abilities.”

“It’s my students who keep me here... I’m grateful for the wonderful connections I have made with several of them. It gives me genuine joy to watch them shine, and I look forward to continuing to see how great many of them will do in their lives.”

Discussion

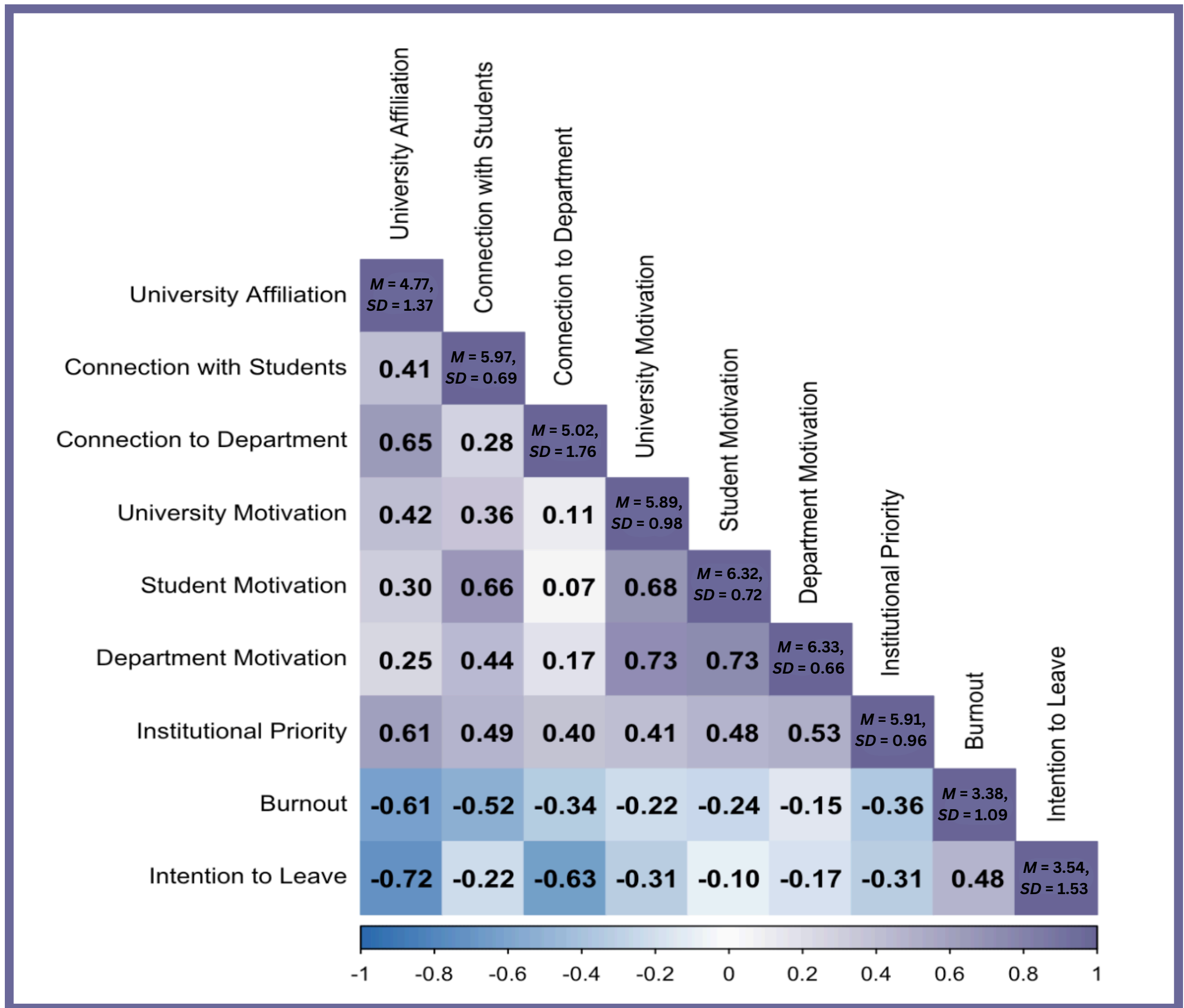
Higher levels of faculty belonging (at the institutional, departmental, and classroom/student levels) are associated with higher levels of commitment to the institution’s belonging-related priorities (e.g., being more invested in promoting classroom belonging for students), lower levels of burnout, and a weaker intention to leave the university. **These findings suggest that, to promote the university’s mission, it is vital to invest in faculty belonging.**

Possible avenues for intervention to improve faculty belonging include those at the institutional and departmental level (e.g., improving shared governance to increase faculty perceptions of “having a say”), as well as those that may improve faculty-student relationships. In fact, the latter may initiate a sort of virtuous cycle, in which **faculty sense of belonging in the classroom may facilitate student belonging, which in turn may improve faculty psychosocial adjustment and institutional commitment.** (For more information about a unique example of a faculty-student pedagogical partnership and its effects on belonging and academic success, please see Cook-Sather & Felton, 2017.)

Future research should:

- Examine these relationships with larger sample sizes and across a variety of institution types;
- Investigate the unique associations of each type of belonging with burnout, intention to leave, and other variables of interest;
- Explore the predictive power of the gap between desire (motivation) to belong and sense of belonging; and
- Evaluate whether faculty with higher levels of belonging are perceived and behave in ways that facilitate student belonging

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Demographic Predictors of Burnout

Faculty members who experience higher levels of burnout:

- Have significant caregiving responsibilities ($t(36) = -2.03, p = .05, d = .65$); and
- Have been at the university for 4+ years ($F(5, 35) = 2.80; p = .03$).