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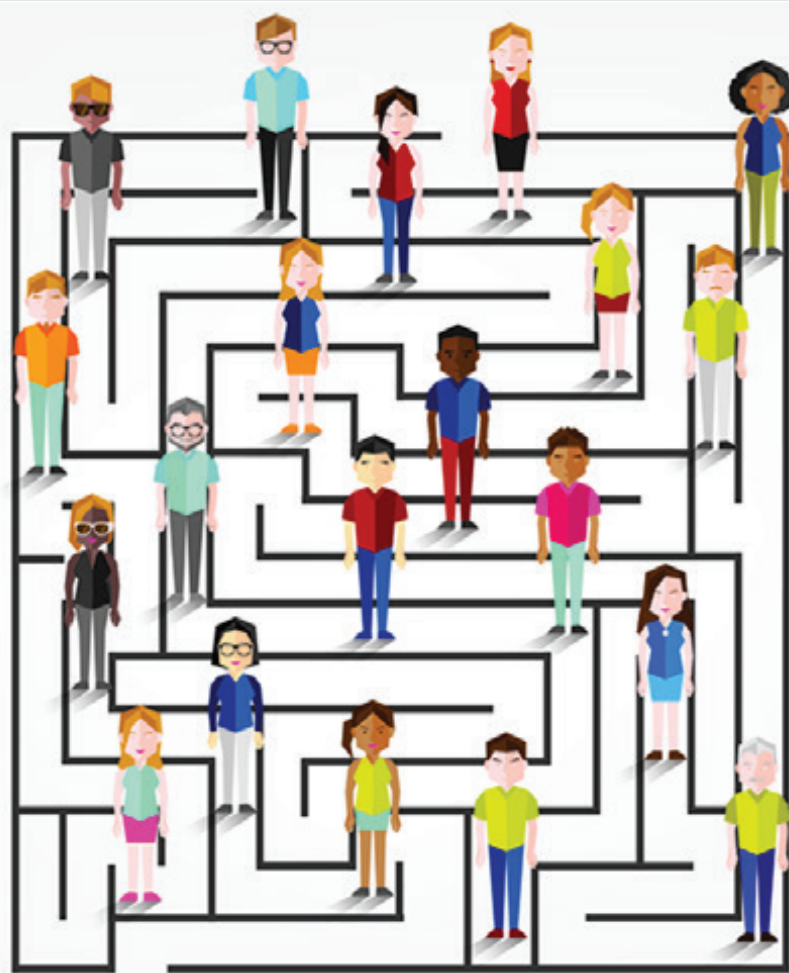
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SECOND EDITION

COLLEGE STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING

A Key to Educational Success for All Students



Terrell L. Strayhorn

ROUTLEDGE

COLLEGE STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING

Belonging—with peers, in the classroom, or on campus—is a critical dimension of success at college. It can affect a student's degree of academic adjustment, achievement, aspirations, or even whether a student stays in school. This book explores how belonging differs based on students' social identities, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or the conditions they encounter on campus. The second edition of *College Students' Sense of Belonging* explores student sub-populations and campus environments, offering readers updated information about sense of belonging, how it develops for students, and a conceptual model for helping students belong and thrive. Underpinned by theory and research and offering practical guidelines for improving educational environments and policies, this book is an important resource for higher education and student affairs professionals, scholars, and graduate students interested in students' success.

New to this second edition:

- A refined theory of college students' sense of belonging and review of current literature in light of new and emerging findings;
- Expanded best practices related to fostering sense of belonging in classrooms, clubs, residence halls, and other contexts;
- Updated research and insights for new student populations such as youth formerly in foster care, formerly incarcerated adults, and homeless students;
- Coverage on a broad range of topics since the first edition of this book, including cultural navigation, academic spotting, and the “shared faith” element of belonging.

Terrell L. Strayhorn is Professor of Urban Education and Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs at LeMoyne-Owen College, USA. An internationally recognized student success expert on equity and diversity issues, he also owns a private educational consulting firm, Do Good Work LLC.



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COLLEGE STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING

A KEY TO EDUCATIONAL
SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

Second edition

Terrell L. Strayhorn

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This book is dedicated to my parents, Wilber and Linda Strayhorn; my two children, Aliyah Brielle and Tionne Lamont Strayhorn; my maternal grandmother, Creola Evelyn Warner, who devoted over 50 years of unwavering professional service as a public school teacher. She taught me to “love many, trust few”—one of her life mottos—and to dare to believe in the impossible. I dedicate this second edition of the book to my beloved godsister, Kimberly Yvette “Fat” Williams, who won a three-year battle with cancer in July 2017, just as I was finishing up edits for the publisher. She was a major supporter, “a biggest fan” as she would say, and always took pride in me and my work. “Kim, though I can’t hold you anymore, I will always hold you in my heart. *You belong there.*” All of these people—those mentioned and those implied—have helped me to believe that I matter, that I am important, and that I am cared about, all of which are key components of *sense of belonging*. Because of them, I am and this book is complete.



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Foreword by Quartez Harris

I am a paper thin book
without pages of camaraderie.
While on this brittle shelf
of worldwide publishers
I am encumbered by thick dust of loneliness,
missing the touch of another.
The swarm of students bypassing me,
with enough storage in their backpacks
never browse the tarnished pages of my emptiness
They assume I am not alone
but they are blinded by the shadows of their assumptions
These sills are nothing more than hardcover books
that never dared to breathe me into their stories.
I am just waiting for somebody
to read each chapter of my loneliness,
while I linger in this crowded room of a library.

Quartez Harris is a graduate of The Ohio State University and award-winning spoken-word artist. A native of Cleveland, Ohio, Mr. Harris continues his creative expressions through multiple forms of media.

Foreword by Walter R. Allen

“I am somebody! I am somebody! I must be respected! I must be protected! I am God’s Child! I am somebody!” This is how Reverend Jesse Jackson opened Saturday morning meetings of Operation PUSH. These words gave meaning and power to disenfranchised Black people in Chicago and across the United States. These words also held profound meaning for me, a Black graduate student swimming upstream in the sea of whiteness at the University of Chicago. Family, tribe, community—the Black nation—had affirmed, embraced and sustained me on my journey through unwelcoming, oftentimes hostile, white spaces. Without these places and spaces where I truly belonged; where I felt safe, valued and “normal,” I surely would have been lost.

This important book by one of the world’s leading experts on the subject, Professor Terrell Strayhorn, speaks to that predicament and the lived experiences of college students from a multitude of different backgrounds who share the common challenge of finding ways to “fit in,” to matter, and to belong. Their quest predicts whether they will achieve social, emotional, personal, and academic success. Whether they will persist, dropout, or transfer institutions. And college student educators—faculty, practitioners, and administrators—play a critical role in creating environments where all students can thrive and belong. They have the power to help students who feel lost find their way.

In this book, Terrell Strayhorn masterfully spans and connects wide literature and empirical data sources to help us understand the basic desire of humans to belong, especially in learning contexts. He skillfully weaves Maslow’s concept of basic human needs with a version of Beverly Daniel Tatum’s thoughtful question, “Why do all the [diverse or vulnerable]

children sit together in the cafeteria” and provides clear answers, innovative ideas, and effective practices that link research to practice, policy, and theory. The result is a compelling, creative, rigorous examination of how belonging relates to healthy development and academic success for all college students.

The power and relevance of this book is revealed as Dr. Strayhorn probes the existential linkages between student experiences of belonging and successful student outcomes. He helps expand our understanding of how best to achieve the elusive goals of diversity and inclusion; how best to join increased access AND success in higher education. Strikingly this book offers a promising formula for achieving broader student success. Whether the student is from the majority or minority, s/he will maximize their “best self” with the scaffolding and support belonging provides. We all share the essential, human need to belong, especially in places and times when we are prone to feel like an outsider or invisible, and Strayhorn makes these theoretical linkages crystal clear in this 2nd edition.

“I see you,” is one way young folks affirm and embrace each other in popular vernacular. This statement embodies age old yearnings. It joins “Me” with “We” and “Us” with “Them” to build, maintain, and promote community. Only from community can we expect to grow the fruits of success. When we truly “see” and value diversity—each other, magic happens, moving higher education closer to her ideals of inclusive excellence, student-centeredness, and democracy. Achieving this is difficult, but this book not only calls us to a higher place, it offers the promises and practices we need to help save future generations from feeling lost to finding hope and belonging in college.

Walter R. Allen
Allan Murray Cartter Professor of Higher Education
Distinguished Professor of Education, Sociology
and African American Studies
University of California—Los Angeles

Preface

The idea for this book evolved out of my own personal experiences as a student turned professor. Thinking back to my undergraduate years, there were certainly times when I felt like I did not belong in college. Several years later these feelings would return while I was pursuing my doctoral degree as a graduate student at Virginia Tech. And just when I thought that I had experienced everything, they arose again (and in different contexts) as a professor at two major research universities. Indeed, sense of belonging matters.

It is my hope that this book will contribute to the body of knowledge in at least one of several ways. First, it might represent a worthy contribution to the national discourse about degree completion, career and college readiness, student success, and the impact of college on students. Sense of belonging affects all of these and, in my opinion, has been missing from the proverbial conversation nationally. Second, it might be viewed as a powerfully useful tool or guide for undergraduate and graduate students, educational researchers, and faculty members who have an interest in these issues. Finally, if nothing else, I hope it begins to address some of the unanswered questions that lurk and linger regarding college students' sense of belonging.

Keep in mind, gentle reader, that many of the explanations presented are provided to render the complex, simple; realizing that a degree of accuracy is lost in the process. While more detailed than the first edition, this version of the book is not entirely exhaustive but provides a starting place for those who want to know (and read) more about college students' sense of belonging.

Future reviewers of this text may wonder why I decided to use my own work as useful illustrations of how this topic could be investigated in college student research. To be sure, countless other examples abound in the

extant literature (most are cited in the book) and my work is by no means the grand exemplar by which all other studies should be judged. However, the decision to feature my own work was both important and necessary to the goals of this text, as it allowed me to “unpack and unveil” my thinking as I moved through the research process, to share with readers on paper what might otherwise go unsaid and unwritten, implied yet rarely admitted, and to make the inexplicit, explicit. With these goals in mind, I release this volume to you. Let’s talk about how it is organized and then turn attention to the intended audiences.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

In keeping with the overarching objectives, this volume was organized around four major questions that serve as the primary foci. First, what is sense of belonging? Second, what are the central tenets and key concepts of sense of belonging? Third, how has sense of belonging been examined in prior work, some of which is my own? And fourth, how does sense of belonging apply to various student populations? All of these are addressed over the course of the volume.

The book consists of 11 chapters, divided into two parts. Part I includes three chapters. Chapter 1 serves as the introduction to the book and provides a detailed discussion of sense of belonging and a general description of its content. Chapter 2 focuses on reviewing the relevant literature on or about sense of belonging, framing it in ways that are consistent with the overall objectives and the tenor of my main arguments. Chapter 3 briefly describes and outlines the broad contours of a sense of belonging model that will prove useful to several chapters in the second part of the book.

Part II includes seven chapters. Chapter 4 highlights the role that sense of belonging plays in the success of Latino collegians. Gay students are the focus of Chapter 5 in a national study of gay male collegians of color. Chapter 6 draws upon data from first-year students participating in a summer bridge program to demonstrate the influence of educational interventions on college students’ sense of belonging, while Chapter 7 examines the belonging experiences of students in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. Chapter 8 devotes attention to the belonging experiences of Black male collegians, while Chapter 9 focuses on graduate students. In Chapter 10, I review much of what is known about involvement and engagement, and argue for a theoretical link between these two constructs and sense of belonging. Using students’ participation in campus clubs and organizations as a lens, I offer insights that distinguish these concepts theoretically, while also demonstrating how they might be related in service to educational success. Chapter 11 is the epilogue, which recalls the

purpose of the book and key points raised in the volume. A robust set of references is placed at the end of the book—perhaps rightfully so—pointing readers to the sources of information upon which several of my arguments stand. Organizing the book in this manner was a deliberate decision on my part; I thought it necessary to cover a wide range of contexts and populations for the book to be applicable to broader audiences.

WHAT'S NEW IN THIS EDITION?

The basic message communicated in the first edition has proven as useful and powerful today as when I first shared it in 2012. It is undeniably clear that sense of belonging is a basic human need, vital for optimal human functioning and critical for students' learning and development. Everybody wants to belong and one's need to belong is heightened in contexts and settings where individuals are prone to feel alienated, invisible, (pre)judged, stereotyped, or lonely. In fact, I am *more* convinced today about the importance of belonging and its ability to predict college students' success than I was years ago when I wrote the first edition. This second edition provides far more detailed information about sense of belonging, how it develops for students, and insights about the extent to which it matters in college.

The research base of belonging has evolved as the world of theory, policy, and practice has changed too. For instance, education as a field has witnessed the advent of sense of belonging interventions such as attributional retraining and expansive campus-wide civility campaigns that celebrate the dignity, humanity, and worth of all beings. Nowadays, sense of belonging is incorporated in campus strategic plans, enrolment management strategies, and faculty development workshops. This second edition includes much of what we have learned through research and best practices since the publication of the last edition.

I have also found that many people in higher education and private sector organizations have used the previous edition of this book in classroom settings, faculty development workshops, staff trainings, and independent research. Though this book is intended mostly for educators, leaders, managers, planners, and stakeholders of education policy organizations, I have also discovered that a surprising number of college students themselves use the book to assess the importance of finding a sense of belonging, as well as to identify effective strategies for achieving belonging and success. The second edition of this book includes a number of significant enhancements including:

- A significantly expanded and refined theory of college students' sense of belonging (Chapter 3) that can serve as a framework for guiding future research discoveries;

- Countless best practices related to fostering sense of belonging in students in college classrooms, clubs, residence halls, and other contexts;
- New results from more recent studies on the college student samples addressed in this volume, as well as insights for new student populations such as youth formerly in foster care, formerly incarcerated adults, and homeless students;
- New “call out” boxes or vignettes that address a broad range of new topics that have evolved from my research since the first edition of this book, including cultural navigation, academic spotting, and the “shared faith” element of belonging, to name a few.

FOR WHOM WAS THE BOOK WRITTEN?

College Students’ Sense of Belonging was written with several audiences in mind. First, college student educators and student personnel administrators, who work with students directly, will likely benefit from the research-based recommendations presented throughout the book. For instance, student activities directors and staff members may consider my recommendations about advising students to “see” involvement as a way of establishing a sense of belonging on campus, not just a résumé filler (see Chapter 10). Similarly, summer bridge program staff may find the information in Chapter 6 particularly helpful as they work to revise existing or formulate new curricula and activities for students.

Campus administrators and college student educators will likely find the practical recommendations for nurturing students’ sense of belonging provocative, useful, and possible to enact on their own campus. For example, STEM outreach coordinators, STEM advisors, and faculty may consult information in Chapter 7 to adopt or refine practices such as student orientation programs, living-learning communities, or summer research opportunities as a way of promoting belonging among students. Even graduate advisors and deans may find themselves revisiting Chapter 9 for ways to build belonging among graduate students.

That the book focuses on students’ experiences inside and outside the classroom should appeal to higher-education professionals in both academic affairs (e.g., provosts, deans, faculty) and student affairs (e.g., student activities, housing). Consider that several chapters turn attention to what happens in the classroom or related spaces (e.g., Chapters 7–9), while other chapters place an accent on the out-of-classroom, extracurricular, or social spheres of college life (e.g., Chapters 4 and 10). Again, this was an intentional design, reflecting my belief that sense of belonging, too, has academic (cognitive) and social (behavioral) dimensions.

The main substantive chapters present new findings from research studies that employ quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches; thus, educational researchers and scholars from related fields (e.g., psychology, sociology) may be attracted to the book's empirical base, the various ways in which data were used to achieve the book's purposes while "telling the story" of students from various backgrounds whose voices are virtually silent or "silenced" (hushed by power) in the extant literature. It may also be useful to researchers to find so much information about sense of belonging under a single cover. This can potentially reduce the amount of time spent in the library (or online) hunting for references to the relevant literature.

Lastly, students may stand much to gain from this book. Graduate students in Student Affairs and Higher Education programs may find the book useful for enhancing their understanding of sense of belonging, its relation to student success, and the role they can play in nurturing sense of belonging in various educational settings. It is not a far stretch to think that college students themselves may benefit from the book's content as well. I have tried to articulate my thesis about sense of belonging via words (and numerical data) provided by students themselves. Having their belonging experiences reflected back at them through the words, vignettes, and responses of students who share their interests and backgrounds may lead student readers to nod their head in passionate agreement, to gasp in amazement that others share experiences closely mirroring their own, or to read the book cover-to-cover in a single sitting. If nothing else, I hope this book calls attention to sense of belonging as a critical ingredient in the recipe for student success. I hope it demonstrates to students that college student educators care about them and want to work to create campus conditions that promote their belonging in college. Conversely, I hope the book demonstrates to college student educators that not only are all students capable of learning or able to achieve, but also yearning to belong. Information in this book may even inspire some students to connect with the campus in ways that they might not have imagined otherwise.

Note. This second edition of *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students* includes new images, photos, and diagrams to illustrate the function and structure of sense of belonging in postsecondary contexts; these new photos and images are also instructive in showing belonging's applicability to various scenarios. Unless otherwise noted, all illustrations, photos, and graphics were created by the Author or made available for use in the public domain at: www.publicdomainpictures.net or www.public-domain-photos.com. Both sites authorize "use of images for any purpose, including commercial."

Acknowledgments

Any undertaking of this magnitude leaves the author indebted to a number of individuals. First, I want to thank my wonderful advisees and research assistants over the years for their help with the various projects that form the basis for this book. Special thanks to Amanda Blakewood (PhD, Tennessee), James DeVita (PhD, Tennessee), Derrick Tillman Kelly (PhD, The Ohio State University [OSU]), Joey Kitchen (PhD, OSU), Fei Bie (MS, OSU), Todd Suddeth (PhD, OSU), Michael Steven Williams (PhD, OSU), Royel Johnson (PhD, OSU), Leroy Long (PhD, OSU), and Marjorie Dorime-Williams (PhD, Illinois), all of whom have served as members of my research team through one of the three academic research centers that I have directed. Other members of my research teams over the years have contributed in meaningful ways to these works too: D.J. Baker, Chrissy Hannon, Karl Jennings, Fred Calvin McCall, Shanna Pendergrast, Demetrius Richmond, Chutney Walton, William Roberts-Foster, Eric Stokes, Porche Wynn, Aaron Hatchett, and Feven Girmay (UCLA). Without the competent support of my graduate students, this book—first or second edition—would not have been possible.

I benefited greatly from the generous financial support of the American College Personnel Association's (ACPA) Commission for Academic Affairs Administrators, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission in partnership with the US Department of Education, and from professional development grants available through the Provost's Office at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville and The Ohio State University. External grants from the National Science Foundation Division of Research on Learning has supported my research on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), some of which is featured in this book.

I've said it before and I must say it again, my family gave me the encouragement and motivation to start this project, especially my son and daughter. While my family provided the fuel to start this project, it took the constant support and encouragement of my close friends to sustain me over time, long after I thought I had written the "last line." Special recognition to Jamaal Brown, Elias Fishburne, Leon Howell, the late Darren Harris, Joshua Johnson, Evelyn Leathers, Joseph Terrell Lockett, Belinda Bennett McFeeters, Jeremy Morris, Tonya Saddler, and Herbert Smith. This second edition was particularly helped along by candid conversations with and indirect support from TJ Andrews, Xavier Killebrew, and Royel Johnson.

I wish to thank several "higher ed colleagues" who have encouraged me over the years that I've worked on this book project too. Without their contributions to our collective knowledge, my understanding of higher education, student development, and college students' sense of belonging, while still incomplete, would be far too limited to write an entire book about it. Thus, I recognize the encouragement and support of Don Creamer (my doctoral advisor), Marybeth Gasman, Joan Hirt, Sylvia Hurtado, Steve Janosik, Susan Komives, George Kuh, Norma Mertz, Amaury Nora, Laura Perna, Kris Renn, Vincent Tinto, Frank Worrell, Dante Dixon, and DeLeon Gray. Special recognition to my former faculty colleagues at The Ohio State University for their support, direct and indirect, during the first edition. So much of this second edition was done with support from new OSU faculty colleagues (Matt Mayhew, Marc Johnston, Anne Marie-Nunez) and leaders across the country including Jamie Washington, DL Stewart, Menah Pratt-Clarke, Vern Granger, to name a few.

Finally, I thank Dr. DeLeon Gray and the many other graduate students, scholars, and practitioners with whom I spoke and those with whom I worked as I carried out this second edition. Our conversations, questions, and confusion served as a basis for my additional thoughts about college students' sense of belonging. Special thanks to Heather Jarrold, Kate Lalor, and the editorial staff at Routledge; your enormous patience was appreciated as I worked to produce the edition that I *wanted* to write, not the one that I had time to write in light of so many life transitions. Working with you on this second edition has been literally amazing and I hope we'll do this again soon. To all of you and those who are implied, but not listed, I offer a multitude of "thanks."

Here's to belonging.

Introduction

If both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, then there will emerge love and affection and belongingness needs, and the whole cycle already described will repeat itself with this new centre. Now the person will feel keenly.

(Abraham Maslow)

This is a book about sense of belonging. Say this: “I belong here.” Now, turn to someone near you and say it again: “I belong here.” If you’re alone, grab your cell phone and text someone: “I belong here.” What’s their reaction? What’s yours? If you receive affirming nods in agreement or feel a sense of warmth, then pause and connect with the moment. That’s your mind (cognitive), body (behavioral), and soul (affective) converging on the sentiment that you are important, that you matter to others around you, and you belong. If your declaration is met with blank stares, disagreement, dismissive laughter, or the all-too-familiar text reply (?! ☺) then take a moment to sense your feelings. Channel them toward your mind. What are you thinking? What do you want to do now? What meaning do you make of the entire exchange? Connect with those emotions before moving on. All of this is the essence of sense of belonging, a phenomenon that we will talk about over the course of this entire volume.

BACKGROUND

On September 8, 2009, former President Barack Obama delivered a widely televised, though hotly contested, “Back-to-School Address” at Wakefield

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High School in Arlington, Virginia. Thousands of students across the country, from kindergarten to 12th grade and beyond, tuned in as the then President offered encouragement and inspiration to America's future about their potential. During his 15-minute address, the country's first Black President recalled his experience as a child raised by a single mother who struggled at times to make ends meet. "There were times when I was lonely and felt like I didn't fit in." He went on to explain how important it is for students to feel safe and have a sense of belonging in educational settings. His comments implied that safety and belonging were correlated with success in school. And his comments certainly align with the evidence base presented in this book, namely the link between social isolation, loneliness, perceived fit, and belonging.

If we know anything at all, we know that belongingness is a basic human motivation and all people share a strong need to belong (Maslow, 1962). As Maslow explained in the quote that opens this chapter, "If both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, then there will emerge ... belongingness needs." Many definitions of belongingness abound. **Sense of belonging generally refers to a feeling of connectedness, that one is important or matters to others** (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).¹ The absence of a sense of belonging typically is described as a "sense of alienation," rejection, social isolation, loneliness, or "marginality," which has been linked to negative proximal and long-term outcomes such as dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, depression, substance abuse, and suicide (Hagerty, Williams, & Oe, 2002). Lack of a sense of belonging can undermine academic performance (Walton & Cohen, 2007) and even one's plans to stay in college (Berger, 1997). Students who do not feel like they belong rarely stay in college. In fact, students "who do not have a sense of belonging complain that their college experience is like 'stopping by the mall' to get what they need on the way to somewhere else" (Jacoby & Garland, 2004–2005, p. 65).

We've also learned from dozens of studies that posit sense of belonging as a function of perceived support from one's peers, teachers, and family members (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002–2003; Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008a). For instance, scholars have documented that students' sense of belonging is greater if and when they socialize with peers whose backgrounds may differ from their own² (Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008c). For college students, peers play an important and powerful role in facilitating sense of belonging, as it is the peer group that provides the feedback and support necessary for the achievement of this need (White & Cones, 1999). And since we know that peer interactions can produce or inhibit sense of belonging, it is critical for college student educators to encourage positive interactions among students through conditions that *really* matter in college, ranging from advising networks to cocurricular involvement, from learning communities to peer mentoring,

to name a few (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). I will say this many times in different ways: positive interpersonal, peer interactions increase students' sense of belonging and sense of belonging leads to student success so those charged with increasing college student success should think just as much about campus climate and policies governing social interactions as they do about predictive analytics, intrusive advising, curricular alignment, and early alert systems. It all *really* matters.

Although a good deal is known about sense of belonging as a basic human motivation, factors that influence students' sense of belonging, and the influence of sense of belonging on important outcomes such as achievement, adjustment, and plans to stay in college, comparatively little is known about differences that exist in terms of college students' sense of belonging, as well as social identities and campus environments that create a sense of belonging for such students. And, more recently, researchers and policymakers have called for a change in the focus of educational research from "research for research's sake" to purposeful examinations that lead to empirically based recommendations for institutional transformation by improving educational practices, policies, and programs, given that in the past "the results of scholarly research on teaching and learning [were] rarely translated into practice" (US Department of Education, 2006). With this in mind, the second edition of *College Students' Sense of Belonging* was designed to achieve these larger objectives as well.

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

The book has several main purposes. First, the Introduction and leading chapters will offer a substantive review of the extant literature on sense of belonging and critique that literature in light of new and emerging scientific discoveries. Second, the book's review of literature will lead to a synthesis of several theoretical threads and conceptual components that represents the book's overarching organizing framework. The resultant model will be outlined generally, defined explicitly, and illustrated graphically, mostly in Chapter 3.

Third, the book presents new and recent research findings from quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies conducted by the author and many other scholars across various fields/disciplines throughout the country. As was mentioned in the Preface, the second edition includes studies published since the previous edition too. And, finally, *College Students' Sense of Belonging* offers college student educators what's really needed by translating research into practice—practical recommendations for improving educational environments, practices, policies, and programs in ways that facilitate students' sense of belonging on campus. Before proceeding with a

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critical review of existing literature and theory, let's establish a "working definition" for sense of belonging that will level our understanding of this concept.

A WORKING DEFINITION

Quite often, before scholars can mine an idea for its empirical worth, it is necessary to attend to basic definitions and concerns. For the purposes of this book, sense of belonging is framed as a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior.

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers.

It is a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an affective and/or behavioral response.

Sense of belonging is relational, and thus there's a reciprocal quality to relationships that provide a sense of belonging. Each member benefits from the group and the group, in a sense (no pun intended), benefits from the contributions of each member. It is the proverbial "I am we and we are each" phenomenon. Under optimal conditions, members feel that the group is important to them and that they are important to the group. Consider the student who is a member of a collegiate sorority—she likely feels important as a member and the group serves an important role in her life, partly because it satisfies one of her fundamental needs and that is to belong. By the same token, the sorority means nothing without members who constitute its very existence. The group satisfies the belongingness needs of the individual—in exchange for membership, members will be cared for and supported. The group needs its members, however, to exist and the members yearn to be part of the group as it also gives meaning and purpose to their existence. So, in essence, **sense of belonging is a "feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together"** (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). (Question: Do you think college students today feel like their institutions need them to exist and vice versa?)

Let's consider another example that illustrates these points in a college environment. Meet James. James is a first-year student from a rural

neighborhood in southwest Virginia. New to college, and first in his family to attend beyond high school, James spends a lot of time contemplating questions about his future. *Will I make friends? Will other students like me? Will I “fit in” in my residence hall? And, can I do it?* During summer orientation, he learns that the university offers a freshman living-learning community called “Explorations” for students who are interested in science careers. Despite his relatively modest upbringing in poorly resourced public schools, James has always done well in science and had given considerable thought to becoming a scientist or engineer someday. Notwithstanding initial uncertainties, he moved quickly to sign up for the living-learning community without consulting his parents, academic advisor, or friends.

Why would a first-year, first-generation college student from a rural community make such a hasty decision without seeking further advice? Simply put, the “Explorations” learning community seemed to meet one of James’ most basic needs: a sense of belonging, of being around and accepted by others who may share common interests. Recall that definitions of **sense of belonging generally refer to “an individual’s sense of identification or positioning in relation to a group or to the college community, which may yield an affective response”** (Tovar & Simon, 2010, p. 200). By participating in the “Explorations” learning community, by engaging peers who likely share common interests, and by living in a university space sanctioned for those interested in science or engineering careers, James reduced his worries about making suitable friends, satisfied his need to connect with others on campus, and increased the likelihood that he would feel a sense of belonging in a space that was otherwise foreign, unfamiliar, lonely, and unwelcoming. This example not only reflects key elements of sense of belonging such as involvement or mattering, but in part, reveals my approach to examining this important dimension of students’ experiences in college. There are many decisions that students make that trace back to their basic belonging needs.

Conceptually, my approach reflects a social cognitive perspective on achievement motivation. That is, sense of belonging, as I explain it here, is part of a larger motivational framework. Such a framework maintains that individuals have psychological needs; satisfaction of such needs affects behaviors and perceptions, and characteristics of the social context influence how well these needs are met. In this book, I frame sense of belonging as a basic human need that takes on heightened importance in *certain* social contexts where *some* individuals are prone to feeling unsupported, unwelcomed, or lonely, or in *some* social contexts where *certain* individuals are more likely to feel that way. Recall that James worried about making friends and feeling accepted—his need to belong was heightened as a first-generation, first-year student in an unfamiliar college environment where he expected to stand out, stick out, or even feel lonely and left out. Given the importance of belonging, he moved quickly, even without advice, to join a

learning community where his need to belong and matter could be satisfied. Illustration of my approach to this topic leads to an important question, which is addressed below.

WHY WRITE THIS BOOK?

I decided to write this book for at least three reasons. First, over the years, I have conducted a number of large-scale research projects examining the experiences of college students in various contexts. Viewed as a social scientist whose primary interests center on the academic study of students in postsecondary and higher education, I have several lines of work that focus on student access and achievement, issues of equity and diversity, as well as student learning and development. Whether studying the role that summer bridge programs play on low-income racial/ethnic minorities' preparation for college, the academic supports that enable the success of minority men in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, or the meaning-making processes of gay men of color, I have uncovered a preponderance of evidence suggesting the importance of community, support, membership, and acceptance, all core elements of the book's central topic, *sense of belonging*. So, I wrote this book because data from my research, over the years, suggested the need for it.

It's not only the number of times that sense of belonging has been identified in my research as an important factor in the success of college students that demonstrates the compelling need for this book, although I think that certainly deserves mention. Rather, it's the nature in which students talk about sense of belonging that underscores its significance to the college student experience. As you'll see in the next chapters, college students stress the importance of social acceptance, support, community, connections, and respect to their own identity, development, mental health, wellbeing, and academic success. When I started thinking seriously about writing a book on college students' sense of belonging, I was working with members of my research team to complete a wave of interviews for a mixed-methods project. Following one of the interviews, a participant asked, "What will you do with this information?" As usual, I shared that aggregated information would be published in journal articles and presentations (you know, the usual "IRB 101" stuff), but I also added that I was contemplating a book on sense of belonging. The participant's eyes lit up and she proclaimed, "YES [emphasis added], you've got to ... Sense of belonging is so important. It can literally be a matter of life or death for some students, like me." So, I wrote this book because my informants over the years encouraged it. The book's topic is important, weighty, and has gravity for students' success in college—I wrote it to help all students succeed.

There is a third reason why I wrote this book. In graduate school, my doctoral advisor, Don Creamer, would say to students, “It’s hard to write a paper when you have nothing to say.” Simple, yet profound wisdom. And if it’s hard to write a paper without something to say, imagine trying to fill enough pages to constitute a book! I firmly believe that reading should usually precede writing, jump-starting one’s impulse to write. And, for me, I began (this book) by reading (other people’s work), which led to writing (and thinking) my own ideas, and more reading, which, in turn, led to more writing (and thinking) on a topic about which I feel strongly. I didn’t start writing this book because I *wanted to*; rather, I had to. The more I read about campus environments, the more I wrote about community and vice versa. I wrote this book because, simply put, I felt like I had something to say about the topic. Sense of belonging is a topic about which I feel strongly; those feelings compelled me to begin writing and sustained me as I completed the previous edition of this book. Surprisingly, similar convictions and feelings fueled my work on the present (second) edition of the book too.

Before concluding this chapter, I should mention one other aspect of the book’s design that relates to *why* and *how* I wrote it. You will notice that each substantive chapter begins with at least one quotation, some preserved from the first edition and some new to this second edition. Quotes were drawn from participants in my previous studies or were spoken by politicians, philosophers, educators, and entertainers. I found this a useful way to jump-start my thinking about sense of belonging in particular arenas. In other cases, I thought the quote was appropriate as it captures the essence of sense of belonging as I am framing it in this book. Where possible, I attempt to use the quotation to launch a discussion of sense of belonging in terms of the chapter’s specific focus, but I also strive to return to the quote at the chapter’s end as a way of “circling back” to the thoughts that initiated our conversation in the first place. For instance, in this chapter, we will return to the words of former President Barack Obama before moving on to the next chapter.

CONCLUSION

Echoing the words of Barack Obama that began this chapter, I, too, recall times growing up when I did not belong. I was in grade school—a rising fourth grader—when one of the assistant principals decided that I would make a good addition to the “football gang,” as it was called, which of course is fundamentally problematic in so many ways. The “football gang” consisted of mostly young Black men who attended the predominantly White elementary school where I was enrolled. They were known amongst teachers, staff, and some students as “brutes,” “thugs,” “jocks,” and even

“monsters” mostly because they were taller, bigger, stronger than most of our peers. Standing at nearly under 4 feet and so small that I was often mistaken as a third grader, I’m not sure why the assistant principal thought that I would *find community* in this group (except for obvious and *racist* reasons). Looking back, it’s clear that *race mattered* even in fourth grade at my award-winning, highly ranked elementary school that boasted very large numbers of veteran teachers with master’s degrees and hundreds of graduates who scored highest on standardized assessments. Regardless of what we shared in phenotype—mostly boys of color, ranging from chocolate brown to caramel yellow in skin tone—I knew that I would stick out like a sore thumb. They wanted to skip class and I wanted to get there early so I could sit up front near the teacher. They wanted to throw food in the cafeteria as a way of inciting a riot and I wanted to eat my food quickly (including my dessert) so I could be dismissed early and spend time working alone in the computer lab. They wanted to play football, tackle each other, and make touchdowns—I wanted none of this. Just because we looked alike to some people, we actually shared very little in common. I did not belong. I felt like I didn’t matter. And I was rejected many times over once they all learned that I knew very little about football (and didn’t care to), had no intention of ever being tackled, and would drop the ball before I would ever let one of them drop me. I was always one of the very last to be “chosen” by team leaders and usually that moment was met with pregnant pause, rolling eyes, and something like: “Shucks, we got Terrell.” Not exactly the most welcoming refrain. My time with the “football gang” was lonely; though surrounded by dozens, I felt alone.

Although it is clear that I shared very little in common with members of the “football gang,” there was hardly a time when I felt unsafe (with the exception of a few times that someone came close to tackling me). Generally speaking, I felt safe and secure at school, which according to Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs brought my love and belonging needs to the fore. I can recall times in high school when I did not belong and my safety was threatened. For instance, I ran for office in the Student Government Association (SGA). I ran on a strong platform arguing to give more visibility to students, their needs, and wishes. My campaign slogan was upbeat and optimistic, but I also championed issues of diversity in my campaign speech. I remember it like it was yesterday—my speech closed with a cadence as I rhythmically recited the words etched on my paper about creating community, unifying bands of students, and strengthening the bonds of *personhood* in the school. Just as I reached the last paragraph, I crossed over into my best imitation of “Kermit The Frog” and declared: “It’s not easy being green.” I sang the entire song in that disguised voice. It was a metaphor, hinting lightly at what it was like for students of color (like me) in the predominantly White, highly selective high school that I attended.

Everyone rose in ovation at the end and my music teacher was so impressed that she was crying in the corner of the stage. The next day, I arrived at school and found that dozens of my campaign flyers had been defaced with the word “Nigger” written across my photo. I was devastated. I was hurt. I felt lonely. I was afraid. I felt unsafe. Quickly, I worked with my team and school personnel to remove the flyers and produce new ones. News spread fast and pretty soon I was getting help from people who I had never even met. That support, outpouring of love and care brought light to a dark situation and restored my faith in our school spirit. I won the election and people cheered. I felt a strong sense of connection to that school, the people ... like I was there on purpose and I belonged.

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it many times again: sense of belonging is a basic human need, a fundamental motivation, sufficient to drive behaviors and perceptions. Its satisfaction leads to positive gains such as happiness, elation, wellbeing, achievement, and optimal functioning. Given its significance in various social contexts, as well as its consistent association with positive health, and social and psychological outcomes, I think its importance cannot be stressed enough. Much of what we do, we do to establish and maintain a sense of belonging in the contexts and fields that constitute our ecology, our lives, our world. In many public talks and lectures across the globe, I point out for audiences that humans go to almost any length to *feel* as if they belong or to “find their people,” “their village,” or “mi gente,” as one Latino undergraduate told me years ago. People will change their style of dress, buy a new car, build a brand-new home, change academic majors, join a fraternity or sorority—even despite expensive membership dues—cut their hair or dye their hair blue to gain acceptance, to experience community, or to feel a sense of belonging. It’s crucial, important, and related to student success in college. Until the next chapter ...

NOTES

- 1 The first edition of this book included a reference to “fitting in” as a feature of belonging. However, since that time, I have come to disagree with my previous point. True belonging is not about fitting in; it’s about being authentically oneself, flaws and all. I’ll say more about this later in the book.
- 2 Even though conventional wisdom may lead one to believe that homophily—being amongst one’s own kind—is a precondition for belonging.

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