

Co-creating conditions for belonging in higher education: An appreciative inquiry research study

by

Tamara Bauer

B.S., Kansas State University, 2005

M.S., Kansas State University, 2011

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

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Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

This qualitative research study explored how undergraduate students at a public four-year land grant university can co-create a sense of belonging through an appreciative inquiry (AI) process. The study employed a strengths-based and generative approach to investigate the experiences of students within the same student organization, focusing on how these experiences contribute to a deeper understanding and practice of belonging. Utilizing AI as the research methodology, this study followed the 5-D AI cycle—define, discover, dream, design, and deliver—to facilitate a structured exploration of belonging among students, and to gather data on students' experiences and perceptions of belonging. Participants engaged in focus group discussions and activities that helped them reflect on their experiences and envision future possibilities for co-creating belonging on campus.

The research findings highlight several key themes that contribute towards the co-creation of a sense of belonging among students, including (a) safety, acceptance, and inclusion, (b) organizational structure and dynamics, (c) meaningful interpersonal connections, and (d) purpose and investment. The AI process not only facilitated a deeper understanding of these themes but also empowered participants to co-create strategies for enhancing belonging among themselves. By focusing on positive experiences and collective aspirations, the study demonstrates how AI can be a powerful tool for fostering inclusive and supportive environments in higher education and can be utilized as both a philosophy and method in qualitative research.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

“We change the world one room at a time. This room, today, becomes an example of the future we want to inhabit. There is no need to wait for the future. Creating the experience of belonging in the room we are in at the moment becomes the point, namely that the way we structure the assembly of peers and leaders is as critical as the issue or concerns we come together to address.” - Peter Block

This quote from Block (2018), emphasizes the significance and possibility of individuals coming together to create an aspired future. It also begs the question, “How can we fully harness the collective potential when we gather?” To maximize the potential of a community, one must attend to creating spaces of belonging. In this exploratory research study, I sought to describe how belonging can be co-created among students within a university setting through an appreciative inquiry (AI) process.

The need to belong is fundamental for all humans throughout their life span. After physiological and safety needs are met, if people do not experience love and belonging, they cannot continue to develop in esteem and work toward self-actualization (Allen, 2020; Maslow, 1962; Strayhorn, 2019). Additionally, “love and belonging are irreducible needs for all people. In the absence of these experiences, there is always suffering” (Brown, 2021, p. 159). Because mattering and feeling social belonging are instinctual needs, people are motivated to fulfill those belonging needs for human functioning (Maslow, 1962; Strayhorn, 2019). When belonging needs are unmet, individuals face numerous challenges with identity formation, loneliness, health, and all functions that contribute to psychological, physical, and social wellbeing (Allen, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019). Therefore, attending to belonging is as essential as attending to other basic needs.

Belonging takes on additional importance for college students (Meehan & Howells, 2018; Strayhorn, 2019). According to Strayhorn (2019), the need for belonging in college students is heightened “given where they are generally in their personal development – traditionally at the crux of identity exploration and vulnerable to peer influence” (p. 28). The college experience, therefore, is a crucial time and place where individuals develop. While there are multiple missions and aspirations for the university experience, central to its purpose is the development of young adults for citizenship and professional work (Abowitz, 2008; Cuellar et al., 2022). To work toward this aspiration, both Maslow (1962) and Strayhorn (2019) suggested that “a college student’s need for belonging must be satisfied before any other higher-order needs such as knowledge and self-actualization” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 31). Consequently, fostering a genuine sense of belonging within the campus community is imperative to meet the goals and purposes of higher education, which include nurturing intellectual growth and achieving proficiency in relevant skills for personal and professional growth. It is, therefore, crucial for those involved in higher education to prioritize the implementation of practices and conditions that create a sense of belonging for college students.

The term *belonging* is a buzzword in higher education, as illustrated by articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Lu, 2023b; Supaino, 2018), newly created administration positions and offices with belonging in the title (e.g., Vice President for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB); Division of Belonging and Student Engagement; Office of Student Belonging and Inclusion), and campuses focusing their energy on belonging (e.g., Frenk, 2016; Strayhorn, 2018). In Lu’s (2023a) article, *Everyone Is Talking About ‘Belonging’, What Does It Really Mean*, she discussed the growing interest in the concept of belonging in higher education, highlighting several examples of colleges and universities working to foster a sense of

belonging, such as creating affinity groups, offering mentorship programs, and strengthening discrimination and harassment policies. However, the goal of creating belonging is elusive, given that there is no universal blueprint or solution for belonging since a person's sense of belonging can change in different contexts and at different times (Baumeister & Robson, 2021; Lu, 2023b). As noted by Strayhorn (2023), "we have missed for decades the important role that relationships and feeling supported and valued, safe, and secure to be oneself at school and college played in the formula for success. That's what belonging is" (para. 6). Lu (2023b) also noted that the focus on belonging is not just about creating a welcoming environment but also about improving outcomes for students and promoting equity and social justice in higher education. As such, universities are exploring infrastructures to support belonging, recognizing that sense of belonging is a potential lever for change in terms of student success, retention, and wellbeing. *Belonging* is beginning to belong in higher education.

While there has been significant research on the concept of belonging and the factors that influence belonging from an individual level (e.g., Flint, 2018; Strayhorn, 2022; Walton & Cohen, 2007), there is limited understanding regarding how belonging is actively co-created among people, especially in the higher education context. In fact, Block (2018) asserted that "belonging does not have to be left to chance or to be dependent on the welcoming nature of others" (p. xviii), meaning that belonging is something that can be fostered and created. Better understanding the conditions of how belonging can be co-created by individuals within a college setting will further help universities cultivate this essential human need. Additionally, understanding how to foster belonging within a college setting proactively will help universities cultivate this essential human need, which will, in turn, increase student success and wellbeing.

This qualitative research was exploratory in nature, as it aimed to discover in-depth learning about the conditions (which could include factors, practices, ways, and/or behaviors) that co-create belonging among people. Belonging is a complex phenomenon to study because it is considered a latent or hidden variable and can change depending on individuals, environment, and context (Strayhorn, 2019). This research centered on exploring the positive core of “what works” for co-creating belonging through an AI methodology. The AI process engaged participants by exploring their own positive experiences around belonging in order to surface themes related to the conditions that support that co-creation. AI also emphasized a change approach for participants to feel more knowledgeable and driven to co-create belonging as a result of their experience with the process. In summary, this research aimed to surface the intricacies of the co-creation of belonging among college students by utilizing an appreciative approach through AI and exploring belonging as the positive core.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore how undergraduate students at a public, four-year land grant university describe the conditions of how belonging can be co-created among people through engagement in an appreciative inquiry process. By utilizing a practitioner-scholar lens, I aspired to learn how belonging can be co-created among people while simultaneously working toward improving belonging among students.

The research questions for this study included:

1. How can individuals within a group co-create the conditions for belonging?
 - a. How do participants describe the conditions that co-create a sense of belonging?
 - b. What are practices and conditions that contribute to the co-creation of belonging?

- c. How do students perceive the conditions that co-create belonging based on social identities?
2. How does the appreciative inquiry process contribute to the co-creation of belonging among college students?

Operational Definitions

In this section, I provide brief definitions of terms utilized throughout the dissertation, providing readers with an overview of how these concepts are contextualized and framed within the study.

1. **Belonging** (Note: though there are multiple and varied definitions of belonging. I surface those that informed this study)
 - a. “True belonging does not require us to change who we are; it requires us to be who we are” (Brown, 2021, p. 158).
 - b. 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).
 - c. Sense of belonging is “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” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 5).
 - d. Belongingness is defined as a “sense of personal involvement in a social system so that persons feel themselves to be an indispensable and integral part of the system” (Anant, 1966, p. 21).

- e. “A subjective feeling of value and respect derived from reciprocal relationships built on shared experiences, beliefs, or characteristics” (Mahar et al., 2013, p. 1031).
- f. “Belonging can be thought of as a longing to be. Being is our capacity to find our deeper purpose in all that we do. It is the capacity to be present and to discover our authenticity and whole selves. Community is the container within which our longing to be is fulfilled” (Block, 2018, p. xviii).

2. College students’ sense of belonging

- a. Sense of belonging refers to “students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class” (Goodenow, 1993a, p. 25)
 - b. “Sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). Indeed, it is a cognitive evaluation that leads to an affective response of behavior in students” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 29).
 - c. “Sense of belonging reflects the social support that students perceive on campus; it is a feeling of connectedness, that one is important to others, that one matters” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 51).
3. **Asset-based** – focused on existing strengths, successes, and possibilities, as opposed to problems or deficits (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

4. **Co-create** – a collaborative process where stakeholders emphasize shared responsibility and joint accountability, allowing participants to contribute their ideas and perspectives, ensuring the organization’s goals are collectively created and supported by all involved (Block, 2018).
5. **Conditions** – refer to the environmental, structural, and cultural factors within a system, group, or institution that create a foundation for belonging. Conditions form the foundational environment in which practices are implemented.
6. **Practices** – refer to the specific actions, behaviors, and strategies employed by individuals or groups to foster a sense of belonging. These are often more dynamic and interactive, focusing on day-to-day interactions and activities.
7. **Appreciative Inquiry (AI)** – a strengths-based organizational tool and philosophy that seeks to engage stakeholders in self-determined change. It is a process that highlights positive traits within systems to foster self-determined change.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This research design was theoretically grounded in a constructionist paradigm, understanding that “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, beings constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). The constructionist paradigm further emphasizes that meaning is not discovered but *constructed* by humans as they interpret the world in which they are engaging (Crotty, 1998; Jones et al., 2014). A constructionist approach to qualitative research can bring to light a phenomenon often taken for granted or hidden, such as the co-creation of belonging, through exploring narratives in a collaborative process (Creswell, 2014). Being open to possibility and

learning “invites us to approach the object in a radial spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning. It is an invitation to reinterpretation” (Crotty, 1998, p. 51). This approach allows flexibility and curiosity to deeply explore the questions at hand related to concepts and the co-creation of belonging.

Furthermore, this study was informed by assumptions of social constructionism, acknowledging that reality is jointly constructed and that most of human life exists as it does due to social and interpersonal influences (Gergen & Davis, 1985). Social constructionism aligns with the topic of study as belonging is a social phenomenon that can be experienced through our social world and through interactions with others (Allen et al., 2021). Our social reality, therefore, is a function of shared meaning and is constructed, continued, and further replicated through this social life (Greenwood, 1994). This approach allowed the exploration of the complex nature of belonging within the shared context of the university setting. Culture and social context influence the ways in which we generate meaning and shape our view of the world, and the social aspect is what serves as the mode of generating meaning. Using this lens to understand and describe the co-creation of college students’ sense of belonging helped to paint a rich and useful description.

Belonging

This study was guided by the concept of sense of belonging and a conceptual framework about the core components of college students’ sense of belonging. In his book Strayhorn (2019) provided a comprehensive review of existing literature on college students’ sense of belonging as organized into the following three categories: “belongingness as a concept; circumstances that promote (or thwart) belonging; and the relation between belonging and other outcomes or

behaviors” (p. 21). This analysis provides a conceptual model for understanding the phenomenon of belonging among people.

To provide a more detailed understanding, I turned to Strayhorn’s (2019) model of college students’ sense of belonging. According to Strayhorn (2019), sense of belonging has seven core elements:

1. Sense of belonging is a basic human need.
2. Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive that is sufficient to drive human behavior.
3. Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance (a) in certain contexts, such as being a newcomer to an otherwise established group; (b) at certain times, such as (late) adolescence when individuals begin to consider who they are (or wish to be), with whom they belong, and where they intend to invest their time and energies in the future; and (c) among certain populations, especially those who are marginalized or inclined to feel excluded, invisible, irrelevant, or “left out” in said context.
4. Sense of belonging is related to and seemingly a consequence of mattering.
5. Social identities intersect and affect college students’ sense of belonging.
6. Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes.
7. Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change. (pp. 161-162)

These core components were essential framing for this study, as they contextualized and provided details about the complex phenomenon of belonging within a university setting and the need to prioritize ways to support belonging.

Furthermore, these elements contextualize the latent variable of belonging through recognizing its complexity and individualized context. Additionally, Nunn (2021) identified

three distinct realms where college students experience belonging: (a) academic belonging, (b) social belonging, and (c) campus-community belonging. *Academic belonging* refers to the feeling of being an accepted member of the academic community of your campus. *Social belonging* takes the form of friendships and membership in organizations or clubs. Finally, *campus-community belonging* is feeling comfortable as you are within the culture of the campus community. Nunn (2021) based her research on sociologists' understanding of how communities work and the notion that "belonging is something that communities provide for individuals; it is not something that individuals can garner for themselves" (p. 6). In alignment with social constructionism, feelings of belonging are not, and cannot be, achieved through the individual lens.

Taking into account this conceptual framing, one can begin to understand belonging as something that is co-created among people. More work needs to be done to explore the practices or behaviors that co-create belonging among people. Strayhorn (2019) stated,

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. (p. 3)

By further exploring how belonging can be co-created among people, some of these gaps can be addressed to proactively foster belonging among university students.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

To explore the co-creation of belonging among college students, I utilized AI as an overarching theoretical framework and as the methodology for this study. AI can be described as a method, a philosophy, and an approach depending on how and where it is used (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). In its most fundamental description, “appreciative inquiry is the study of what gives life to human systems when they function at their best” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, sect. 1, para 2). Designed as a process for change leadership, it is a cooperative, coevolutionary methodology searching for the best in people and their systems. With its emphasis on inquiry, imagination, and innovation rather than deficit orientations, AI assumes that focusing on the positive core facilitates the emergence of multiple untapped and innovative assets (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). This framing was essential in understanding the co-creation of belonging due to its hidden, complex, and malleable nature.

Qualitative research is aligned with a social constructionist framework because it utilizes descriptive inquiry, which is essential for understanding participants’ experiences beyond the statistical cause-and-effect design in some areas of quantitative research (Creswell, 2014; Gergen, 2014). To explore the conditions of how belonging is co-created, I used AI as the methodology to guide this qualitative exploratory research. As a scholar-practitioner, I aimed to utilize a methodology that reflects engaged scholarship, an approach to scholarship that not only produces new learning, but also generates positive outcomes throughout the course (Van de Ven, 2007). Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) framed AI “as a capacity-building approach to transforming human systems” (p. 40), thus allowing me to explore the implications of AI in the co-creation of belonging. Additionally, the AI process is intended to serve as a vehicle for positive social change, so while exploring the research questions of how belonging is co-created

across campus, the process itself was poised to contribute positively to actions taken to create belonging within the university community.

Applied to research, the AI process engages members as co-researchers as they inquire into the most life-giving forces of their context. Through a dialogic approach, AI is grounded in social constructionism, recognizing the existence of many realities (rather than one ultimate truth) to be discovered collectively (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). The AI process utilizes four phases, coined the 4-D cycle (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The first phase is *discovery*, or appreciating the best of what is. Second is *dream*, or envisioning what might be. The third phase is *design*, or co-constructing what would be ideal. Fourth, *deliver/destiny*, or implementation of the collective design. Additionally, the 4-D cycle has been adapted to include a fifth step, *define*, at the introduction of the process, clarifying the central question or topic of the inquiry (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). This process allows for the creation of a container for participants to share their experiences and aspirations for the co-creation of belonging as a practice of leadership. Additionally, AI allows for opportunities wherein participants discuss experiences related to belonging and elicit ideas for positive solutions and strategies throughout the AI cycles.

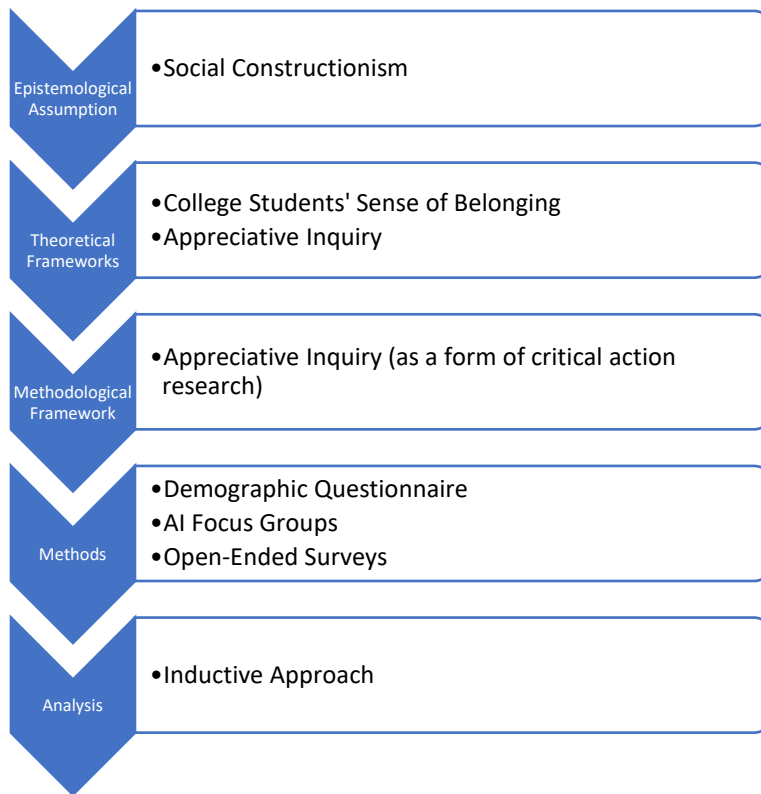
AI can be considered a form of action research or community-engaged research, as the theoretical levers of AI focus on trying to intervene and spark change by engaging all voices through a process of generativity and a focus on cooperative capacity (Griggs & Crain-Dorough, 2021). By focusing on the potential for positive change, the AI experience also leverages individuals with minoritized and marginalized identities to engage fully. In contrast, problem-based or deficit-based approaches often put individuals on guard as they feel they need to defend their part in the problem or may not feel comfortable expressing their perspectives (Griggs &

Crain-Dorough, 2021). Being conscious of the approach utilized is especially important as educators and scholars engage diverse voices with varied experiences related to belonging on a college campus. Flint (2018) emphasized through their work that the concept of belonging is and should be “elusive” and should not be “reduced to static approaches or descriptions of best practices” (p. 228). Additionally, the methodology and methods utilized in future research should reflect the dynamic and relational conception of belonging (Flint, 2018). The co-constructed nature of AI creates space and practice for this complex way of knowing.

The Study

This study used AI to guide the research process. The methods of data collection included a survey, interviews, and appreciative inquiry focus groups, which aligned with the philosophical positioning in social constructionism and the interaction between researcher and participants. The questions and reflection exercises utilized in the focus groups were designed following an AI approach using the 5-D cycle of *define* (what we aspire to know), *discovery* (appreciating what has been), *dream* (what could be realized in the future), *design* (planning for progress), and *deliver* (agency and accountability in moving forward). Participants were encouraged to use storytelling and to recall memories throughout as they considered their experiences with belonging on campus and the conditions that contributed to belonging. Additionally, participants captured their main thoughts on poster paper and engaged in an exercise where they mapped out an ideal blueprint for the co-creation of belonging. In analyzing the data, I used an inductive analysis method (Bhattacharya, 2017) to draw out patterns that influenced or co-created belonging. More details about the data management and analysis can be found in Chapter 3. Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the framing for this study.

Figure 0.1. Framing of Study



Limits and Possibilities of the Study

There are several potential limitations of this study. While I aspired to learn more about the conditions and practices that we can engage in to co-create belonging in every space we are in, I was cautious to avoid the data generated merely becoming a reflection of ways to maintain the status quo. This process should not continue to replicate systems of exclusion for people with minoritized identities, so it was essential that participants were representative of varied identities and experiences. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants, which facilitated a process to focus on diversity of identities among student participants. This approach was vital as it allowed the inclusion of individuals who could contribute valuable knowledge and experience (Creswell, 2013). However, because the sample size only included seven students, there are still significant limitations in the diversity of identities among participants.

Additionally, this exploratory study represents a single unit of study. Though the findings can suggest transferability, it is important to note that they are not generalizable (Bhattacharya, 2017). This study explored a potential problem in AI that would need to be followed up with additional studies to determine transferability and possible generalization. Creating belonging is inherently a custom experience with every gathering because each group will have different compositions related to the components of belonging. As such, it may be challenging to derive broadly applicable practices or conclusions from the research themes. However, the insights gleaned into the elements of belonging and our diverse experiences with belonging offer a valuable framework for proactively co-creating belonging.

Lastly, there is known criticism about the use of AI as a methodology, claiming that focusing on the positive may not allow space for negative or critical feedback to emerge. However, the approach to the study was not merely positive, rather the focus was on generativity. Therefore, my focus was not selective in only studying or listening for the positive (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Griggs & Crain-Dorough, 2021). This process not only aligned with the concepts of belonging and leadership but inherently served as a catalyst for creating positive change toward belonging on campus.

This study can serve as foundational learning to inform future research. Based on the findings from this study, I have proposed a new model of co-creating belonging, which can be distributed and analyzed through additional studies. This study also addressed a basic human need that impacts individual wellbeing in mental health, academic success, social wellbeing, and more. Identifying practices that enhance belonging in all spaces is of value to students, faculty, and staff throughout all experiences of the academy.

Subjectivity Statement

I have always been a curious learner, my excitement increasing as I found connections between objects, meaning, and systems. Growing up, I loved science and found my interest in learning about how things functioned, from the human body to an ecosystem. Finding the interconnectedness between things that appeared isolated reinforced values of wholeness and connectedness that drive how I experience the world today. Specifically, learning ways to identify patterns and systems developed a practice of me asking, “How are those things connected and related?” or, “What else do we need to learn to understand what is happening here?” Specifically, I am always looking for ways to better see and diagnose complex systems that impact the ways in which we live together as human beings.

As an undergraduate student, I studied biology and learned systematic and systemic approaches to understanding the complexity of the living world. As a leadership educator, I focus on theories that define leadership as an activity that all can engage in (e.g., Heifetz et al., 2009; O’Malley & Cebula, 2015). The practice of leadership, then, asks us to explore the root causes of wicked challenges and how individuals can engage together through the practice of leadership to make progress on those challenges for the common good. And, as an educator in higher education developing the capacity of our students to exercise leadership, I am always questioning the interrelated components of the learning experience that create the most transformation and growth among students. These approaches lead me to continually examine the complexity of social systems among humans and what else is needed to learn to understand these more fully.

At the heart of these curiosities is a deep care for understanding more about what makes us human and how we are bound together. The interconnectedness of these areas has led me to explore the phenomenon of belonging as it relates to leadership and higher education. If “sense

of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 159), the implications for surfacing the connection between belonging, leadership, and the college student experience are imperative. Recent research has provided clarity on definitions and elements of belonging, but far less is known about *how* to actively create belonging. Given that belonging is a foundational element of basic needs within the human experience and, therefore, of achieving high levels of learning and self-actualization (Strayhorn, 2009), more research is needed to understand how we can better understand practices that cultivate and create belonging. As a leadership educator, I am deeply interested in how individuals can work together—as a practice of leadership—to co-create such an experience. Furthermore, if belonging can be co-created by each group, this can work to restore power imbalances, address issues of diversity and inclusion, and create environments in which all can thrive.

As a White, cis-gender, straight, non-disabled woman with an upper-middle-class background, I have spent many years working to be more introspective and to understand the systemic inequities that exist for different social and cultural identities. Specifically, considering how privilege, the unearned social advantages for certain identity groups, shows up in my life and in the work I do as a college educator. As an educator, I have strong values that guide me and my purpose in this work. I see education as a structure to help dismantle oppressive inequities and to liberate and empower all individuals. I believe that transformative learning can unlock individual and collective potential, inspiring each to find their place in creating a better and prosperous world for all. Creating societal change is challenging and discouraging, yet I believe that learning and education have the greatest potential for creating the future we aspire to see. As such, it is essential that I continually examine and reflect upon our current realities and systems. Essential to that examination is identifying the ways that privilege exists, especially in

my own life. Acknowledging how privilege makes my life easier is an important component in the work of creating more just communities.

For instance, my experience with belonging is one significant privilege I hold that relates directly to my research area. Our need to belong is a fundamental human need, as is documented in Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs. After physiological and safety needs are met, if we do not experience love and belonging, we cannot continue to develop in our esteem and work toward self-actualization. Many factors can influence belonging, though the social and personal identities we hold are one important factor. While I have certainly felt the deep pain of not fitting in or belonging within a group at various points throughout my life, I have not had to experience not belonging due simply to an identity I hold. The majority of the identities I hold are considered majority identities, meaning I can see myself represented in almost any place I have been. If our need to belong is so foundational, how do individuals with minoritized and marginalized identities begin making sense of the environments around them? In order to create more just communities, we must begin by creating places where each person can belong. "If I get to be me, I belong. If I have to be like you, I fit in" (Brown, 2017, p. 160).

My positionality and privileges can certainly influence the way I engage in research around belonging. Especially if my majoritized identities are not carefully interrogated, I run an ethical risk of centering my identities in the work of belonging. As McIntosh (1988) shared, "if we think about our lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal... when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow 'them' to be more like 'us'" (p. 1). It is crucial to me that we are co-creating belonging as a practice of justice, to liberate all individuals collectively. I will need to be open and curious about how others share about belonging and not belonging, so that I can highlight their narratives without shadowing these with my own lived

experiences. The beauty that is possible in surfacing these stories and details aligns perfectly with belonging, as defined by Brown (2017): “True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are” (p. 158). I must work to allow each person to authentically and courageously share that perspective.

Summary

This introductory chapter provided the background and rationale for this study by describing how this exploratory research study examined how belonging can be co-created among college students through an AI process. This chapter described how, through the use of AI as both a theoretical framework and methodology, the research engaged students in reflecting on their positive experiences, envisioning ideal futures, and collaboratively designing strategies to create a supportive campus environment. By focusing on strengths and positive experiences, the study aimed to identify the conditions that support the co-creation of belonging, with a particular emphasis on including diverse voices and addressing the needs of minoritized and marginalized students. Chapter 2 highlights relevant literature on belonging, college students’ sense of belonging, and appreciative inquiry and describes how this dissertation built upon existing knowledge to fill a gap in the literature.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Ubuntu: I am because we are...that is, how can one of us be happy while the rest are miserable?

- Peter Singer, discussing the ancient African word meaning 'humanity to others'.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to utilize an appreciative inquiry (AI) approach to discover and describe how belonging can be co-created among students at a public, four-year land grant university. While there has been significant research on the concept of belonging and the factors that influence belonging from an individual level, there exists limited research about how belonging is actively co-created among people. This qualitative study worked to bridge the gap in understanding college student belonging with actions that can be taken to proactively co-create belonging. Better understanding how belonging can be co-created by individuals within a college setting will further help universities cultivate this essential human need. Additionally, Block (2018) discussed how building community and belonging will be a powerful strategy for ending the displacement and isolation that plague so many aspects of the world. By exploring ways in which belonging can be co-created, this practice can build the capacity of the individuals within communities to make progress on other challenges experienced.

I conducted my search for literature utilizing the K-State library search function, Google Scholar, and the ERIC database. Concerning belonging, I also relied heavily on three key texts: *College Students' Sense of Belonging* (Strayhorn, 2019), *College Belonging: How First-Year and First-Generation Students Navigate Campus Life* (Nunn, 2021), and *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Block, 2018). Strayhorn (2019) and Nunn (2021) have both completed significant research on college student belonging, working to synthesize disparate studies of belonging.

Block (2018) provided essential strategies and a conceptualization of belonging as a practice that can be shared by all individuals.

The philosophical positions informed how I approached the study in more abstract terms, and the theoretical frameworks offered framing on the phenomenon through existing scholarly literature (Jones et al., 2014). In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of research on belonging as a concept, then move into what is known about college student belonging. I then describe AI as a framework for studying belonging and end by presenting an argument for how I designed this dissertation study to draw conclusions and close gaps around the co-creation of college student belonging utilizing an AI approach.

Belonging

Belonging is a fundamental human need and is so compelling and pervasive that people continually seek to find and maintain a sense of belonging (Allen, 2020; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1962; Strayhorn, 2019). The need to be in connection with the systems around us—people, places, and things—is an essential component of human existence and improves the quality and quantity of life (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister & Robson, 2021). As such, sense of belonging predicts numerous mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioral outcomes. Recent studies have highlighted concerning trends around lack of connection to others, isolation, and loneliness (Allen et al., 2021), which impact sense of belonging and overall wellbeing. This social disconnection experienced by many has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, racial injustice, school shootings, political divides, and other events. Moreover, the evolution of the social environment—such as the increased and interconnected population, relationships experienced as being replaceable, skills needed to connect with many and diverse individuals,

and shifts in technology—has resulted in additional barriers to belonging (Allen, 2020; Baumeister & Robson, 2021).

The struggle to belong is heightened among people who hold minoritized and marginalized identities, and members of socially stigmatized identities. This includes people with minoritized identities related to race and ethnicity, physical ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and learning ability, among others (Allen et al., 2021; Mahar et al., 2013; Nunn, 2021; Walton & Cohen, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2011). For example, in an educational study, Walton and Cohen (2007) found that Black students, often stigmatized in academics, displayed drops in their sense of belonging and potential. In another study, Nunn (2021) explored how first-generation students and students of color have distinct experiences related to belonging and the structural barriers that influence sense of belonging. Mahar et al. (2013) explored belonging related to the evaluation of community-based programs for people with disabilities, as belonging is a core dimension of social inclusion of persons with disabilities. These findings, among other reasons, are why researchers from many disciplines have focused their attention on belonging.

Belonging literature is broad and theoretically dispersed, as it is approached from many different disciplines and perspectives (Allen et al., 2021; Mahar et al., 2013). Allen et al. (2021), Mahar et al. (2013), and Strayhorn (2019) are a handful of the researchers who have engaged in systematic studies to document and synthesize the vast array of research on belonging. As noted by Allen et al. (2021), though “there is general agreement that belonging is a fundamental human need...there is less agreement about the belonging construct itself, how belonging should be measured, and what people can do to satisfy the need for belonging” (p. 2). There are multiple and varied definitions, as noted by Mahar et al. (2013) who completed a narrative study of peer-reviewed publications utilizing the search term “sense of belonging” and found over 20

definitions of belonging, which makes articulating and understanding this phenomenon succinctly a challenge. Through their work with this literature review, the authors proposed a definition of belonging as a subjective feeling of value and respect derived from reciprocal relationships built on shared experiences, beliefs, or characteristics (Mahar et al., 2013, p. 1031). Additionally, Mahar et al. (2013) identified five intersecting themes central to the concept of belonging, as shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1. Conceptualizing Belonging

Theme	Description
Subjectivity	Belonging is a perception unique to the individual, centering on feelings of value, respect, and fit. It is crucial to capture an individual's perceptions separately from their formal, objective membership or physical participation with an external entity such as a group.
Groundedness to an External Referent	A sense of belonging requires an external referent to which an individual feels connected. This referent serves to anchor the subjective feeling of belonging, whether it be a community, a group, or an institution. This theme underscores the importance of specifying the context or referent group to measure belonging accurately.
Reciprocity	Belonging involves a sense of relatedness or connectedness shared between the individual and the external referent. Shared experiences, understandings, and beliefs play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging beyond mere physical or intellectual characteristics.
Dynamism	Belonging is a dynamic phenomenon influenced by both physical and social environments, which can either hinder or promote a sense of belonging. This theme highlights the fluid nature of belonging, recognizing that it can change based on various personal and environmental factors.
Self-Determination	This theme respects the individual's right to choose their interactions and the perceived power in those interactions. The ability to feel a sense of belonging and decide whether to belong is influenced by factors like choice and power dynamics. Systemic barriers, such as discrimination, can impact this sense of self-determination and, consequently, belonging.

These themes highlight the multifaceted nature of belonging, recognizing it as a subjective feeling of value and respect that arises from reciprocal relationships with external referents, such

as communities or social groups. In other words, belonging is not static but is dynamically influenced by personal and environmental factors, making it a complex and evolving phenomenon. As such, “a transdisciplinary, multidimensional understanding of sense of belonging is still needed” (Mahar et al., 2013). The pervasive nature of belonging also heightens the importance of developing a deeper understanding of the conditions that foster it.

In other studies, belonging has been defined and understood as a subjective feeling that one is an integral part of their surrounding systems, including family, friends, school, work environments, communities, cultural groups, and physical places (Hagerty et al., 1992). While it exists as a subjective feeling within each individual, it can only be experienced through our social world, and one’s sense of belonging can only be accelerated or impeded by the dynamic interactions with people, things, and experiences of our social world (Allen et al., 2021). Furthermore, though belonging is a universal human need, and we all have a need for belonging ourselves, Baumeister and Leary (1995) contended that we are deeply conditioned to provide a sense of belonging to others, hence the reciprocal nature.

Belonging is fluid, malleable, and complex and must be met continually and changes with many circumstances. It is a latent or hidden variable located in one’s subconscious feelings and thoughts (Strayhorn, 2019). Compared to expressed needs, which are conscious and present, latent variables are challenging to capture, measure, track, or trend. Common research methods, such as surveys and interviews, are generally unsuccessful at capturing latent needs because the individual is often unaware of their particular need (Strayhorn, 2019). Additionally, while sense of belonging can be associated with people, it can also be connected to places, memories, objects, experiences, events, animals, and more (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Malone et al., 2012). Belonging literature also differentiates between state (i.e., situation-specific senses of

belonging) and trait (i.e., belonging as a core psychological need) belonging, making the phenomenon more complicated to define and measure (Allen et al., 2021). This explains why most belonging research has focused on trying to better understand and define belonging, rather than on practices for cultivating belonging.

Many different instruments have been utilized to assess belonging, yet there is not an agreed-upon measure. Most belonging measures are unidimensional, subjective, and static, representing a snapshot of a person's perception at the time of administration (Allen et al., 2021, p. 5). Examples of the most frequently cited scales for belonging are displayed in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2. Scales Measuring Belonging

Scale	Description	Type
Sense of Belonging Instrument, Psychological Experiences (SOBI-P), Hagerty & Patusky, 1995	Measures the psychological experiences of belonging, including feelings of being valued and fitting in.	Quantitative
Sense of Belonging Instrument - Antecedents (SOBI-A), Hagerty & Patusky, 1995	Assesses the antecedents to a sense of belonging, such as supportive relationships and personal involvement.	Quantitative
Social Connectedness and Social Assurance Scales, Lee & Robins, 1995	Combines and evaluates measures of social connectedness and assurance, emphasizing both connection and confidence in social interactions.	Quantitative
UCLA Loneliness Scale, 1996	Assesses subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation, which is related to belonging but focuses more on the absence of social connection.	Quantitative
Need to Belong Scale, Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2006	Measures the inherent need to belong, providing insight into the drive for social acceptance rather than the experience of belonging itself.	Quantitative
Global Measure of Belongingness Scale, Malone, Pillow & Osman, 2011	Evaluates overall sense of belongingness in various contexts. Offers a broad assessment of	Quantitative

	belongingness across various contexts, making it versatile but less specific.	
Sense of Belonging Scale, Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow & Salomone, 2002-2003	Specifically designed for educational settings, providing detailed insights into students' sense of belonging in schools.	Quantitative
Sense of Belonging at Imperial College London Scale, Gehlbach & Brinkworth, 2011	Assesses students' sense of belonging specifically at Imperial College London, making it highly specific but less generalizable to other contexts.	Quantitative

These scales, as well as others used to measure sense of belonging in research, can provide valuable quantitative data that can highlight individuals' feelings of connection, value, and inclusion within a group or community. They offer a structured approach to assessing belonging, facilitating comparisons across different populations and contexts. However, their use also presents limitations. Quantitative scales may oversimplify the complex, dynamic, and subjective nature of belonging, potentially missing nuanced aspects of individual experiences. Additionally, these scales might not fully capture the fluid and context-dependent characteristics of belonging, leading to incomplete or skewed results. Therefore, while useful, these scales should be complemented with qualitative methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sense of belonging.

Multiple studies on belonging have concluded with the recommendation that more work is needed to identify strategies that can increase people's sense of belonging at the individual and collective levels (Allen et al., 2021). One study utilizing narrative inquiry through focus groups found the need for future research to uphold belonging as "elusive" as to fully represent the dynamic complexity (Flint, 2018). Sense of belonging is an inherent aspect of being human, and it can change in different contexts and over time, making the phenomenon a moving target (Lu,

2023). Therefore, research on belonging is complex and contextual, making the phenomenon seem obscure and difficult to articulate.

Many contexts for belonging research have included educational settings. Belonging takes on importance in educational settings because of the increased importance of belonging in adolescence. Adolescence and the transition into early adulthood mark significant developmental stages of social identity, psychosocial adjustment, coping, and resiliency, as this is a period when young people rely less on their familial ties for social support (Allen, 2020; Nunn, 2021). Because of the heightened importance of belonging throughout adolescence, much of the research on belonging has involved students in school settings and how the structure of the school system can provide significant opportunities for belonging (Allen, 2020). However, most of this research has been on *individual* students' sense of belonging in educational settings (Strayhorn, 2019), leaving gaps in understanding how belonging can be fostered or developed among students. Currently, only one nationally representative data set measured students' belonging in college using a single item (Gopalan & Brady, 2020), demonstrating yet another challenge in understanding college student belonging.

Educational settings like colleges and universities are actively seeking strategies and actions to enhance belonging among students (Lu, 2023). Belonging is part of a motivational framework, and a high sense of belonging can engender positive outcomes such as academic motivation, high self-esteem, and positive mental health. In contrast, low belonging can result in students acting in ways that work against their belonging, potentially engaging in detrimental behaviors, and having increased risks for dropping out and poor academic performance (Allen, 2020). However, Flint (2018) argued that "belonging (and higher education contexts) are not static states and sites that can be manipulated through factors and checking boxes of best

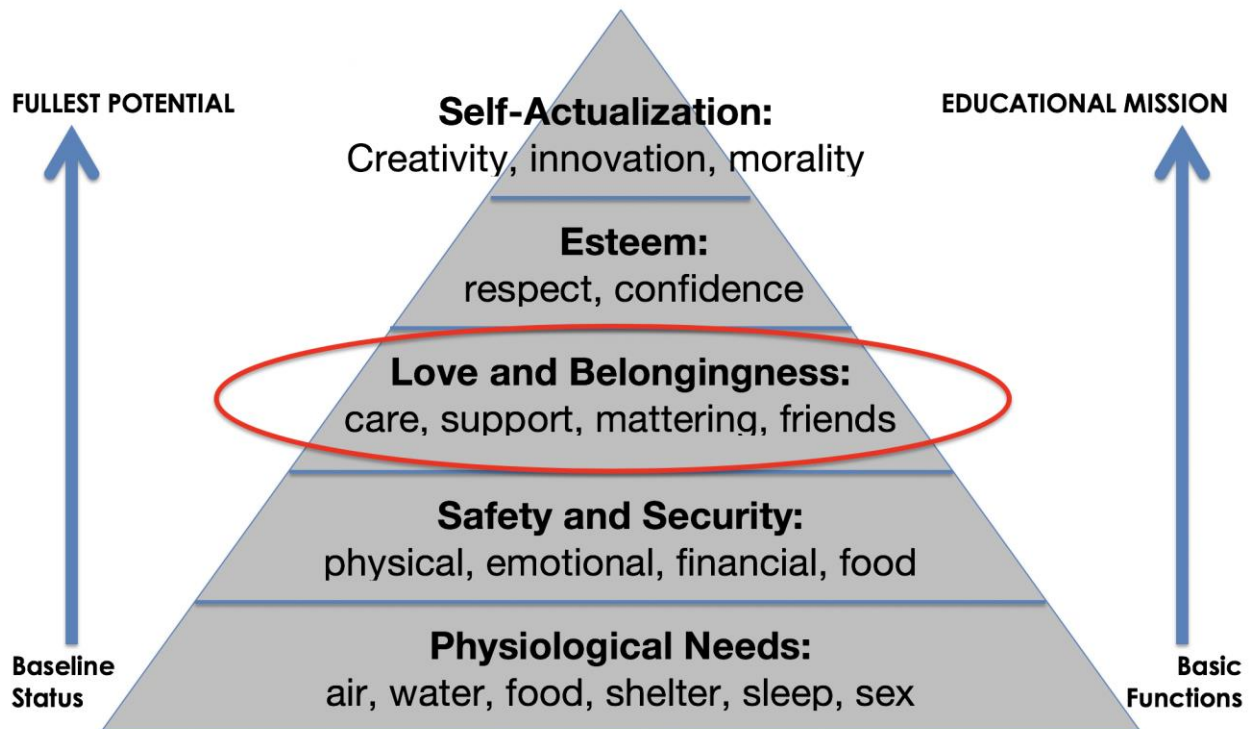
practices, but rather are a messy and complicated series of relations, flows intensities, and becomings” (p. 228). The transition to college creates significant social, cultural, and academic shifts, thus escalating the importance of belonging in the university experience (Meehan & Howells, 2018). Higher education professionals must consider belonging as a key ingredient to college student success—as well as overall wellbeing—and understand ways to foster belonging within environments. For the purposes of this dissertation, the focus was on college students’ sense of belonging, situated within the larger field of belonging literature.

College Students’ Sense of Belonging (or Sense of Belonging at College)

While belonging is an essential need for all humans, it has been documented that the college student experience signifies an elevated importance for belonging (Nunn, 2021; Strayhorn, 2019). Building from work by Maslow (1962), Strayhorn (2019) asserted that “a college student’s need for belonging must be satisfied before any other higher-order needs such as knowledge and self-actualization” (p. 31). Thus, in the context of higher education, one cannot acquire knowledge or attain proficiency without having a sense of belonging to the learning space. Strayhorn (2019) contended, “To excel, students must feel a sense of belonging in schools or colleges, and therefore educators must work to create conditions that foster belongingness among all students” (p. 17). Maslow’s hierarchy organizes human needs into a pyramid, starting with (a) basic biological and physiological needs, like food and water; followed by (b) safety needs, such as protection; then (c) love and belongingness, including friendships and intimacy; (d) esteem needs, like achievement; and finally, (e) self-actualization, involving personal growth and fulfillment. Strayhorn (2012) simplified Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs by integrating it with aspects of belongingness theory.

Strayhorn (2009) applied Maslow's (1954) hierarchical framework to college students, emphasizing the critical role of belongingness. His model (see Figure 2.1) aligned with Maslow's, suggesting that students must address each level of need to advance.

Figure 2.1. Strayhorn's (2019) Revised Model of College Students' Sense of Belonging



For instance, just as hunger directs attention to eating, students lacking a sense of belonging prioritize this need over higher-level needs such as esteem or self-actualization. Strayhorn (2009) argued that unmet belonging needs can lead to emotional withdrawal or dropping out of college. He asserted that lacking social integration or belonging affects both persistence and commitment to college, and a deficiency in belonging may lead to more severe outcomes like depression and withdrawal. Conversely, a strong sense of belonging can enhance involvement, happiness, and achievement. Strayhorn (2009) referenced Hausmann et al. (2007), whose research supported the idea that a strong sense of belonging correlates with increased college persistence. This

correlation underscores the critical importance of belonging, with significant implications if this need remains unfulfilled.

In addition to this model, Strayhorn (2019) provided a comprehensive review of existing literature on college students' sense of belonging to help readers understand the multifaceted nature of belonging and why it plays such a crucial role in fostering educational and personal success for all students. Strayhorn's (2019) review was organized into the following categories:

1. **Belongingness as a Concept:** Strayhorn (2019) described belongingness as a fundamental human need that significantly influences students' experiences and success in college. It encompasses students' feelings of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others on campus, such as peers, faculty, and staff. This concept is crucial because it affects students' motivation, engagement, and overall satisfaction with their college experience.
2. **Circumstances that Promote or Thwart Belonging:** Various factors can either foster or hinder a sense of belonging among college students. Positive interactions with peers, supportive relationships with faculty, involvement in campus activities, and a welcoming campus climate promote belonging. Conversely, experiences of discrimination, isolation, and lack of support can thwart students' sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2019) emphasized the importance of creating inclusive environments where all students feel they belong, regardless of their social identities or backgrounds.
3. **The Relation Between Belonging and Other Outcomes or Behaviors:** A strong sense of belonging is positively correlated with numerous beneficial outcomes, such as higher academic achievement, increased retention rates, and better mental health. Students who feel they belong are more likely to engage actively in their academic and social

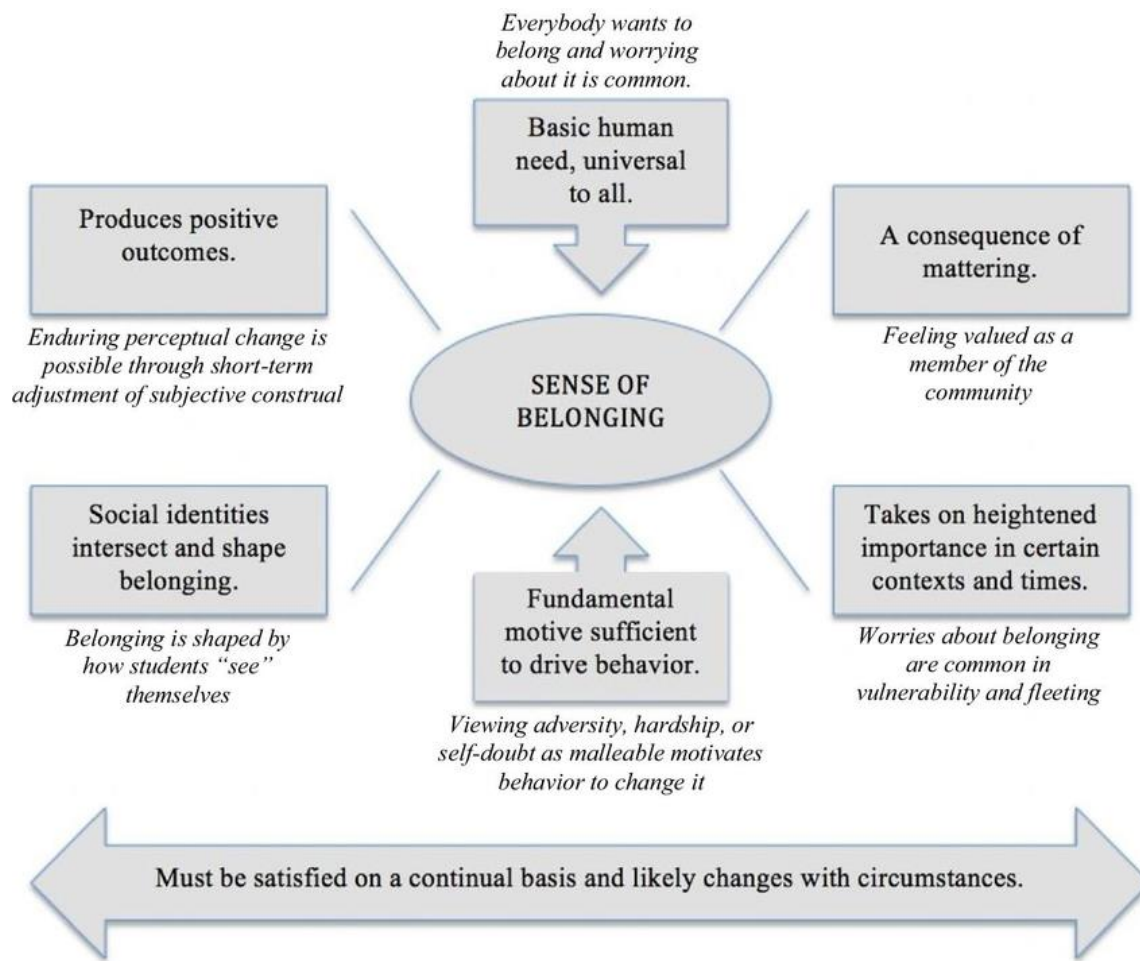
environments, leading to greater overall success. On the other hand, a lack of belonging can lead to negative consequences like academic disengagement, lower grades, and higher dropout rates.

This analysis situated belonging within the college environment where Strayhorn (2009) then provided a conceptual model for understanding the phenomenon of belonging among people, specifically college students. According to Strayhorn (2019), sense of belonging has seven core elements:

1. Sense of belonging is a basic human need.
2. Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive that is sufficient to drive human behavior.
3. Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance (a) in certain contexts, such as being a newcomer to an otherwise established group; (b) at certain times, such as (late) adolescence when individuals begin to consider who they are (or wish to be), with whom they belong, and where they intend to invest their time and energies in the future; and (c) among certain populations, especially those who are marginalized or inclined to feel excluded, invisible, irrelevant, or “left out” in said context.
4. Sense of belonging is related to and seemingly a consequence of mattering.
5. Social identities intersect and affect college students’ sense of belonging.
6. Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes.
7. Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change. (pp. 161-162)

Understanding these core elements of belonging further emphasizes the importance and complexity of the role of sense of belonging on college students. Figure 2.2 presents these core elements.

Figure 2.2. Strayhorn's (2019) Framework of College Student Sense of Belonging



Most empirical studies on college student belonging have addressed one or more of these core components. Recognizing that belonging is fluid, contextual, related to identity, and has affective and cognitive impacts can help us consider how belonging can be co-created. Current scholarship on college students' sense of belonging has offered important data on defining and describing belonging by aligning with one or more of Strayhorn's (2019) elements. Research has demonstrated how belonging affects students' experiences, such as academic success, wellbeing,

and graduation (Nunn, 2021). For example, studies have been conducted to explore how students with minoritized identities (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, sexuality and gender expression, and first-generation) experience belonging (e.g., Esquivel, 2010; Strayhorn et al., 2015; Trawalter et al., 2021). Others illustrated how students from minority groups often face challenges in feeling connected and supported (Allen et al., 2024). These examples aligned with the fifth core element of Strayhorn's (2019) framework, recognizing the influence of social identities on sense of belonging. Other elements, like the potential of belonging to engender other positive outcomes, have guided studies that have demonstrated how sense of belonging correlates with persistence to graduation (e.g., Green, 2020; Museus et al., 2018). While these seven elements can help better contextualize the concept of belonging, limited research has been conducted on the ways in which belonging can be proactively created among college students.

In addition to better understanding core components of belonging, Nunn (2021) identified three distinct realms wherein college students experience belonging: academic belonging, social belonging, and campus-community belonging. *Academic belonging* refers to the feeling of being an accepted member of the academic community of your campus. *Social belonging* takes the form of friendships and membership in organizations or clubs. *Campus-community belonging* is feeling comfortable as you are within the culture of the campus community. Using a comparative study of students' experiences at a public and private university, Nunn (2021) systematically compared first-generation and continuing-generation college students within each campus context. There were significant differences among the three realms of belonging, and this study shed light on how existing scholarship does not differentiate between these areas (Nunn, 2021).

Nunn (2021) based her research on sociologist Durkheim's (1858-1917) understanding of how communities work and that "belonging is something that communities provide for

individuals; it is not something that individuals can garner for themselves” (p. 6). In alignment with social constructionism, feelings of belonging are not, and cannot be, achieved through the individual lens. Thus, if universities want to generate a sense of belonging among their students, a community approach is required. Strayhorn (2022) explained, “indeed, the absence of belonging is a structural problem, not an individual flaw, deficit, or deficiency—it simply exposes that there isn’t an ecosystem in place to ensure this basic need is met for all students” (p. 54). By further exploring how belonging can be co-created among people, scholars can address some of these gaps.

Additionally, creating communities of belonging has been found to provide a more equitable environment where all are valued and have opportunities for wellbeing and success. In a nationally representative sample, students of color and first-generation students at 4-year schools consistently reported a lower sense of belonging than their peers (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Because belonging is an important factor that underscores the college student experience, further examining how students and faculty can co-create belonging focuses practices to address issues of marginalization, exclusion, and alienation. In this regard, it is imperative that those in higher education consider the practices of creating belonging on campus a top priority.

Belonging Interventions

Because sense of belonging is a crucial factor in students' academic success and overall wellbeing, colleges and universities have created targeted belonging interventions aimed at enhancing students' feelings of inclusion, support, and connectedness to their academic institution, peers, and the wider community. The following interventions represent current research on interventions designed to improve college students' sense of belonging.

1. **Social Support Interventions.** One common intervention is social support. Social support interventions aim to connect students with peers, mentors, or staff members who can provide support and guidance. A meta-analysis by Yeager and Walton (2011) found that social support interventions have a small but significant positive effect on sense of belonging, with the effect being stronger for first-generation and underrepresented minority students. A study by Strayhorn et al. (2015) found that a mentoring program for African American students improved sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy.
2. **Peer Interventions.** Peer interventions can also be effective in promoting a sense of belonging. Peer interventions involve training students to provide support and guidance to their peers as they can provide students with valuable information, social support, and role modeling, all of which contribute to increased feelings of belonging. For example, a study by Hurtado & Carter (1997) found that a peer-led intervention focused on building community and providing academic support improved sense of belonging among first-year Latino students. Similarly, a study by Allen et al. (2016) found that a faculty mentoring program improved sense of belonging among underrepresented minority students. Other peer intervention programs can include campus guide programs and activities that allow students opportunities to connect with other students and ask questions (Strayhorn, 2019).
3. **Classroom Interventions.** Inclusive classroom practices aim to create a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment that can foster a sense of belonging. These interventions may include creating opportunities for students to share their experiences and perspectives, promoting group work, and encouraging faculty to use inclusive language. A meta-analysis by Yeager and Walton (2011) found that classroom interventions can

have a significant impact on students' sense of belonging and academic outcomes. A study by Abdullah (2022) shares five principles of classroom management that can increase a students' sense of belonging, especially those from diverse backgrounds. Drawing upon Wenger's social theory of learning, Masika and Jones (2016) found that students developed a sense of belonging and confidence through participation in group activities, online communication, and reflective practices facilitated by a learning management system. They suggested that higher education institutions should focus on creating supportive learning environments through communities of practice that encourage interaction, collaboration, and mutual support among students. Additional practices involve faculty training, course redesign, and the use of inclusive pedagogy.

4. **Diversity Education Interventions.** Diversity education programs typically promote intercultural awareness and understanding. These programs might involve workshops, seminars, and dialogue sessions and can serve as an intervention to increase sense of belonging among students. For example, a study by Owusu-Agyeman (2021) found that a diversity education program improved sense of belonging among students. Scholars have documented that students' sense of belonging is greater when they socialize and engage with peers from different backgrounds (Strayhorn, 2019), so facilitating opportunities for intercultural interaction is also an intervention toward belonging.
5. **Technology-Based Interventions.** Technology-based interventions can also be effective in promoting a sense of belonging. These interventions often involve the use of online platforms to facilitate peer support and engagement. For example, a study by Strayhorn (2021) Wang found that an online short video intervention increased sense of belonging among first-year students. Social media platforms and online discussion boards can be

used to create virtual communities where students can connect and support each other, and normalize the transition to college. Another study by Walton et al. (2023) investigated 26,911 students at 22 institutions who completed a brief, online intervention before college that included reading and reflecting on stories on belonging. The intervention significantly increased the rate at which students completed their first year as full-time students, particularly effective for groups with historically lower progression rates.

6. **Psychological Perception Interventions.** Offering reassurance to students with marginalized identities about belonging and succeeding in college can improve their academic performance and sense of belonging. A study by Walton and Cohen (2011) integrated a social-belonging intervention through online modules and writing assignments focused on helping Black students internalize the idea that their struggles are normal and that they belong in college. Students who received the intervention reported higher GPA's than those who did not receive it. This study also highlighted the importance of recognizing and addressing unique challenges faced by Black students (and students with other historically marginalized identities) in higher education.

From the examples highlighted above, some interventions have focused on creating a sense of belonging for specific student populations. For example, interventions were designed specifically for first-generation students, students of color, or LGBTQ+ students. These interventions might involve creating affinity groups, providing targeted mentoring or counseling services, or offering identity-specific programming. A study by Hurtado & Carter (1997) found that interventions targeted at first-generation students had a significant impact on their sense of

belonging and academic outcomes. However, most intervention studies have treated belonging as a secondary outcome, not the primary source (Allen et al., 2021).

Overall, interventions aimed at promoting undergraduate college students' sense of belonging can be effective. Social support interventions, peer interventions, classroom interventions, diversity education interventions, technology-based interventions, psychological perception interventions, and targeted interventions for specific student populations have all been found to be effective. However, these practices have not focused on intentionally designing the social interaction of belonging among students with one another. While institutions of higher education should consider implementing these interventions to create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment for all students, more can be done to foster belonging among students.

Conceptualizations of Belonging

In addition to interventions focused to increase belonging, a number of scholars have provided different models or conceptualizations of belonging. These frameworks help readers consider the elements and contexts needed to support belonging.

Competencies, Opportunities, Motivations, and Perceptions. Allen and colleagues (2021) explored the concept of belonging, emphasizing its fundamental importance to human health and wellbeing. The authors argued that belonging is not only a core psychological need but also a dynamic construct that evolves within a social context. They highlighted the complexity of belonging, noting that it encompasses subjective feelings of connection with social groups, places, and experiences. The review presented an integrative framework for understanding belonging, which included four interrelated components, (1) competencies, (2) opportunities, (3) motivations, and (4) perceptions.

The review discussed how these four components interact dynamically to foster a sense of belonging, with each playing a crucial role in the process. For instance, competencies refer to the skills needed to connect with others, opportunities involve the availability of social interactions, motivations relate to the desire to belong, and perceptions are the subjective feelings about one's experiences. The authors emphasized that belonging is not a static state but a fluid and emergent construct that can change depending on various factors, including social and environmental contexts. Additionally, the review underscored the importance of belonging for mental and physical health, citing evidence that a strong sense of belonging is associated with numerous positive outcomes such as better social relationships, academic achievement, and overall wellbeing. Conversely, a lack of belonging is linked to negative consequences, including mental health issues and reduced life satisfaction. The authors called for more research to develop effective interventions that can enhance belonging. They also suggested that future studies focus on understanding how belonging emerges from the interplay of its core components and the contexts in which individuals live.

Connectedness, Feeling Safe, Being Valued and Accepted, and Diversity and Inclusion. A systematic review by Allen et al. (2024) explored the concept of belonging in higher education over the past twenty years. The study identified the key definitions, determinants, and implications of nurturing a sense of belonging among university students. Using a comprehensive search strategy, the authors selected 33 articles from the Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice for detailed review. The analysis revealed four main themes of belonging: connectedness, safety, being valued, and embracing diversity.

Findings from the systematic review indicated that belonging in higher education is multifaceted and involves several key aspects. First, connectedness is essential, as it

encompasses students' relationships with their peers, staff, and the institution. Quality relationships are crucial for fostering a sense of belonging. Secondly, students need to feel safe, at home, and part of the university community, with emotional safety being a key component. Thirdly, students must feel valued and accepted for their authentic selves, which involves recognizing and appreciating their unique strengths and weaknesses. Finally, diversity and inclusion are vital, as belonging requires an environment that values diversity and implements policies and practices supporting inclusivity (Allen et al., 2024).

The determinants, or factors, of belonging identified across the selected studies that influenced a student's sense of belonging in higher education connected across four themes: (1) institution-wide approaches; (2) creation and maintenance of inclusive environments; (3) educator practices; and (4) quality relationships with educators and peers. Allen et al. (2024) also highlighted five overarching themes related to strategies for fostering belonging in higher education. Those strategies include: (1) strategies targeting multiple system levels (at the macro and micro levels); (2) building relationships; (3) effective educator practices and pedagogies; (4) utilizing technology effectively; and (5) creating inclusive environments that value diversity. These themes highlight the importance of institutions understanding and implementing practices that address the determinants and strategies that support belonging among college students.

Overall, this study reinforced how belonging positively impacts academic outcomes. Belonging it is linked to improved academic engagement, motivation, and persistence, and it also benefits students' mental health and overall wellbeing (Allen et al., 2024). The factors and strategies provide opportunities for institutions to focus on, and a basis for further research.

The Structure of Belonging. Block's (2008) book delved into the dynamics of building and sustaining vibrant communities through a transformative lens. Overall, Block's (2008)

insights provided a roadmap for individuals, organizations, and institutions to foster empowered communities that prioritize human connection, cooperation, and collective wellbeing by “putting the capacity to do this in the hands of citizens” (p. xvi). He described the value of social capital, which is “acting on and valuing our interdependence and sense of belonging” (Block, 2008, p. 7). His approach underscored the importance of creating environments where belongingness flourishes through shared purpose and mutual support. Block (2008) focused on creating a framework, “The Alchemy of Belonging,” that anyone can engage with at any time to create a sense of belonging within communities. This framework emphasizes six key areas:

1. **Leadership is Convening.** Leadership is redefined as the act of bringing people together. Leaders are seen as conveners who create spaces for meaningful dialogue and connection rather than merely directing or controlling outcomes. This approach shifts the focus from traditional hierarchical structures to fostering collaboration and engagement.
2. **The Small Group is the Unit of Transformation.** Block (2008) emphasized that transformation occurs most effectively within small groups. These intimate settings allow for deeper connections, mutual support, and more authentic conversations. Small groups become the foundational units where change and growth can take place, fostering a sense of belonging and community.
3. **Questions are More Transforming than Answers.** The book highlighted the power of asking the right questions. Transformative change arises from engaging with thoughtful, open-ended questions that provoke reflection and dialogue. This approach values inquiry over providing solutions, encouraging individuals to explore possibilities and co-create their realities. The focus on “community as conversation” (Block, 2008, p. 56) invites a

shift from conversations about problems to one of possibilities, as well as from a focus on those with titles to all citizens as responsible for community.

4. **Six Conversations Materialize Belonging.** Block (2008) identified six crucial conversations that help materialize a sense of belonging:

- a. Invitation: Inviting others into a shared space and purpose.
- b. Possibility: Exploring what can be created together.
- c. Ownership: Taking responsibility for the collective outcome.
- d. Dissent: Allowing space for differing opinions and constructive criticism.
- e. Commitment: Making promises to each other and the community.
- f. Gifts: Recognizing and sharing individual talents and contributions.

5. **Hospitality, the Welcoming of Strangers, is Central.** Hospitality was viewed as a central element in building community. By welcoming strangers and creating an inclusive environment, communities can break down barriers and build trust. This act of hospitality fosters a sense of safety and belonging for all members.

6. **Physical and Social Space Support Belonging.** The design and arrangement of physical spaces play a crucial role in supporting social interactions and a sense of belonging. Spaces should be created to encourage engagement, connection, and accessibility. Similarly, social spaces—both formal and informal—should be cultivated to support relationships and community dynamics.

Block's (2008) methodology, "The Alchemy of Belonging," provides a comprehensive approach to fostering a sense of community by focusing on leadership, small group dynamics, the power of questions, key conversations, hospitality, and the design of supportive spaces. Overall, Block's (2008) approach to belonging emphasizes creating environments where

individuals not only feel included but also actively contribute to and shape their community's identity and direction. His framework encourages building strong social connections, fostering shared values, and promoting collaborative efforts that enhance the sense of belonging among community members.

Belonging For Privileged and Minoritized Students. Vaccaro and Newman (2016) explored how first-year college students from both privileged and minoritized backgrounds develop a sense of belonging at a predominantly White, public university. Using a constructionist grounded theory approach, the study involved 51 first-year students and identified three primary themes that shape belonging:

1. **Environmental Perceptions.** These include how students perceived their surroundings and the campus atmosphere. Privileged students often described the environment with positive terms like “friendly,” “fun,” and “comfortable.” In contrast, minoritized students highlighted the lack of diversity, feeling like the “only one”, being judged, and the need to suppress their authentic selves.
2. **Involvement.** This theme revolved around participation in extracurricular activities and campus organizations. For privileged students, involvement was linked to having fun and feeling a sense of accomplishment. Minoritized students, however, needed involvement opportunities where they could be their authentic selves and make genuine connections.
3. **Relationships.** Relationships played a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging. Privileged students valued friendly, familiar, and task-related supportive relationships. Minoritized students sought deeper, authentic relationships where they could be their true selves without judgment.

The research from this study revealed significant differences in how students from privileged and minoritized social identity groups defined and experienced these themes.

Privileged students often described belonging in terms of feeling comfortable and fitting in, with positive environmental descriptors like friendliness and fun. Their sense of belonging was frequently tied to casual social interactions and task-related support. In contrast, minoritized students emphasized the importance of safety and respect, highlighting feelings of being the “only one” in a predominantly White environment and the need for deeper, authentic relationships. For minoritized students, belonging was closely linked to being able to express their true selves and forming connections in environments that valued their authentic identities.

Vaccaro and Newman’s (2016) study contributed to the belonging literature by presenting an emergent model that illustrates these nuanced differences in the development of belonging. It underscored the importance of recognizing diverse experiences and needs in fostering a sense of belonging among college students. The findings suggested that strategies to enhance belonging should be tailored to address the unique challenges faced by minoritized students, promoting environments where they can feel safe, respected, and authentically connected.

In summary, belonging has been recognized as a fundamental human need that influences various aspects of life, including mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioral outcomes. It involves connecting with people, places, and things, enhancing overall quality of life. Belonging also takes on additional importance at specific times, such as in adolescence, and in specific environments, such as education. The literature on belonging is extensive and diverse, with researchers offering numerous definitions and exploring different dimensions of the concept. This summary emphasizes that belonging is a complex phenomenon influenced by personal and

environmental factors, requiring a transdisciplinary and multidimensional approach to understand and foster it effectively.

Appreciative Inquiry

I selected appreciative inquiry (AI) as a theoretical framework and as the methodology for this research study. Reed (2007) describes AI as:

A simple but radical approach to understanding the social world. Put simply, AI concentrates on exploring ideas that people have about what is valuable in what they do and then tries to work out ways in which this can be built on – the emphasis is firmly on appreciating the activities and responses of people, rather than concentrating on their problems. (p. 2)

As such, AI can be described as a method, a philosophy, and an approach depending on how and where it is used (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). Scholars support that AI is not simply a technique but also a form of action grounded in philosophical and theoretical tenets. Reed (2007) shared that AI “can be both a means for generating new knowledge and understanding while transforming entire communities, organizations, and individuals” (p. viii). AI works well to explore complex and multifaceted phenomena and is an aligned approach for fields focused on social relationships and human interaction because of the fluid and collaborative approach (Reed, 2007). Designed as a process for change leadership, it is a cooperative, coevolutionary organizational methodology searching for the best in people and their systems (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2008). Because qualitative research is utilized to discover and understand the meanings that individuals or groups assign to social or human issues, AI is an aligned approach to utilize in such studies.

In their original articulation about AI, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) wrote:

In contrast to a type of research that is lived without a sense of mystery, the appreciative mode awakens the desire to create and discover new social possibilities that can enrich our existence and give it meaning. In this sense, appreciative inquiry seeks an imaginative and fresh perception of organizations as ‘ordinary magic’ as if seen for the first time ... an inquiry that takes nothing for granted, searching to apprehend the basis of organizational life and working to articulate those possibilities giving witness to a better existence. (p. 47)

AI is a type of action research that aligns with scientific standards in generative-theoretical terms. Beyond the focus on knowledge, it is rooted in a metaphysical belief that social existence is a profound mystery that cannot be entirely understood (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Thus, in this research, AI served as a theoretical framework and methodology for exploring factors and conditions that co-create belonging among people by inviting participants to explore possibilities that would intentionally co-create belonging.

The Philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry

Reed (2007) shared three foundational concepts of AI: inclusivity, collaboration, and a focus on building on the positive. AI aligns with social constructionism because it focuses attention on social worlds and realities that are created by people through conversation and interaction. Social constructionist research deeply explores unconscious knowledge, focusing attention on the social processes through language practices (Reed, 2007). AI is not simply a research technique, though, because it is also a form of practice where the collaborative nature of AI asks participants to share and develop ideas together, which can have a powerful impact on how people act. It is a collective activity where people share and develop ideas, and the co-construction has a powerful impact on how people behave. Reed (2007) explained, “people can

tell different stories about the past, present, and future, and the way these stories have the power to shape and reflect the way people think and act” (p. 26). AI is strengths-based, therefore creating a sense of possibilities with participants, rather than limitations, as they co-construct a narrative on the future.

Several principles of AI have been developed to describe and ground the process and purpose. Cooperrider et al. (2008) proposed the first five: (a) the constructionist principle, (b) the simultaneity principle, (c) the poetic principle, (d) the anticipatory principle, and (e) the positive principle. Three additional principles were later added by Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010): (f) the wholeness principle, (g) the enactment principle, and (h) the free-choice principle. Further information is shown in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3. Appreciative Inquiry Principles

AI Principle	Definition
The constructionist principle	Reality is socially created through language and discourse. Therefore, it is a subjective rather than objective state.
The simultaneity principle	Inquiry is an intervention to create change. The questions asked are important for creating the future possibilities.
The poetic principle	A group or organization’s story is constantly being co-authored; there are endless interpretative possibilities to create the future.
The anticipatory principle	Human systems move in the direction of their imagined futures. Positive images of the future lead to positive actions.
The positive principle	Momentum and long-lasting change are generated through positive questions that amplify the positive core.
The wholeness principle	Bringing groups together stimulates creativity and builds collective capacity.
The enactment principle	Positive change is created when change is a living model of the ideal future.

The free-choice principle	Free choice stimulates positive change, commitment, and better performance.
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These principles of AI provide a foundational framework for operationalizing this “simple but radical approach to understanding the social world” (Reed, 2007, p. 2).

The constructionist principle asserts that reality is shaped through language and discourse, emphasizing subjectivity over objectivity. The simultaneity principle views inquiry as a form of intervention that can catalyze change by posing questions that envision future possibilities. The poetic principle suggests that organizations continually co-author their narratives, offering diverse interpretations to shape their future. The anticipatory principle posits that human systems move toward their envisioned futures, emphasizing the power of positive images to inspire constructive actions. The positive principle underscores the transformative potential of inquiries centered on strengths and positive potentials. Additionally, the wholeness principle advocates for inclusivity to enhance creativity and collective capability. The enactment principle highlights the importance of embodying ideal future models to drive positive change, while the free-choice principle encourages autonomy and commitment in fostering improved performance. Incorporating these principles in qualitative research can deepen understanding, foster collaboration, and promote sustainable positive outcomes within communities and organizations alike. Furthermore, these principles work to collaboratively engage participants in building on a positive core, which can help break through new ways of thinking and doing, in which systems grow in the direction of their words (Cooperrider, 2013).

The History of Appreciative Inquiry

AI emerged in the late 1980s as an iteration of the action research approach to organizational development (Cooperrider & Srivasa, 1987). Cooperrider was completing a PhD

study on organizational dynamics/development (completed in 1986). During his research conducting organizational diagnostics of Cleveland Clinic to learn what was wrong with how the organization was operating, he was intrigued by the level of teamwork, innovation, and collaboration within certain parts of the medical facility. He adjusted his research to focus on the causes of such excellence (Mohr & Watkins, 2002). Rather than inviting people to focus on problem-solving, he engaged in an approach that focused on the positive and potential (Reed, 2007). He interviewed a number of doctors and found that by asking questions that invited them to describe and discuss aspects of their work they valued, people were more likely to speak in unrestricted ways. This caused a powerful and creative shift in the organization (Mohr & Watkins, 2002).

The basic idea was to ask questions that were appreciative, and through his study he developed the outline and process of AI. Cooperrider looked at parallel studies wherein focusing on the good resulted in better results (e.g., placebos that increased healthy feelings; teachers who were told descriptors of their students [able, averagely able, not very able] and their scores matched with their statements; “learned helplessness” where people learned they were unable to change their situation and became apathetic and hopeless). Overall, “asking positive questions facilitated positive behavior” (Reed, 2007, p. 24). This served as the foundation for how AI work began, and several high-profile development projects in the early 1990s utilized this approach. Interest spread, and people found AI not just as a set of techniques for change but also as “a philosophy and orientation to change that can fundamentally reshape the practice of organizational learning, design and development” (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. 21). Thus, though originally connected to the field of organizational development, AI has evolved into many uses, including as a research methodology. In the years that followed the vision for AI as a generative

theoretical approach to knowledge, many people and organizations engaged in new practices and tools for utilizing AI throughout the world (Cooperrider, 2013).

The Appreciative Inquiry Process

Traditionally, there are four cycles that participants engage in to explore AI, known as the 4-D Cycle. The stages include (Cooperrider et al., 2008; Reed, 2007):

- **Discovery:** Appreciating What Gives Life. This stage involves a quest to understand the organization and identify what energizes and sustains it. Group members interview each other around the central topic, gathering insights that serve as the foundation for the subsequent cycles.
- **Dreaming:** Envisioning What Might Be. In this stage, participants collaborate to develop ideas about what the future could look like. It requires creative and unrestricted thinking, encouraging participants to think big and imagine possibilities beyond current constraints.
- **Designing:** Determining What Will Be. Participants come together to craft concrete plans for the future. This includes creating provocative propositions—assertive statements about what the organization aspires to achieve. These propositions are shared with confidence and without caveats, intended to challenge and stretch the organization’s vision.
- **Delivery:** Planning What Will Be. This final stage focuses on action planning to bring the provocative propositions to life. Participants outline specific activities, actions, tasks, and processes necessary to realize the envisioned future.

The 4-D cycle has been adapted by organizational developers to include a fifth step at the onset of the process: define. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) subsequently modified their 4-D

cycle to include this new introductory stage in which people define the project purpose and identify the focus of the AI. This update marked the creation of the 5-D Process Model for AI. As noted by Stavros et al. (2015), the guiding question in the define phase is, “what generative topic do we want to focus on together?” (p. 119). This is an opportunity to clarify the central question or topic of the inquiry. Reed (2007) stated that identifying and articulating the focus of inquiry are critical to the cycle of AI and should reflect the following characteristics:

- a. They are affirmative or stated in the positive.
- b. They are desirable; that is, they identify the objectives that people want.
- c. They are topics that the group is genuinely curious about and wants to learn more about.
- d. They move in the direction that the group wants to go in. (pp. 29-30)

The AI process represents a cycle that can be repeated or expanded as groups and organizations continue to learn. It is not intended to be rigid or linear in its approach; rather, it is fluid and responsive to the situation and how the participants are engaging within the context (Reed, 2007). This approach will create an experience of openness and possibility to explore the concept of college student belonging.

Appreciative Inquiry’s Alignment with Research

Several authors have written about the alignment of AI with research. Griggs and Crain-Dorough (2021) explored the use of AI as a methodology for program evaluation and research. The research study applied AI to examine a partnership between a high school and a local industry. Interviews with school administrators and industry leaders revealed elements that facilitated the partnership’s success and its perceived benefits. Participants shared stories of how industry partners contributed to business administration classes, demonstrating practical skills

and mentoring students. Key findings included AI's effectiveness in building rapport with participants, encouraging open communication, and generating actionable insights. Initially surprised by the positive focus, participants soon engaged deeply, providing rich, detailed, and heartfelt responses. Griggs and Crain-Dorough (2021) described these advantages of AI:

1. **Positive Affect and Engagement:** AI helps build rapport and trust, leading to more genuine and detailed data collection. Participants feel valued and are more willing to share their stories and experiences. They also feel more willing to engage in the research process due to the envisioning of positive futures.
2. **Empowerment and Inclusivity:** AI is particularly effective in giving voice to marginalized or minoritized groups, ensuring that their perspectives and contributions are acknowledged and valued. AI creates a safe space for marginalized voices to share stories without fear of judgment, and it also amplifies voices that are often overlooked or silenced. By focusing on strengths and positive experiences, AI empowers participants to recognize their own contributions and potential, which can increase sense of agency.
3. **Generativity:** AI encourages the creation of new ideas and visions for the future, fostering transformative change. While challenges can still be discussed, the focus on co-constructing a desired future builds collective vision and values of the group.
4. **Life-Giving Properties:** By focusing on positive experiences, AI helps organizations and individuals identify and build on their strengths. Telling and sharing these stories can be catalysts for change.

In summary, AI serves as both a theoretical framework and a methodology for qualitative research by promoting a strengths-based, collaborative, and transformative approach to studying

and improving organizations. Its principles guide the research focus and inquiry process, while its structured 5-D Cycle provides a practical methodology for conducting the research and effecting positive change. Thus, as a theoretical framework, AI provides a lens through which the research is conceptualized and interpreted. The focus is on understanding phenomena through a strengths-based perspective, and the principles of AI guide the framing of research questions and data interpretation. As a methodology, AI offers a structured process (the 5-D Cycle) for conducting the research. This includes defining the focus, discovering strengths, dreaming about the ideal future, designing interventions, and implementing changes. The methodology is participatory, action-oriented, and aims to bring about positive change through the research process itself. The methodology will be described in further detail in Chapter 3.

Conclusion

In this literature review, I explored the concept of sense of belonging and how belonging takes on heightened importance throughout college. As shared previously, belonging research has focused on better understanding the construct and theoretical development of belonging as a concept and some structural interventions to support belonging in higher education settings. However, far less is known about practices and practical application of belonging in various contexts (Allen, 2020). This dissertation study sought to close the gap between theory, research, and practice by providing an asset-based approach to understanding how college students can co-create belonging as a practice of leadership. Understanding how to proactively foster belonging within a college setting will help universities cultivate this essential human need, which will in turn increase student success and wellbeing. As Strayhorn (2021) shared, “the absence of belonging is a structural problem, not an individual flaw, deficit, or deficiency. It simply exposes there isn’t an ecosystem in place to ensure this basic need is met for all students” (p. 54). Better

understanding the conditions, factors, behaviors, and practices that we can all engage in to foster and build belonging will help strengthen the social fabric of the university experience.

Chapter 3 - Research Design and Methodology

Building upon the introduction in Chapter 1 and the literature review in Chapter 2, this chapter describes the philosophical positions, methodology, and methods that defined this research. The decisions a researcher makes regarding the research paradigm informs the conceptual way to organize the research process, as it serves as a frame or set of beliefs and understandings about the social life, and ultimately a way of understanding the world (Babbie, 2008; Crotty, 1998). As discussed in the prior chapters, I situated this study within a social constructionist paradigm and engaged in a methodology that aligned with the two overarching purposes of qualitative research. According to Jones et al. (2014), these purposes are:

1. To illuminate and understand in depth the richness in the lives of human beings and the world in which we live.
2. To use new understanding for emancipating practices. (p. 11)

My methodological decisions allowed me to further discover the social phenomenon of belonging among college students and explore how to foster belonging through co-created practices. To begin, a review of the research purpose and questions are provided.

Research Purpose & Questions

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore how undergraduate students at a public, four-year land grant university describe the conditions of how belonging can be co-created among people through engagement in an appreciative inquiry (AI) process. In doing so, the research was intended to answer the following questions:

1. How can individuals within a group co-create the conditions for belonging?
 - a. How do participants describe the conditions that co-create a sense of belonging?

- b. What are the practices and conditions that contribute to the co-creation of belonging?
 - c. How do students perceive the conditions that co-create belonging based on social identities?
2. How does the appreciative inquiry process contribute to the co-creation of belonging among college students?

This research was exploratory in nature, as it aimed to discover in-depth learning about the conditions—which could include factors, practices, ways, and/or behaviors—that co-create belonging among people. This research centered on exploring the positive core of what works through an AI methodology, discussed in more detail throughout this chapter. In line with this change methodology, I also hoped that participants would feel more knowledgeable and driven to co-create belonging as a result of their experience with the process.

Philosophical Positions

This AI research design was situated within a constructionist paradigm and an interpretivist epistemology, understanding that “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, beings constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Unlike research organized within an objectivist or positivist paradigm, the learning this study aimed to capture was not a definitive reality or predictive pattern that can be generalized to an entire population. Instead, I sought to explore and understand the social phenomenon of belonging among people by utilizing an in-depth inquiry with a smaller population (Bhattacharya, 2017).

This study took on a social constructionism approach, acknowledging that reality is jointly constructed and that most of human life exists as it does due to social and interpersonal influences (Gergen & Davis, 1985). This perspective aligned with the topic of study, belonging, as belonging is a social phenomenon that can be experienced through our social world and through interactions with others (Allen et al., 2021). Additionally, AI as a methodology invited participants to explore and co-create together, focusing on “research as being a collective activity, where people share and develop ideas together” (Reed, 2007, p. x). Through the lens of social constructionism, our social reality is a function of shared meaning and is constructed, continued, and further replicated through this social life (Greenwood, 1994). Key principles of social constructionism include (a) taking a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge and (b) the understanding that our culture and social context are not universal but instead created through our shared interactions. Knowledge, therefore, is sustained by social processes, and meaning is generated through this shared context (Crotty, 1998; Reed, 2007). Because belonging is considered a latent or hidden variable and a basic human need (Strayhorn, 2019), it may be regarded as taken-for-granted knowledge that is socially constructed, warranting further study to understand its nuances.

Action Research

Action research serves as a foundational philosophical position for AI methodology within qualitative research studies (Reed, 2007). This connection is underscored by the shared goal of both action research and AI—to not only understand the world but to also enact change within it. According to Reed (2007), there is a clear link between AI, research, and change, with the connection being action research, a long-established form of inquiry that engages the researcher with the world being researched. This engagement is crucial as it positions the

researcher as an active participant in the research process, directly influencing and being influenced by the context they are studying.

Principles of action research emphasize the importance of research as an intervention, reflecting the AI principle of simultaneity as described in Chapter 2. Reed (2007) stated, “The idea of research as having an impact on action, of being an intervention in itself, is also reflected in the AI principles of simultaneity” (p. 63). The simultaneity principle in AI suggests that inquiry and change happen at the same time; merely asking questions and engaging with participants initiates transformation. This principle aligns seamlessly with the goals of action research to integrate inquiry and action to facilitate meaningful and immediate improvements in practice.

Action research has been extensively explored and developed to leverage the potential synthesis of research and change (Reed, 2007). This synthesis is essential for creating actionable knowledge that is grounded in real-world contexts and experiences. By integrating the processes of inquiry and action, action research provides a robust framework for AI to achieve its aims of fostering positive change through collaborative and participatory research methods.

In the context of this qualitative research study, utilizing action research as a philosophical underpinning for AI methodology ensured that the research was dynamic, responsive, and impactful. The iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting inherent in action research aligned seamlessly with the AI approach of discovering and amplifying strengths within a community or organization. This alignment enhanced the credibility and relevance of the research findings and ensured that the research could contribute to tangible improvements and innovations in the field of study. Thus, action research provides a

powerful and effective philosophical foundation for conducting AI within qualitative research, enabling researchers to engage deeply with their subjects and drive meaningful change.

Critical Perspectives

This study also employed a critical approach, because it aimed to “raise critical consciousness rather than merely describe social reality” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 19) by imagining a better future. Aligned with the premise of AI as a change methodology, Reed (2007) shared that “critical theories in current higher education research are...focused on challenging the dominant ideology in some way...” (p. 57), thus congruent with a focus on change. As a researcher, it is important to me that research not further perpetuate social structures of oppression (Bhattacharya, 2017). Thus a critical approach allowed this study to examine and explore ways that race, gender, age, and other identities intersected with belonging. Specifically, “critical theory, then, focuses on reexamining established ideas in a way that is independent of the power structures that perpetuate them” (Reed, 2007, p. 57). AI can serve as a process to challenge assumptions of inadequacy “by focusing on the positive achievements of people who can be regarded as powerless: the people who carry out the work of an organization” (Reed, 2007, p. 57). Participants were prompted to explore taken-for-granted understandings of organizations and systems and to recognize power structures (Reed, 2007) as they explored the conditions that co-create belong for all people.

Tierney and Rhoads (2004) shared that critical perspectives hold five premises that higher education research should adopt to engage in a critical lens:

1. Research efforts need to be tied to analyses that investigate the structures in which the study exists;
2. Knowledge is not neutral. It is contested and political;

3. Difference and conflict, rather than similarity and consensus, are used as organizing concepts;
4. Research is praxis-oriented; and
5. All researchers/authors are intimately tied to their theoretical perspectives. We are all positioned subjects. (p. 327)

A critical perspective aligned with the philosophical and theoretical assumptions of this research, recognizing the process would allow participants to create new ways of imagining the future by acknowledging current systems of power. As such, “the role of inquiry is to challenge and critically evaluate these processes in a way that can emancipate participants from the restrictions these ideas can entail” (Reed, 2007, p. 57). Participants were invited to critically examine belonging related to power structures and identities to consider intentional ways that belonging can be co-created, acknowledging the historical and systemic structures of injustice.

AI can be linked to critical theory research because the process invites a reexamination of established ideas and power structures, and its collaborative and participatory nature can redistribute traditional power structures. Additionally, AI challenges assumptions of inadequacy, “by focusing on the positive achievements of people who can be regarded as powerless: the people who carry out the work of an organization” (Reed 2007, p. 57). Through careful sensitization of issues of power, AI can explore new and more democratic ways forward. This study sought to explore and interrogate power dynamics involved in co-creating belonging.

In summary, this study was situated within social constructionism, action research, and critical approaches. The following section describes AI as the methodology.

Research Design and Methodology

This section describes how the AI methodology was utilized within the research process, as well as the methods selected to gather and analyze data. Methodology can be described as a strategy to guide the research plan (Jones et al., 2014). In exploring methodologies consistent with my theoretical principles, framework, and research purpose, I found alignment with AI. While I explored the prevalent methodological approaches in higher education (e.g., grounded theory, narrative inquiry, phenomenology, case study, and ethnography) (Jones et al., 2014), I found AI to provide the most alignment with my intended research because of its collaborative and generative approach. Reed (2007) described AI as an aligned methodology for fields focused on social relationships and human interactions. Rather than seeing research and intervention as separate processes, AI as a methodology is a form of “social construction in action” (Reed, 2007, p. viii), focusing on the construction of a reality of potential through focusing on the language utilized by participants. Reed (2007) shared that “AI research involves not only data collection but also data generation” (p. 134). Therefore, AI can also be viewed as a contribution to research methodology by challenging the ideas of researcher distance or disengagement, demonstrating research as a more open and democratic process, and illustrating strategies for maximizing data collection (Reed, 2007).

Reed (2007) shared that AI contributes to research because of its focus on:

- a. **Supporting people:** AI research needs to take an engaged stance rather than a disengaged one, as AI development is facilitated by the active input of those exploring change.
- b. **People getting together:** AI research is communal in that it involves collective interaction to share and explore practices.

- c. **Telling stories:** An interest in the ‘telling process,’ the language that people use to express ideas, is evoked in AI.
- d. **Positive development:** AI focuses on change and innovation and the generation of plans for the future. The process of development in AI starts with uncovering experiences of achievement in the past and present and involving people in planning for the future. This temporal dimension fits with notions of story and narrative.
- e. **Changes in the workplace:** AI emphasizes the importance of focusing on the workplace setting and uncovering its context. (p. 47)

This research method embodied a commitment to engaged inquiry and collective exploration that aligned with the topic of belonging. AI research allows researchers to highlight an organization’s or participants’ strengths, and the transformational potential of AI is grounded in dialogue and affirmation of the positive. In addition to the rationalization for AI as a methodology, this section describes the AI cycle employed for the research study, how data was collected and organized, and how data was managed and analyzed.

AI Research Design

This section provides details of the AI approach utilized for this research study, including the methods selected to gather data. The study utilized AI’s 5-D cycle (define, discovery, dream, design, destiny) to guide interviews and focus groups, as shown in Figure 3.1. Participants were asked to share their best memories, dream about future possibilities, design improvements, and envision their roles in achieving these goals. This approach fostered rich, detailed, and heartfelt responses, leading to valuable insights and data saturation.

Figure 3.1. Appreciative Inquiry 5-D Cycle. Adapted from Cooperrider et al. (2008). *Appreciative inquiry handbook: for leaders of change* (2nd edition.), p. 5.

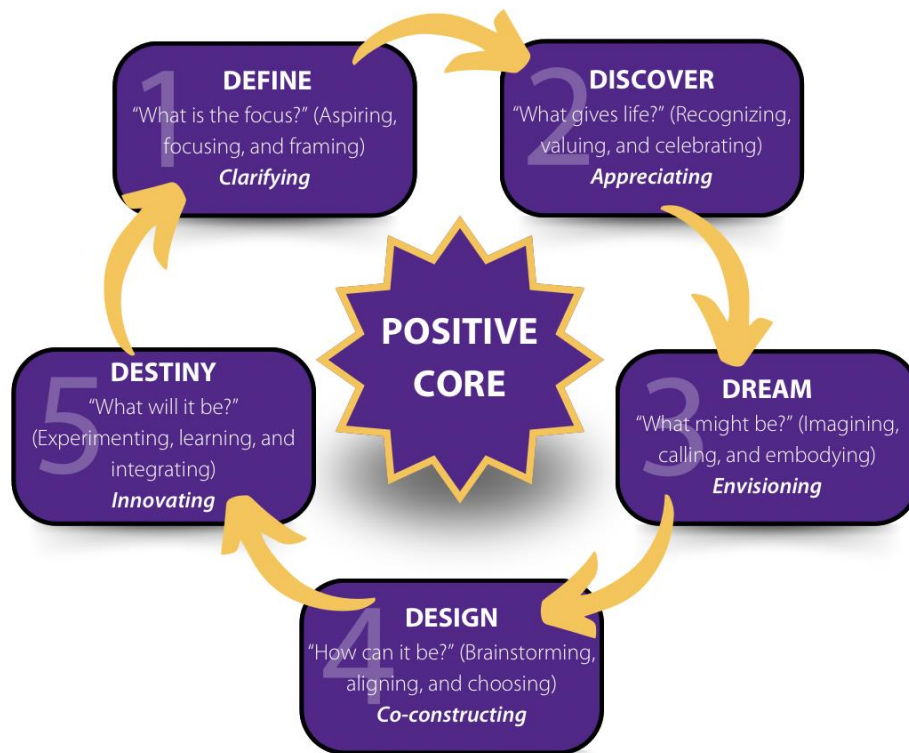


Table 3.1 provides an overview of the methods utilized. The data collection process is further described later in this chapter. See Appendices for the timeline of the study, survey questions, and focus group process and questions. All focus groups were video recorded and transcribed.

Table 3.1. Alignment of AI Cycle and Data Collection Methods

AI Cycle	Methods	Description
Define	Survey 1	Questions throughout the process were asset-based, asking participants to reflect on prior experiences or potential possibilities (Reed, 2007). Questions in the survey focused on exploring understanding and experiences of belonging within the undergraduate setting and identifying factors that have positively contributed to belonging. This information was carried forward to help guide the first focus group to further explore the “Define”

		cycle by sharing stories of belonging and asking questions about belonging.
Define Discover Dream	Focus Group 1	Focus group 1 began with a collective focus on “Define” with the researcher sharing a brief overview of college students’ sense of belonging and participants reflecting and responding to shared information. Utilizing large poster paper in a gallery walk format, participants moved to the “Discover” and “Dream” cycles, exploring the best of their experiences related to belonging and imagining a future where belonging is intentionally created at its highest.
Define Discover Dream	Survey 2	Survey 2 asked participants to reflect upon their collective experience in the first focus group and share their most important or exciting ideas that emerged.
Design Delivery/ Destination	Focus Group 2	Focus group 2 invited participants to move from dream to reality in the “Design” and “Delivery/Destination” cycles as they explored more practice-based ways to co-create the conditions for belonging. After revisiting highlights from their first focus group, they were invited to individually and collectively create a blueprint for the co-creation of belonging.
Design Delivery/ Destination	Survey 3	Survey 3 asked participants to share their most important or exciting things that emerged from focus group two and synthesize their understanding about the co-creation of belonging. Additionally, participants were invited to share how their ideas about the co-creation of belonging had been enlarged or changed.

Researcher Role

Researchers engaged in a constructionist paradigm can be referred to as bricoleurs as they are knowledgeable about many interpretive paradigms, are self-reflexive, and focus on the qualities that exist to glean new and multiple possibilities (Crotty, 1998). The researcher engages as a learning partner throughout the process rather than as the expert on a subject matter. Being open to possibility and learning “invites us to approach the object in a radial spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning. It is an invitation to reinterpretation” (Crotty, 1998, p.

51). This approach aligns with the practices of AI as a methodology, which invites the researcher and participants to engage in a collaborative and democratic process, centering inclusivity through their voices and experiences within the context of the study (Reed, 2007). Participants in this study were invited to share, co-create, and engage as partners in the research. To signal this approach, I utilized the term co-researchers as I invited students into the study and as I referred to their contributions throughout.

AI as a research methodology challenges some forms of research that focus on distance between the researcher and subjects, “showing how engagement can contribute to the development of knowledge and also how traditional structures of power and influence, in which ‘science’ is seen as having more status than practice, can move toward a more open and democratic endeavor, with shared responsibilities and benefits” (Reed, 2007, pp. 188-189). The role of the researcher in qualitative studies often requires them to become deeply engaged in and responsive to the context, and, therefore, there is a relationship between both parties (Jones et al., 2014). Thus, this practice also reinforces the concepts of belonging, which decenters power and authority, and allows for flexibility and curiosity as co-researchers deeply explore the questions at hand.

Reed (2007) described how the researcher navigates a dual role as both an insider and an outsider. This duality involves being deeply embedded within the context being studied while maintaining an external perspective to ensure objectivity and analytical rigor. Embracing the insider approach, I leveraged my intimate understanding of the organizational culture and dynamics, facilitating deeper trust and richer data collection. Reed (2007) emphasized that “the insider role allows for a nuanced understanding of the context, fostering more authentic and meaningful interactions” (p. 82). By positioning myself as an insider, I could build stronger

relationships with participants, encouraging open and honest dialogues that are crucial for AI's strength-based, collaborative inquiry. This insider perspective ensured that the research was not only reflective of the participants' lived experiences but also immediately relevant and actionable within their specific context.

Pilot Study

In the spring of 2023, I conducted a pilot study to deepen my understanding of AI as a methodology and to test the research purpose and questions for this qualitative research study. The pilot study, "Co-creating conditions for belonging in higher education," aimed to explore the conditions that foster a sense of belonging among undergraduate students at a public four-year land grant university. Through focus groups, pair interviews, and surveys, I gathered rich data from a diverse group of four participants, utilizing an inductive approach for analysis. See Appendix D for participant information and findings from the pilot study.

The findings of the pilot study provided valuable insights into the perceived conditions that create a sense of belonging for college students. Key themes that emerged included (a) safety, (b) comfortability, (c) acceptance, (d) mattering, (e) shared commonalities, (f) acknowledged identities, (g) open-mindedness, (h) investment, (i) relationship-building, and (j) transformation. For example, participants emphasized the importance of physical, psychological, and emotional safety as prerequisites for engaging with others. They also highlighted the role of comfort and acceptance in fostering a sense of belonging, noting that feeling accepted regardless of differences was crucial.

The pilot study revealed that participants' internal thoughts and desires significantly impacted their sense of belonging, underscoring the importance of personal initiative in seeking and creating connections. Additionally, external factors such as the continuous turnover of

students in the university environment and the role of traditions and inherited spaces were identified as influential.

These findings informed several adjustments to my current research design. Firstly, I refined my research questions and aligned them with my questions through the AI process to focus more explicitly on the perceived conditions that co-create a sense of belonging rather than focusing on conditions of belonging. My pilot study data revealed many important descriptors of sense of belonging, but it did not focus specifically on how belonging can be co-created. I also adjusted my data collection process, moving from four focus groups to two and eliminating the interviews. I was able to capture the data in other ways that were not as time-consuming for the participants. Finally, I recognized that while these students were all students at the same university, the collective organization within to consider belonging and change, that scope was too large for participants to engage with one another about how they saw themselves as actors in co-creating belonging. Thus, for my dissertation study, I decided to invite participants who were all part of the same student organization to provide a smaller organizational context.

This pilot study provided me with excellent data about the topic and the process. For example, it became clear the importance of including diverse participant perspectives, particularly those from underrepresented groups. The diversity of participants was necessary to capture a comprehensive view of belonging and allow a critical approach to be taken to understand issues of power, injustice, and identities and the impact of these on belonging. Furthermore, the pilot study underscored the importance of building trust and rapport with participants, leading me to incorporate more interactive and participatory methods in the main study to enhance engagement and data richness. By integrating these insights, my current research design was better equipped to explore the complexities of belonging in higher education

through the lens of AI, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of how to foster inclusive and supportive environments for all students.

Participant Invitation and Selection

Sampling Strategy

To select participants for the study, I employed criterion sampling, a type of purposeful sampling that involves selecting individuals based on a predetermined set of criteria. According to Maxwell (2013), purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that allows for the deliberate selection of settings, individuals, or activities relevant to the research questions and goals. The selection of settings, individuals, or activities is a critical decision in qualitative research, as purposive sampling has five goals: (1) to achieve representativeness in essential areas, (2) capture heterogeneity of the population, (3) identify critical cases for illuminating additional insight, (4) establish comparisons to better understand differences in individuals or settings, and (5) select participants with whom one can access, establish productive relationships with, and can best respond to the research questions (Maxwell, 2013). Additionally, strategic decisions and approaches about who to invite to participate in the study is necessary for an AI study because participants need to have experience, knowledge, and understanding of the subject matter, as well as a willingness to share about those experiences (Reed, 2007). Maxwell (2013) emphasized the importance of feasible access and data collection processes when selecting a purposive sample.

Using this approach, I purposively invited participants who met specific inclusion criteria, ensuring that the sample accurately represented the target population. The criteria for inclusion in this study were: undergraduate students at a 4-year, public, land grant institution who were members of the same campus organization. In order for the participants to represent as

diverse identities and experiences as possible (Creswell, 2013), I made attempts to select students who represented different identities and experiences, such as different years in school (freshman, sophomore, junior, seniors), different academic colleges, different social and personal identities (place of origin, race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation), work status, and involvement in different programs/clubs/organizations. Reed (2007) elaborated on this idea, sharing that if a critical approach is taken in AI to challenge “accepted and taken-for-granted ideas...then there is a strong argument that invitation to participate in an AI study should be made to people who have diverse positions and views, to increase opportunities to hear from different voices and ideas” (p. 72), which also falls in line with the AI principle of inclusivity. Thus, invitations were also made to individuals who would bring in different viewpoints and experiences from different levels and perspectives within the student organization with which they were all affiliated. Undergraduate students who were enrolled in a class I taught or who I supervised at the time of the study were excluded as potential participants. Invitations to join the study were made in person and via email (See Appendix E).

Sample Size

Maxwell (2013) suggested that in qualitative research, sample size should be determined by the research question and the extent to which participants can provide relevant and rich data to answer the research questions. Rather than aiming for large sample sizes, qualitative researchers often seek to recruit a relatively small sample of participants who can provide rich, detailed, and diverse data that can answer the research questions. Additionally, it is important to establish a sample size large enough to meet the needs of the study while remaining small enough to be easily managed by the researcher (Creswell, 2013). The concept of information power proposes that the required sample size can be smaller when the research questions are

clear, the sample includes participants with rich and varied experiences, and the analysis is focused and precise (Maxwell, 2013). In qualitative research, sampling is an ongoing process, with the sample size determined by data saturation, which is the point at which collecting additional data no longer yields new information (Maxwell, 2013). Therefore, the appropriate sample size depends on the research question and the richness of the data collected. In total, nine students indicated interest in participating, which I deemed too large a group for an in-depth dialogue through the focus group. Thus, I invited the group to split into two groups to allow more time in which to produce rich sharing by all participants. The first group had four participants, and the second group had three participants (two participants became ill at the start of the process and were unable to join). Co-researchers were informed of the study's requirements through an email and online survey, which included the informed consent form.

Shared Student Organization

All students in this study were undergraduate students at a public four-year land grant university and members of the same student organization, the "Campus Leadership Fellows." This organization is a year-long program for students in their final year at the university. Members go through an application and interview process in the spring semester of their junior year and participate in the program during the fall and spring semesters of their senior year. Generally speaking, students in the Campus Leadership Fellows are interested in deepening their knowledge of leadership, exploring the transition from student to professional life after graduation, and engaging in service and leadership opportunities throughout the year. As a group, Fellows represent all academic colleges and have varied experience prior to joining the organization. There are approximately 25-30 Campus Leadership Fellows each year.

Throughout their year as Campus Leadership Fellows, students engage in several required activities. These activities include (a) a small group relationship building experience that spans over five weeks designed to let members get to know other members in their small group of seven or eight; (b) a two-day retreat; (c) coaching a youth sports team for the community; and (d) other leadership workshops. This program and all associated events are considered co-curricular activities, meaning they are not for academic credit but involve specified learning objectives. Additionally, this program is hosted by a leadership department and is run with the support of three full-time staff and faculty members.

Introduction to Participants/Co-Researchers

Seven undergraduate students from a mid-western, public, land-grant university participated in this study. For the purposes of maximum variation in sampling, I sought representation of a mix of genders, races, academic programs, and experiences (Creswell, 2013). As shown in the compiled participant demographic data (Table 3.2), participants reflected various identities that differed from one another. The data in Table 3.2 and in participant biographies includes pseudonyms, student status, academic college major, minors/secondary majors, first-generation college status, age, work status, race, ethnicity, gender, pronouns, sexuality, hometown, faith or religious system, military status, and socioeconomic status. While demographics were not used as a method of selecting participants, I provide demographic data to describe the group.

Table 3.2. Participant Demographic Data (n=7)

Pseudo- nym	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Sexuality	Identificati on with a belief system, religious practice, or faith community	Socio- economic Status	Hometown (Resident/ In state, or Out of State)	First- genera- tion college student	Age	Military Status
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Parker	White	Woman	Bisexual	No	Middle Class	Out of state	No	22	Not affiliated
Grady	Black or African American	Man	Heterosexual	Yes	N/A	Out of state	No	21	Not affiliated
Kelly	White	Man	Heterosexual	Yes	Middle Class	Out of state	No	22	Not affiliated
Isabel	White/ Hispanic/ Latino, or Spanish origin	Woman	Bisexual	Sometimes	Middle Class	Resident/In state	Yes	21	Dependent
Avery	White	Woman	Heterosexual	Yes	Middle Class	Out of state	No	21	Not affiliated
Carter	White	Woman	Homosexual	Yes	Middle Class	Resident/In state	No	21	Not affiliated
Lucy	White	Woman	Pansexual	No	Middle Class	Resident/In state	No	22	Not affiliated

Parker (she/her/hers)

At the time of the study, Parker was a senior and concurrent master's student in architectural engineering. She was the president of an engineering society, involved in an engineering institute for her major, an ambassador for her major, and a member of an honor society. She worked approximately 20 hours per week at the College of Engineering. Parker participated in the first group of students for the focus groups with Grady, Kelly, and Isabel.

Grady (he/him/his)

At the time of the study, Grady was a senior in business marketing with a minor in music and a focus in pre-law. He was the president of a multicultural student organization, a member of a multicultural fraternity, and part of the campus orchestra. He worked for the campus radio station. Grady participated in the first group of students for the focus groups with Parker, Kelly, and Isabel.

Kelly (he/him/his)

At the time of the study, Kelly was a senior in industrial engineering with a minor in leadership studies and a certificate in non-profit leadership. He was president of an engineering society, an ambassador for a department on campus, and a member of the campus choir. Kelly worked approximately eight hours per week at the campus food pantry. Kelly participated in the first group of students for the focus groups with Parker, Grady, and Isabel.

Isabel (she/her/hers)

At the time of the study, Isabel was a senior in fashion business with a minor in leadership studies. She was part of a national fashion organization and had two jobs where she worked approximately 22 hours per week. One job was working for a department on campus, and the other was working for a software company out of New York that specializes in fashion. Isabel participated in the first group for the focus groups with Parker, Grady, and Kelly.

Avery (she/her/hers)

At the time of the study, Avery was a senior in education studies with minors in management and leadership studies and certificates in non-profit leadership and conflict resolution. Avery had been a peer learning assistant for a first-year class, a peer coach for the Strengths initiative, and participated in an international service team. She worked approximately 23 hours per week split between her job at a center for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and roles in two departments on campus. Avery participated in the second group for the focus groups with Carter and Lucy.

Carter (she/her/hers)

At the time of the study, Carter was a senior in English education with a minor in leadership studies and a certificate in non-profit leadership. Carter was the president of the diabetics club on campus and active in a student religious organization. She did not work at the

time of participating in the study but had previously worked for the athletics department. Carter participated in the second group for the focus groups with Avery and Lucy.

Lucy (she/her/hers)

At the time of the study, Lucy was a senior in elementary education. She was employed as a residence assistant in university residence halls and active in an LGBTQ+ committee for the halls. Lucy worked approximately 20 hours per week at a local restaurant. Lucy participated in the second group for the focus groups with Avery and Carter.

Data Collection and Organization

For this study, the data collection took approximately four months (see Appendix A) and included the following data sources: (1) a demographic questionnaire of participants and initial survey, (2) two appreciative inquiry 5-D focus group interviews, (3) collection of documents from focus groups, and (4) two participant surveys following each focus group. The data also included transcripts from the focus groups and researcher notes throughout the process. Data sources and the collection process are described below.

Demographic Questionnaire of Participants and Survey One

Upon completion of the informed consent form, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and open-ended survey utilizing Qualtrics. The demographic questions helped me, as the researcher, understand the varied identities and experiences of all participants. The open-ended questions invited participants to share their initial thoughts about belonging before the first focus group.

The following demographic information was collected:

- a. Name
- b. Academic College/Degree Program

- c. Year in School
- d. Age
- e. Gender
- f. Sexual Orientation
- g. Race/Ethnicity
- h. Place(s) you call home
- i. Socioeconomic status
- j. First-generation
- k. Military
- l. Religion
- m. Involvement in clubs/organizations on campus (list)
- n. Work status (list)

Participants were also asked to respond to these open-ended questions:

- a. What does belonging mean to you a) in general and b) in the context of being an undergraduate student at this institution?
- b. Share a personal experience of when you have experienced belonging during your time at this institution. Provide as much detail as possible, including describing the factors that fostered belonging.
- c. Share a personal experience of when you intentionally worked to create belonging with or for someone else. Provide as much detail as possible, including describing the factors that contributed toward fostering belonging.
- d. What are some things you want to know or wonder about belonging among college students?

AI 5-D Focus Group Interviews

There were two AI focus groups held for each group of participants, for a combined total of four AI focus groups. During the first focus group, participants engaged in the define, discovery, and dream phases. During the second group, participants engaged in the design and delivery phases. The questions and activities were designed utilizing an appreciative and positive focus related to each phase. The scope of the questions was in relation to their student organization and within the broader university setting. All sessions were video- and audio-recorded utilizing Zoom technology. See Appendix C for a complete list of questions.

Focus Group One. In the first focus group, participants engaged in the define, discovery, and dream phases, collectively exploring their own experiences and understanding of belonging in their lives and college experiences.

Define. In the define stage, we spent time discussing personal stories related to current and presented understandings of belonging. To begin, participants were exposed to concepts of belonging presented in this dissertation and asked to share their insights or personal connections to these ideas. This overview was presented through a short PowerPoint that highlighted the definition or key components of belonging by various authors. This served to familiarize participants with the concept of belonging, which is often a hidden or nuanced variable (Strayhorn, 2019). Furthermore, by sharing multiple definitions and frameworks of belonging, participants could react and respond to ideas that resonated with them and their experiences with belonging. Participants were asked to elaborate on those experiences by sharing personal stories of experiencing and creating belonging, whether in their student organization, Campus Leadership Fellows, or within their university experience as a whole. Next, participants were asked to share their wonderings or questions about belonging among college students or within

their student organization. They were then asked to respond to a central positive core idea:

Imagine a world in which everyone belonged...what would that look like or result in?

Participants were introduced to AI, with explanations as to the focus of this process on exploring the best of how to co-create belonging rather than focusing on belonging from a deficit-based or problem-focused approach. Participants were invited into the role of co-researchers and co-investigators and introduced to the 5-D cycle that would guide the collaborative exploration.

Discovery. In the discovery phase, participants were invited to narrow their focus further. They looked at their experience in their student organization and recalled a time when they felt “most alive, most involved, or most excited about your connection and feeling of belonging to the community.” Through storytelling and follow-up questions, they were asked to describe the factors and conditions that contributed to that experience. Then, they were asked to describe their current sense of belonging within Campus Leadership Fellows, as well as their sense of belonging in the room at that moment. These descriptions included what was influencing that sense of belonging. Lastly, they were asked to describe the factors that have contributed to their feeling a sense of belonging within their university and within their group, including a peak experience of when they experienced belonging, and how they may have worked to cultivate belonging among others. These questions were iterative in nature, building upon the brainstorming in the define phase, asking participants to expand upon their ideas in more detailed and nuanced ways. I recorded their main ideas on large poster sheets displayed in front of the participants.

Dream. In the dream phase, participants were invited to stand up and take a “gallery walk” to explore questions about the future in hopes of imagining “what could be” as it related to

belonging. The gallery walk involved a process where participants found large posters with questions on them. Participants did not have to answer the questions in order; rather, they went to the question where they had energy and worked together as a group to share ideas related to the questions. Reflections and main ideas were written on the posters with markers as they discussed. The four questions included asking participants to reflect on future achievements in fostering belonging and criteria for recognition, how individuals with historically underrepresented identities would experience an intentionally inclusive space, future casting to look back at their student organization and ways they had prioritized belonging in the past year, and inquiries about areas of belonging they would like to explore further and how that knowledge would be beneficial. The focus group concluded with an opportunity to surface themes, patterns, or thoughts as a result of this focus group, and the debriefing statement.

Focus Group Two. In the second focus group, we began by revisiting the main concepts shared during the first focus group, including the posters with their ideas. Participants were asked to share any thoughts or questions they had been considering since the previous focus group and then add to or revise their sharing from that discussion. We then revisited the AI process and discussed what the design and destiny phases would entail.

Design. For the design phase, participants were asked to consider a social architecture of co-creating belonging, which can be considered an infrastructure or blueprint for moving their dreams to reality. To begin, participants were asked to individually write the elements or factors necessary to co-create the kind of belonging described in the first focus group. They recorded these ideas on a large whiteboard, so everyone would be able to read what they wrote. For example, during the first focus group Isabel wrote, “small group discussions with all of our Fellows beyond the ‘elevator speech’, create space for understanding and empathy, and shared

interests and morals.” From the second group, Carter wrote, “Vulnerability, no judgement, active listening, following-up and checking-in, honesty, trust, harmony, love and support.” They shared their lists with one another and added to these, asked questions, or shared stories related to each other’s findings.

As a secondary step, participants were then asked to list the practices, behaviors or actions needed (or not needed) to facilitate the list of elements and factors they brainstormed. For example, Isabel wrote, “Do engage in understanding and active listening, do not have assumptions, force conversation that doesn’t feel right in the moment.” Carter wrote, “Be open to sharing the more sacred parts of your heart; have an open mind/body/heart for all; eye contact, no phones, visual cues like nodding head; call/text someone if they don’t show up or you notice something is off about them; be open about the things in life; don’t go sharing others’ thoughts/stories; choose grace when disagreeing with others’ views, and don’t make them feel wrong for the things they believe; choose love.”

Through detailed conversation, participants then shared these ideas with one another and engaged in storytelling and experiences related to these descriptions. Images of these writings can be found in Appendix F. After a discussion around the practices, behaviors, and actions that put into motion the elements of co-creating belonging, participants brainstormed a “provocative proposition” to summarize the design phase. In this context, a provocative proposition was a possibility statement that illustrated the co-creation of belonging as a bold approach. An example from the first focus group, Grady shared, “I would say being fully present in the moment. I think when we do that, we’re open to new ways of thinking because we are actually listening to someone and being there in the moment.” From the second group, Avery said, “Reflect inward first, before blaming others or larger corporation for the lack of belonging. A lot of these are

characteristics about oneself.” Each participant had the opportunity to share, then add any additional thoughts throughout the sharing process.

Delivery. For the delivery phase, participants were asked to consider drawing or writing a blueprint or map for the co-creation of belonging, utilizing all of the ideas they had come up with to this point. They were to detail the strategies and action items that could help foster and co-create a sense of belonging throughout their organization, specifically focusing on strategies that they all had the ability to influence. In focus group one, participants drew a word cloud with “belonging” at the center and the following words surrounding it: “Understanding → self-aware; quality time → shared experiences; intentionality → active listening → physical body language → asking questions → challenge the status quo; small group → responsibility → no hierarchy.” Focus group two discussed their blueprint rather than writing it. These words capture their core ideas:

Emphasis on attendance and being fully present, accountability, don’t take it for granted/make it a priority/you get in what you put out, celebrate others, be grateful, structured check-ins, small group experiences focused on relationship building, all Fellows engage in proactive communication, and honest self-reflection.

Finally, they were asked to reflect on their current sense of belonging within the room and the group at that moment. The focus group concluded with a debrief of thoughts or questions that were coming up for them following the exercise, and a sharing of the debrief statement.

Follow-Up Surveys

Open-ended surveys were conducted after each focus group utilizing Qualtrics to allow participants an opportunity to individually share their thoughts and ideas throughout the process. Open-ended surveys allow participants to reflect and respond at their own pace and time, which

can lead to more thoughtful and detailed responses than what might emerge during the constraints of a focus group (Creswell, 2013). These surveys can capture individual perspectives and nuances that might be overlooked in group discussions, ensuring quieter voices are heard and that diverse viewpoints are represented (Patton, 2015). Additionally, responses from open-ended surveys can help guide subsequent focus group discussions, highlighting areas that need further exploration or revisiting and clarifying any emerging themes (Morgan, 1997).

Participants were sent a survey after the first focus group, designed to capture lingering thoughts and ideas from the participants. One question read, “What are the three most important or exiting things that emerged as a result of our focus group?”

Following the second focus group, another survey was sent in order to allow the most prevalent thoughts or ideas to emerge and included these questions:

1. What are the three most important or exciting things that emerged as a result of our focus group?
2. Based on the focus group experience, what one message do you want to communicate that focuses on our goal of exploring the conditions that co-create belonging among people?
3. How have your ideas about the co-creation of belonging been enlarged or changed?

Responses to these surveys were downloaded via Qualtrics and saved to my computer. I sent follow-up emails to participants who did not initially complete the survey, asking for their participation.

Qualitative Data Management & Analysis

Data management and analysis in qualitative research studies must skillfully provide depth and justification to support the findings of the study and ensure that these are aligned with

the theoretical frameworks, understanding of the literature, and research purpose and questions (Bhattacharya, 2017). The process is iterative and requires in depth analysis as the researcher utilizes an analytical lens to align their interpretations of the data with the theoretical frameworks employed (Bhattacharya, 2017; Saldaña, 2021).

This study utilized an inductive analysis, which “refers to working ‘up’ from the data” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150). Inductive analysis invites researchers to begin with an open mind and not have preestablished codes or criteria before beginning. Therefore, researchers begin by looking at all the raw data and then break it apart into smaller units with shared meaning. According to Saldaña (2021), this is a “‘learn as you go’ approach that spontaneously creates codes the first time the data are reviewed” (p. 41). Analysis of the data, referred to as coding, will cluster similar units of meaning and identify them as categories or themes (Bhattacharya, 2017; Saldaña, 2021). Researchers will look for patterns to identify themes by considering similarities, differences, frequencies, sequences, correspondences, or causations. The coding process is heuristic, as the data is *discovered* through the process, and original codes are created as the initial data is worked through. Deductive coding operates under the premise that there are certain codes, categories, or themes that will most likely appear in the data due to a particular conceptual framework and research questions. Alternatively, an inductive process invites the data to speak for itself (Saldaña, 2021). Because qualitative inquiry requires in depth exploration and attention to language and details, researchers must engage in multiple cycles of coding, which supports the iterative nature of the process (Saldaña, 2021). Throughout the coding process, I prioritized participants’ perspectives, rather than my own, since I was studying their perceptions (Saldaña, 2021). This process aligned with social constructionism and AI frameworks, which emphasize the voices of participants.

Data Management

Effective data management is crucial for ensuring the integrity and confidentiality of research findings. In my study, I manually transcribed all video recordings from the focus groups. This critical step in my analysis process allowed me to carefully listen to each word and actively engage with the language used by participants. The survey data was exported into electronic format, while the hard copy AI focus group data (notes written on the large poster sheets and whiteboards) were digitized into pictures and transcribed onto Word documents. To safeguard participant confidentiality, all data was securely stored on my password-protected computer. Pseudonyms were used, and actual names and locations were stored separately (Jones et al., 2014).

Overall, my data included 339 minutes of Zoom video recording from the four focus groups, 76 pages of single-spaced transcriptions, 16 poster sheets with writing, 14 pictures taken of writing on the whiteboard during the design phase, and survey data.

Initial Coding

To prepare for the coding process, I printed each transcript with a large column on the left for writing codes. In my initial data exploration, I employed pre-coding techniques like bolding, highlighting, underlining, or italicizing significant quotes or text throughout the transcript (Saldaña, 2021). This approach helped me familiarize myself with the data and identify noteworthy words and phrases. While some preliminary themes emerged, I documented them in my research journal, keeping an open mind to let participants' words and descriptions guide the analysis.

First Cycle: In Vivo Coding

I then utilized line-by-line In Vivo coding, which involved using participants' thoughts by capturing "word(s) or short phrase(s) from the actual language found in the qualitative data" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 105). I read each line of each transcript, pulled out phrases from the text, wrote these in the left-hand column, and then underlined them in the text. I found that using longer phrases rather than singular words helped me capture the essence of what each participant shared and maintain a close connection to their expressions, facilitating a nuanced understanding of their perspectives. By incorporating participants' varied words and contexts, I uncovered unique codes that accurately represented their experiences. This description is essential, as it forms the foundation of qualitative data.

I did an additional read-through of the transcripts and added any codes I thought may have been missing with my first pass-through. I also utilized analytic memos to capture preliminary jottings and reflections throughout the data collection and analysis phases. This involved pausing analysis to reflect on anything significant or related to the data. Throughout the coding cycles, analytic memo writing can work to create additional codes, categories, themes, or concepts, and it can provide additional narrative to the study (Saldaña, 2021). In this study, analytic memos served as another reference point as I engaged with the data. Finally, I combined all the codes into one document, color-coding each code by person and by focus group (Jones et al., 2014) to help me track the data source.

Second Cycle: Axial Coding

For the second cycle of coding, Saldaña (2021) shares that the primary goal "is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of first cycle codes" (p. 297). I began to group similarly coded data into categories that

shared some characteristic, which allowed me to see patterns emerge to create categories or themes (Saldaña, 2021). This categorical approach was done by-hand by taking the master list of codes from the Word document and cutting and pasting them into similar clusters. I then utilized axial coding to clarify the categories and “strategically reassemble data that were ‘split’ or ‘fractured’ during the initial coding process” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 308). This process allowed me to find interconnections across fragmented data from the four AI cycles.

Data interpretation involves reflexivity, which Reed (2007) defines as “the purposeful and critical reviewing of ideas and responses to information and the consideration of alternative meanings” (p. 138). This process may seem as ambiguous as data collection, but focusing on context, development, and change can aid in making sense of the data. From there, meta-themes, themes, and categories emerged. It took several iterations and revisiting codes and categories before finding the interconnected story. In my axial coding process, I applied Glaser’s (2014) approach by defining code boundaries, proposing empirical criteria, explicating conditions for property emergence, describing connections between codes, and asserting the significance of properties in the overall analysis (as cited in Saldaña, 2021, p. 126). Data interpretation should be organized in ways that that will help researchers, “...understand what people feel they have achieved and how this might be helped to happen again” (Reed, 2007, p. 139). This continual coding cycle allowed me to engage in a thorough and systematic process that prioritized participant voice.

Document Analysis

Throughout both focus groups, participants were asked to utilize large poster paper to write and draw their individual and collective ideas. This was another way to capture significant ideas and participant voices beyond verbal discussion. Capturing main ideas and thoughts on

poster paper also supported participants as they built on ideas from phase to phase, allowing them to revisit their earlier thoughts and ideas. The writing on the poster paper was analyzed systematically in response to the overarching research questions. Documents were coded, and, in this way, the document data served as a point of triangulation.

Considerations

One consideration I had throughout the research process was whether or not to utilize collaborative coding, which involves bringing in multiple researchers or participants to create a shared interpretation and understanding of what is being studied (Saldaña, 2021). Reed (2008) described a collaborative coding process with participants as an ideal process for AI. While I considered utilizing this collaborative coding approach, I ultimately decided against it. This process would align with AI methodology, in which inclusivity and collaboration are essential components of the entire process (Reed, 2008). However, a collaborative analytical process can prove challenging for many reasons, including issues of management and validity (Reed, 2007; Saldaña, 2021). In order to address these challenges, I shared the coded data with the participants as a form of member checking to gain their feedback and to invite them to challenge any interpretations I had made. This engaged the participants through the lens of co-researchers, focusing on hearing everyone's voice and ensuring that the final decisions and choices were widely supported by as many participants in the group as possible (Reed, 2007). While not all participants provided input, those who did indicated that the themes and codes were in line with their reflections and did not recommend further edits. This engagement with participants also served as an audit trail (Reed, 2007), in which transparency of the process of analysis and the ideas identified are shared with readers for critical reflection.

Trustworthiness & Ethical Considerations

Ensuring trustworthiness is crucial throughout the various stages of qualitative content analysis, from data collection to reporting of results. Trustworthiness allows researchers to present features and concepts with credibility, thereby establishing the transferability, credibility, and dependability of their research, all of which impact the ability to add meaningful contributions to the field (Creswell, 2014). To strengthen the reliability and consistency of a study, researchers often employ triangulation, which involves gathering and corroborating evidence from various data sources and individuals. This study drew from four data sources: (1) a demographic questionnaire of participants and initial survey, (2) two appreciative inquiry 5-D focus group interviews, (3) collection of documents from focus groups, and (4) two participant surveys following each focus group. Additionally, by conducting focus groups with two separate groups, I was able to learn from the process through multiple experiences. Throughout the coding process, I compared data sources (e.g., participant surveys with the focus group transcripts). Integrating and evaluating data utilizing multiple methods allowed me to triangulate the data, thus enhancing the overall validity and robustness of the study's findings (Patton, 2015).

To increase the trustworthiness of data collection, analysis, and interpretation, ethical considerations must be taken into account. The participants in this study were young adults, and the nature of the study was to gather positive examples and experiences related to the co-creation of belonging. The nature of the study limited the number of ethical concerns. Although there was unlikely harm associated with this study, steps were taken to protect individuals. Informed consent was a priority, and each participant provided electronic consent before data collection commenced. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms and keeping any identifying

information private. Measures were taken to secure research-related records and data by utilizing a personal password-protected computer that only I could access. Data will be stored for three years from the end of the project to allow time for ongoing analysis and writing toward publications after which time all electronic data files will be removed/erased, and hard copies of transcripts or artifacts will be shredded. Additionally, I employed triangulation and member checking to interpret findings (Creswell, 2013) to be sure participants were in agreement about the findings and data analysis.

Summary

This chapter outlined the philosophical positions, methodology, and methods used, building on the introduction and literature review presented in earlier chapters. Utilizing an AI design, this research was guided by the overarching goals of qualitative research, which are to understand human experiences deeply and to use this understanding to foster emancipatory practices related to the co-creation of belonging. This chapter also discussed the action research framework that supports the AI methodology, emphasizing the integration of inquiry and action to facilitate meaningful change. Critical perspectives were also considered, aiming to challenge dominant ideologies and explore the intersections of identity and belonging. Detailed descriptions of the AI research design, data collection methods, and participant selection process were provided, highlighting the collaborative and participatory nature of the study. The chapter concluded with a comprehensive approach to data management and analysis, ensuring the integrity and confidentiality of the research findings while emphasizing the importance of participant voice in the analysis process. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the data collection and provides a discussion of the themes that emerged from the data sources.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Qualitative research is a valuable approach to understanding complex social phenomena in-depth, and its findings can provide rich and nuanced insights into the experiences and perspectives of individuals and groups (Patton, 2015). This chapter presents the findings of an exploratory qualitative research study that aimed to explore and understand the conditions that co-create belonging among students in a higher education setting. The study was conducted using an appreciative inquiry (AI) methodology, and data was collected through focus groups and surveys. An inductive approach guided analysis of the data, and the findings offer new understandings of practices that foster the co-creation of belonging among college students. The research questions for this study were:

1. How can individuals within a group co-create the conditions for belonging?
 - a. How do participants describe the conditions that co-create a sense of belonging?
 - b. What are the practices and conditions that contribute to the co-creation of belonging?
 - c. How do students perceive the conditions that co-create belonging based on social identities?
2. How does the appreciative inquiry process contribute to the co-creation of belonging among college students?

In this chapter, I share five themes that were derived from inductive analysis. As a reminder, all participants were enrolled at the same university and were part of the same student organization, Campus Leadership Fellows, which was described in Chapter 3. Themes 1-4 responded to the first research question, “How can individuals within a group co-create the conditions for belonging?” These findings described conditions (i.e., the environmental,

structural, and cultural factors) that create a foundation for belonging, as well as the practices (i.e., specific actions, behaviors, and strategies) employed by individuals to foster a sense of belonging. Throughout the study, it was not easy for participants to readily distinguish and identify between conditions and practices, illustrating the overlap between conditions and practices facilitating the co-creation of belonging. In some instances, the practices co-create the conditions for belonging, while in other instances, the conditions create the space for practices that co-create belonging. As the participants described their own experiences within the shared group, they illuminated (a) conditions and practices of safety, acceptance, and inclusion, (b) elements of organizational structure and dynamics, (c) ways to build and foster meaning, and (d) interpersonal connections that support belonging. Further, participants revealed (e) how the development of individual and collective purpose contributed to belonging. These themes encapsulated the conditions and practices that support the co-creation of belonging, which are described in detail through the categories listed within each theme.

Theme 5 responded to the second research question, focusing on how the process of AI contributes to the co-creation of belonging. Table 4.1 illustrates categories that make up each theme.

Table 4.1. Themes 1-5.

Theme	Categories
Theme 1: Safety, acceptance, and inclusion	Creating safety and comfort Fostering acceptance, understanding, and authenticity Withholding judgment Valuing and appreciating others Honoring and designing for diversity
Theme 2: Organizational structure and dynamics	Structured and intentional activities Intentional time and purpose Group size and location Responsibility within the group

Theme 3: Meaningful interpersonal connections	Connecting and relating to one another Listening and sharing enthusiastically Being vulnerable Building trust, respect, and honesty
Theme 4: Purpose and Investment	Cultivating motivation and mindset Supporting attendance and accountability Building shared purpose Fostering personal growth and self-awareness
Theme 5: Influence of AI process	Shifts in thinking and application Fostering sense of belonging through AI reflective process

Theme 1: Safety, Acceptance & Inclusion

Essential for participants in co-creating communities of belonging was a focus on safety, acceptance, and inclusion. Participants discussed the importance of feeling safe and accepted as foundational conditions for experiencing belonging. They also discussed actions that increased the inclusion of all group members, such as practicing acceptance and understanding and acknowledging diversity and difference. Overall, they emphasized creating an environment free from assumptions and judgment, where individuals felt valued, seen, and heard, as a necessary condition to foster a more inclusive community for everyone involved. This theme encompassed five categories as outlined in Table 4.2. This theme was the most frequently and deeply discussed by all participants in both focus groups.

Table 4.2. Theme 1: Safety, acceptance, and inclusion

Theme	Categories
Safety, acceptance, and inclusion	Creating safety and comfort Fostering acceptance, understanding, and authenticity Withholding judgment Valuing and appreciating others Honoring and designing for diversity

Creating Safety and Comfort

When asked to describe experiences of feeling a sense of belonging, all seven participants utilized the words “safe” and/or “comfortable.” Feeling safe promoted feelings of comfort and comfortability, which served as foundational conditions to experiencing belonging. Lucy shared,

You’re not going to feel like you belong if you feel like you’re threatened in a space – and, that’s in every way. Emotional, physical, like you just want to know you are not going to be judged or hurt in any way.

Participants described a safe place as one where they felt welcome, there was comfort, individuals did not feel threatened or triggered because potential threats and triggers were removed, and ultimately, they were not afraid to show up authentically or worried about what others would think. They described several specific experiences of feeling safe and unafraid throughout their time in Campus Leadership Fellows, including the fall retreat and experiences with small-group activities. Parker shared that one way safety was fostered was by allowing group members to create the rules for how they would feel safe and comfortable. In addition to discussing what safety meant to the group, Lucy shared that another practice to create safety was “removing triggers,” or things that make others uncomfortable.

Participants explained that when they felt safe in their environment, they were more likely to feel welcome and comfortable, allowing them to be their authentic selves. For instance, seeing familiar faces and being in a space where they were not judged or threatened fostered an atmosphere of acceptance and support. Lucy shared that comfort built on each prior experience with the group and that Campus Leadership Fellows was “a space I look forward to and am comfortable.” Parker commented, “I am definitely more comfortable because I know more people on a deeper basis,” which reinforced how important relationship-building was in creating

safety and comfort. Avery stated that when she did not have to worry about her feeling safe in a group, then she was better able to make choices about how she wanted to engage and contribute within the group.

Avery also discussed examples of safety and comfort she experienced in the room during the focus group. She said, “We have food, we have water, and bathrooms. We’re not feeling judged or drained here, and it’s like I feel like I’m chilling at home.” This level of comfortability was also experienced by members in the first focus group. Isabel shared that the type of engagement they were having, including joking with one another, made the environment feel more “normal” and less “like a big whole research study.” This made her feel like it was not as stressful and that she could “just chill.” I interpreted these comments as feeling like individuals could show up fully and be comfortable as themselves, which made them feel safe and comfortable, which then influenced their sense of belonging. Individuals were able to contribute to creating the conditions of safety with one another, and they could also experience environments that provided safety and comfort for them to feel a sense of belonging.

Fostering Acceptance, Understanding, and Authenticity

Participants frequently acknowledged the diversity and differences among people in general, as well as within Campus Leadership Fellows, and discussed how these differences impacted the sense of belonging. They discussed that whether it be differences in values and beliefs, academic college or program, different social identities (e.g., race, gender or sexual orientation, motivation factors, or more), acceptance to embrace these differences was a foundational element of co-creating belonging. Responding to the question of how belonging was defined, Grady shared, “Acceptance under any circumstances,” pointing to the practice of acceptance as key to facilitating belonging. Lucy described acceptance, stating:

I guess it's acceptance without needing understanding if that makes sense...it's like you don't need to understand the way that someone's living their life. You don't need to like deeply understand what caused them to act a certain way or to have certain opinions. You just need to accept that their journey has led them to that point, and you know, celebrate who they are as is, without needing to understand it.

Lucy also shared an example outside of Campus Leadership Fellows when she put this concept into practice. She said,

A time that I intentionally created a space of belonging for others was when I was a residence assistance in residence halls. Not only because it was part of my job, but also because I wanted to see all of the freshman be welcomed into the university with open arms and be accepted for who they were. I helped resident find activities that they liked, find friend groups that accepted them, and just got them involved in ways that they did not have the resources to do on their own!

This story was elaborated on as Lucy explained that, to best support her residents, she first needed to accept them as they were. This created an openness for connection and being who they are without needing to change.

Acceptance was a reoccurring theme throughout all four focus groups, coupled with words such as understanding, empathy, and creating space (for difference). Isabel shared that being grouped with other members who held different strengths and experiences allowed them to "form a better understanding of each other...our differences just meshed well." Parker added to that concept by sharing about her experience in Campus Leadership Fellows: "I feel like there was formed appreciation for other people. Like, 'Oh, I don't have that ability,' but, we have a

stronger overall ability together.’ Creating an environment of acceptance allows students to be themselves unapologetically.” These practices supported creating environments of acceptance.

Authenticity came up frequently with participants in the second group. They shared that when individuals could be their truest, most authentic selves, it fostered an environment of openness and genuine connection. Students who felt they could express their true identities and beliefs without fear of judgment contributed to a culture where everyone felt accepted and valued for who they are. Lucy reflected, “Thinking back to the times where I felt the strongest sense of belonging, all of those times were when I and the people around me were the truest, most authentic version of ourselves and free of judgment.” Avery shared that by investing in things (like Campus Leadership Fellows) that were more authentic to herself also increased her sense of belonging. The collective commitment to authenticity allowed students to navigate their imperfections together, reinforcing a supportive and inclusive community. By embracing and encouraging authenticity through acceptance and understanding, these students were able to co-create a space where everyone could flourish and feel genuinely connected to one another.

Analysis of the participants’ responses showed that belonging emerges when individuals were accepted unconditionally, understood for being themselves, and embraced without requiring full comprehension of their journeys or choices. Encouraging all group members to engage in these practices helped create the conditions for belonging. This environment of acceptance and understanding encouraged students to express themselves authentically, fostering openness and genuine connections.

Withholding Judgment

Many participants described refraining from making judgments or assumptions as another prominent factor and practice in co-creating belonging. When individuals felt that they were not

being judged, they were more likely to open up and share their authentic selves, fostering deeper connections within the group. Participants noted how judgment and assumptions created barriers, as negative assumptions about others could significantly impact their sense of belonging. Grady acknowledged that while challenging to practice, working to eliminate judgment and bias “to whatever degree possible” created an environment where everyone felt safe to express their stories and experiences without fear of negative repercussions.

Grady described this in action through an activity held at the fall retreat for Campus Leadership Fellows. The activity was designed to allow every person to share about themselves:

I felt like in that room we were able to eliminate judgment to the best of our ability...it's like as people were sharing their stories, it wasn't like people were being judgmental of them, or making them feel some type of way for sharing their experiences. It felt like a safe spot.

This activity, which involved personal storytelling, was brought up several times as an experience that facilitated belonging among the group.

Avery described that when people did not take the time to get to know you and instead made quick decisions about who you are and what you believe, “then you're on the opposite and you feel like your voice just got shut off – so, (having) no assumptions really affect belonging in a lot of areas for me.” She suggested that, rather than making quick assumptions, it was important to ask questions and get to know a person more, as this was something she felt happened in Campus Leadership Fellows. She shared, “Don't assume everyone has the same perspectives, like political party, friends, culture, etc. By doing that, you can take away someone's voice if you make them uncomfortable about their values, and that's really diminishing.” Isabel shared similar sentiments, stating, “Belonging to me feels that despite racial,

socioeconomic, or personal background I don't feel judged but rather welcomed. I hope to see people of diverse backgrounds and... hoping to understand and connect.”

One participant left the following anonymous comment in the final open-ended survey after completing both focus groups: “From our conversations (in this focus group), it was revealed to me how much assumptions can limit a person's potential to feel belonging. It can halt building relationships and diving into a place/person/organization.” Participant data demonstrated that an open-minded approach—exemplified in settings where dialogue and relationship-building could happen and where judgment was consciously minimized—allowed for more genuine understanding and acceptance. Reserving judgment and avoiding assumptions about others' perspectives, values, and backgrounds prevented the diminishment of voices and ensured everyone felt heard and respected. These practices were important in creating a judgment free environment.

Valuing and Appreciating Others

Highlighted throughout the data was how feeling valued and appreciated were crucial elements in co-creating a sense of belonging. These sentiments were highlighted by Kelly, who emphasized “feeling valued,” and Parker who added “feeling seen,” as they initially defined what belonging meant to them. When individuals felt valued, their contributions and presence were acknowledged, fostering a deeper connection to the community.

According to participants, this sense of value was reinforced through direct eye contact, acknowledging presence, and active listening. Being “seen” and “heard” validated a person's existence and opinions, making them feel integral to the group. For instance, Carter shared that seeing and agreeing with someone while they were speaking reinforced their significance and promoted mutual respect. Isabel shared that the way she worked to foster belonging with others

was to “acknowledge their presence” through eye contact and conversation, which reinforced that they were a valuable part of the experience. These comments were shared as they described their experiences of belonging within Campus Leadership Fellows and as part of how they were engaging together throughout the focus groups in the moment.

Another way members felt valued was when others had a genuine interest in getting to know them. Avery shared how she felt valued when another party or person was pursuing her, meaning that they had a genuine curiosity about her and wanted to support her. Carter communicated that when people followed-up with her because they remembered something she said, it created a stronger connection. This genuine interest was driven by the action of asking intentional questions and being curious about another person.

In terms of environments that cultivated belonging, participants highlighted the value of sharing appreciation with one another. Parker said, “showing appreciation makes a big deal,” especially when seeing differences in one another and appreciating those. Avery stated, “It’s selfless and kind to be enthusiastic every time we see each other” as she described what appreciating each other in the group looked like to her. Carter talked about how checking in on someone to ask how they were or if you noticed something was off showed the care and support for that person.

Celebration was also described by participants as a way of sharing appreciation for each other. Lucy stated, “part of belonging is having people there to celebrate those moments with you, and you being there for them” because it was important to cheer on others when something was important to them. This form of celebration supported relationships and helped others feel valued. Carter shared that she wished Campus Leadership Fellows celebrated even more in their group chat, because there were so many people with small and big things to recognize.

Celebrating and acknowledging one another fostered a supportive and inclusive environment because it also acknowledged each person's individuality. Avery said, "It's validating to hear what you're good at and why" as a way that group members could show they cared about you and acknowledge your individuality.

Participants explained that to celebrate someone did not require a complete understanding of their personal journey but instead focused on recognizing and valuing what was significant to them. Lucy shared that, to her, "Belonging means to be celebrated and included for being unapologetically myself both outside and inside of the university." Participants provided examples, such as cheering on peers, acknowledging accomplishments in group chats, or simply hyping someone up. They said these acts of celebration enhanced the sense of community.

Lucy offered an example of an appreciation activity she did as part of another group where each member was on the "Mom fridge," which meant that others could celebrate the contributions of the person by posting about them on the refrigerator. In the final survey following the focus groups, one anonymous participant pointed to this example as a significant takeaway:

Lucy brought up celebrations and I had never thought of it, but I have experienced it. When you are with someone/someplace that celebrates you (your friends, your department, Campus Leadership Fellows, etc.) you feel a place of purpose and belonging. But, you need to celebrate with others. I appreciated Lucy's perspective of celebrating without understanding as well. You do not need to be in a person's shoes to celebrate and cheer them on.

Ultimately, this kind of celebration demonstrated that individuals cared about each other. Participants explained that they knew other Campus Leadership Fellows cared about them

because of small acts like checking in on each other if something seemed off or sending texts to see how someone was doing. Carter shared this story about how she experienced belonging at the university:

During my freshman year, my older brother realized I didn't have many friends and went out of his way to create belonging for me by inviting me to events with him and his friends, such as going out to eat. This meant a lot to me because it made me feel loved and appreciated for who I was.

Carter described the concept of belonging as, "Every part of you is welcomed, remembered, loved, and appreciated for what you bring (or don't bring) to a certain place." A safe and comfortable space where students felt appreciated by being valued and celebrated was significant in fostering an inclusive environment that enhanced the overall sense of belonging.

Honoring and Designing for Diversity

When asked to consider how holding different historically underrepresented identities influenced belonging, participants described factors that influenced their sense of belonging, or lack thereof, related to their identities. For example, Grady shared how important it was to be surrounded by other Black/African American males, as that was the identity he identifies with the most. The shared commonality helped him feel like he belonged when being with others who shared a similar culture and had "similar understandings to me and the nuances I go through."

Another participant, Isabel, expressed a different sentiment, articulating that she was not accepting of herself as a person of color, and conversations around that identity created discomfort for her. Kelly acknowledged that he does not think about how his identities influenced his belonging because he holds all majority identities and he "feels very comfortable in most situations within his state and university," and that "I feel like I belong pretty much

everywhere here.” He went on to say that he appreciated hearing about all of the cool things identity-specific groups did across campus, but that he really “has no idea what’s actually going on in the community because you’re not a part of the group.” He enjoyed groups like the Campus Leadership Fellows because he was with a more diverse population, and he enjoyed hearing about things members did, ranging from learning about the rodeo to different majors to identity-specific groups.

Parker shared that one way she felt and demonstrated behaviors that supported belonging was by showing appreciation for the differences in others. She shared that she appreciated hearing about things others were doing that she may not be part of or could relate to, and that she “wished people would talk about it more” so that they could better connect. After hearing that idea, Grady then shared about an event his multicultural student organization was hosting later in the week and invited the other members of the focus group to join them, to which they responded with appreciation and curiosity. The conversation continued and Parker shared, “I feel like we’re all split up – by (academic) college and so many other things.” Kelly followed-up by sharing some of the challenges that could happen when you spend time with the same type of people each day and how being in Campus Leadership Fellows provided exposure to different people and approaches. He said,

One of the big strong suits is that we have everybody, we have a lot of people from a lot of different places, so when we engage, we have many different people who are all driven in different ways, achieving the same thing or working toward the same thing.

Parker agreed with this comment, “Each of us come from a different background and we otherwise wouldn’t have met.” Reflecting further on the diversity among the Fellows, Grady followed-up with, “It’s so very interesting to be here and see where I intersect and where my

answers would be different.” This conversation and sentiment reflected the importance of recognizing and honoring difference.

The second group of participants surfaced parallel ideas of appreciating difference and reinforced that, for a group to create belonging, it needed to have diversity *and* acknowledge and design for that diversity. Carter commented that belonging was created when you knew you were not alone because “more than likely there are other people or individuals or within the group sort of like you.” Especially for individuals with underrepresented identities, facilitating an environment with authentic connections and curiosity about one another was essential. Another participant from this focus group wrote this in her open-ended survey after attending the first focus group: “When you focus on what is right with people and not what is wrong with people, belonging is fostered.” Finding ways to acknowledge and affirm those differences supported their belonging.

Lucy also commented that safety was essential to support individuals with underrepresented identities, such as the LGBTQ community. For example, she shared that, as a resident assistant in the residence halls, “We put certain restrictions or rules to make people feel more safe there in that space.” Acknowledging needs of individuals, especially those who hold minoritized and marginalized identities, could help reduce barriers and increase inclusivity among group members.

Parker shared a story about how she worked to foster belonging among women in engineering, who often are underrepresented in her field. She tried to initiate contact with new women because she “wanted them to feel more comfortable and welcome.” As a fifth-year student, she understood what it was like to attend the meetings for the first time and wanted to “spread my level of belonging to those who may not feel it quite yet.” She went on to say,

Taking the role as president (in this engineering club) this year, I learned very quickly that making the club a place of belonging was a necessary step to building the club back from the pandemic. We can plan as many events as we want, but if people do not feel like they belong, no one will come. I made sure to emphasize at every recruiting opportunity, all are welcome from different skill levels of manufacturing and interests. I have planned a few different events, focusing on the diversity of manufacturing processes and industries. To accommodate the lack of experience, I initiated training for the whole club on introductory skills. This helps create a level playing field for that specific process so the members can have something directly in common to bond over.

This story emphasized the need to recognize difference (in this particular case, skillset) and make intentional efforts to promote inclusion. Examples from participants highlighted that whether diversity was experienced as social identities, past experiences, different skillsets, or knowledge, an important practice of belonging was to honor and design for that diversity. These practices could enforce the conditions that fueled a sense of belonging.

In summary of Theme One, participants described creating safety, acceptance, and inclusion by (a) providing a comfortable environment; (b) being accepting, understanding, and authentic; (c) avoiding judgments; (d) helping individuals feel valued, recognized, and heard; and (e) honoring and designing for diversity. The next theme describes additional ways to design for belonging through organizational structure and dynamics.

Theme 2: Organizational Structure and Dynamics

In this theme, participants reflected on how specific organizational structures and dynamics impacted their sense of belonging in Campus Leadership Fellows, ranging from the structure of activities to group size. These design elements of the organization, such as place and

structure, could be heavily influenced by the authority structure in charge and responsible for the group. Thus, these were initially considered conditions that foster belonging. However, through deeper reflection, participants also described the practices members could engage in to promote belonging in these areas. As participants discussed specific experiences that facilitated belonging, five categories emerged that unpacked these variables, outlined in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3. Theme 2: Organizational Structure and Dynamics

Theme	Categories
Organizational Structure and Dynamics	Structured and intentional activities Intentional time and space Group size and location Responsibility within the group

Structured and Intentional Activities

Throughout all the focus groups, every participant commented on specific activities or events that supported their sense of belonging. Participants shared that these activities, ranging from everyday bonding events to required group gatherings and collaborative work, provided opportunities for members to interact, connect, and work toward common objectives. Parker shared that the provided *structure* of these experiences made things feel “not as awkward” and helped group members “bond, have fun and get to know each other.” Participating in structured activities allowed Campus Leadership Fellows to develop personal relationships and shared purpose, making members feel more connected and supported.

The first activity the Campus Leadership Fellows participated in was a structured relationship-building exercise that spanned over five weeks. The large group of 29 was divided into four smaller groups, each consisting of seven or eight people. They spent time each week responding to questions to get to know one another. Isabel said this activity was “a great way to create belonging and outside of that structure, it (our belonging) just grew, and we started hanging out outside our setting more.” Avery shared that the structure of this activity “made it

easy to check in with one another,” which provided “accountability” with one another. Kelly described that the questions and outline of what to do provided the right amount of structure for the group to engage in meaningful ways. The purpose was valuable, as it was designed to build meaningful relationships among Fellows. Overall, participants commented that the purpose and the way this experience was structured helped to facilitate the belonging among group members.

Another activity participants mentioned frequently was the two-day fall retreat and the many smaller activities built into the weekend retreat, such as the personal storytelling exercise, watching a football game and eating together, and a ball activity focused on teamwork. Grady shared that during the personal storytelling exercise, each member had to speak and share about themselves, adding that “that helped us build our sense of belonging or community.” Utilizing provided prompts, each person could share experiences about their lives. Grady said how important it was to “get everyone’s voices heard, whether that be through talking chips, calling on people, or other ways.” The structure of the activity invited in every voice while also reinforcing that the purpose of the activity was to come together as a Fellows class.

Parker shared that structured activities that invited participation and opinions from group members added to the desire to be there. For instance, getting to define the rules or process of an activity helped the group collectively decide how “we want the space to feel...and gives us more desire to be there.” Lucy reflected that the activities during the retreat helped to “set the tone” for how the group would engage together throughout the year. Carter said, “As a collective we set the rules/expectations,” through engaging in a structured activity during retreat. The design of these experiences provided structure, balanced with allowing group members to contribute, and shaped how they engaged together. It was also intentionally connected to the purpose of the

retreat. Avery said, “There is some leeway for what you wanted to do, but also structure to keep you safe and others safe.”

In addition to the retreat, another event the participants discussed was the opportunity to coach youth sports teams in small groups. Each person in Campus Leadership Fellows was part of a coaching team where they worked together to coach a youth’s sports team in the community, such as flag football or volleyball. Many participants talked about this experience and how valuable it was to them coming together while also reinforcing feelings of being a needed part of the organization. Isabel shared that she knew she “couldn’t not show up” because others were depending on her. This type of structured activity fostered connection and purpose among Campus Leadership Fellows.

Participants expressed that engaging in shared experiences helped to create a collective identity and purpose, as individuals came to appreciate each other’s strengths and contributions. This shared understanding was a powerful catalyst for inclusion and belonging, as it reinforced the idea that each member was an integral part of the group’s journey and success.

Something Lucy shared with her focus group was that she wished there had been something else for Fellows to do together during the second part of the year. She said, “We haven’t had a grounding this semester, like the retreat in the fall...a grounding could have helped me and us as a group.” She even suggested engaging in another session of the structured relationship-building activity they did at the beginning of the group. So, while there were activities for the group to participate in during the spring, those workshops and events did not carry the same structure and intentional purpose that had previously supported the group coming together.

Overall, references to the aforementioned structured activities were frequently revisited throughout the focus groups, further unpacking the components of each and what led those experiences to cultivate belonging among the Fellows. Additionally, these activities connected to other themes discussed later in this chapter, revealing numerous nuances to unpack. Ultimately, this data demonstrated that structured engagement activities with clear purpose helped group members co-create a cohesive and supportive environment where individuals could form meaningful relationships and work together toward shared achievements. This enhanced the group's overall sense of belonging and boosted engagement, motivation, and group cohesion.

Intentional Time and Purpose

Coinciding with the concept of structured activities, participants mentioned time as they described aspects that influenced belonging. Certainly, spending time together was important for creating a sense of belonging, but participants emphasized that time was only valuable if it was used and crafted intentionally. In fact, one participant shared this question in the open-ended survey following the first focus group: "Time sure helps foster belonging but it's not the answer. Why does time create belonging in some groups but not others?" This question was responded to through the dialogue below.

Parker suggested that "quality time" and "intentional time" allowed group members to understand one another better and come together. She elaborated that having time together to spend intentionally, whether in a large- or small-group setting, helped facilitate the connection and relationships with one another. Parker added to this point by saying that the time needed to be "structured time" to make sure it was intentionally planned with purpose, such as asking questions of each other, creating a mission statement together, or an outline of how to maximize time together. Kelly contributed that he would take this learning (about the concept of time

discussed in the focus group) into other groups he was in and start by explaining the importance of the time spent together. One idea he brainstormed was to ask group members to identify at least two key things to do to spend the time together in an intentional way.

Kelly proposed that a way to increase belonging was to schedule events where everybody could be there and ensure a recurring monthly time was on everyone's calendars. He said, "Intentional time to maintain long term because people get busy, we understand that. But being able to do events together as a larger group is what builds the strength of the group." He wanted more time to do things together. Kelly shared how he was a member of the campus choir, and the group "has been very inclusive of non-music majors." As a non-music major, this had been meaningful to him because they had "bent over backwards to keep all student involved in their programs." This meant considering all barriers to meeting times and scheduling events when most participants were able to attend. This signaled that they intentionally designed the time to include as many members as possible.

Other considerations around time emerged from participants. Grady shared that considering the overall timeframe the group had together also mattered because "we only have one year to connect then we all leave," thus using time as a way to frame and motivate one another. Likewise, Lucy and Avery discussed the importance of time, but coupled that idea with the space between the time groups were together. Lucy reflected,

Real belonging happens when you can have all the space in the world, and you come back and know you are just as accepted and safe, and have room to be yourself, as if you have been seeing each other every week.

Lucy admitted that she did not have this with many other groups she was part of but did with the Campus Leadership Fellows. She said when other groups got back together, she did not feel as

open to the group, but with Campus Leadership Fellows, she did. Lucy said, “It says something when you can withstand space from each other and still come back.”

While most participants commented they wanted more time together, especially during the second half of the year, several also expressed that there needed to be a healthy balance. Avery said that the space between the times they were together in Campus Leadership Fellows made her thankful for the group and not overconsumed. She did not want the group to be overprogrammed, but the space between gatherings was healthy.

Overall, participants commented on how they felt a stronger sense of belonging when time was used intentionally, which included facilitating meaningful interactions and a purposeful design.

Group Size and Location

The size of the group and physical location of the group gathering also influenced sense of belonging. Campus Leadership Fellows has approximately 30 people, and several participants reflected on how the larger group made it more difficult to get to know everyone. Isabel even said the group size was “overwhelming and stress inducing” to her. However, participants also expressed that they felt the most energy and belonging when the entire group was gathered.

To help make sense of this, I connected their other comments around group size and experiences. Five participants named how when they broke into smaller groups for structured activities, such as the structured relationship-building activity or coaching a youth sports team, that fueled their sense of belonging because they were more “intimate” and “with less people you get more time to talk” and “the small groups provided a base.” Isabel shared, “Because it’s small and intimate, I feel comfortable...small group attendance is where my comfort lies.” Similarly, Lucy explained, “With a smaller group it’s easier to get to know everyone well.” Moving

between small group and large group activities intentionally helped foster the co-creation of belonging. Grady shared that the small groups were like “a subgroup or base...it’s your little cohort of people you know well.” Parker said that time in the smaller groups then made the larger group experiences more comfortable and that this added to the overall feelings of the bigger group. Following the first focus group, one participant shared the following in their open-ended survey as a key takeaway: “I learned that being in small groups make it easier to ‘digest’ larger groups and grows community faster.” Thus, considering how to create both small and large group experiences influenced sense of belonging.

One participant, Kelly, commented on the physical location and the importance that had for the beginning of the group developing their sense of belonging. He said,

I think the location is critically important, but also very unimportant when you look at the overall sense of belonging. So, we first came together, the location of us being in the stadium was very important. It was a big place. It was a big part of our identity. But then we moved to a different building, and it was a different location. But we knew we still had our identity to group. And we’ve been different places doing different things. And we still, you know, try to belong together in different places. So location is very important maybe in the beginning...but I wouldn’t say continuing on it needs to be the most important thing because you should be focusing more on the individual relationships.

The group members then reflected ’n how the design of the space and the excitement of an intentional location helped bond the group members as they first gathered. However, the bond was what carried them through to be in other locations. Considering how a location affected group members could either support or take away from a group developing a sense of belonging.

Data revealed that size and location can impact belonging among college students. Smaller groups often fostered closer relationships and a sense of intimacy, where some individuals felt more comfortable sharing and connecting on a personal level. In contrast, larger groups offered diversity and a broader range of perspectives and enthusiasm but also required more effort to establish meaningful connections. Physical location of a group also played a crucial role, as comfortable and inclusive spaces promoted engagement and a sense of belonging. Whether in intimate settings or larger environments, both the size and location of groups influenced how these students perceived their sense of belonging.

Responsibility within the Group

Building on the concepts above, participants also shared how having a role to play or some responsibility within a group was crucial for individuals to feel a sense of belonging. Kelly said, “If everybody chips in, then it helps everyone have some buy-in with the experience, and everyone feels like they can do that thing the group is responsible for...everyone has that shared responsibility.” According to participants’ responses, when individuals were empowered to have roles or responsibilities, they felt they were valued members of the group. This recognition fostered a sense of purpose and significance within the group, enhancing their connection to the collective mission.

These responsibilities happened in different ways among Campus Leadership Fellows. From Kelly’s perspective, the primary responsibility of each Fellow in the program was coaching the youth sports team with other members. He reflected on his experience with the team and shared that the other Campus Leadership Fellows in his group did not have a background in coaching or the sport, while he did. Rather than only letting himself coach, he purposefully found a way for them to contribute. He said,

Let's all do something! I didn't want them to feel like they were just babysitters on the sideline. I wanted to make sure that even if I had the (coaching) experience, everyone else in the group is also getting to contribute so they feel seen.

By inviting everyone to play a role, he said it increased everyone's engagement and connection. Isabel agreed, describing her experience as a coach on the youth sports team, where the shared responsibility fostered a sense of being needed. She did not want to let her other coaches or team down. Parker shared that the responsibility of being a coach allowed her to share strengths with the team. She said, "I was excited to be there and teach them and share my experiences with them." Overall, finding ways for each member to contribute engaged them and helped them build a sense of belonging among the group.

This also happened in other ways. For example, Lucy shared that the faculty/staff helped "set the tone and pointed us toward purpose" during the retreat, but "after you gave us direction, then all of us took the gears." Avery elaborated on this, and described a specific moment during the storytelling exercise in the retreat where someone in the group asked if they could clap after each person shared. Avery said, "After that, it was immediately like an open, honest conversation where we're never keeping anything in, we can say what we are thinking." Allowing group members to engage and direct within the activity helped fuel their connection with one another.

Avery also talked about how valuable it had been to "design the experience with one another" as a way to actively get all members contributing and playing a role within the group. "Whatever environment you're in, look what people are good at and put them in those places," she said, as that reinforced individual and collective responsibility. Lucy shared this reflection:

I think that kind of like is going to like letting everyone play to their strengths.

Everyone's different. Everyone's unique. Everyone has a unique skill set and tool belt.

Let them like in a group built for people belonging...everyone needs to be able to use their tool belt. Everyone needs to be able to like shine where they you know, are meant to, and sometimes being the mom friends, that's a great example of like, Hey, this is what I'm good at. This is what I'm gonna do for this group. Sometimes people, you know, planning the activities being the leader of th' group, you know, that's their skill set. They're gonna do that. And I think that kind of allows everyone to be themselves and show their strengths.

Fulfilling roles and responsibilities allowed individuals to actively participate and engage with the group, deepening their bonds with other members. Lucy discussed how having “someone who takes a leadership role at certain times is very important” because that person provided structure for the group while also deepening their connection within the group. For example, Grady talked about how having a peer in the group serve as the facilitator to lead some of the activities was helpful to drive the conversation, ask questions, and push the group to think deeper. Creating more opportunities for this could further cultivate belonging.

Participants also discussed the organizational structure of Campus Leadership Fellows, including valuing the lack of hierarchy among group members. Kelly shared that “maintaining equal privileges and rights within the group,” “leveling the playing field for everyone,” and “having no clear pyramids of power that someone doesn't feel they have the right to be there” were important for facilitating the co-creation of belonging. Avery discussed:

I don't think bureaucratic leadership would work to create belonging, but I do appreciate a person being a little authoritative in policies to follow rules and responsibilities. There has to be some support from authority sometimes, just not all of the time. I think it goes

back to a little authoritative structure which provides boundaries or safety and policies and structure with you being allowed to explore your role for yourself, too.

This authoritative framework helped initially create an environment where Fellows felt secure and directed, knowing there was a foundation upon which they can rely. However, for the group to foster a sense of belonging, participants shared it was important for the members to be empowered to take ownership and actively engage with one another.

While coaching youth sports and leading small group activities were some responsibilities these participants held in the group, they discussed how having more opportunities for roles and responsibilities could be beneficial. Kelly suggested that individuals did not have as many roles or responsibilities in Campus Leadership Fellows and that would have added to the engagement and buy-in, influencing a greater sense of belonging. Ultimately, roles and responsibilities gave individuals a tangible way to invest in the group's success, making them integral to the community and reinforcing their sense of belonging.

In summary, Theme Two highlighted important organizational components to consider that fostered belonging among participants, including having structured and intentional activities for group members to engage in, spending intentional time together, considering group size and location, and creating opportunities for responsibility within the group. These variables created the conditions that fostered belonging. The next theme will describe the value of relationships and creating opportunities for connection among group members.

Theme 3: Meaningful Interpersonal Connections

This theme highlighted the importance of fostering a sense of belonging through the creation of meaningful interpersonal connections among group members. Meaningful interpersonal connections were described through five categories, as outlined in Table 4.4.

Participants emphasized that they felt a sense of belonging by connecting and relating with their peers in a way that focused on building relationships beyond the “surface level.”

Table 4.4. Theme 3: Meaningful Interpersonal Connections

Theme	Categories
Meaningful interpersonal connections	Connecting and relating to one another Listening and sharing enthusiastically Being vulnerable Building trust, respect, and honesty

Connecting and Relating To One Another

Participants all described the importance of spending quality time getting to know their peers as essential for cultivating their sense of belonging. They reflected on the opportunities to spend intentional time building relationships and connecting, specifically highlighting the structured relationship-building exercise at the start of joining the organization and during the retreat. For example, Lucy shared:

We had intentional time to learn about each one of our lives and past that’s led us to this point. I think doing that at the beginning of meeting each other really helped to set the tone of belonging for the rest of the year.

During the retreat, Campus Leadership Fellows engaged in a personal storytelling activity. Kelly described this time as “listening and talking about intricacies,” while Grady described it as “getting to know each other down to the nitty gritty details of each other.” Lucy said this experience was “getting to know each other on a deeper level.” This experience helped members connect and relate with one another, which fueled their sense of belonging.

Avery and Grady highlighted the importance of asking questions to connect with one another further. Avery shared that “asking powerful questions” let people bring up something about themselves and their interests in a way that allowed them to talk about what they wanted to

share. Grady said asking questions “helps break the ice” and “can push the group to think deeper.” Engaging in relationship-building early on helped provide a foundation for connectivity and belonging.

Building relationships through relating to one another also allowed an opportunity to connect on challenges or insecurities. For example, Lucy discussed how “I didn’t feel like I belonged any of my freshman year.” This experience, though, allowed her to relate to other people who were going through similar challenges. Grady shared, “Connecting to the personal experiences and things that have happened in our lives, then you can connect into the diversity embedded (within the group).” These experiences allowed members to relate with one another. Another way the group connected with each other was through their shared time coaching a youth sports team. Kelly stated, “We were all relating to each other” because of the similar experiences they had together. Whether they commiserated over their frustrations of working with their youth team or celebrated their positive successes watching their team grow, that connection was a “big belonging time” according to Kelly.

Group members also shared they feel a greater sense of belonging when they can bond over commonalities and shared interests. For instance, Grady talked about bonding over the University’s sports team increased their connectivity from the beginning. Isabel reflected on how having shared interests and morals helped increase her sense of belonging among other members in the Campus Leadership Fellows program. She said this was developed early on within the group, which helped her feel more connected to those people and also created understanding and empathy among group members.

Lucy and Kelly talked about the commonality of everyone having a connection back to leadership, even though everyone was from different colleges and majors across campus. Avery

explained that “Belonging at our university means being in an environment or around people who have at least one commonality to build a relationship from. For example, one love for our university, having the same major, etc.” Lucy shared that even when she did not think she had a “singular thing in common” with her residents in her residence halls, she would still work to find a connection and commonality. Finding these commonalities or intersections supported the group coming together.

Connecting and relating to each other was essential for these students in creating belonging because it fostered a sense of community and mutual understanding. Participants noted how important it was to engage in these practices to create the conditions for belonging.

Listening and Sharing Enthusiastically

All seven participants mentioned listening as an important practice for fostering belonging. Isabel, Kelly, and Carter each spoke to the value of active listening, which often involves nodding your head, keeping eye contact, and engaging through body language. Avery and Parker described being listened to as “being fully heard,” which built connection. They discussed that, in order to truly listen, it was important to remove distractions, such as being on your phone, because otherwise it made people feel like what they shared did not matter. Grady said, “Active listening to people and listening to understand. Not listening to like, respond just to have something to say.” This reinforced that active listening was truly comprehending what the other person was communicating rather than focusing on what you wanted to share next.

All seven participants noted the importance of being fully present or paying attention as a necessary practice to foster belonging. Lucy contrasted being fully present to “Not just like being there, zoning out, and responding with ‘yeah, yeah, yeah’.” Grady summarized his thoughts on how this co-creates belonging:

I would say being fully present in the moment. I really like remove distractions. I feel like being actively present kind of encompasses a lot of the things like listening, not having those distractions and being intentional. And I think when we do that, we're just open to new ways of thinking because we are actually listening to someone. And, again, being there in the moment.

Participants commented on several opportunities in Campus Leadership Fellows where they could be fully present and actively listen, including the small-group relationship-building activity, the retreat, and personal storytelling. Lucy mentioned the opportunities for intentional time to learn about each person in Campus Leadership Fellows, noting that what made that so meaningful was that "Everyone was enthusiastic about sharing and listening. That's kind of rare to find...a lot of times you have someone who is keen on one or the other." This emphasized the importance of both practices in building interpersonal connections through listening and sharing and creating opportunities for this exchange to happen among one another.

Outside of Campus Leadership Fellows, Lucy shared how she developed better listening skills as a resident assistant in the residence halls on campus. She would ask questions to her residents about themselves, and, through active listening, she would be able to better support them and connect them to their interests. Carter described active listening as essential to an organization she was part of because each person in the group had diabetes and the best way they connected was through listening to each other. "A big part of the club is to be around other diabetics, because having diabetes sucks, and it is just a way that we can foster inclusion with each other and let the other people know they're not going through it alone." This also fostered the practice of relating and connecting to one another. Grady acknowledged that when you belong, you feel more comfortable sharing.

Both Parker and Avery described an environment with high belonging as “happy” because people wanted to be there and enjoyed the experience. Additionally, Grady shared, “When you belong, you’re more comfortable sharing. You’re more comfortable putting yourself out there, putting your ideas out there.” Thus, comfort also increased sharing and engagement among group members.

Kelly told a story about sharing, recalling a time when a student in one of his classes brought dessert to that class period for her birthday “because she wanted to do it.” He expressed how it made the class feel more like a community because she brought a part of herself to the group, and that strengthened the connection they had with her. Finding ways that each person can share part of themselves with the group and create the environment for actively listening and being present fueled belonging among group members.

In summary, participants emphasized how important listening and sharing were to cultivating belonging among group members because they helped individuals feel valued and connected, thus enhancing belonging. These practices were further heightened through the next practice: demonstrating vulnerability.

Being Vulnerable

In the process of building meaningful interpersonal relationships, five participants discussed the role of vulnerability and depth in the conversation. According to Grady, vulnerability looked like “sharing very personal stories” and “learning about people from an internal standpoint, rather than what you see external,” while depth was described as “beyond the surface,” and “getting to the meat and potatoes of everything,” which he experienced throughout Campus Leadership Fellows. The opportunity to share below the surface level was a common thread among participants. Isabel highlighted how important and challenging it could be to go

beyond the “elevator speech” of stating name, major, hometown, and finding a way into conversation that would connect with their age group. Getting to do this in small groups throughout Campus Leadership Fellows was, “just so great. It was really great to create belonging.”

Carter referenced that the Campus Leadership Fellows got “so deep so fast” when they were taking time to share about their lives during the retreat. She said that “vulnerability is being open to sharing more sacred parts of your heart.” Similarly, Avery shared that “getting to the root of how people feel makes more belonging.” Grady acknowledged that both were necessary – the surface level things like facts about the person, their name and face, as well as the depth about each person. This practice of sharing also fueled creating an inclusive and accepting environment highlighted in Theme One. Lucy commented that she had experienced the most belonging in a group through Campus Leadership Fellows. She elaborated by saying, “I think it is because we all got very vulnerable when we first met each other, and we all accept and love each other for exactly who we are, and that is really hard to find with a group that large.” Vulnerability played a significant role in this dynamic, as it helped build mutual understanding and acceptance within the group.

Overall, being vulnerable with one another was a key practice that co-created belonging, as participants noted how sharing personal stories and connecting beyond surface-level introductions helped to facilitate greater mutual understanding, acceptance, and inclusion within their group.

Building Trust, Respect, and Honesty

As participants described the importance of meaningful interpersonal connections that facilitated belonging, they discussed the importance of trust, respect, and honesty. Lucy said that

trust was the biggest factor that influenced her sense of belonging. She said, “If I can’t trust a group of people, I’m not going to be vulnerable.” Carter shared, “In Campus Leadership Fellows we got deep so fast, and the trust and respect levels were so high, so quickly.” Likewise, Lucy expressed, “You’re not going to feel like you belong unless you have a sense of trust with those people...you’re not going to be in a place where you can be the truest version of yourself unless you trust those around you.” The importance of a sense of trust was further described by these group members when Carter said, “What happens in the room, stays in the room,” and Lucy said, “Whatever is said or done within the group is a shared understanding and creates trust.” Avery reflected on how they built trust through the small group storytelling activity during the retreat. She said, “We knew that that was staying in that room, and I truly believe that did stay in that room. I think that was a big area of respect as well, because we dove in so deep, so quick, that we all respect one another to not go air out this vulnerable conversation.”

Coinciding with trust was the concept of respect and honesty. Creating a “respectful atmosphere” was described by Lucy when she reflected on the first moment that she met all of the other Campus Leadership Fellows. She said, “It’s like the minute I met all you guys it was a respectful atmosphere where we were getting to know each other on a deeper level.” That respect was also emphasized through honesty and how individuals were authentic in how they engaged with one another. Carter shared that how “people answer questions” was how you could sense the honesty, explaining that honesty was how respect and trust were facilitated. Avery said that she appreciated the Campus Leadership Fellows because of the “open and honest conversations” they had among all group members.

While the concepts of trust, respect, and honesty were discussed several times in depth, there was also an acknowledgment of boundaries and not feeling forced, both of which were

essential components of the engagement. For instance, Grady talked about “not feeling forced to do things” and “having the option to participate,” such as “allowing people to talk when they want to and when they don’t” also facilitated a trustworthy, honest and respectful environment. On the other hand, Isabel explained that being forced to share before she was ready caused her a lot of discomfort and made her want to avoid the group for a period of time. Thus, the importance of respecting boundaries and being clear with the boundaries was important in facilitating trust and respect. Avery said,

Do not push people to tell you something, assuming they are okay with that. Do ask questions. What does this look like for you? Allow others the freedom and comfort to share or not share...there are lots of ways to create boundaries. Having a conversation about boundaries so everyone is comfortable.

Lucy described boundaries by stating, “Protect your heart and peace, don’t put energy in people who aren’t going to do the same back,” which also emphasized the mutuality of respect and trust. Avery talked about how important it was that she knew she could say “no” if she wanted to.

The high levels of trust and respect enabled students to be vulnerable, fostering deeper connections and a more inclusive community, connecting back to Themes One and Two. Participants explained that embracing practices that supported trust, respect, and honesty facilitated an environment where belonging was cultivated.

Theme 4: Purpose and Investment

This theme highlighted elements of belonging focused on purpose and investment through four categories outlined in Table 4.5. For a group to develop a sense of belonging, there was a need for an understood and acted-upon focus on purpose by individual members and by members collectively. Factors that influenced purpose and investment of group members

included (a) cultivating motivation and mindset, (b) supporting attendance and accountability, (c) building shared purpose, and (d) fostering personal growth and self-awareness.

Table 4.5. Theme 4: Purpose and Investment

Theme	Categories
Purpose and Investment	Cultivating motivation and mindset Supporting attendance and accountability Building shared purpose Fostering personal growth and self-awareness

Cultivating Motivation and Mindset

Participants throughout the focus groups raised questions such as: What factors make some group members more energized to participate than others? What motivates a group member to be engaged or disengaged? Participants shared that when belonging was at its highest, all members made a choice to be there and to engage, and that increased engagement led to a stronger sense of belonging. This was summarized by Carter, Lucy, and Avery, who said, “You get in what you put out” and “Don’t take it for granted.” Facilitating an experience where group members could explore their motivation, mindset, and how to prioritize their engagement was an important aspect of all members feeling a sense of belonging with one another, as it reinforced a shared unity in purpose.

Overall, participants described the Campus Leadership Fellows as highly motivated because they were “excited to get involved” and “very enthusiastic coming in.” Carter even shared that after attending the retreat, “We all wanted to do everything we could (as a group).” Participants reinforced that helping to foster a mindset of “buy-in” and “opting-in” helped to increase engagement, which increased a sense of belonging. When people wanted to be there, they were more engaged and, therefore, contributed more to the overall community.

Participants also shared how mindset influenced how one perceived themselves belonging, or not, within a group. Carter reflected that if you struggled with belonging and/or

mental health in high school or elsewhere, those past experiences could affect how you think about belonging in new groups. Additionally, Isabel discussed how belonging “is something that does not come easy for me,” and that early on, conversations about belonging or considering how she would belong within the university context made her feel anxious. One’s prior experiences with belonging could influence how they saw themselves as part of the group or not. Taking time to explore the roles of motivation and mindset in fostering belonging and group cohesion was crucial for understanding the needs of both individuals and groups.

Lucy discussed how everyone in Campus Leadership Fellows was “chosen for their desire to be in the group” and that the ability to opt in to this experience and articulate their purpose for joining was directly tied to motivation. However, she also talked about other organizations where the desire to join may be rooted in more technical decisions, such as gaining experience or skillsets and receiving benefits or salary. Taking time to understand what motivates group members could increase engagement, which could then increase belonging. Carter talked about how she had been trying to find what motivated people in the diabetics club she led and that it was challenging to get people “there.” According to participants, spending time talking about why they joined the group and what motivated them helped to center this internal feeling.

One idea that participants in the first group explored was spending time discussing their “why” for being part of the group. Parker shared, “I think it would be cool that one of the first meetings...we could define what everyone’s mission for the why they joined the Campus Leadership Fellows, because, each group of people might be different.” Isabel expanded upon this idea and suggested the group craft a mission statement as a way to articulate purpose more explicitly. Grady shared,

I think a mission statement is always good, because, like then it lets the members of the organization in and kinda know that they all have the same understanding of what something's supposed to be and supposed to do. We all have different ideas about what Campus Leadership Fellows are supposed to do, and I'm sure some are similar and some are different. So our mission statement helps to make sure that, like everybody's on one page.

In the second focus group, participants discussed how each member had to make a conscious choice about how they engaged in the group. Lucy described this as,

You also just make that choice like cause all of this is a choice, you know. No one like has to do any of this. I mean, will people like not feel that great around you? Yeah. But you know, like you have to choose all of this when creating a group of belonging. And so I think it's important that everyone's making that conscious choice.

When group members prioritized their involvement and engagement within a group, it affected belonging. Avery said, "I expect people to prioritize what they're involved in...it's honesty and respect." She said that she has experienced belonging to dwindle and be affected in a negative way when group members did not prioritize the group. She explained, "If you do not know your why, you will not prioritize it." Going back to what motivates individuals, spending time individually, and asking a group to articulate their purpose was important. Avery shared,

I wish I told my if I would tell myself you should always know the why of what you're doing, or else you're not going to prioritize it. And so, even after leaving the bowling meeting, I should have walked out to my car thinking about the purpose of why I was there to create belonging to. You're going to want to continue to pursue this organization if you debrief with yourself, or reflect with yourself, or reflect with yourself, and hold

yourself accountable. Hey? How did I show up at that. Did I sit in the corner not say anything? Or did I really dive into people's lives?

Motivation and mindset to actively participate within a group promoted engagement and strengthened social bonds, contributing to a deeper sense of belonging. Fostering practices that encourage motivation and a mindset of belonging helped build shared purpose and understanding, thus influencing overall sense of belonging.

Supporting Attendance and Accountability

Another topic that surfaced frequently was attendance and accountability. Participants shared that members with high attendance and active presence played a crucial role in enhancing sense of belonging, as they helped build a sense of collective unity and purpose. Grady reflected that he often assessed another member's sense of belonging by tracking if that person attended events every week. When students regularly attended group activities, meetings, or events, it fostered a sense of accountability and commitment to the group. Isabel shared that when there was consistency with events and attendance, everyone felt more belonging. Participants expressed that high attendance rates contributed to a vibrant and energetic community, as the presence of many members created a dynamic and engaging atmosphere. Avery reflected,

The times I felt most alive, most involved, and most excited with the connection of my community (in Campus Leadership Fellows) was when attendance was high. There is more energy, engaging in storytelling, more genuine curiosity of one another...and you can create a new pairing in the community or a new connection.

This consistent participation helped to build a collective identity as a group and reinforced the shared purpose of the group, making each member feel more connected and invested in the

community. Required events ensured that everyone had the chance to engage, fostering inclusivity and ensuring that no one was left out.

Conversely, participants shared that when attendance was low, it significantly impacted the group's sense of purpose and belonging. The absence of members created gaps in communication, reduced the effectiveness of activities, and diminished the overall energy of the group. Participants even reflected on the impact of their own lack of attendance and how it influenced their sense of belonging. Grady shared, "I missed the first day of retreat, so I don't have that connection to certain people." Parker also expressed, "I missed the second day of retreat and the depth of how deep and connected everyone got." This lack of participation led to feelings of disconnection and undervaluation among those who did attend, as the group's cohesiveness and collective spirit were weakened.

As participants discussed attendance, they also brought up words like "busy," "crazy schedule," "stressed," and "missing things." Five participants talked about how their schedules or other commitments did not allow them to go to everything they wanted to in Campus Leadership Fellows. Avery said, "It's sometimes hard to prioritize when you're so stressed." Thus, while the group desired higher attendance, there was an underlying tension due to acknowledging everyone's existing, and sometimes competing, commitments.

Lucy shared that there could be more emphasis and accountability on attendance and communication within Campus Leadership Fellows to help with belonging. She and Avery brought up the idea of "structured check-ins" as a way to provide some accountability for group members. Lucy stated, "I think there should be more emphasis when you agree to be part of Campus Leadership Fellows that you are going to communicate with each other." This

communication could have been another way for group members to feel a higher level of engagement with one another, especially if attending all events was not an option.

In the final survey completed by participants after attending both focus groups, one participant shared this about the connection between accountability and belonging:

I have realized that I am in systems that mean something different to everyone involved. When I am in a space, I need to be present. I think finding a space of belonging is a responsibility if you take it on. If you join an organization, a friendship, etc, you need to take the steps to nurture the belonging. When I am busy or stressed sometimes I am not focused on where my feet are and that affects others in the group. When I center myself and realize how important building a community of belonging is with people around me, it not only will positively affect me but others as well.

This comment not only reflected accountability of attendance but also of being fully present and participating in behaviors that facilitated belonging for everyone involved.

Overall, participants emphasized that high attendance and active presence contributed significantly to collective unity and purpose. Consistent participation fostered accountability and commitment, thus cultivating a collective sense of purpose for gathering and being together.

Building Shared Purpose

Parker described belonging as “Being part of something,” and Grady shared, “We’re all from the same group. It’s a big thing. I know we’re all Campus Leadership Fellows. It’s like we’ve all had those similar experiences.” This sense of having a shared experience and overall purpose was something participants described as influencing their sense of belonging.

Parker explained that purpose could even be a focus on belonging. She said, “Being upfront that we want this group to form a space where you all feel like you belong, and having

that like upfront thought, makes people think about it more...we're pushing to become closer.”

Taking time to articulate those shared goals and purposes among group members facilitated belonging.

The group's Sense of belonging increased when they were able to articulate and work toward a common purpose of shared goals. Campus Leadership Fellows had several opportunities to work toward the same goal, such as coaching their youth sports team or determining how they wanted to engage together in the upcoming year. Grady explained that when he got together with his small group every week to coach their youth sports team, they had a shared goal and purpose, which made them all more comfortable and connected. Carter reflected on how Fellows collectively worked together to set the expectations for how they wanted to engage together through various activities, such as the personal storytelling exercise during the fall retreat. “Making sure everyone is on the same page” is another way Grady described how important it was to take the time to come together on shared goals or purpose, and how that fueled belonging among group members.

Avery talked about how having a shared purpose increased her belonging in an on-campus job she held. She reflected,

I felt as though I truly belonged in this group because, first, we all had the love of what we do and assisting people in engaging in their potential. We were all able to have conversations about this which energized us. Second, our graduate assistant created a safe, professional, and efficient environment. What I mean by this is during our meetings we were getting things done. Since we were focused and energized we never felt like it was a waste of our time, we were engaged. Third, because I was happy we were getting things done, I was energized by what we were getting done, and I had a commonality

with my 11 other colleagues, I was 100% myself. We were allowed to be ourselves and everyone celebrated authenticity.

Working together toward a shared purpose allowed Avery and her peers to experience a great sense of belonging with one another. Taking the time to understand how each person fits into the goals and purpose of the group helped develop a collective sense of belonging.

Overall, participants expressed that having shared purposes allowed group members to foster unity, thus promoting a sense of belonging among them. Opportunities to work toward something together also fostered growth and investment, as members could work together toward their shared purpose.

Fostering Personal Growth and Self-Awareness

Another aspect that contributed to belonging was the concept of personal growth. Five participants discussed the role growth played within their experience of Campus Leadership Fellows. Growth, referring to an individual's developmental growth, was highlighted as Grady talked about how his peers in Campus Leadership Fellows "challenged each other to make each other better." Avery said she appreciated how members in Campus Leadership Fellows "pushed me to reach my potential" and how the group had "grown together" over the course of the year. This focus on growth was an important element that increased belonging among group members.

Lucy suggested that, "It takes everyone pushing and investing in each other" and to, "push each other to be the best version of oneself and encourage each other to fulfill potential." To create belonging she shared,

Invest in others and yourself. There's not one group that I felt like I belonged, that I didn't have others investing in me that was like a key thing. It's like you don't just want people who are gonna sit back and let you live your life. However, even if you're like,

you know, just like not living up to your fullest potential, I still want to surround myself with people who push me to do what I can do and like use all my potential. And you should be doing that for others, too, you know. If you're belonging...you have a group where you all actively want to like be the best versions of yourself. And I think that's what Campus Leadership Fellows truly is. I think all of us do a good job of like giving each other ideas for the future, pushing each other.

Kelly described that form of pushing each other as, "challenging each other, trying to make each other better...out of our comfort zones." Grady said it was like, "iron sharpening iron." This focus on growth and development also served as an understood purpose among these Campus Leadership Fellows.

Avery, Carter, and Lucy also talked about the importance of support related to personal growth, which influenced investment. Supporting one another, whether personally or for an achievement, helped a person grow. Examples they provided of supporting someone included sharing resources or experiences with them. These actions demonstrated an investment in one another and also allowed peers to offer whatever type of support they could in each other's journey.

Partnered with the concept of growth was the need for self-awareness. Isabel shared that having self-awareness was key to creating spaces of belonging. Avery said that a lot of the characteristics of belonging they had discussed in the focus groups "are about oneself". She said, "I'm not saying that you can solely create belonging, but at first you have to look inward before blaming {others}." She gave examples of this introspection, such as "reflecting with yourself and holding yourself accountable" by asking yourself, "How did I show up at that?"

In the final survey that participants completed anonymously after completing both focus groups, one participant shared:

Finally (after the exercising of writing on the poster sheets), I saw the things that create belonging can be individual characteristics. You may not feel a sense of belonging in a space or with people yet, but you need to reflect on yourself first to see if you're taking the steps (loving, celebrating, positivity, honesty, no assumptions, etc). You do not always need to show up as your 'best self', my best friends have seen me at my worst yet when you still work at these characteristics of belonging its almost a step to finding belonging.

Being around individuals who challenged and supported each other for continued growth and who were self-aware to reflect about themselves increased a sense of belonging. Support, whether emotional or practical, ensured that individuals did not feel isolated and underscored their importance within the community. This focus on continual growth, learning, and improvement, both individually and collectively, ensured that the community was meeting evolving needs and remaining relevant to the lives of the individuals who were part of it.

In summary, Theme 4 highlighted the importance of cultivating motivation and mindset, supporting attendance and accountability, building shared purpose, and fostering personal growth and self-awareness. Participants emphasized that motivation and mindset drove engagement and unity, with high attendance fostering a dynamic community. Articulating and aligning on a shared mission strengthened group identity and purpose. Personal growth and self-awareness were also crucial, as members challenged and supported each other to reach their potential. Regular participation and accountability helped build a sense of unity, while self-reflection helped members understand their role in fostering belonging. Together, these elements created a

cohesive, supportive community, built around purpose and development, enhancing the sense of belonging among group members.

Theme 5: Influence of AI Process

This theme responded to the second research question: *How does the appreciative inquiry process contribute to the co-creation of belonging among college students?* Data revealed two categories, listed in Table 4.6. The first category described participants' shifts in thinking about belonging and how they planned to apply their learning about belonging moving forward. The second category outlined how participants described an increased sense of belonging as a result of the AI process and the accompanying reflection throughout the process.

Table 4.6. Theme 5: Influence of AI Process

Theme	Categories
Influence of AI Process	Shifts in thinking and application Fostering sense of belonging through AI reflective process

Shifts in Thinking and Application

Throughout the research study, participants were asked to share their thoughts and experiences related to belonging. At the beginning of the study and prior to attending the first focus group, participants completed a survey responding to four open-ended questions about belonging, in addition to providing demographic information. Their varied responses provided rich insights into how students conceptualized belonging in different ways. Their responses are shared below in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7. Participant Definitions of Belonging

Participant Name	Response to question: What does belonging mean to you a) in general and b) in the context of being an undergraduate student at this university?
Parker	Belonging corresponds deeply to being a part of something. This could be just being a part of the university family and feeling a connection with others

	or being in an extracurricular where interests can thrive deeper depending on someone's desired involvement level.
Grady	Acceptance under any circumstances.
Kelly	Feeling seen and acknowledged by your peers, easy access to organizations and groups you identify with.
Isabel	Belonging to me feels that despite racial, socioeconomic, or personal background I don't feel judged but rather welcomed. In the context of being an undergraduate student at the university, I hope to see people of diverse backgrounds and if not that, then knowing other backgrounds and hoping to understand and connect.
Avery	Belonging to me in general means personally making choices to find things, people, and places that lessen anxiety/worry because I do not need to focus on being safe. Belonging at the university means being in an environment or around people who have at least one commonality to build a relationship from (For example: one love for our school, same major, etc.)
Carter	Belonging means every part of you is welcomed, remembered, loved, and appreciated for what you bring (or don't bring) to a certain place. At our university, belonging means you aren't judged for the things you do or don't do and that you have a welcoming smile everywhere you go.
Lucy	Belonging means to be celebrated and included for being unapologetically myself both outside and inside of the university.

All participants offered unique definitions of belonging. Parker saw belonging as being part of something larger, like the university family or extracurricular groups. Grady defined it simply as acceptance under any circumstances. Kelly emphasized the importance of feeling seen and acknowledged, with easy access to groups that align with one's identity. Isabel highlighted the importance of feeling welcomed regardless of background and hoped to see or connect with diverse peers. Avery mentioned finding people, places, and activities that reduce anxiety and foster a sense of safety. Carter described belonging as being welcomed and appreciated for one's whole self, without judgment, particularly in the university setting. Lucy felt that belonging meant being celebrated for being oneself, both inside and outside the university. These diverse

responses highlighted the multifaceted nature of belonging and how it was perceived differently by each individual.

During the first focus group, participants had the opportunity to hear a variety of definitions and overviews of belonging (described in more detail in Chapter 2) and respond with their thoughts. For example, when considering belonging as a basic human need (Maslow, 1962; Strayhorn, 2019) opinions varied on how essential belonging was when compared to other basic needs. Grady said, “When I think of basic human needs, I think of water, food, shelter...I don’t really think of my friends of belonging or being part of the community.” Isabel followed-up with, “I feel like belonging is important, but more like a want and not as much a need as shelter, food, and water.” Kelly shared that many of his friends were simply not driven to be around other people. He also wondered how belonging was experienced if people are not physically together, which was how he initially conceptualized belonging. Grady also wondered how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced belonging because of the lack of physical interactions with others. Additional conversation centered around not being able to force people into experiencing belonging and wondering why some people felt a sense of belonging and others do not. This discussion illuminated the varied perspectives on the importance of belonging and its role in human life.

Throughout the entire study, participants had the opportunity to share questions about belonging. To me, these questions reflected the complexity and multifaceted nature of belonging. For example, at the start of the study, Avery wondered whose responsibility it was to create a sense of belonging. She felt that belonging was the responsibility of at least two parties, but she wondered who was more responsible. She asked,

I want to know if people are stuck in a mindset that they don't belong and that negatively affects their experience? Or are the universities truly not doing a good job or are they doing a great job? And what percentage of each party's responsibility is it?

Lucy asked, "Is there really an answer of creating a space of belonging that fits the needs of every person." And Carter asked, "What does belonging look like when you can't meet up with people because school and work exist?" These kinds of questions spurred the group's conversation with one another into in-depth conversations. The more the participants engaged in the process, the more willing and curious they were to share questions and consider different aspects of belonging.

After each focus group, participants shared their evolving insights through anonymous surveys. For example, one participant shared, "I realized that belonging is not always a physical/in-person activity or feeling." This demonstrated a shift in perspective from the beginning of the first focus group when participants thought about belonging through the lens of physically being together. Another participant shared their takeaway was, "Understanding more about what belonging means," demonstrating additional knowledge about belonging. At the conclusion of the second focus group, Kelly shared this reflection:

I think I described my sense of belonging as essentially the roles that I held of coach, and the person who fixes the bullying, or different roles that I've held and that falls under responsibility within the small group. But from this culmination activity I realize that my intentionality of just making sure that I am present and mentally present in each event has also nurtured a sense of belonging within the group as well. So, it's not just that I can fix whatever they throw with me, that's not the only part of how to encourage belonging. I can explore other ways.

The opportunity to deeply discuss the experience of belonging was a takeaway noted by several participants through the surveys and focus groups, reflecting a more thorough and descriptive understanding of belonging at the conclusion of the experience.

Participants were also asked to reflect on the AI process of the 5-D cycle, as well as information they generated and takeaways they had. Participants shared practical ways they would utilize their experience and learning. For example, Parker shared,

At the next Campus Leadership Fellows event I'm going to have these concepts in my mind. And, how can I like go talk to some of the people that maybe I haven't talked to as much, and kind of continue to create that for other people. And for myself.

Carter highlighted her takeaway as, "Learning more about belonging and what it can/should look like in Campus Leadership Fellows and on a college campus in general." This indicated her plan to be more intentional with applying some of the ideas and practices discussed through the second focus group.

Parker suggested the final exercise they did as a group in focus group two, crafting the blueprint for co-creating belonging, could be provided "to a different organization or new Campus Leadership Fellows group to have knowledge of it. As a way to say, here's what I can be doing – my responsibility – for co-creating belonging." Isabel shared that the blueprint idea would reiterate to group members "what you're really there for," and Kelly felt it would be a way to intentionally decide how to spend time as a group, deciding which activities should be focused on which actions or behaviors they brainstormed in the blueprint. Grady thought that this would serve as an internal "benchmark" and provide something that can be "measurable" because of all the ways they brainstormed how to co-create belonging. He elaborated with a few examples, such as "active listening" as being one way to co-create belonging or "physical body

language” and “asking questions” as a way to “measure belonging to a degree.” Parker thought this idea would “provide a lot of intentionality to promote belonging,” and that being “upfront that we want this group to form a space where you all feel like you belong.” Participants recognized the importance of intentionality and developed strategies to promote belonging in various contexts.

Kelly noted how the study made him more aware of the intentionality behind fostering belonging. Between the first and second first group, Kelly shared,

Going through a week of all the activities I normally do with different groups...it’s spurred different thoughts in my head and things I’m bringing up with my exec team or smaller groups about how we drive belonging. But, also how much intentionality there is with what we’ve done...and I’ve noticed how real intentionality there isn’t with some of the other things I do...it goes back to a lot of intentionality on time, and small awareness. Isabel brought up the idea of a mission statement that could allow smaller groups within a bigger group to “tie it all together with our strongest points.” She thought that would allow the group to focus on that mission and practice it regularly when they are together. The process of creating a diagram that everyone could come together on would allow for a more transparent understanding of what they need to create belonging. Grady built on this idea, saying that this focus on mission would provide a shared understanding of how to be and do things together.

In summary, the study’s participants demonstrated a growing awareness of the complexity and importance of belonging. Through surveys, focus groups, and reflective exercises, they developed a deeper understanding and practical strategies for fostering belonging in their university community and within Campus Leadership Fellows. This process of sharing

and reflecting allowed participants to articulate their thoughts on belonging more clearly and consider how to intentionally create inclusive environments in their future endeavors.

Fostering Sense of Belonging Through AI Reflective Process

Another theme that emerged from the data was the impact on participants' sense of belonging through the AI reflection process. In the initial survey and first focus group, participants were asked to share their personal experiences of belonging during their time at the university and within the Campus Leadership Fellows program. This elicited a wide variety of responses. Isabel and Carter shared that belonging had not always come easy to them within the university context. In contrast, Kelly, Lucy, and Avery recounted moments at the university where they felt a deep sense of belonging through their involvement in other organizations.

Comments also varied when asked about their sense of belonging within Campus Leadership Fellows. Several participants mentioned feeling "somewhat connected," while others felt "extremely connected." For example, Parker shared,

For me, I feel like it depends on the group of people...if it isn't such a big group of people, sometimes I do feel more belonging than with others. And, I do feel like my attendance affects it, sometimes I wasn't able to go to events that a lot of other people were able to go to.

When asked about her current sense of belonging with the other focus group participants at that moment, Parker described it as "medium," attributing it to the amount of time she had spent with them and indicating she could get to know them better. Grady appreciated the smaller group setting, saying it allowed them to come up with more ideas and expand on them instead of staying at the "surface level." When Lucy responded to this question she said, "I've never felt like I didn't belong {in Campus Leadership Fellows}. I think my sense of belonging is stronger

when we're having events...because I'm actually seeing people." Lucy shared that, "Campus Leadership Fellows has done a great job of making people feel like they belong." The diversity in responses enabled the group to ask follow-up questions to further explore the conditions and practices that support belonging, described in Themes 1-4.

At the conclusion of the last focus group, the same questions were posed to the participants about their sense of belonging within Campus Leadership Fellows and with the small research group they were with at the time. All seven participants expressed in their own words that they felt a stronger sense of belonging with the other members of their research group as a result of the AI experience. Parker noted, "This experience in here is increasing belonging among all five of us" (Note: I am the fifth person Parker references here). He elaborated, "We've spent more time on a different level, maybe not deeper, but thinking about things differently together." Kelly echoed this sentiment, saying, "I belong more now because we have had another shared experience," and added that he would feel more comfortable attending another Campus Leadership Fellows event due to spending more time with this small group. Grady reflected on the diversity of perspectives saying,

I've realized that we all come from different areas and different places. Even though ... like we're all getting the same question...it's like...having people all doing the same assignment, but, like there are many different ways that assignment can be interpreted. So, with that same thing with these questions, there are many different ways that we can interpret the questions and like, because of like our backgrounds, because of our majors, and how we spend our time, all of our answers are again different. So, it's very interesting to be here where I intersections intersect, and then where my answer would be different.

Kelly believed that the AI process would be “difficult to do for a group starting off” and that it might be more effective for groups that have been together for some time. He stated, “I don’t think this activity could start a sense of belonging, but it could increase it.”

Lucy found the AI process to be a missing piece of reflection, stating, “This has been the reflection we’ve been missing. It has served as reflecting for, ‘What did all that build up to? What did that give me the tool belt to do?’” She elaborated sharing:

I think, I’m just thinking about Campus Leadership Fellows differently...you get the tools to create belonging without necessarily focusing on the word belonging, you know, like throughout everything we do...the workshops and the retreat and everything. But this has been the reflection we’ve been missing. You know, like this is honestly that deep reflection with others that I was kind of missing after everything.

Avery shared how discussing the positive impact of Campus Leadership Fellows made her realize its significance and motivated her to continue investing in it, especially as the school year drew to a close. She expressed pride in what the group had accomplished and appreciated being around strong women with shared commonalities.

In summary, the AI process significantly impacted participants’ sense of belonging and provided a valuable opportunity for reflection. By sharing personal experiences, discussing diverse perspectives, and engaging deeply with the concept of belonging, participants were able to co-create a stronger sense of community and connection within both the Campus Leadership Fellows program and their smaller research group.

Chapter 5 - Summary, Discussion, and Implications

Summary of Study

While sense of belonging exists as a subjective feeling within each individual, it can only be experienced through our social world. As such, one's sense of belonging can only be accelerated or impeded by the dynamic interactions with people, things, and experiences of our social world (Allen et al., 2021). There has been significant research on the concept of belonging and factors that influence belonging from an individual level, but little is known about how belonging is actively co-created among people. This study sought to understand the conditions and practices of how belonging can be co-created among individuals within a college setting. Understanding how to proactively foster belonging within a higher education setting will help universities cultivate this essential human need, which will, in turn, positively contribute to student success and wellbeing. Multiple studies conclude with the recommendation that more work is needed to identify strategies that can increase people's sense of belonging at the individual and collective level (Allen et al., 2021). This study was conducted using an appreciative inquiry (AI) methodology, and data was collected through focus groups and surveys. Analysis of the data was guided by an inductive approach, and the findings described the conditions and practices individuals engaged in collectively to facilitate the co-creation of belonging among college students in higher education.

In this concluding chapter, I summarize how the findings addressed the research questions, integrating them with the theoretical frameworks and relevant literature. Then, I discuss the significance of the study, highlighting implications and recommendations for practice. Finally, I discuss opportunities for future research.

Discussion of Research Questions

This exploratory study was guided by two research questions, which I discuss individually in this section to highlight how this study provided insights to these points of inquiry.

1. How can individuals within a group co-create the conditions for belonging?
 - a. How do participants describe the conditions that co-create a sense of belonging?
 - b. What are practices and conditions that contribute to the co-creation of belonging?
 - c. How do students perceive the conditions that co-create belonging based on social identities?
2. How does the appreciative inquiry process contribute to the co-creation of belonging among college students?

Question One

Participants in this study engaged in an AI process to explore the co-creation of belonging among college students. Utilizing their own experiences within the university and as members of the same student organization, participants elicited four themes that described the conditions and practices that co-create belonging.

Theme 1: Safety, Acceptance, and Inclusion. The theme of safety, acceptance, and inclusion centered on creating a secure and welcoming environment where individuals feel comfortable, accepted, and valued. Participants emphasized the importance of safety as a foundational condition to foster belonging, highlighting the need for an environment free from threats, judgment, and assumptions. They discussed practices such as creating comfort, understanding and accepting differences, being authentic, and designing for diversity. This

theme, deeply discussed by participants, underscores the significance of feeling seen, heard, and appreciated for their authenticity in fostering a sense of belonging.

Safety is a crucial aspect of belonging (Allen, 2020; Allen et al., 2024; Maslow, 1962; Strayhorn, 2019) and was prioritized by participants in this study as they described how safety was an integral part of college students' sense of belonging. In other words, safety serves as the foundation upon which they build their comfort and connection within a community. This sense of safety is multifaceted, encompassing emotional, physical, and psychological dimensions, which aligns with Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs, where safety is a prerequisite for achieving higher levels of psychological wellbeing (Allen, 2020; Maslow, 1962; Strayhorn, 2019). Participants emphasized environments that were comfortable for them to engage as their authentic selves, which aligns with findings from Vaccaro & Newman (2016) where environmental perceptions influence how students perceive their surroundings. Environments that fostered positive energy, relaxed atmospheres, and even playful and fun interactions (e.g., retreats, dynamic activities, and intentional locations) contributed significantly to this sense of safety and comfort. Several participants described feeling safe and comfortable during the focus group experience, with provided food and an absence of judgment, noting that it felt as comfortable as being at their home. Block (2008) discusses this aspect of "breaking bread together" (i.e., sharing food together) as a sacred way to fuel culture that gives a nod toward care and community and through the strategy of hospitality and creating a welcoming environment. By prioritizing safety and comfort, students can cultivate an inclusive, supportive environment that enhances everyone's sense of belonging.

Paying attention to ways groups can foster safety and comfortability among members of their group is a practice that can co-create belonging. Several ways group members can co-create a sense of safety and comfort include:

- a. Allowing group members to discuss the importance of a safe environment and establish rules or agreements for feeling safe collectively.
- b. Intentionally removing triggers and creating a welcoming environment.
- c. Encouraging familiarity and building relationships to enhance comfort.

A safe and comfortable environment encourages students to be their authentic selves, enhancing their sense of belonging. Establishing safety protocols and fostering familiarity can help students feel secure and connected.

Acceptance and understanding were critical in allowing individuals to show up as their most authentic selves. Emphasizing an environment free from assumptions, participants shared how these conditions could foster belonging. When students embrace a judgment-free mindset, they contribute to a culture of inclusivity and mutual respect, which is essential for fostering a strong sense of belonging in a diverse college community (Allen et al., 2024). Practices that group members can engage in to support acceptance, understanding, and authenticity are:

- a. Embracing diversity and accepting differences without needing complete understanding.
- b. Encouraging authentic self-expression and creating space for diverse identities and perspectives.
- c. Consciously minimizing judgments and assumptions about others.
- d. Encouraging open-mindedness and curiosity about others' experiences and perspectives.

Creating spaces of authenticity not only enhances personal investment in relationships and activities but also increases the overall sense of belonging. Authentic interactions, characterized by open and honest conversations, help calm anxieties and build trust within the group.

Acceptance and understanding foster an inclusive community where students feel valued for who they are, and promoting authenticity can lead to deeper connections and a stronger sense of belonging (Block, 2018; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

To foster an environment that practices acceptance, understanding, and authenticity, it is also important to withhold judgment about others to allow each person to engage fully (Allen et al., 2024). While challenging to practice, group members can support one another in creating a judgment-free environment through the following practices:

- a. Promoting and modeling open communication by demonstrating acceptance and respect so students feel safe expressing their thoughts and opinions without fear of criticism.
- b. Encouraging active listening by teaching and modeling listening skills, ensuring all voices are heard and respected in conversations and group activities.
- c. Fostering empathy and understanding through activities and programs focused on storytelling and perspective-taking.
- d. Providing support resources to ensure students have access to mental health resources to support their wellbeing and help them navigate challenges in a nonjudgmental way.
- e. Regularly assessing and reflecting the group's climate regarding judgment and inclusivity through surveys, group reflections, and making adjustments to improve the environment.

The importance of valuing and appreciating one another was also essential for co-creating belonging. Creating environments where individuals feel valued, seen, heard, and recognized for diversity fosters a more inclusive community for everyone involved. These findings support previous research highlighting the significance of inclusivity and mutual respect in fostering a sense of belonging (Allen, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019). For example, Strayhorn's (2019) model of sense of belonging describes belonging as related to mattering, which is supported by the data from this theme. Practices to support feeling valued and appreciated include:

- a. Acknowledging and celebrating individuals' contributions and presence.
- b. Demonstrating genuine interest in getting to know others and showing appreciation.
- c. Showing genuine care for the interest and wellbeing of group members.
- d. Recognizing and honoring diverse identities and experiences through acknowledgment and opportunities to contribute to the group.

Group members must also honor diversity and design the group's activities and engagement in ways that support the diversity embedded. Because each student represents a wide variety of identities, experiences, and backgrounds, groups must pay attention to how each member can feel affirmed and understood in the group (Allen et al., 2024; Strayhorn, 2022). To honor and design for diversity within the group, members can:

- a. Design inclusive practices and environments that accommodate different backgrounds and needs.
- b. Integrate diverse perspectives and materials into group activities or learning experiences that reflect the experiences and contributions of various cultures, ethnicities, and identities.

- c. Promote dialogue and interaction, facilitating programs and initiatives that encourage dialogue among students from different backgrounds or identities.
- d. Engage in training and knowledge-building around diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- e. Celebrate intersectionality of students, understanding their experiences are shaped by multiple, overlapping factors (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status).
- f. Address any discrimination that may occur, ensuring students feel safe and supported in bringing forward their concerns.

Acknowledging and designing for diversity ensures that all students feel included and represented. Intentional efforts to include various identities and experiences promote a culture of inclusivity and belonging.

While all participants shared the importance of these practices, the participants who held minoritized identities (e.g., race or sexual orientation) discussed in more detail the need for safety and environments where they could be their authentic selves. This aligns with Vaccaro and Newman's (2016) study looking at the development of a sense of belonging for privileged and minoritized students. In their study, privileged students often described the environment as "friendly," "fun," and "comfortable," whereas minoritized students noted a lack of diversity, feeling like the "only one," and needing to suppress their authentic selves. Vaccaro and Newman (2016) highlight differences in how these themes are experienced, with privileged students feeling comfortable and fitting in, and minoritized students emphasizing safety, respect, and authenticity. These discussions underscored the importance of fostering environments that honor and celebrate diversity, ensuring that all individuals, particularly those with historically underrepresented identities, feel accepted, included, and valued. This also responds to the third sub-question: *How do students perceive the conditions that co-create belonging based on social*

identities? By celebrating differences and creating empathetic spaces where everyone feels heard and supported, students can build a cohesive and inclusive community.

Theme 2: Organizational Structure and Dynamics. The second theme focused on how specific structural elements and group dynamics influenced the sense of belonging among college students. Participants highlighted how the organization of activities, group size, roles assigned within the group, and involvement of authority figures impacted their feelings of connection and belonging. They identified key factors that foster belonging: structured engagement, intentional use of time, group size and location, and individual roles and responsibilities within the group. These factors align with how Mahar et al. (2013) describe “dynamism” in their conceptualization of belonging through five intersecting themes. Dynamism, the fourth theme, describes belonging as a constantly changing experience affected by both the physical and social surroundings, and it can be strengthened or weakened by these environments. This theme emphasizes that belonging is not fixed and can vary depending on different personal and external factors, thus reinforcing the need for ways to co-create conditions that foster belonging.

Block (2008) shares how creating belonging is about attention and practice. He says, “The structure of belonging is simply about getting the room right, forming small groups, getting the questions right, and putting a lid on our desire to rescue, fix, and train” (p. xvii). Participants shared how several experiences in Campus Leadership Fellows (e.g., the small group relationship-building experience, the two-day retreat with a personal storytelling exercise, and coaching a youth sports team) fueled their sense of belonging. Structured activities with purpose and intention provide a framework for students to connect and build relationships. These

activities reduce awkwardness and foster a shared purpose, making members feel more connected and supported. Practices that groups can take to foster intentional activities include:

- a. Designing and prioritizing activities that promote interaction, such as relationship-building exercises, extended time together (e.g., retreats), and collaborative tasks and events.
- b. Ensuring these activities have clear purposes and involving member participation in setting rules and expectations.

Time spent together with intentional purpose strengthens relationships and enhances the sense of belonging. Additionally, structured and meaningful interactions create a cohesive and supportive environment. Intentional time together is crucial for facilitating belonging among college students as it provides opportunities for meaningful interactions and relationship-building while also building on purpose. When students actively engage in planned activities or gatherings, they create bonds based on shared interests, values, and experiences. These shared experiences foster a sense of camaraderie and belonging as students feel connected to a larger community. Intentional time together also allows for deeper conversations, mutual support, and the exploration of diverse perspectives, enhancing empathy and understanding among peers. By investing in intentional gatherings, colleges can cultivate inclusive environments where students feel valued, supported, and empowered to contribute to their community's collective identity and growth. Group members can:

- a. Plan and allocate time for group interactions thoughtfully, focusing on quality and purposeful engagement.
- b. Schedule regular, recurring events that are inclusive and that accommodate all members.

Working together on shared goals or projects further strengthens these bonds, as it requires cooperation, communication, and mutual respect. Every participant commented on how structured engagement and activities that focus on building relationships and shared goals or purpose were essential for fostering a sense of belonging within the group.

Another factor that enhanced belonging was the consideration of group size and location. Small groups foster closer connections and ease of communication, while larger groups bring diverse perspectives and energy. The physical location can impact initial bonding and set the tone for the group's development. Block (2008) discusses the importance of arranging the room as the "shape of things to come" (p. 162), taking into consideration the location of chairs, tables, the view outside of the room, and more. Block (2008) describes small group and large group methodologies and suggests that these can be designed for the experience of community and belonging:

In the small group discussion, we discover that our own concerns are more universal than we imagined. This discovery that we are not alone, that others can at least understand what is on our mind, if not agree with us, is what creates the feeling of belonging. (p. 99)

Ways groups can put into action this concept would be:

- a. Utilizing both small and large group settings to balance intimacy and diversity.
- b. Choosing comfortable and inclusive physical locations for gatherings, especially during the initial phases of group formation.

Finally, this theme highlighted how having roles and responsibilities gives students a sense of purpose and significance within the group. It promotes engagement, accountability, and a stronger connection to the group's mission. The sense of accountability and contribution that comes with having a defined role also helps to build trust and mutual respect, as each member

understands and appreciates the efforts of others. A balanced authoritative structure creates a safe and supportive foundation, and empowering members fosters ownership and deeper engagement. This balance helps create a secure yet dynamic environment conducive to belonging. By balancing authoritative structure with the freedom for individuals to explore and define their roles, authority figures can cultivate a space where members feel both guided and autonomous.

Group members can:

- a. Assign roles and responsibilities to each member, ensuring everyone has a stake in the group's activities.
- b. Encourage members to utilize their strengths and skills in contributing to the group's objectives.
- c. Maintain a balance between authoritative structure and member empowerment.
- d. Provide initial direction and support, then allow members to take ownership and lead within the group.

This approach not only enhances the group's cohesion and functionality but also encourages personal growth and authentic participation, ultimately leading to a stronger, more inclusive community.

While this theme included dynamics specific to Campus Leadership Fellows, it is presented in a way that groups can consider their own organizational structure and dynamics and make intentional decisions about how they can influence their group's sense of belonging. Overall, effective organizational structures and dynamics involve (a) a combination of structured activities, (b) intentional use of time, (c) thoughtful group size and location management, and (d) clear roles and responsibilities. These elements work together to create an environment where students can connect, contribute, and feel a strong sense of belonging.

Theme 3: Meaningful Interpersonal Connections. The theme of meaningful interpersonal connections emphasized the importance of building deep and genuine relationships among group members to foster a sense of belonging. Participants highlighted that meaningful connections arise from (a) spending quality time together, (b) engaging in active listening and sharing, (c) embracing vulnerability, (d) practicing honesty and respect, and (e) celebrating and caring for one another. These elements help create a supportive environment where individuals feel valued and understood. This can be understood through the theme of “reciprocity,” as described by Mahar et al. (2013) in their conceptualization of belonging. In their research, reciprocity refers to how belonging is about mutual connectedness between a person and their group. It is built on shared experiences, understandings, and beliefs, not just physical or intellectual traits. Furthermore, Baumeister and Leary (1995) contend that we are deeply conditioned to provide a sense of belonging to others, hence the reciprocal nature.

Interpersonal connections were crucial for fostering belonging. Participants emphasized the importance of spending quality time getting to know their peers as essential for cultivating a sense of belonging. They highlighted the value of structured relationship-building exercises and retreats, which set the tone for deeper connections throughout the year. Personal storytelling activities allowed members to share intricate details of their lives, fostering a deeper level of understanding and connection. Asking thoughtful questions helped break the ice and encouraged meaningful conversations, further strengthening bonds. This aligns with Block’s (2008) concept of “connection before content” (p. 154), meaning that to foster a sense of belonging, group members must share connections with one another.

Additionally, Block’s (2008) six conversations “creates communities in which citizens will choose accountability and commitment” (p. 115). Shared experiences (e.g., coaching a youth

sports team) created common ground and reinforced their sense of belonging. Bonding over shared interests and values, such as university sports or leadership, helped members feel more connected and empathetic toward one another. These findings are consistent with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) assertion that humans have an inherent need to form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships. When students can relate to each other's experiences, backgrounds, and identities, they feel validated and supported. This connection reduces feelings of isolation and encourages collaboration and empathy, both of which are essential for building inclusive and cohesive environments on campus. To promote connection with one another, groups can:

- a. Provide structured opportunities for relationship-building, such as personal storytelling activities.
- b. Encourage asking questions to deepen connections and explore common interests and experiences.

Facilitating opportunities for students to relate to each other on a deeper level fosters a sense of community and mutual understanding. This helps create a foundation of connectivity and belonging extending beyond surface-level interactions.

Active listening, being fully present, and sharing about oneself are crucial elements in cultivating belonging among college students. Active listening fosters empathy and understanding, allowing students to connect deeply with each other's experiences and perspectives. Being fully present in interactions demonstrates respect and validation, creating an inclusive atmosphere where everyone feels valued. Sharing about oneself encourages vulnerability and builds trust, facilitating meaningful connections and fostering a sense of community. Together, these practices promote genuine engagement, mutual support, and the

creation of inclusive spaces where all students can feel accepted and empowered to contribute their unique perspectives and identities. This is supported by Block's (2008) notion that "The right small group conversation releases an aliveness and intention into the community" (p. 106).

To support these practices, groups can:

- a. Promote active listening practices, including maintaining eye contact, nodding, and being fully present without distractions.
- b. Create environments where students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences.

Active listening and genuine sharing build trust and strengthen interpersonal bonds. These practices ensure that students feel heard and valued, contributing to a stronger sense of belonging.

Sharing and vulnerability play pivotal roles in fostering belonging among college students by creating authentic connections and mutual understanding. When students share their experiences, challenges, and identities with openness and honesty, they cultivate empathy and build trust within their community. This exchange of personal stories and feelings not only validates individual experiences but also encourages others to share and engage in meaningful ways. To encourage vulnerability, group members can:

- a. Encourage an environment where students feel safe to share personal stories and experiences.
- b. Normalize vulnerability by creating spaces where students can express themselves without fear of judgment.

Ultimately, embracing vulnerability fosters deeper connections and mutual understanding. The resulting openness helps build a supportive community where students can be their authentic selves, enhancing their sense of belonging.

Trust, respect, and honesty were fundamental to college students' efforts to co-create a sense of belonging. Honesty fosters trust and openness, allowing students to share their true selves without fear of judgment. When individuals are candid and straightforward, it builds a foundation of trust essential for meaningful connections. Respect plays a crucial role in this dynamic, ensuring that all individuals receive equal attention and consideration, regardless of their backgrounds or perspectives. Respectful interactions promote a harmonious atmosphere where differing views are accepted with grace. Trust, in turn, is built through consistent, respectful behavior and the assurance that shared thoughts and experiences will be kept confidential. This mutual understanding and the integrity of keeping shared information within the group reinforce a sense of safety and belonging. The importance of boundaries and allowing group members to participate at levels they feel comfortable with align with Mahar et al.'s (2013) theme of "self-determination," which means having the right to choose your interactions and feeling empowered in those interactions. It involves having the freedom to decide if you want to belong to a group. Factors like choice and power dynamics influence this feeling. However, systemic barriers (e.g., discrimination) can affect self-determination and, as a result, impact one's sense of belonging. To work toward an environment of trust, respect, and honesty, group members can:

- a. Establish a culture of trust by encouraging honest and respectful interactions.
- b. Create clear boundaries and respect individual choices about participation and sharing.

Trust and respect are foundational to building meaningful relationships. By fostering an environment of honesty and respecting boundaries, students feel safe to engage more deeply, which enhances their sense of belonging.

Overall, meaningful interpersonal connections are crucial for creating a sense of belonging among college students. By fostering genuine relationships through structured activities, active listening, vulnerability, trust, respect, and celebration, students can build a supportive and inclusive community where everyone feels valued and understood.

Theme 4: Purpose and Investment. The theme of purpose and investment highlighted the importance of cultivating (a) motivation and mindset, (b) supporting attendance and accountability, (c) building shared purpose, and (d) fostering personal growth and self-awareness. Participants emphasized that both individual and collective engagement are essential for fostering a sense of belonging. The theme underscores the importance of members being motivated and prioritizing their involvement, having a shared purpose, promoting personal growth, and maintaining high attendance and accountability within the group. Mahar et al. (2013) describe “groundedness to an external referent” as the second intersecting theme central to the concept of belonging. In this theme, a sense of belonging requires something outside of yourself to feel connected to, like a community, group, or institution. This connection helps anchor the feeling of belonging. It is important to identify what or who you feel connected to understand and measure belonging accurately.

When students are motivated and understand their purpose, they are more likely to engage actively, enhancing their sense of belonging. Discussing motivations can help align individual goals with the group’s objectives, fostering a deeper connection. While prior experiences with belonging may influence how someone feels in a new group (Allen, 2020),

taking the time to discuss their mindset and motivation can be important. For groups to support these behaviors, they can:

- a. Encourage group members to explore their motivations and articulate their reasons for joining and engaging in activities.
- b. Foster a mindset of “buy-in” and commitment to the group’s purpose by having group members explore this together.

High attendance and accountability foster a vibrant and engaging community. Consistent participation reinforces the shared purpose and collective identity, making each member feel more connected and invested in the group. Therefore, encouraging and maintaining high attendance is vital for fostering a sense of belonging among college students. It promotes accountability, energizes the group, and strengthens the community, ensuring each member feels valued and connected to the collective mission. According to Block (2008), “accountability is the willingness to care for the whole, and it flows out of the kind of conversations we have about the new story from which we want to take our identity” (p. 50). The findings from this study demonstrated that accountability with regular attendance ensures that all members have the opportunity to contribute, engage, and bond with one another, which is essential for maintaining a strong sense of belonging. For group members to encourage attendance and accountability, they can:

- a. Emphasize the importance of regular attendance and active participation, asking members to describe success in these areas.
- b. Implement structured check-ins and communication to maintain accountability and connection, even if group members are not able to see each other in person regularly.

A shared purpose helps create a collective identity and fosters unity. When students work together toward common goals, they feel more connected and invested in the group's success, enhancing their sense of belonging. For group members to encourage a shared purpose, they can:

- a. Invite group members to articulate and work toward a common purpose or goal.
- b. Create mission statements or shared goals to unify group members.

Personal growth and self-awareness contribute to a stronger sense of belonging. When students feel supported and challenged to reach their potential, they are more likely to feel valued and connected within the group. Mahar et al. (2013) discuss subjectivity as the first theme to conceptualize belonging as a personal feeling unique to each individual. Subjectivity focuses on whether they feel valued, respected, and like they fit in. It is important to understand a person's feelings about belonging separately from whether they are officially part of a group or physically present in group activities. Group members can:

- a. Encourage personal development and support each other's growth by discussing opportunities.
- b. Promote self-awareness and reflection among group members through intentional reflection and debriefing activities.

Overall, fostering a sense of belonging among college students involves creating a motivated and engaged community with a shared purpose. Promoting personal growth, maintaining high attendance, and ensuring accountability are key factors in building a cohesive and supportive environment where all members feel valued and connected.

Proposed model. To summarize the findings of the conditions and practices that co-create belonging among college students, I share a proposed model (Figure 5.1) that encapsulates essential themes, conditions, and practices. This model can be shared with participants to

reinforce their learning and to use as a blueprint for co-creating belonging amongst one another. Students can discuss how they might incorporate this model into their activities as a group, providing another way to reinforce the importance of co-creating belonging.

Figure 5.1. A Proposed Model of the Conditions and Practices That Co-create Belonging Among College Students



Question Two

Theme 5, Influence of the AI Process, addresses how the AI process contributes to the co-creation of belonging among college students. The data revealed two main categories: (1)

shifts in thinking and application and (2) fostering sense of belonging through the AI reflective process. Through the AI process, participants shared their diverse perspectives on belonging, engaged in deep discussions, and developed a more thorough understanding of belonging and how to foster it. This experience also enhanced their sense of belonging within their small research group and the Campus Leadership Fellows program.

To facilitate a structured exploration of belonging among students through the 5-D AI cycle—Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver—students developed a clearer understanding of how to create environments that foster belonging. This reflection led to practical strategies for fostering belonging in various contexts, such as forming mission statements and setting shared goals.

The AI process helped students feel more connected by allowing them to engage in meaningful conversations and shared activities. This enhanced their sense of belonging within the group and provided valuable insights into conditions that support belonging. Additionally, the AI process encouraged intentionality in promoting belonging, making it a practical tool for existing groups to strengthen their connections.

The AI process could be utilized to support the co-creation of belonging by:

1. encouraging students to explore and articulate their understanding and knowledge of belonging,
2. facilitating discussions and activities that prompt students to reflect on their experiences and motivations related to belonging, and
3. utilizing AI processes to facilitate reflective discussions on shared experiences among group members to encourage knowledge and practices of belonging within the group.

These practices align with Allen et al.'s (2021) integrative framework for understanding belonging, which includes four interrelated components: competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions.

- a. **Competencies** refer to the skills and abilities needed to connect with others effectively, including social, emotional, and communication skills that facilitate building and maintaining relationships. The participants in this study articulated a more robust understanding of belonging as a concept and strategies to increase belonging among others.
- b. **Opportunities:** Opportunities involve the availability and access to social interactions and environments where connections can be made, including the importance of having contexts and settings that allow for meaningful social engagement. The AI process participants engaged in creating an opportunity that can be carried forward in future contexts.
- c. **Motivations** relate to the desire and drive to belong and influence how individuals seek out and engage in social interactions, which are driven by the intrinsic need to form connections with others. One of the key themes identified by participants was understanding individual- and group-level motivations for engagement and belonging within a group.
- d. **Perceptions** are subjective feelings and interpretations about one's experiences of belonging. This includes how individuals perceive their connections with social groups, places, and experiences, which affects their overall sense of belonging.

All findings from this study reinforced the complexity and subjectivity of belonging among individual participants and as a group. Thus, the AI process can be utilized to support the co-creation of belonging by:

- a. Encouraging students to explore and articulate their understanding and knowledge of belonging.
- b. Facilitating discussions and activities that prompt students to reflect on their experiences and motivations related to belonging.
- c. Utilizing AI processes to facilitate reflective discussions on shared experiences among group members to encourage knowledge and practices of belonging amongst group members.

These practices align with the integrative framework for understanding belonging by Allen et al. (2021).

Additionally, the AI principles proposed by Cooperrider et al. (2008) and expanded upon by Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010) align closely with the findings in this study on co-creating belonging in higher education. These principles provided a foundation for understanding how AI facilitates the co-creation of belonging by engaging participants in reflective and constructive processes. Table 5.1 describes the overlap between the principles and elements of the study.

Table 5.1. AI Principles Related to Study

AI Principle	Description and Connection to Study
The constructionist principle	This principle posits that reality is socially created through language and discourse, which is related to how participants in the study articulated their understanding of belonging. By discussing and defining belonging collectively, students shaped a shared reality that enhanced their sense of connection.

The simultaneity principle	Inquiry as intervention was evident in this study as the AI process itself prompted students to reflect on their experiences and motivations related to belonging. The questions asked during AI sessions catalyzed change by encouraging students to envision and create possibilities for a more inclusive community.
The poetic principle	The idea that a group's story is constantly co-authored resonated with findings throughout the study. The AI process allowed participants to continuously reinterpret and recreate their narratives of belonging, fostering an evolving sense of community.
The anticipatory principle	This principle, which emphasizes moving toward imagined futures, was reflected in how participants visualized and worked toward a future where belonging was enhanced. Positive images of the future generated through AI discussions led to positive actions and outcomes.
The positive principle	The focus on positive questions and amplifying the positive core aligned with this study's emphasis on understanding and nurturing motivations for belonging. This principle helped generate momentum and lasting change within the student community.
The wholeness principle	Bringing groups together to stimulate creativity and build collective capacity was central to this research. The AI process united participants, allowing them to co-create a sense of belonging through shared experiences and collaborative efforts.
The enactment principle	This principle suggests that positive change is created when approached as a living model of the ideal future. By engaging in AI, participants enacted the very principles of belonging they wished to see, modeling the behaviors and attitudes that foster a supportive community.
The free-choice principle	The idea that free choice stimulates positive change and commitment was reflected in the autonomy given to students in the study. Allowing participants to choose their level of engagement and the focus of their discussions enhanced their commitment to the process and to fostering belonging.

Overall, these AI principles underpinned the processes and outcomes observed in the research study, illustrating how AI facilitated the co-creation of belonging by engaging participants in a constructive, collaborative, and positive manner.

Additionally, the AI process utilized in this study aligns with Griggs & Crain-Dorough's (2021) four advantages of AI as methodology for research.

- a. AI facilitated **positive affect and engagement** by building rapport and trust among participants, which led to more genuine and detailed data collection. Participants felt valued and were more willing to share their stories and experiences, engaging deeply in the research process with a vision of positive futures.
- b. **Empowerment and inclusivity** were central to the study, as AI provided a platform for marginalized or minoritized groups to voice their perspectives without fear of judgment. This inclusivity amplified often-overlooked voices, fostering a sense of agency and empowerment among participants.
- c. This study embraced **generativity** by encouraging the creation of new ideas and visions for the future, focusing on co-constructing a desired future that built collective vision and values.
- d. The **life-giving properties** of AI were evident as the process helped participants identify and build on their strengths through positive storytelling, serving as catalysts for transformative change.

Overall, AI's principles were instrumental in facilitating a supportive, inclusive, and forward-looking research environment.

Finally, this AI study also aligned with Block's (2008) framework for creating belonging, which emphasizes (a) shifting attention from problems to the possibilities of community, (b)

fostering connectedness, and (c) caring for the whole. Block advocates for focusing on gifts rather than what is missing or broken. He states, “The hard part of building community is that it is always a custom job. It is born of local people, with unique gifts, deciding what to create together in this place” (Block, 2008, p. 5). This resonates with this study’s approach to AI, which engaged participants in recognizing and utilizing their unique strengths and contributions to co-create a sense of belonging.

Block (2008) also emphasizes the need for theories and methodologies that are both powerful and accessible:

The challenge is to think broadly enough to have a theory and methodology that have the power to make a difference yet are simple and clear enough to be accessible to anyone who wants to make that difference. We need ideas from a variety of places and disciplines to deal with the complexity of community. Then, acting as if these ideas are true, we must translate them into embarrassingly simple and concrete acts. (p. 5)

This study’s AI process, with its focus on positive inquiry and co-creation, reflects this balance of theoretical depth and practical simplicity, making it accessible and impactful for the participants. Furthermore, Block asserts that building community requires engaging in new conversations that create experiences of aliveness and belonging. He says,

Building community requires that we engage in a new conversation, one that we have not had before, one that can create an experience of aliveness and belonging. It is the act of engaging citizens in a conversation that allows us to act in concert and, equally important, to create accountability between citizens. (Block, 2008, p. 32)

This study’s AI approach facilitated such new conversations among students, allowing them to share their stories and co-create a sense of belonging.

Finally, Block emphasizes the importance of the structure and context of gatherings: “transformation occurs when we focus on the structure of how we gather and the context in which the gatherings take place; when we work hard getting the questions right; when we choose depth over speed and relatedness over scale” (Block, 2008, p. 77). This practice aligns with the purpose of qualitative research and is evident in this study’s intentional design of AI sessions that prioritized meaningful engagement, thoughtful questioning, and deep, relational interactions over quick or superficial results. Through these aligned principles, this study not only fostered a sense of belonging but also contributed to the transformative potential of community building as envisioned by Block (2008).

Summary

This research aimed to explore the intricacies of the co-creation of belonging among college students by utilizing an appreciative approach through AI, exploring belonging as the positive core. Belonging is a fluid, malleable, and complex latent variable rooted in one’s subconscious feelings and thoughts. It requires ongoing attention and is difficult to capture, measure, track, or trend using common research methods, as individuals are often unaware of their specific need for belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). This study uncovered more about the latent variable of belonging, providing a process and findings that highlighted its dynamic complexity and the numerous small steps involved. Through an AI methodology, this study invited participants to explore, describe, and ultimately co-create the conditions for belonging. In summary, this research study responded to these primary research questions with the abbreviated findings listed in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2. Summarized Findings

Research Question	Abbreviated Findings
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1. How can individuals within a group co-create the conditions for belonging?	Through the AI process, individuals can collaboratively identify and build upon positive experiences, thereby co-creating conditions that foster a sense of belonging.
1a. How do participants describe the conditions that co-create a sense of belonging?	Participants emphasized the need for safety, acceptance, meaningful connections, and structured engagement, highlighting that belonging is deeply intertwined with these conditions.
1b. What are the practices and conditions that contribute to the co-creation of belonging?	Practices such as open communication, trust-building activities, and intentional organizational structures were identified as critical to fostering belonging.
1c. How do students perceive the conditions that co-create belonging based on social identities?	The study revealed that belonging is perceived differently based on social identities, with minoritized and marginalized students often requiring deeper, more authentic connections to feel a sense of belonging.
2. How does the appreciative inquiry process contribute to the co-creation of belonging among college students?	AI proved to be a powerful tool for facilitating the co-creation of belonging, as the process focuses on positive experiences and collective aspirations.

Belonging is a fundamental human need crucial for psychological and emotional wellbeing, significantly impacting students' academic success, retention rates, and overall satisfaction with their college experience (Allen et al., 2024). The findings underscore that students' sense of belonging is shaped by several key factors, including safety, acceptance, inclusion, organizational structure and dynamics, meaningful interpersonal connections, purpose, and investment. Additionally, the AI processes aided in the co-creation of belonging among students in the study, demonstrating its applicability as a philosophical approach and methodology.

Significance of Study

This research study fills a notable gap in the literature on college students' sense of belonging by providing a collaborative approach to understanding and proactively co-creating belonging among students. Additionally, this study illustrates how appreciative inquiry (AI) can be both a research philosophy and a methodology.

Many institutions operate with a limited understanding of how belonging is created among people or groups, resulting in less effective programs and policies. This is especially the case for marginalized students, such as first-generation students or students of color (Nunn, 2021). Flint (2018) argues that belonging in higher education contexts involves a complex interplay of relationships and transformations, necessitating a dynamic and relational concept of belonging. Higher education professionals must prioritize learning about and acting on strategies that consider these dynamics to foster belonging effectively.

This study introduces a framework for the co-creation of belonging through AI, emphasizing the active role students play in shaping their experiences within the university setting.

The study provides practical insights and strategies for fostering a more inclusive and connected student body through the use of AI. The findings highlight the importance of creating intentional and collaborative environments where students can actively participate in building their sense of belonging, thus promoting greater student engagement, retention, and overall wellbeing. Additionally, this study introduces AI as a framework for cultivating belonging, illustrating how it can, therefore, be considered as both philosophical framework and methodology for research.

Furthermore, by utilizing AI, this study introduces a practice for co-creating belonging, emphasizing the active role students play in shaping their own experiences within the university setting. The practice outlines the dynamic and multifaceted nature of belonging, incorporating the numerous small steps and interactions that contribute to a cohesive sense of community and can be engaged to facilitate the co-creation of belonging.

Although the study focused on seven participants from the same student organization at one university, limiting the generalizability of the findings, it offers valuable insights for institutions, practitioners, and higher education leaders. These insights can inform efforts to address race and sense of belonging, ultimately helping cultivate a stronger sense of belonging among students in higher education.

This approach not only enhances our understanding of belonging as a complex and evolving phenomenon but also provides practical insights and strategies for educational institutions to foster a more inclusive and connected student body. The findings underscore the importance of creating intentional and collaborative environments where students can actively participate in building their sense of belonging, thus promoting greater student engagement, retention, and overall wellbeing.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

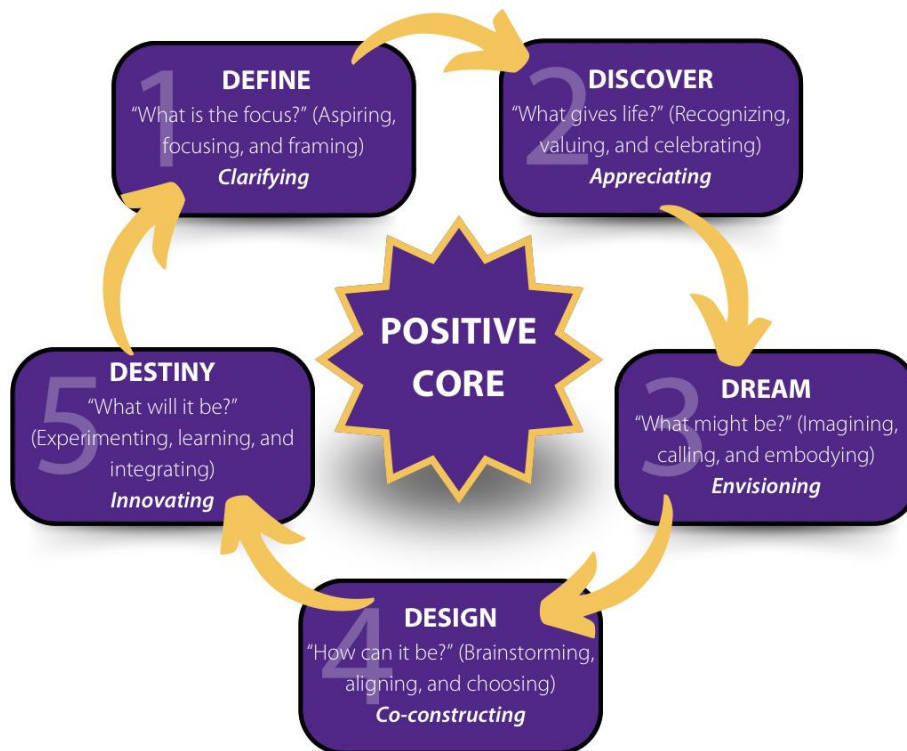
Literature on belonging underscores the importance and challenge of creating environments in higher education that foster a sense of belonging among students. The findings of this study deepen the understanding of belonging and offer insight into practices and conditions that co-create belonging among college students. Next, I will present several implications and recommendations for higher education institutions.

Universities must design for belonging amongst students through collaborative approaches. Many studies on belonging focus on educational settings due to the increased importance of belonging during adolescence. Adolescence and the transition into early adulthood are critical developmental stages for social identity, psychosocial adjustment, coping, and resiliency as young people begin to rely less on familial ties for social support (Allen, 2020; Nunn, 2021). Given the heightened significance of belonging during this period, much of the research has involved students in school settings, where the structured environment offers significant opportunities for fostering belonging (Allen, 2020). However, most of this research focuses on *individual* students' sense of belonging, leaving gaps in understanding how belonging can be *collectively* fostered among students. Strayhorn (2019) notes, "What has amassed, to date, is best described as research on individual students' sense of belonging in college" (p. 24). Block (2008) adds, "We have a hundred ways of encouraging individual development, but we are semiliterate when it comes to the question of communal development" (p. 3).

Universities must adopt a community approach to better generate a sense of belonging among students. Strayhorn (2022) emphasizes, "The absence of belonging is a structural problem, not an individual flaw, deficit, or deficiency—it simply exposes that there isn't an ecosystem in place to ensure this basic need is met for all students" (p. 54). Cultivating and facilitating belonging requires collaborative approaches among members of a group, organization, class, or cohort. This collective approach actively engages all stakeholders, inviting them to consider and act upon strategies that will promote their collective belonging. Nunn (2021) asserts, "Belonging is something that communities provide for individuals; it is not something that individuals can garner for themselves" (p. 6). A collective approach to fostering belonging places the knowledge and process of belonging in the hands of those seeking it.

Universities can design for belonging amongst college students by utilizing the 5-D AI cycle as a practice that will increase knowledge about belonging and serve as a catalyst to increase belonging among participants of the process. The 5-D AI cycle can be adapted to work with students in clubs and organizations, workplaces, classes, shared living arrangements, and other spaces where students are among one another. Designed as a collaborative process, each group will be able to surface the essential conditions and practices of co-creating belonging.

Figure 5.2. Belonging Appreciative Inquiry 5-D Cycle. Adapted from Cooperrider et al. (2008). *Appreciative inquiry handbook: for leaders of change* (2nd edition.), p. 5.



Provide anti-deficit, strengths-based, emergent approaches for cultivating belonging. To positively contribute to belonging, universities must adopt anti-deficit, strengths-based, and emergent approaches that support belonging. Creating communities of belonging addresses issues of marginalization, exclusion, and alienation, especially for students of color

and first-generation students who consistently report lower levels of belonging than their peers (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Because belonging is a critical factor in the college student experience, especially for students who hold minoritized and marginalized identities, higher education institutions must prioritize practices that co-create belonging with an equity imperative in mind. Belonging studies or interventions can be harmful to minoritized and marginalized students if they reinforce deficit narratives, fail to account for diverse experiences, exclude student voices, lack cultural competence, or overemphasize individual resilience. For research to be truly supportive, it must be inclusive, strengths-based, culturally competent, and focused on systemic change. Additionally, belonging manifests differently for different groups (Nunn, 2021), emphasizing the need for approaches to be emergent in design, reflecting the fluid, contextual, and malleable nature of belonging.

To provide anti-deficit, strengths-based, emergent approaches for cultivating belonging, universities should utilize the 5-D AI process: Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny. This structured yet flexible framework allows for the continuous adaptation and evolution of practices that cultivate a sense of belonging for all students. By employing the AI process, educational institutions can actively engage students in co-creating their experience of belonging, promoting greater student engagement, retention, and overall wellbeing. AI's emphasis on strengths and positive experiences empowers students to recognize their contributions and potential, enhancing their sense of agency and belonging. This anti-deficit, strengths-based approach is particularly supportive of students who hold minoritized identities, fostering a more equitable environment where all individuals are valued and have opportunities for wellbeing and success.

Prioritize opportunities for learning about and discussing the co-creation of belonging among college students. Bringing awareness and knowledge of belonging and the co-creation of belonging among students will work to surface belonging as a latent variable to one that is more easily understood and expressed (Strayhorn, 2019). Allen et al.'s (2021) review proposes an integrative framework for understanding belonging, which includes four interrelated components: (1) competencies, (2) opportunities, (3) motivations, and (4) perceptions. Allen et al. (2021) explain that these components interact dynamically to foster a sense of belonging, which is crucial for mental and physical health. Furthermore, knowledge about the significance of belonging can motivate students to prioritize belonging. For example, a strong sense of belonging leads to positive outcomes, such as better social relationships and academic achievement, while a lack of belonging can result in mental health issues and reduced life satisfaction. Participants in this research study noted how valuable and informative the focus on belonging was, furthering their understanding and desire to proactively cultivate belonging amongst peers.

Universities can utilize the proposed model of Co-Creating Belonging Among Students (see Figure 5.1) as an entry point for enhancing knowledge and practices that students can engage in to cultivate belonging. All members of the student group would receive a copy of the proposed model, and the group could be led through a discussion to engage how the noted conditions and practices support their sense of belonging or lack thereof. Additionally, the proposed model could serve as a blueprint, and students could engage in dialogue to develop a list of actions or behaviors supporting each category. See Figure 5.3 for an example. It is important to note that, due to the dynamic and contextual nature of belonging, there is no exact formula or prescribed framework to support students' sense of belonging. However, facilitating

engaged practices around this proposed model will allow students to adapt and articulate their own nuances for cultivating this essential need among one another.

Figure 5.3. Co-Creating Belonging Blueprint with Actions



Categories	Group members can co-create belonging by:
Creating Safety and Comfort	1) Allowing group members to discuss the importance of a safe environment and establishing rules or agreements for feeling safe collectively. 2) Intentionally removing triggers and creating a welcoming environment. 3) Encouraging familiarity and building relationships to enhance comfort.
Fostering Acceptance, Understanding, and Authenticity	1) Embracing diversity and accepting differences without needing complete understanding 2) Encouraging authentic self-expression and creating space for diverse identities and perspectives 3) Consciously minimizing judgments and assumptions about others. 4) Encouraging open-mindedness and curiosity about others' experiences and perspectives.
Withholding Judgment	1) Promoting and modeling open communication by demonstrating acceptance and respect so students feel safe expressing their thoughts and opinions without fear of criticism 2) Encouraging active listening by teaching and modeling listening skills, ensuring all voices are heard and respected in conversations and group activities 3) Fostering empathy and understanding through activities and programs focused on storytelling and perspective-taking 4) Providing support resources to ensure students have access to mental health resources to support their wellbeing and helping them navigate challenges in a nonjudgmental way. 5) Regularly assessing and reflect the group's climate regarding judgment and inclusivity through surveys, group reflections, and adjusting to improve the environment.
Valuing and Appreciating Others	1) Acknowledging and celebrating individuals' contributions and presence. 2) Demonstrating genuine interest in getting to know others and showing appreciation. 3) Showing genuine care for the interest and wellbeing of group members. 4) Recognizing and honoring diverse identities and experiences.
Honoring and Designing for Diversity	1) Designing inclusive practices and environments that accommodate different backgrounds and needs. 2) Integrating diverse perspectives and materials into group activities or learning that reflect the experiences and contributions of various cultures, ethnicities, and identities. 3) Promoting dialogue and interaction, facilitating programs and initiatives that encourage dialogue among students from different backgrounds or identities.

Organizational Structure & Dynamics

	4) Engaging in training and knowledge-building around diversity, equity, and inclusion 5) Celebrating intersectionality of students, understanding their experiences are shaped by multiple, overlapping factors such as race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. 6) Addressing any discrimination that may occur, ensuring students feel safe and supported in bringing forward their concerns.
Structured and Intentional Time	1) Designing and prioritizing activities that promote interaction, such as relationship-building exercises, extended time together such as retreats, and collaborative tasks and events. 2) Ensuring these activities have clear purposes and involving member participation in setting rules and expectations.
Intentional Time and Purpose	1) Planning and allocating time for group interactions thoughtfully, focusing on quality and purposeful engagement. 2) Scheduling regular, recurring events that are inclusive and accommodate all members.
Group Size & Location	1) Utilizing both small- and large-group settings to balance intimacy and diversity. 2) Choosing comfortable and inclusive physical locations for gatherings, especially during the initial phases of group formation.
Responsibility Within the Group	1) Assigning roles and responsibilities to each member, ensuring everyone has a stake in the group's activities. 2) Encouraging members to utilize their strengths and skills in contributing to the group's objectives. 3) Maintaining a balance between authoritative structure and member empowerment. 4) Providing initial direction and support, then allowing members to take ownership and lead within the group.
Connecting and Relating to One Another	1) Providing structured opportunities for relationship-building, such as personal storytelling activities. 2) Encouraging asking questions to deepen connections and explore common interests and experiences.
Listening and Sharing Enthusiastically	1) Promoting active listening practices, including maintaining eye contact, nodding, and being fully present without distractions. 2) Creating environments where students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences.
Being Vulnerable	1) Encouraging an environment where students feel safe to share personal stories and experiences. 2) Normalizing vulnerability by creating spaces where students can express themselves without fear of judgment.
Building Trust, Respect, and Honesty	1) Establishing a culture of trust by encouraging honest and respectful interactions. 2) Creating clear boundaries and respecting individual choices about participation and sharing.

Cultivating Motivation and Mindset	1) Encouraging group members to explore their motivations and articulate their reasons for joining and engaging in activities. 2) Fostering a mindset of “buy-in” and commitment to the group’s purpose by having group members explore this together.
Supporting Attendance and Accountability	1) Emphasizing the importance of regular attendance and active participation, asking members to describe success in these areas. 2) Implementing structured check-ins and communication to maintain accountability and connection, even if group members are unable to see each other in-person regularly.
Building Shared Purpose	1) Inviting group members to articulate and work toward a common purpose or goal. 2) Creating mission statements or shared goals to unify group members.
Fostering Personal Growth and Self-Awareness	1) Encouraging personal development and supporting each other’s growth by discussing opportunities. 2) Promoting self-awareness and reflection among group members through intentional reflection and debriefing activities.

Future research

While the present study provides valuable insights into the conditions and practices that co-create belonging among one group of college students, it is important to acknowledge that this exploration was limited due to the nature of working with a small group of students within the same student organization at the same institution. This study can serve as a foundation for future research and provide more robust ways of understanding how to co-create belonging among students.

First, this study could be replicated with other student organizations or groups who share a connection, such as students living together in a residence hall, taking a class together, or working on campus together. Additional studies utilizing this same framework would allow the researcher to compare similarities or differences among the reported conditions and practices that co-create belonging and encourage revisiting the proposed model of Co-Creating Belonging for potential modifications. Furthermore, future studies could include working with students at different points in their experience with their student cohort or at different points in their university experience. For instance, participants in this study had been together for

approximately nine months and were all seniors in college. How would this process influence a new group just beginning their time together? Or if the participants were all in their first year at college?

This study could be enhanced by integrating a quantitative scale of belonging to capture an individual's current sense of belonging at a moment in time. If participants complete the scale at the beginning and end of the study, this information could be useful to the researcher as they describe shifts in belonging throughout the process.

Additionally, it would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study in which participants were reconvened several times following the AI process to share their reflections and points of learning about belonging since their previous touchpoint.

Further studies could look more specifically at certain identities or cohorts that have varied experiences with sense of belonging. Moreover, as a leadership educator, I am interested in learning more about the co-creation of belonging as a practice of leadership and its associated outcomes on the practice of leadership. Overall, there are many directions this study can go that will provide additional learning and practices about how belonging can be co-created among college students.

Conclusion

The dissertation offers an exploration into how undergraduate students can co-create a sense of belonging at a public four-year land grant university through the AI process. This study, grounded in qualitative research methods, provides insights into the multifaceted nature of belonging and offers practical implications for higher education professionals seeking to foster inclusive and supportive campus environments.

In conclusion, this dissertation contributes significantly to understanding belonging in higher education. By highlighting the critical conditions and practices that foster belonging and demonstrating the efficacy of the AI process, this research provides a valuable process for higher education professionals. As Block (2008) shares, “The key to creating or transforming community, then, is to see the power in the small but important elements of being with others... The structure of belonging gets down to this: How are we going to be when we gather together?” (p. 10) As institutions continue to navigate the complexities of student wellbeing and academic success, diversity and inclusion, and engagement and retention, this study offers practical, actionable strategies to create environments where all students can thrive and feel a genuine sense of belonging.

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Appendix A - Timeline of Study

Date	Data Collecting Activity
January 2024	- Submitted and received IRB approval - Round 1 Coding of Participant Survey
February 2024	- Recruited student participants from Campus Leadership Fellows via in-person announcement and emails - Participants completed consent form - Participants completed demographic survey and Survey 1 - Group A attended Focus Group 1
March 2024	- Group A completed Survey 2 - Group A attended Focus Group 2 - Group B attended Focus Group 1
April 2024	- Group B completed Survey 2 - Group B attended Focus Group 2
May 2024	- Group A & B completed Survey 3 - Transcribed focus groups
June 2024	- Round 2 Coding of Data to share during Focus Group 4 - Member checking with participants - Coding and analysis of all documents

Appendix B - Surveys Sent to Participants

SURVEY 1 (to be collected before Focus Group 1)

2. Demographic information
 - a. Name
 - b. Academic College/Degree Program
 - c. Year in School
 - d. Age
 - e. Gender
 - f. Sexual Orientation
 - g. Race/Ethnicity
 - h. Place(s) you call home
 - i. Socioeconomic status
 - j. First-generation
 - k. Military
 - l. Religion
 - m. Involvement in clubs/organizations on campus (list)
 - n. Work status (list)
3. Questions:
 - a. What does belonging mean to you a) in general and b) in the context of being an undergraduate student at this institution?
 - b. Share a personal experience of when you have experienced belonging during your time at this institution. Provide as much detail as possible, including describing the factors that fostered belonging.
 - c. Share a personal experience of when you intentionally worked to create belonging with or for someone else. Provide as much detail as possible, including describing the factors that contributed toward fostering belonging.
 - d. What are some things you want to know or wonder about belonging among college students?

SURVEY 2 (to be collected between Focus Group 1 and 2)

1. What are the three most important or exciting things that emerged as a result of our focus group?

SURVEY 3 (to be collected between Focus Group 2 and 3)

4. What are the three most important or exciting things that emerged as a result of our focus group?
5. Based on the focus group experience, what one message do you want to communicate that focuses on our goal of exploring the conditions that co-create belonging among people?
6. How have your ideas about the co-creation of belonging been enlarged or changed?

Appendix C - Focus Group Process and Questions

Note: Below is the appreciative inquiry focus group process and questions intended for participants throughout this study. Due to the nature of qualitative research, questions may be adapted to allow new and unforeseen topics to be explored in the research process. What is listed below, are the anticipated questions and intended lines of inquiry established at the beginning of the research process. Tear sheets will be utilized throughout to help participants collaborate and build upon their ideas.

Each focus group will last approximately 1.5 hours.

FOCUS GROUP 1

Part 1: Opening and Introduction (10 min)

1. Group introductions, purpose of research, and timeline. Imagine a world in which everyone belonged.
2. Confirmation of Informed Consent signature and receipt of the project summary handout allowing for questions and clarifications.
3. Remind participants steps taken to ensure confidentiality, and their participation is voluntary, allowing them to withdraw at any time without penalty.
4. Introduce the Ai process, and why this approach was selected. As part of Ai, invite them into the co-investigator role to co-construct the future of belonging at our university. Discuss the importance of belonging for psychological and physical health and heightened importance during college. Imagine if you could help co-create belonging for everyone at this institution, what images come to mind?
5. Ask for questions.

Part 2: Appreciative Inquiry: “Define” – What is the topic of inquiry (20 min)

1. Introduce research focus on belonging and share overview of current research as context. Will share word clouds with information below highlighted:
 1. Seven core elements of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019).
 2. Environment, Relationships, Involvement; privileged and minoritized identities (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).
 3. Four components of belonging provide specific areas to focus interventions, identifying enablers and barriers of each of the components: competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions. (Allen et al, 2021)
 4. Seven principles for belonging: authenticity, purpose, participation, collaboration, inclusion, accountability, growth (Vogl, 2016).
 5. Share connection to leadership and researcher’s interest, including pilot study results.
 6. Define belonging utilizing their responses from survey.
2. By noticing what is on the word cloud, share personal stories of experiencing and creating belonging, and the factors that contributed to the co-creation of belonging. Identify themes or patterns.
3. What are some things you want to know or wonder about belonging among college students or within your organization?

Part 3: Appreciative Inquiry: “Discover” – Appreciate the best of “what is” (20 min)

1. Looking at your experience in your organization, can you recall a time when you felt most alive, most involved, or most excited about your connection and feeling of belonging to the community.
 1. Tell us about the factors or conditions that contributed to that experience. (pair interviews)
2. Describe your sense of belonging within your organization right now.
 1. Describe your sense of belonging in this room right now.
 2. What is influencing your sense of belonging?
3. Without holding back, what are factors that have contributed to you feeling a sense of belonging at this institution and within this group?
 1. Tell me about a peak experience of when you have experienced belonging.
 2. Without being humble, how have you, if at all, worked to cultivate belonging among others at this institution?
 3. From your perception, how is belonging co-created in this organization or in higher education?

Part 4: Appreciative Inquiry: “Dream” – Imagine ‘what could be’ (20 min)

1. It’s 2027 and your organization is being awarded for creating the most belonging across campus. What is the award criteria?
2. One of your identities is from a historically underrepresented group. How has this group created an intentionally inclusive space for you to belong and thrive?
3. It’s graduation weekend in May 2025. As your organization is preparing to graduate its seniors, you all reflect back on the ways in which you have prioritized belonging over the past year. What has changed? What are you proud of?
4. If you could learn more about belonging, what would you most want to know? How would that information help you?

Part 3: Debrief

1. What thoughts are coming up for you as a result of this experience?
2. What questions are surfacing as a result of this experience?
3. Share debriefing statement.

FOCUS GROUP 2

Part 1: Appreciative Inquiry: “Design” – Determine ‘what should be’ (20 min)

Introduce the idea of social architecture as the infrastructure that allows organizations to move from dream to reality. In this phase we will address design elements, internal and external relationships, themes, and provocative propositions (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008).

1. What elements do we need to consider as we think about co-creating the conditions for belonging in this room today? And within this organization?
2. Who are the key relationships or people (internal and external) connected to belonging? What do they need to do, or not do to foster belonging?
3. What themes emerge from the first two questions? Do they connect to any personal stories?
4. Individually each participant will write a provocative statement or possibility statement about co-creating belonging within our organization. (A provocative statement will include the criteria listed below and shared with participants). Participants will share their statements and dialogue as they work to write one shared statement that serves as a clear and purposeful vision.

Criteria for Good Provocative Propositions

- Is it *provocative*? Does it stretch, challenge, or interrupt status quo?
- Is it *grounded*? Are examples available that illustrate the ideal as a real possibility? Is it grounded in the organization's collective history?
- Is it *desired*? Do you want it as a preferred future?
- Is it stated in *affirmative* and bold terms?
- Does it follow a *social architecture* approach?
- Does it expand the 'zone of proximal development'?
- Is it a *participative* process?
- Is it used to stimulate *intergenerational learning*?
- Is there balanced management of *continuity, novelty, and transition*?

(Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008, p. 168)

Part 2: Appreciative Inquiry: “Delivery/Destiny” – Creating ‘what will be’ (20 min)

Select the provocative proposition to work with and, as a group, revise, edit, or improve if needed. Then, build or map the positive core through an image or collection of words by answering these questions:

1. What strategies or action items can help individuals do to proactively co-create the conditions for belonging?
 1. What is the social architecture of belonging that we all have the ability to influence?
2. Describe your sense of belonging within your organization right now.
 1. Describe your sense of belonging in this room right now.

Part 3: Debrief

1. What thoughts are coming up for you as a result of this experience?
2. What questions are surfacing as a result of this experience?
3. What are your top three takeaways from this experience?
4. Share debriefing statement.

Appendix D - Pilot Study Summary

Participant Demographics

Four undergraduate students from a mid-western, public, land-grant university participated in this study. For the purposes of maximum variation in sampling, I sought a mix of genders, races, academic programs, and experiences (Creswell, 2013). As shown in the compiled participant tables (Tables 1 and 2), there are various identities that each person holds that differ from one another. This data includes pseudonym, student status, academic college major, minors/secondary majors, first-generation college status, age, work status, race, ethnicity, gender, pronouns, sexuality, hometown, faith or religious system, and socioeconomic status.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudo-nym	Race	Ethnicity	Gender	Pronouns	Sexuality	Belief System or Religion	Socioeconomic Status
Jackie	Black or African American, American Indian or Alaskan Native	No, not of Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or Spanish origin	Woman	She/Her/Hers	Bisexual	Yes, I identify with a particular belief system, religious practice, or faith community	In Poverty
Felicia	White	No, not of Hispanic, Latino/a/x, or Spanish origin	Woman	She/Her/Hers	Heterosexual /Asexual	Sometimes, I identify with a particular belief system, religious practice, or faith community	Middle Class
Cornelius	White	No, not of Hispanic, Latino/a/x,	Man	He/Him/His	Heterosexual	Yes, I identify with a particular belief system, religious	Middle Class

		or Spanish origin				practice, or faith community	
Otto	White	Yes, Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano/a/x	Man	He/Him/His	Heterosexual	Yes, I identify with a particular belief system, religious practice, or faith community	Middle Class

Table 2: Participant Demographics Part 2

Pseudo-nym	Student Status	Hometown(s)	Major	Minor/Secondary Major/Certificate	First-generation college student status	Age	Are you currently working?
Jackie	Junior	Wichita, KS, USA Hutchinson, KS, USA	Psychology	Couples and Family therapy and Leadership studies	No	20	Yes
Felicia	Senior	Gardner, KS, USA	Secondary Math Education	Leadership Studies and Math	Yes	22	Yes, 25 hours
Cornelius	Senior+	Manhattan, KS, USA Wamego, KS, USA	Food Science & Industry	Leadership Studies Global Food Systems Leadership	No	21	Yes, 15 hours
Otto	Senior	Liberal, KS, USA	Chemical Engineering	Chemistry, Leadership Studies	Yes	22	No

Participants

Jackie, Junior in the College of Arts & Sciences

Jackie is employed as a residence assistant in her residence halls, where she has lived since her freshman year. She is also part of a scholar program that supports the scholarly

development of academically talented first-generation, low-income, and/or underrepresented students. She also recently went through a name transition.

Felicia, Senior in the College of Education

Felicia joined many organizations throughout college. She served as a peer leader for an introductory to leadership course two times, traveled abroad for an international service team trip, is an ambassador for her college, joined a senior leadership development program, and also works at a local coffee shop.

Cornelius, Second Year Senior in the College of Agriculture

As a food science and industry major, Cornelius manages a food science research and extension lab and is a member of the food science club. He was a peer leader for an introductory to leadership course two times, joined a senior leadership development program, and is an ambassador for the leadership program.

Otto, Senior in the College of Engineering

As a first-generation college student, Otto participated in a pre-university academic success program, which is a multi-week program designed to prepare incoming, multicultural, first-generation students to the university environment before their freshman year. Otto also participated in a Connection Across Topics (CAT) course for first-generation students during his first year. Throughout college he became involved in an engineering leadership program, a society for Hispanic professional engineers, an ambassador for his college, and also as a peer leader for the first-generation student CAT community.

Findings/Results

In this section, I present the findings of the study, which offer insights into the perceived conditions that co-create a sense of belonging for college students at a four-year public

university. These results are the synthesis of analyzing data from the survey, focus groups, interviews, and the researcher's analytic memos. While each theme will be discussed individually, they all represent dimensions of the conditions to co-create belonging.

Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6 present a summary of the themes, categories, and corresponding codes. The four themes are described include:

- Theme 1: Conditions that create a sense of belonging (Table 3)
- Theme 2: What others can do to foster a sense of belonging (Table 4)
- Theme 3: An individual's internalized thoughts and desires related to belonging (Table 5)
- Theme 4: Additional factors that influence college students' sense of belonging (Table 6)

Table 3

Theme 1: Conditions that create a sense of belonging	
Safety	-Physical, psychological, and/or emotional safety -Safety will make people feel more comfortable -Free from judgment -Safety needs vary given personal identities
Comfortability	-Feeling comfortable around others -Creating a comfortable space -Relationships are established, we are past the small talk -Repetition or more time allows for more comfortability
Acceptance	-Feeling like others will accept me regardless of if they agree with me or have the same likenesses -Even though you may be different or have a different life, there is general respect of the person -We are like-minded in how we respect others, but that does not mean always having to share identities -Who I was on the inside was more important than the outside -An understanding of who I was as a person -Authenticity, feeling like I can be myself/unapologetically myself -Not having to hide my interests, habits, personalities
Mattering	-Felt like I mattered -Being seen (not overlooked) -People appreciate and value me -Not looked at as subordinate or needing help

	-I make the group better and the group makes me better -The larger group matters to me, and I matter to the larger group
Shared commonalities	-Similarities or shared interests -Common ground -Shared goal/purpose -Like-minded -Shared similar stories (I was not alone)
Acknowledged identities	-Recognition of being more than my visible identities (not being defined by my identities) – “I feel like you saw me for who I was, not the identities I hold” -Creating a space where an identity is seen and supported -Recognition that some things are going to affect me differently -Identities influence belonging (people who have privilege, belonging is more natural; your identities won’t be an issue)
Open-mindedness	-Held conversation to discuss differences -Being curious -Understanding of difference
Investment	-Doing things together (create a snapchat group, spend time together) -Investment outside of the classroom connects you to the larger community more -When you’re contributing to something in that space it gives you a sense of ownership of what’s happening on campus
Relationship-building	-Focus on building community, not just task at hand -Built sincere relationships (not focused on small-talk) -Developed friendships -Being emotionally connected with others
Transformation	-Challenges self and group/not complacent -When something helps you grow/learn, it increases your motivation -When you’re helping the group of the community: the community is teaching and growing you, and you are growing beyond what you can do in the classroom.

Table 4

Theme 2: What others can do to foster a sense of belonging	
Be welcoming	-Inviting everyone into space/situation -Intentionally welcoming (“I’m glad you’re here”) -Positivity -Know everyone’s names -Smiling -Initiating conversation

	-Provide rules or structure for safety -Create comfortability
Be inclusive	-Accessibility for all identities (“everything was not tailored to me”) -Hearing everyone’s voices -Inclusion does not always mean belonging -Inclusion is trying to make sure everyone is part of it, but that may not feel like you belong -I may feel included, but not that I belong -Inclusivity is like everywhere, belonging is the next step to make sure you are actually feeling like you belong and others care about you -Allyship of those with minoritized identities
Design the experience/space for us/with us	-Must be curious about how others experience/view the space -The group should be able to make space their own -Co-create the environment -Open doors/welcoming environment
Provide mentorship	-Assist with transition into college -Check in on me -Connect me to resources or opportunities or people -Can help increase someone else’s sense of belonging by connecting and supporting them -Valuable also to mentor, not only mentee (reciprocity) -Has knowledge or lived experience that is beneficial to share with those new to a group -Older/experienced: bring safety, positivity, comfort, validation, and community to the group -Newer/younger: bring curiosity, open-mindedness, vulnerability, promise to invest in the group
Engage in storytelling	-There was vulnerability in sharing stories with one another -Hearing the stories made me feel less alone -A way to learn about something new and see it from someone’s side -Sharing stories of belonging could continue to help learn more about that person

Table 5

Theme 3: An individual’s internalized thoughts and desires related to belonging

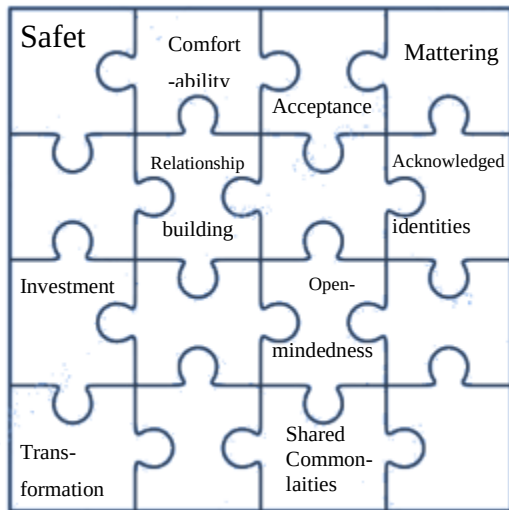
My internal thoughts impact belonging	-Belonging is very mental/psychological for each person -My attitude toward each experience influences my belonging -My identities influence how I think about myself in this space -My identities also influence how I perceive the world to see me and make judgments about me -I need to be authentic to who I am -I must have self-acceptance (many college students experience an identity crisis)
Belonging requires personal initiative	-I must go out of my way to connect/put myself out there -I need to figure out what things are important to me to feel a sense of belonging -I need to have a desire to be there and work toward belonging -I need to figure out who I am and what you want/need -The more invested I am, the more motivated I become to engage and belong -Even if belonging is there, I must be ready to receive it

Table 6

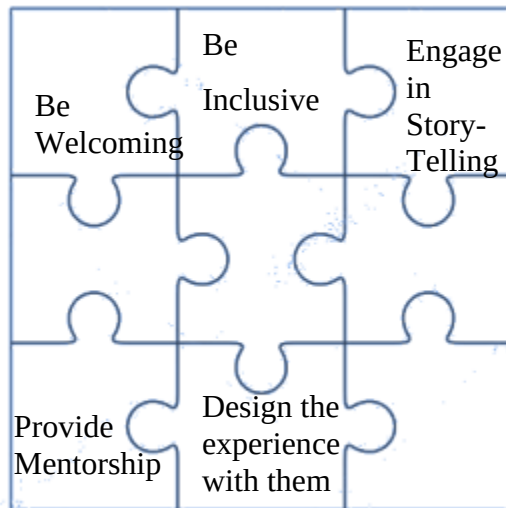
Theme 4: Additional factors that influence college students' sense of belonging	
How the cycle of how the university experience impacts belonging	-Continual turnover in college experience (~ every four years) -Things get passed down (traditions, spaces), and we also inherit belonging (or not) from those before us -Co-created by all, but students are only here for so long -It is challenging to create communities of belonging because students are not here longer
How participants described belonging	-Not easy to describe or understand -Tough to wrap your head around -Belonging is in the eye of the beholder, but it's in the hands of the creator -It's very mental and on an individual level -When I think about belonging, I think about my personal experiences and my personal connection to people -Belonging is a key element in someone's life that alters their way of thinking -Belonging is already inside us like a missing puzzle piece (a need inside of us) -Belonging helps us with a greater sense of purpose -Many things influence belonging -When we connect, belonging can come out -There is a mutuality/reciprocity in belonging

	-When I initiated the belonging for others, it made me feel valued and happy -There is a co-dependency in spaces of belonging
How participants described the complexity of belonging	-We all have experienced/found belonging, but in different areas (due to identities and experiences and interests) -We all discuss different actions we appreciate to feel belonging -It's different for everyone, it takes consideration for you to know how you feel like you belong -There is no right "formula" or "science" for belonging for all people -It's very individualized; what works for you will probably not work for me

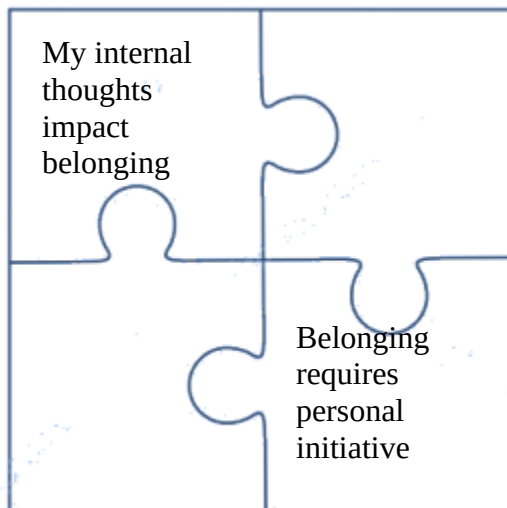
Visual Representations



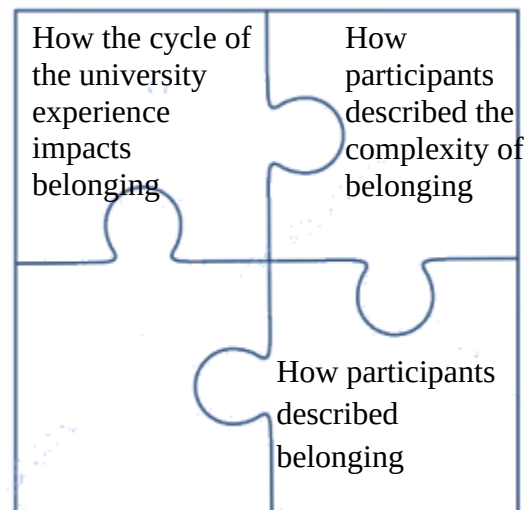
Theme 1: Conditions that create a sense of belonging



Theme 2: What others can do to foster a sense of belonging



Theme 3: An individual's internalized thoughts and belonging requires personal initiative



Theme 4: Additional factors that influence college students' belonging

Appendix E - Invitation to Participants

Dear X,

Are you interested in exploring how to increase belonging among participants in your organization?

I am reaching out to you today to ask for your participation in a research study I am engaging in for my dissertation for my doctoral program. As students part of XYZ, I feel you would have valuable insights and experiences to share as part of this process. If you participate, you will be able to contribute to better understanding college student belonging and how it can be co-created among people, which is an essential element of the college student experience. This process should also help to increase belonging among your group members. Together, we will describe and learn the ways that belonging can be co-created among individuals within your group. You and other members of your organization will engage in an appreciative inquiry process to share your experiences and ideas related to belonging on campus.

Participation in the research study is **completely voluntary** and **your responses and information are confidential**. The details of this study are outlined in this electronic Informed Consent Document (insert link here) and below. Your participation in the study does not impact your current or future relationships with me, as the researcher. As you review the consent form, you will see you have some options for what data you wish to have included in the study (or not).

What is asked of you: As part of this research study, you will be asked to engage in the following opportunities, each designed to build upon the previous. You are invited to:

- Complete a short survey sharing and reflecting on your experiences related to belonging.
- Participate in two in-person focus groups, lasting ~1.5 hour each.
- Complete two short surveys between each focus group.
- Participate in one “member reflection” session (which serves as a checkpoint to check for accuracy in the data represented and provide opportunity for questions and feedback)

Below is the proposed timeline:

- Week of February 10: Participant survey
- Week of February 26: Focus Group 1 + Survey
- Week of March 4: Focus Group 2 + Survey
- Week of April 1: Member Reflection

Please feel free to reach out to me with any questions and thank you for considering! Tamara Bauer

Appendix F - Images of Participant's Writing

These images contain the elements that facilitate belonging, and corresponding behaviors that enable that element to be practiced or experienced.

