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COVID-19 Impact on Undergraduates Sense of Belonging at the University of San Diego

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Abstract

My purpose in this research was to understand how COVID-19 impacted undergraduate students' sense of belonging at the University of San Diego. In doing so, I gained insight into how residential advisors (RAs) have been and are currently impacted by a sense of belonging at the University of San Diego. This research process consisted of three cycles. This research asked participants to describe how COVID-19 affected whether they found a sense of belonging and what steps they have taken to create a sense of belonging within their student leadership roles. All cycles of this research allowed participants to meet each other and have an open discussion to share their University of San Diego experiences. At the end of this research, I provided data-driven recommendations to inform student services funding allocations to promote social interaction for students impacted by COVID-19.

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Social Location & Introduction

I value growth through overcoming challenges and identify as someone who struggled during my undergraduate experience to find my support system. I knew I would need it if I planned on completing my degree at Chico State. There is a wave of things undergraduates need to adjust to during this transition, and the first thing that comes to mind is having people to go to for support. This can consist of professors, mentors, and friends from classes, clubs, or social events. Students are provided the guidance needed to thrive in a college environment by creating a community of support. What led me to my research topic was the thought of how long it took for me to find my support system. This determined whether I would drop out to find a job, go to a local community college, or stay at Chico State.

As a previous residential advisor, I saw many students drop out because they needed more time to find their support systems. I also know that at the University of San Diego, there is a disconnect among first- through third-year undergraduate students, regarding how to socially connect. There is an internally shared experience of debating the same decision of whether going to college was the right decision and struggling to make social connections on campus when I check in with my student staff. When COVID-19 was added to the equation for many young adults, it changed everything. This was an issue for high school students who were going to graduate and go to college, students who were in their first year of undergraduate programs, and those about to obtain their degrees. This uncertainty of what to do next and how to make friends when you feel like you missed the opportunity to do so through social connection in-person. These barriers negatively impact finances, sense of belonging, and student educational plans.

It will take time for students to feel like they have caught up to what they missed. I hope that the University of San Diego is in tune with their needs and provides them the opportunities

to do things they did not get the chance to when it was meant to happen. I have succeeded because I found a sense of belonging by reaching out to others and learning to ask for support when needed. I have seen other undergraduates successfully obtain their degrees when they, too, found a sense of belonging. The goal is to provide students with safe spaces to build a community that will support them through their academic journey by creating more opportunities for them to connect socially. I hope to increase the support students have on campus by making friends and building a community. This can be done by attending on-campus events to adjust and complete their academic paths. Therefore, the research questions framing my study are: (a) How can I increase an undergraduate's sense of belonging during an ongoing pandemic? and (b) How can we create social connections and other opportunities for students who have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic?

Background and Literature Review

The first case of COVID-19 was reported in China in late 2019. The outbreak infected thousands daily. COVID-19 spreads through direct interaction with others or droplets from sneezing or coughing from surrounding individuals. The virus induces symptoms that include fatigue, fever, cough, and wide-ranging severity (Rothan et al., 2020). California had its first known case in late January 2020, and the United States declared a public health emergency by January 30. During the transition from February to March, there was a substantial increase in cases, deaths, and market shelves being emptied out. By March 4, 2020 Governor Newson declared California in a state of emergency. The cancellation of significant events began on March 12, and all bars were required to close by March 15. Even restaurants had to reduce their capacity to 50 people. Before March ended, COVID-19 was recognized as a worldwide

epidemic, impacting health, economies, and educational systems and bringing drastic changes to our daily lives.

The state and local governments issued "stay-at-home" orders that followed Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations to prevent the further spread of COVID-19, which include: "increasing hand washing, wearing masks in public, reducing face touching, and engaging in physical distancing from others" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). In response to federal and state actions, universities across the United States sent residential students home during the spring 2020 semester, canceled on-campus activities, and moved all instruction online to reduce the risk among students and faculty. Over 25 million U.S. college students were affected (Rhea, 2020). The shift was abrupt, with little notice that would allow faculty and students to prepare for the transition.

I worked as a case manager when the pandemic began, heavily providing resources to low-income populations. When it was announced that schools and workplaces were closing, most follow-up calls with students and parents were regarding how they would pay rent or afford groceries. There were not enough pantries that remained open during the early stages of the pandemic. Many students lost their jobs creating financial hardship and increasing stress and anxiety as they had to rely on family members or others for financial support (Birmingham et al., 2021). The loss of work and subsequent return to the family home may have been particularly stressful for students and perhaps contributed to them feeling like a "child" again (Birmingham et al., 2021).

A commonality within most articles was the connection between how undergraduates' sense of belonging impacts other areas of success and adjustment. Specifically, the report by Tice et al., (2021) focused on COVID's impact on various areas of holistic well-being. It noted that

COVID-19 took away the opportunity for many to experience exposure to living life and learning from it. It has delayed many areas of development. If students do not find a place on campus in which they feel they can be their true selves or be provided with the support to thrive in person, we began to see how this creates barriers. These moments also create a situation where students withdraw from psychological ownership of their learning. Without enabling a culture of student ownership and agency, students will likely not establish a sense of belonging to their institution and will leave when an alternate offer arrives (Tice et al., 2021).

General themes in the literature were barriers for undergraduates and types of transitions. Obstacles, as mentioned earlier, focus on the direct impact on students' finances, decrease in the sense of belonging, and change in educational plans. Transition as a theme includes transitions experienced moving from in-person instruction to online, academic motivation, and the transition back from online to in-person teaching. Most universities are seeing similar patterns and are working towards addressing the aftermath impact COVID-19 has had and continues to have on their students. All the articles written are from universities within the United States, Europe, and Asia researching areas of well-being.

Barriers

Financial

Students faced various barriers while the pandemic took over our daily lives. The more commonly known one I was able to experience was financial. When the pandemic began, I worked as a case manager, providing resources to low-income populations. There needed to have been more pantries that remained open during the early stages of the Pandemic. Many students have lost their jobs creating financial hardship and increasing stress and anxiety as they may now rely on family members or others for financial support (Birmingham et al., 2021). The loss of

work and subsequent return to the family home could be particularly stressful and perhaps contribute to feeling like a "child" again (Birmingham et al., 2021).

The most common question asked as a case manager in 2020 was regarding employment support. Finding a job with no prior or full-time experience made it rugged enough before COVID-19. Once the pandemic took over, it added much more pressure. Most students were anxious that they would be unable to find full-time employment (Birmingham et al., 2021). In most articles, this general pile-up of all the things students felt impacted motivation and created barriers to accessing services. Students for whom stress, motivation, technology, financial difficulties, time management, distracted home settings, and lack of time due to caring for others were significant barriers were much more likely to report their spring 2020 grades were lower than typical (Hickey et al., 2021).

Decrease in Sense of Belonging

My focus is on a sense of belonging; therefore, as I researched articles, I supported the impact it has on overall learning and young student growth. The need for belonging is theoretically identified as a basic psychological need. It is an essential human motivator, considering that all people are innately driven to find a sense of belongingness and sustain it (Mcleod, 2020). College students' understanding of belonging continues to be a significant predictor of mental health even amidst the pandemic, conveying the importance of an inclusive climate (Gopalan et al., 2022). During my current position here at University of San Diego as an assistant community director, Residential Life surveys our undergraduate student population four times per year. This population consists of incoming first-year students and the transfer population within their first year to measure a sense of belonging, among other areas of holistic well-being.

A commonality within most articles was the connection between how undergraduates' sense of belonging impacts other areas of success and adjustment. Specifically, the following In Marler et al. 's (2021) report, which focused on COVID's impact on various areas of holistic well-being, stated a significant positive association between high academic motivation and a strong sense of belonging. Because COVID has taken away the opportunity for many to experience exposure to living life and learning from it, it has delayed many areas of development. If students do not find a place on campus that allows them to be their true selves, be provided with the support to thrive, or get the opportunity removed to be in person; We begin to see how this can create barriers. These moments create opportunities for students to withdraw from psychological ownership of their learning. Without enabling a culture of student ownership and agency, students will likely not establish a sense of belonging to their institution and will leave when an alternate offer arrives (Tice et al., 2021).

Educational Plans

Students also expressed concerns about the disruptive impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on their career plans, with nearly half citing worries about a poor job market, the quality of job opportunities, tight competition for the job market, and limited opportunities to network (Molock et al., 2021). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused several students to consider deferring graduation, taking a leave of absence, and postponing their entry into the workforce (Molock et al., 2021). Undergraduate students had to determine if continuing classes online for another year was their path. Seniors in high school had to decide whether to apply and pay the same college tuition as they would have for in-person classes. It is much more stressful in a time of uncertainty and needing more information to make an informed decision.

Transitions

Transition from in person to Online

The pandemic abruptly compelled many universities, including USD, to shift to emergency remote teaching as a rapid response for continuity of learning (using the popular Zoom platform) (Wilson et al., 2021). This was a way to prevent COVID-19 from spreading at a faster rate. This also meant that students and faculty had to adapt to a new way of meeting the curriculum. It was an unexpected set of burdens and time demands, often requiring individuals to master new technology. The pressure such demands have placed on academic workload and well-being is evident (Tice et al., 2021). Demands for students to do more work to make up for the fact that classes were not in person were a trend.

My colleagues who pursued teaching would share how much larger classes grew as other teachers quit the job. Barriers included a lack of a computer or other needed technology, anxiety and stress, and a distracted environment at home (Arslan et al.,2021). An added stressor was keeping students focused, while the burn out of being online for long hours was felt across the board. Our impression was that many educational developers of online instruction media already know that attention is only possible to sustain with the physical presence of co-viewers (Tice 2021).

Academic Motivation

The transition to online instruction indicated that many students struggled to adapt, reported distractions at home, and reduced motivation and interest in their classes (Aguilera-Hermida et al., 2020). Many of the students I worked with no longer had rooms of their own when they moved back home because siblings or other family members had taken over those spaces. Parents also found it stressful to create multiple spaces within their homes for their children to have desk areas and Wi-Fi to connect to classes on zoom. Many students reported that

distractions at home reduced motivation and struggled to adapt to online learning (Arslan et al., 2021). Aside from the struggle to have space to do the academic work, both students and parents felt stressed by all the unknown factors that came with COVID-19. Questions about when students will be able to return to class or live on campus were commonly asked. The perception of stress has always been regarded as a critical factor affecting individuals' learning motivation, engagement, and academic performance (Zhao et al., 2021).

Transition from Online to In-person

Preliminary results suggest that the majority of students refer in-person learning over online learning (Marler et al., 2021). As a student who has been able to experience both online and in-person learning I can state that there is a different amount of personal growth that comes from interacting with others in person. It has access to bounce ideas off one another, get support, answer questions in the moment, and go over the required material. Students learn less online than in-person instruction when expected to be on-campus and in-class, although not seemingly apparent in pre-pandemic classrooms (Tice et al., 2021). Several students noted that changing from in-person to virtual learning environments was stressful (Molock et al., 2021). An added stressor was that no one knew when classes would transition to in-person and, if so, what that process would look like. When campuses reopened for in-person courses, students found themselves experiencing the same or even greater anxiety about returning to campus, worrying about the safety of classrooms, dorms, and other areas of public gatherings resulting in a continuation of poor health choices (Zhao et al., 2021). This was (and continues to be) very unsettling for students and those working in higher education.

Context

My setting for the research has taken place at the University of San Diego. My connection to the topic is someone who has experienced a disconnect from campus during my undergraduate experience. I struggled to find my place on campus and find genuine friendships and others who would provide the support I needed during a transition with many adjustments. I gave myself a year to figure out if I would stay, transfer to a community college, or drop out. This topic is important to me because it impacted me throughout my first year away from home. I also understand how COVID-19 has been a factor to consider in why there has been difficulty in establishing community and friendships within and outside of dorm life. It is vital to the overall college experience to support student development and retain the student population. I have also listened to direct student feedback throughout my current role, stating how making friendships in a space where the pandemic is still ongoing is difficult. This anxiousness was shared regarding the status of dorms and classes staying open for the 2021-2022 academic year. Now, I see that students require community more than ever.

Currently, I am an assistant community director for an upper-division area for student housing; this means I manage a team of residential advisors who support the second-year population, transfer students, and students returning to housing. Being passionate about working with students helped me establish a relationship through my ongoing cycles throughout the Fall 2022 semester. A challenge I experienced was the power dynamic. I am in an authority role so students might have felt uncomfortable sharing responses or make them feel it was mandatory to participate. I engaged with others by having community conversations regarding the responses while collecting data.

Project Rationale

As someone who works within higher education and has experience, it is important to understand various perspectives from undergraduate students during the COVID-19 global pandemic and in seeing the aftermath of a still present pandemic. My personal connection to this topic has been understanding how crucial the first few weeks of school are in figuring out whether there are people you can rely on and go to for support. Intentionally, during my undergraduate experience, Chico State University made sure all students who were going to live on campus had to move in one week prior to classes started. This was meant to be a time where various clubs hosted events and recruited members. Residential life also hosted daily events at various locations throughout the days with the goal to provide space for roommates to form bonds and meet others living in dorms.

Data supporting the importance of these first 6 weeks had been put into practice here at the University of San Diego for the fall of 2022. Student survey responses showed that they appreciated having weekly events to attend. The post event feedback from resident advisors was that although it was tiring to host events so late in the night for those 6 weeks, they enjoyed being able to provide a space where residents could connect with one another. The University of San Diego's student population takes surveys multiple times a semester and it is something most students, including myself, have expressed finding tedious to do, especially when it is more than 10 questions. Therefore, when picking my method, I figured I could survey in person and with fewer questions. It also provided me with the space to create a community by going through the cycles with the same RA team.

Research Design

I used Schlossberg's (2006) transition theory as my theoretical frame. Schlossberg identified four significant sets of factors that influence a person's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. These factors are also known as the 4 S's (Evan et al., 1998). Social support focuses on intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, institutions, and communities (Evan et al., 1998). I focused on the social aspect and discussed how increasing opportunities for social connections will increase student's transition and retention. Transitions are something we go through consistently, and by building our support systems in all areas of the four S's, we can better support our undergraduate students during this post-pandemic area.

Figure 1

Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson (2006) p. 33. *Transition Theory*

I used a traditional research cycle involving the cyclical repetition of four steps: planning, taking action, observing, and reflecting (Coughlan & Brannick, 2001). This process revolves around designing, implementing, and evaluating specific actions that seek to answer research questions (Coughlan & Brannick, 2001). I chose this design because it supported me through each cycle, which is discussed in more detail under the cycle descriptions. The quantitative portion of my study narrowed questions, so I collected precise data from undergraduate participants. My qualitative method allowed for a creative outlet for gathering data. Using both ways, I learned more about ways to help students' sense of belonging by increasing social-wellbeing. My assumption prior was that there is a need for additional student support as a result of the ongoing pandemic.

Figure 2

Coughlan & Brannick (2001). *Spiral Action Research Cycles*
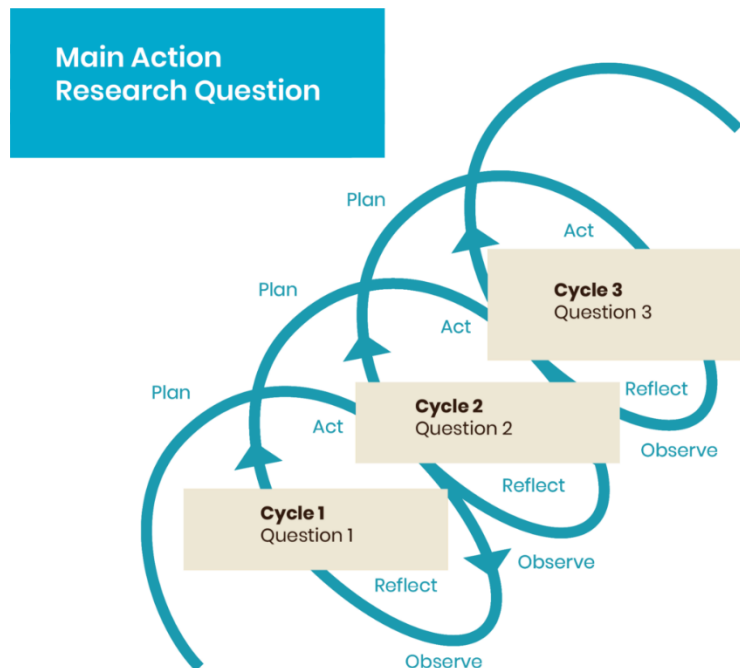
Data Collection

Description of Cycle #1

The purpose of this first cycle was to have participants begin analyzing how COVID-19 impacted their sense of belonging. This cycle allowed participants to reflect comfortably before sharing aloud in the group. I anticipated that this would be the first time some participants had reflected on their experiences regarding their sense of belonging since the COVID-19 pandemic. Providing a reflective journal page offered the opportunity for deeper reflection and breaking down a "sense of belonging" into how they, as students, were impacted by COVID-19. This allowed me to gain deeper insight into their individual identity development and how they viewed themselves at the University of San Diego.

Cycle one included outreach to all of our current 85 RAs for the 2022-2023 academic year, 10 consented, and three started the survey, completed the survey, and were included in the final analysis. Participants were all continuous RAs, the term used for students returning to the position a second year in a role. RA participants were two females and one male; by the second cycle, an additional male was added.

All cycles used mixed methods. My first cycle asked participants to respond to two questions. Quantitative Question - On a scale of 1-5, how would you rank how much COVID-19 has impacted your sense of belonging? Qualitative Question-Journal entry: How has COVID-19 impacted your sense of belonging? The last Qualitative portion (Question No.3) remained consistent for all three cycles. This asked the participants to select a song representing their response to Question #2 and state why they picked it. They were given a page with questions and could answer in any format that best expressed their response.

Cycle 1: *Findings*

While reading the responses regarding how COVID-19 impacted the participants' sense of belonging, there was a common theme of feeling behind academically, socially, and in comparison, to peers on different life paths. An additional theme was being challenged in finding the space to meet peers due to restrictions. When stating they felt like they were behind, it concerned other peers in academics, experiencing traditional class environments and first year college experiences. These responses fit in with the conventional understanding of what impacts a sense of belonging. These themes were aspects that were not experienced as a result of COVID-19's restricting interactions from occurring.

Some participants shared how belonging meant engaging in authentic conversations with their peers, residents, and faculty. Authentic conversations were further defined as being able to relate to others or at least share similarities through joining the same clubs, having the same interests outside of academics, or bonding over academic support with peers in the same field. Feelings of being restricted from interactions with others, restrictions for social events such as rushing, and connecting with professors for in-person office hours. When asked to respond using the 1–5 Likert scale, two participants felt that the impact on the sense of belonging was 3, and one chose 4. On this scale, 1 was for minimal impact, and 5 represented the most significant impact.

In the second portion of this cycle, participants' responses were regarding a song selection representing how they experienced COVID-19 impact on their sense of belonging. The chosen songs were "Changed" by Catie Turner, "Almost There" from the "Princess and the Frog " soundtrack, and "One" by Filter. Some of the themes I found were in regards to how the RA's felt at the beginning of the pandemic, and all went on to explain how they had to learn to be

alone, rely on themselves, and how things felt both lonely and stagnant. Loneliness is identified as people's subjective perception of deficiencies in their social connections (Russell et al., 1984) and an absence of meaningful and positive relations with other people (Weiss, 1973). This unpleasant experience occurs with a personal loss of the quantity and quality of social relationships (Arslan et al., 2020). As they changed over time, everything around them remained the same. These changes were defined as learning to be alone, working hard and not expecting credit for it, and finding happiness in being alone. Other responses shared during the larger group was how belonging was the last thing felt, except that they all knew everyone was struggling with similar feelings.

When asked to rank how much COVID-19 impacted their sense of belonging, two voted on 3 and the other on 5, meaning they feel they have found their sense of belonging within the university. The responses that followed this were regarding why they had felt better over time to adjust and found opportunities to find their sense of belonging. One participant said, "I feel much better socially with restrictions being lifted." Providing some form of new normality had given participants the opportunity to in some way "make up for lost experiences," as another participant noted. There was a group that felt a sense of relief compared to other peers and their life experiences, one of those participants said, "nobody cares that I'm older." Although the university took some time to take a step back from strict COVID-19 protocols, randomized testing, and required proof of vaccination, participants have now taken up all the opportunities they had postponed pursuing due to COVID-19.

All participants shared being "happier" because they found spaces with peers that make them feel welcomed and okay with where they are, regardless of having missed doing things at a specific time in life. Life went from feeling "challenged to meet peers" to "being able to meet

people as the campus opened up." Overall, this cycle supported understanding common themes before and after COVID-19, how reflective connections were made within the song selection process, and in creating an additional space on campus for participants to share their COVID-19 impact experiences.

Description of the Outcomes and Changes as a Result of the Research

Students had trouble finding a sense of belonging during COVID-19. They often felt unable to "find peers they could relate to". They reported feeling a lack of normality over the crucial aspects of life, both lonely and behind because of circumstances outside their control. These disruptions can be impactful in a variety of ways. Social and physical isolation likely result in losing social connection to our sphere of comfort, which friends and family members sustain. Social and physical isolation "are associated with poor health behaviors, including smoking, physical inactivity, poor sleep quality" (Birmingham, et al., 2021, p. 12). Lack of sleep can diminish attention span, learning memory, and decision-making (Birmingham, et al., 2021).

I reviewed and synthesized what was shared and adapted my second cycle to making individual google drive folders. In doing so, I could scan their response journal sheets, and by the second cycle, I could upload the questionnaire document. This change was made so they could write more if they wanted to and make up any upcoming cycle sessions. Doing so led to more extended, thoughtful responses, which was great for analysis. The one thing it allowed was for participants to feel no longer motivated to show up in person. They still needed to respond to the document within their drive folder, along with a follow-up email as to why they would not be able to make it in person for the cycle itself.

Description of Cycle #2

The second cycle followed the same setup, allowing participants to further reflect and build on what was shared in their google document questionnaire after they had written out all responses to the three questions. A slight adjustment made that day was giving them 15 minutes to write answers out rather than sharing their responses with pauses to write for the following question. This way, they could all have their replies ready, and they would go in a circle taking turns being able to share answers for the first question. Once everyone shared the response for the first one, they moved on to the next. Quantitative Question #2 - On a scale of 1-5, how would you rank if you have found your sense of belonging? Qualitative Question #2: - Journal entry: How can you (as an RA) increase undergraduate students' sense of belonging during the ongoing pandemic? For this portion of the questionnaire, you will select a song that represents your response to Question #2 and state why you chose that song.

 I wanted this second cycle to help participants build a story around their identities as residential advisors and their experiences. The purpose of this second cycle was to have participants verbally share their experiences and hear themselves express their sense of belonging. With honesty and vulnerability, I wanted them to become empowered by their narrative so they could continue sharing in the cycle that followed. Additionally, I wanted them to be able to see how although they felt alone at the beginning of the pandemic, they could hear, based on shared responses, that they shared similar experiences during and as they adjust to life after COVID-19, while trying to engage in student engagement to gain a sense of belonging altogether.

Cycle 2: *Results & Findings*

The second cycle focused on how RAs could increase undergraduates' sense of belonging during an ongoing pandemic. Responses varied from checking in with residents, programming,

communicating availability, and supporting residents in helping residents find friendships through clubs or interests. An additional theme was building community and building friendships with residents as well. When stating they wanted to build community, it included letting their residents know they were there to support students, emphasizing the importance of fun while finding a sense of belonging. "Fun because that brings happiness, and when a place and community bring you happiness, you will feel like you belong there." These responses fit in with the social aspect of building a sense of belonging. Participants have attempted these things and areas in which they plan to expand on more to ensure their floors and or buildings feel inclusive and safe and provide a sense of familiarity.

In further responses shared within the large group, types of effort made to connect with residents were discussed. This varied from continuing "Torero Tuesday" events, which is a new 6-week model program residential life implemented for the fall 2022 semester. This entailed having the first six Tuesdays of the semester, exact location and time, hosted events that varied and were led by RAs. Although the general feedback given by RAs was that it was exhausting to host these events continuously, all were able also to acknowledge the benefits reaped by their residents. Some of these benefits included having a consistent space for students to socialize, and some feedback given by residents to RAs was that they were able to recharge from the everyday academic and work schedule, enjoying being able to do something new and meet others.

When asked to rank if they have found their sense of belonging, two voted 4 and the other 5, meaning they feel they have found their sense of belonging within the university. Based on scale responses, respondents discussed feeling a sense of normalcy. In the fall of 2021, COVID testing was required upon return from each break. By spring 2022, randomized testing was introduced to campus. In the fall of 2022, the University of San Diego discontinued

randomized testing. Still, it required all students and faculty to show proof of vaccination and a negative test upon moving into residence halls and to continue enrollment. This shared "normalcy" students could finally engage in events such as rushing for frats and sororities, attending Club tabling events, trying out for sports, and having residential housing slowly go back up to its capacity of 2,800 students.

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly shook campuses and residence life systems across the globe. Specifically, some of the core roles of student affairs work such as social integration, student development, and feeling valued, respected, and connected—better known as the sense of belonging fell to the wayside (Hernández, E et al., 2021). Once students could return to "usual" college activities and exposure to these experiences, they could express feelings of belonging through the friendships made within those spaces. Although RAs are considered student leaders on campus, they also are still students who are learning to balance their RA role, being a student, and additional responsibilities such as employment outside of campus and extracurriculars. They still require experiences that are supportive, developmental, and connected.

In the second portion of the cycle, participants' responses were regarding a song selection representing their response to the second question regarding how they plan to increase their residents' sense of belonging. Respondents chose songs that fell under the category of "hope." Selected titles were: "I'll be There for You" by the Rembrandts, "We are One" by Pitbull, and "Somewhere Forever" by Garden Gloves. In providing further information as to why the song selections were made, they represent a few categories: friendship, shared experience, personal, community, and based on personal interest. Songs selected were described as having someone who will always help out, uplifting melodies, and songs that feel like, although it might be a

weird time, it is a place for constant discovery. In the same group space, participants added that they felt excited about what the new standard would look like if expectations of the college experience changed more with time and shared how it had already been impacted. Ways COVID-19 influenced expectations were what individuals wanted to get out of the college experience, ways in which they tried to obtain these experiences, and their view on the value of pursuing higher education after high school.

Description of the Outcomes and Changes as a Result of the Research

Based on integrated information from the second cycle of interviews, the third cycle was meant to be a continued conversation. As the facilitator of this space, I first asked participants to share their stories with other individuals. Afterward, I asked each participant to share ways in which themes they heard in each of their stories. The purpose of this cycle was to have participants directly share what themes of belonging they identified as most important to their sense of belonging and experiences at the University of San Diego. Moreover, I wanted them to diagnose what further efforts they can make as RAs to build a stronger sense of belonging. I created a safe space for students to share their experiences. Moreover, when other participants responded with an affirmation or shared a similar experience, the room began to feel more natural—using the first cycles as the building block. I wanted participants to create a safe space within themselves. I wanted participants to feel they could share as much or as little as they wanted based on what they had written for a response. In having participants go around and share their experiences, more became inclined to do so as well, rather than summarizing what they had written. They could also express further why they wrote their responses and how hearing others share made them feel.

Description of Cycle #3

The third cycle took a step back and provided a clear lens regarding what RAs had observed within the undergraduate population. It was also able to expand on additional individual efforts made to support residents and focus on how the University could step up in providing opportunities to create a sense of belonging. This time, participants did not share in large groups because only one showed up in person. This changed the dynamic of going around to share, reflect and expand on individual responses. I obtained other participants' responses due to them responding to the questionnaire placed in their google folders. Quantitative Question #3 - On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your satisfaction with the number of opportunities to increase your sense of belonging at USD? All three participants said 4 out of 5 regarding satisfaction. Qualitative Question #2: - Journal entry: How can we (as a community) create ongoing opportunities for those who are still struggling with a sense of belonging as a result of the ongoing pandemic? For this portion of the questionnaire, you will select a song that represents your response to Question #3 and state why you selected that song.

I wanted this last cycle to help participants look at the larger picture. Be able to hear what they have observed around peers and residents. The purpose of this last cycle was to have participants verbally express how the University was meeting and lacking to meet the need. Keeping in mind that only one person was present, they shared their responses, and I could see the other two participants' responses afterward. It was a brief point of conversation, expanding on why they thought it was essential to show up in person. In the end, I obtained enough responses to see commonalities, the impact on participants who did show up, and how the reactions were longer regardless of all limitations.

Cycle 3: *Results & Findings*

The third cycle focused on how we, as a community at the University of San Diego, can increase opportunities for those still struggling to find a sense of belonging due to the ongoing pandemic. Responses varied from increasing social spaces, attending campus events, and directing student surveys to get feedback. Participants shared that third-year undergraduates were less interested in signing up to be more involved with campus-led events. Some of the participants stated that they "believe that part of the problem with finding a sense of belonging after the pandemic is the issue of involvement". There was a variation of those who took on more than their schedules could allow and would have to drop some clubs to balance academics better. Additionally, there was a conversation theme regarding how residential hall events contribute to students having more opportunities for random encounters to socialize. This was a theme expanded on during the cycle prior.

In response to the discussed pattern seen within the third-year population, others shared that many of their peers had to rethink how they wanted to experience gaining socializing when COVID-19 was still present. Others shared responses regarding how as RAs, they could utilize their student leader roles to support their fellow student populations. This would be done by asking what undergraduate residents wanted to see more of on campus to make spaces more comfortable to socialize in. "I believe we can all help promote involvement opportunities via clubs and activities, as well as build communities". One RA shared inviting residents on their floor to join clubs and sports the RA was involved in as an additional way to bond with residents and expand on what others might be interested in.

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly shook campuses and residence life systems across the globe. Once students could return to "usual" college activities and exposure to these experiences, they could express feelings of belonging through the friendships made within those

spaces. Although RAs are considered student leaders on campus, they also are still students who are learning to balance their RA role, being a student, and additional responsibilities such as employment outside of campus and extracurriculars. They still require experiences that are supportive, developmental, and connected.

In the second portion of the cycle, participants' responses were regarding a song selection representing their response to the second question regarding how they plan to increase their residents' sense of belonging. Respondents chose songs that fell under the category of "hope". Songs selected titles were: "Slow Down" by Laufey ", "You Find Out Who Your Friends Are" by Tracy Lawrence and "Wide open spaces" by Dixie Chicks. The songs selected fell under the theme of finding comfort in the unknown. In explaining reasoning for song selection, the RA who selected "Wide open Spaces" discussed how "this song shows that going out and trying new things can be hard but it's what one needs and can be very good in the long run". It was towards the end of being in isolation that RA's were able to see who was there for them during and after COVID-19 and able to acknowledge that the most growth occurs in the discomfort of unknown spaces.

Description of the Outcomes and Changes as a Result of the Research

This cycle was unique because only one participant showed up in person. I shared the individual folders with the participants and placed the last session's questionnaire in the folders the night before. This resulted in the remainder of the participants answering the questions earlier on the scheduled session day and all needing to show up. No further changes could be made due to this being the last session, but my takeaway was to present materials only on the set session date. I also learned that the outcome of participants not showing up is a form of data. In participants not showing up, the participant took longer to type out responses. When asked how

this impacted them, they stated they felt like they had more time to sit with what they wanted to write.

Limitations

Challenges in recruiting, considering we have a total of 85 Residential Advisors, there were only four participants for the duration of the three cycles. Limitations included a need for incentives to volunteer to participate. After announcing my research during residential life training in August, personal announcements through individual supervisors in team meetings, and email outreach in September, I was still trying to recruit. I overcame this limitation by reaching out to the residential life department to receive funding for gift cards that were raffled at the end of each cycle session. Although the benefit was to work within my department because it was the population I've worked with the most, it set some limitations regarding collaboration with other departments.

The first Cycle's Limitations was that I did not provide zoom as a platform option. Some had asked if they could zoom in or be sent the questionnaires instead. I took the feedback into account and made adjustments to providing the questionnaires within participants' google drive folders the day set for the cycle. In making a slight adjustment, it made it equitable to those who could not make it to meet in person but still made time within that day to participate by answering the questionnaire for cycle No.2. The result of providing this option was shorter responses in comparison to those participants who participated in person. In-person, responses were longer, more in-depth in detail, and seemed more thoughtful. Overall limitations included having fewer participants to see larger-scale patterns in responses when coding. I found some similarities during the first cycle but then struggled to do so when coding for the second cycle. Focusing on one population of undergraduates rather than opening it to all undergraduates with

leadership roles and positions on campus could've opened up a pool of people who also work towards creating student opportunities through event planning.

Major Findings

The present study included undergraduate university students who experienced the pandemic's impact on their sense of belonging. The participants were all Residential Advisors and reported generally feeling: loneliness, lack of motivation, experiencing fear of missing out (FOMO) on a traditional college experience and learning to rely on being alone. In conversations regarding how they can support creating a sense of belonging, RAs talked about how they have worked towards building community within their resident halls. They also discussed how letting their residents know they are there for them or inviting them to join them for on-campus activities has made a difference in the undergraduate experience. All cycles had in common that RAs were looking forward to engaging in a new normal, in supporting others in finding their sense of belonging and to continue defining how they want to be supported by the University. The cycle started with inner reflective questions regarding "self", then the next focus was on "others" and lastly, how the University can support both student leaders to help other students on campus better.

Implications

My actual findings differed from what I thought would be the outcome. I intentionally picked this topic due to hearing general student feedback and making a personal connection regarding the feelings of lack of belonging experienced during undergrad. The main difference was that this feeling seemed to be increased due to the ongoing pandemic. The most surprising result is how much quicker the RAs had felt more comfortable this semester compared to when I

initially started, and the majority of campus events were struggling to motivate students to attend. There was this unspoken barrier regarding nerves to re-engage with others, fear of not fitting in, and fear that too much time has passed to make up for missed college milestone experiences. I still believe that there is some general anxiety regarding socializing, which would apply more to the anti-social population. In Fall 2023, the University of San Diego had more students enroll in clubs than ever. If anything, the result was that students realized that they overcommitted to time frames for everything they had signed up for. This allowed them to ask some of my RA team what was worth staying enrolled in and how to manage time better to have a social life, excel in academics, and complete RA role responsibilities.

Regarding limitations, I never considered it would take as long as it did to obtain enough interested participants or that my number of participants would be under 10 RAs even with incentives to participate. I believe that the continued various types of surveys and now campus events specifically aimed towards both assessing and increasing a sense of belonging will be why students will, as an outcome, feel a larger sense of belonging within the campus and among peers over time. The question always comes down to how we can, as a school, get more funding and how we, as a Residential Life Department, better support our student leaders to support their residents better and be a resource to others on campus.

Recommendations

Future studies should include more diverse samples to understand better how COVID-19 impacted undergraduates' sense of belonging. Various areas affect undergraduates, such as Financial, Educational plans, transitions from in person to online, and academic motivation. Additionally, continued assessments for RAs and residents through the residential housing department can determine how the University of San Diego can expand on opportunities for

students to find their sense of belonging. To support undergraduates outside of the housing, collaborating with campus partners to combine budgets and brainstorm creating spaces and events in which students can meet others outside their majors and housing communities. Recommendations for the returning and new RA's would be to continue with Torrero Tuesday weekly events. These created consistency in community building and in providing space for undergraduates to bond over engaging in the activities provided.

Conclusion

COVID-19 collectively impacted undergraduates' sense of belonging during the pandemic, leading to feelings of loneliness and disconnect from human interaction. In the aftermath of COVID-19, participants felt optimism for what the future holds and normalcy in what in the pandemic felt like "falling behind in life and traditional college experiences". I learned that although using mixed methods would have been helpful if there were more participants, I could still find a pattern with the folks who decided to participate. I also adapted per cycle, which I have been working on personally—adapting with time and as I experience life. I started recruitment with numbers in mind because it is ideal when attempting to collect data, but at the same time, having few participants made the experience more personalized. I could even get data from when participants did not show up and had in mind not to take it personally but look at the larger scheme of things. Overall, I was also able to get familiar with how the entire Institutional Review Board process works and the types of methods that can be used to collect data. Even in the practice of presenting my research prior to starting, and knowing I will present the results at the end of the semester, I feel more confident to present at conferences.

Personal Values and Future Goals

I value education because it creates opportunities to expand ways to view, lead, and experience the world all around. I was able to connect how I have been mentored and inspired to continue pursuing higher education in finding my sense of belonging through residential life. I found a way to connect my undergraduate experience before finding that sense of belonging to what students were now feeling due to the pandemic. In a full circle moment, I have been privileged to connect my research back to my current field in the residential department here at the University of San Diego. It is a way to give back to my current department, providing data that can support incoming students who may struggle with finding their sense of belonging. In better supporting our student leaders, they can not only succeed but will also help other students around them to do so. It will continue to inspire the academic work I pursue in expanding my research and professionally.

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Appendix A

Relevant Materials: Recruitment Letter

SOLES Leadership in
Higher Education
Katherine Reyes

5998 Alcalá Park
San Diego, CA 92110-2492
P: (323)458-9412

University
of San Diego®

Hello,

I hope this email finds you well this time of the semester. My name is Katherine Reyes, and I am currently a second year in the Higher Education Leadership program here at USD.

My research project is titled **COVID Impact on Undergraduates Sense of Belonging at the University of San Diego.**

This project aims to gain insight on how COVID has impacted undergraduate students' sense of belonging at the University of San Diego. You are being asked to participate because you are an undergraduate student working in the Residential Department at the University of San Diego.

I am seeking 50 participants to be a part of this project. The only criteria for this project are that participants need to identify as being a Residential Advisor (RA) at the University of San Diego (USD).

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to meet in an in-person group setting to participate in the following acitvities:

- Respond to a two part questionnaire
- 1 time a month over the span of 3 months that takes about 75 minutes to complete each time. You will be asked things like: How has COVID impacted your sense of belonging. Have you found a sense of belonging? How can USD support increasing a sense of belonging?
- During this time you will be asked to submit your response to the first question by using a 1-5 likert scale, this portion will not be shared within the group
- Additionally you will be asked to respond to the second question by both writing your response in individual journals and sharing your response within the group.
- The total time commitment is 4 and a half hours over the span of the Fall Semester

All interviews will be recorded by writing responses in individual journals and by using a 1-5 likert scale. All interviews will happen in an in-person group setting within a private space.

We will work around schedules and try to make the best out of this experience together. If you decide to take part in this research study, you will be asked to sign a consent form to ensure you understand the study's procedures. Please note that this will be a voluntary process, and you can opt out at any time without retaliation or penalties.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at kreyes@sandiego.edu. You can also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Cheryl Getz at cgetz@sandiego.edu

Thank you for your consideration.
Katherine Reyes

Appendix B
Cycles take place at the University of San Diego, 2022

Cycle 1) October:

1) Quantitative Question #1 - On a scale of 1-5 how would you rank how much COVID has impacted your sense of belonging?
2) Qualitative Question #1 - Journal entry: how has COVID impacted your sense of belonging
3) Song selection that represents participants sense of belonging

Cycle 2) November:

1) Quantitative Question #2 - On a scale of 1-5 how would you rank if you have found your sense of belonging?
2) Qualitative Question #2: - Journal entry: How can you (as an RA) increase undergraduate students sense of belonging during the ongoing pandemic?
2) Song selection that represents participants sense of hope for the undergraduate students.

Cycle 3) December:

1) Quantitative Question #3 – On a scale of 1-5 how would you rate your satisfaction with the amount of opportunities to increase sense of belonging at USD?
2) Qualitative Question #3: Journal entry: how can we (as a community) create ongoing opportunities for those who are still struggling with a sense of belonging as a result of the ongoing pandemic?
2) Song selection that represents how RA's can build community support.

Interview Guide

Cycle 1: October:

Introduction: (35 seconds)
Hello Everyone, thank you for taking the time to participate. My name is Katherine Reyes, I am starting my second year as a graduate student for the Higher Education Leadership Program and will be continuing on to my second year working in Residential life as an Assistant Community Director. The purpose of this research is: to study how COVID has impacted undergraduate students' sense of belonging at the University of San Diego.

Adult Consent/Signatures: (5 minutes)
I will now take a few minutes to read outload the Adult Consent form and will allow for questions, comments or concerns afterwards.

- If you are still interested in participating you may stay in this space.

Activity Time: (10 mins)
For Tonight's first question you will be given a few minutes to respond to the following questions
-Pass out sheet with questionnaire

1) Quantitative Question #1 - On a scale of 1-5 how would you rank how much COVID has impacted your sense of belonging?

- When everyone is done, give a thumbs up so I can provide you with a paper journal.

- Moving on to our next question, you will be provided with 10 mins to respond via journal entry.

2) Qualitative Question #1 -how has COVID impacted your sense of belonging

- Once you have completed answering your second question, take some time to find a song that best represents your sense of belonging

- 15 minutes to share responses in space

Closing: (30 seconds)
Thank you all once again, I will be sending out google invites to confirm attendance for next month's cycle.

Cycle 2: November

Check in Question: One word description check in (3 mins)

Activity Time: (10 mins)
For today's first question you will be given a few minutes to respond to the following questions
-Pass out sheet with questionnaire

1) Quantitative Question #2 - On a scale of 1-5 how would you rank if you have found your sense of belonging?

● When everyone is done, give a thumbs up so I can provide you with a paper journal.

● Moving on to our next question, you will be provided with 10 mins to respond via journal entry.

2)) Qualitative Question #2: - Journal entry: How can you (as an RA) increase undergraduate students' sense of belonging during the ongoing pandemic?

● Once you have completed answering your second question, take some time to find a song that best represents your sense of belonging

● 15 minutes to share responses in space

Closing: (30 seconds)
Thank you all once again, I will be sending out google invites to confirm attendance for the last cycle next month.

Cycle 3: December

Check in Question: One word description check in (3 mins)

Activity Time: (10 mins)
For Tonight's first question you will be given a few minutes to respond to the following questions
-Pass out sheet with questionnaire

      1) Quantitative Question #3 – On a scale of 1-5 how would you rate your satisfaction with the amount of opportunities to increase your sense of belonging at USD?

- When everyone is done, give a thumbs up so I can provide you with a paper journal.

- Moving on to our next question, you will be provided with 10 mins to respond via journal entry.

      2) Qualitative Question #3: Journal entry: how can we (as a community) create ongoing opportunities for those who are still struggling with a sense of belonging as a result of the ongoing pandemic?

- Once you have completed answering your second question, take some time to find a song that best represents your sense of belonging

- 15 minutes to share responses in space

Closing: (30 seconds)
Thank you all! I will be following up with a link that will include a spotify playlist made up of all the songs used within your journal entry responses in hopes that it is a first step in building community among yourselves.

Adult Consent Form:

University of San Diego
Institutional Review Board
Research Participant Consent Form

For the research study entitled:

COVID Impact on Undergraduates Sense of Belonging at the University of San Diego

I. Purpose of the research study
Katherine Reyes is a student in the Leadership and Higher Education program at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is: to study how COVID has impacted undergraduate students' sense of belonging at the University of San Diego.

II. What you will be asked to do
If you decide to participate, you will be asked to meet in an in-person group setting to participate in the following acitvities:

- Respond to a two part questionnaire
- 1 time a month over the span of 3 months that takes about 45 minutes to complete each time, for a total of 2 hours and 30 minutes. You will be asked things like: How has COVID impacted your sense of belonging. Have you found a sense of belonging? How can USD support increasing a sense of belonging?
- During this time you will be asked to submit your response to the first question by using a 1-5 likert scale, this portion will not be shared within the group
- Additionally you will be asked to respond to the second question by both writing your response in individual journals and sharing your response within the group.

All interviews will be recorded by writing responses in individual journals and by using a 1-5 likert scale. All interviews will happen in an in-person group setting within a private space. All participants will be provided with pizza and be entered to win a gift card at a raffle that will be held at the end of each cycle.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts
Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day: San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339. Additional resources are below.

- University of San Diego's Counseling Center (619) 240-4655
    - Therapy and group counseling is available
    - A counselor is on-call 24/7, 7 days a week
- University of San Diego's Department of Public Safety–x2222 on any campus telephone; or call their direct line at (619) 260-2222

- The 24 hour San Diego Access and Crisis Line (1-888-724-7240); they also offer crisis intervention, information, and referrals

IV. Benefits
The direct benefit to you for participating in this study is being entered to win a gift card which will be raffled at the end of each cycle and provided with . The indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand how COVID has impacted undergraduate students' sense of belonging at the University of San Diego.

V. Confidentiality
Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in a google drive for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and *may* be used in future research.

VI. Compensation

a) All participants will be provided with pizza and be entered to win a gift card at a raffle that will be held at the end of each cycle. You will receive this compensation even if you decide not to complete the entire study.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

VIII. Contact Information
If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:.

1) Katherine Reyes
Email:kreyes@sandiego.edu

2) Dr. Cheryl Getz
Email:cgetz@sandiego.edu

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

_____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

_____

Signature of Investigator   Date

Appendix C

Spotify Playlist

- Include photos, art, or any other relevant images (add response drive here)

- Spotify playlist (link)