

CONDITIONS THAT AFFECT SENSE OF BELONGING IN A STUDENT
GOVERNMENT AT A MID-SIZED PRIVATE UNIVERSITY: A COLLABORATIVE
ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

A Dissertation
by
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ABSTRACT

CONDITIONS THAT AFFECT SENSE OF BELONGING IN A STUDENT GOVERNMENT AT A MID-SIZED PRIVATE UNIVERSITY: A COLLABORATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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The factors that assist college students in finding meaning, connection, and community during the undergraduate experience are nuanced and varied. Many studies have reviewed the importance of meaning and connection in the context of undergraduate experiences that, when successful, often lead to persistence and retention.

In addition to meaning and connection, much has been researched and articulated about the *Sense of Belonging* concept, essentially combining meaning and connection while examining micro and macro influences on college students before and during undergraduate experiences. While the literature on sense of belonging in relation to involvement in student organizations has gradually emerged over the last several decades, discussions on how a sense of belonging impacts a specific subset of student organization involvement—student governments—is negligible.

Undergraduate student governance is characterized by the following aspects that make it unique to other involvement opportunities on college campuses: (a) the public

nature of the organization, in terms of campus-wide transparency on decision-making and election processes; (b) interactions with key campus faculty and administrative leaders; and (c) the pressures on members of the organization to create and/or advocate for campus change in often public-facing issues.

This study focuses on how these and other challenges affect Student Government members' sense of belonging in an institution over a semester. Using Collaborative Ethnography, Student Government members assisted in creating the specifics of the study and avenues to use what is discovered and shared during research to make lasting changes to positively impact a sense of belonging in the organization.

Keywords: sense of belonging, student government, collaborative ethnography

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Dedication

To my mom, Eileen, and my father, Jay.

I owe you both everything.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Sense of belonging examines conditions that affect a student's ability to find connection and affinity. Building off research historically concerning student retention, a sense of belonging is an extension of attempts to conduct research on why students do and do not stay in school and ultimately graduate (Strayhorn, 2012). Why do some students find affinity and connection in college while others do not? What are the various factors that help students find these connections? How do curricular and co-curricular experiences assist or inhibit a student's sense of belonging? How does a student's identity and background contribute to finding belonging? What role do student connections with faculty and staff play? These are examples of a few conditions that researchers have dissected over the years regarding their impact on students.

This study focuses on how specific factors that impact the sense of belonging in college students play out due to student government participation at a medium-sized private university. Specifically, in this study, I will conduct research on how these factors play out over time within a cohort of student government members during the 2022–23 academic year. I will examine the sense of belonging by breaking down the historical contexts of the concept, discussing relevant theories and frameworks, and examining the factors and conditions needed to help students achieve a sense of belonging. Additionally, I will explain the history of student governance in American colleges and universities and elucidate some of the research regarding the impact of student government on undergraduate student development.

Problem Statement

In Fall 2013, 17.5 million students were pursuing postsecondary degrees in colleges and universities across the United States (Kena et al., 2015). This figure marked an increase of 46 percent from the 12 million students enrolled in higher education institutions in 1990 (Kena et al., 2015), nearly doubling the 9 million students enrolled in degree programs in 1980 (Tinto, 2012). From 2000 to 2010, undergraduate enrollment increased by 37 percent (Kena et al., 2015). According to pre-SARS-CoV-2 pandemic projections, by 2024, the undergraduate population was estimated to have approached 20 million students. This consistent growth was fueled by several factors, including (a) population growth, (b) the perception that post-graduate degree attainment leads to increased economic success (Kena et al., 2015), and (c) measures oriented toward personal development and leadership and civic engagement skills (Tinto, 2012). Eventually, most likely due to the pandemic, enrollment decreased by 9 percent to 15.9 million students. In line with these statistics, total undergraduate enrollment has been projected to increase by 8 percent, to 17.1 million students, by 2030 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Despite the projected flux in enrollment, the most recent longitudinal study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics indicated that less than 65 percent of first-time, full-time four-year college students earn bachelor's degrees within six years of matriculation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Several disparate factors impact the ability of a college student to secure the success necessary to attain a degree. In this context, Ribera, et al. (2017) postulated that the relationships students form and the resources they take advantage of in their first year are key. Academic success predicts persistence and retention for almost all students, especially with GPAs of 3.0 or higher

(Cochran et al., 2014). Low-income, first-generation, and minoritized students are less likely to graduate (Kena et al., 2015). In addition, Willcoxson and Wynder (2010) found that the experience of entering college with defined major and clear vocational goals increases the probability of persistence.

Among the many factors that impact the success of college students in attaining a degree, a sense of belonging cannot be disputed. Walton and Brady (2017) defined belonging as “a feeling of being accepted, included, respected in, and contributing to a setting, or anticipating the likelihood of developing this feeling” (p. 272). Hurtado, on the other hand, defined sense of belonging as “a psychological measure of integration in the college community and attachment to an institution” (Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015, p. 62). Research has proven that belonging positively influences academic achievement, retention, and persistence (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Rhee, 2008). According to various state researchers (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Goodenow, 1993; Maestas et al., 2007; Weiss, 1973), positive interactions with campus community members often offer support and connections that are critical to student retention.

One of the most studied aspects of the college experience concerning retention is the correlation between a sense of belonging and involvement in undergraduate clubs and organizations. Astin (1993) theorized that undergraduates play an important part in self-guiding degrees of involvement in academics, clubs, and organizations and as a mechanism for interpersonal and group development. Astin stated that the quality and quantity of that involvement influences the capacity for student learning and development. Terenzini, Pascarella, and Bliming (1996) stated that specific out-of-class experiences, such as student organization involvement, can be powerful sources of student success when

creating opportunities for positive interpersonal interactions. Herein, Tinto (2012) cited co-curricular involvement as a major condition for student retention success.

While the impact of involvement in clubs and organizations on sense of belonging and student retention has been broadly discussed, there is little to no research on the concept as it specifically pertains to student governments (Bray, 2006). The only relevant work on the impact of student governance on retention levels was conducted in 1988 (Pascarella, et al., 1988). A major conclusion of this study was that a student's involvement in social leadership experiences during college had the most significant influence on student development and success during college and attachment to civic and humanitarian activities after college (Pascarella, et al., 1988). Even collected works over the past several decades, which specifically address the impact of student government on college campuses (Miller & Nadler, 2006; Cuyjet, 1994), do not discuss the impact of student governance on individual members' sense of belonging.

Purpose and Goals of the Research

This study aims to analyze factors that affect the sense of belonging of the individual members of a student government at one specific institution. This study focuses on the student government of Roselle University, a medium-sized private institution in the Southeastern region of the United States. The focus on the Roselle Student Government (RSG) is specific to the 2022–23 academic year. Roselle's Student Government is the representative student body of the undergraduate college of the specific institution. The members are elected to represent students from all university undergraduate classes in all matters of governance and advocacy related to being a part of the campus community.

Student Government representatives bring together various experiences, identities, and interests to create an institution representative of the student body. Membership in Student Government consists of three levels—senators, cabinet members (committee chairs), and executive board members.

This research aims to understand the specific factors that affect the sense of belonging for this specific group of Student Government members based on their involvement in the organization. As the organization charged with the governance of the Roselle undergraduate university community, Student Government plays an important role in student success. To best serve students, Student Government undergraduate members must better understand the personal, organizational, and institutional factors that enhance or inhibit their peers' desire to be a part of the organization and how this desire affects their overall sense of belonging. Additionally, this goal helps the advisors and professional staff working with Student Government understand these factors.

Significance

Kuh and Lund (1994, p. 6) stated that participation in student government allows for an increase in “purposeful and meaningful leadership activities, such as policy and decision-making, and conflict resolution. However, little is known about what students gain from student government leadership positions.” In this regard, studies show that participation in student government nurtures and develops leadership, decision-making, planning, and organizing skills (Schuh & Laverty, 1983), social and practical competence skills (Kuh, 1991), humanitarian values and human relations (Pascarella et al., 1988; Schwartz, 1991), and consensus building (Bambenek & Sifton, 2003).

The lack of research on the topic is one of the most pressing challenges faced when articulating the effectiveness of Student Government participation in creating meaningful student development opportunities. Efforts in 2006 state frustrations that research on Student Government outcomes assessment conducted decades ago has become antiquated (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006). Bray (2006, p. 21) stated, “There are relatively few recent studies that empirically show the effect of student governance involvement on those students or even seek to evaluate it.” Laosebikan-Buggs (2009) agreed that the number of studies on outcomes development within student governments is limited. Stevens (2021, p. 31) concurred, “Few research studies have explored student government involvement independently.” To underscore the gap in studies specific to Student Governments, it must be noted that two of the most impactful references in this study are 17 (Bray, 2006) and 14 years old (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2009).

As previously mentioned, in reference to the specific concepts of retention and sense of belonging, Pascarella, et al., conducted the sole research focusing on student government in 1988. Except for this study, no notable research exists on the conditions within student governments that promote a sense of belonging and retention amongst its members as a direct effect of participation. From a student development perspective, further understanding these conditions will help in several ways. Kuh and Lund (1994) discussed the need for campus-based professionals to better assist student government members with outcomes development by creating self-reflection opportunities on how participation in student governance assists the campus, the organization, and the development of each student. Additionally, the endeavor of helping student government, as an organization and as individual members, facilitates better understanding of factors that affect the sense of

belonging, thereby assisting the students and their advisors in identifying challenges that may negatively affect their experiences. Identifying these challenges and enhancing self-reflection and support opportunities can mitigate the challenges that negatively affect belonging.

Generally, some challenges include the stress associated with taking on controversial campus topics (Schwartz, 1991) or feelings of isolation for student government members who hail from minoritized identities (Goodman, 2021). While the findings of this work cannot be generalized across campuses or student governments, these will facilitate an opportunity to take a closer look and provide a guidepost for additional research.

Research Paradigm

The research paradigm that is most apt to this study is constructivist. Schwant (1994, p. 125) stated that those with constructivist views “are deeply committed...to the view that what we take to be objective knowledge as truth is the result of perspective.” Schwandt (1994) added that those with constructivist viewpoints emphasize the instrumental and practical functions of theory construction and knowledge retention. Shared social norms and cues create the reality of prevailing thought in a group. Each group member interprets these shared social norms and cues individually. As Crotty (1998, p. 58) stated, from an epistemological perspective, constructivism focuses on “the meaning-making activity of the individual mind.” In this study, the social norms that dictate student government members’ sense of belonging comprise general rules and norms created by university community members, specifically emphasizing what is created by this organization. From an ethnographic perspective, I am interested in better understanding how student government members’ interactions with each other, the students, and faculty and staff stakeholders they

work with directly affect their sense of belonging in the context of the rules co-constructed by the organization.

From an ontological perspective, the realities of the research subjects are local and specific to this specific institution. My research will aim to understand how Roselle Student Government members derive a sense of who they are and how Student Government helps or hinders this sense of self in the context of the university community. As this study focuses on a specific subset of the university, comprising approximately 50 students that are a part of the student government during the 2022–23 academic year, each member of the organization will have intrapersonal factors (self-identity, academic major, year in school, and so on) that individually impact their sense of self. These intrapersonal factors then are mixed in with the context of organizational meaning-making as each student government member navigates their experience within the rules socially constructed as a group.

Conceptual Framework

Many models and frameworks center on the sense of belonging. Some of the seminal examples include Astin's (1984) Input-Environments-Output (I-E-O) Model, Tinto's (1993) Theory of Departure, Hurtado and Carter's (1997) Work on Validation, Swail's (2003) Model of Persistence and Validation, and Museus' (2014) Culturally Engaging Environments Model.

This study concentrates on the following three specific frameworks: Schlossberg's Transition Theory, Strayhorn's Theory on Belonging, and Walton and Brady's Considerations for Belonging.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Nancy Schlossberg (1989) stated that transitions are events or non-events that alter a person's life. Three different types of transition are possible, bringing different contexts and factors to a student's life. The first, *anticipated transitions*, occur predictably. Examples for college students include the following instances: becoming involved on campus, selecting a major, or adjusting to new living situations or academic rigors. The second, *unanticipated transitions*, are not predictable or expected. Examples include struggling in an academic course in which a student excelled during high school, ending a relationship with a friend or romantic partner, or having a roommate conflict. The third, *nonevents*, are transitions that a student expects to occur but does not. Examples include not being elected to leadership positions, unsuccessful attempts to get into graduate school programs, or not being selected for internships (Goodman et al., 2006). Non-events can be classified as *personal* (related to individual goals or accomplishments), *ripple* (the effects of a non-event from somebody close to the student), or *delayed* (anticipating or hoping that a non-event will still turn into a positive transition) (Goodman et al., 2006).

Strayhorn's Theory on Belonging

An outgrowth of the work done by Tinto on academic and social integration and Hurtado on validation as well as Terrell Strayhorn's core elements of Sense of Belonging comprise the most concise framework on the topic. Strayhorn posited that the following six potential conditions affect a student's sense of belonging: (a) Belonging is a basic human need, universal to all; (b) Belonging takes on heightened importance in certain contexts and times; (c) Belonging is a consequence of mattering; (d) Belonging is a fundamental motive sufficient to drive behavior; (e) Social identities intersect and shape belonging; and (f)

Belonging produces positive outcomes (Strayhorn, 2012).

Belonging must also be satisfied continually, as circumstances, conditions, and contexts are likely to change. Belonging is a flexible concept and susceptible to influence in positive and negative directions. In this context, factors such as involvement opportunities, relationships, academic successes and challenges, living circumstances, and challenges to identity play key roles in a student's constant renegotiation with feelings of belonging. The disruption of one's feelings of belonging can have positive or negative consequences based on the nature of the activity. Herein, students constantly engage and re-engage in activities and interactions that foster belongingness to regain a sense of acceptance and inclusion.

Walton and Brady's Considerations for Belonging

Walton and Brady (2017) posited that individuals' feelings of belonging are based less on relationships and more on social cues. People struggle to identify social cues that may indicate their perceived level of belonging in various situations. These cues are inferred through individuals' reading of relationships, experiences, and contextual factors. Subsequently, these cues are processed and transformed into people's judgments regarding their perceived level of belonging. A positive reading of these cues is an even stronger precursor of belonging than the need for a person to already have strong relationships in the situation being analyzed (Walton & Brady, 2017). Walton and Brady's theory (2017) on belonging has the following four considerations: (a) Belonging is a perception of fit between self and context; (b) Belonging centers on meaning, as opposed to relationships; (c) Recursion can change an individual's perception of belonging; and (d) and belonging is integral to other needs.

For several reasons, the works by Schlossberg, Strayhorn, and Walton and Brady were chosen to analyze Student Government's sense of belonging. Schlossberg's definition of marginality and mattering was one of the first frameworks to discuss transition challenges amongst all personalities and identity types. Additionally, Schlossberg stressed the universal nature of transition and how it has a universal impact beyond the influence on first-year students. Strayhorn's framework harkens back to classic frameworks while considering minoritized students' challenges. Earlier theorists often overlooked these challenges. Strayhorn also recognized the nuances associated with specific periods in a student's life that impact the student's sense of belonging. Examples of these periods include (a) the first six weeks for a new student; (b) midterms and finals; and (c) times when students transition into higher leadership positions in student organizations.

Additionally, Strayhorn's analysis of marginalization was directly deduced from Schlossberg's work. The research conducted by Walton and Brady complemented Strayhorn's work by honing in on the relational and goal-directed motivations that Strayhorn posited as factors in student belonging and mattering. Essentially, while Strayhorn discussed student negotiation of the social and academic norms of an undergraduate community, Walton and Brady examined factors that students embrace while being onboarded into such communities and making decisions as to whether the initial cues within those communities provide adequate incentives for students to deepen their commitment. Walton and Brady also leveraged recursion to assign a name to the idea that belonging can comprise a cycle of positive cues that augment other positive outcomes and how this positive cycle can engage students in the community by deepening their level of belonging. The complementary nature of these frameworks will comprise the foundation of this study, with Walton and Brady's

work on individual interactions complementing Strayhorn's work, which describes various macro-level systems of belonging.

Methodology Overview

From a methodological perspective, social constructions suggest that individual constructions can only be elicited and refined through interactions between and among researchers and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Guba and Lincoln (1994) stated, "methods must be fitted to a predetermined methodology" (p. 106).

Collaborative Ethnography

Collaborative ethnography is a striking example of what can happen when immersion between researchers and participants becomes a primary driver for the approach of conducting research. Using D'Andrade's (1992) definition of culture as a guidepost, members of a culture are motivated to pass down their cultural markers to younger members to ensure permanency. Collaborative ethnography involves enlisting members of the culture being researched to serve as researchers in documenting the culture, thereby safeguarding a sense of permanency. Collaborative ethnography can be defined as "an approach to ethnography that deliberately and explicitly emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it...from project conceptualization to fieldwork, and, especially, through the writing process." (Lassiter, 2005a, p. 15). The term "collaborative ethnography" is often associated with Luke Eric Lassiter's 1998 doctoral dissertation and development in subsequent publications (Clerke & Hopwood, 2014). One of the main tenets of ethnographic research is the need for collaboration. The ability of the researcher(s) to

work closely with co-researchers and subjects to build the relationships is imperative for creating what Geertz (1973) referred to as a “rich, thick description of research” (p. 312). Collaborative ethnography takes the concept of relationship building and weaves it into every facet of the research process. The commentary provided by research participants is expanded to influence every aspect of developing the project—from goals and outcomes to decision-making pertaining to the writing and editing processes. Every step within that process, including (a) how goals may shift and change; (b) how the research subjects co-create techniques for conducting research; and (c) the ultimate decision-making on the perspectives in which final projects are constructed, written, and disseminated, was executed in consultation with a team that also acted as research subjects (Lassiter, 2005a).

While working with student government on this research, it was discovered that collaborative ethnography is aligned with aspects of what Boatman (1988) identified as key characteristics and skills of an ideal student government, faculty, or staff relationship. These include (a) having the ability to develop relationships with students, (b) being an informed resource and advocate on behalf of student government, and (c) being a positive role model in terms of modeling creative problem-solving, positive approaches to challenges, and an appreciation of diverse student thoughts and perspectives.

The collaborative ethnographic methods used as part of this study have been elucidated in the subsequent sections.

Life Story Analysis

Lawless (2019) referred to oral autobiographies as “Life Story Analysis” (p. 43) due to skepticism that oral history is perfectly constructed and delivered in a chronological order. Life story analysis allows researchers to focus on the agency and self-identity of their

subjects in constructing retroactive accounts of their lives constructed in the present. Life story analysis is concerned with providing subjects the opportunity to shape their biographies.

In this study, life story analyses allow subjects to share many factors influencing their involvement in student government and their definition of belonging. This includes what Tinto (1993) referred to as *Pre-Entry Attributes*, such as (a) pre-college academic experiences; (b) family support; (c) possession of traits such as resilience and grit; and (d) levels of financial support. It also allows subjects to discuss visible and invisible identity factors and, specifically for students of historically excluded backgrounds, the chance to discuss factors that have enhanced or inhibited their validation at the university level and in student government. Herein, the goal would be to turn an initial written life story analysis with each student government member into follow-up community forums and life story analyses to glean specific insights.

Community Forums

Community forums allow communities to provide thoughts, perspectives, and feedback on research topics and projects (Lassiter, 2005b). Such forums allow community members pressed to manage other obligations to generate awareness about a community challenge or crisis. Forums ensure that community-wide participation is an integral part of the process and that the voices of all community members can be centered. Community forums also allow researchers to seamlessly check in with larger groups and present evolving research designs and findings (Lassiter, 2005b). Additionally, community forums are an opportunity for members of the organization to process ideas and create new ideas in a collaborative fashion (E. Campbell, personal communication, March 28, 2023). In this

research, a community forum was held once a month as a part of a weekly student government meeting. This provided opportunities to the members of the organization to discuss aspects of belonging that are a part of student government and provide feedback and critique for specific insights gathered as a part of the life story analysis aspects of this study.

Research Questions

The research questions most relevant to this study are as follows: What specific conditions within Student Government impact individual members' sense of belonging as members of the university they represent? How do these conditions specifically impact a sense of belonging in either a positive or negative way? Based on the study's methodology, sense of belonging frameworks, and methods of ethnographic research being used, specific questions utilized as a part of each method are outlined in Chapter Three: Methodologies.

Site and Participant Selection

Roselle University is a medium-sized, private, residential university in the Southeast Region of the United States. This university approximately has 50 student government members—a figure that rendered the sampling strategy unrealistic for a study being conducted over a semester, as it was imperative to allow each member of the organization to be involved. Therefore, the goal of the written life story analyses was to allow each member of student government to provide thoughts, perspectives, and feedback independent of other organizational influences over the first three months of the semester.

Positionality

In this research, the importance of a collaborative ethnographic approach is paramount due to my relationship with Student Government. From the 2015–16 to the 2020–21 academic years, I served as the primary advisor to RSG. In this advisory role, I served as the primary university liaison to all organization members, specifically the Student Government President and Chief of Staff.

From an epistemological perspective, I am linked as the researcher to the subjects of this specific investigation based on the researcher–subject relationship. Taking into consideration my advisory relationship with student government, it is even more imperative for the students on the review team to provide thoughts and perspectives to ensure the integrity of the research. This research was inspired by discussions with Student Government members about the need for the organization to look inward and better understand how the organization functions from an interpersonal perspective. More specifically, based on the constructivist nature of this research, I was most curious about the meaning-making derived from student government by the organization’s members. Epistemologically, many stakeholders in student government derive meaning-making from what Strayhorn (2012) posited regarding contextual factors, such as the importance of seminal times in a student’s life that intersect with a sense of belonging. Therefore, akin to most college students, many stakeholders in student government find their sense of belonging from the social cues they learned before college (Astin, 1993; Schlossberg, 1989; Tinto, 1993). These social cues normalize the unwritten rule that getting involved leads to contacts and friendships, which, in turn, increase a sense of community and belonging, especially in the first year. In total, 91 percent of the students at this university were involved in co-curricular activities in high

school (Roselle University Campus Activities Benchmarking Assessment, 2021). The average first-year student expects to spend at least 11 hours a week participating in co-curricular activities (First Year Survey, 2020). This early time in a student's college experience is when many of the rules—written and unwritten—are normalized for those involved in student government. Ontologically, I believe that student government members follow cues that Walton and Brady (2017) classified as the *recursive nature* of belonging. Specifically, when students sense positive social cues in organizational settings early on, they are more likely to persist and find meaning in those groups. This leads to additional security and positive meaning-making, increasing sense of belonging even more.

As I explored my level of research and understanding of the individual members of student government in depth, it was important to consider the impact of my assumptions. As a cis-gendered, white, extroverted male from a middle-class educational background, I could easily access support for engagement and belonging in high school and college. My experiences with high school athletics, performing arts groups, collegiate student organizations, and fraternal groups allowed me to establish connections easily. However, I cannot assume that this is the case for the students who comprise the subjects of this research, especially those hailing from historically excluded identities and socioeconomic backgrounds. The involvement of student government members in the research team is critical, as it helped me remember my biases and assumptions.

Definition of Terms

Each term that may not be commonly known or understood has been defined in this section, often drawing on appropriate citations.

Sense of Belonging: This entails feeling accepted, included, respected in, and contributing to a setting or anticipating the likelihood of developing this feeling (Walton & Brady, 2017, p. 272). This is a psychological measure of integration in the college community and attachment to an institution (Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015, p. 62).

Student Government (RSG): Student Government is the representative student body of the university's undergraduate college participating in the study. The members are elected to represent students from all university undergraduate classes in all matters of governance and advocacy related to being a part of the campus community. Student government representatives bring together various experiences, identities, and interests to create an institution representative of the student body. Membership in Student Government consists of three levels—senators, cabinet (committee chairs), and executive board members.

Student Budget Advisory Committee (SBAC): This is the Student Government appointed organization charged with allocating almost \$600,000 in university funding to approximately 220 university-recognized clubs and organizations.

Collaborative Ethnography: This is an approach to ethnography that deliberately and explicitly emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process without veiling it from processes, ranging from project conceptualization to fieldwork, especially through the writing process (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015, pp. 16–17).

First-year Member(s): Members of Student Government in their first year with the organization. First-year members are either first-year students that have been elected through the first-year election process or upper-class students appointed by the executive board.

Upper-class Students(s): Members of the Student Government with at least one year of experience in the organization.

Organization of Study

The content of this study has been organized into five chapters. Chapter one introduces the topic and problem statement on which the study is centered along with the study's purpose, goals, and significance. Chapter two focuses on the literature review relevant to the topic. Chapter three takes an in-depth look at the methodology used in the study, including a deeper dive into the specific type of qualitative analysis used. Chapter four discusses the findings of the study. Chapter five discusses the implications of the findings as they pertain to future research and practice recommendations.

Figure 1:

Schlossberg's Framework on Marginality and Mattering

<p>Marginality</p> <p>A sense of not fitting in. Can lead to self-consciousness, irritability and depression. For some, these feelings can be permanent conditions.</p> <p>Feelings of marginality often occur when individuals take on new roles, especially when they are uncertain about what a new role entails.</p>	<p>Mattering</p> <p>Attention: The feeling that one is noticed.</p> <p>Importance: The belief that one is cared about.</p> <p>Ego Extension: The feeling that someone else will be proud of what one does or will sympathize with one's failure.</p> <p>Dependence: The feeling of being noticed.</p> <p>Appreciation: The feeling that one's efforts are appreciated by others.</p>
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Figure 2:

Strayhorn's Framework for Belonging

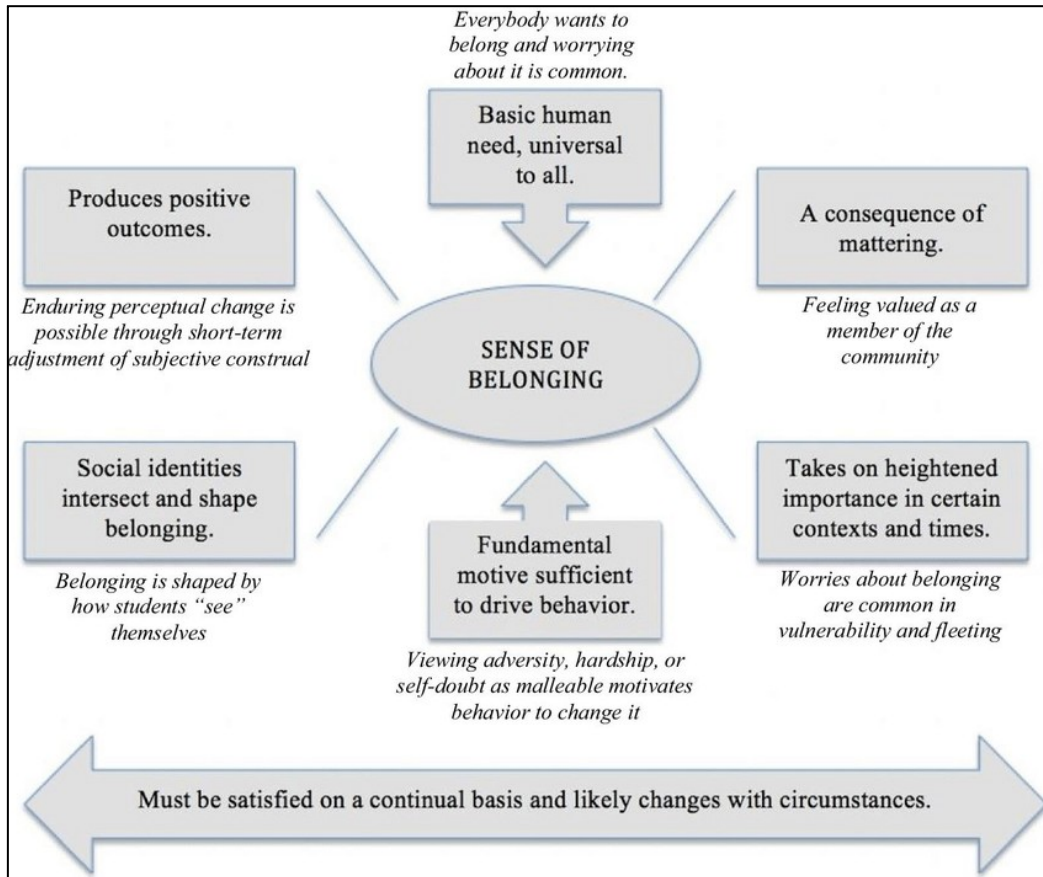


Figure 3:

Walton and Brady's Considerations on Belonging

Belonging:

- Is a perception of fit between self and context
 - How others regard and treat oneself
 - Who can be in the context they find themselves in?
- Is integral to other needs
 - Motivation
 - Achievement
 - Wellbeing
- Centers on meaning, as opposed to relationships
 - Discerning and negotiating ambiguity
 - Experiencing positive and negative cues
- Can be changed based on the Recursive nature of interactions
 - Behavior is driven by expectations and results
 - Belonging leads people to engage in ways that drive lasting change

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter describes some historical aspects of college student governance, including history, seminal moments, and the current landscape of how college students' governance organizations impact campuses. Additionally, this chapter reviews research drawn from the literature on frameworks centering on retention, persistence, and sense of belonging factors for college students. This review elucidates the historical context of the concept, discussing relevant theories and frameworks and examining the resources and conditions needed to help students achieve a sense of belonging. Sense of belonging has been described as a construct, and its relevance for college students is established. The literature review outlined in this chapter describes system-specific challenges regarding sense of belonging for college students and individual factors that affect belonging for all students, emphasizing the needs of minoritized students.

Background and History on College Student Governance

Student governance has been an integral part of college campuses since 1828 when Amherst College first formed a "House of Students" governing body to discuss campus issues affecting undergraduate life (Miller & Nadler, 2006). According to Keppler and Robinson (1993, p. 36), "This early organization ushered in the student government movement in American higher education. Early student governments were focused on undergraduate accountability, upkeep of student living quarters and consulting with faculty regarding student social life." Campus student governing bodies became more prevalent nationwide between the 1900s and the 1920s. Eventually, campus administrators viewed student governance as a form of training for real-world citizenship and built governance structures based on models of state and national institutions (Alexander, 1969). These student

groups had undergraduate leadership selected by their peers but lacked real advocacy or decision-making powers (Horowitz, 1987). According to Horowitz (1987, p. 108), “Self-governance meant that while undergraduates might give opinions and advice, they could not make the rules, at least the important ones.” Campus administrators often expected these governing boards to influence other students to ensure that administrative decision-making was accepted by the general student body (Kuh & Lund, 1994). As Alexander (1969, p. 41) stated, historically, “Some student governments have gained an image of being composed of irresponsible rah-rah boys.”

The first real widespread shift in the attitude of student governance began in the 1930s when small groups of intellectually and socially achieving students began utilizing campus governing bodies to promote more student-focused needs (Kuh & Lund, 1994). An example of this shift was observed at the University of Minnesota, where a group of students “gained control of student organizations...they tried to make student government into a real policy-making body. Rather than the puppet of the administration” (Horowitz, 1987, p. 162). Gradually, student governments perceived a shift from campus-based challenges to political and societal challenges in the sixties and seventies, as seen in reference to the anti-Vietnam war, free speech, and civil rights movements at campuses such as the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Michigan and shootings at campuses such as Kent State and Jackson State (Kuh & Lund, 1994; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006). However, even in these seminal times for student governments, as faculty and staff began rethinking the role of students in campus governance (Kuh & Lund, 1994), student influence did not facilitate additional power on campus in terms of institutional decision-making (Horowitz, 1987). Additionally, undergraduates in campus governing bodies began focusing more intently on

students' political and social differences within organizations during this time. An example of this increasing intra-organizational dynamic was the resignation of conservative-leaning Harvard Student Government President Howard Phillips in 1961 due to his critical remarks about the Peace Corps (Smith, 1980). By the early 1970s, the administrative views of student governance shifted to the need for more deeply involving students in institutional decision-making. As colleges moved further from the challenges faced during the 1960s and early 1970s, student governments became increasingly focused on campus-based issues, such as the use of student fees, parking challenges, and increasing student support services (Horowitz, 1987).

Over 5,100 recognized college student governing bodies are spread across the nation, approximately representing 71 percent of colleges and universities in the United States (American Student Government Association, 2022). Common functions among modern student governments include (a) serving as the official “student voice” to campus administrators; (b) creating mechanisms for students to participate in university decision-making and appointments; (c) administration of student-generated fees for campus activities; and (d) recognition and governance of student clubs and organizations (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006). In this context, advocating for diversity, equity, and inclusion has additionally become more of a focus for student governments. Simultaneously, this focus has often been more in support of student organizations that advocate for historically underrepresented identities and/or interests (Stevens, 2021).

Student governments must possess several essential organizational characteristics to be effective on college campuses. These characteristics include (a) access to campus information on par with what faculty and staff governing bodies receive; (b) access to relevant institutional decision-makers (the president, cabinet members, and board of trustee

members); (c) shared respect between campus stakeholder groups such as faculty and staff, student sub-communities, alums, and campus-based news organizations; and (d) an organizational structure that facilitates comprehensive student representation, leadership development, and an empathy-driven collegial atmosphere for students, faculty, and staff (Boatman, 1988). At its best, involvement with student government leads to a “greater than average satisfaction with student friendships” (Astin, 1999, p. 526). Furthermore, Astin stated that involvement with student government leads to more frequent interpersonal interactions, thereby accelerating peer relationship building and positive involvement and learning.

The lack of research on this topic is one of the most pressing challenges when articulating the effectiveness of Student Government participation in creating meaningful student development opportunities. Bray (2006, p. 21) stated, “There are relatively few recent studies that empirically show the effect of student governance involvement on those students or even seek to evaluate it.” Laosebikan-Buggs (2009) agreed with Bray that the number of studies on outcomes development in student governments is limited. Stevens (2021, p. 31) concurred, “Few research studies have explored student government involvement independently.”

Sense of Belonging Frameworks

Sense of belonging examines conditions that affect a student’s ability to find connection and affinity. Building on research historically concerning student retention, sense of belonging is an extension of attempts to conduct research on why students do and do not stay in school and ultimately graduate.

Less than 60 percent of first-time, full-time four-year college students earn bachelor’s

degrees within six years of matriculation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

There is no more important time for helping students set a positive course for matriculation than in their first year. The relationships students develop and the resources they take advantage of in their first year are key (Ribera, Miller, & Dumford, 2017).

A sense of belonging has many nuances, contexts, and factors. Walton and Brady (2017, p. 272) defined belonging as “a feeling of being accepted, included, respected in, and contributing to a setting, or anticipating the likelihood of developing this feeling.” The need for belonging is found in every setting, including familial, vocational, civic, and educational settings. Hurtado defined sense of belonging as “a psychological measure of integration in the college community and attachment to an institution” (Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015, p. 62).

Astin’s Input, Environments, Output (I-E-O) Model

Alexander Astin’s 1984 Input, Environments, Output (I-E-O) model was one of the early frameworks that examined student retention factors. Herein, inputs refer to specific traits and characteristics that students possess when entering college. Furthermore, environments refer to the programs, policies, interactions, relationships, and community factors that a student experiences in college. Outputs refer to the change (or lack thereof) in student characteristics after involvement in collegiate environments (Astin, 1993). Initially, Astin focused on students’ satisfaction levels at their institution post-graduation. However, Austin recognized that satisfaction was subjective to each student’s perspective and that these perspectives are important for institutions to understand collectively. The I-E-O model was created to ensure that undergraduate satisfaction was assessed considering a student’s holistic experiences instead of solely concentrating on post-graduate outcomes (Thurmond et al., 2002).

Astin's (1993) theory suggested that the following five basic assumptions dictate the involvement-related direction that each student will take: (a) involvement means the investment of physical and psychological energies in different opportunities; (b) involvement occurs along a continuum, with different students investing diverse levels of energy in various opportunities at various times in their undergraduate lifespan; (c) involvement includes qualitative and quantitative components; (d) the amount of individual learning, and personal development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement; and (e) the impact of any program, initiative, organization, or event on a student is correlated to its influence on increasing students' involvement.

Astin measured student responses to their involvement experiences in two different ways. The first criterion was *satisfaction with the environment* (Astin, 1993). Examples of satisfaction measures include (a) student relationships with faculty, staff, and other students; (b) campus facilities and their impact on a student; and (c) the quality of a student's curriculum and faculty instruction. Environmental factors include institutional priority regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion, faculty interest in the student experience, and student relationships with the campus administration.

The second criterion was *ratings with the environment* (Astin, 1993). The distinction between the two criteria is that ratings with the environment focused on issues with what Astin (1993, p. 274) referred to as having to do with "campus climate." Examples of ratings with the environment include (a) diversity; (b) social change factors; (c) resource acquisition; and (d) institutional reputation. At the time, Astin's perception of campus climate had more to do with the intellectual climate of the institution and did not specifically name diversity, equity, and inclusion factors as specific criteria imperative to retention. To further winnow

down on the specific aspects of the college environment, Astin analyzed more specific sub-factors of satisfaction (outcome) and environmental measures that students reported as affecting their undergraduate experience (input and environment). Leveraging the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey, Astin (1993) found that the factors that most specifically affected student satisfaction positively were the courses in a student's major and opportunities to get involved on campus. Astin (1993) also found that a student's level of satisfaction was predicted much more accurately by the environmental factors affecting undergraduates while on campus, as opposed to pre-college characteristics. For example, one of the stronger predictors of undergraduate satisfaction was if a student decided to move away to go to college, as opposed to living at home. Astin (1993) postulated that moving away to college was a positive predictor of students being more likely to immerse themselves in the undergraduate experience. Astin's findings are supported by additional data, which indicated that one of the strongest predictors of negative undergraduate satisfaction was the inability to find community as a part of college experiences.

When examining the role played by finding community as a positive predictor of a student's college experience, Astin (1993, p. 398) clarified that "the student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the college years." Furthermore, Astin (1993, p. 400) defined a peer group as "a collection of individuals with whom a student identifies and affiliates, with the purpose of seeking acceptance or approval." Astin gleaned that part of peer group acceptance includes a shift in an individual student's attitudes, beliefs, and aspirations toward those of the dominant group(s) in which the student has been involved as an undergraduate.

Acceptance is key to peer group affiliation as a major predictor of a student's satisfaction in college (Astin, 1993). Astin divided the concept of *acceptance* into two parts. First, the acknowledgment that members of the larger group, be it formal or informal, have norms and expectations to which participants must adhere. Second, the fact that potential members must, to a certain degree, conform with and adhere to the norms and values that must be considered for group affiliation (Astin, 1993).

While the I-E-O framework is influential to this day, it is not devoid of criticism. Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995) further divided Astin's model by examining his fourth and fifth assumptions, specifically based on the experiences of minoritized students. Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995) stated that, as it pertains to assumption four, the quality and quantity of involvement for minoritized students is directly related to their ability to exist in a supportive, inclusive, and representative environment. According to Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995), the fifth assumption is predicated on assurances that administrators and faculty are transparent in creating an inclusive educational and social environment that supports the curricular and co-curricular growth of minoritized students. Additional work has postulated that I-E-O is an effective framework for nurturing a sense of belonging in college students; however, its applicability must be checked to ensure that practitioners understand the balance between inputs and environment as an influence on belonging as an output. The model potentially becomes less powerful if multiple inputs or environmental factors are not understood as impacting a student's experience (Yanto et al., 2011).

Tinto's Theory of Departure

A second seminal framework alongside the one proposed by Astin is Vincent Tinto's Theory of Departure (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). Longitudinal in nature, Tinto's (1975) work argued that four factors could predict a student's successful persistence in college. These factors could positively or negatively affect a student's experience from academic, social, or environmental perspectives, especially when integrated into a college or university's curricular and co-curricular systems. Tinto (1975, p. 96) remarked, "Other things being equal, the higher degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be the commitment to the specific institution and the goal of college completion."

Pre-entry Attributes. All students possess some level of pre-institutional skills or resources such as (a) previous academic experiences, (b) family support, (c) traits such as resilience and grit, and (d) levels of financial support (Tinto, 1993). These skills or resources encompass characteristics that prepare a first-year student to either act or react in times of stress or difficulty. Pre-entry attributes also influence contextual factors such as new living situations, increased academic commitments, or the ability to seamlessly navigate new friendships and relationships (Tinto, 1993).

Goals and Commitments. Tinto (1993) stated that all students have internal motivation. This motivation centers on an academic discipline, motivation to be involved on campus, or a preferred employment goal post-graduation. Students also have various levels of external commitments and self-perceived obligations. Examples include the motivation to make family members or previous teachers proud or the need to meet certain academic metrics to maintain scholarship or financial aid packages. Internal motivations and external commitments can positively or negatively affect students (Tinto, 1993).

Institutional Experiences. Supportive faculty and staff play an important role in the successes and challenges associated with student retention. The students who connect with mentors as a part of the campus community are much more likely to participate in curricular and co-curricular activities (Tinto, 1993).

Academic and Social Interactions. Curricular and co-curricular experiences are the most prevalent reasons students thrive or struggle. Academic and social environments are often influenced by pre-college factors, student goals and commitments, and successful experiences, combining and factoring in successful connections with students, faculty, and staff members (Tinto, 1993).

Like Astin, Tinto (1993) believed that students' abilities to persist is much more predicated on decisions made after a student enters college, as opposed to before matriculation. Colleges are dynamic communities of social and educational opportunities, which improve the potential for daily interactions with several members of such communities.

According to Tinto (1993), successful student retention often depends on the ability and willingness of stakeholders in colleges and universities to involve themselves in the social and intellectual communities that are so important to student interactions. Institutions' initiatives to devote resources to students to assist in belonging efforts, in turn, lead to students developing a similar commitment to their campus communities. Subsequently, this cycle leads to successful retention levels (Tinto, 1993).

According to Tinto (1993), students transition in and out of college in various ways when a lack of belonging is the primary cause of student departure. These different transition factors include specific decision-making points such as (a) the intention of the student to

return to college or leave the domain of higher education entirely; (b) the belief that a student will return to that institution or transfer to another institution; or (c) the belief that a student will leave the institution for a predetermined period or an unplanned period before returning. Herein, support and mentoring from institutional agents, as well as pre-entry attributes also determine students' transition decisions (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's work has been scrutinized for several reasons. Nicoletti (2019) noted that Tinto's variables lack specificity, leaving far too wide a gap to accurately determine consistent factors within the variables that can be accurately assessed to ascertain a degree of influence over student persistence. An overwhelming majority of students indicate degree completion is the final goal of their educational journey (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Additional pushback has been observed over the years with retention as a key indicator of success, as persistence better encapsulates students' continued progression toward degree attainment despite experiences of transferring institutions or dropping out (York et al., 2015).

Pascarella and Terenzini (Terenzini et al., 1981) created an assessment that tested Tinto's early ideas, specifically social and academic integration and institutional and goal commitment. This assessment supports Tinto's theories (Terenzini et al., 1981). Pascarella, et al. (1981) discussed the need for colleges and universities to assess and make transparent the outcomes they provide students due to their educational outputs and services. With the rise in the cost of higher education, the public has held colleges accountable to prove their worth (Terenzini & Lorang, 1981). The study was designed to determine if student perceptions of self-growth could be accurately linked to their undergraduate experiences and, if so, whether colleges could determine which aspects of the undergraduate experiences they held tangible influence over (Terenzini et al., 1981).

Using Tinto's early work on undergraduate pre-college traits as an indicator of collegiate persistence, Pascarella theorized that the more a student was integrated into their institution's academic and social fabric, the likelier the odds were that student would grow and persist through degree attainment. The study examined five factors of student persistence: (a) peer interactions; (b) faculty interactions; (c) faculty concerns for student development and teaching; (d) institutional goal commitment; and (e) intellectual development.

The researchers found that students involved in the educational and social fabric of the institutions were as much as 25 percent more likely to persist and graduate from the institutions. Measures such as student-faculty informal relationships regarding intellectual or career concerns were positively correlated with students' success. Additionally, positive academic achievement and intellectual growth also contributed to additional persistence. However, two measures showed inconsistent results. The first was the sex of the participants, as female students reported more personal growth than male students. Therefore, the researchers surmised that female students are likelier to be honest about personal growth than male students. The second measure was the negative correlation between informal student-faculty interactions and the ability to persist. In this case, the researchers surmised that more academically successful students were less likely to interact with faculty in informal settings beyond office hours.

Another significant measure that showed varied results was a student's race or ethnic origin as an independent variable as a covariate of perceived growth in terms of academic knowledge. When examining this measure, the researchers found that non-minoritized students consistently reported more progress than minoritized students. Unlike previous

measures considered in the study, the researchers did not attempt to share an opinion on the discrepancy between non-minoritized and minoritized students. Furthermore, the researchers did not clarify their reasoning for not sharing their opinions.

A challenge to Pascerella and Terenzini's work was that it was taken from one institution, not accounting for factors that may differ across institutional types (public, private, urban, rural, and so on). A second study by Terenzini, et al. (1981) focused on multiple institutions and found the results were consistent with the original study. The studies showed consistency in institutional and goal commitment, supporting Tinto's framework (Terenzini et al., 1981). From a cultural context, Strayhorn, Lo, Travers, and Tillman-Kelly's (2015) research validated the idea of academic and social interactions. The researchers found that African American college men who felt confident about their transition to college also felt increased levels of belonging. This confidence was noted in the pre-matriculation campus onboarding programs (Strayhorn et al., 2015) and reiterated Tinto's belief that institutional experience involving faculty and peer support is key to retention and belonging.

Milem and Berger (1997) linked Astin and Tinto's models, noting that the two frameworks were "among the most widely cited approaches in the higher education literature" (1997, p. 387). The commonalities that Milem and Berger analyzed include the contention by Astin and Tinto that involvement contributes to student persistence and integration with the social and academic environment. More specifically, Milem and Berger (1997) sought links between Astin's belief in the behavioral outcome of involvement as a persistence factor and Tinto's concentration on involvement as a perceptual outcome.

Milem and Berger found several links between Astin and Tinto's work. Most notably, early peer involvement predicts sustained involvement and persistence. Students who do not

get involved early are more likely to remain uninvolved and perceive the institution as not providing support and care (Milem & Berger, 1997). Conversely, students who do not find a sense of belonging amongst peers but find early involvement with faculty positively perceive institutional support and commitment for students. This is especially important, as a link to faculty can play an even more important role in student persistence (Milem & Berger, 1997).

One of the most troubling aspects of Milem and Berger's work is their finding of the experiences of African American students as it pertains to persistence. According to this study, African American students enter college with strong levels of institutional commitment but soon form perceptions that the institution is less supportive and trustworthy for them than it is for most students (Milem & Berger, 1997). Milem and Berger's study contributed to some of the first sustained criticism of Astin and Tinto's frameworks for not being inclusive of race as an indicator of student persistence. Museus (2014) also specifically stated that traditional frameworks such as the ones proposed by Astin and Tinto did not account for minoritized students' challenges when institutional environments are unaware of historical and structural privilege. Milem and Berger named Sylvia Hurtado's (1998) framework one of the first to examine campus racial climate as a critical factor affecting belonging and persistence.

Schlossberg's Theory of Transition

Marginalization. According to Schlossberg (1989), when students are in transition, they often believe they do not matter to others. This feeling, known as *marginalization*, indicates a perceived loss of importance based on the lack of friends, positions, or circumstances with

which a student is familiar before transition (Schlossberg, 1989). The possibility of feeling marginalized occurs any time a student changes roles or experiences a transition. The larger the difference between the old and new experiences, the more significant change will occur in terms of feelings of marginalization (Schlossberg, 1989).

Marginality can also be ascribed to personality or identity types, especially with reference to members of historically underrepresented identities. Marginalization can encourage individuals to focus on a dominant mode of thinking and behaving (Schlossberg, 1989). In this context, marginalization based on identity often leads to students becoming involved in co-curricular activities as volunteers or professionals to allow for support and centering of that identity (Schlossberg, 1989).

Working through a transition can take significant time. A student works through “moving into” the transition, “moving through” the transition, and “moving out of” the transition. These different phases can result in significant challenges to the student and lead to growth, decline, or ambivalence. Different contextual factors lead to what Schlossberg, et al. (1995) explained as “why different individuals react differently to the same type of transition and why the same person reacts differently at different times” (p. 57)

Four different contextual factors are used to describe the challenges that students face with transitions. The resources and support available to assist students through these challenges and individual student characteristics determine the success of navigating the transition.

Situation. Situational factors can affect a student’s ability to react positively. They include the following: (a) the *Trigger* (What precipitated the situation?); (b) *Timing* (Does the transition disrupt the timing of the student’s social clock?); (c) *Control* (Does the student

self-perceive the ability to control their reaction to the situation?); (d) *Role Change* (Is there a change in the status of the student, and is that change perceived to be positive or negative?); (e) *Duration* (Is the transition perceived to be permanent, temporary, or uncertain?); (f) *Previous Experience* (Has there been a similar situation and how did the student cope with it? What lessons can be used in this case?); (g) *Concurrent Stress* (Are there other stressors in the student's life?); and (h) *Assessment* (Who or what does the student perceive to be the cause of the transition, and how is students' behavior affected by this perception?) (Schlossberg, 1989).

Self. Factors that affect students' self-perception include personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources. Personal and demographic characteristics are defined as identity and status markers that students self-perceive. Examples include gender, age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and status on campus. *Psychological resources* include coping mechanisms, outlook on life, resiliency, values, and grit (Schlossberg, 1989).

Support. Support is defined by the friendships, family support, intimate relationships, and/or institutional support that the student undergoing transition can utilize for assistance in working through the transition. Specific to the types of support available to the student is the level of stability and access to that support. Support includes providing affirmation, honest feedback, and student aid as necessary (Schlossberg, 1989).

Strategies. Strategies include techniques and plans for helping students undergoing transition comprehend the reason behind their distress with the transition, manage the stress, and modify the situation to move forward. This includes the use of direct action, information seeking, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior (Schlossberg, 1989).

Schlossberg (1989) advised working to diagnose which aspects of marginalization are transitional versus permanent. In focusing on transitional marginalization, ritual can be important in helping students overcome challenges.

Mattering. Mattering is “the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate” (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 165). Schlossberg augmented Rosenberg’s work and identified the following five important aspects of mattering: (a) *Attention*, or commanding the interest of others in a new setting; (b) *Importance*, or believing that others care about you and support you; (c) *Ego Extension*, or wanting to know others take pride in your accomplishments and/or are emotionally affected by your challenges and failures; (d) *Dependence*, or the deepening of a relationship and the desire to be needed, and need others; and (e) *Appreciation*, or the desire to have one’s efforts noticed and lauded (Schlossberg, 1989).

Hurtado’s Work on Validation

Before the research conducted by Hurtado, researchers had begun to, more specifically, validate the experiences of minoritized students as they pertain to retention and belonging. Sedlacek (1987) discussed the historical marginalization of African American students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) based on historically racist structures established to support white students and alums. Sergent and Sedlacek (1990) further divided the marginalization of impacted students of color attempting to get involved at PWIs while navigating resources and supports designed for a majority white population. Examples of the resources and supports lacking for minoritized students include (a) a lack of faculty and staff to serve as mentors and role models; (b) a lack of consistent academic preparedness; (c) campus activities that did not meet the needs of minoritized students; and (d) support

structures that catered to white students (Jacoby, 1991). Davis (1994) stated that early work on the experiences of African American students primarily focused on the differences in the experiences of African American and white students and the effects of attending a PWI, as opposed to a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). Green and Wright (1991) challenged research paradigms that focused more on declining participation and attrition rates of African American students instead of diving into the specific factors leading to those rates. Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995) concluded that minoritized students displayed increased levels of belonging and identity development when they found involvement opportunities and campus supports that spoke specifically to their cultures.

Hurtado's work with retention and belonging of students was some of the first to center minoritized students' experiences and call out early theories that did not consider these experiences. For example, Hurtado and Carter (1997) noted that Tinto's work was focused on majority white students and did not consider the specific challenges of minoritized students. Specific criticism is focused on minoritized college students' challenges in finding curricular and co-curricular support and mentors that understand their specific cultural backgrounds and needs. Additional challenges include minoritized students often lacking family and financial support and feeling that they exist at the fringes of social life at PWIs (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Hausman, Schofield, and Woods (2007) augmented Hurtado and Carter's findings through their study, showing that the variables that strengthen belonging are the strongest when applied at the beginning of the year when students are more likely to seek community and support.

Museus, Yi, and Saelua (2017) noted that when the majority and minoritized students in PWIs behave similarly, the minoritized students traditionally experience more negative

interactions. The authors specifically refer to Hurtado's ideas of a Sense of Belonging as an improvement on Tinto's work due to Hurtado's notion that minoritized students perceive and experience environments and their interactions in those environments in different ways (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017). Experiences of bias and discrimination affect feelings of belonging amongst almost all minoritized students, even those with academic and social support (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015).

As mentioned, Hurtado, et al. (2015) defined a sense of belonging as "a psychological measure of integration in the college community and attachment to an institution" (p. 65). A Sense of Belonging has been linked with persistence and can vary based on race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. Belonging has also been linked to the types of institutions students attend, experiences during transition to college, various measures of academic and social activities, faculty interaction, and multiple aspects of campus climate for diversity (Hurtado et al., 2015). According to Hurtado (2015), key aspects of belonging are the extent to which students (a) feel they are members of their college; (b) perceive themselves as members of the campus community; and (c) feel an affinity for their institution. The role of discrimination and bias is critical in influencing minoritized undergraduates' sense of belonging. The different types of bias that students experience include (a) witnessed discrimination; (b) verbal comments; (c) written comments; (d) exclusion; (e) offensive visual images; and (f) insensitive or disparaging remarks from staff, faculty, or students (Hurtado et al., 2015).

In expanding on belonging as it impacts minoritized students, Hurtado built on the dissertation work completed by Elisabeth Barnett on the concept of *validation* (Hurtado et al., 2015). By performing quantitative analysis at a single university, Barnett found that four

sub-constructs of validation emerged, namely (a) students being known and valued; (b) receiving good instruction; (c) faculty and staff having an appreciation for diversity; and (d) a culture of mentoring (Barnett, 2007). Hurtado (2015), building on the sub-constructs, posited that students are most likely to succeed in college if they are provided the institutional support to make their personal and academic decisions. Based on interactions with faculty, staff, and students inside and outside the classrooms, this empowerment helps students see themselves leading their personal, social, and academic development (Hurtado et al., 2015). In this manner, students can view themselves as capable leaders based on the academic and interpersonal development processes they experience.

A key aspect of validation is a sense of belonging (Hurtado et al., 2015). Students must experience their unique selves as a larger part of the undergraduate community. Building on Tinto's idea of Institutional Experiences, validation involves demonstrations of faculty and staff support and institutional recognition and support for individual students and sub-communities (Barnett, 2007). These support demonstrations are especially important for enhancing a sense of belonging in less traditional and/or minoritized populations, including underrepresented racial/ethnic groups and community college students. Hurtado highlighted two specific types of validation.

The first is *academic validation*, which occurs when faculty and staff support and assist students in developing their internal capacity to learn and acquire confidence in college (Hurtado et al., 2015). Academic validation involves faculty and staff demonstrating support and cross-cultural understanding, providing well-developed instruction of curricular offerings, and facilitating mentoring opportunities relevant to students with diverse experiences and identities. The second is *interpersonal validation*, which occurs when

faculty and staff engage students in adjusting socially and developmentally while providing valuable resources to assist students in navigating the complexities of the institutions. This endeavor helps students become aware of the level at which faculty, staff, and peers recognize their potential to get involved and learn, which, in turn, leads to growth and success.

Positive academic and interpersonal validation can mitigate the negative effects of a hostile climate on students' psychological sense of integration and belonging (Hurtado, et al. 2015). To accomplish this goal, positive validation must counter the challenges of discrimination and bias. General interpersonal validation shows a stronger, direct path to belonging. Hurtado theorized that interpersonal validation captures holistic positive support for students as a positive correlation toward student reflection and interpretation of the importance of this support. This type of validation feels more comprehensive than academic validation, which is solely directed toward curricular development (Hurtado, et al. 2015).

Hurtado's recommendations toward supporting minoritized students in finding belonging include (a) espousing and making an ethics centered on care, respect, and community transparent; (b) acknowledging the multiple realities and unequal legitimacy of marginalized identities; and (c) incorporating proactive and culturally relevant practices and supportive responses to acts of discrimination and bias faced by minoritized students face.

Museus' Culturally Engaging Environments Model

Museus elaborated on Hurtado and Carter's early work by examining the specific environments in which students live, study, and socialize. As a part of this endeavor, Museus and Maramba (2011) focused on the role of *cultural suicide*, the idea that students of minoritized identities must disengage from their culture to find a sense of belonging in PWIs.

The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model created by Museus examined the individual influences on environments that affect the ability of minoritized students to find validation and belonging. While paying homage to Astin's (1993) and Tinto's (1993) works on the role that external influences and pre-college characteristics play in the experiences of college students in finding belonging, the CECE model postulated that the more students find campus environments that speak to their culture and identity, the greater their chances of finding belonging, academic success, and persistence (Museus, 2014). The CECE model proposes two clusters of indicators often found in college environments that intentionally and meaningfully create environments of positive belonging for minoritized students (Museus, 2014).

Cluster One – Cultural Relevance. Cultural relevance indicates the degree to which learning environments are relevant to students' cultural backgrounds and identities. In many ways, cultural relevance is a timely update to Astin's concept of Inputs and Tinto's concept of Pre-Entry Attributes, as it bolsters Hurtado's points on validation. Museus pointed out that students enter college with a bevy of intersectional characteristics, and colleges must be prepared to assist students in finding support and representation for these characteristics. The Cultural Relevance cluster comprises the following five indicators that ensure these characteristics are represented in undergraduate learning environments (Museus, 2014): (a) *Cultural Familiarity*, or the extent to which college students have opportunities to connect with those who understand their backgrounds and experiences; (b) *Culturally Relevant Knowledge*, or the degree to which students can learn about their cultural communities; (c) *Cultural Community Service*, that is, the opportunities to give back and enhance local communities while building cultural connections can heighten a sense of affinity for the

student, the community, and the institution; (d) *Meaningful Cultural Engagement*, that is, students' ability to participate in curricular and co-curricular engagement opportunities with peers from diverse backgrounds; and (e) *Culturally Validating Environments* or the extent to which campuses value students' cultural knowledge, backgrounds, and identities (Museus, 2014).

Cluster Two – Cultural Responsiveness. Cultural responsiveness is the ability and extent to which campus support systems effectively respond to the needs of culturally diverse student populations. Harkening back to environmental factors (Astin) and expanding on the criticisms of Institutional Experiences and Academic and Social Interactions (Tinto), the four indicators of cultural responsiveness indicate a comprehensive understanding of the cultural norms and values of students and a willingness to ensure those support systems respond by considering those norms and values. They are (a) *Collectivist Cultural Orientations*—the idea that campuses must stress collectivist values such as mutually beneficial success, cultural understanding, teamwork, and group affinity to support students; (b) *Humanized Educational Environments*, or environments in which faculty, staff, and students develop meaningful, empathic, and understanding relationships with students; (c) *Proactive Philosophies*—the idea that campus faculty and staff provide abundant avenues for students to have awareness about and opportunities for accessing information and support; and (d) *Holistic support*—the degree to which students can tap into faculty and staff's interventions for mentoring and connection (Museus, 2014).

Swail's Model of Persistence and Validation

Swail's Model of Persistence and Integration also examined the relationship between pre-college characteristics and campus environments that affect a student's ability to find

belonging. Swail aimed to provide institutions with a framework to analyze students' individual needs and use institutional resources to create customizable supports and interventions (Swail et al., 2003). This model examined the association between cognitive, social, and institutional factors that impact a student's sense of belonging (Swail et al., 2003). This model was distinctive because it placed the student experience in the middle of these three factors, rendering the experience more individualized as per a student's needs. These factors are (a) *Cognitive Factors*—pre-college characteristics related to the intelligence, knowledge, and academic abilities that students bring to their undergraduate experience; (b) *Social Factors*—which include family and peer support, career goals, and the ability to develop and thrive in social situations; and (c) *Institutional Factors*—the ability of the campus to provide the necessary academic and social resources to students to help them succeed, persist, and thrive in the academic environments. Examples include academic assistance, financial aid, curriculum instruction, and student services (Swail et al., 2003).

Swail used the term *equilibrium* (Swail et al., 2003) to describe students' ideal state—finding a balance between cognitive, social, and institutional factors. Each of the three factors had individualized positives and deficits specific to each student's background, support, resources, and experience (Swail et al., 2003). In the first stage of the model, these positives and deficits in the aggregate positively or negatively affect student growth. This net effect was called *reciprocity* (Swail et al., 2003). In the second stage of the model, all three sides comprehensively assess a student's experience. Essentially, Swail perceived the three sides as a triangle to determine if a student has achieved some sort of balance between the cognitive and social factors. If these factors were skewed, then the goal would be for the institution to aid the student find the required resources to augment their experiences. If

students possess high social and cognitive skills, minimal institutional support would be necessary.

Strayhorn's Theory on Belonging

As an extension of Tinto's work on academic and social integration, Schlossberg's work on Marginality and Mattering, and Hurtado's research on validation, Terrell Strayhorn's core elements of Sense of Belonging comprise the most concise framework on the topic to date. Strayhorn posited:

Belonging is a basic human need, universal to all. With respect to the core aspect of theories on belonging, Strayhorn (2012) stated the most basic need of people is to belong and find acceptance from others. Belongingness is a universal need and applies to all people. Strayhorn goes as far as to say that belonging is a necessary precondition for higher-order needs such as the desire for knowledge, understanding, and self-actualization.

Belonging takes on heightened importance in certain contexts and times. Strayhorn (2012) stated that college students seek environments or settings congruent with their expectations, values, and attitudes. This is especially important during personal development and transitions, such as entry into post-secondary environments. If institutions are broad and diverse in their norms and values, then the factors that facilitate students' belonging in such academic environments during the transition period can be much more seamlessly provided. This idea, known as *normative congruence*, assists students in finding opportunities aligned with their norms and values (Strayhorn, 2012).

Belonging is a consequence of mattering. Mattering encompasses the feeling that one is valued and appreciated by others. Mattering accents the relational aspect of a sense of belonging—the social synergy that leads to the creation of strong social bonds through the

distinctive contributions one makes to the whole. “It is also true that mattering to others can act as a motivating factor...to those with whom they (college students) feel related, connected, and important as a member of the group” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 21).

Belonging is a fundamental motive sufficient to drive behavior. Strayhorn (2012) highlighted that the desire to find belonging stimulates goal-directed activities designed to satisfy this desire. This means that the behavior of college students, with support from faculty and staff, can be driven to congruence with academic achievement and community development norms. Conversely, students that feel unsupported or marginalized by community members may find belonging with peer groups that drive anti-academic norms of behavior (such as hazing or high-risk alcohol use).

Social Identities Intersect and Shape Belonging. Social identities such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and religion converge and intersect in ways that simultaneously influence aspects of one’s feelings of belonging. Students may have similar identities and needs, but their strategies for belonging could differ. Additionally, the contexts and circumstances of such strategies ensure that there is no “one size fits all” approach to finding belonging. The nuances of the intersectionality of the various facets of individual students are often very different. According to Strayhorn (2012), “to understand students’ belonging experiences, one must pay close attention to issues of identity, identity salience or ‘core self,’ ascendancy of certain motives, and even social contexts that exert influence on these considerations” (p.22).

Belonging Produces Positive Outcomes. Belonging is related to college persistence in several ways. Students who find a sense of belonging on campus do so through strong social affiliations with faculty, staff, or students. These affiliations associate them with the

institution. The initiative to satisfy the need to belong leads to many positive and/or pro-social outcomes, such as engagement, achievement, well-being, happiness, and optimal functioning.

Belonging must also be continually satisfied, as it is likely to change as circumstances, conditions, and contexts gradually undergo changes. Belonging is a flexible concept and susceptible to influence in positive and negative directions. Factors such as involvement opportunities, relationships, academic successes and challenges, living circumstances, and challenges to identity all play key roles in a student's constant renegotiation with feelings of belonging. The disruption of one's need to belong can have positive or negative consequences. Students constantly engage and re-engage in activities and interactions that foster belongingness to regain a sense of acceptance and inclusion.

Walton and Brady's Considerations for Belonging

Walton and Brady (2017) highlighted a unique perspective on belonging. Instead of relying on relationships, they believe in honing in on social cues that students give and receive in various settings. Overcoming the challenge to make meaning of these cues can be a key cog in helping students perceive their self-perception of belonging in a specific context. Students must work through many intricacies associated with these social cues to accurately judge a specific academic or social situation and their place in it. Walton and Brady (2017) posited that a successful interpretation of these signals is the most effective factor in determining belonging, even more so than possessing positive relationships (Walton & Brady, 2017).

The dependence on social cues as an indicator of perceiving belonging leads to a reliance on individuals to fall back on intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences, individual

and group identities, and other personal factors. This, in turn, leads to a *social identity threat* (Cohen, et al, 2012); Murphy & Taylor, 2012)—the belief that the perceived status of one’s identity may lead to a negative association and, ultimately, diminished opportunities for belonging. Examples include the stereotype that black men often face at PWIs, namely they must be too busy to become involved in organizations on campus, owing to the stereotype that all black men are involved in institutions’ athletics programs. The constant concern of marginalized students having minimized opportunities for belonging compared to more privileged students leads to *belonging uncertainty*—the feeling of having one’s experience in a social setting minimized by others based on identity factors (Brady et al., 2020). Belonging uncertainty can quickly become a self-fulfilling prophecy for marginalized students, making it less likely those students will take advantage of involvement, mentoring, or support opportunities that could lead to enhanced opportunities for a sense of belonging (Brady et al., 2020).

Social identity threat and the subsequent belonging uncertainty are influenced by two factors through which individuals analyze the context of their social environments. The first is the ambiguous factors everyone must analyze in any interpersonal or group setting. This includes individuals turning verbal and non-verbal cues, miscommunications, or misunderstandings into interpersonal challenges. This phenomenon is known as *attributable ambiguity* (Weiner, 1985). Attributable ambiguity ensures that two individuals analyze the contextual factors of the same situation differently, normally falling back on previously mentioned identity and experience factors.

The second factor that acts as a precursor to social-identity threat is the recursive nature of the social world (Walton & Brady, 2017). Relationships matter to people and from

the perspective of belonging, individuals naturally act to build, protect, and maintain the relationships that are important to them. Individuals with close relationships continue to grow in sharing positive affirmations. This growth is based in, no small part, on the factors that made the relationship positive in the first place.

Additionally, as people find comfort and security in a relationship, a burgeoning sense of belonging engenders an extension of trust and positive risk-taking in that relationship. Conversely, perceived negative or maladaptive cues between individuals can be construed as being based on negative motivations in a relationship. Essentially, recursive factors of relationships can act as parameters in a positive or negative reinforcing cycle by reinforcing or negating a sense of belonging (Walton & Brady, 2017).

Walton and Brady's theory on belonging have the following four considerations:

Belonging is a perception of fit between self and context. Walton and Brady (2017, p. 274) stated that belonging is “a relationship with a setting.” As students build meaningful interactions that lead to feelings of belonging, they are more likely to persist within the settings where those interactions occur. Each setting has various contextual factors, and each individual is influenced by various intrapersonal factors. Interventions and support can be created and/or provided to augment the factors affecting the self or the context in the settings.

Belonging centers on meaning, as opposed to relationships. While relationships are important to belonging, Walton and Brady posited that they are not always necessary. Belonging can often take the form of an individual learning to understand the social cues in each environment, thereby reducing belonging uncertainty. If interventions allow individuals to better understand and navigate these cues, belonging can occur, regardless of the depth of the relationship.

Recursion can change an individual's perception of belonging. Early interventions create a self-fulfilling prophecy to augment positive interpersonal factors that bolster an individual's sense of belonging. When an individual has a positive sense of belonging, based on positive interactions with others, a cycle will form in which that individual will continue to have a positive sense of self, leading to continued positive interactions with others.

Belonging is integral to other needs. With reference to the recursive nature of belonging, positive belonging engenders positive outcomes in identity, motivation, health, and achievement, just to name a few. As Strayhorn (2012) posited, a positive sense of belonging is a fundamental human need that can shape a person's development. Additionally, a positive sense of belonging can repeat other positive outcomes over a long period.

Conclusions

While many different frameworks regarding belonging exist, consistent similarities can be drawn throughout them.

The first conclusion is that intrapersonal thoughts, feelings, and perspectives must be considered to judge where one finds oneself when considering belonging. Tinto, an early theorist, highlighted the roles of grit, resilience, and internal motivation for students to succeed in college. As Tinto's work was criticized for lacking perspectives on the role of identity and privilege in centering belonging, Schlossberg and Hurtado specifically named the importance of identity and status as factors that students have to negotiate when seeking belonging. These research studies established the foundation for theorists such as Museus and Strayhorn to create models that specifically name factors such as cultural relevance and identity as markers with which students wrestle from a cognitive and affective perspective.

The second conclusion is that campuses must be aware of and prepared to name and support resources that advance a sense of belonging. Astin's work with Environments as a part of the I-E-O model comprises important early work in naming aspects of campus such as peer support, faculty and staff resources, and academic and co-curricular resources being key for students to find belonging. Tinto also acknowledged the importance of faculty, staff, and students in terms of the social and intellectual connections that students need to make to thrive. Schlossberg expounded on the types of support needed by naming the importance of available resources to students in transition times. Hurtado and Museus named the need for this support to be specific to the needs of minoritized students in terms of representation, mentoring, and environments that support their academic and social needs.

Lastly, there is consensus that those who find belonging benefit greatly in several ways. In terms of outcomes such as persistence (Terezini, et al., 1981), satisfaction with the environment (Astin, 1993), or successful student retention (Tinto, 1993), early theorists highlighted that students who found resources, support, and community are successful. As Hurtado (2015) expanded on the concept of validation, student success outcomes not only became much more cleanly delineated between academic, social, and institutional support but also in tenets of diversity, equity, and inclusion that impacted and enhanced the experiences of specific identities. Walton and Brady (2017) and Strayhorn (2012) focused on more intricate aspects of the student experience, such as the benefit of positively gleaning social cues and realizing that belonging can shift and reset itself as students engage in new and different experiences throughout college.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This research study aimed to understand the conditions that affect the sense of belonging for Student Government members at a medium-sized private institution based on their level of involvement in the organization.

Research Questions

The research questions most relevant to this study are as follows: What are the specific conditions within the Roselle University Student Government that impact individual members' sense of belonging as members of the university they represent? How do these conditions specifically impact a sense of belonging in either a positive or negative way?

Rationale for Approach

Ethnography, as a process and a product, is a type of qualitative research methodology that focuses on the observation and study of culture and social regularities of groups of people as a part of everyday life (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016). While originally enacted by researchers in a detached, observational style, ethnography has gradually transitioned into a process that allows researchers to serve as observers and participants in the cultures in which they are immersed (Tedlock, 1991). Ethnographic research is centered on understanding the specifics that shape the behaviors of individuals and cultures and how these specifics change over time. To better understand these specifics, a researcher must actively participate in the natural setting of the group and gather data by better observing and understanding the group's experiences, perspectives, and contextual factors (Allen, 2017). This process, known as *participant observation*, leads to the gathering and sociocultural

interpretation of data by the researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), with the goal of achieving a “rich, thick description” (Geertz, 1973) when gathering and interpreting data. Successful ethnographic research results in abundant subject matter, including different contexts, perspectives, and variables within the population studied. To achieve rich, thick descriptions, ethnographic researchers must illuminate the contexts, perspectives, and variables of the population being studied and provide a level of detail that allows readers to draw their conclusions about cultural markers within the specific population. Successful ethnography makes the complexity of the data transparent to help readers draw their conclusions, as opposed to telling the readers what to think (as is often the case with quantitative research).

Additionally, rich, thick descriptions involve rigor that goes above and beyond accumulating data and tying it back to theoretical frameworks (Tracy, 2010). Malinowski (as cited in Turner & Risjord, 2007, p. 399) stated, “One of the first conditions of acceptable fieldwork is that it should deal with the totality of all social, cultural, and psychological aspects of the community, for they are so interwoven that no one can be understood without taking into consideration all of the others.” Rigor involves what Golafshani (as described in Tracy, 2010) referred to as *face validity*, that is, whether a study appears reasonable and appropriate. To achieve the level of validity that Golafshani described, ethnographic researchers must ensure that (a) there is enough data to support the claims of the research; (b) the researcher gathers significant and interesting data; (c) the context and sample are appropriate given the goals of the study; and (d) adherence is maintained to appropriate research interview, note taking, and analysis procedures (Tracy, 2010). Ethnographic researchers value the power of stories as a part of their research, whereas quantitative researchers generally use data to generalize information about a population (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Storytelling provides the unique opportunity to unlock multiple layers of

consciousness, which can connect the personal stories of individual members of the study with the cultural markers of the population being studied. As stated by Holstein and Gubrium (1995, p. 15), storytelling allows researchers to comprehend the “what” and the “how.”

A keen focus on human society and culture unites all forms of ethnography (Tracy, 2010). One of the first definitions of culture that shaped the conceptual framework of ethnography was coined in the late nineteenth century by Edward Taylor (as cited in Turner & Risjord, 2007, p. 402), who stated, “culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Taylor believed that all humans share culture (Turner & Risjord, 2007). Thereafter, a modern definition of culture, as it pertains to ethnography, was proposed by D’Andrade, et al. (1992) p. 230), who stated that culture “is shared by a significant number of members of a social group; shared in the sense of being behaviorally enacted, physically possessed, or internally thought” (p. 230). D’Andrade, et al. (1992) further posited that cultural markers could be identified as symbolic and/or special sub-groups that can be passed down through generations to younger members. For a researcher to best understand and interpret aspects of any culture, a significant amount of time must be spent observing, studying, and interpreting the settings, structures, and people that comprise that culture. This concept, known as *immersion*, states that the primary mode of data collection is executed by a participant observer in the field (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016). As an integral part of the immersion process, the researcher is charged with recording and processing personal feelings, ideas, impressions, or insights regarding the specifics of the data collection as it pertains to a specific culture (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016). Immersion is important for several reasons. In terms of the population under study, the researcher must analyze the constructivist perspectives derived from each participant’s thoughts, feelings, and

experiences. This approach contrasts with the framework of social constructionism established by the organization's overarching culture and the manner in which that culture affects each specific to their sense of belonging (Crotty, 1998). This distinction can only be gleaned and understood with an extended commitment to the organization's culture and the individuals that are a part of it.

Collaborative Ethnography

Collaborative ethnography is a striking example of what can happen when immersion between observers and participants becomes a primary driver for decisions on how to conduct research. Using D'Andrade's (1992) definition of culture as a guidepost, members of a culture feel motivated to pass down their cultural markers to younger members to ensure permanency. A foundational tenet of collaborative ethnography is enlisting members of the culture being researched to serve as researchers in documenting that culture, thereby safeguarding a sense of permanency. In this study, activities such as bringing in the Roselle University Student Government as partners to conceptualize ethnographic techniques, creating research questions, and processing reflective opportunities were the hallmarks of the immersive process. The ability to customize the methods used to conduct this study harkens back to what Campbell and Lassiter (2015, pp. 16–17) referred to as “an approach to ethnography that deliberately and explicitly emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process....” “Collaborative ethnography” is often associated with Luke Eric Lassiter's 1998 doctoral dissertation and development in subsequent publications (Clerke & Hopwood, 2014). One of the main tenets of ethnographic research is the need for collaboration. The ability of the researcher(s) to work closely with co-researchers and subjects to build relationships is imperative for creating the “rich, vibrant description”

described earlier. Collaborative ethnography takes the concept of relationship building and weaves it into every facet of the research process. Herein, the commentary provided by research subjects is expanded to influence every aspect of project development—from goals and outcomes to decisions made during the writing and editing processes. Every step in this process, including (a) how goals may shift and change; (b) how the research subjects co-create techniques for conducting research; and (c) the ultimate decision-making on the perspectives in which final projects are constructed, written, and disseminated, are executed in consultation with a team that also acts as research subjects (Lassiter, 2005a).

Collaborative ethnography entails a radical departure from traditional forms of qualitative research (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). While all ethnographic research involves collaboration, such collaboration normally begins and ends with fieldwork. As Rappaport (2008) stated, “The bulk of the English language literature on collaboration focuses on the substantive content that results from this brand of research...how researchers come to learn through collaboration” (p. 2). As mentioned earlier, ethnographic researchers normally work with subjects in assessing and interpreting key aspects of a setting or culture that are gleaned as a part of the research process. This assessment and interpretation prioritize the internal workings and perspectives of the setting/culture. Interpretation and decision-making in terms of the final aspects of the research process normally remain in the hands of the researcher, restricting the collaborative part of the process to fieldwork. The process of transitioning from working with others to collect data versus trusting a team to co-create the project is the hallmark of collaborative ethnography. As Lassiter (2005a) stated, this is a departure from earlier forms of collaborative ethnography, which were perceived more as collaborative processes between professional researchers and other experts in the field. To be truly effective as a modern-day collaborative ethnographer, the co-creative process must involve

research subjects and/or local experts throughout the project. Collaborative ethnography creates the scope for conceptualizing meaningful research beyond traditional academic outlets. This includes the formation of alternative research topics and the construction of alternative research methods (Rappaport, 2008).

For collaboration to be successful, the researcher must understand the challenges and realities associated with the endeavor of collaborating with local experts (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). One of the main differences in working closely with local experts is what Hinson (cited in Lassiter, 2005a) referred to as the “constant ongoing discussion” (p. 16) with local subjects about the research process. Rappaport (2008) referred to this process as the “co-production of theory” (p. 16). This is a distinction and a deepening from *reciprocal ethnography*, wherein there is a simpler “act of return” in which a researcher exchanges time spent in a culture or community they are studying for access. Instead of a transactional relationship that allows participants to simply share their perspectives and researchers to receive materials for their projects, the collaborative relationship allows participants to serve as consultants and create the parameters and questions for the project. This form of a collaborative relationship can go as far as having participants assist with the project’s conceptualization, writing, and editing. Parts of this deeper relationship between researcher and participants have existed previously in ethnographic research, but as Lassiter (2005a) stated, “collaborative ethnography has a rich, but marginal heritage” (p. 18) in truly incorporating research participants as consultants and partners in the research process. Collaboration flips the research process from a process of data collection to a process of co-conceptualization (Rappaport, 2008). Rinehart and Earl (2016) expanded on Lassiter and Rappaport’s descriptions of the relationship between researchers and local participants by describing the collaborative ethnographic process as being defined by reciprocal trust

between researchers and participants and the use of collaborative strategies to arrive at a resolution regarding diverse perspectives.

Population and Sample

The population for this study comprises the members of the Student Government enrolled at a specific higher education institution at the undergraduate level. Roselle University is a medium-sized, private, not-for-profit institution in the Southeast region of the United States. This institution has a Carnegie Classification of R2 (high research activity) (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges accredits the sample institution. The current enrollment of the institution is as follows: 15,130 applied for admission in 2020–21, with 3816 applications being accepted and 1412 being enrolled. The total undergraduate enrollment is 5472, with an additional graduate and professional school enrollment of 3478. The total institutional enrollment is 8950. The institution awards 45 undergraduate majors and 60 undergraduate minors.

With respect to the racial/ethnic background of the 5472 enrolled undergraduate students, 68 percent were white, 9 percent were non-residential undocumented students, 8 percent were Hispanic or Latino, 6 percent were Black or African American, 5 percent were a combination of two or more races, 4 percent were Asian, 4 percent race/ethnicity unknown, and 1 percent were American Indian or Alaska Native. In total, 53 percent of the undergraduate population identified as female. In total, 80 percent of undergraduate students lived on campus. In total, 91 percent of first-year students graduated in the top quarter of their high school classes (2021 Roselle University Factbook).

Composition of Organization

In total, Forty-Three members of the Student Government participated in the project. Differing from the campus gender breakdown of 53 percent female and 47 percent male, approximately 69 percent of reporting members of student government identified as female, and 31 percent of reporting members identified as male. The mean age of members in the student government was nineteen, with the median and mode reported at nineteen or twenty years. The age of members in student government was between eighteen and twenty-two years—with a difference of four years between the youngest and eldest members. The majority of current RSG members are either eighteen or nineteen years old, at 53 percent. Student Government is primarily white, with 64 percent of the organization identifying as such. Overall, 13 percent of the organization identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 9 percent identified as African American, 6 percent identified as Asian, 6 percent identified as a combination of two or more races, and 3 percent preferred not to identify their ethnicities. Most racial/ethnic identifiers are similar to the campus demographic breakdown. The exception is Hispanic/Latinx members—with a higher number in the organization than the approximately 4 percent member count represented in the undergraduate population.

Membership in Student Government consists of three levels—senators, cabinet members (committee) chairs, and executive board members. According to the student government constitution, the executive board consists of four elected positions—the president, speaker of the house, secretary, and treasurer. A fifth executive board position, chief of staff, is appointed by the president after campus-wide executive board elections have been completed and made official in April. The president is the head executive board member and is charged with critical duties such as representing student government with university leaders, overseeing the organization’s election process, and appointing students to

faculty/staff-led university committees that need undergraduate representation. On the other hand, the speaker of the house is responsible for overseeing the running of student government general meetings, appointing chairpersons for the seven standing committees, and selecting student representatives for university committees. Furthermore, the secretary is responsible for organizing and maintaining records of general and executive board meetings and cataloging all internal and external communications. The treasurer oversees all student government budget allocations and serves as the university's Student Organization Budgeting Committee chairperson. According to their governing documents, the Student Organization Budgeting Committee allocates almost \$600,000 in university funding to the almost 220 recognized clubs and organizations. Lastly, the chief of staff is charged with all special projects assigned to them by the president and is often responsible for setting the president's agenda and meeting schedule.

Other than the executive board, each student government member serves as a member of one of the seven standing committees that comprise the organization. According to the student government constitution and bylaws, the seven committees are as follows:

Physical Planning. Responsible for the student voice regarding physical facilities, the university master plan for campus growth, and the overall campus security.

Academic. Represents the academic needs of the students, such as grading requirements, considering new majors and minors, and faculty appreciation.

Public Relations. Relays key information from the faculty, the administration, and student government to the student body.

Chartering. Assists new student organizations through the chartering process and ultimately evaluates the merit of groups seeking a charter.

Campus Life. Considers issues that improve quality of life on campus, such as mental health needs, alcohol policies, and the town/gown relationship.

Judiciary. Considers and heightens the awareness of honor and conduct regulations that govern students and the judicial procedures that surround them.

Diversity and Inclusion. Works to ensure that all backgrounds, identities, affiliations, abilities, and ideologies are supported and advocated for on campus (Student Government Constitution).

The culture of the organization relies on the hierarchical structure of the organization to transfer information up and down the line. Stakeholders in the entire organization meet once a week for Tuesday general body meetings. This is where (a) general business is transacted; (b) bills and resolutions are debated and eventually voted on; (c) campus-wide challenges are discussed; and (d) campus administrators and/or special guests speak to the entire body. The seven committees each meet individually every week. The information gathered from these meetings is shared with the cabinet (committee chairs) and the executive board during Sunday night cabinet meetings. The cabinet meetings are where the agenda is finalized for the Tuesday meetings, decisions are made as to what bills and resolutions will be presented, and committee chairs highlight concerns or ideas to be considered by the cabinet and executive board.

Collaborative Ethnographic Techniques and Timeline

Lassiter (2005, p. 15) defined collaborative ethnography as “resituating collaboration practice at every stage of the ethnographic process, from fieldwork to writing and back again.” Lassiter expanded on his understanding of collaborative ethnography by stating that

the primary goal of the process is to work through the ethnographic process with community members under study as active collaborators. Lassiter further expounded upon the depth of the process by stating that mutual engagement with the community is a part of every process step (Lassiter, 2005). This process leads to a more equitable research process (Lassiter, 2005) and, in case of student government members, a process that Miles and Miller (2006) referred to as “a model...that is focused on the duality of improving efficiency (within student government) while at the same time enhancing the experience of the student’s learning.” This in-depth involvement of student government members in the collaborative process provides multiple benefits, including improvement in individual members’ understanding of factors that enhance belonging within the organization and enhancement of the belonging of the members invested in the research process.

Collaborative Ethnographic Process

Meeting with the Student Government Members

The executive board’s buy-in and support were imperative in understanding the project’s scope and providing resources (human and time) necessary for the project. This work began in April 2022 with a series of discussions with Student Government members to discuss the concept of a sense of belonging and the basic parameters of the project. The research questions developed preliminarily were a direct result of feedback and perspectives provided by the focus groups. Eventually, conversations continued with the Student Government president and chief of staff over the Summer of 2022 in anticipation of a meeting with the executive board at the beginning of the Fall 2022 semester. As a part of the executive board meeting at the beginning of the semester, the executive board defined a sense of belonging specific to the Student Government: “Sense of Belonging is the experience of

matter or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important as a member of the University community.” Additionally, the executive board agreed to create the scope for a monthly Student Government community forum with a follow-up life story analysis. Three forums and life story analyses were agreed upon for Fall 2022 semester, with a follow-up forum and life story analysis approximately scheduled around early Spring 2023 semester.

Selection of a Review Team

The review team was selected after first discussing the role of the team with the Student Government executive board during the Summer of 2023. The Executive Board’s primary concern with the study was ensuring that the organization’s members could balance the time committed to participation in this study. This included potential members of the review team and general members participating in the study. Roselle University students cited interference with academic obligations and insufficient time as reasons behind why they did not involve themselves in further activities (2021 Roselle University Campus Activities Benchmarking Assessment). The Executive Board considered it important to account for these concerns.

The study was an opt-in for all members of the organization, and the review team, which was led by a member of the executive board, had a small number of upper-class students. Sally, a senior and student government secretary, served as the student lead. Sally presents as a white female. Three other members of the Student Government served as members of the review team—Steve, a senior and Physical Planning Co-chair; Kadeem, a junior and the Judiciary Committee Co-chair; and Dalia, a junior and the Student

Organizations Council Co-chair. Steve presents as a white male, Kadeem presents as a South Asian male, and Dalia presents as a Middle Eastern female.

Review Team Training

The endeavor of training the review team members involved understanding the basics of collaborative ethnography, the works of Strayhorn and Walton and Brady, the parameters of the research process, and ethical considerations in terms of working with me acting as the doctoral student and reviewing and providing the findings and interpretations of the study.

Review Team Responsibilities

The review team collaborated to (a) define a list of ethical responsibilities; (b) create specific roles in assisting in the data collection and data review processes; (c) discuss and agree upon confidentiality and transparency as an integral part of the research process; and (d) outline project timelines. During the study, the Executive Board and/or review team met six times to discuss and analyze the following study elements:

Tuesday, August 16th: Meeting with the Executive Board to finalize study parameters and discuss a Student Government specific definition of a sense of belonging.

Friday, August 19th: Meeting with Sally to (a) finalize the definition of sense of belonging; (b) discuss the study's time frame; (c) review team selection; and (d) create questions for the first community forum.

Friday, October 28th: Meeting with the review team to (a) share an understanding of collaborative ethnography; (b) review team roles; (c) discuss findings and themes from the first community forum and the first written life story analysis; and (d) finalize questions for the second community forum.

Friday, November 30th: Meeting with the review team to discuss findings and themes from the second community forum and the second written life story analysis and finalize questions for the third community forum.

Friday, January 20th: Meeting with the review team to (a) discuss findings and themes from the third community forum; (b) share overall themes from the fall 2022 semester; and (c) finalize questions for the final community forum.

Research Techniques and Questions

Community Forums

The central hub of student government continues to comprise the feedback and reflection derived from weekly meetings with key stakeholders in the entire organization. The use of these weekly meetings as community forums facilitated real-time feedback from the entire organization about the planning and execution of the research. Furthermore, these forums allowed organization members who could not participate in review opportunities to provide valuable thoughts and perspectives.

Life Story Analysis

As discussed in Chapter One, life story analysis allows researchers to give their subjects agency and self-identity in constructing a retroactive account of their lives constructed in the present (Lawless, 2019). Life story analysis is concerned with providing subjects the opportunity to shape their biographies.

Written Life Story Analysis

As one-on-one interviews are time-consuming and privilege the interviewer, the use of written self-reflection ensured that subjects could convey unfettered thoughts, feelings, and perspectives about factors of belonging within the student government. For example, Walton and Brady's work on the recursive nature of relationships can be more easily dissected through the journaling activities of a member of the student government that identified as introverted and needed time to process, which may not be afforded in a one-on-one interview. Additionally, Boud (2001) believed that written self-reflection could be an effective mechanism to reinforce learning before (helping individuals clarify their expectations), during (responding appropriately to the current situation), and after (making sense of their experiences) educational activities. For student government members, journaling can play an important role as a "catch-all" in sharing thoughts and perspectives throughout the research process. In this study, journaling was conducted as a written life-story analysis. This life-story analysis allowed the research process to call back to Walton and Brady's (2017) naming of the reading of relationships, experiences, and contextual factors as key facets of belonging. For numerous students, the ability to discern these factors is a key element of belonging, especially in unfamiliar social situations where relationships have not yet been established. For first-year senators, a reflection on establishing and learning social cues with upper-class student government members was important. This process had the impact that Campbell and Lassister (2015) stated "is what it's all about" (p. 102) — opening up new domains using reflection.

In the context of this study, written life story analyses allowed subjects to share multiple factors that influenced their involvement in Student Government and key factors that shaped their definition of belonging. This includes what Tinto (1993) referred to as

Pre-Entry Attributes, such as (a) pre-college academic experiences; (b) family support; (c) possession of traits such as resilience and grit; and (d) levels of financial support. Strayhorn's Framework on Belonging was even more predictive than Tinto's work on life story analysis. This framework allowed subjects to discuss visible and invisible identity factors and, specifically for students hailing from underrepresented backgrounds, the chance to discuss factors that have enhanced or inhibited their validation at the university level and within student government with the goal of having each student submit three written life story analyses throughout the project.

Trustworthiness

One of the most important facets of this study is the trustworthiness and credibility of the process and the data. Trustworthiness refers to qualitative research findings' quality, authenticity, and truthfulness. It relates to the degree of trust or confidence that readers have in the results (Schmidt & Brown, 2015). The use of triangulation techniques or "crystallization" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246) is imperative to safeguard trustworthiness. Collaborative ethnographic techniques ensure triangulation/crystallization in several ways. First, the use of multiple researchers and reviewers from the community being researched enables an iterative member check of research techniques, data collection, data interpretation, and findings. As Maxwell stated (2013, pp. 126–127), member checks are "the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on." Second, the use of multiple data collection methods (life story analysis, community forums, and review team meetings) ensured that Student Government members had multiple opportunities to

share their unfettered perspectives and ensure consistency in the data. This was done using the anonymous data in the Community Forums to create themes that could be turned into more specific questions for the Life Story Analyses. Themes from each Life Story Analysis were then shared with the review team for feedback and consideration. The review team created a set of questions for an upcoming community forum. These myriad opportunities provided a third point of triangulation, what Merriam and Tisdell (2016) referred to as data saturation and emerging findings, ensuring that no new information becomes available as more data is collected. Lastly, the use of Schlossberg, Strayhorn, and Walton and Brady's works ensured that multiple frameworks were utilized to examine aspects of a Sense of Belonging through multiple perspectives. This fourth type of research verification moves the reliability and validity of this study toward crystallization—deconstructing validity and transitioning the study toward a place where the perspectives of student government members are verified to create the scope for their multiple truths and experiences.

Data Analysis

Before the commencement of the study, I sought approval from the Appalachian State Office of Research Protections to conduct the study (see Appendix A). As collaborative ethnography projects are not considered generalizable, IRB approval was deemed unnecessary. Data analysis began with cataloging and organizing the research materials for Life Story Analysis. The materials derived from written life story analyses were transcribed and based on an alias for each member of the student government. Furthermore, the materials derived from community forums were transcribed and shared as “anonymous.” Anonymity was utilized with community forum responses in order to allow for participants to share their

true feelings with the larger group, while going more in-depth with the follow-up life story analyses.

Thematic Analysis techniques were utilized to organize community forums and life story analysis information. The thematic analysis identified patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a formative type of qualitative analysis, as it provides basic skills that can be transferred to additional types of analysis. Additionally, thematic analysis is not associated with any specific epistemological or theoretical perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). In the case of this study, this was advantageous due to the reliance on the collaborative ethnographic techniques and the inputs provided by the review team to analyze emergent themes and make recommendations on topics and questions for each subsequent community forum or life story analysis.

The analysis aimed to identify important thematic patterns and use such themes to propel the research forward. It is important in thematic analysis to ensure that the themes result from careful analysis instead of a summary of the main interview questions. As a part of the analysis, the researcher became familiar with the data by carefully reading and re-reading the responses from each life story analysis and community forum. This activity was followed by an initial search for themes and an additional self-review. After the self-review, the results were shared with the review team in monthly meetings. Once agreed upon by the review team, the themes were shared with the Student Government in the subsequent community forum.

Patterns that emerged from the Life Story Analysis were also shared with two members of the dissertation team and compared against Schlossberg, Strayhorn, and Walton and Brady's frameworks for additional consideration before the final analysis.

Collaborative Ethnographic Interactions

Data collection questions were provided to Student Government members six times during the Fall 2022 semester. Student Government members participated in community forums four times. During these forums, research questions were publicly posed to the entire organization, followed by small group discussions. After small group discussions on each question, the members anonymously submitted individual answers anonymously from their smartphones using Mentimeter ([mentimeter.com](https://www.mentimeter.com)), an online polling tool that facilitates interactivity as a part of a presentation use of (in this case) web-based, open-ended questions that can be accessed through a smartphone. Each forum approximately lasted for one hour.

Student Government also participated in three written life story analyses as follow-ups to the community forums. The analyses facilitated follow-ups based on themes derived from the community forums. Each analysis was created using Google Forms ([google.com/forms](https://www.google.com/forms)) and by leveraging open-ended questions. The review team provided specific insights to inform the intricacies of the life story analysis questions. After each analysis, a random drawing of the participating members for \$25 Amazon gift cards was conducted at the subsequent general body meeting.

Community Forum One (Tuesday, September 13, 2022)

The first forum was intended for returning upper-class members of the Student Government, and twenty-four members were present in this forum. This community forum aimed to (a) review Student Government members' interpretation of the sense of belonging; (b) discuss personal and historical perceptions of the sense of belonging; and (c) share individual insights and examples of the sense of belonging.

The forum began with (a) an overview of the use of collaborative ethnography as a

methodology for the study; (b) an explanation of community forums and written life story analyses; (c) sharing of past research on student governments nationally, including gaps in the sense of belonging with reference to student governments; and (d) sharing the definition of sense of belonging that the Student Government executive board created that at their summer retreat. The Student Government entity was divided into groups of three, and research questions were shared with the small groups. After each question, the group was given five minutes to discuss and another five minutes to share their anonymous responses using Mentimeter. The responses were public, and the entire organization could view the Mentimeter answers.

Community Forum Two (Tuesday, October 4, 2022)

The second community forum was similar to the first; however, it was conducted for the new first-year senators and appointees of the Student Government. Overall, fourteen members were present, as first-year elections and appointments had not been completed before the first forum. Therefore, these members were not a part of the Student Government at the time of the first forum.

Life Story Analysis One (Thursday, September 15 to Wednesday, October 5, 2022)

Life story analysis one comprised twenty-five total participants. The activity began with an explanation that the Life Story Analysis allowed RSG members the autonomy to self-identify aspects of their experience regarding sense of belonging in order to construct an accurate account of their lives currently at Roselle. Additional explanation was provided that the life story analysis process was concerned with allowing subjects to shape their biographies. In the context of this study, life story analyses allowed Student Government members to share numerous factors that influenced their involvement in RSG and factors that shaped their definition of belonging. Specifically, as a follow-up to community forum one, it was explained that the analysis was an

opportunity to share detailed insights regarding the individual impact of Student Government on belonging. An explanation was provided that any identifying information will be kept strictly confidential to the researcher and that insights will be utilized in terms of the aggregate. Specific insights, which would be quoted as a part of the writing portion of this study, would not be derived without the student's permission to provide the specific insights. If a specific student is referenced, it would be done with the student's explicit permission and the use of an alias.

The questions for life story analysis one were based on a more specific analysis of the concept of belonging specific to Student Government. The concept of belonging for the analysis was based on the definition created by the Executive Board—"Sense of Belonging is the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important as a member of the Roselle University community."

Life Story Analysis Two (Tuesday, October 4 to Tuesday, October 11, 2022)

Overall, fourteen members participated in life story analysis two. The second analysis was the same as the first; however, it was conducted for the new first-year senators and appointees of the Student Government. These members were not a part of the Student Government at the time of the first forum. Themes were blended with the results of the first analysis.

Community Forum Three (Tuesday, October 11, 2022)

The third forum was the first time the 2022–23 Student Government cohort met for a discussion that included thirty-seven participants. The outcomes of Community Forum Three were to (a) review themes from the initial community forums and life story analyses; (b) discuss Student Government members' perceptions of the terms "accepted" and "respected;" and (c) analyze the impact on "accept" and "respect" in Student Government in terms of finding belonging. This forum was akin to forums one and two in terms of the breakout

group discussions and anonymous public Mentimeter answers.

Life Story Analysis Three (Tuesday, November 1 to Tuesday, November 15, 2022)

Overall, thirty-five members participated in the third life story analysis. As a follow-up to the third community forum, the third analysis provided Student Government members an opportunity to share detailed insights regarding their opinions on the impact of hierarchy within the organization and how it impacts each member's understanding of belonging. The questions for life story analysis three were reviewed and agreed upon by the review team. The researcher reminded the participants about the study agreement regarding confidentiality and aggregate information usage.

Community Forum Four (Tuesday, November 15, 2022)

In total, thirty-seven students participated in community forum four. Based on feedback from the review team, the decision was made to change the collection method for the final forum. The review team shared concerns that organization members may have copied each other's answers if a third public Mentimeter was used. Therefore, instead of using Mentimeter, organization members were provided a written questionnaire to fill out and hand in. The outcomes of community forum four were to (a) review the Student Government's interpretation of the sense of belonging; (b) discuss potential shifts in personal perceptions of the sense of belonging; and (c) share insights on examples of belonging within Student Government during Fall 2022 semester. The group was reminded of the Student Government's definition of a sense of belonging. Subsequently, the group was further divided into small groups, wherein the students were asked to collaborate with members of the organization who were not included in their committee structure. The groups were given five minutes to discuss each question after it had been presented and an additional five minutes to write their answers.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This study aimed to explore and understand the sense of belonging in the Roselle University Student Government. The research questions most relevant to this study are: What are the specific conditions within the Roselle University Student Government that impact individual members' sense of belonging as members of the university they represent? How do these conditions specifically impact a sense of belonging in either a positive or negative way?

Findings

The findings in Chapter four have been directly derived from the comprehensive data set, which comprises the community forums and life story analyses conducted over the 2022–23 academic year with the Student Government. As discussed in Chapter Three, community forums were utilized to create the scope for real-time conversation and feedback and allow organization members to provide valuable thoughts and perspectives. As the community forums involved public sharing of students' thoughts, feedback was recorded anonymously. As a result, anonymous quotes have been derived from community forum feedback. Written life story analyses allowed students to provide unfettered thoughts and perspectives as a follow-up to the community forums. Furthermore, quotes attributed to specific student government members (using pseudonyms) were derived from life story analyses. The findings were broken down using Strayhorn's Core Elements of Belonging as the overarching framework. Schlossberg, Walton, and Brady's theories were also regarded as complementary frameworks.

Core Element of Belonging 1: "Belonging as a Basic Human Need"

When first contemplating belonging at the beginning of the collaborative ethnographic process, Student Government members reflected on multiple themes aligned

with Strayhorn's description. This included unpacking the universal nature of the phrase *sense of belonging* to Student Government members as a part of their life history before college. Figure 4 shows five general themes that emerged when reflecting on the overarching idea of feeling accepted and included by others. The first theme derived from Student Government members' responses was that the affective and cognitive elements of belonging led to an internal sense of "being able to be yourself around others." These feelings and thoughts resulted in comfort with others, which, in turn, allowed students to perceive support before coming to college. Members shared that belonging stemmed from being a part of communities that made them feel safe and allowed them to share their authentic thoughts and feelings about themselves and their beliefs. David, a committee chair, stated, "The ideas of acceptance and value particularly resonate with me because, fundamentally, acceptance is the first step toward any sense of belonging, and one cannot begin to feel cared about or respected if they are not accepted." An anonymous member said, "Being able to attach yourself to a group or community with shared interests and values and share your viewpoints without judgment...this brought a feeling of security and community found amongst others."

The second pre-college theme indicated that, from a behavioral perspective, students found a sense of belonging to community involvement from various supports. The commonly shared supports included (a) family systems; (b) clubs and organizations in high school; (c) athletic teams; (d) religious affiliations; and (e) work/employment opportunities. For members of the Student Government, these examples provided the affective perspective discussed above. The examples also manifested in terms of behavioral perspectives as students could process support and transform it into courage and motivation to share opinions and speak their minds in various communities. An anonymous Student Government member

stated in the community forum, “Listening, good conversation that led to change, a welcoming aspect, and good vibe in each setting I was involved in led to belonging.”

Another anonymous member said, “I felt like I belonged when I was heavily invested in a group and did a lot for that group. I didn’t have to filter myself around those people, and I had fun.”

Byron, a second-year senator, remarked:

These feelings and behaviors continued to be bolstered as part of the initial life story analysis. Having a sense of belonging allows all individuals to be just that—individuals. The ability to be one’s self instead of changing who you are to fit in is an important thing.

Giselle, an upper-class committee member, noted:

I would say the ideas of being accepted and cared about most deeply resonated with me. I would say this because being accepted and cared for are the factors with the strongest force. What keeps me around anywhere are these two factors by orders of magnitude beyond the others. These are the foundation for building deep and lasting friendships.

Student Government members summarized the pre-college experiences that contributed to their formative understanding of belonging. A third theme emerged as members reflected on the importance of support from interactions with others. Students felt supported from different sources, including (a) peer relationships; (b) family members; and (c) teachers, coaches, and mentors. These supports encouraged students to take healthy risks and try out new experiences. These supports also acknowledged students’ efforts during successes and comforted students during challenges. “I found belonging in the clubs and

activities that I was a part of [before college],” said one upper-class member. This member added, “I [felt belonging whenever I felt like I truly bonded and meshed with the members of the groups I was involved with.” Another member noted, “I found belonging in clubs and activities being around individuals who also had an interest in the different parts of my life.”

The support and community that stemmed from the tangible support systems also deepened the cognitive aspects of belonging. “My voice was heard (by others),” said one member. This member added, “People were welcoming and encouraged me to be outspoken and bring new ideas. People valued what I had to say and wanted me to pursue my interests,” said another anonymous member.” A third anonymous member stated, “I felt loved. I felt like people truly cared for me. I felt involved when I understood I could make a difference and my voice would be heard.” Braxton, a first-year Student Government senator and committee member, noted:

I have been a part of groups and teams in which I have truly felt cared for, and this is when I feel the greatest sense of belonging. I also feel belonging in my family, and this is because my parents and siblings care for me and value me as a person.

Cognitively, the feelings of support and community also led to a sense of shared goals and feelings of success shared with others. One member said anonymously, “I felt a sense of happiness, a purpose that I had been searching for, feeling a part of a family, and most importantly, feeling like I was making a difference alongside others.” Another anonymous member noted, “[Belonging] felt like what I was doing was observed and being implemented by others, and vice versa.”

Conversely, students could also articulate what it felt like when they did not feel a sense of belonging and how it affected them before coming to college. This feeling, which is

known as *belonging uncertainty* (Walton & Brady, 2017), can be distinguished by feelings of not connecting in or valuing a setting or valuing a setting but still questioning one's connection to it. "It [Belonging] resonates with me because I have been in communities before where I did not feel comfortable being myself, and I don't ever want myself or others to feel that way in the future," stated Byron. Umar, a junior committee chair, stated:

It is one thing to fit in and be accepted, but it is another to feel like the members of that community respect you and believe you are an important part of that community. I think this resonates with me most because, in high school, I fit in and had a nice group of friends. However, I did not feel like my voice was heard or viewed as important by the administrators at my high school.

According to the reflections provided, Student Government members have a basic recognition and understanding of the seminal tenets of belonging before coming to college. This recognition and understanding involve recognizing places that the students used as sources of belonging, a self-perception of the impact of belonging and belonging uncertainty, and an understanding of resources and supports necessary to enhance a sense of belonging.

Figure 4:

Pre-College Experience Themes

Belonging allowed students to “be themselves”

Family systems, clubs and organizations, athletic teams, religious affiliations and work/employment opportunities were early examples of communities that led to belonging

Supports from those communities included peer relationships, family members and teachers/coaches/mentors

Communities of support led to shared goals and feelings of success that could be shared with others

Students understood and were able to discern belonging uncertainty

Core Element of Belonging 2: “Belonging Takes on Heightened Importance in Certain Times and Contexts”

Social constructivism is imperative in understanding a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). College students are pressed to make sense of the world into which they have transitioned. For many students, finding support and affinity amongst the many sub-communities in a campus setting speaks to what Crotty (1998) referred to as *reification*, or the understanding of the world through the lens of those viewing that world. College students often find connections in academic institutions through organizations, family, and coaches/mentors (Astin, 1994; Schlossberg, 1989; Tinto, 1993). As students transition into college, defined groups and/or specific social contexts present opportunities for individuals to join. In joining such groups and social contexts, students hope to find a sense of security, acceptance, and the ability to “be yourself.” In attempting to join, students often define (or

redefine) themselves as being “worthy” to belong within the contexts and rules created by these groups. Being defined as “worthy” of that belonging by those that create the rules and customs of a specific group or social context is the perceived first step to security, acceptance, and (ultimately) belonging.

Student Government as a Contextual Factor for Belonging

One of the critical aspects of understanding belonging as it pertains to Student Government members is to understand the importance of the organization as their primary driver for belonging. Among the 43 members of Student Government that participated in this study, 38 members rated the organization as either their most important priority at Roselle (beyond schoolwork, familial, and/or personal needs) or equally prioritized Student Government with one other leadership/involvement obligation. This included 100 percent of the 14 first-year senators who perceived Student Government as an emerging priority in their first year at college. As shown in Figure 5, the prominent themes as to why Student Government members felt the organization was a top priority and helped them feel invested in Roselle University were (a) the opportunity to make positive change at the institution; (b) the opportunity to provide students’ perspective and feedback to university leaders; and (c) the opportunity to focus on a specific campus-based challenge of particular interest to specific members. David, a sophomore committee chair, said:

I feel as though I’m empowered to be able to make a difference. I’m invested in decisions made daily, as I know they all will impact students. Even the smallest of decisions have profound impacts on the daily life of students. I’m heavily invested in Roselle University as I want to ensure every student is having the best time possible.

Eduardo, a junior executive board member, remarked:

Student Government is the way that I get to feel most connected to the University by understanding more than the average undergraduate and having access to the people who make decisions for the University. I often get to see behind the curtain and really understand what is going on, as well as advocate for myself and other students when I see something that may need changing. In this way, Student Government allows me to form a much deeper connection with Roselle than I think I would have otherwise.

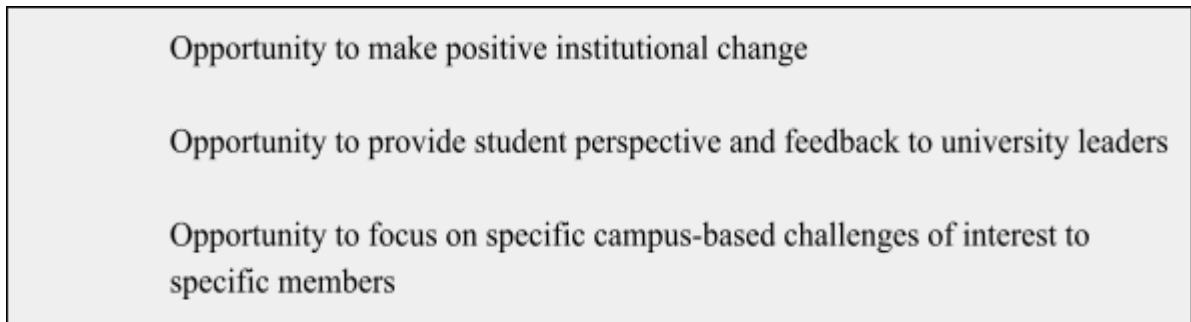
Dahlia, a junior committee chair, noted:

I definitely feel invested in Roselle because of RSG. Increasing my sense of belonging on campus has been one of my biggest goals after really struggling with not wanting to be involved in a social sorority. Through my committee, I love hearing about students that are trying to bring their passions to campus to help this cause.

The student perspectives in considering the contextual aspects of belonging align with Walton and Brady's (2017) definition of belonging as a perception of fit between *self* and *context*. The examples shared by students, which tied their passions (self) to the work of Student Government (context) in taking on specific campus challenges, included work done by RSG committees to motivate students to take a campus-wide sexual misconduct perception assessment and advocate for the hiring of more counseling professionals from historically underrepresented backgrounds. These examples comprise initiatives in which RSG members positively implemented campus change with respect to the lived experiences of members, friends, and classmates in their sub-communities. The ability to positively impact self and others increases members' feeling of purpose, thereby enhancing a sense of belonging.

Figure 5:

Reasons for Prioritizing and Feeling Investment in Student Government



Normative Congruence Within Student Government

Strayhorn (2012) espoused another important contextual factor, that is, *normative congruence*. Normative congruence suggests that students seek environments or settings aligned with their values, norms, and experiences. Reflecting on their investment in Student Government, one of the dominant themes for many members of the organization is the opportunity to interact with campus administrators in leading positive change efforts. These efforts are either campus-wide or personal in scope and stem from individual members' developmental journeys, which are often centered on experiences and opportunities before college. Most experiences before college that inform student perspectives include participation in opportunities to make positive change (such as high school student councils) or individual examples of members involved in positive efforts to implement change for personal and/or familial reasons. Normative congruence refers to reification in that students often work through aligning new living and social environments by relying on feedback from those who previously experienced change-making opportunities. One anonymous Student Government member remarked in terms of how getting involved at Roselle led them to RSG:

I look for areas where I can make differences. I also look for opportunities in which I can meet new people and form new relationships. I feel like the opportunities that

represent who I am are the ones I truly feel passionate about.

Another member stated, “[I was looking for opportunities] regarding bettering a community and making a difference in the lives of individuals. I searched for different spaces I felt that I could make an impact on.” Frank, a first-year senator, noted:

Student government gives me that sense of student council that I always loved about my high school. Before Roselle, I was so used to doing big things in high school and participating in everything, and I was so scared about how I would adapt here, but student government has become my safe haven.

The five students that did not list Student Government as their most important priority still recognized the commitment associated with involvement in the organization but had other leadership opportunities that they considered to have a heightened level of importance. Among the 43 members, 41 (95 percent) felt Student Government made them feel invested in Roselle University. Jesper, a junior committee chair, noted:

It’s a bit of a yes and no. To be honest, the type of students in student government isn’t really “my tribe,” so to speak. That being said, I feel passionately about certain aspects of student government as an institution. So yes, in the sense that I feel like I can improve my community. No, in the sense that I don’t vibe with my peers in RSG.

Jesper’s quote is an example of how some members of RSG center belonging within the organization on the meaning of implementing campus change instead of relying on relationships for social support. As Walton and Brady (2017) stated, when these cues are understood by students, belonging uncertainty can be reduced, even if the scale of relationship building has not increased.

Student Government as a Support in Periods of Transition

In Tinto's 1975 work on the necessity of positive academic and social interactions for students transitioning into college, the importance of new students to find new avenues for belonging has been well documented. Strayhorn posited that belonging is paramount when students feel that the satisfaction of their most basic needs, such as support during the transition into college, feel disrupted or uncertain. Unsurprisingly, this is true for the newest members of the Student Government in the Fall 2022 semester. Thuy, a first-year senator, remarked:

As a freshman, everything is new. Everyone here is new. My schedule is new. My environment is new. I am sure people would agree that it is frightening. But the fear can be aided by the feeling of belonging somewhere. We want to believe that we made the right decision coming here and that we will meet "our" people. But that also comes with the feeling that you are loved and seen.

Lonnie, a first-year committee member, stated:

A sense of belonging resonates with my life as I have always had to adapt to change. From a young age, I had to move countries and had a life-changing diagnosis. These two aspects of my life always made me feel like an outsider, but as I grew and developed throughout my life, I learned to adapt and acquire this sense of belonging by reaching out and getting out of my comfort zone. Coming into Roselle, I knew I wanted to make a difference in the community and make it all the more inclusive so everyone could feel the same sense of belonging I have acquired since I first arrived. Thus, I joined Student Government in hopes of doing so.

Charlotte, an upper-class committee chair, highlighted:

Roselle University was jarring when I first entered it. I had a lot of scattered friend groups but could not really understand what the campus as a whole meant. Now, I feel like I can see where communities intertwine and how small of campus this really is. Student Government genuinely allows me to combine those friend groups/interest groups and create intersections.

The Role of Social Cues in Belonging

For students transitioning into new social environments and contexts, leveraging relationships with peers and mentors that are a part of these new groups is normally not an option at the beginning of the transition. Walton and Brady (2017) posited that, for students undergoing transition, the *initial recognition* of social situations is a precondition for forming social relationships. This recognition often comes in the form of small cues or interactions between existing members of these communities and students seeking an entry in. “Such small acts can have powerful benefits for vulnerable populations,” stated Walton and Brady (2017, p. 275). As students navigate the affective and cognitive factors associated with translating the contextual factors of new communities, subtle cues and interactions play an important role in helping those students onboard and transition to behavioral factors. Walton and Brady posited that when cues are derived from somebody representing a set of interests, the personal tie will signal an opportunity to connect to the setting, thereby increasing motivation and (potentially) opportunities for belonging. Additionally, cues from more seasoned group members that signal opportunities to collaborate on a task with younger or less experienced members also have powerful affective and behavioral effects. The experience of being treated like a peer or an equal increases the likelihood that students

might persist, connect, and find a sense of belonging.

As shown in Figure 6, in relation to Student Government, the cues that students felt (or did not feel) run the gamut from (a) basic cues that stem from interactions germane to any group; (b) contextual and organizational cues specific to joining RSG; to (c) detailed cues that draw students into increased opportunities for connection and responsibility within the organization. “The cues that I had when I first joined were strictly among members,” said Jesper. In this context, Jesper added, “The experienced senators welcomed me with open arms into their community and helped me understand the process.” Walter, a first-year senator, said:

Even though I have only been to one meeting [at the time of the initial community forum], I have felt that I did receive cues of investment just by the environment and the ways everyone made an effort to speak to me and acknowledge that it was my first meeting. Being invited as soon as I joined to be a part of a community and having those conversations with others that think the same as me helped me start to have that sense of investment and how much everyone cares about trying to make the environment and presence of student government on campus a positive thing.

In the first community forum, the most common cue for Student Government members as they navigate the transition into the organization comprises the small interpersonal gestures that provide new members the perception of a welcoming environment in the first several weeks. This time in Student Government, which includes several general meetings, first-year senator orientation, committee selection and assignment, and the fall Student Government retreat, has been historically regarded as an important time for younger members to get acclimated to a new environment. These are the events in which shared time

with upper-class students manifests in initial positive non-verbal interactions, attempts to learn names and backgrounds, and initial conversations. Additional cues include finding peers with similar goals and topics of interest within the organization and upper-class student support for formalizing the goals of committee membership. Peer acclimation and upper-class support activities often commence in the committee selection process, making it an important initiative for members. Kadeem, a committee chair, remarked:

The first cue that helped me feel a sense of investment was talking to upperclassmen senators about potential ideas that could happen for my committee. I saw some of my first ideas come to life. What reaffirmed this was my meeting with key administrators right away, getting my voice heard, and seeing my ideas and thoughts get partially carried out.

As students understand Roselle's setting and their perspectives as it relates to Roselle, their specific context in the greater institutional setting defines what students seek in order to find a sense of belonging. As students settle into the institution, specifically into Student Government, they report identifying how their pre-college experiences help shape these contexts. Additionally, the social cues being neglected by upper-class members play a key role in helping students understand how to perceive Student Government as a resource for belonging, especially during a transition period, such as the first semester in college.

Figure 6:

Common Initial Cues for Belonging in Student Government

Perception of a welcoming environment within Student Government over the first few weeks of the fall semester
Finding peers with common goals and interests
Upper class student support for new senators

Core Element of Belonging 3: “Belonging as a Consequence of Mattering”

Strayhorn affirmed what Schlossberg (1989) had espoused decades earlier—mattering is the feeling that each of us has for others who depend on us, are interested in us, and are concerned for us. However, there is a critical need to go beyond surface-level interactions in living and social environments to feel that one matters to another. This is because mattering also acts as an aperture through which students filter cues and experiences (Schlossberg, 1989). Additionally, mattering can motivate individuals to seek achievement in the community to which they belong to maintain a sense of belonging. As previously discussed, Schlossberg (1989) divided mattering into the following five types: (a) Attention; (b) Importance; (c) Ego Extension; (d) Dependence; and (e) Appreciation. When positive interactions manifest into one of these five types, the interactions transcend from a positive cue to a deeper interaction that potentially triggers a sense of belonging. From the perspective of Student Government, mattering within the organization manifests in different stages throughout the organization. In the initial community forums and during life story analysis, Student Government members routinely reported their perceptions of the difference between “accepted” and “respected” within the organization. After discussing this set of insights with the review team, a specific focus was placed on accepting/respecting the

follow-up life story analysis. Upon review and analysis of these reflections, the concept of “respect” was found to bear a striking resemblance to the deepening levels necessary to transition from a positive interaction to one that truly espouses mattering, as explained by Schlossberg.

As shown in Figure 7, when specifically asked about respect within Student Government, three general themes were gleaned from first-year organization members. The first is first-year senators’ desire for validation and consideration of their ideas and perspectives by the more experienced members of the organization. The second theme comprises the desire for robust decision-making in a non-hierarchical fashion within the organization, further supporting the validation and engagement of the entire organization and not just those in leadership positions. The third theme comprises the feeling of credibility desired by first-year members within the larger group as an end product of enhanced responsibility, new perspectives, and faith in the organization’s decision-making opportunities. First-year senators perceived that being accepted within Student Government is an important first step, but value within the organization is not created until respect is given by the older members of the group. First-year senators also acknowledged that respect must be earned by contributing to committee work, volunteering for extracurricular activities, and having a positive attitude.

The themes shared by first-year senators are similar to the findings of Schlossberg’s theory and Rosenberg and McCullough’s work, specifically the transition from attention to importance as a part of the transition phase in an organization (Schlossberg, 1989). As students enter the organization, they initially believe that they are being noticed by each other and by older members. However, students quickly become concerned about deepening this

attention to a level that shows concern for what first-year senators think, see, and do. This is the line between being accepted and increased concern and attention associated with the need to acquire growing respect within the organization. An upper-class student said, “Accepted is feeling like you have a place, whereas respected is feeling like you have value. I think acceptance comes first in Student Government because, in certain ways, you must earn respect. That takes time.” Also, a first-year senator highlighted, “Accepted means you’re treated as part of the group. Respect means people value you for your work, ideas, and/or personality. I think the two are not mutually exclusive, but in RSG, acceptance generally comes first.” Another first-year senator remarked more plainly, “Accepted gets you in the door. Respected gets you in positions of power.”

Figure 7:

Acceptance Versus Respect – First-year Student Themes

Desire for validation and consideration of ideas and perspectives by the more experienced members of the organization.

Desire for decisions within the organization to be made in a non-hierarchical fashion, supporting the validation and engagement of the entire organization

Feeling of credibility, leading to enhanced responsibility, perspective and credence in decision making

As shown in Figure 8, the themes shared by upper-class members regarding acceptance versus respect are similar to the themes proposed by first-year senators. The instances where the themes diverge indicate the level of mattering expected from upper-class senators while collaborating with other members of the organization and campus administrators, and that mattering is more aligned with Ego Extension (Schlossberg, 1989). The first theme comprises upper-class students’ beliefs that being accepted in Student

Government means that the organization acknowledges and supports members of the organization, but that being respected in RSG means that the organization feels you are a valued part of the group and are actively contributing to the organization. The second theme of respect with reference to Student Government upper-class students' perspectives is that respected students can safely provide viewpoints in conversations and debates and listen and critically consider contrasting viewpoints. In case of upper-class students, these themes manifest in their expectations from new senators and the blueprint for advancing toward more prestigious positions, namely chairing a committee and potentially running for the executive board. From the perspective of mattering, upper-class students want to know that other members of Student Government and key campus leaders notice their accomplishments and/or are emotionally affected by their challenges and struggles. This emotional investment plays out in the final theme gleaned by upper-class senators, which comprises the public recognition of the higher-level (and public-facing) positions and the deepening of relationships and support within Student Government and with campus administrators.

Figure 8:

Acceptance Versus Respect – Upper-class Student Themes

Being accepted in Student Government means that the organization acknowledges and supports members within the organization. Being respected in SG means that the organization feels you are a valued part of the group and are actively contributing.

Respected members can safely provide viewpoints in conversations and debates and also possess the ability to listen and critically consider contrasting viewpoints.

Respect in Student Government is both the public recognition of being appointed to cabinet and elected to the executive board, as well as the deepening of relationships and support within Student Government and with campus administrators.

The knowledge that others are emotionally invested in the highs and lows of a student's life indicates to the student that their life is shared with others. "Feeling respected to me is an acknowledgment from others that the work I am doing matters and is helpful to Student Government," said one upper-class student as a part of a community forum. "Being accepted is something I typically associate with the early stages of RSG when student leaders clarify that it's okay to voice your true thoughts and share your identity. Respect is something that's built through consistent contribution," said a third upper-class member. Zane, a second-year Student Government committee member, stated:

What I've noticed regarding student government is that the insights of students are not only heard and appreciated but especially sought out. Where institutions can be

rigid and run by a singular or small authoritative body and not consider the input of those it presides over, I appreciate that student government is a group of students and faculty that also takes into consideration what the entirety of the campus is concerned with. It makes me feel very invested. I appreciate hearing what goes on “behind the scenes” on this campus and being part of it all.

Rich, a senior executive board member, remarked:

Being in RSG has made me feel incredibly invested in the success of the university, especially considering how much I, as an executive member, feel as though the decisions being made are a reflection of the feedback we give key university leaders. It almost feels as though the events that go on at Roselle are sometimes a reflection of what we as an exec are doing, which heightens my sense of responsibility and makes me feel like I am a part of something much bigger than myself.

Dependence is characterized by the deepening of a relationship and speaks to the desire to be needed and to need others (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Several key behaviors are influenced by knowing that you have a sense of purpose toward others and vice versa. Dependence is also a major factor in the idea that Walton and Brady (2017) posited about belonging being integral to other needs, such as a positive sense of identity, motivation, and health. One upper-class leader stated regarding dependence on RSG:

I had met some of my best friends who had literally cared for me when I was super sick with Covid or other medical challenges. They never let me face anything alone, and while we may not all be friends that are deeply connected, I have met two of the best people ever in RSG.

A second upper-class leader noted:

I expected Student Government to bring me relationships resembling those of colleagues, but I actually made a lot of close friends through the organization, which was unexpected. Ultimately, I think this was due to the fact that while we all have differences regarding our backgrounds and other involvements on campus, we are all extremely like-minded individuals in the sense that we want to be leaders on campus and have a voice in major decision-making.

Lastly, *appreciation* is the desire to have one's efforts noticed and lauded as important, whether in academics, organizations, or with friends and family (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1891). The idea that one feels appreciated often leads to feelings of positive affirmation and increased motivation levels. In the case of Student Government, this results in recognition or appreciation from senior administrators with whom the organization has contact. Dina, an upper-class committee chair, said:

I had lunch with RU's Vice-President for Student Affairs, and while she may be an administrator, she is also an incredible person to know and understand at the university. Talking to her while sharing a meal allowed us to learn more about one another, and we were able to connect. This lunch is just one example of how people I have met through Student Government have allowed me to feel a greater sense of belonging in the Roselle community.

Lori, an upper-class committee chair, noted:

Some of the cues that made me feel a sense of investment were administrators beginning to recognize my name and the work I was doing. This made me feel valued

as an individual in the RU community rather than just ‘another student.’ Additionally, the more involved I got in student government, the more I found myself being nominated for different awards and roles (for example, graduation marshal).

One of the key findings of this study is the various facets of mattering within Student Government, such as “acceptance” versus “respect” for newer members or dependence and appreciation for more experienced members. Regardless of the experience level of members in the Student Government, each member’s feelings as they search for meaning along with other members of the organization who are invested in their lives is important. The ability to recognize and reflect upon different types of and levels of mattering levels the playing field when discussing a sense of belonging. Additionally, the universal concept of mattering, coupled with the various levels at which it functions within the organization, centers all members’ feelings when wrestling with belonging uncertainty.

Core Element of Belonging 4: Belonging is a Fundamental Motive, Sufficient to Drive Human Behavior

Belonging is not only a basic human need but also a driver of human motivation and behavior. Individuals are compelled to act to fulfill this motivation or enact such behavioral patterns. While the literature on belonging reflects resources and supports that enable belonging for individuals, there are also examples of instances when the need for belonging does not propel students to accomplish pro-social or productive goals. Strayhorn (2012) used several instances such as individuals who stay in unproductive relationships or join gangs as examples of the desire to feel belonging as a driver of behavior, which is contrary to the very idea of safety and well-being.

From the perspective of college students, belonging as a motivator to drive positive behavior can also manifest for and against academic and behavioral norms. For example, numerous studies have shown the dangers that fraternities and sororities pose in terms of reduced academic standards (Bowman & Holmes, 2017) and increased likelihood of hazing and high-risk alcohol usage (Allan & Madden, 2009; Walker, Martin & Hussey, 2014; Weschler, Kuh, & Davenport, 2009). These studies also showed that, despite the dangers, fraternities and sororities are still perceived as high drivers for student belonging, affinity, and volunteerism (Bowman & Holmes, 2017; Gallup, 2014; Routon & Walker, 2014).

When students are driven to anti-academic or behavioral norms, the bonds of support, trust, and friendship in groups can also be affected. In Student Government, the most pressing themes that affect these bonds are the roles that positionality and hierarchy play in the organization. At their most basic level, student governments are complex organizations that serve various purposes and stakeholders on college campuses. These purposes include (but are not limited to) running campus-wide projects and programs; administering financial allocations for student organizations; chartering new student groups; assisting in matters of student conduct; and supporting upper-level administration in liaising with students during strategic planning and in times of crisis (Dunkel & Schuh, 1998). Additionally, student governments provide services to students, including (a) addressing student apathy; (b) examining issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion; (c) liaising with faculty leaders regarding the impact of academic and curricular changes on students; and (d) screening and selecting students for campus-wide committees (Cuyjet, 1994).

Hierarchy is an important component of most organizations, and, considering the expectations placed upon them, student governments are no exception. Hierarchy in any

organization depends on factors such as (a) expert skills; (b) a body of abstract knowledge; (c) the ability to self-govern; and (d) standards of ethics and conduct (Blau, 1968). One of the essential needs of a well-functioning student government hierarchy is an organizational structure that facilitates clear leadership, communication, and leadership development (Boatman, 1988). The importance of student organizations in belonging and leadership development of individual members has long been established. Recent research has shown that students in organizations focus less on organizational rank and more on the longevity of students in the organization. Herein, students perceived longevity in the organization to be a significant factor influencing the leadership competence of students (Glink et al., 2014).

As previously mentioned, Student Government is an organization that utilizes a hierarchical structure. This hierarchy includes the top-down structure derived from an executive board/committee chair/committee structure. The role of hierarchy within the Student Government at Roselle University became a major reflection point for the organization's members during the collaborative ethnographic process. As a part of the second community forum, hierarchy within Student Government was frequently mentioned by first-year and upper-class students as a factor that inhibits investment and, ultimately, belonging in the organization. The submitted examples included (a) a lack of leadership positions beyond the cabinet and the executive board; (b) a disconnect between the committee chairs and their committees; and (c) a lack of delegation and assignment of responsibilities beyond the committee chairs. While these examples are common within hierarchical organizations, the reflections from some organization members associated these challenges with their lack of belonging. One anonymous upper-class student said, "When students feel that they have to get in with a certain crowd to get higher up in student

government. This causes people to lose passion and therefore investment.” Another anonymous upper-class student noted, “When senators do not take different opportunities as they arise. Sometimes missing one opportunity means new opportunities aren’t presented to you. I think this structure needs to change.” A third upper-class student also highlighted:

I think that committees are a big part of this. It is important that people feel passionate about their committee’s work, and that may be hard for some first-year students if they end up in a different committee than they would have preferred.

Once this feedback was processed with the review team, the decision was made to focus the life story analysis on the role of hierarchy as it impacts the sense of belonging for Student Government members. As shown in Figure 9, organization members described elements of hierarchy that they felt contributed to successful organizations. Some common examples of answers included (a) strengthening the organization leadership and structure; (b) keeping the organization focused and on task; (c) providing mentoring and knowledge to younger members; and (d) ensuring role clarity for members. Dina remarked:

Hierarchy is when work and the layout of the organization fall within the hands of those who have previous experience within the organization and can provide useful insight. Typically, they are upperclassmen, and I think this is beneficial because rather than using their power for their good, hierarchy can help delegate work, mentor younger and newer members, and serve as a resource.

Frank noted:

As far as other extracurriculars that I have been a part of, hierarchies are less stringently enforced. The president does have more power, but within groups that I’ve

seen, they function more like a first among equals. I feel like for more leisurely clubs, this structure works; however, for more serious ones, an executive capable of making independent and decisive decisions is necessary.

Barry, a first-year senator, stated:

I understand being able to hear everyone's voices, but there is a line that you simply cannot move past if there is no hierarchy. The guidance, the structure, the voice to hone into, and the collaborative energy that remains all contribute to leading a successful group.

The members were also asked about the role of hierarchy in enhancing or hindering (a) relationships with key stakeholders; (b) helping members find purpose in the organization; (c) enhancing or hindering peer interactions; and (d) enhancing or hindering work on campus issues and challenges. The themes for each question were as follows:

Enhancing or hindering peer interactions

Members feel that hierarchy within Student Government (a) creates enhanced interactions between senators and the executive board and committee members; (b) matches senators with committees and other senators that share similar passions; and (c) enforces responsible use of power over peers within the organization.

Challenges with the hierarchy in terms of peer interactions include (a) role confusion when newer members feel like they are on the outside in terms of decision-making and (b) disconnect and isolation among more experienced members when prioritizing and agenda setting seems to follow an overly "top down" approach. Coupled with the pre-existing feelings that younger members struggle to find "respect," this top-down style can result in

belonging uncertainty. A first-year senator, Patrick, said:

I believe that the hierarchy within Student Government does enhance the relationship but also hurts it. I think that we missed the opportunity to bond honestly between the upper hierarchy and the rest of the first years. Now it kinda feels like there is a disconnect between the members. Faculty and staff sometimes only see the people in the higher parts of the hierarchy because they are seen as the face of the organization. Although it is clearly communicated to the rest of the council, the relationship [with faculty and staff] is not built for the members.

Some members of the organization outlined the pros and cons of the impact of hierarchy on relationships in the organization. Seth, an upper-class committee chair, remarked:

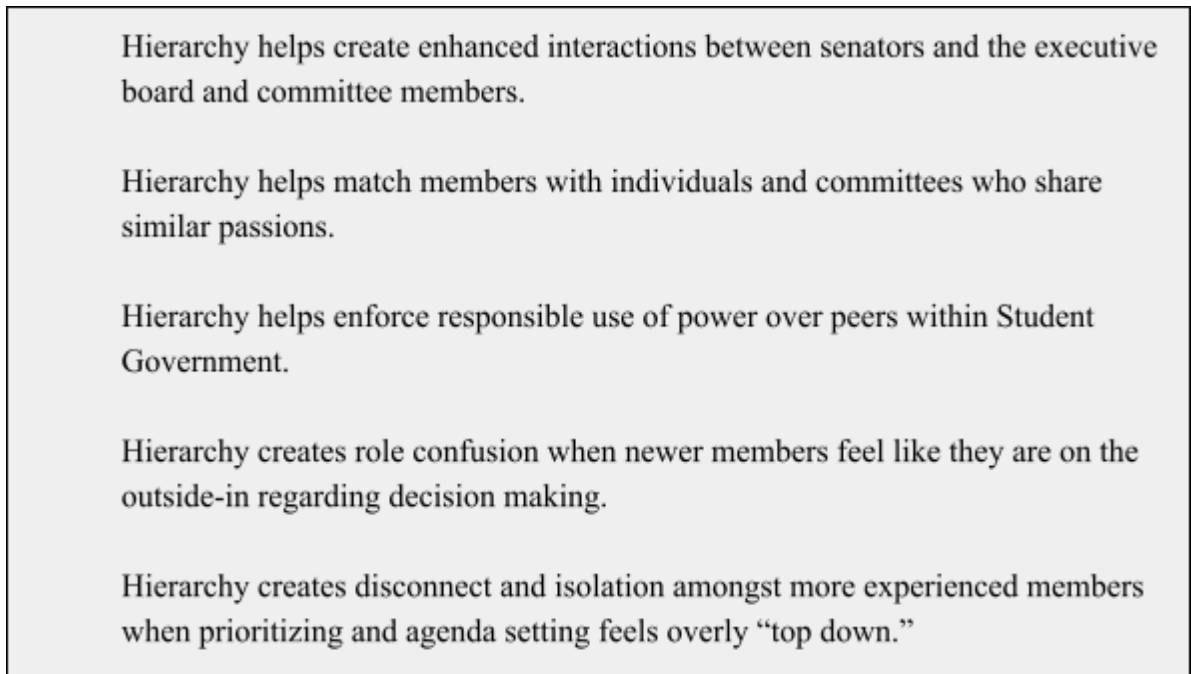
[Hierarchy] allows members to be as involved as they want if they want to be involved and move up. It makes student government more organized, and it streamlines points of contact between students and faculty and staff so that they are not overwhelmed. However, [hierarchy] consolidates power among a few people, often making students feel excluded or out of “the club.”

Liyana, an upper-class committee chair, noted:

Student government wouldn't be able to function without hierarchy. There are members that have more information about topics but have proven they can handle and are responsible enough to react to and resolve issues that pertain to the information. The way I see hierarchy is that if you have proven yourself that you can handle the responsibilities of your job, you can move up the hierarchy.

Figure 9:

Impact of Hierarchy on Student Government Peer Interactions



Enhancing or hindering relationships with key stakeholders

One of the Student Government’s most pressing challenges is liaising with key faculty and staff members. Members of the executive board and cabinet regularly meet with the Roselle University president, provost, deans of the academic schools, and vice presidents for student affairs, diversity, equity and inclusion, and institutional advancement. As shown in Figure 10, members of the organization felt that the hierarchy within Student Government (a) enhances the ability of key leaders to understand RSG priorities; (b) enhances the efficient running of meetings and communicating with members; (c) improves relationship building with upper-class students, faculty, and staff. Some members did note that hierarchy within the organization can render interactions with the general student body difficult. The committee chair, Lorenzo, stated:

I think the hierarchy within RSG enhances the relationships because, at first, being a

senator, you are able to learn the ropes from higher-ups. Then you move into the cabinet and build closer relationships with certain faculty and students. Then, you can move up into exec, which further extends these connections. There is a clear progression that allows you to build more relationships.

A first-year senator, Barbara, remarked:

Hierarchy can help and hinder. Faculty and staff sometimes only see the people in the higher parts of the hierarchy because they are seen as the face of the organization. Although it is clearly communicated to the rest of the council, the relationship is not built for the [general] members.

Figure 10:

Impact of Student Government Hierarchy on Stakeholder Relationship Building

Hierarchy enhances the ability for faculty and staff to understand Student Government priorities.

Hierarchy enhances efficient running of meetings and communicating with members.

Hierarchy enhances relationship building with upper class students, faculty and staff.

Helping members find purpose within the organization

As shown in Figure 11, members felt that the hierarchy within Student Government; (a) enhances purpose and clarity of roles; (b) enhances the commencement of projects and implementation of legislation aligned with the priorities of the executive board and the passions of the members; and (c) outlines clear lines of communication when navigating the task and purpose of projects and legislation. This area was also met with several questions

and challenges from the organization's members. The major challenge that members of the organization reflected upon is the process of younger senators working through relationship building within the committee structure during their formative first year in the organization.

A second-year senator, Steven, noted:

I think it hinders me from finding purpose, as sometimes there is a limit on how much I can communicate. However, later it will enhance the purpose I have as I will eventually be able to lead projects and connect with faculty and staff without having to go through as many hoops.

More experienced leaders in Student Government affirmed the perspectives of younger members. Umar stated:

During your first year, this [hierarchy] may hinder you from finding purpose because you may feel more on the outside of the inner circle of student government. You are less so a part of the many meetings and decision-making that occur between exec and cabinet. However, if you are in the cabinet or exec, you are a part of that, so it can help you find purpose.

A committee chair, Stephanie, stated:

I believe that it may be difficult to determine your purpose within student government when you have a line of succession to which you must report. However, I think the relationships you form with the executive board and co-chairs create incredible opportunities and points for contact when you determine your place within Student Government. Even if you do not realize it, these leaders with bigger roles than you will serve as incredible mentors and improve your purpose as you learn what that is.

Sometimes hierarchy neglects committee-to-committee interaction, which can halt the transfer of new ideas, specifically from senators. If we took more time to bring senators' voices, new, important, and creative ideas would be shared more frequently.

Figure 11:

Impact of Student Government Hierarchy on Finding Purpose

Hierarchy enhances purpose and clarity of roles

Hierarchy enhances projects and legislation that are in line with the both the priorities of the executive board and the passions of the members

Hierarchy helps set clear lines of communication when navigating the task and purpose of projects and legislation.

Impact of Student Government Hierarchy Regarding Work on Campus Issues

As shown in Figure 12, the clarity based on feedback that Student Government's hierarchy helps senators increase interactions with each other bears out in how the Executive Board and Cabinet collaborate to assist members of the organization in finding their purpose. Student Government members believe that the hierarchy clarifies roles and responsibilities, enabling members to focus on projects and initiatives for which they can find a purpose. The hierarchy establishes clear lines of communication, helps leaders' potential to emerge in formal and informal settings, and enables younger members to transition from "acceptance" to "respect." Challenges within the hierarchy in terms of working on campus issues and challenges include role confusion for members not on the executive board and the delay that is sometimes associated with clarifying and prioritizing constituent concerns that are transformed into workable initiatives. Lori affirmed this point:

The co-chair/committee member relationship is the most impactful aspect of the

hierarchy in RSG. Members often interact most directly, in a hierarchical manner, with their co-chairs. Hierarchy also makes student government committee members feel the most disconnected from Exec members. Decisions and information constantly coming in a top-down fashion make newer members feel not included in decision-making and disconnected from Exec as people/friends.

Student Government has been involved in several campus-based challenges over the past several years that speak to the importance of hierarchy in helping senators transform theirs and others' thoughts, actions, and perceptions into tangible actions. This work toward action, added by a clear hierarchical structure, increased clarity regarding the work being done by RSG, resulting in increased belonging. For example, in the 2021–22 academic year, when grappling with how to increase student awareness regarding sexual violence prevention on campus, a grassroots Student Government effort led by the executive board and upper-class students resulted in the formation of a standing committee to work on assessment, education, and stakeholder collaboration on the topic. Subsequently, the thoughts and feelings of individual students led to organized efforts, through this committee, to promote a campus-wide assessment on the topic, which was completed by over a third of the undergraduate population. Younger students that participated in this assessment effort were eventually elevated to leadership positions on this committee to continue educational efforts in 2022–23. At this point, the committee has become a permanent fixture of Student Government. One of the members of this committee remarked:

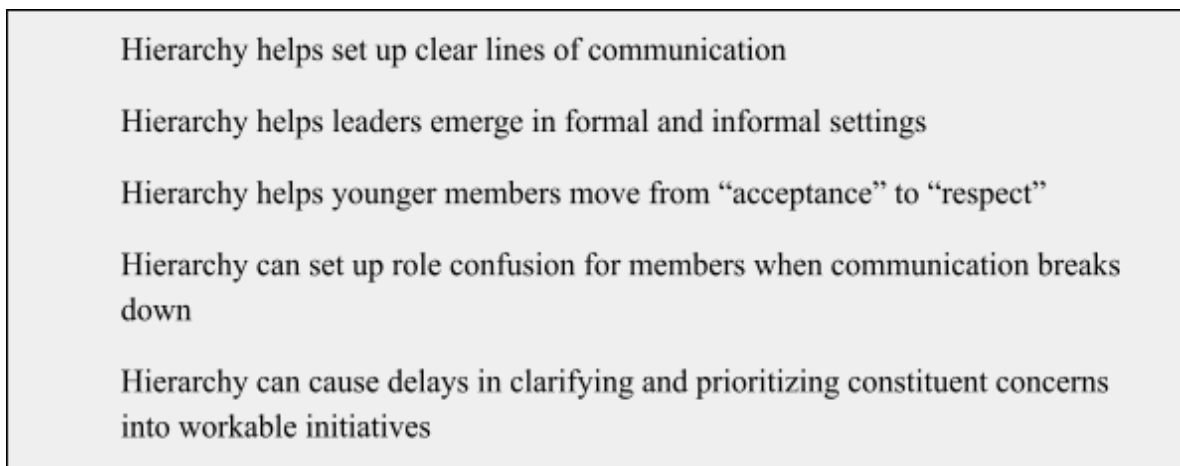
I definitely think that the hierarchy in RSG allows students to orient themselves and find a purpose within this organization...the structure of RSG allows students to have a role model and work up to being in that higher position. Their actions or initiatives

are likely geared toward one day stepping up into that Executive or Cabinet position. It gives younger/newer Senators something to look forward to throughout their time in RSG.

Upon final reflection on the findings of this study, the role of hierarchy within Student Government was the most resonating finding with members of the organization. Members of RSG felt that aspects of hierarchy, such as the chain of command and meeting structure, are well established and effective. Furthermore, the members felt that hierarchy increases the organization's efficiency, establishes legitimacy, and makes navigating the organization easier for new members. It was also agreed that the organization's structure has improved in terms of how first-year and upper-class students with less defined roles are utilized. Additionally, disconnect within the hierarchy is often perceived as a cue that inhibits belonging, leading to the need for additional work to support members with such misperceptions.

Figure 12:

Impact of Student Government Hierarchy Regarding Work on Campus Issues



Core Element of Belonging 5: “Belonging Produces Positive Outcomes”

The connections, affiliations, and networks that students build to find belonging are some of the most important antecedents to positive and/or pro-social outcomes such as engagement, achievement, well-being, happiness, and optimal functioning (Walton & Brady, 2017). Strayhorn (2012, p. 22) espoused that the bonds students make as a part of their campus experience should be considered “stuck to” each other in a way that is impossible to break away from. Strayhorn clarified that, as research on belonging continues to evolve, positive outcomes are not based on “fitting in” (Strayhorn, 2022) to others’ norms or beliefs but rather on positively correlated engagement. This includes socialization with peers, faculty, and staff inside and outside formal academic and involvement opportunities (Strayhorn, 2012). A more specific breakdown of socialization includes (a) connecting with others who share interests, values, and commitments; (b) becoming familiar with the campus environment; (c) affirming individual identity, interests, and values; and (d) feeling that one matters and that others depend on them (Strayhorn, 2012). In this context, Walton and Brady (2017) posited that belonging functions as a psychological hub and facilitates outcomes as diverse and important as motivation and achievement to health and well-being.

As shown in Figure 13, various themes strongly emerged when reflecting on the positive outcomes engendered due to participation in Student Government. The most prominent theme was the belief that a focus on belonging, as it pertains to experience level and hierarchy within the organization, pays off recognition of the stages of belonging navigated by the newest members of the organization. One cabinet member said:

[There is growth] in terms of interpersonal relationships and asking younger members to work on things they care about. Specifically, within the cabinet, we have had

conversations that made us rethink our role with the first-year students and how discussion, specifically outside of the cabinet, is crucial to bettering RSG.

A second theme is a connection between the discussion of belonging as a positive effect and its association with specific behavioral work done within the organization to get more senators involved in its culture. A third-year senator noted:

The initiative to have younger senators within the committee speak more has been a way to increase a sense of belonging and allow for many more first-year students to become integrated. I've noticed new senators participate more frequently than in the past, which will only increase and promote the greater involvement of incoming members.

"I voiced a concern [in a Student Government general meeting] which was shot down, but two committee members spoke up and defended what I said. It was awesome. I felt supported," stated a first-year senator. An upper-class member stated, "I have seen more mentorship and relationship building. I feel more connected and have more conversations that are honest and built on trust that was not happening earlier."

A third prominent theme of the reflection is how the Student Government has been specifically working to restructure the hierarchy within the organization to ensure increased connection among more group members. In this context, committee chair noted:

Pairing chairs with exec members has really helped my committee feel better about the state of our work and made us feel less criticized. The open communication has been phenomenal. Collaboration outside my committee will reflect largely on the impact of senators' sense of well-being. This allows us to meet new friends that have

both similar and different perspectives than us. Belonging is a value that we have continued to discuss, and we have found new ways to involve more people.

A fourth theme pertained to how continuous discussions regarding belonging within the group resulted in an increased focus on connection and mattering, even when not a formal part of the organization. A committee member remarked:

Simply being more aware of the idea of a sense of belonging has been critical for changes to occur, such as how we treat each other in the ways in which we have engaged in dialogue. For example, in committee meetings, there is more intentionality in the ways in which we converse and elaborate on topics.

Upon reflection on the final community forum and life story analysis, it can be perceived that the concentration on belonging within the organization leads to positive change in moving belonging from affective and cognitive domains to behavioral domains. The endeavor of naming challenges such as understanding how to utilize the hierarchical nature of RSG to enhance belonging and reconsidering the role of new members can route a positive recursive nature into organizational culture.

Figure 13:

Positive Emergent Organizational Outcomes

Upper class recognition of the stages of belonging for new SG members.

Cognitive understanding of belonging in SG is leading to behavioral change by the organization.

Hierarchy is being addressed with an emphasis on belonging.

A cycle of continuous discussion around belonging is beginning to emerge in SG.

Core Element of Belonging 6: “Social Identities Intersect and Affect Belonging”

While belonging is a universal need that affects all college students, different students have diverse needs. These different needs are quite often predicated on diverse social identities. As shared previously (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, Hurtado, et al., 2015; Museus, 2014), students from underrepresented or minoritized backgrounds must have their experiences centered on additional curricular and co-curricular support peers and mentors that understand their specific cultural backgrounds and needs. Strayhorn (2012, 2022) affirmed this point and indicated that the processes associated with finding a sense of belonging that supports unique identities is a “dynamic, synergistic and three-dimensional process” (2012, p. 21). Herein, Walton and Brady (2017) discussed the concept of *recursion*, which states that the cues that students internalize about their belonging status within a group or social setting often become self-fulfilling prophecies. Students hailing from minoritized identities face the most significant and complicated challenges when those cues are issued at a PWI. Implicit bias, discrimination, or lack of attention to the needs of minoritized students can be a result of such challenges.

As Student Government members broke down and reflected on their Sense of Belonging, there were several instances where social identity, as a precursor for belonging, was brought forward as a salient theme. One senator noted:

I feel as though coming from a minority (identity) at a predominantly white institution, the feelings of belonging or inclusion are very important. Imagine playing a game in gym class, and they have two team captains picking players for their team, and you don't get picked. You would feel hurt and left out, would you not? I feel it is important to allow everyone to feel equally appreciated for a comfortable and

enjoyable space. I agree that everyone is human, and I feel everyone has a voice that should be heard, regardless of skin color, gender, or ethnicity.

Another senator said, “The concept of being accepted is very important to me, just being a minority at a predominantly white institution trying to adjust to not always fitting in, just feeling accepted helps me to cope with that.”

While data in initial community forums and life story analyses during the fall semester was limited in terms of data on the impact of social identity in Student Government, further discussion with the organization regarding the study’s findings opened up new avenues to contemplate the topic. When provided along with recommendations to propel the organization forward regarding belonging, the idea of a culturally relevant organization was one of the most prominent themes. Museus (2014) defined *cultural relevance* as the degree to which learning environments are relevant to cultural backgrounds and identities. This includes understanding the identities of individual members of the organization and the intersectional nature of such identities. Additionally, as a culturally relevant organization, members can strive to assist students in finding support and representation for their identities as students from historically underrepresented backgrounds. During the discussion, Student Government members acknowledged the imbalance in perspectives in a majority-white organization at a PWI. Bailey, a third-year committee chair, said:

I think that working toward being a culturally relevant organization is, without a doubt, the most important recommendation. RSG has struggled in the past with this, and I think that if we were able to make RSG culturally relevant that it would alter the internal and external operations of the organization.

Umar, a first-year senator, noted:

With being one of the few black individuals in student government, the organization being culturally relevant is very important to me. At times it can feel as though I'm not quite seen or understood when it comes to issues spoken or done in sg. as well as always being me if the few individuals to always speak out regarding issues occurring with individuals of color (black students) can get tiring and exhausting.

While not enough data was generated to create themes, members within Student Government perceive Sense of Belonging as the need to be associated with the initiatives of centering the experiences of students hailing from underrepresented populations within the organization. Both Hurtado and Museus support Strayhorn's assertion that campus cultures that positively impact minoritized students' experiences and outcomes will increase their sense of belonging within the culture (or, in this case, organization).

Core Element of Belonging 7: Belonging must be Satisfied Continually and Likely Changes as Circumstances, Conditions, and Contexts Change

Belonging can be satisfied by conditions and support that engender feelings of value, respect, and appreciation. Belonging is also critical at key times of transition for college students. The contexts and conditions in which students find themselves in college are dynamic. When contexts and conditions change, students may find their sense of belonging disrupted or altered and need to adjust to the new contexts and conditions. Disrupted belonging can have negative consequences if students do not engage in opportunities or interventions to enhance a sense of belonging. This disengagement, in turn, can affect loneliness, disengagement, or diminished interest in activities (Strayhorn, 2012).

One main focus for Student Government moving forward must be the continued

consideration of upper-class students as it pertains to the sense of belonging to the organization. Student Government is inherently an organization that includes different viewpoints, as any college campus comprises sub-communities with differing perspectives. Mostly, the focus is placed on visible members of the organizational hierarchy (Executive Board, Committee Chairs, and first-year students). Upper-class students feel the same effects of marginalization and recursion. In this context, one upper-class committee member noted, “I feel like for the majority of students, normal committee members, it [hierarchy] hinders finding purpose as any meaningful action or work is done by either exec or committee chairs.”

David stated:

Within student government, I firmly believe that hierarchy in its current state hinders relationship building and peer interactions. I believe newer members who already struggle to fit in generally and other members without stated leadership roles or a sense of purpose are inherently left outside of decision-making and friendship-building due to the organization’s more firm hierarchical structure that runs in a top-down style.

Discussion

Perhaps the most resonant realization of this study is the universal nature of the impact of affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of belonging on Student Government members. As students grapple with ever-changing contextual factors, they have to constantly unpack their thoughts and feelings within the scope of those contexts and, from there, make decisions on the balance between belonging and belonging uncertainty. These decisions, in turn, lead to behavioral decisions regarding how students react to the knowledge

they have processed and learned. Using Student Government as a lens for these dimensions, the themes listed in chapter four prove that every student grapples with affective, cognitive, and behavioral challenges, regardless of position or experience within the institution or the organization.

With reference to the cognitive and affective dimensions, the idea of grappling with belonging uncertainty and processing various external cues to determine one's feeling about initial acceptance runs the gamut from a first-year student at their first Student Government meeting to an executive board member meeting with members of the university's cabinet for the first time. Navigating a new group's diverse customs and nuances involves deciphering unwritten rules and contexts and interpreting how they are manifested cues. Working through the initial recognition of cues toward acceptance—from an opening conversation during a student's first committee meeting to an initial ask for opinions from a senior member of the administration—students have to understand their environments, compare them to their values and experiences, and apply their perspectives in this world.

From the behavioral perspective, translating thoughts and behaviors into action is what, in Student Government's terms, leads to the transition from "acceptance" to "respect." The theorists discussed in the study referred to this process as advancement into behaviors, leading to the discovery of a sense of belonging. Student Government members that have found an environment aligned with their norms and expectations and navigated contexts and cues perceive behaviors that signal a sense of belonging in several ways. For some students, it involves engaging in learning to understand and work within the hierarchy of Student Government to successfully complete a project that they are passionate about. For others, it encapsulates the ability to provide feedback to campus leaders and influence university-wide

practices. Practitioners face challenges in helping students recognize how thoughts and feelings can positively influence actions. Schlossberg (1989) posited that many positive interactions lead to belonging. Helping students understand and work toward these interactions is key, and helping students articulate how successfully working through interaction is a gateway to deeper meaning.

The most resonant example of how thoughts, feelings, and actions play out in Student Government is the juxtaposition of formal and informal interactions and the impact of these interactions on belonging. While the organization reports understanding the formal need for hierarchy within Student Government, there is also an undercurrent of desire for decisions to be made more informally to avoid gaps and/or delays in communication. In the case of younger members, delays in information sharing due to hierarchical decisions are often perceived as cues that inhibit their feelings of being bonded to the organization. These cues could manifest in feelings that input is being rejected or not heard, as such inputs are often filtered up through committee chairs and shared and processed by the cabinet and executive board at levels that younger students are not a part of. If misperceived by a younger member and not comprehensively explained by a committee chair, a normal aspect of hierarchy can quickly become a cue that fosters belonging uncertainty. This harkens back to Schlossberg's work on attention and importance. Members of the Student Government, still transitioning from acceptance to respect, could misperceive hierarchical delays as a lack of caring and support. Having upper-class support to translate and process these cues with younger members is critical to propel the recursive nature of belonging trends toward a positive, affirming experience. This, in turn, will help members continue to buy in and manifest positive thoughts and feelings into continued action on behalf of the Student Government.

For more experienced members of the organization, maladaptive hierarchy impacts students' comprehensive decision-making within the organization and collaboration with and exposure to key decision-makers external to the organization. It is important to maintain transparency and attention with this level of student government to ensure that members feel a level of appreciation, recognition, and a sense of accomplishment for their work with external stakeholders. Additionally, transparency promotes the perception that decisions are being made with the organization's inputs in mind, as opposed to a "top-down" style that privileges formal leaders inappropriately. With older and younger members of the organization, prioritizing belonging in the hierarchy of student government bolsters not only members' sense of purpose but also strengthens relationships inside Student Government, fostering dependence on and appreciation toward each other.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, CONCLUSIONS

Role as a Researcher and Administrator

In critiquing student success frameworks (including many referenced in this document) Strayhorn (2022) references Astin (1993) in reminding us of a flaw that many prominent frameworks “place undue burden and responsibility on the student to get involved, get engaged, or seek help to negotiate their way to and through college” (pg 23). A common mistake in student affairs work is an overreliance on the expectation that students have the time, resources and energy to make widespread change on their own. Additionally, as Strayhorn (2022) reminds us, students’ experiences are complicated, intersectional, and rarely without challenge or conflict. This chapter provides implications and recommendations for further research. Most important, it is an attempt to assist student governments with considering recommendations to ensure that belonging is always at the forefront of organizational efforts.

Higher education can downplay the critical role that institutions and institutional actors can play in facilitating successful navigation of an unknown campus (Strayhorn, 2022). When revisiting D’Andrade’s (1992) definition of culture, cultural markers can be identified as elements that are recognized as special by sub-groups and can be passed down to younger members. Immersion reminds us that a significant amount of time must be spent observing, studying, and understanding settings, structures, and people that are a part of that culture. Strayhorn (2022) affirmed this fact by positing that culture is also enacted through behaviors. Varying behavioral patterns comprise traditions in higher education. Many traditions, such as first-year orientation and convocation, are centered on transitions. The

initiatives of noting and recognizing these transitions is a key facet of any campus community. These endeavors help students undergoing the transition and those observing and supporting them. Strayhorn referred to such support systems as cultural navigators. Many such cultural navigators include individuals that Student Government members cite to act as supports before coming to college, namely parents, friends, coaches/teachers, and mentors. During their time in college, they also include academic advisors, faculty, staff, campus administrators, and other students. These additional navigators are immersed in the culture and context of the campus community, especially in the context of transitions. The implications and recommendations in this chapter provide assistance in such forms of navigation.

Ritualizing Recommendations

When considering recommendations, implications and next steps for student governments in navigating belonging for their members, it is imperative to note that belonging interventions that can be rooted in the organizational systems. The knowledge of how many of the recommendations and implications are immersed in challenges stemming from tradition indicates an immediate intervention—a discussion of the recommendations’ ritualization. Harkening back to Schlossberg’s (1989) transition theory, rituals help people make sense of the contradiction and paradox of many transitions. Strayhorn affirmed Crotty’s (1998) view on reification—there is no single truth, and individuals bring their identities, experiences, and assumptions into a new community. Rituals effectively help students navigate their socially constructed worlds. As Schlossberg (1984) noted, rituals for transitions in student organizations are rare and effectively clarify confusing and intimidating

situations. Joining a student organization can naturally evoke feelings of marginality. It takes time for students to feel central to the group, and cultural navigators should strive to invoke a spirit of mattering. Effective rooting of recommendations reflects D'Andrade's (1992) assertion that when culture is perceived as a guidepost, members of that culture are more motivated to pass this guidepost on to younger members of the organization to safeguard permanency.

Recommendations for Student Government

When considering interventions that can be ritualized to enhance members' sense of belonging in Student Government, RSG's recommendations are framed using questions posed by Walton and Brady (2017). Leveraging these questions to frame recommendations helps consider the social context of Student Government and enables members of the organization to consider how they can define their identities in such contexts. The fit between a member and their setting is key in helping Student Government articulate its vision for how the organization plans to safeguard members' sense of belonging at the forefront of the organization and encourage members to find themselves included in that vision.

Question One: Does Anybody Here Notice Me?

Even before belonging can be considered a precondition to higher-order needs, recognizing and acknowledging is widely regarded as a precondition for finding belonging (Walton & Brady, 2017). As discussed earlier, providing visible social cues for members seeking connection is one of the most important early interventions. With respect to Student Government, several immediate recommendations from the community forum three directly

segue into this recommendation.

The first recommendation is to create a plan to better use Student Government's office and lounge space to connect members. The Student Government space currently comprises one large, open lounge area with five adjoining offices for the executive board members. This space is located on the main floor of the university's student center and considered a high-traffic area. Despite these advantages, the use of space was mentioned as one of the most prominent themes to better help Student Government members establish connections. An open space accessible to all members facilitates continued opportunities to build on the contextual cues that RSG members reflected on, such as initial conversations between members about backgrounds, reasons behind attending Roselle University, and initial interest in specific aspects of Student Government. Community forum three mentioned initiatives that Student Government launched in the Fall 2023 semester, which helped build upon these initial cues. Examples include one-on-one "coffee chats" between members, group dinners immediately before RSG meetings, and informal dialogue and brainstorming opportunities that allow members to collaborate across committees. These opportunities should be formalized and conducted in the Student Government lounge.

Question Two: Are There People Here With Whom I Can Connect?

Bringing members together to use the Student Government lounge space initiates the *mere belonging* process (Walton & Brady, 2017) and facilitates minor cues to create social connections. These social connections can manifest into broader connections to enhance members' motivation and understanding of the organization's purpose.

The second recommendation concerns coffee chats, group dinners, dialogue, and brainstorming opportunities. These three opportunities, widely acknowledged by senators as

potential opportunities to systemize conduits for connection, need to be formalized. Based on both community forum feedback and the use of various belonging and transition frameworks, topics could include (a) discussing backgrounds and pre-college experiences and personality styles of Student Government members; (b) facilitating better understanding of the formal and informal rules of Roselle University; (c) discussing roles, responsibilities, and “a day in the life” of senators, committee chairs, and executive board members; (d) posing questions and offering answers about the history and reasoning behind the Student Government’s hierarchical and policy decisions; and (e) analyzing campus opportunities and challenges that are aligned with the purpose of Student Government and individual members. The formalization of coffee chairs, community dinners, and dialogue/brainstorming opportunities also allow members of the organization with different communication, personality, and processing styles to take advantage of opportunities that best fit who they are. Additionally, the community-wide topics at these events cultivate tasks and projects that bring students with a shared sense of purpose and intrinsic motivation together. As a part of the third community forum, one of the senators said, “I think collaboration outside of my committee would impact a senator’s sense of belonging. This allows us to meet new friends with similar and different perspectives.”

Question Three: Do People Here Value (and Like) Me?

Even as opportunities are facilitated and ritualized to allow Student Government members to better connect and understand each other, the challenges faced by first-generation, economically disadvantaged students who hail from minoritized identities can create conditions that foster social identity threats, leading to belonging uncertainty. This finding also applies to first-year senators who are new to the institution and do not yet

understand the unwritten rules and customs associated with a new community. With the aid of cultural navigators (such as their staff advisors), Student Government needs to consider ways to maintain a well-intentioned set of initiatives by unintentionally forcing students to experience bias or discrimination. Several recommendations for Student Government must be considered to prevent such occurrences.

The first recommendation is the use of coffee chats and community dinners at the beginning of each semester to provide storytelling opportunities for upper-class students to share struggles, strategies, and resources to help first-year senators navigate these challenges. These stories can include (a) discussions about academic and transition resources; (b) affinity opportunities and examination of unwritten rules for historically disadvantaged students; and (c) strategies for getting started in Student Government and normalizing the first year as a senator.

A final recommendation regarding the interaction opportunities is for Student Government to focus on topics that students feel are most likely to adversely impact their sense of belonging to the organization. Based on the reflections shared in the community forums and life story analysis, emphasis should be placed on two areas—first-year senators and upper-class senators that are not in a committee chair or executive board position. The focus could be directed toward (a) understanding Student Government hierarchy and how to navigate it; (b) working with your committee chair to maximize the impact of your role; (c) working successfully on cross-committee projects; and (d) building connections with key student leaders and administrators.

Question Four: Is This a Setting in Which I Want to Belong?

Often, students are tasked with deciding whether the common challenges they must

navigate in a specific setting are the ones that they feel are worth the human capital to find purpose, motivation, and belonging. As a part of understanding and working through a setting, students need to be made aware of these challenges to normalize the challenges and help students understand if this is something they want to take on. In the case of Student Government, the more pressing challenge is the “accepted versus respected” narrative that has permeated the organization’s culture. As a part of this narrative, additional time must be spent on the perspective of many members that most work and opportunities must be assigned to the committee chairs and the executive board.

It is recommended the organization must work by leveraging the Social Change Model of Leadership Development to restructure the narrative of positional leadership in Student Government. The Social Change Model, “a purposeful, collaborative, values-based process that results in positive social change,” (Komives & Wagner, 2009, p. xii) was designed to generate awareness about reciprocal relationships, shared responsibility, and mutual development of leaders in an organizational setting (Dugan, 2017). The most important aspect of the social change model is the emphasis on leadership as a process rather than a position. The model asserts that leadership is based on a combination of meaning-making centered on life experiences and training and development opportunities. Leadership is a learnable skill, which is not solely based on being a formal leader in an organization. Herein, a sustained focus on leadership throughout the organization will help members focus on hierarchy more as a part of organizational management and less as a finite entryway to leadership.

Question Five: Can I Be More Than a Stereotype Here?

One of the areas that was not adequately addressed in this study is the impact of

Student Government on members with historically underrepresented identities. As Student Government considers the next steps in understanding the concept of belonging to members in the organization and addressing the themes gleaned within this study, comprehensive work needs to be undertaken by the organization to ensure recursion in the organization is not the result of marginalization based on identity. In the short term, Walton and Brady (2017) recommended value affirmation opportunities to ensure that students potentially feel concerned about identifying threats and find commonalities with other students in the organization. A *self-affirmation activity* (Cohen & Sherman, 2014), it allows students to take what Walton and Brady (2017, p. 284) refer to as a “psychological time-out” and reflect on their general sense of self. Additionally, self-affirmation activities allow students to glean like-minded values from other students, which is especially important in settings that involve transition or navigation through new rules and contexts. This approach allows students to open up, express who they are in a new setting, and signal to others that recursion does not have to be a self-defining threat (Critcher & Dunning, 2015).

In order for Student Government to become an organization that supports belonging for all students with historically underrepresented identities present at Roselle, consideration needs to be given to what steps need to be taken to make the organization what Museus (2014) referred to as culturally relevant. No themes emerged under Strayhorn’s Core Element of Belonging Six, “Social Identities Intersect and Affect Belonging,” as the inputs from the group were inadequate to create tangible themes. Some students provided narratives regarding visible underrepresented identity; however, the majority of students did not provide insights. On the one hand, a limitation of this study was the fact that the time frame for Collaborative Ethnography did not lend itself to a deep dive into all facets of Strayhorn’s

model. Herein, it is telling that the majority of students in a predominately white organization did not perceive identity markers in their life story with respect to belonging. Student Government should focus on three aspects of Museus's model—first, creating sustained opportunities for Student Government to participate in activities that foster meaningful cultural engagement with peers from diverse and inclusive backgrounds; and second, as a part of mentoring and value identification activities, students should be able to increase engagement with faculty, staff, and students who understand diverse backgrounds and experiences. This approach could comprise a collaborative process including faculty, staff, and students from advocacy centers and student organizations that support identity groups. Finally, the organization can collaborate with such centers and groups to increase representation and retention of Student Government members from diverse identity groups.

Question Six: Are People Like Me Incompatible with this Setting or Behavior?

In any group setting, there is a recognition of what behavior is acceptable within the organization. This recognition helps identify and call out misperceptions regarding the behaviors that may be normalized affectively and cognitively but not behaviorally. In the case of Student Government, as it pertains to a sense of belonging, the most obvious example of this instance can be derived from the research in terms of the role of hierarchy within the organization. While there was adequate reflection in the initial community forums to warrant additional research on how hierarchical behaviors potentially hinder an organization's growth, what came through was that, beyond the actual structures within Student Government, members' interpretation and understanding of those hierarchies posed challenges. As a part of Student Government member development programming, a formalized mentoring program for first-year and upper-class students could be instrumental

in breaking down the perception of formal leadership roles. Mentoring of Student Government members occurs when the mentor and the mentee are in a period of transition, regardless of the role, due to the one-year nature of the RSG position that each member is in as a part of the organization. Mentoring can focus on (a) written and unwritten rules specific to student government and the timespan the mentee is in positionally; (b) current and potential roles and responsibilities in the organization; (c) connection to faculty and staff, and (d) finding connection with other members of the organization. By participating in effective mentoring relationships with members of the organization, RSG members scaffold key skills associated with finding connection, motivation, responsibility, purpose, and belonging within the organization.

Figure 14:

Recommendations for Further Research

- Reconceptualize use of SG space
- Increase opportunities for interactions (“Coffee Chats and Pre-meeting dinners)
- Create dialogue opportunities regarding belonging within SG
- Integrate the Social Change model of leadership
- Work towards being a culturally relevant organization
- Create mentoring for first year senators and upper-class senators without a formal position

Recommendations for Further Research

Impact of Social Identity on Student Government

As previously mentioned, the most immediate and impactful next step for further research is social identities’ role in impacting belonging in Student Government. Frameworks used to analyze factors of belonging in Student Government emphasize the importance of

naming the experiences of students with historically underrepresented identities. Roselle University is a PWI, and this research stresses that members of the Student Government that do not identify as white are more susceptible to belonging uncertainty. Walton and Brady (2017) pointed out that the burden of recursion falls disproportionately on students who have to navigate the social contexts of more privileged sub-communities.

Use of Space

One of the major suggestions from the final community forum was the need for student government members to use their lounge space more effectively. More research needs to be dedicated to how student organization space can be better utilized to enhance belonging for college students. Space is socially constructed so that it can be adapted. If social relations and interactions are affected by space, then implementing changes to a space can transform interactions (Samura, 2018). Conducting research on ways to redesign the space in the Student Government lounge to better integrate all members into the space and draw external constituents into the space could create “socially catalytic spaces” to foster collaboration and belonging (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 3).

Generation Z—Common Denominator in Student Government

Seemiller and Grace (2016) noted that more than 70 percent of Generation Z college students identified with characteristics of loyalty, thoughtfulness, determination, compassion, open-mindedness, and responsibility. Additional research found students who identified as eager, hardworking, creative, and motivated (Flippin, 2017). This generation has expectations of working on projects that tap into their specific passions and making a difference in others’ lives (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Additional work needs to be done for student government to reflect on how these characteristics are satisfied in Student Government, especially in the

case of students not assigned to defined leadership roles who still expect to make contributions based on different generational characteristics.

Reflections on the Collaborative Ethnographic Process

In this project, all activities—from creating the questions to analyzing the feedback to drafting the schedule for community forums and life story analyses—was performed with the consultation and perspective of local experts. In this case, these experts comprise the Roselle University Student Government. The most important aspect of working with local experts is understanding their needs, challenges, and realities. In the case of the students involved in the review team and the overall process, this approach helps one comprehend their obligations and time commitments. This study asked students to add to their already busy schedules by scheduling additional meetings for the review team and taking up Student Government meeting time for the general body. This fact alone resulted in the change of the methods used in the project, as focus groups and individual interviews were a part of the original idea for these students. However, discussions with the review team clarified that students' time commitments would not allow additional meetings. This worked out well, as the community forums gave the students a voice to share their thoughts and perspectives about a sense of belonging with each other and voice their concerns regarding Student Government as a factor that potentially inhibits belonging based on hierarchy and privileges associated with being a predominately white organization.

Lassiter (2005a, p. 20) posited that collaborative ethnography is a “part of a larger and time-honored effort to construct a more equitable social science.” An intrinsic part of the learning process of applying the equitable aspects of the collaborative ethnographic process involved having the patience to allow the processes to unfold and not to put the researcher's

bias at the forefront of the research process. For example, despite comprehensive understanding about the lack of representation historically posed by Student Government for students with underrepresented identities when the theme of cultural relevance did not emerge in the first few community forums, the review team was adamant that this theme should not be immediately pursued, as it had not availed itself as a part of the research process. Listening to this advice and pursuing the challenges that hierarchy and a contextual understanding of “accept” versus “respect” presented led to the discovery of more overarching facets of Student Government that must be discussed first. By listening to the advice of the review team and focusing on the emerging themes, the Student Government challenged itself to consider the power and privilege of positionality. By listening to the local experts, the research process resulted in the determination of what Lassiter (2005) referred to as *urgent research topics*, as opposed to serving the self-perceived sense of urgency of the researcher. By creating interventions to examine newer members’ challenges with hierarchy and “accepted” versus “respected,” Student Government created opportunities to break down and discuss its members’ backgrounds, identities, and lived experiences. Thus, the needs of those being studied and the goal of discussing cultural relevance are still prevalent.

Another challenge with collaborative ethnography is understanding the time necessary to follow the process thoroughly. The initiative to comprehensively understand the culture of Student Government will span several years. The questions asked through this research process only scratch the surface of cultural challenges that resonate consistently year after year and change every time a new executive board is elected. To continue this research in a holistic manner, a new executive board needs to be elected, and a new review team needs to be agreed upon, and that team needs to consider new goals, questions, and research

techniques. Even with a different group, the culture of Student Government comprises students who want to make a difference in their organization, in particular, and at Roselle University, in general. Therefore, to continue the collaborative process and execute the recommendations and subsequent follow-up research opportunities, the relationship between the researcher, the review team, and the organization must be rendered transparent on a yearly basis. This is the essence of ritualization.

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive upon reviewing the collaborative ethnographic process with the Student Government after agreement to recommendations and next steps had been secured. The students felt that the process took their thoughts and perspectives into account and provided tangible feedback and recommendations. Rob, a third-year committee chair, said:

I have never been a part of anything like this, so it was very interesting to see how detailed and thought-out the process was. Additionally, participating in a project that was studying us that we were aware of was an interesting concept. I found myself being very honest with the answers given I know how they would be used, which I think was effective.

Bailey said, regarding the way in which Student Government uses the feedback in real time:

The best part about this process was the real changes that Student Government implemented along the way due to [the] feedback. My opinions on some of these issues changed a lot throughout the year (both because it is my first year in Senate and because the Executive Board made many changes in response to feedback).

Mo, a first-year senator, said regarding the interactivity of the process:

I think the Collaborative Ethnographic process we used worked really well because

hearing others' thoughts about the topic opened my eyes to new perspectives and topics I didn't even think about before hearing them from others. Anonymous feedback was also very helpful in sharing my real feelings. Working on a subcommittee also was very helpful in sharing feelings and ideas without presenting them in front of the whole group.

While Student Government generally enjoyed the collaborative ethnographic process, the group could provide solid feedback to move the project along and better organize the content. Suggestions included (a) using focus groups and individual interviews to follow up on student reactions; (b) truncating the forums from one hour to a half hour to keep students engaged; (c) facilitating follow-up opportunities where students can review their previous answers to examine any changes in perspectives; and (d) creating dialogue opportunities about the goals and using these dialogues as follow-up opportunities.

Implications

While there are implications that other student governments can consider, it is important to note that the collaborative ethnographic process cannot be replicated, as it comprises a snapshot of one student government in a particular place and time. All research projects are socially negotiated activities based on moral agreements between various stakeholders (Graves & Shields, 1991). Any collaborative project relies on the relationship between the researcher and their review team, their target population, and any other stakeholders involved in the research process. In this context, there is no effective way to accurately repeat such a diverse group of individuals' thoughts, perspectives, biases, and motivations.

In trying to provide lessons to others regarding the impact of a single organization on

students' sense of belonging, some themes can be examined and considered when collaborating with other groups. First, no other current research could be found upon review of the literature regarding the student government's impact on the sense of belonging. Room for additional research can be deduced by understanding the unique impact of student governments on college campuses and the unique nature of student government member selection and advancement processes.

Second, the collaborative ethnographic process provides an opportunity to examine organizations within the context of relationship building and trust between the researcher and the organization. Collaborative research allows one to learn more about the culture and the context of a group and include the members of that group in creating organizational culture about trust, dialogue, and comprehensive examination of what makes a population function the way it does. To be truly effective, the researcher and the population being studied needs to make a long-term commitment to the process to work through the constant transitions that are an integral part of any student organization. This commitment includes an in-depth understanding of the topic, the population, and the group rules. It also means understanding how the priority of the study changes the relationship between the researcher and the population. This specific study was rooted in a review of the organization that had initially led to positive recommendations and outcomes. However, this is no guarantee that this will always be the case.

Finally, the discussion regarding the sense of belonging has certain universal truths that, while different contextually between organizations, will generally hold. The universal nature of the impact of affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of belonging in a student organization plays out in all groups, as all groups grapple with the intrapersonal,

interpersonal, and organizational actions of its members. In this context, unwritten rules, contexts, and cues that separate students who feel belonging and belonging uncertainty are different for each organization but exist in each group nonetheless. This study did not intend to prove whether this finding has merit but rather to examine its relevance in the context of the Roselle University Student Government. Additionally, every organization has a semblance of a hierarchical structure. While the Roselle University Student Government has arrived at a set of realizations about the impact of that structure on new and upper-class members, these realizations are impacted by the specific nature of the organizational framework utilized by this group. The dialogue opportunities, leadership frameworks, and cultural relevance plans are specific to this group based on this group's discovery that it needs the collaborative ethnographic process.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to provide recommendations gleaned by the research team and affirmed by the Roselle University Student Government in the collaborative ethnographic process that examined sense of belonging as an integral part of the organization. Additionally, this chapter provided the opportunity to share how the organization felt about the research process and provide thoughts and feedback. Additionally, this study confirmed that Schlossberg, Strayhorn, and Walton and Brady's frameworks are central to Student Government. Student Government reviewed elements of the frameworks reflected in terms of their specific impact within the group and then discussed and affirmed recommendations to center belonging within RSG. Working with the methodology and the frameworks. The insights that these students have shared and the lessons they have learned will bring value to the organization and the field in the short and long term.

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Appendix A: Office of Research Protections Human Participants Notice

To: Timothy Wilkinson, Timothy Wilkinson
Leadership & Edu Studies, Graduate Students

Date: August 24, 2022

RE: HS-23-39 - Initial: Not Human Subjects Research (NHSR)

STUDY #: HS-23-39

STUDY TITLE: Collaborative Ethnography Student Govern

Research Protections staff have determined that the activity described in the study materials does not constitute human subjects research as defined by University policy and the federal regulations [45 CFR 46.102 (e)&(l)], and therefore does not require IRB approval or exemption.

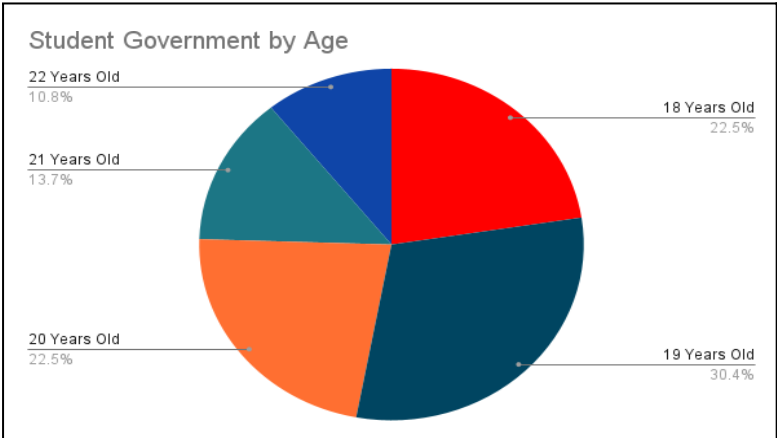
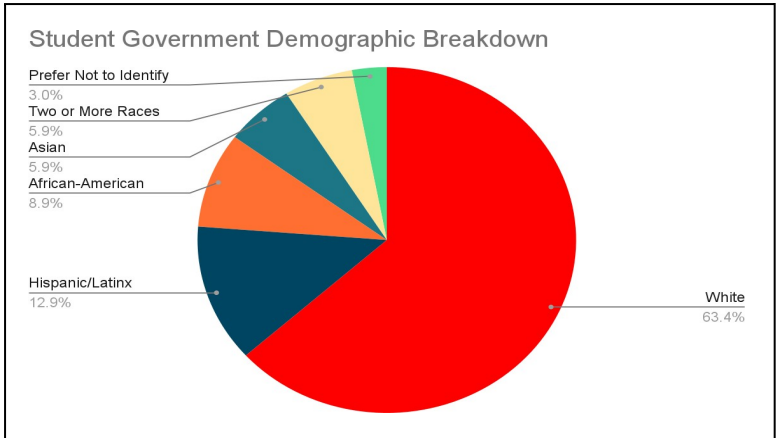
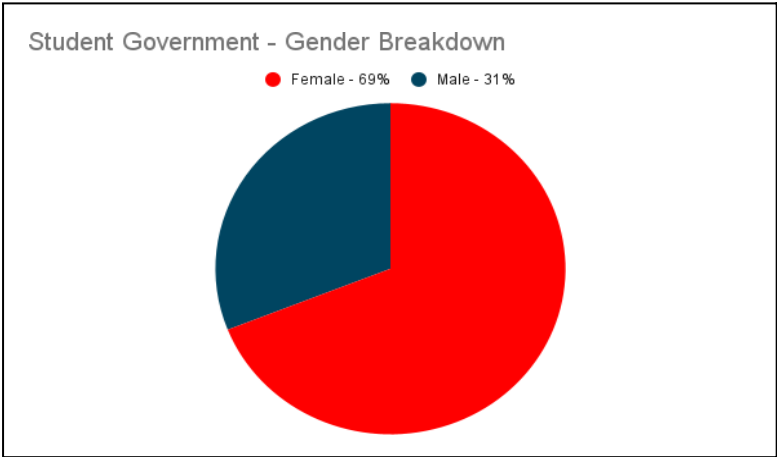
The described project focuses on the 2022-23 Wake Forest Student Government, without an intent to generalize the findings beyond this specific group. This project therefore does not meet the federal definition of research, as it is not designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.

This determination may no longer apply if the activity changes. IRB approval must be sought and obtained prior to conducting any research with human participants.

If you have any questions about this determination, please contact the IRB Administration at 828-262-4060 or irb@appstate.edu.

Thank you,
IRB Administration

Appendix B: Demographic Composition of Student Government



Appendix C: Example Individual Life Story Analysis Questionnaire

1/10/23, 4:09 AM

Individual Life Story Analysis - 9/20/2022

Individual Life Story Analysis - 9/20/2022

As a follow up to Community Forum #1, an opportunity to share more deeply regarding the impact of Student Government on Sense of Belonging. Please note: Per the study agreement, any identifying information will be kept strictly confidential to Tim Wilkinson only. Insights will be utilized in the aggregate. Specific insights that may be utilized as part of the writing portion of this study will not be utilized without permission of the student providing the specific insight. If a specific student is referenced, it will be with permission and via the use of an alias.

As a reminder, the Life Story Analysis is "a process that allows for the researcher to give their subjects agency and self-identity in constructing a retroactive account of their lives constructed in the present (Lawless, 2019)." Life story analysis is concerned with the process of allowing subjects the opportunity to shape their own biography. In the context of this study, life story analyses would allow Student Government (SG) members to share many of the factors that have influenced their involvement in SG, as well as factors that shape their personal definition of belonging.

* Required

1. Name (first and last) *

2. Major/Minor(s)/Class Year *

3. Number of Years in Student Government *

4. Current Position in Student Government *

Check all that apply.

- Executive Board Member
- Committee Chair
- Committee Member
- Other: _____

5. Based on your understanding of Sense of Belonging, what aspects of the concept *
most deeply resonate with you? Why do you think those concepts resonate with
you? **(The Wake Forest University Student Government definition of Sense of
Belonging: "Sense of Belonging is the experience of mattering or feeling
cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important as a member of
the Wake Forest University community.")**

6. Where does Student Government rank on your list of priorities as a student? What *
type of resources (ex. time in meetings, time spent on projects, time attending
events) do you invest in Student Government? What are competing priorities to
Student Government?

Appendix D: Individual Life Story Analysis Questions

Life Story Analysis One: Thursday, September 15 to Wednesday, October 5, 2022 (25 members participated)

-and-

Life Story Analysis Two: Tuesday, October 4 to Tuesday, October 11, 2022 (14 members participated)

- Based on your understanding of a sense of belonging, what aspects of the concept most deeply resonate with you? Why do you think those concepts resonate with you?
- Where does Student Government rank on your list of priorities as a student? What type of resources (for example, time in meetings, time spent on projects, and/or time spent attending events) do you invest in Student Government? What are the competing priorities of Student Government?
- Does Student Government make you feel invested in Roselle University? If so, please explain how. If not, please explain why you feel this way.
- When talking about Student Government specifically, did you feel cues that helped you feel a sense of investment? If so, what were those initial cues? How have those cues lead to deeper feelings of belonging? If not, what cues have led you to feel less of a sense of belonging?

Life Story Analysis Three: Tuesday, November 1 to Tuesday, November 15, 2022 (35 members participated)

- Describe the concept of hierarchy as you have experienced it in clubs/organizations/involvement opportunities that you have experienced in your life.

- What aspects of hierarchy do you think lead to successful groups?
- Do you believe that the hierarchy within Student Government enhances or hinders relationship-building with faculty, staff, and students? Please explain why you feel this way.
- Do you believe that the hierarchy within Student Government, as you describe it, enhances or hinders you from finding purpose within the organization? Please explain why you feel this way.
- Do you believe that the hierarchy within Student Government, as you describe it, enhances or hinders peer interactions within the organization? Please explain why you feel this way.
- Do you believe the hierarchy within Student Government, as you describe it, enhances or hinders you from working on campus issues? Please explain why you feel this way.

Appendix E: Example Community Forum Feedback Session

What does the phrase "Sense of Belonging" mean to you?

Mentimeter

community

Sense of belonging means to me being welcomed and respected in a group or organization I am involved with.

Feel like you fit in and are welcomed

Being able to attach yourself to a group or community with shared interests, values, etc. and share your viewpoints and such without judgement

Being able to be comfortable in your identity because people around you are willing to accept it.

Feeling comfortable and able to be your authentic self

It means to feel like you are comfortable and have found your place and purpose in a certain environment.

Feeling connected and included in a group

feeling that you are a part of something

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What does the phrase "Sense of Belonging" mean to you?

Mentimeter

A feeling of security and community found amongst others

Feeling attached to something or someone

It is the feeling when I feel comfortable around other people or a group.

Feeling a part of a community

You have a passion that keeps you going day to day. And regardless of anything bad happening around you having a motivation (sense of purpose) keeps you going.

"Sense of belonging" is a phrase that often resonates with my sense of feeling comfortable, both physically and mentally within a specific space.

A feeling of comfort and place within a certain structure that produces feelings of inclusion.

"Sense of belonging" means that you feel valued, comfortable, accepted, and happy in a group or community.

TogetherNESS

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Appendix F: Community Forum Questions

Community Forum One: Tuesday, September 13, 2022 (24 members participated)

-and-

Community Forum Two: Tuesday, October 4, 2022 (14 members participated)

- What does the phrase “sense of belonging” mean to you?
- What aspects of your life before Roselle University elicited what you define as a “sense of belonging”?
- What were the ways in which you were involved before attending Roselle? What cues made you feel like you belonged?
- What did you seek in involvement opportunities? How did you find opportunities other than the Student Government? What aspects of your time at Wake elicited what you define as a sense of belonging? What cues made you feel like you belonged?

Community Forum Three: Tuesday, October 11, 2022 (37 members participated)

- What does “feeling respected” mean to you in the context of Student Government?
- What is the difference between being accepted and respected? Which one do you believe comes first? Why do you feel this way?
- What keeps Student Government members from finding investment?

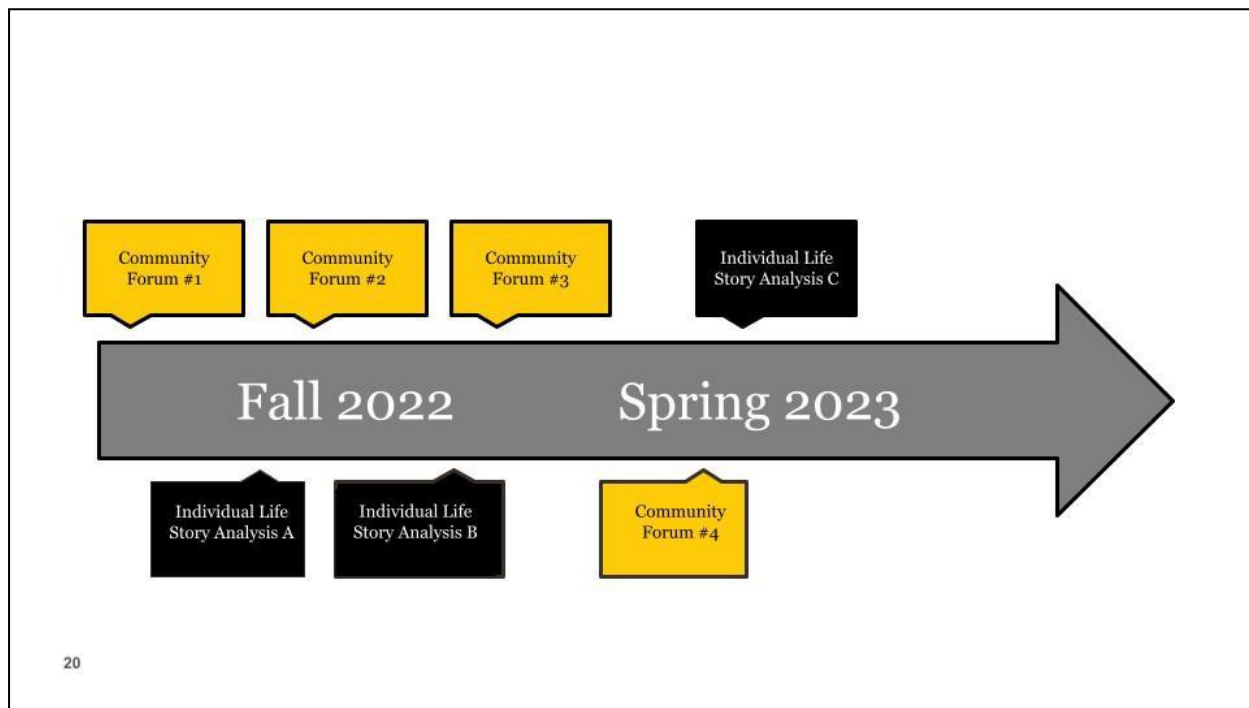
Community Forum Four: Tuesday, November 15, 2022 (37 members participated)

- Has the Student Government’s focus on the sense of belonging impacted or shifted your understanding of the concept this semester? If so, describe how. If not, describe why do you think that is?
- Have you seen tangible examples of a focus on the sense of belonging within Student Government? If so, please provide an example. If not, please share why you do not

feel that you have.

- What are some positive examples of a sense of belonging within Student Government that you would like to see continued in the future? What aspects of belonging would you like to see Student Government continue to nurture and develop?

Appendix G: Collaborative Ethnography Timeline



Vita

Timothy Scott Wilkinson is currently in his eighth year at Wake Forest University, where he serves as the Senior Associate Dean of Students. As Senior Associate Dean, he oversees the Office of Student Engagement. Mr. Wilkinson has worked in Student Affairs for twenty-three years professionally, spending most of his career working with fraternity and sorority communities. Mr. Wilkinson holds a Bachelor's degree in Speech Communications from West Chester University, a Master's degree in Human Services Administration from Rider University, and did additional Master's work in Counseling and Human Services at Lehigh University. In 2017, Mr. Wilkinson began work towards Ed.D. in Educational Leadership with a concentration in Higher Education and Adult Learning from Appalachian State University.

Mr. Wilkinson resides outside of Winston-Salem, North Carolina with his wife and son.