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Reflecting on Belonging: Stories to Normalize College Transition and Encourage Engagement

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Abstract

Students' capacity to develop a sense of belonging during the transition to college is recognized as a critical aspect of student retention. A lay theory of belonging was introduced on a regional, mostly-commuter campus of a midwestern public university during a summer bridge program for 21 upper-year student mentors and 29 incoming first-year students through a social-belonging growth-mindset intervention. Participants viewed a video of upper-year students and recent alumni sharing their personal stories of gaining a sense of belonging on campus, interspersed with facts about the transition to college. Students were asked to respond to writing prompts about the video. Qualitative analysis of their responses illustrated distinctions between upper-year and incoming students' descriptions of belonging and conditions for future belonging based on students' level of familiarity with the campus. Implications are discussed for introducing students to psychological lay theories to create a growth-mindset orientation towards sense of belonging.

Keywords: belonging, first-year students, growth mindset, student mentors, summer bridge program, regional campus

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Reflecting on Belonging: Stories to Normalize College Transition and Encourage Engagement

Students' capacity to develop a sense of belonging in college is a critical aspect of student retention (O'Keefe, 2013) and is theorized to impact academic achievement and persistence (Strayhorn, 2019; Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011). Social-belonging interventions which share upper-year students' and alumni's stories of adjusting to college and developing feelings of belonging may normalize feelings of uncertainty during the transitional period (Asher & Weeks, 2014; Walton & Brady, 2020) and increase the retention, persistence, and academic performance of incoming students (Yeager et al. 2013, 2016). Specifically, students of color can benefit from other diverse students' stories of transitory belonging uncertainty because many students encounter internalized racial stereotypes related to academic achievement and historically based underrepresentation of students of color on college campuses (Brady et al., 2020). Belonging is especially important at community colleges and regional four-year campuses, where commuter students can struggle to feel connected (Bloomquist, 2014). Indeed, even commuting students who have a sense of belonging in other contexts of their life may lack a similar sense of belonging at the university (Asher & Weeks, 2014). Belonging is increasingly recognized as an important area of research on the college experience.

In this study, we conceptualize belonging as a psychological human need and form of engagement, which is fulfilled by having the perception that one is an essential part of a learning environment (Collier, 1992; Strayhorn, 2019; Wilson et al., 2015). In the literature, belonging is described as having three components: *psychological* (Collier, 1992; Strayhorn, 2019; Walton & Cohen, 2007; Wilson et al., 2015), *academic* (Pichon, 2016; Strayhorn, 2019; Thomas, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007;), and *social* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Thomas, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Scholars have demonstrated the malleability and extent of external influence on an individual student of the psychological components of belonging.

At commuter campuses where belonging cannot be fostered through dorm-based experiences, belonging is positively correlated with persistence (Bloomquist, 2014). Our study examines a social-belonging experience framed through a growth-mindset lens at Regional Campus (all names are pseudonyms), a midsized midwestern regional university, with a 90% commuter population. Persistence to graduation was a major challenge at Regional Campus where the 2009 incoming class' four-year graduation rate was 8%. Like many regional campuses and community colleges, the campus could not afford costly, third-party pre-college experiences; however, the campus was involved in designing and instituting several retention initiatives, including a math mindsets experience (Suh et al., 2019), which were intended to introduce academic success strategies and support students' persistence to graduation. We believe such campus-created, practitioner-led, and research-based initiatives are essential to carrying out the open-access, student-success missions of the 942 regional universities and community colleges which serve over 5.5 million of the nation's minoritized, under-represented, first generation, incoming college students (Duffin, 2020). This article reports on one such practitioner-led

initiative in the hopes of encouraging other open-access college educators to similarly contribute to the scholarly literature on student access and persistence.

Study Purpose

The present study reports findings from a social-belonging experience inspired by the Project for Education Research that Scales (PERTS, 2020) to create a lay theory experience (Yeager, et al. 2016) on the psycho-social skills of belonging. The original PERTS research upon which the present study replicated was part of a larger research agenda funded by the William and Melinda Gates Foundation, Stanford University, and the University of Texas at Austin. However, because of the prohibitive cost of joining a PERTS cohort, the campus received permission from the PERTS researchers to replicate the original study with a campus-specific belonging intervention.

The resulting social-belonging experience intended to initiate student reflection on seeking ways to gain a sense of belonging on campus. In particular, the experience was aimed at incoming and mentor students who were likely to be at risk from an internal stereotype threat because of their race, socioeconomic class, or non-traditional age. The researchers assumed that upper-year students would conceptualize campus belonging differently than incoming students and wanted to explore those differences in order to design future interventions to facilitate incoming students' sense of belonging. Further, as research-practitioners, the campus' involved faculty and staff hoped that all students participating in the belonging experience would internalize the belief that with the passage of time and engagement in academic relationships with others on campus, students would increase their sense of belonging on campus.

As a part of the campus' broader exploration of student persistence, the present study explored perceptions of campus belonging among incoming first-year students' and upper-year students who participated in the Belonging experience, a growth-mindset social-belonging activity presented in a summer bridge program called the First-Year Institute (FYI). This study explored the research questions:

1. How do student mentors and incoming students enrolled in the FYI conceptualize belonging in college?
2. Is there a qualitative difference between how incoming mentor students (e.g., upper-year students) and incoming first-year students conceptualize belonging?

Conceptualizations of Belonging in the Literature

There are multiple ways to foster a sense of belonging (Ostrove & Long, 2007). Below we examine the physiological, academic, and social components of belonging as these are most salient for college students. We also summarize relevant literature on growth mindset interventions.

Components of Belonging

Psychological components of belonging are related to strong motivational needs (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Bowlby 1988) including an innate drive to belong to groups (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Baumeister & Leary, 2005). Psychological components of college belonging include

students' ability to establish favorable relationships with peers and faculty (Hoffman et al., 2002; Thomas, 2012), their perceptions of the environment as caring (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and feelings of mattering or being valued (Asher & Weeks, 2014; Strayhorn, 2019).

Academic components include feeling comfortable in a classroom (Pichon, 2016; Strayhorn, 2019) and developing "knowledge, confidence, and identity" as a successful college student (Thomas, 2012, p.15). In one phenomenological study evaluating the academic-social experience of community college students simultaneously taking courses at four-year institutions, Pichon (2016) found that instructors' creation of a safe, welcoming classroom space can instill a sense of academic belonging which can increase students' persistence and graduation rates. Walton and Brady (2020) found that students who are underrepresented in academia are more at risk of belonging uncertainty. The researchers concluded that students who do not feel like they belong may choose not to be engaged and may lose their motivation to be academically engaged.

Social belonging is a sense connection to the campus, a student organization, or other students who share a major (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Thomas, 2012). In a UK-based 'What Works?' report, Thomas (2012) noted that a difference between students' socioeconomic or academic background and their perception of the campus may result in student beliefs that they are not well-matched for the institution. Walton and Cohen (2007) refer to this lack of social relationships as "belonging uncertainty" and suggest that subjective feelings of lack of social belonging in students of color may hinder their academic success (p. 82).

Growth Mindset Interventions

Yeager and Dweck (2012) describe mindsets as implicit theories students hold about themselves and their ability to develop academic and social resilience. In contrast to holding a fixed mindset, or belief that an individual has an innate level of ability (i.e., that they are "smart" or "stupid"), students with growth mindsets believe that they can learn or grow through hard work and perseverance. The growth mindset theory has been applied to a variety of efforts to increase students' perceptions of their academic persistence, including interventions targeting belonging (Suh et al., 2019; Yeager et al., 2016).

Although highly popular, some researchers still critique the efficacy of growth mindset interventions (McPartlan et al., 2020), and critical scholars have questioned the implications of education theories, such as growth mindset, which privilege individual persistence without analyzing the contexts in which students are expected to engage in persistence (Love, 2019; McKinney, 2018; Wood, 2018). These scholars aptly argue that researchers and educators need to consider the role of context and the intersectional nature of students' previous experiences when examining notions like academic success or belonging in academic spaces. Dweck and Yeager (2019) acknowledge that "these [growth mindset] interventions are highly dependent on subtle features of the materials and procedures and on how they are matched to the target population" (p. 489). However, gaining a sense of belonging by actively participating in a welcoming campus community can lead to students' academic success, and graduation, impacting lives professionally, economically, socially, and psychologically (Strayhorn, 2012).

Our study seeks to understand upper-year and incoming students' sense of belonging at their university. Recognizing that students may not come to college with a strong sense of belonging, a group of faculty developed a belonging experience modeled after the PERTS intervention. The experience began with watching a video that current students and faculty had created of authentic student and alumni experiences of belonging. After playing the video to upper-year students and incoming students in a summer bridge program, members of the research team asked the students to write about their sense of belonging on the campus. In addition to illuminating differences between upper-year and incoming students' sense of belonging, our data captures stories of how the upper-year students gained a sense of belonging. Below we report our findings and discuss how developmental educators can design and implement theoretically driven research projects which are directly responsive to local contexts, including the material limitations of their campuses.

Methodology

In this study, both the belonging experience and our analysis of students' responses were framed within a critical approach to growth mindsets. The research team focused on how students made sense of belonging through their personal experiences. The experience was supported through an internally funded grant project to produce the belonging video which mimicked the PERTS (2020) social-belonging intervention that asked incoming students to read stories of belonging and then respond to written prompts with (1) descriptions of their own developing sense of on-campus belonging and (2) advice to other students who may feel they, too, do not belong. After the experience was completed and data were collected, one of the research team members invited the first author (a former Regional Campus faculty member involved in campus retention) and the second author (a doctoral student studying developmental education), to disseminate the findings from the experience.

Data Sources and Collection

The study was conducted at Regional Campus, a public four-year regional university with a majority commuter population. Regional Campus's 2012 incoming class's four-year graduation rate was 17%; approximately 36% of students graduated within eight years (institutional data, n.d.). These figures align with a general upward trend in the campus's graduation rate, which was 8% in 2009. In the past decade, the campus has established several student retention and completion initiatives, including the First-Year Institute (FYI), a four-day summer bridge program to introduce students to campus culture, student support services, and facilities. In addition to attending FYI, incoming students participate in a year-long peer-mentoring program where upper-year students who are former FYI students serve as mentors for the incoming cohort, assisting incoming students in goal setting and academic success strategies. FYI is open to first-generation college students, non-traditional, and minority students. The FYI upper-year and incoming students were therefore more diverse than the rest of the campus (Table 1).

Table 1
Student Demographics

Demographic	FYI Participants	Campus-Wide
<i>Gender</i>		
% Male	20%	41%
% Female	80%	59%
<i>Race</i>		
% White	60%	85.6%
% African American	22%	6.2%
% Multiracial	12%	2.6%
% Asian/Pacific Islander	2%	1.5%
% Other	4%	4.1%
<i>Type of Student</i>		
% First Generation	50.7%	45%
% Non-First Generation	49.3%	55%

The Belonging experience occurred during the final day of the 2015 FYI. FYI participants took a brief demographic survey, watched the belonging video, and received the video transcript. Based on the PERTS mindset intervention involving written belonging narratives attributed to students at a flagship residential university (Yeager et al., 2013), the research team produced a six-and-a-half-minute video of ten interviews with Regional Campus students and alumni about developing a sense of belonging at Regional Campus. Interviewees were selected to over-represent racially diverse, non-traditional, transfer, and international students. The video also included a student with a speech/communication disability and one graduate student alumnus. Between interviews, short messages scrolled across the screen conveying messages about student success strategies, goal setting, on-campus involvement opportunities, student support services, and perseverance encouragement. After viewing the video, FYI participants responded to three open-ended items modeled after the PERTS growth mindset intervention (Yeager et al., 2013). The writing prompts included (1) summarizing the ways the video-recorded interviewees developed a sense of belonging, (2) explaining a time when the FYI participant developed a sense of belonging, and (3) writing a message of encouragement to another student who may not feel like they belong in the transition from high school to college (Appendix B).

Data Analysis

We applied thematic analysis to develop a qualitative understanding of how incoming and upper-year FYI participants perceive belonging at Regional Campus. Thematic analysis is appropriate for survey data analysis since it supports the researchers' in-depth analysis of emerging themes which were not included in the research questions (Tanaka et al., 2012). Braun and Clarke (2006) identify six phases of thematic analysis: (1) familiarization with the data to

notice patterns of meaning or potentially interesting issues (e.g., themes), (2) generating initial codes (or labels which can identify the most basic segments or pieces of the data), (3) searching for themes within the data and codes, (4) refining themes to create a thematic map that collapses related codes into a single theme or expand codes to dive deeper into specific themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and ending with (6) writing up results. Our coding was also informed by themes from the literature review. After the authors independently coded surveys, they reviewed coded utterances, discussing discrepant codes until consensus was reached.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to confidence in the methods used to gather and interpret data in order to ensure a study’s quality (Connelly, 2016). Trustworthiness demonstrates validity and reliability in the same way that quantitative researchers seek to demonstrate rigor. The present study’s trustworthiness is established through the thorough explanation of the data collection and analysis procedures as well as the detailed explanation of reported themes (Richard, 2006).

Results

Scholars have identified several belonging components, or *evidence of current belonging* (Strayhorn, 2019; Thomas, 2012); however, the FYI participants in this study also described conditions which they believed foster *future* belonging. The analysis uncovered distinctions between upper-year and incoming students’ descriptions of belonging and conditions for future belonging at their regional campus. Upper-year students’ written responses also included higher frequencies of both components and conditions of belonging.

Conceptualizations of Belonging: Components of Belonging

In the literature, belonging is manifest through academic, social, and psychological components on college campuses (Strayhorn, 2019; Thomas, 2012). In our study, upper-year and incoming students identified each of these components (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2

Upper Year Student Belonging Components (540)

Component	Example
<i>Social</i> (445)	“There’s always someone you can talk to, so you are never alone.”
<i>Psychological</i> (56)	“Find something that you love, or d[e]sire, and to chase it.”
<i>Academic</i> (39)	“We are here to further our education and reach our goals.”

Table 3

Incoming-Student Belonging Components (283)

Component	Example
<i>Social</i> (193)	“Learning how to be open to others.”
<i>Psychological</i> (52)	“Not to give up when things get hard.”
<i>Academic</i> (38)	“There are tutors and people willing to help.”

Social components. Upper-year students were far more likely to include references to *social components* (445 compared to 193), such as “I feel like my voice matters among peers and on-campus.” Within the *Social Component*, the subtheme *Campus Community* was applied to upper-class student responses 157 times, including 114 mentions of on-campus *Student Involvement* (Table 3 reports the two dominant aspects of this theme). Frequently, upper-year students’ examples and advice referenced personal experiences and familiarity with the campus: “After I joined Sigma Kappa that is when I really felt like I belonged at [Regional Campus].” This statement also illustrated the importance of *Greek Life* (15) for some upper-year students. Incoming students made substantially fewer references to *Campus Community* (80; Table 4); this difference is unsurprising given incoming students’ limited exposure to the campus at the time of data collection. *Student Involvement* (60; Table 5) was also influential for incoming students’ conceptualizations of belonging. Incoming students’ *Student Involvement* references were similarly divided between *Advice to Get Involved* and *Involvement Examples*. Overall, incoming students’ references were less specific than those provided by the upper-year students. The lack of specificity in incoming students’ responses can be explained by their limited experiences from which to offer advice to friends.

Table 4

Upper Year Student Involvement (114)

Reference to Involvement	Example
<i>Involvement Examples (71)</i>	
<i>Clubs/Organizations (54)</i>	“Had I not went Greek, I would not be as happy at [Regional Campus]”
<i>Activities (14)</i>	“I went to intramural events and met people through that.”
<i>Study Group (3)</i>	“Start study groups, which is a great way to get involved.”
<i>Advice to get involved (43)</i>	
<i>Step out of comfort zone (14)</i>	“You have to go out of your comfort zone to make friends in college.”

Table 5

Incoming Student Involvement (60)

Student Involvement	Example
<i>Involvement Examples (32)</i>	
<i>Clubs/Orgs. (15)</i>	“Join groups and be involved in many activities in school.”

Activities (14)	“They [interviewees] met people within the club.”
Study Group (3)	“We can start studying together.”
<i>Advised to Get Involved (28)</i>	
Step out of comfort zone (9)	“I also put myself out there and made a point to feel connected.”

On-Campus Relationships was another common subtheme within *Social Components* for both upper-year and incoming students. Upper-year students more frequently described *Student-to-Student Relationships* (Table 6); however, they also discussed *Faculty/Staff Support*. Similar to the *Campus Community* subtheme, incoming students made fewer references in general to *On-Campus Relationships* (Table 7) and were more likely to reference *Meeting New People* (47) than upper-year students (27).

Table 6

Upper Year Students' On-Campus Relationships (179)

On-Campus Relationships	
<i>Student-to-Student Relationships (92)</i>	
<i>Friendships (35)</i>	“Though you may not feel like you belong now, over time, you will gain friends.”
<i>Peers/Classmates (56)</i>	“Spark up a conversation in class with someone you haven’t talked to before.”
<i>Institutional Support (60)</i>	
<i>Faculty/Staff (17)</i>	“If you show you care, your professor will be willing to help you.”
<i>Meeting New People (27)</i>	“Try putting yourself outside of your comfort zone and introducing yourself.”

Table 7

Incoming Student Relationships (89)

Incoming Student Relationships	
<i>Student-Student Relationships (25)</i>	
<i>Friendships (16)</i>	“Though you may not feel like you belong now, over time, you will gain friends.”
<i>Peer/Classmates (9)</i>	“Spark up a conversation in class with someone you haven’t talked to before.”
<i>Faculty Support (17)</i>	“You have to get to know your professors.”
<i>Meeting New People (47)</i>	“Meeting new people is the number one thing.”

Academic components. Upper-year and incoming students made qualitatively similar references to *Academic Components*. For example, “It helps you feel like you belong because you have someone by your side and to study with” (upper-year student) and “[Do] not be afraid to ask for help when there are tutors and people willing to help” (incoming student). Incoming students were slightly more likely to discuss *Academic Resources* (19 versus 12 upper-year mentions): “Take advantage of campus resources- personal counseling, student development, career development” (incoming student). Upper-year students more frequently connected their academic belonging to peers (27 versus 19 incoming student mentions). However, the limited number of references to *Academic Components* make meaningful quantitative comparison impossible.

Psychological components. References to *psychological components* also were qualitatively similar: “I had to share part of myself and become vulnerable” (upper-year student) and “Presentence[sic] and desire will help you and play a large role in your experience” (incoming student). Upper-year students identified psychological components less frequently than social or academic but still with greater frequency than incoming students (0.90 mentions per upper-year mentor compared to 0.24 per incoming student).

Affect is an element of the psychological component of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). This element emerged as an important aspect related to belonging in upper-year and incoming students’ letters to friends (Tables 8 & 9). For example, one upper-year student reflected a negative affect resulting from her fear that she did not belong as a nontraditional student: “I remember sitting in the parking lot in my car and looking at the buildings *being afraid to get out of the car* on my first day. Coming back to school at the age of 39 was a challenge.” Another upper-year student’s comment illustrated a sense of positive affect resulting from forming The Dining Hall: “After forming this group, I have made so many more friends and *feel more welcomed and included* with things on campus.” The research team distinguished between positive affect (as a general sense of positivity about belonging) and pride (as positivity rooted in the students’ sense of self-worth and confidence).

Table 8

Upper Year Student Belonging Affect (37)

Upper Class Student Affect	Example
Positive (23)	“I...feel more welcomed and included with things on campus.”
Negative (11)	“Being afraid to get out of the car on my first day.”
Self-Pride (3)	“Be proud of who you are.”

Table 9
Incoming Student Belonging Affect (45)

Incoming Student Affect	Example
Positive (19)	“Put passion in all things to create a confident belongingness.”
Negative (19)	“I was nervous of messing up and not being able to do a good job.”
Self-Pride (4)	“feeling like I will do just fine in college and adjusting.”

Both incoming and upper-year students who participated in the FYI belonging experience emphasized social components of belonging, such as on-campus involvement or building on-campus relationships. Incoming students referenced social components nearly four times more frequently than psychological or academic components. The discrepancy was even greater for upper-year students who made similarly frequent references to psychological and academic components but more than double the mentions of social components. Because the study did not measure changing conceptualizations of belonging over time, we make no claims of causality between social conceptions of belonging and length of time or persistence at Regional Campus.

Qualitative Differences Between Mentor and FYI Students

As reported in the previous section, the thematic analysis uncovered several qualitative differences between the two groups’ conceptualizations of belonging components and their advice for developing a sense of belonging. Both groups offered advice to actively seek out ways to engage through formal campus events and clubs as well as informal connections to other students. However, upper-year students offered more detailed (and more frequent) descriptions of the social component of belonging. Upper-year mentors were also more likely to stress the importance of the campus community and on-campus relationships in particular. Their descriptions and advice regarding belonging included greater detail. Upper-year students also identified a greater range of specific opportunities to get involved, particularly by recounting their own experiences. In contrast, incoming students included fewer concrete examples to support their recommendations.

Discussion and Implications

Before discussing the findings and implications, we note that this study had several delimitations and limitations. Delimitations refer to things that were excluded from the study by design. For example, the research team chose not to collect data beyond the FYI students’ letter writing or to engage in member-checking in order to minimize disruption from FYI’s purpose related to student success. Similarly, the study did not measure participants’ sense of belonging, such as through the Sense of Belonging Scale (SBS; Hoffman et al., 2002-2003), or the impact of the video experience on persistence or action (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). Finally, there were limitations based on the video intervention itself: The video may have primed viewers to focus on factors that influenced belonging without explaining how these factors contribute to students’

actual belonging. Despite these delimitations and limitations, the study presents relevant qualitative analysis of students' perceptions as they internalized a belonging message, and—perhaps more importantly—represents the potential for future more rigorous practitioner-based research on issues directly relevant to their colleges and students.

Belonging on campus is primarily a social element for both upper-year and incoming students. We found that upper-year mentor students were more likely to identify social components (445) than incoming students (193). This emphasis on the social component of belonging aligns with contemporary belonging literature (Strayhorn, 2008). However, our data present some important differences from the literature. Notably, although Strayhorn (2008) theorizes the importance of academic and psychological factors of belonging, the analyzed responses showed that participants had a strong sense of belonging as social element but a less well-developed conceptualization of the psychological or academic aspects of belonging. Scholars and educators emphasize the importance of belonging, in part, because of its explicit connection to persistence (Medina, 2018). Given the relationship between belonging and persistence, our findings that institutions need to increase students' understanding of the academic components of belonging and institutional resources for developing academic belonging (Strayhorn, 2020). Encouraging study groups or implementing more learning communities can build from students' recognition of social belonging to develop academic belonging. Additionally, the findings can be used to identify and research initiatives targeting incoming students' emergent belonging components.

Both mentor and incoming students offered advice about how to get involved on campus—demonstrating their focus on the social components of belonging. Qualitative differences in upper-year and incoming students' descriptions of belonging most frequently suggested upper-year students' greater knowledge of and breadth of experience at Regional Campus. The findings do not suggest some secret knowledge about belonging on campus or that a single activity or event can foster belonging. Instead, incoming and upper-year students agreed that the best way to belong was to be action-oriented in seeking out opportunities to engage. Further, it may be that these upper-year students, who agree to serve as FYI mentors, feel a greater sense of belonging on campus than other upper-year students and that they therefore are better prepared to share their personal belonging experiences with other students. However, college faculty and staff can still play an essential role in helping all students develop a sense of belonging within academic contexts. For example, more than half of the upper-year mentor students mentioned the importance of joining Greek life to enhance belonging. However, Walton and Brady (2020) caution colleges not to conflate participation in social activities with feelings of belonging, “One misconception is that the intervention focuses on purely social experiences, such as close friendships or feelings of homesickness. To the contrary, the emphasis [in developing a belonging initiative] is on experiences of belonging and nonbelonging within the core academic context of school— in classrooms, study groups, lab settings, and in interactions with classmates or instructors” (p. 26).

Perhaps ironically, the most meaningful aspect of this project for the practitioners engaged in this work was the least discussed aspect of the study design. The video which was used in the belonging experience was produced by a member of the original grant-funded team. This team member assigned the video as a project in his photojournalism class. In addition to meeting course objectives, the video was intentionally designed to mimic a social-belonging intervention with stories from real Regional Campus students and alumni in order to foster a sense of belonging in FYI participants. The resulting study included several limitations, but—unlike some other more rigorously designed studies—the research utilized existing strengths and skills of Regional Campus practitioners to responded directly to Regional Campus needs without significant additional resources. Too often the research we read is disconnected from or out-of-reach for practitioners while the practitioners engaging in field-based and experiential research lack access to the methodological training to design studies which can be published in highly rigorous research journals. Our resulting reporting of the present study illustrates the continued need within the field of higher education to better connect scholars and practitioners from the earliest stages of intervention design through dissemination of results. As research-practitioners, we call upon our colleagues to develop their own sense of belonging within the professional community committed to higher education access and retention. We seek to develop future collaborations which are methodologically rigorous while still being accessible and applicable to the practitioners and students we serve.

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