Spring 2023

Familiar Faces and Comfortable Spaces: The Role of the College Union in Fostering Sense of Belonging on a College Campus

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Familiar Faces and Comfortable Spaces:
The Role of the College Union in Fostering Sense of Belonging on a College Campus

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of Educational Leadership &
Higher Education Administration

West Chester University
West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of
Doctor of Education

By
Adriane A. Reilly
May 2023
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, who stepped up to support me along this journey in every way possible. First, to my husband, Brendan, thank you for pushing me off the proverbial cliff and encouraging me to take on this life-changing task for two years and ten months. You have been so selfless and incredibly patient with me making academics a priority. Thank you for making memories with the kids during my writing weekends. Thank you for waking me up after the kids’ bedtime so I could write late into the night. Thank you for calming my stress every semester around mid-terms like clockwork. Thank you for getting Wawa [redacted] times per week when I was too busy or too tired to cook. Thank you for being so understanding when I was distracted, for wishing me good luck during late-night writing sessions, and for those moments when your words of encouragement like “take your time” and “keep going” gave me the energy I needed to carry on. This endeavor was truly a joint effort. I couldn’t have done it without you. You have made my wildest dreams come true in many ways. I love you.

To my amazing daughter, Austin, and son, Jameson, you are my greatest achievement. This dissertation proves that you can complete any big task in life if you have the right amount of support and focus on a little bit at a time. You are capable of more than you can even imagine! I hope you find your spaces of belonging wherever life takes you.

To my parents, Mary, Joe, and Vince, who nurtured my love of learning through every step of my education. Thank you for every educational opportunity you gave me over the years that led me to this milestone. My siblings, in-laws, aunts, uncles, and cousins also deserve a big thanks for their amazing support through an Ed.D. program and a global pandemic. Whether it
was helping with the kids, cleaning our house, or sharing words of encouragement, it
significantly impacted my ability to meet this goal. I am so grateful.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my students from the past, present, and future. You
make work fulfilling and fun. I will always strive to make your college experiences better.
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my committee. Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri, thank you for challenging me to think deeper, write better, and defend my choices confidently. I am grateful for how you set me back on the right path when I got lost in my own thoughts and anxieties. Thank you for seeing me as a whole person balancing school with family and work. To Dr. Matthew Kruger-Ross, thank you for the metaphors, the late-night chats, the lunches, and the friendship. I deeply appreciate your curiosity about the role of the college union and your encouragement of my writing and research. I would also like to thank Dr. Jackie Hodes for granting me the opportunity to further my education. Thank you for your support, encouragement, time, and attention. Most importantly, thank you for the pep talks in my weakest moments.

The participants of this study deserve my heartfelt thanks for sharing their time and experiences with me. Thank you for the engaging conversations.

I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Clayton Kolb, and my co-workers. The SUSA team has been so incredibly supportive throughout the last three years, listening to my scholarly ramblings and keeping me laughing through the stress.

To my dear friends, Kim Celano and Shaina Adams-El Guabli, for being my texting buddies, therapists, and cheerleaders for the last three years. To Sarah Williamson, thank you for being my writing retreat partner and mental map specialist. To all my friends and relatives who sent words of encouragement on Facebook and Instagram, every message boosted my motivation to keep working and finish strong. Thank you for your support.

Thank you to my classmates in cohort five, especially Meliorem’s Best and Brightest and Orkideh’s Actual Chosen Ones. From Zoom classes to the Grad Center, our challenges brought
us closer together. It’s been a pleasure learning from and with you. I’m so proud of your accomplishments! Congratulations.

Special thanks to my ACUI family for their amazing support and curiosity about my research. Your messages of encouragement IRL and via social media has kept me going. I started this program with the goal of contributing to the association’s research agenda. I will have met my goal if my work inspires just one person in their college union and student activities work or research.

One day, I joined the Academic Mom Facebook group and found a community of peers working diligently toward their terminal degrees in Silent Zoom sessions. Thank you, Lydia, Audrey, and many others for motivating me and commiserating about what a literal and physical pain in the butt this journey has been! You’re next.

Finally, I owe a shout-out to some items and places that made this journey easier, including paper plates, Starbucks, and the McDade-Cara School of Irish Dance parking lot.
Abstract

The physical environment of the college union building has the potential to influence a student’s sense of belonging. Using a conceptual framework that included campus ecology framework (Strange & Banning, 2001) and sense of belonging theory (Strayhorn, 2019), this study explored undergraduate student experiences of belongingness in the college union. Particularly, this study focused on a college union located on the campus of a public, regional university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Further, this study aimed to explore the variety of ways that the union’s physical space does (or does not) influence sense of belonging for a diverse sampling of undergraduate students. Eight undergraduate college students were invited to participate in two interviews, including a photo-elicitation activity. The first interview established the participants’ relationship with the college union building and their understanding of sense of belonging. The second interview began with a photo-elicitation activity that asked participants to capture images of areas in the college union where they did and did not feel belonging. Data analysis revealed that spatial elements such as lighting, murals, photography, and signage enhanced belonging. The findings also indicated that comfortable and mobile furnishings advanced sense of belonging. Additionally, spaces that were well-kept sent positive non-verbal messages to students. Finally, the data indicated that other non-spatial elements, including food, busyness, and involvement, also contributed to students’ sense of belonging. Therefore, spaces that incorporated the elements described above had a greater chance of fostering a sense of belonging for students.

Keywords: college union, sense of belonging, campus ecology, photo-elicitation
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Chapter 1

In the United States, after completing compulsory secondary education, many students continue their education by pursuing a degree from a postsecondary institution (Irwin et al., 2022). For perspective, 25,349,502 students enrolled in postsecondary institutions in 2020-2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). However, this number is projected to decline steadily through 2028 due in part to decreasing global fertility rates over the last 60 years (Brown et al., 2020; Society for College and University Planning, 2019) and the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic (Kyaw, 2021). The population decline is predicted to limit the number of young adults by 10% by the late 2020s and is expected to decrease by 15% through 2028 (Brown et al., 2020). In addition, the student debt crisis and discourse on the worth of college are also factors threatening postsecondary enrollment (Kyaw, 2021). As higher education leaders strategize ways to respond to the “enrollment cliff,” matters of equity, affordability, and the value of a postsecondary education come into focus (Kyaw, 2021; Schaeffer, 2022).

In contemporary times, a college education is often associated with career preparation, as studies have shown that individuals with college degrees out-earn those without (Schaeffer, 2022). However, postsecondary education offers more than job-related knowledge and the potential for financial stability; it also fosters students’ personal and intellectual growth (Parker, 2021; Schaeffer, 2022). In addition to career readiness, students have opportunities to expand their critical thinking skills, explore new worldviews, and socialize with diverse individuals (Astin, 1993; Giroux, 2014; Schuh et al., 2017). College also allows students to learn through experiences outside of the classroom, develop leadership skills and self-awareness, and advance a sense of personal and civic responsibility (Astin, 1993; Patton et al., 2016; Schuh et al., 2017).
Finally, in college, students can establish their adult identities and learn to consider themselves part of a greater community (Jones & Abes, 2013; Patton et al., 2016; Schuh et al., 2017).

Despite the benefits mentioned above, society greatly emphasizes degree completion rates as one of the primary measures of institutional quality (DeAngelo et al., 2011; Easley et al., 2021; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). From the university’s perspective, student attrition and degree non-completion harm the institution’s reputation, which has ripple effects on funding, enrollment, employee retention, and overall institutional success (O’Keefe, 2013). Therefore, scholars have identified undergraduate students’ sense of belonging as a critical factor that promotes persistence and timely graduation (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Boyd et al., 2022; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Hoffman et al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; O’Keefe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016, 2022). Fundamentally, belonging is one of the deepest human desires (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). This study explores how undergraduate students experience a sense of belonging in the college union building, thereby supporting persistence toward degree completion.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) defined students’ sense of belonging as a psychological feeling of identification and affiliation with the campus community. A lack of a sense of belonging (i.e., rejection, isolation) is associated with student attrition (O’Keefe, 2013). Conversely, human connection and belongingness are strong indicators of positive student outcomes (Boyd et al., 2022). Therefore, fostering a sense of belonging for all students, especially those who belong to groups identified as at-risk for non-completion, is particularly important for their journey to graduation (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019). As a result, academic and student affairs administrators dedicate considerable
resources toward influencing student success via belongingness. (Kitchen & Williams, 2019; Ribera et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2022)

Faculty and staff work toward nurturing a sense of belonging via several high-impact curricular and co-curricular initiatives, many of which are targeted at first-year students transitioning to postsecondary experience (Kuh et al., 2005; Schlossberg, 1989). For example, they plan and execute annual programs such as new student orientations (Chan, 2019). Welcoming students into the campus community via university traditions (e.g., academic convocation) and rituals (e.g., The University of Texas’ Gone to Texas celebration) also support the development of feelings of inclusion and affinity (Gone to Texas, 2022; Schlossberg, 1989). In addition, they establish first-year seminars or living-learning communities (Araujo et al., 2014; Schussler & Fierros, 2008). Furthermore, student affairs administrators encourage involvement in student organizations (Astin, 1999; Kuh et al., 2005). Indeed, O’Keefe (2013) argued that “the creation of a caring, supportive, and welcoming environment within the university is critical in creating a sense of belonging” (p. 605).

While these programs are undoubtedly beneficial, they ignore the physical environment and its benefits for belongingness. Specifically, higher education professionals commonly overlook the role of the college union facility in fostering a sense of belonging and happiness on campus and the successful and timely attainment of the degree (Tierno, 2013a). The college union building exists for the use of the entire campus community long after the rituals and first-year programs conclude and has the potential to influence sense of belonging not just for first-year students but for all students regardless of their time to completion (ACUI, 2018; Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2020; Tierno, 2013a).
Commonly referred to as the ‘living room of campus,’ the college union building serves as the heart of the university campus community and enhances the student experience (ACUI, 2018). In addition to providing services and facilities that meet the campus community’s needs, the college union also serves as a site for various social, recreational, cultural, and educational programs (ACUI, 2018; Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2020; Rouzer et al., 2014). Historically, the college union has always been more than a physical space; it blends physical space with a learning-centered environment (Butts, 2012). Further, it serves as a community center for campus rooted in student involvement and recreation (Barrett, 2014, 2016; Rouzer et al., 2014). Finally, complementing the institution’s academic mission, the college union provides learning opportunities for students outside the classroom (Butts, 2012; Rullman & Harrington, 2014; Smyth, 2016).

Whether inside or outside of the classroom, research indicated that environments affect individuals and their behavior, and, in turn, individuals affect their environments (Banning & Kaiser, 1974; Banning & Strange, 2015; Kuk et al., 2010). In the postsecondary context, scholars interpreted this to mean that characteristics of the campus environment influence the student postsecondary experience (Banning & Strange, 2001, 2015; Moos, 1979; Museus et al., 2017, 2018). Described as a campus ecology framework, scholars explored how campus environments’ four aspects- physical, organizational, human aggregate, and constructed- influenced the student experience (Banning & Strange, 2001, 2015; Moos, 1979). In addition, studies analyzed how these aspects enhanced or hindered a student’s ability to learn and succeed (Banning & Strange, 2015; Perez, 2020a, 2020b). For example, Scott-Webber, Strickland, and Kapitula (2013) found that the classroom layout increased student perceptions of their engagement, their ability to earn higher grades, and enhanced motivation for attendance.
Furthermore, students who feel they belong in their learning environment will also experience better learning outcomes (Strayhorn, 2019). Conversely, if a student feels like an outsider, they may struggle to reach similar outcomes. These concepts apply to the college union as well. Smyth (2016) described the college union as a “laboratory of learning.” This depiction means the college union provides the environment for students to “practice, apply, and rehearse” both personal and professional learning outcomes such as leadership, critical thinking, civil discourse, or project management via opportunities like student organization involvement, employment, or simply visiting the space to fulfill basic needs (Maki, 2004; Smyth, 2017). This study explores the potential the college union possesses to influence student sense of belonging through the lens of campus ecology because it is an underrepresented focus in postsecondary literature and practice.

**Rationale for Study**

Porter Butts, a pillar of the college union movement, published *The College Union Idea* in 1971 as a “story of an adventurous idea in education” (Butts, 2012, p. 7).¹ Butts (2012) told the history and philosophy of the college union because he believed too few people understood

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¹ In 2017, ACUI learned of Porter Butts’ affiliation with a non-secretive honors society of fraternity men called The Ku Klux Klan Interfraternity Society during his time as an undergraduate member of Alpha Tau Omega in 1922. The association tasked a work group to investigate Butts’ involvement with the organization and write a full report. The University of Wisconsin archives suggested that the society was not associated with the national Knights of the Ku Klux Klan organization. In 1923, the society changed its name to “Tumas” due to confusion with the national organization. Years later, Porter Butts wrote a letter to the University of Wisconsin’s Alumni Association clarifying the society’s function and described the former name as “curious, irrelevant, and very unfortunate” (ACUI, 2023). After a thorough investigation, the association’s working group found no definitive evidence that Butts was or was not racist and recommended the Board of Trustees retain Butts’ name on one of its most prestigious awards that ACUI grants, the Butts-Whiting Award. As a result of this incident, the working group authored a new procedure for naming awards in the future.
the role of the college union and its potential. He argued it was an oversimplification to consider the college union merely a building with auxiliary services; instead, its primary purpose was education (Butts, 2012). He described the college union as an organization demonstrating “a well-considered plan for the community life of the college” (Butts, 2012, p.8). Butts’ philosophy carried the college union through the challenges and successes of several generations of higher education (Knell & Latta, 2005). Over 50 years later, scholars and practitioners remain dedicated to developing well-considered plans in their work (Banks et al., 2014; Barrett, 2014; Harrington, 2014; Maxwell, 2016; Rullman & Harrington, 2014).

This study is necessary because the value of the college union to the community life of the college and its academic mission are still underrepresented and underappreciated. Regrettably, the value of the college union facility is rarely discussed in academia, as evidenced by the scarcity of empirical research on this topic that is limited to master and doctoral theses. To illustrate this point, Barrett (2014) found that only 23 dissertations about the role of the college union were published over 30 years. In contrast, nearly 50 dissertations regarding university housing were completed in just five years (Barrett, 2014). One possible explanation for the shortage of research focused on the college union could be the nature of the work. Since college union work is a blend of student development and facility operations, the existing scholar-practitioners in college unions rarely have the time to continue researching, writing, and submitting manuscripts to academic journals once they receive their doctorate (S. Chaplin, personal communication, February 9, 2022). Regardless of the reason, this study seeks to contribute to the limited literature on belongingness in the college union. The work of college union professionals and the influence of the physical space of this unique facility on student
success deserves more attention. The story of the college union must be told to a broader audience.

Despite the paucity of empirical evidence on the importance of the college union, extant research is promising insofar as positioning the college union as a community-building force on campus. For instance, one quantitative study found a statistically significant relationship between student satisfaction with the college union facility and their satisfaction with a sense of community on campus (Barrett, 2016). Another qualitative study suggested that when the college union serves as a safe and inclusive environment, students feel more comfortable and can then focus their attention on engagement opportunities that build their overall sense of community and, ultimately, their academic success (Camputaro, 2018). While the studies mentioned above refer to sense of community, this study explores the concept of sense of belonging. Sense of community and sense of belonging are interrelated concepts, upon which I expand below.

Though sense of community is strongly associated with sense of belonging, each term has a distinct meaning. Four elements comprise sense of community: 1) a feeling of belonging or membership to the group, 2) a sense that one matters to the group and influences the members, 3) a sense that the group will meet one’s needs through the shared resources belonging to it, and lastly 4) a shared emotional connection through experiences, shared history, time together, and common places (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Also multifaceted, sense of belonging as it relates to the college environment includes a student’s perception of connection, group social support, feelings of respect, value, acceptance, and mattering (Strayhorn, 2019). Students who feel belonging and community are more likely to persist and graduate (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Kitchen & Williams, 2019; Museus et al., 2017; O’Keefe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). As such, belonging is a critical factor in student success. Inherent in the college
union’s mission is fostering belonging and community (ACUI, 2018; Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2020).

To reiterate Porter Butt’s (2012) stance, the college union is more than just a building. On the one hand, the college union is a multipurpose facility and centralized hub that hosts a variety of programs, meetings, events, and services (Rullman & Harrington, 2014). Indeed, the college union provides such spaces and services as lounges, dining, recreational spaces like game rooms or esports rooms, ballrooms, dance or fitness rooms, meeting rooms, identity centers, and information desks (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2020). On the other hand, C. Shaw Smith, the first union director at Davidson College, described the college union as “the house of serendipity” (ACUI, 2018). He wrote, “You go for one thing and you get more than you bargained for. It’s inescapable. It gets into your head and into your heart, and you’re never quite the same again. The right Union will change you” (Minnesota State University Mankato, 2022). The synergy of the services, spaces, programs, and serendipity affect student success (Lang, 2020; Paynter, 2021; Reif, 2014b; Smyth, 2017; Tierno, 2013b). The college union is an essential site for student learning, development, and community building (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2020). This study considers this point more through empirical research.

**Purpose of Study**

Ahn and Davis (2020) found that a student’s surroundings (i.e., living spaces) were an important domain for developing a sense of belonging. Campus ecology framework suggests that physical spaces communicate via non-verbal cues that signal behavior, emotions, or actions (Rapoport, 1982). Moreover, artifacts send important messages about the organizational culture and values (Gagliardi, 1990). As such, college union professionals must explore the messages the
facility and its artifacts send to their students, primarily since it has been determined that space communicates differently to different individuals to achieve value alignment (Kuk et al., 2010). The purpose of this study is to elucidate the essence of undergraduate student belongingness in the college union. In particular, this study focuses on a college union located on the campus of a public, regional university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Further, this study aims to explore the variety of ways that the physical space of the union does (or does not) influence sense of belonging for a diverse sampling of undergraduate students at a regional university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States.

**Research Questions**

As previously stated, this research illustrates the critical role that college unions play in influencing sense of belonging for students who are part of a particular campus community. Two research questions will guide this qualitative study:

1. How do undergraduate students enrolled at a public, regional university in the mid-Atlantic experience belongingness, particularly in the college union?
2. Which specific elements of space enhance or diminish students’ sense of belonging in the college union, and how do they do so?

The first research question explores if and how research participants experience a sense of belonging in the college union. For example, does the Commuter Center make them feel welcome and comfortable, or does the space communicate a sense of discomfort, exclusivity, or bias? Elements of the space, such as furniture, signage, or art on the walls may support or detract from a student’s sense of comfort, belonging, or mattering (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Banning & Strange, 2015). This concept leads to the second research question.
The second research question narrows down the responses from the first question to pinpoint the physical characteristics within the spaces around the college union that promote or hinder sense of belonging. Whereas scholars such as Tinto (1987, 1996), Astin (1984, 1999), and Osterman (2000) have explored the role that qualitative factors such as academic and social engagement play in influencing sense of belonging, Ahn and Davis (2020), suggested two more domains that influence belonging: surroundings and personal apace. In this study, I seek to understand specifically what elements of students’ surroundings influence belonging for this second research question. For example, I wonder if the tone and appearance of the signage in the space are harsh or uninviting. By gathering data via interviews and photo-elicitation and analyzing themes from participants’ responses, I hope to shed light upon the research questions mentioned above and make recommendations for how college union professionals can create and sustain more inclusive environments. In the following section, I detail the research methods I have selected for this qualitative study.

**Rationale for Methods**

Sense of belonging is a qualitative experience; thus, this study calls for a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is “a broad approach to the study of social phenomena” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 3). Marshall and Rossman (2016) characterized qualitative research as taking place in the natural world, using multiple interactive, humanistic methods, focusing on context, being fundamentally interpretive, and being emergent rather than tightly prefigured. This is an appropriate research approach for the dynamic setting of the college union.

The college union is the opposite of “tightly prefigured.” In other words, its whole purpose is achieved in both intentional planning and the spontaneity of human nature. Described as the house of serendipity (Minnesota State University Mankato, 2022), the college union serves
as the location for bountiful human interactions worth studying, from human-environment interaction (Godfrey, 2018; Harrington, 2014; Maxwell, 2016) to the influence of student employment (Ducatt, 2014), and its role in building a sense community (Camputaro, 2017, 2018; Reif, 2014b, 2014a; Smyth, 2016, 2017). Furthermore, the history of college unions in the United States is rich in human stories (Butts, 2012). Qualitative research, including semi-structured interviews and participant-driven photo-elicitation, brings those stories to the academy to inform and improve future practice.

Positionality

I am a white, cis-gender, heterosexual, working mother, and wife. I was born and raised in a small borough in northeastern Pennsylvania, where most families resembled mine. The values guiding my work and educational pursuits are based on my Catholic upbringing, including Jesuit and Augustinian teachings. Inspired by my high school’s model of educating “men and women for others,” I felt called to a career in education, helping students by using my strengths. As a college union professional, I can combine my research interests, strengths, and career to work toward equity in the success of all students. I believe I have a moral obligation to evaluate the efficacy of the unions in which I work to ensure that they live up to their mission of instilling belongingness, inclusion, and community building. I contribute to student success by adapting the facility to meet the needs of as many students and community members as possible. As an emerging leader in the college union movement, I am well-suited to conduct this study because it offers not only the opportunity to study my passion area in great depth but also allows me to use data to inform my work going forward.
Significance of Study

This study is important because community (and therefore belonging) and the spaces in which they are built touch everyone in some way. Belonging is a fundamental, relational human motivation (Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2022). Where humans gather, belonging plays a critical role in community building, in which individuals share a common purpose, shared values, and agreement on goals (Tierno, 2013). Since humans are inherently motivated to belong, belonging matters in every community, from neighborhoods, churches, sports teams, and social circles to the campus environment. The qualities of the spaces in which communities take shape also play a role in influencing belonging or isolation (Banning, 2018; Banning & Strange, 2015; Rapoport, 1982). On the college campus, the layout of the campus and the buildings that create the physical embodiment of the institution factor into a student’s feeling of inclusion, mattering, and community (Banning & Kaiser, 1974; Kuk et al., 2010). All students deserve to feel like they matter and belong at their institution.

The influence of belonging is growing in recognition among postsecondary administrators, as evidenced by their strategic priorities and professional development opportunities. For example, one state system in the mid-Atlantic region hosted an annual diversity, equity, and inclusion summit in which the theme wondered what it means to belong (PA State System of Higher Education, 2022). The summit aimed to share ideas about cultivating relationships and building equity-minded communities where students, faculty, and staff could belong and thrive (PA State System of Higher Education, 2022). As the state system’s DEI summit indicated, more research is needed to ensure the spaces meet the needs and sense of belonging of the continually diversified population (PA State System of Higher Education, 2022).
As the landscape of higher education evolved, the purpose of the college union adapted while staying true to its origin. The college union builds community, strives to meet students’ needs via services, amenities, programs, and activities (Barrett, 2016), and complements the institution’s academic mission (Johnson, 2019). However, as college student demographics shift, so too must college union professionals’ understanding of the effect of the college union (Banks et al., 2014). Creating and sustaining inclusive environments is within our control as college union professionals. As a result, college union professionals have a unique and important role in student success. This study seeks student input on their experiences of belonging in one college union in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. that could inform future research and practice in college unions of comparable size and type.

Summary

In this chapter, I began with a broad explanation of the “enrollment cliff” threatening postsecondary education and mentioned how the value of a bachelor’s degree, student retention, and degree completion comes into focus in such a tenuous situation. I challenged the notion that the postsecondary experience is limited to career preparation. Instead, I pointed out the personal and intellectual growth opportunities that higher education provides, despite the prioritization of degree completion and its use as a measure of institutional quality. Next, I explained how sense of belonging is a critical factor in encouraging student persistence and graduation with examples of curricular and co-curricular initiatives aimed toward positive student outcomes. Then, I highlighted how the college union is missing from the value proposition of the college experience. Next, I explained the purpose of my study and shared two research questions that will guide my study. Finally, I justified why this study matters in the scope of higher education and the college union movement.
The next chapter provides a literature review and conceptual framework that provides the context necessary for this dissertation.
Chapter 2

This chapter is composed of two portions: The first section is a literature review that examines (a) the origin of the college union and the role of the college union in campus community, (b) empirical research on the college union, and (c) recommendations for meeting the needs of a diverse student population. In the second section, I present a conceptual framework that connects college student sense of belonging theory (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2022) with campus ecology framework (Banning & Kaiser, 1974; Banning & Strange, 2001, 2015; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989; Kuk et al., 2010) to provide the lens through which I conducted this study. This section also includes a visual figure of the conceptual framework and concludes with a chapter summary.

Literature Review

This literature review begins with the history of the college union movement and works toward the contemporary concerns presented via recent research. This portion of Chapter 2 is divided into three sections that start with the origin of the college union movement and conclude with the contemporary concerns for the role of the college union. First, I introduce the origins of the college union, which began in England as debate societies at Oxford and Cambridge Universities. The discussion continues with the role of the college union on college campuses in the United States. The role of the college union is that of a student-centered, welcoming environment that serves as a gathering place for all members of the campus community and furthers the institution’s academic mission through programs, facilities, and services (ACUI, 2018; Rouzer et al., 2014). Second, I share extant empirical research about the college union’s impact on the college experience. As previously discussed, college union literature is sparse, so this section presents research gathered primarily from doctoral dissertations due to the lack of
peer-reviewed publications on this topic. Finally, I highlight the recommendations for research and practice to improve the college union by focusing more on students from diverse populations. This literature review is intended to provide the information necessary to understand the context of this dissertation.

**Origin and Role of the College Union**

The original purpose of the college union has always been to provide more than just a physical space; rooted in creating a time and place for student involvement and recreation (Rouzer et al., 2014), the college union also served as a community center for campus (Barrett, 2014, 2016; Rouzer et al., 2014). However, it is important to note that the college union idea first began as a student organization whose purpose was unifying students with diverse opinions. As the student organization acquired their own facilities, the purpose of the college union idea transformed. I will discuss this evolution in the forthcoming section.

Even though the college student population was much more homogeneous when the first college union was built in the United States, the college union movement has been rooted in unity and respect for diversity since its inception (ACUI, 2018; Butts, 2012). Eighty years before the construction of the first college union in the United States at the University of Pennsylvania in 1896, the college union idea took shape not with the construction of a building but with the debate societies established at English universities (Butts, 2012). Enterprising students at the University of Oxford in 1812 and the University of Cambridge in 1815 desired opportunities to engage in discussion freely and openly outside of the classroom (Butts, 2012). They established the first debate societies named the Oxford Union and Cambridge Union Society, respectively, to foster unity through “the understanding of differences” (Butts, 2012, p. 17). With “union” in their names, these societies (that later became housed in dedicated buildings) were founded to
bring students together to debate and discuss their differences (Butts, 2012; Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2020). Society members discussed politics, philosophy, and history, often with an air of humor to avoid seeming pretentious (Butts, 2012).

The Oxford Union and the Cambridge Union Society had a tenuous start, however, since they lacked the support of their faculty and university administrators. Within two years, university administrators abolished the Cambridge Union Society because they considered it a distraction from academics (Butts, 2012). However, they later changed their minds based upon the belief that open discussion was the “greatest of safety-valves” and reinstated it in 1821 (Butts, 2012, p. 17). Consequently, the Cambridge Union Society could be considered the first student free speech movement on a college campus (Butts, 2012). As the college union idea transformed, it grew to encompass more than academic debate. Eventually, university administrators credited the debate societies as co-curricular training for the emerging leaders of church and state to prepare students for life in society following graduation (Butts, 2012).

As the positive reputation of the debate societies developed, the unions acquired their own buildings equipped with libraries, dining halls, and billiards rooms (Butts, 2012). Thus, the foundation of the contemporary college union took shape. However, it would still take 60 to 70 more years for the concept of the union facility to cross the Atlantic Ocean to colonial universities in the United States, such as Harvard University, Brown University, and the University of Pennsylvania (Butts, 2012; Smyth, 2017). As stated previously, the first college union building in the United States was built on the campus of The University of Pennsylvania in 1896 (Smyth, 2016). According to the Catalogue of the University of Pennsylvania, Houston Hall’s benefactors wished to create a place for all students, regardless of academic discipline to meet “on common ground” with “every available facility for passing their leisure hours in
harmless recreation and amusement” (Butts, 2012, p. 25). Like its forerunners in England, Houston Hall contained dining options, billiards, chess, and reading rooms (Butts, 2012). Further enhancements included a swimming pool, bowling alleys, an auditorium, and smaller meeting rooms (Butts, 2012).

As with Cambridge and Oxford, the mission of U.S. college unions focused on free speech, leadership development, socialization, and interpersonal skills (Butts, 2012; Knell & Latta, 2005). The college union movement expanded to include a physical space where students could further exercise their academic pursuits, seek out recreational activities, and connect with their peers (Butts, 2012; Knell & Latta, 2005). Indeed, once academic perspectives evolved to value the learning opportunities inherent in both curricular and co-curricular experiences, the college union served as one of the earliest non-classroom spaces to provide communal, experiential learning (Dahlgren et al., 2013). A review of college union literature includes over a century of college union professionals justifying the facility’s unique role at the institution to others in academia.

**The Role of the College Union Statement.** Students and college union leaders from the Midwest region of the U.S. founded the National Association of Student Unions to build a professional network of college union organizations as the college union idea gained momentum in the United States in the early 20th century (ACUI, 2022; Butts, 2012). The first gathering to discuss the emerging college union movement occurred in 1914 among nine institutions (Association of College Unions International, 2014). Attendees included eight students, a university president, a college professor, and college union personnel. By 1922, college union professionals outnumbered student members as the association evolved from an informal
network to a national association now known as the Association of College Unions International (ACUI) (Association of College Unions International, 2014).

In addition to the Association’s mission, vision, and values, members wrote the *Role of the College Union Statement* based on Porter Butt’s *The College Union Idea* to articulate ACUI’s educational philosophy. Updated in 2018, the Role statement identified the college union as the heart of the campus community that reinforces the educational mission of the institution through experiential learning (ACUI, 2018). The statement explained that the college union develops socially responsible leaders through employment and involvement experiences. Furthermore, the *Role of the College Union Statement* conveyed ACUI’s commitment to inclusion, equity, and respect by aiming to affirm the identities of all (ACUI, 2018). Recognizing that community is established through connections and relationships, the statement explained that both formal and informal interactions should be encouraged in its spaces (ACUI, 2018). Finally, the Role statement concluded with: “Traditionally considered the living room, the college union enhances the student experience and cultivates an enduring connection to the institution” (ACUI, 2018, para. 3). In other words, the college union’s function on campus extends beyond its amenities (e.g., meeting basic needs such as shelter, food, and Wi-Fi service) (Janisz, 2014). The college union serves as a site for student learning and transformation as it fosters community, inspires belonging, and supports an emotional connection between the institution and the students (Camputaro, 2018; Lang, 2020; Reif, 2014b).

Current scholarship regarding the purpose of the college union and its connection to learning and community building calls for intentionality in all areas, especially when justifying spending or working with diverse students (Banks et al., 2014; Rullman & van den Kieboom, 2015). College union professionals working with intentionality means decisions are either
mission- or data-driven with outcomes focused on student learning and meeting basic needs. Intentionality is the key to the college union maintaining relevance amid the changing landscape of higher education and contributing value to the institution’s mission.

**Empirical Research on the College Union**

Empirical research regarding the influence of the college union is limited. The dearth of literature reflects how relatively young the scholarship is despite the college union’s 126 years of contributions to the campus environment in the United States (Barrett, 2016). Moreover, nearly a decade after Barrett observed the paucity of college union scholarship, the body of literature is still growing slowly (Lang, 2020). Nevertheless, research on the influence of physical space on the development of community adds value to student affairs scholarship and helps to drive the field forward (Barrett, 2016; Harrington, 2014).

As exhibited by this literature review, scholars have spent the last 109 years asserting the value of the college union to the university via qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research and approached their studies from several topical angles. Some topics of exploration included college union student employment (Ducatt, 2014; Paynter, 2021), the college union’s effect on student retention (Tierno, 2013b), women in leadership positions in the college union (Payment, 2003), and faculty experiences in the college union (Stagni, 2019). The most explored phenomenon is that of the role of the college union in building community or in influencing student engagement (Barrett, 2014; Camputaro, 2017; Clapp, 2020; Godfrey, 2018; Harrington, 2014; Janisz, 2014; Maxwell, 2016; Smyth, 2016). This section reviews studies that focus specifically on building community or belongingness since they are the most relevant to my research question.
Purpose and Efficacy. With more than a century of college union theory and practice behind them, Janisz (2014) and Tierno (2013) conducted empirical studies to establish the core purpose and efficacy of the college union. Janisz (2014) completed a Delphi study of 22 college union and student activities directors to identify the college union’s purpose and the most common amenities and services it offered. She also sought to identify the most pressing barriers to success for the modern college union. Analysis of data revealed the following four core purposes of the college union: 1) building, creating, or fostering community, 2) acting as the welcome center of campus, 3) serving as the living room of campus, and 4) supporting student success (Janisz, 2014, p. 165), which align with the history of the college union movement described above. The data also indicated that the most important amenities offered by the college union were internet, mobile device charging stations, ATMs, coffee shops, convenience stores, and food courts (Janisz, 2014). Participants identified four constraints on the college union’s effectiveness: financial, political, knowledge, and physical. Among those barriers were maintaining aging buildings, meeting the needs of a changing student population, and keeping pace with technological advances (Janisz, 2014).

Similarly, Tierno’s (2013) mixed method study sought to identify student and staff perception of the college union facility and its programs and how their perception impacted student retention. Using a grounded theory approach that combined Boyer’s (1990) 6 Principles of Community with ACUI’s Core Competencies (ACUI, 2019), Tierno (2013) developed the Six Principles of College Union Efficacy that support student retention. The six principles are: 1) supports the academic mission of the institution, 2) enhances communication of community values, 3) is a diverse space on campus, 4) is a Community Center, 5) is a Welcome Place, and 6) celebrates traditions (Tierno, 2013, p. 77). Tierno’s six principles enhanced Janisz’s core
purposes with attention to diversity and campus traditions. Tierno (2013) argued that institutions that used his six principles to assess their programs and facilities and guide decision-making would see increased student retention.

Both studies utilized empirical data to affirm the history of the college union movement and demonstrate the college union’s unique role on campus. Indeed, both Janisz’s (2014) and Tierno’s (2017) studies demonstrated that throughout the evolution to meet the diverse needs of generations of college students, the college union has remained true to its core purpose. In addition, it has continued contributing to student retention and success through innovation and flexibility. This sentiment is echoed by Rullman and Harrington (2014), who emphasized the importance of designing and managing college union facilities with intended outcomes in mind and flexibility to be responsive year after year. Adapting with intentionality has been integral to the success of the college union; such practice will continue to maintain the college union’s value to the institution over time (Rullman & Harrington, 2014).

The Influence of Physical Space. Since learning is a social activity, belonging is crucial to the full learning experience (Rullman & Harrington, 2014). Consider the converse-- a student who feels excluded from life and learning in the college union is unlikely to take advantage of all available learning opportunities. This may take a toll on their mental and physical health, which, in turn, could hinder their academic success and retention (Rullman & Harrington, 2014). Barrett (2016) supported this concept with quantitative research on sense of community and the college union. In terms of student satisfaction, she found a strong relationship between physical space and sense of community (Barrett, 2016). Most importantly, she found that the physical space variable that had the most impact was student satisfaction with the college union (Barrett, 2016). Barrett’s findings align with Tierno’s (2017) conclusion that college union components such as
student employment experiences, student involvement opportunities, relaxing spaces for hanging out, and the overall design of the facility influence satisfaction. Barrett (2016) insisted that an investment in the college union is an investment in student success. Likewise, Johnson (2019) agreed that in fulfilling its role on campus, the college union contributes to the academic mission of the institution while also contributing to student success and retention.

Building upon Barrett’s research on the influence of student satisfaction, Camputaro (2017) added that feelings of inclusion, safety, and satisfaction further the role of the college union. He created an emergent conceptual framework called the College Union Sense of Community Actualization Model that demonstrated how college unions expedite the development of a sense of community for students. Grounded in campus ecology framework, Camputaro’s (2017) model suggested that because the college union creates a home-like environment that influences a student’s sense of inclusion and safety, students can then focus their attention on getting engaged in sub-communities, which builds their overall sense of community, and ultimately, their academic success. Thus far, the research has focused solely on the student’s perception of the college union’s purpose. Other college union scholars explored the college union’s influence on building and sustaining community among users.

Maxwell (2016) examined the relationship between the student union and its impact on building community. Also grounded in campus ecology framework, Maxwell (2016) argued that interactions in physical spaces such as the college union create connections among students. These connections create positive engagement which then fosters a sense of belonging and success. Therefore, special attention to physical space is critical. To determine how notions of community appear in the planning process and use of a student union, Maxwell (2016)
performed a qualitative case study in the student center at a large public research institution that was expanded and renovated in 2015.

Maxwell’s qualitative study had two parts: semi-structured interviews and observations. First, Maxwell interviewed individuals on the student union’s renovation planning committee. Next, he completed post-occupancy observations of how students used two particular spaces in the union, the Monumental Stairway and the Student Organization Center, after the renovation. The two methods allowed the author to determine the congruence between the intent of the physical space during the planning process and its actual use after the renovation’s conclusion. Although the planning committee members never explicitly defined community, study participants stated they deliberately worked to create a space where students could connect using a set of six guidelines they developed after consulting the campus community’s needs (Maxwell, 2016). Through his observations, Maxwell (2016) noted that students (generally representing the demographics of the entire population) exhibited feelings of ownership and belonging over the space. In the two spaces, he observed students alone and in groups participating in various activities such as talking, studying, and sleeping. Overall, Maxwell (2016) concluded that the intentional design of the Student Center positively affected community.

Clapp (2020) also studied the influence a renovated college union had on creating a sense of community. His mixed methods action research project combined surveys, semi-structured focus groups, and a mapping exercise to explore student use and perception of the physical environment of the college union. Clapp (2020) utilized Bitner’s (1992) physical environment typology to code participant responses. The three types of physical environments were 1) spatial layout and functioning (e.g., traffic and seating), 2) ambient conditions (e.g., natural light, nature, temperature, and sound), and 3) signs, symbols, and artifacts (Bitner, 1992). Clapp (2020) found
a significant relationship between hours spent in the college union and a positive sense of community. However, he found that students identifying as LGBTQIA+ had a negative sense of community despite reporting spending many hours in the pride center of the college union. Clapp (2020) discussed his findings with the director of the pride center, who surmised that LGBTQIA+ identifying students’ negative sense of community was a broader issue at the university rather than sense of community specifically in the student union. This differentiation between university sense of community and college union sense of community has inspired me to focus more specifically on sense of belonging in the college union. In other words, do students feel like they belong in the college union facility specifically or do they feel belonging in other ways and spaces and establish community elsewhere on campus?

Harrington (2014) also explored the role of physical space on student involvement and community through ethnography. Employing photo-elicitation and semi-structured interviews, Harrington worked with nine students with at least two years of experience on campus at a highly selective research university in the southeast United States. The study asked about the participants’ perceptions of safety, inclusion, and involvement related to community. Harrington (2014) asked the participants to take photographs of areas of interest across campus and areas they tend to avoid. Semi-structured interviews then allowed the participants to describe and explain the photos and their meaning. Harrington (2014) found that some of the spaces that students valued most were outdoor spaces, student organization offices, academic facilities, and recreational areas. In addition, the students reported that they could establish meaningful connections with their peers through interactions in those spaces (Harrington, 2014).

Regarding safety, the participants shared that they felt physically safe overall and struggled to name a place where they felt unsafe or vulnerable (Harrington, 2014). Students also
reported feeling psychologically safe in restorative spaces like the college union. Harrington defined restorative spaces as “environments where individuals feel relaxed, comfortable, and engaged” (p. 19). Like Camputaro’s (2017) and Maxwell’s (2016) research, Harrington’s (2014) research connected safety, involvement, and the development of community. She wrote, “The natural and built environments influence how students discovered, built, and sustained community at Francis University” (Harrington, 2014, p. 80).

Harrington’s findings indicate that physical space alone does not create community; involvement is required. This aligns with scholars like Smyth (2016) who conducted a study on award-winning community-building college union facilities. Smyth (2016) noted that he expected to hear the terms “belong” or “mattering” from the students he interviewed but it seldom came up in his data collection and analysis. Instead, participants used terms such as gathering, interaction, conversation, or connectedness to describe how they made meaning of their community (Smyth, 2016). Smyth (2016) interpreted this to mean students seek engaging experiences instead of simply a welcoming space.

While the extant research indicated that physical space alone is not contributing to retention or student satisfaction, my main argument is that the influence of physical space deserves more emphasis in the literature. I agree that student involvement is integral to building community and fostering sense of belonging; however, the treatment of involvement as the key variable to community building and sense of belonging places the burden on the student instead of the professional and the institution. The influence of physical space should not be underestimated, especially considering how space communicates messages (Banning, 2018; Banning & Strange, 2015). Moreover, college union professionals have control over creating and
fostering a safe, inclusive, restorative space that fosters community. Herein lies the crux of my study.

**Recommendations for Meeting the Needs of a Diverse Student Population**

To reiterate, the extant literature on the college union demonstrates the value of the college union and pushes the college union movement forward as the higher education landscape evolves. However, the tension in the college union literature mirrors the tension in college union practice. The college union has been slow to address the unique needs of students from marginalized identities. However, the *Role of the College Union Statement* espouses an inclusive space that affirms all identities (Banks et al., 2014). After 30 years of studies that established the value of the college union to the campus community, contemporary research appears just now to tackle more critical concerns such as the role the college union plays in instilling a sense of belonging for students with historically marginalized identities (Lang, 2020). As college enrollment trends evolve and the student body gets increasingly diverse, college union research must keep pace with the needs of the diverse student population to fulfill its mission honestly (Banks et al., 2014).

Indeed, Janisz (2014) identified residential and traditional-aged undergraduate students as the college union’s most commonly served students, which aligns with the history of higher education. However, little research focuses directly on the relationship between the college union and students who hold historically marginalized identities.

Though some students visit the college union for merely transactional tasks, architects and college union professionals aim to design optimal environments for engagement that invite all students to stay and learn (Camputaro, 2017). After analyzing a few behavioral theories, Rullman and Harrington (2014) concluded that environmental and architectural theories alone
cannot explain human behavior because college students are so diverse. The way students interact with space varies from theoretical predictions based on their diverse needs or cultural conditioning (Rullman & Harrington, 2014). Similarly, Banks et al. (2014) affirmed that students from historically marginalized groups have different needs and attitudes toward the college union. They urged college union professionals to prepare for the diverse student body headed to college in the coming years (Banks et al., 2014). To accomplish this goal, college union scholar-practitioners can look at research outside the confines of the college union to examine best practices and models for cultivating culturally engaging campus environments that foster sense of belonging for students from historically marginalized identities (Museus et al., 2017, 2018; Museus & Chang, 2021).

Three more recent dissertations lead the conversation on the extent to which the college union supports students who hold historically marginalized identities. Lang’s (2020) study on the impact of college union involvement on sense of belonging and campus climate found that “college unions are currently failing to consistently demonstrate to students of color and international students, through programs, services, policies, and procedures, that the organization is committed to and values historically underrepresented cultures” (p. 116). Similarly, Clapp’s (2020) study concerning the influence of the physical environment on students’ sense of campus community in a renovated college union building found that students who identified as LGBTQIA+ have a lower sense of campus community than participants who identified as heterosexual. Participants who identified as adult learners also indicated a lower sense of campus community (Clapp, 2020). Previous research that indicated the potential for the college union to build community and foster sense of belonging successfully involved mostly white students.
Future research must continue Lang and Clapp’s work by intentionally focusing on participants from minoritized populations.

For example, in her dissertation regarding the impact of the college union on student engagement at a historically Black university, Godfrey (2018) found that participants regarded the union as a destination for services, a home for events, and a location for fellowship. Participants also indicated that the HBCU college union was a safe space for engagement away from their residences and classrooms (Godfrey, 2018). Despite the tension presented in this literature review, Godfrey’s findings indicate that the college union movement is still relevant and successful. However, this chapter of the story of the role of the college union needs more authors to join her, Lang, and Clapp.

This literature review summarized the limited empirical research regarding the influence of the college union on building a sense of community. It also highlighted the need for further research targeting students from historically marginalized racial and social identities. In the following section, I discuss the theoretical framework upon which the study rests.

**Conceptual Framework**

This theoretical framework encompasses two concepts: college student sense of belonging theory and campus ecology framework. Scholars use theory to help others come closer to understanding the complex world we inhabit (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). Brookfield (2017) defined theory as “nothing more (or less) than a set of explanatory understandings that help us make sense of some aspect of the world” (p.171). In higher education, scholars and practitioners use theories as a guide to inform their work. A theoretical or conceptual framework is the unique way a researcher combines interdisciplinary theories and concepts that give their study structure and serve as a lens for data coding and analysis (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). The conceptual
framework allows researchers to position their study within the body of established scholarship and explain how they will approach all aspects of the project and why it matters (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). The purpose of this section is to describe the theories and concepts that compose the conceptual framework that guides this dissertation. I will integrate the concepts of college student sense of belonging theory and campus ecology framework to support the exploration of my research questions. All other aspects of my doctoral study will be built upon the foundation of these two concepts in connection with one another.

**College Student Sense of Belonging Theory**

Theoretical perspectives of belongingness are found in psychology, evolutionary theory, social cognitive neuroscience, and psychosocial development (Vaccaro & Newman, 2022). All align with the idea that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation (Vaccaro & Newman, 2022). My research is grounded in the psychological perspective of belongingness because that is the perspective scholars used when introducing belongingness to higher education. Psychologists and educators established sense of belonging as a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019) that motivates individuals to seek affiliation with others (McClelland, 1961; Murray, 1938).

Maslow (1968) furthered this theory stating that the need to belong motivated humans toward growth. In a pyramid-shaped hierarchy of basic human needs, Maslow (1954) placed belongingness third behind physiological and safety needs. Only when the need to belong is satisfied can an individual focus on higher-level needs such as creativity, innovation, or self-actualization (Maslow, 1954). Synthesizing existing research on sense of belonging, Strayhorn (2019) defined it as “student’s perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation or connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued
by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (p. 28). This definition draws from previous scholars such as Schlossberg (1989) and Hausmann et al. (2009) to give a comprehensive description of the concept of sense of belonging.

While Hausmann et al. (2009) related sense of belonging to “fitting in,” Strayhorn (2019) argued that it is more about finding community and acceptance for being one’s authentic self than simply “fitting in.” On the other end of the belongingness spectrum is marginalization, isolation, or alienation (Strayhorn, 2019). Strayhorn (2019) also explained that students’ social identities intersect and influence their sense of belonging. Students’ intersecting identities are hard to isolate to pinpoint a particular behavior, feeling, or belief (Strayhorn, 2019). Sense of belonging is essential in settings where individuals are inclined to feel alienated or uncomfortable (Strayhorn, 2019). Feelings of marginalization occur commonly during transition periods (Schlossberg, 1989), such as first-year students adjusting to college life or in environments in which the student holds non-majority identities, such as students of color attending a predominately white institution (PWI).

Needs are domain- and situation-specific (Maslow, 1968). Students will function better in a setting where their needs are met (Osterman, 2000). As such, students may experience belongingness in the college union instead of the classroom (Strayhorn, 2019). Furthermore, students who experience connection, belonging, and caring are happier and function better than those who experience isolation and intimidation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Strayhorn, 2019). Only when educators understand how sense of belonging is developed can they design better programs, services, and policies that foster a sense of belonging in students (Vaccaro &

**Campus Ecology Framework**

Ecological models of human development offer insight into how the interaction between people and their environments influences their growth and development (Evans et al., 2010). Aligned with Bronfenbrenner’s (1989) ecological systems model, the campus ecology framework focuses explicitly on the relationship between college students and the higher education environment (Banning & Strange, 2015), making it appropriate for studying the relationship between students and the college union. The campus ecology framework explores the reciprocal relationship between the college student and their campus environment (Banning & Kaiser, 1974; Banning & Strange, 2001; Evans et al., 2010). The campus ecology framework is an ecological approach to student development that supports interpreting the processes (not the outcomes) related to student development and human behavior (Banning & Bryner, 2001; Evans et al., 2010). Banning and Kaiser (1974) introduced campus ecology theory into student affairs, followed by further development by Strange and Banning (2001, 2015). Strange and Banning (2015) presented four components of the human environment that influence human behavior: physical, human aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed. First, they define the physical environment component as the built environment, both natural and designed landscapes, and human-made objects and artifacts (Banning & Strange, 2015). Second, the aggregate environment component states that environments are “transmitted through people” and considers the characteristics of the humans that inhabit the environment (Banning & Strange, 2015, p. 51). Next, the organizational environment encompasses the structure and processes created to achieve certain goals (Banning & Strange, 2015). Finally, the socially constructed environment
incorporates the consensus of individuals who perceive and determine a setting’s climate or culture (Banning & Strange, 2015). This conceptual framework primarily focuses on the physical environment because I am interested in how aspects of the physical environment (such as signage or décor) interact with and influence students’ sense of belonging.

The physical environment component of the campus ecology framework focuses on the transactional (i.e., mutually influential) relationship between humans and the social and physical aspects of their environment or place (Strange & Banning, 2015). Strange & Banning (2015) defined place as the interplay between the built environment and the “people-made objects” and “artifacts of material culture” that make up the campus and interact with the people who visit (p. 12). The authors stated that the layout, location, arrangement, facilities, artifacts, and behavioral traces left behind by other people send visitors functional or symbolic non-verbal messages (Strange & Banning, 2015). They explained:

Messages of material artifacts can signal a sense of belonging (or rejection), a feeling of being welcomed (or ignored), a sense of safety (or risk), and a sense of role, worth, and value (Banning et al., 2008), enhancing or detracting from student’s ability to cope with college stress. (Strange & Banning, 2015, p. 31).

Contrary to student development theories describing the outcomes, ecology theories describe the process of student development (i.e., the “why and how” rather than the “what”) (Evans et al., 2010, p. 173). Equipped with an understanding of the process, “student affairs educators can use ecological models to understand how student development may occur and also to consider how campus environments can be shaped to promote optimal growth and development” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 159). The ways college union professionals shape the college union environment to promote student growth and development is a foundational concept
for my study as I aim to explore the extent to which the college union fosters sense of belonging in students. I selected Strange and Banning’s campus ecology theory for my conceptual framework because of its specificity to the college environment and students. In the next section, I will draw connections between sense of belonging theory and campus ecology framework.

**Connecting College Student Sense of Belonging and Campus Ecology**

Campus ecology theory is not intended to determine student outcomes but offers guidance on achieving those outcomes (Evans et al., 2010). Sense of belonging is part of a larger motivational framework that posits that individuals have needs that lead to peak functioning when satisfied or substandard functioning when left unmet (Strayhorn, 2019). Campus ecology framework and sense of belonging theory can work in tandem to offer insight into how the physical environment can be shaped to influence positive outcomes for students on the path toward graduation, such as persistence, curricular and co-curricular success, and greater social engagement and involvement (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2019).

Figure 1 below depicts how aspects of the physical environment, including its layout, location, arrangement, facilities, artifacts, and behavioral traces may send non-verbal messages to individuals occupying the space. In the case of the college union and my proposed study, the individuals are students. The box on the left lists aspects of place, such as layout, location, arrangement, facilities, artifacts, and behavioral traces that send functional or symbolic non-verbal messages to individuals in that space (Strange & Banning, 2015). For example, the type of furniture, such as a soft armchair, and its arrangement can send a functional, non-verbal message of comfort and an invitation to sit and stay for a while. On the other hand, a plastic folding chair can send the opposite non-verbal message: “Sit for a moment, accomplish your task, and be on
your way.” The arrow connecting the Place box to the Person box represents the non-verbal messages.

The box on the right depicts Strayhorn’s (2019) enhanced hierarchy of needs for college student sense of belonging, which posits that students can reach their fullest potential (thereby achieving the institution’s educational mission) when their basic needs are met first. Those needs start with physiological needs and build to safety and security, then love and belongingness. This study focuses on the need for belongingness and connects aspects of place to belongingness, thereby demonstrating the role of place in influencing a student’s sense of belonging.

Through a campus ecology framework, the campus ecology either meets or does not meet a student’s needs (Strange & Banning, 2015). Therefore, my research regarding the college union rests upon the environment of the college union fostering a student’s sense of belonging and supporting their optimal functioning (reaching their fullest potential) to illustrate the importance of the role of the college union.

**Figure 1**

*Physical Environment and Sense of Belonging Conceptual Framework*
As Strayhorn (2019) theorized that social identities intersect and affect sense of belonging, Vaccaro and Newman (2022, 2016) also linked a student’s sense of belonging to their social identities and the subtle forms of oppression they may experience. They argued that strategies to foster belonging must also be nuanced to address systems of oppression embedded in the environment and biases enacted in relationships held by campus community members. This inherent tie between belonging and social identities inspired my work. If the college union fulfills the need for belonging, students can focus on higher-order needs. However, suppose the college union fails to address embedded oppression in its physical or social environments. In that case, it thwarts student success and cannot claim that it upholds its departmental mission of building community and a welcoming environment for all.

Strayhorn (2019) joined his definition of sense of belonging with Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of basic human needs to illustrate college students’ sense of belonging and demonstrate the critical role belonging plays in a college student’s success. Students must satisfy their need to belong before they can tend to higher-order needs (Strayhorn, 2019). For this reason, Strayhorn (2019) asserted that a college or university could only fulfill its educational mission when students feel like they belong. This concept supports my argument that the college union is a vital resource in fulfilling the mission of the institution. As a scholar-practitioner, college student sense of belonging theory and campus ecology framework help me make sense of the college environment, communicate that sense to others, and inform future actions (Brookfield, 2017).

Summary

In this chapter, I presented a literature review in three sections and a conceptual framework. In the literature review, I first summarized the origins of the college union
movement from its debate society roots to its establishment as a campus facility. I also described the role of the college union on a college campus as a student-centered learning community. Next, I shared the results of several empirical studies that explored the relationship between the physical environment of the college union and a student’s sense of community. Finally, I highlighted calls for future research and practice that meet the needs of students from historically marginalized identities for the college union to continue fulfilling its mission as an inclusive community.

In the conceptual framework section, I defined college student sense of belonging theory and campus ecology framework and explained how they both connected to the college union’s purpose. This conceptual framework will serve as a lens through which I will explore student sense of belonging in the Golden College Union. I will describe my research methods and qualitative approach in the next chapter.
Chapter 3

This study explored the essence of undergraduate student belongingness in the college union. The setting for this study was a college union on the campus of a public, regional university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, to which I assigned the pseudonym Golden College Union. In this chapter, I discuss the qualitative methodology used to explore sense of belonging among students in the Golden College Union. The chapter begins with descriptions of the setting and the participants. Then, the chapter describes the research design, coding procedures, and data analysis. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of the study’s limitations. As previously stated, this study endeavored to answer the following questions:

1. How do undergraduate students enrolled at a public, regional university in the mid-Atlantic experience belongingness, particularly in the college union?
2. Which elements of space enhance or diminish students’ sense of belonging in the college union, and how do they do so?

Description of the Setting

The setting for this qualitative study was a college union Golden College Union (a pseudonym), which is positioned on the campus of Golden University, a public, regional university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Golden University enrolls approximately 14,500 undergraduate students and 2,800 graduate students. The institution offers 70 undergraduate degree programs, 44 graduate degree programs, and 60 certificate programs across seven schools and colleges. Golden College Union (GCU) is located within one mile of the downtown area of the college town and 25 miles from a major metropolitan city. Though GCU is self-described as the hub of community life on the campus, its physical location is not central to the campus. Instead, it is situated on the outside edge of the central portion of campus,
adjacent to the Graduate Admissions building and across the street from a residence hall tucked between two academic buildings. During the academic year, the building is open seven days per week as early as 7:30 a.m. and as late as 11:00 p.m. Golden College Union features four floors of common spaces, offices, meeting rooms, a food court, and multipurpose spaces. Figures 2-5 below are maps of the building organized by floor. However, this description of the setting is organized thematically by type of space and its amenities instead of by floor. Therefore, the figures will appear in floor order after one or more of the spaces on that floor are mentioned thematically.

According to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, “contemporary college union buildings in the U.S. vary from historical campus structures with antiquated infrastructure to the newly constructed contemporary structures that are equipped with the most up-to-date technology, equipment, and sustainable design” (2020, p. 9). Golden College Union lies somewhere in between these two parameters. The facility was constructed in the mid-1970s and partially renovated in 1995 and 2017. Parts of the building’s infrastructure need replacement (e.g., the HVAC system and furniture). In contrast, other parts were improved recently (e.g., the roof, wooden soundproofing panels in the ballroom, food court, and information desk). Additionally, new audio-visual technology was installed to facilitate hybrid meetings during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, Golden College Union leadership made several aesthetic improvements such as artwork, painting, and signage in the last four years to breathe new life into the space and make it more inviting for visitors. Still, room exists for improvement.

The mission of Golden College Union is to create a “vibrant campus community through excellent programs and services.” The staff of the Golden College Union department aligns its
mission statement with that of the university by encouraging and providing an environment where everyone on campus can gather to participate and learn through diversity and co-curricular experiences. Members of the university and surrounding communities are invited to make use of the facility’s services, conveniences, and facilities. For example, students, faculty, staff, and guests can use the ATM, shop at the campus store (see Figure 2), dine at the food court (see Figure 3), host or attend events in our spaces, and relax in the common areas. A coffee shop, lactation room, Commuter Center, computer lab, and prayer and meditation space complete the roster of amenities on the ground and third floors (see Figures 2 and 5).

**Figure 2**

*Golden College Union Map - Ground Floor*
Golden College Union houses several university departments and identity-based centers from the divisions of student affairs and academic affairs. Student affairs departments that support off-campus and commuter life, student organizations, and fraternity and sorority life share a suite on the second floor of the building (see Figure 4). The LGBTQIA+ Center has a few offices in that same suite and a small lounge nearby. The yearbook and campus newspaper organizations also have office space on the second floor. In addition, the Center for Multicultural Students has offices and a small lounge and workspace on the ground floor (see Figure 2). A
non-profit organization associated with the university also operates a business center, a campus store, and a student services window within Golden College Union.

**Figure 4**

*Golden College Union Map- Second Floor*

![Golden College Union Map- Second Floor](image)

**Figure 5**

*Golden College Union Map- Third Floor*
Golden College Union staff strives to balance recreational, social, educational, and cultural programs and activities in the facility. Furthermore, Golden College Union provides experiential learning opportunities such as student employment that promote the development of the whole student by enhancing the academic experience. Approximately 25 student paraprofessionals serve as building managers who staff the information desk and set up tables, chairs, and audio-visual equipment for meetings and events. Student development is often accomplished through student employment, student organization leadership opportunities, participatory decision-making, and empowerment connected with the operation of the facility.
Participants

This qualitative study (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) focused on the experiences and perspectives of undergraduate students in Golden College Union. I interviewed eight individuals who were 18 years or older and enrolled as full- or part-time undergraduate students at Golden University. Participation in this study was voluntary. After completing an Informed Consent document via Qualtrics survey (Appendix D), I collected demographic data for each participant and information on their typical frequency of use of Golden College Union. This served as a foundation for my data collection as I analyzed the data collected on the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews.

Recruitment and Selection

The first phase of the study included recruiting undergraduate students as research participants using convenience sampling. Convenience sampling involves engaging participants who are easily accessible, which could undermine the study’s credibility (Creswell, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this study, the participants were users of the college union where I work. As a result, I address the study’s credibility, or trustworthiness, in Chapter 5. Participant selection occurred in several forms. First, I posted a paper flyer in approved locations within Golden College Union. Next, I placed a digital flyer in periodic e-mail newsletters geared toward undergraduate students. Finally, using my position as an insider of my setting, I also asked some of my colleagues with student-facing roles across campus to share my flyer and invitation with their students.

Participant Demographics

A demographic profile of each of my eight participants follows below. Table 1 displays the demographic information from The Informed Consent form and Demographics Questionnaire
(see Appendix D). As part of the recruitment process, I aimed to interview a balance of students who were and were not employed by the department that manages Golden College Union. I also desired to find a balance of students who reported varying degrees of use of Golden College Union from every day to never. Unfortunately, none of the potential participants who indicated they never visited Golden College Union completed the Informed Consent Form. All participants were full-time undergraduate students; however, none were first-year students. They also all identified their nationality as the United States. All participants self-identified as never married and did not identify as parents. The following paragraphs describe each participant’s background, academic status, and housing arrangement.
Table 1

**Participant Demographic Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Racial/Ethnic Groups</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Class Standing</th>
<th>First-Gen</th>
<th>Transfer Student</th>
<th>Residential Status</th>
<th>Employed by GCU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin; White or Caucasian White or Caucasian</td>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>On-campus</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Heterosexual/ Straight</td>
<td>White or Caucasian</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Public Health</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Off-campus or Commuter; 0-5 miles</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>White or Caucasian</td>
<td>Polish &amp; German</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>On-campus</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joaquin</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin; White or Caucasian White or Caucasian</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Criminal Justice &amp; Psychology</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>On-campus</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shania</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>White or Caucasian</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>On-campus</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Asian; Biracial or Multiracial; Middle Eastern or North African; White or Caucasian</td>
<td>Multi-ethnic</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Off-campus or Commuter; 0-5 miles</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Heteroflexible</td>
<td>White or Caucasian</td>
<td>European (not known)</td>
<td>Media &amp; Culture</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>On-campus</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>White or Caucasian</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Statistics</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>On-campus</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Oliver was a 19-year-old, second-year student majoring in Computer Science. He self-identified as a male, first-generation, non-transfer student. Oliver lived in on-campus housing and worked as a building manager for Golden College Union. He reported visiting the building every day during an average academic week. To offer insight into his perspective, Oliver self-identified his race and ethnicity as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin (specifically Puerto Rican) and White or Caucasian, as well as his socioeconomic status as lower-middle income.

Sydney was a 22-year-old senior majoring in Public Health. She self-identified as a female, non-transfer student. Sydney lived in an apartment less than 5 miles off-campus and worked seasonally in the campus store, which is in Golden College Union. She reported visiting the building some days during an average academic week. To offer some insight into Sydney’s perspective, she self-identified her race and ethnicity as White or Caucasian and her socioeconomic status as low income.

Betty was a 22-year-old senior majoring in Psychology. She self-identified as a female, first-generation, non-transfer student. She lived in on-campus housing and worked as a building manager for Golden College Union and as an executive board member of the University Programming Board. Betty reported visiting the building every day during an average academic week. To offer insight into her perspective, Betty self-identified her race and ethnicity as White or Caucasian, specifically of Polish and German descent. Betty also shared her low-income socioeconomic status.

Joaquin was a 21-year-old junior majoring in Criminal Justice & Psychology. He self-identified as a male, non-transfer student. Joaquin lived in on-campus housing and was not employed by the department that manages Golden College Union. Joaquin reported visiting the building every day during an average academic week. To offer some insight into Joaquin’s
perspective, he self-identified his race and ethnicity as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin and White or Caucasian. Joaquin also reported his lower-middle-income socioeconomic status.

Shania was a 19-year-old, second-year student majoring in Criminal Justice. She self-identified as a female, non-transfer student. Shania lived in on-campus housing and did not work for the department that manages Golden College Union. She reported visiting the building most days during an average academic week. To offer some insight into her perspective, Shania self-identified her race and ethnicity as White or Caucasian. Shania preferred to refrain from answering questions regarding her socioeconomic status.

John was a 25-year-old junior majoring in English. He self-identified as a male, first-generation transfer student. John lived with his family in a home less than 5 miles off-campus. He was not employed by the department that manages Golden College Union. John reported visiting the building some days during an average academic week. To offer some insight into his perspective, John self-identified as multi-ethnic, including Asian, Biracial or Multiracial, Middle Eastern or North African, and White or Caucasian races. John also reported his low-income socioeconomic status.

Emily was a 20-year-old, second-year student majoring in Media and Culture. She self-identified as a female, non-transfer student. She lived in on-campus housing and worked as an executive board member of the University Programming Board. Emily reported visiting the building every day during an average academic week. To offer some insight into Emily’s perspective, she self-identified her race and ethnicity as White or Caucasian, specifically of unknown European descent. Emily also shared her low-middle-income socioeconomic status. Finally, Emily disclosed that she was Autistic.
My final participant was Ethan. Ethan was a 20-year-old junior majoring in Statistics with minors in Computer Science and Business Analytics. He self-identified as a male, non-transfer student. Ethan lived in on-campus housing and worked as an executive board member of the University Programming Board. He reported visiting the building every day during an average academic week. To offer insight into Ethan’s perspective, he self-identified his race and ethnicity as White or Caucasian. Ethan also described his socioeconomic status as upper-middle income.

Procedures

I collected data via two rounds of individual, semi-structured interviews, the second of which was informed by a photo-elicitation activity. Table 2 illustrates the data collection, coding, and analysis timeline that took place over four months from November 2022 to March 2023. In addition, this section details the procedural methods planned for the data collection phase of the study.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Activity</th>
<th>Responsible Party</th>
<th>Date of Completion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IRB application submission</td>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>November 2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB application approval</td>
<td>Institutional Review Board</td>
<td>December 2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant recruitment</td>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>December 2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed Consent distribution</td>
<td>Researcher &amp; Participant</td>
<td>December 2022-January 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule interviews</td>
<td>Researcher &amp; Participant</td>
<td>December 2022-January 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>Researcher &amp; Participant</td>
<td>January-February 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 2 &amp; PDPE</td>
<td>Researcher &amp; Participant</td>
<td>January-February 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcribing</td>
<td>Researcher &amp; Third-Party Transcription Services</td>
<td>February 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member checking</td>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>February-March 2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding &amp; Data analysis</td>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>February-March 2023</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviews

Participants were asked to complete the first interview, take photographs of spaces around the college union building, complete a second interview, and confirm the accuracy of the interview transcripts. Participation took a maximum of two hours spaced out over three to four weeks. To acknowledge the value of their time, I compensated each participant with a $30 Amazon gift card upon completion of the second interview.

Photo-Elicitation

As previously stated, my phenomenon of interest is sense of belonging in spaces in the college union. Therefore, I utilized individual, semi-structured interviews and participant-driven photo-elicitation (PDPE) as data collection methods. PDPE is defined as “a process in which participant photos are paired with in-depth interviews” (Appendix E) (van Auken et al., 2010, p. 373). PDPE helps break down barriers between the researcher and the participants, which was particularly beneficial in my research if my positionality differed from that of my participants (van Auken et al., 2010).

The photographs collected from the participants provided structure to the in-depth, semi-structured interviews as my other method of data collection (van Auken et al., 2010). I collected data via two rounds of individual, semi-structured interviews. To build rapport, the first interview focused on the student’s major and transition to college. Then the questions shifted focus to Golden College Union. I asked about the participants’ frequency and purpose of their visits to the building, what they liked best, what they liked least, and what (if anything) they would change about the building. I also asked how the students understood the role of the college union. To conclude, the focus moved toward sense of belonging. I conducted all but one
interview in person in a small meeting room in Golden College Union. The interviews lasted between 20-60 minutes each.

At the beginning of the second interview, I asked participants to participate in a photo collection reflection activity. They were instructed to capture photographs of spaces in the college union that elicited feelings of belonging or exclusion (see Appendix E). I gave them 10 minutes to wander around the building and take two photographs of places where they felt they belonged and two where they felt like they did not belong. Upon their return to the interview site, I asked them to email the photographs to me. Appendix E provides the questions that guided the debriefing of the photographs. We discussed the content of the photographs, how they selected and framed the spaces they photographed, and what they wanted me to see in the photographs. For the spaces that elicited feelings of belonging, I asked what attracted the student to that space, how it made them feel, what they did there, and what about the space worked for them. For spaces students tended to avoid, I also asked how that space made the student feel, how much time they spent there, if the choice to avoid the space was conscious or unconscious, and how the space could be improved. The second interview took an average of 30 minutes for each participant.

**Transcription**

Following each interview, I began the transcription process using a third-party transcription service and then manually confirmed the transcriptions’ accuracy against the audio recordings of the interviews myself. Transcription transforms raw, spoken data into processed, written data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). For example, regarding the photographs from the PDPE activity, I focused on and analyzed the participant’s description of and reaction to the spaces pictured in the photographs. Therefore, I transcribed and coded only the discussion of the
photographs rather than the content of the photographs themselves. Once the interview data were transcribed and confirmed, I sent it back to my participants for their review and approval as a form of member checking. Any changes or omissions were due to me within ten days.

Since this study called for two different data collection methods from each of the eight individuals, staying organized during each step of data collection and analysis was essential. A transparent system of organization was crucial to building trustworthiness by avoiding confusion and ethical issues while maintaining the integrity of the data. This started with a clear and organized method of naming files and folders as I saved my data digitally. Using file names to establish a clear audit trail, I noted the participant’s pseudonym and if the data was raw, transcribed, or coded. I also kept a separate folder for my notes, whether handwritten and scanned or typed.

Materials

This section describes the materials used in this study. The study materials included the Recruitment Flyer (Appendix A), Email Invitations (Appendix B), Participant Intake Form (Appendix C), Informed Consent form and Demographics Questionnaire (Appendix D), and the Interview Guide (Appendix E).

Recruitment Flyer

I designed a flyer to recruit participants for my study (Appendix A). The flyer features a photograph of Golden College Union and the words “Seeking participants for research” at the top of the page in bold, bright lettering. A brief explanation of participant eligibility, requirements of participants, and compensation appeared below the photograph. There was also a QR code with instructions to scan the code to complete the intake form or email me for more
information. I posted this flyer in all approved posting locations in the Golden College Union. I also submitted the flyer as an image to accompany the email invitation described below.

**Email Invitations**

The appendices also include the email invitations (Appendix B) I distributed to undergraduate students and colleagues via periodic e-mail newsletters geared toward undergraduate students and direct email communications. The email included a brief description of the study, the criteria for eligibility, requirements of the study, requirements of participants, compensation, and a link to the Qualtrics Participant Intake Form described below.

**Participant Intake Form**

The Participant Intake Form (Appendix C) was a Qualtrics survey through which potential participants communicated their interest in participation to me. It began by explaining the purpose of the study. If a student indicated they were not interested in participating in the study, the skip logic brought them to the end of the survey, which thanked them for the time they spent taking the survey and confirmed their response was recorded. On the other hand, if a student indicated they were interested in participating, they continued to the next section of the form, which collected their name, email address, and phone number. Next, to determine their eligibility, the form asked if they were at least 18 years of age. If students were under 18, skip logic ended the survey and displayed the same concluding message mentioned above. Finally, the form asked how frequently the students visited Golden College Union per week during the semester and if they were ever employed by the department that manages Golden College Union. I used this information to vary the selection of my participants.
Informed Consent Form and Demographics Questionnaire

The Informed Consent form and Demographics Questionnaire (Appendix D) had three portions. The first portion was the project overview, which included a detailed explanation of the study and the requirements for participation. The overview also described the risks and benefits of participating in the project. The second portion addressed frequently asked questions, reiterating the study’s purpose, risks, and benefits. It also detailed how I protected the privacy of participants and their identifiable information. The frequently asked questions also provided contact information for my advisor, Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri, and The Counseling Center in case students had questions, concerns, or needed support. After this portion, the form asked if the participant consented to participate. If the student selected “No, I do not consent to participate in this study,” the skip logic brought them to the end of the survey, which thanked them for the time they spent taking the survey and confirmed their response was recorded.

The purpose of the third portion was to collect demographic information for all participants. Categories of demographic information included age, gender identity, sexual orientation, racial and ethnic identities, nationality, marital status, socioeconomic status, ability status, religion, and parental status. I also asked questions regarding their status at the university, including full- or part-time enrollment, major, class standing, classification as a first-generation student, classification as a transfer student, and residential status. Finally, I asked the student to provide three choices for a pseudonym I could use to protect their identity in this study. To assist with monitoring the inclusion criteria, I set up skip logic to end the survey for participants who indicated they were younger than 18 years of age and not enrolled as undergraduates at the site institution. Not only did I use the demographic information to vary the selection of my participants, but I also included relevant demographic information in my data analysis.
**Interview Guide**

Two semi-structured individual interviews and a participant-driven photo-elicitation activity were the data collection instruments during the study’s interview phase. The Interview Guide (Appendix E) was a list of questions that supported my progress through the semi-structured interviews. The interview guide served as a script and included instructions for facilitating the interview, such as when to pause to allow participants to interpret the questions independently or ideas for follow-up questions if the dialogue stalled. The first interview began with questions to help me build rapport with the students and eased into a discussion about their experiences transitioning to college. Then the interview moved into the topics of the Golden College Union and how they defined belonging. To conclude the first interview, I explained the process for the photo-elicitation activity and the second interview. The first interview contained a total of eleven questions.

The guide for the second interview began by greeting the participants and giving them instructions for collecting photographs on their phones. After they completed that activity, I asked the participant to send me the photos, and then we met to discuss the content of the photographs in depth for the second interview. The second interview contained a total of nine questions.

**Analysis**

After the participants completed the member-checking process on the transcripts of the interviews, I began the data analysis phase. This section describes how I processed and coded the qualitative data in preparation for analysis and interpretation.
Coding

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) described coding as a qualitative research process in which the researcher makes sense of text data by dividing the text, labeling the sections, and assigning themes to the sections for analysis. I analyzed the participants’ interviews and photographs to reduce 166 pages of text to the most significant and interesting points, then identified common themes and patterns (Seidman, 2019). According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), analysis of interviews aims to derive the essence of the experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To that end, I conducted manual inductive coding using a spreadsheet in the first cycle. I noted keywords such as “comfortable,” “uncomfortable,” “lighting,” “color” and “food.” Inductive coding is appropriate because the researcher remains open-minded to letting the data communicate what is important and of interest rather than testing a pre-determined hypothesis or theory (Seidman, 2019). During the second cycle, I employed theoretical coding to categorize the experts from the participants’ interviews by themes derived from my theoretical framework. The categories included such terms as “artifacts,” “arrangement,” “safety and security,” and “love and belonging.” These categories helped me look for meaning in the interview data and discover patterns across the interviews. As meaning emerged from the data, I synthesized it, figured out how it did (or did not) answer my research questions, and shared my findings. At this stage in the study, final efforts toward building trustworthiness included addressing disconfirming evidence and presenting limitations. I display my findings in Chapter 4 as a combination of photographs and quotations from my participants so that the photographs would bring the quotations to life. To protect the confidentiality of the site and photograph subjects, the photographs featured in this dissertation were either edited to remove identifiable information or people or excluded from use altogether if redaction was impossible.
Summary

This chapter reviewed the selected research methodology for this study and described the setting and participants. It emphasized how participants’ safety and right to privacy were maintained. This chapter also described the materials that guided participant recruitment, participant screening, the collection of Informed Consent documentation and demographic information, and the interview process. Finally, this chapter explained the data collection and analysis methods, including inductive and theoretical coding. Chapter 4 details the results of the data analysis.
Chapter 4

This chapter presents findings from the participant interviews and photographs on space in Golden College Union and sense of belonging, organized by research question. Several themes and subthemes emerged from the participants’ responses to each interview question. The two themes in Research Question 1 relate to how participants experienced belonging. The first theme was fitting in with the community. The second theme was comfort and familiarity. The themes that emerged in relation to Research Question 2 concerned elements of space in Golden College Union that enhance or diminish a sense of belonging. The concluding section of this chapter presents a summary of the findings. As previously stated, the building and participants were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Additionally, the names of several spaces and departments have been altered or omitted.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked, “How do undergraduate students enrolled at a public, regional university in the mid-Atlantic experience belongingness, particularly in the college union?” This question intended to establish a baseline for how the participants understand belonging before asking which spaces in the college union fit and do not fit their definitions. The first sub-section below concerns how students define belonging and then explores how they experience it. The second sub-section explores words the participants associated with “belonging” and “the opposite of belonging.”

Defining Belonging

To study students’ experiences of sense of belonging, I first had to establish a definition of belonging from the perspective of my participants. From there, I could explore how that definition came to life in various spaces throughout Golden College Union. The following
section shares participants’ definitions and word associations with belongingness, including “fitting in with the community” and “comfort and familiarity.”

**Fitting in With the Community.** The most common interpretation of belonging referred to fitting in. When asked to define belonging, five of the eight participants responded with some variation on the theme of fitting in. For example, Joaquin replied, “I would say it’s like feeling welcome, you know, feeling like you can come into a space and don’t stand that out or don’t like…the other.” Similarly, John defined belonging simply as “sharing an identity with a group of peers.” However, he did not specify what kind of identity. Three other participants related belonging to fitting in, including Ethan, Shania, and Sydney. Sydney’s definition of belonging expanded upon fitting in to incorporate mattering to a community. She explained, “I feel like belonging is a sense that you are part of the community…whatever that community is defined as, but seeing yourself as part of it and, like, appreciated in that community.”

**Comfort and Familiarity.** Three of the eight participants defined belonging as comfort and familiarity. Betty shared, “I think belonging is having the feeling of safety, comfortability, and being able to fully express yourself who you truly are in a place.” Like Betty, Oliver also mentioned feelings of comfort and family, “like home or with a partner.” Finally, Emily shared a definition of belonging that incorporated many of the ideas of the other participants but added an aspect of fun and support:

Like, belonging is like it’s your family outside of your family. It’s the little things and also the big things too, but that’s not the main point. Having a good time with friends, having someone to talk to, having people that know you very well and you can just laugh and have a good time with, you know, like make… Yeah, I would say, like, a family outside of your family. Like faces you’ve met before and, like, people who were willing
to help you out in any way, spend time with you, like, make sure you’re surviving and thriving.

**Word Associations**

Before conducting the photo-elicitation activity, I wanted to gain a broader understanding of student perceptions and feelings of belonging, especially because there are scholarly definitions of this term, but I wanted to hear from the study participants. I sought to determine their reference point for the spaces before I sent them out into the spaces to take pictures.

**Belonging.** When asked for some words they associate with belonging, participants collectively suggested a multidimensional list. The most common response was “inclusion” from three out of eight participants. Oliver and Joaquin suggested similar terms, such as “welcome” and “open.” Joaquin continued with “friendly,” and Emily also said “friendship.” Oliver, Joaquin, and Betty introduced the idea of comfort with terms such as “comfortable,” “home,” and “safe.” Another theme that arose was “being yourself” as well as “pride” and “freedom.” A theme related to mattering emerged with words like “important, loved, and supported,” in addition to “being heard” and “understood.” Ethan reinforced “fitting in,” while Betty and John emphasized “connection” and “community.” Emily commented that she associated belonging with sharing values such as peace and harmony. John built on that to reinforce his thoughts on sharing identities in a like-minded group. Shania described belonging as a “good environment.” Betty mentioned being aware of one’s surroundings. “Community” and “connection” were suggested. Finally, Sydney added “fun.”

**Unbelonging.** I did not ask participants to define “the opposite of belonging” as directly as I had asked them to define belonging. Instead, I asked them to share words they associate with the opposite of belonging. At the beginning of my data collection process, Oliver used the term
“unbelonging” in our second interview to differentiate the spaces of belonging he photographed from those in which he did not feel belonging. At first, I questioned if it was a real word. Over time, whether it was made up mattered less to me as I began to use it more myself. It came to serve a particular purpose in my research, and I adopted this phrase to summarize the various definitions participants shared when prompted for “the opposite of belonging.” In other words, I used “unbelonging” to represent a diminished sense of belonging, experienced on a spectrum from a mild sense of “I don’t fit in here” to complete marginalization. Aiming to maintain the integrity of the participant’s definition, I hesitated to use words such as “isolation” or “exclusion” to represent the opposite of belonging if those words did not appear in any given student’s particular response. Therefore, “unbelonging” became an umbrella term for all the words associated with not feeling belonging. In this section, I share students’ word associations made for “the opposite of belonging,” also called “unbelonging.”

“Isolation” was the most frequently shared word by five of the eight participants. John, Ethan, and Oliver added “loneliness” and “alone” to the list, followed by “exclusion” from John and Emily. Shania associated unbelonging to being “shoved out of a room” while Sydney said “distanced” and John said, “not having a place.” Joaquin contributed “being ignored” and “judgment.” He referenced being “the other” and John referenced “out-group” in contrast to belonging being “in-group.” In addition to “lack of friendship,” Emily said, “There’s, like, no, like, love for each other. Like, lack of willing[ness] to talk to each other, spend time with each other.” Participants associated many negative terms with the opposite of belonging, ranging from “awkward” to “toxic,” “conflict,” and “disassociation.”

Fear and inauthenticity also played a factor in Betty’s word associations. She shared “afraid,” “caution,” and “unknown safety.” Betty continued:
Maybe, like, fake in general. Fake…Maybe, like, not disgust, but, like, something where I’m thinking, like, disgust and envy but, like, [pause] almost like you’re not proud of who you are? Like, something like that. [pause] Maybe I would, I add disgust, like, you’re disgusted in the situation that you’re in or if this is, like, the person you’re being in that situation.

Finally, to contrast Sydney’s use of “fun” to describe belonging, John used “not fun” to describe unbelonging.

Knowing the words that students associate with belonging provides college union professionals with a foundation for designing spaces that encourage belonging. Conversely, considering unbelonging gives college union professionals a glimpse into what is at stake if we do not intentionally consider how our spaces can affect a student’s experience in our buildings and, by extension, at college.

**Experiencing Belonging**

Research Question 1 explores how students experience belonging, particularly in the college union. When asked where on campus they felt they belonged, all participants named at least one place on campus, so all eight participants in this study experienced belonging somewhere on campus. Several students named Golden College Union, including Betty, Joaquin, Oliver, and Ethan. Ethan joked that Golden College Union outranked the math building. He said, “[Golden College Union is] probably top of that list. I enjoy it here. I have memories here that I enjoy that aren’t complex calculus classes, [laughs] so that’s better.” Shania responded that she feels belonging on campus everywhere. Similarly, Emily shared that she felt belonging “anywhere where I have, like, people to talk to, I just feel like a sense of happiness, like a calling
to make myself feel like I matter.” When asked if she got that sense of belonging in Golden College Union, Emily continued:

I do mainly because of the fact that… I have been in [UPB] for almost two years. Like, there’s… familiar faces that I can talk to, like, give my opinions and they share their opinions. It definitely is a sense of belonging. In a way, I guess, like, we all tend to associate belonging with people because we think of, like, family and friends when we think of belonging. I guess that’s why I think of, like, people-focused terms when I think of belonging.

The theme of familiarity and people arose as participants shared how they experienced belonging in the places they identified. They named places such as academic halls, workplaces, the library, and their place of residence based on connecting with their friends, classmates, professors, and coworkers. Sydney listed the library among the places she felt belonging. She explained, “Always knowing that I run into people when I go there makes me feel like a sense of belonging.” Continuing her focus on the social aspect of experiencing belonging, she also named the Wellness Office because of her role as a student worker there. She said:

So, it’s not a building… if our staff meetings were in our office in [The Health Services Building], it would be the same feeling, but that’s the one place where I feel like I open the door and I walk in the room and I look around and I just see, like, all my friends and people who, like, appreciate me as a person, but also as a worker. And, like, our bosses who are dedicated to not only student health and wellbeing but also us as employees and, like, making sure that we are developing as people and as professionals.

Betty also touched on the social aspect of belonging but added some conditions. First, she spoke about belonging in her friend group and her student organizations. Then she added
experiencing belonging in her major but specified that her belonging in her academic buildings and classrooms depended on who was there and whether she felt connected to them (professors included). Finally, she explained that GCU was the only building on campus where she felt belonging, no matter who was there.

Though belonging has an interpersonal emphasis, one cannot overlook the environment’s influence on the experience. Therefore, my second research question delves into the elements of space that enhance or diminish students’ sense of belonging in Golden College Union.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question asked, “Which specific elements of space enhance or diminish students’ sense of belonging in the college union, and how do they do so?” In this section, I share the participants’ responses to the photo-elicitation activity. At the beginning of the second interview, I asked the participants to wander around the building, taking notice of which spaces made them feel “Oh, I belong here” and which spaces made them feel “I do not belong.” Then, they took photographs of two spaces in which they felt belonging and two spaces in which they felt unbelonging. Upon completing the activity, we discussed what attracted them to the space of belonging and why they avoided the spaces of unbelonging. I also asked how each space made the participants feel. The photo-elicitation activity yielded the following results related to the second research question. I organize these results by first sharing a listing of specific spaces identified by belonging and unbelonging. Then, I discuss specific elements of space, such as light, art, layout, and custodial.

**Photo-Elicitation Activity**

Table 3 summarizes the results of the photo-elicitation activity organized by each participant.
### Table 3

*Spaces of Belonging and Unbelonging*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Belonging</th>
<th>Unbelonging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>Commuter Center</td>
<td>Ground Floor Hallway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Commuter Center</td>
<td>University Store</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>UPB Office</td>
<td>GCU Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joaquin</td>
<td>Food Court</td>
<td>First Floor Lounge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shania</td>
<td>Food Court</td>
<td>University Store</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Commuter Center</td>
<td>LGBTQIA+ Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>UPB Office</td>
<td>Second Floor Meeting Room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>Vending Tables</td>
<td>Main Staircase</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All eight participants completed the photo-elicitation activity, taking all four requested photographs. Glancing briefly at Table 2, it is evident that some participants selected similar spaces, although not one single space jumps out as dominant.

Looking more specifically across the range of spaces, several patterns emerge of agreement and disagreement. The first instance of agreement that stands out among the participants’ responses is the Commuter Center. Oliver, Sydney, and John all photographed the
Commuter Center as a space of belonging. The second instance of agreement is the University Store, photographed by Sydney and Shania. Finally, the University Programming Board’s (UPB) office is the third instance of agreement. As members of UPB’s executive board, Emily and Betty selected the UPB office as a space of belonging because they spend a lot of time there for work and leisure.

Opinions of the Food Court were mixed, as Joaquin and Shania agreed that it is a space of belonging, while Betty and Emily photographed it as a space of unbelonging. The participants’ disagreement on sense of belonging in the Food Court involves its layout, busyness, and cleanliness. I delve into this discrepancy in subsequent sections of this chapter. The LGBTQIA+ Center also served as a mixed-opinion space for John and Shania. While both students identified as straight, John’s belief that the LGBTQIA+ community is known for its inclusion and acceptance led him to categorize the place as a sense of belonging. Conversely, Shania had never been inside the LGBTQIA+ Center and assumed she was not the intended audience for that space as a straight person.

Regarding the most commonly photographed spaces of unbelonging, Joaquin and Sydney photographed the Center for Multicultural Students and Joaquin and John selected the Organization Collaboration Center (OCC). Finally, some participants’ focus on the second floor common area and two sets of staircases was surprising because the purpose of these areas are thoroughfares instead of intentionally designed and partitioned spaces.

**Elements of Space**

In the following five sub-sections, I share the findings that correspond to Research Question 2. The study participants identified several elements of space in Golden College Union that enhanced or diminished their sense of belonging, including light, art, color, signage, layout,
furniture, custodial, and maintenance. I also share some non-space elements such as food, busyness, and involvement that participants mentioned as contributing to their sense of belonging. The participants’ stories and explanations give context for how the elements affect belongingness. The elements also provide insight that could guide college union professionals’ choices to create spaces of belonging.

**Light.** Artificial lighting, windows, and sunlight were the most frequently mentioned elements of space that participants identified as enhancing or diminishing sense of belonging. Four of the eight participants focused on lighting, windows, or sunlight in spaces such as the Commuter Center, the ground floor hallway, the first floor lounge, a stairwell, a second floor conference room, and the Organization Collaboration Center (OCC). In this section, I point to some examples of lighting, windows, or sunlight influencing sense of belonging for Oliver, Sydney, Joaquin, and Ethan.

Oliver, Sydney, and Joaquin mentioned light as an element of space that influenced their sense of belonging. Oliver commented on the “dim” and “inoffensive” artificial lighting in the Commuter Center. Regarding the recessed lights captured in his photograph (see Figure 6), he said:

> They look like warmer lights. They look like they aren’t just pure white but a little bit of, like, an egg-shelly brown kind of mixture. And that helps with the whole thing of not being too abrasive to some people, or for me specifically, but not being too abrasive that it can be annoying or being too dull that it isn’t enticing to be in at the same time.

Oliver explained that the commuter lounge made him feel “calm” and “chill.” He also said the Commuter Center made him feel safe, but not in terms of physical safety. He elaborated, “Nothing is too much. Like I was saying before, the lighting isn’t too dim that it makes it hard to
see or too bright than it kind of hurts sometimes…The same thing with the colors that they use. It’s very neutral.”

**Figure 6**

*Commuter Center*

![Commuter Center](image)

*Note: Image submitted by Oliver*

Sydney also photographed the Commuter Center as a place of belonging. She said, “This is by far my favorite space in the whole building. Like, that is my study space.” Sydney also commented on the lighting in the Commuter Center, but she emphasized the natural light shining in from the windows. She explained that she felt more productive studying in the Commuter Center in a corner by the windows with sunlight than in “a dark corner of the library.” When asked for ways to improve the Commuter Lounge, Sydney suggested letting in more sunlight. She explained that she visited the Commuter Center during breaks while working at the university store. The store is lit with mostly artificial light, so she enjoyed coming to the Commuter Center on sunny days to eat lunch and get some sunlight. She explained that she liked
the window paintings but would rather see the same welcoming messages posted on the wall so more sunlight could shine through the windows instead.

Regarding the windows in the first floor lounge (see Figure 7), Joaquin said, “The windows…There’s a lot of glass in this room, which makes it look very modern and nice.” I asked if physical characteristics such as the windows contribute to Joaquin’s feeling of comfort. He replied, “Probably. If it wasn’t such a good-looking space, I probably wouldn’t like it so much.” Joaquin said the first floor lounge made him feel comfortable. He elaborated, “I can kind of sit there and look at text messages, emails, you know, wait on my food there. I’ve eaten in there too. It’s just comfort.”

Figure 7

First Floor Lounge

Note: Image submitted by Joaquin
Oliver elaborated on the function of windows in the Commuter Center in a striking way. He said the windows not only serve as a way to see people outside but also as a tool to tell “how much time has passed [that] you have been in the room.” Oliver’s comment about the windows helping tell the passage of time was unique. While other participants appreciated the windows for letting in sunlight, Oliver’s comment indicated that windows could have a more functional purpose as a time-telling mechanism.

Ethan, Joaquin, and Oliver mentioned light as an element of space that influenced their sense of unbelonging. Ethan photographed a conference room on the second floor (see Figure 8) because the sunlight shining through the window cast shadows that made it look “really dark and lonely, and like, nothing’s there, nothing’s happening.” With the artificial lights turned off, Ethan pointed out that “it looked like a very little lonely, isolated room.” He explained:

Unaccompanied, kind of, like, dark and gloomy kind of spaces, kind of, like, put a damper on your, like, mood and everything. And I’d rather be all, like, light, cheerful, sunshine, rainbows. So, like, having a space or an area that’s, like, dark and it’s the complete opposite. That is not ideal. Like, if I walked into that room, I turn the light on or I unlock the door to let or open all the windows to let more light in. I wouldn’t keep it that way.

Figure 8

Second Floor Conference Room
Three participants critiqued the lighting in four spaces in Golden College Union: the Organization Collaboration Center (OCC) (see Figure 9), a conference room on the second floor (see Figure 8), a stairwell (see Figure 10), and the light wall on the second floor meeting room hallway (see Figure 11). Joaquin focused on the lighting in the Organization Collaboration Center (see Figure 9). He explained that space reminded him of a high school or an elementary school “just because of how bright it is.” Joaquin’s further thoughts and feelings about the OCC will appear again in the following section regarding layout and furniture.

Figure 9

Organization Collaboration Center
Similarly, Oliver and Ethan noticed the “very bright” artificial lighting in the stairwell (see Figure 10). Oliver described the lighting in the stairwell as “very bright and almost blinding in the picture. You can see a little bit of like the haze.” Oliver said the stairwell made him feel “kind of weird” and suggested improvements for the stairwell, saying:

I think making the lights a little bit different, maybe having them just be a little bit less harsh. I can’t remember if there’s a window there or not. I think there is a small window if you go down the stairs and kind of where my camera is taking the picture from. If you turn right, there’s like a little tiny window, you know, kind of helps that feeling of isolation when you can’t see light or natural light, I mean.

Figure 10

Stairwell
Ethan photographed the same stairwell. Like Oliver, he also remarked that the lights were “very bright” compared to the lighting in the rest of the building. He explained, “I tried to take a picture like three times, and every time my camera would pick up on the glare from the lights.” Ethan laughed at the realization that he had preferences on staircases. He shared, “I never thought I had a least favorite staircase, but here we are.” He ranked this stairwell as his least favorite. He photographed another staircase in the building as a space of belonging which will appear in a forthcoming section.

Oliver also commented on the lighting on the second floor in a corner near several meeting rooms (see Figure 11). The hallways near the second floor meeting rooms are lined with backlit, white frosted glass walls. Oliver said the space makes him feel “odd” and “a little weird.” He elaborated:

This is a really weird thing. I always feel like it looks like, I forget what movie it was, but it was like a horror movie where, like, the poster of it was, like a person’s silhouette behind
that. And I can’t think of anything but that when I look at it. It might have been *Human Centipede*. I just don’t know. But that’s, you know, not a good association.

**Figure 11**

*Second Floor Meeting Room Hallway*

*Note:* Image submitted by Oliver

According to Sydney, Ethan, Oliver, and Joaquin, lighting influences a student’s feelings and sense of belonging in spaces throughout Golden College Union. The next section will explore how art, color, and signage enhance or diminish sense of belonging for the participants.

**Art, Color, and Signage.** Seven of the eight participants mentioned the art, color, or signage in the spaces they photographed of belonging and unbelonging. Nearly all responses on the topic of art, paint, and signage that participants shared for spaces of belonging focused on art. In this section, I highlight some examples of how murals, photography, plaques, and paint color influence sense of belonging for Shania, John, Betty, Oliver, Sydney, Joaquin, and Ethan.
Art. Shania, who self-identified as straight, photographed the LGBTQIA+ Center as a space of unbelonging (see Figure 12). However, she shared that she felt nothing negative about the space. On the contrary, she said, “I think it’s cool that we have it. You know, so we have a space for everyone on campus.” When asked if she would feel welcome entering the Center as a straight-identified person, she assumed those inside would “probably” welcome her, but she asserted she still would not go in. “I don’t have a purpose if that makes sense,” she explained. When asked how she might improve the space to make her feel a greater sense of belonging, Shania clarified that just because she felt unbelonging in a space intended for individuals with identities that differ from hers, she would not do anything to improve the space to make herself feel a greater sense of belonging.

Figure 12

LGBTQIA+ Center

Note: Image submitted by John
Despite not feeling a sense of belonging in the LGBTQIA+ Center, Shania still mentioned the mural outside the door as an attention-grabber. She pointed out that the LGBTQIA+ Center is not located in a prominent place in Golden College Union, but the mural helped to identify the space. She said, “I feel like if you didn’t walk on that floor, you wouldn’t know it’s there. But once you walk on the floor, like you clearly know it is there because they have the wall all that decorated.” Both Shania and John photographed the rainbow-colored word cloud mural. However, John categorized it as a place of belonging, despite identifying as heterosexual. John explained his belonging categorization as such:

Because I think coming from my various multiethnic backgrounds, I don’t really have a like I don’t exactly fit in the, I mean, there is the multicultural center on the ground floor, but I feel like that is a space for more, for the Black students on campus. And I feel from my previous and current friendships with trans and queer people that they accept just about everyone. So, that’s why I feel that it’s a sense of belonging.

John reiterated that he based his assumption of acceptance (and, therefore, belonging) on his specific beliefs about the LGBTQIA+ community rather than elements of the space. He elaborated, “I think more marginalized communities are welcoming to bring or at least not to bring others in, but to have that option if you want to learn more about the community and a group.” Regardless, John commented on the appearance of the mural. He shared that the mural made him feel like he “could go in there.” He described the mural as “colorful and welcoming.” He highlighted words from the mural like “welcoming,” “community,” and “strong” and commented on how they send positive messages of acceptance and non-judgment. He joked, “The ‘purdy’ words were ‘purdy.’ And so, I took a picture of them.” This is an example of how art such as murals sends verbal and non-verbal messages to passers-by.
Oliver also photographed a mural in the ground floor hallway and identified it as a space of belonging (see Figure 13). He said, “I think just the mural itself is attractive. And what I mean is that the pictures on it, it just it attracts your eye very quickly.” He also remarked on the artistic style of the mural as looking like a sketch from a notepad. He reflected, “You wouldn’t think that, like, people would sit and enjoy a hallway.” Yet, he felt attracted to the mural and photographed this space to represent belonging. To improve the previously mentioned “creepy” light walls near the second floor meeting rooms, Oliver suggested putting a similar mural on them.

**Figure 13**

*Ground Floor Hallway*

*Note: Image submitted by Oliver*

In addition to feeling belonging in the first floor lounge due to the windows, Joaquin commented on the large photographs of scenes around campus that were hung on the walls
above the windows (see Figure 7). He explained how, as a member of the cheerleading team, he appreciated the art and included that in the photograph he took. He shared:

It’s colorful. I like the images. Like there’s like the marching band. I’ve made sure to get the cheerleaders in there. Like, it’s very, I get the sense it’s very student-oriented, you know, between the artwork and then the comfortable couch.

**Color.** Color also played a role in influencing a student’s sense of belonging or unbelonging. Many participants noticed the paint colors. Betty described the pale, yellow paint in the UPB Office as “comforting.” Oliver said similar things about the colors of the walls and the furniture in the Commuter Center. However, Ethan, Oliver, John, and Emily all commented on how bland or drab white walls were in certain spaces such as the second floor common area, second floor conference room, and stairwell. Many suggested painting the walls to add more “personality” or “brightness” to the space. It appears that artwork and color played an important role in influencing students’ sense of belonging, even if they categorized the space as unbelonging overall. The next section highlights participants’ feelings about signage in Golden College Union.

**Signage.** Signage caught the attention of three of the eight participants. John complimented the “Welcome to the Commuter Center” sign painted on one of the windows in school colors (see Figure 6). Ethan highlighted the student organizations’ homemade banners that hung from the top of the railing near the main staircase in the lobby. One banner featured painted handprints and shared a message raising awareness for cancer research. Another banner said, “Love is love,” with multicolored hearts all over. Ethan reflected that the banners spread positivity and awareness. He shared, “And that kind of shows collaboration among many
different individuals to, like, one common theme.” Both Ethan and John categorized these spaces as belonging.

Conversely, Sydney shared an example of how signage diminished her sense of belonging. She photographed the plaques on the wall near the second floor common area that identified the university’s registered fraternities and sororities (see Figure 14). She explained that they made her feel bad about herself because they reminded her that she did not fit in with the fraternity and sorority community. She shared, “I’m very much a people person. I like to, like, belong. I like to be part of a community. And I feel like because I don’t fit into fraternities and sororities and, like, the stereotypical mold…” Recognizing that she was generalizing about there being a mold, she continued:

Because I never felt like I belonged in a sorority, never felt like I interacted with fraternity people, like, I get a sense of, like, well, why is that? Like, should I, like, do I need to change or, like, am I still confident in…who I am and I don’t need to change to, like, fit that mold just to, like, feel more connected on campus?

Figure 14

Second Floor Common Area Signage
It is interesting to observe how signage inspired Sydney’s thoughts and feelings of self-doubt. However, when asked how she could improve the space to enhance her sense of belonging, Sydney replied:

It’s a tough question because I think you need to serve all students on campus. And so just because I’m not being served by fraternities and sororities doesn’t mean that there’s not a strong population that is, and people that are looking for community in those organizations. And so, I wouldn’t want to take away from their needs being met just because, like, I don’t feel like I belong there. So, I feel like you really, like, shouldn’t change it because, like, there are people who are utilizing them.

Sydney’s response echoes Shania’s answer to the same question regarding the LGBTQIA+ Center. It appears that some students put aside their feelings of unbelonging to maintain a space that benefits others in the community. Another example like this arose when Joaquin photographed the Center for Multicultural Students (CMS) as a place of unbelonging. He explained that he is half Hispanic but appears white. He categorized the CMS as a space of unbelonging because “I don’t think people will perceive me as other than white…. I feel like the people in that space would judge me as not belonging.” However, when asked if there was anything he would do to change the CMS to make him feel belonging, he replied that nothing could be done to the space to make him feel more comfortable about being there.

John and Sydney provided the final instance of signage influencing students’ sense of belonging. Initially, John said the Commuter Center made him feel “cared about” because it offered “a space for him as an older commuter student,” which inspired his sense of belonging to the campus. Sydney explained that the Commuter Center inspired positive memories from her
quiet Friday night study sessions. However, John and Sydney made the same observation about a sign on the refrigerator in the Commuter Center that sent them mixed messages and inspired negative feelings. They noticed a sign on the refrigerator door claiming frozen pizza was inside the freezer. Much to their disappointment, they discovered only a half-eaten ice cream when they opened the freezer. Sydney reported feeling excited to see such a resource at first, only to feel disappointed and sad at the unfulfilled promise of a pizza. I asked John what kind of messaging this inconsistency sends. He remarked, “Well, I feel like that is just lip service. That it’s just like, ‘We care about you,’ and then, ‘No pizza party.’” As evidenced by John’s reaction, mixed messages can compromise if and how a student feels a sense of belonging.

Art, color, and signage seem to have a great deal of influence on a student’s experience of belonging. The next section will explore how elements of space such as furniture and layout enhance or diminish belongingness.

**Layout and Furniture.** All eight participants mentioned either the layout of the space or the furniture within it as elements of space that either enhanced or diminished sense of belonging. Participants focused on the size of the space, the arrangement of the furniture, and the type of furniture in spaces such as the Commuter Center, the first floor lounge, the main stairwell, the OCC, the food court, and certain offices. In this section, I point to some examples of the layout and furniture that influenced sense of belonging for all participants.

**Layout.** Oliver, Betty, and Emily all mentioned feeling cramped in certain spaces they photographed. For example, Oliver highlighted the tight hallways near the second floor meeting rooms (one of his spaces of unbelonging, see Figure 11). At the same time, Betty and Emma recommended making the UPB office (their spaces of belonging, see Figure 16) bigger to give their organization more room to work, gather, and store supplies. In support of their points,
Ethan explained the benefits of a big, open space as he described why he selected the main staircase in the lobby as a space of belonging. He described:

I like how you have – like, we have the info desk is there, their office is here. It’s just big wide, like, hallway, open area when you first walk in there, a lot of different types of spaces really combine into one. I also like the width of the steps.

Ethan also mentioned how the open space of the staircase increased his line of sight. He explained:

I do enjoy the staircase because of the openness. And how I could – if I see someone I know, I can see them from far away. It’s not like I turn in this corner, it’s, like, “Oh, hi.” Because I’m like, “Oh, I can kind of see who’s walking down,” I’m seeing, like, what I’m walking into... surprises- good or bad.

Shania and Joaquin photographed the Food Court as a space of belonging (see Figure 15). When Shania considered which aspects of the Food Court space work, she highlighted the big, open layout and the furniture arrangement. She responded:

It’s just that it’s...like, it’s an open space. Like, everyone’s there together. Even though everyone’s in their own little, like, world, at their own little table. We’re all still, like, there. So, there’s really no, like, “You gotta sit here, you gotta sit there,” type thing.

Everybody’s just there together.

When asked what she would do to improve her sense of belonging in the space, Shania suggested making more space to sit because “some days, we just get really crowded, you know?” Joaquin also highlighted the layout and arrangement of the space in the Food Court. He provided an interesting analogy to describe the flow of people in the Food Court:
It’s very spacious for people to wait. But also, for people to eat. It’s the kind of thing where you can (and this is very realistic to my experience) you walk in, you get your food, and you leave. Like, it’s kind of like a, like a highway design. Like you can roll in, take your exit, get your food, get back on and leave.

**Figure 15**

*Food Court*

*Note: Image submitted by Shania*

Alternatively, Joaquin cited the big, open space in the OCC as an aspect that diminished his sense of belonging (see Figure 9). He said the open space and layout of the tables and chairs made him feel “stressed.” He elaborated:

Like it’s, it kind of reminds me that, oh, I have work to do. It reminds me a lot of like, like a high school or like an elementary school just because of how bright it is and it’s,
like, work-oriented. And I always see people doing work in there. So, it kind of reminds me of, like, this is a weird comparison, but in high school they had like in-school suspension. It was like a big workroom. And everyone was silent and just doing work.

That’s what it reminds me of.

John shared similar feelings about the big, open space in the OCC. To improve it, he suggested dividing up the room. He clarified, “It’s not going from one extreme to the other, from going from this larger space to individual pods, but a balance between this and then the…commuter lounge.” He compared the OCC, one of his spaces of unbelonging, to the Commuter Center, one of his spaces of belonging. He said he likes the Commuter Center better, stating, “I think it’s just like this space is too open for me.” In the next section, John’s thoughts about the furniture in the Commuter Center further explain his preference for that space.

**Furniture.** Several participants noted the furniture as an element of space that enhances or diminishes sense of belonging. Betty, a student leader of the campus programming board and Golden College Union student employee, photographed the office spaces of UPB (see Figure 16) and Golden College Union as spaces of belonging. In UPB’s office, she highlighted the conference table, which she thinks of “more as, like, a big family dinner table...” She described:

I really love that feeling of being able to work together on different tasks. And I feel like there’s always someone up there that I can talk to, so I love, I love talking…I love being able to be with other people that are similar-minded.

Betty connected feelings of comfort to encouragement to be herself. In further reference to the programming board’s office, Betty elaborated:

It just makes me feel really comfortable. Like I said, it gives me very, like, home aesthetic. Yeah. I feel really comfortable. I feel really encouraged in the space. Like, I’ve
never gone in there and felt like, “Oh, I’m scared to go to work today because my ideas are gonna suck or whatever.” So yeah, I feel very comfortable. I feel very homey. Just really encouraged to be myself.

Betty’s feelings of comfort encourage a multipurpose environment for her. She explained that she used the space to work, eat, hang out with friends, and get advice on personal and professional topics. Then, she laughed, saying, “Yeah, I do a lot in this space. I’ve almost slept in this space [laughs].”

**Figure 16**

*University Programming Board Office*

Note: Image submitted by Emily

Emily, who is also a leader of the programming board, agreed with Betty regarding the programming board’s office as a space of belonging. She positioned the conference table as the center focal point of her photograph. Both women selected the office as a place of belonging. She shared, “It’s very homely. Very, very homely, like, welcoming, you know, it’s just like a reminder of how I belong in UPB.” Emily’s response indicated that not only did she feel like she
belonged in the space, but the feelings reinforced her feelings of belonging in her student organization.

Conversely, John provided an example of how furniture can be used to isolate rather than encourage community. He pointed out that the armchairs in the second floor common area (see Figure 17) encourage students to self-isolate. He cleverly referred to how the students push the armchairs together to create a makeshift nap pod as an “upholstery cocoon.” He elaborated that four chairs pushed together for only two students discourages socialization. He continued that as a space adjacent to a foyer and hallway, it is an interesting place to put a quiet space. However, this space is not an official quiet zone. Students naturally treat it as such. Emily also remarked, “There should be more happening here…but there isn’t…It’s just dead.”

Figure 17

*Second Floor Common Area*

*Note:* Image submitted by John

However, it appeared that comfortable couches did not always evoke feelings of isolation. Oliver pointed out that the couches in the Commuter Center feel “subtly inviting.” He
commented that these elements serve as a non-verbal invitation that makes the room seem enticing. Joaquin described the couches in the first floor lounge as “comfortable” as well. When asked how the space makes him feel, he said, “Comfortable. You know? I can kind of sit there and look at text messages, emails, you know, wait on my food there. I’ve eaten in there too. It’s just comfort.”

Some participants were drawn to furniture they could rearrange themselves. John and Sydney both addressed the merits of the mobile tables and chairs in the Commuter Center. John liked how open the space was so he could move the tables and chairs around to suit his needs—from catching up with friends to doing schoolwork. Likewise, Sydney told a story from her first year when she was a student-athlete running track and cross-country. She came to Golden College Union to study on Friday nights before track meets because the library closed early. In the Commuter Center, Sydney relaxed, studied, and then went to bed early to prepare for her next competition. She said the Commuter Center was “by far my favorite space in the whole building.” She explained how she would push a table into the corner near the windows and move a lamp nearby. From there, she worked while occasionally people-watching out the window. Sydney also noted that going downstairs for dinner in the Food Court was convenient. Sydney’s responses indicated that mobile tables and chairs in an open space gave students the flexibility to create a space of their own that meets their needs, whether it was studying, relaxing, or socializing with friends.

Custodial and Maintenance. Three of the eight participants noted the connection between the condition of the space and their sense of belonging. Participants focused on cleanliness and maintenance in spaces like the Food Court and the Commuter Center. In this
section, I point to some examples of custodial and maintenance issues that diminished sense of belonging for Betty, Joaquin, and Sydney.

**Custodial.** Betty cited the space’s cleanliness (or lack thereof) as a reason why she avoided the space. Referring to the Food Court, she said, “But it’s never like well kept, whether it’s wet or it’s sticky, or there’s a bunch of food thrown in one place. Like, this area is not, it’s not as well as other parts of the building” She shared that “the floors in the cafeteria, in general, are just, like, gross and not very well kept.” She described one instance last semester when she slipped and fell on the wet floor. Though slightly embarrassed, she mostly felt upset about needing more consistent custodial work. When I asked how the accident made her feel, she responded:

> It’s upsetting to me…In this area, I feel like some people would feel most comfortable. And I wish I could feel like that. I wish I felt like the rest of the people, but it’s almost sad that, like, the most accessible part is the worst kept. And it almost shows, like, I mean, if I was a student that I came in here and feel like, yeah, obviously, like, Golden College Union doesn’t really care about this area. Like, or the people who, like, work there don’t care about the area or that would make me question, like, do they care about the building? Like, okay. Do they care about my room when I book one or do, you know? So, it makes me upset.

Betty’s perspective as a student employee for the department allows her to consider the elements of place that GCU offers and what messages the spaces in the building send to guests. Betty’s suggestions for improving the Food Court were to clean the area and provide more accessible seating. Shania also suggested more seating. I also asked Joaquin if he noticed the cleanliness of
the space. “It’s clean enough,” he replied. “I mean, I’ve seen worse… They keep it decently clean. I would say. It’s never like notably dirty. But sometimes there’s messes.”

**Maintenance.** When asked how GCU could improve the Food Court, Joaquin focused on maintaining the condiments instead of the overall cleanliness of the space. He clarified:

> What I said about the condiments and stuff. Because people, especially people who leave after getting their food, want to just get their stuff and go. Sometimes I don’t go back to my room. I might be going to some other destination. So, if they don’t have, like, ketchup, I can’t just go to my room and use my ketchup all the time.

In the Commuter Lounge, Sydney emphatically suggested repairing the blinds that have been broken for a long time. When asked if there was something she would do to improve her sense of belonging in the space, she quickly responded, “Yes. Fix the blinds!” She explained that the sunlight is a big reason why she came upstairs from the university store during her lunch breaks while working. However, since the blind has been broken for a long period, it detracted from her ability to enjoy the space as she intended. Sydney also mentioned that the microwave is “nasty,” and some furniture in other spaces in the building is stained. To improve those spaces, she said, “I think keeping it cozy but, like, freshening it up a little bit would help.”

The condition of space appeared to send non-verbal messages about the espoused and enacted values of those who own and manage the area. I will explore this concept in Chapter 5.

**Other Elements.** Several aspects of space unrelated to the environmental elements discussed above also came up in conversation with some participants, including food, busyness, and involvement. Participants focused on the availability and quality of food, the number of people in busy spaces, and how their involvement in student organizations or employment influenced their sense of belonging. In this section, I summarize some examples of other
elements of space that arose in the responses from Shania, Joaquin, Betty, Emily, and Sydney. These sections are not divided by topic because they overlap in the participants’ responses.

Shania and Joaquin indicated they were drawn to the Food Court primarily because it met their basic physiological need for food. When asked what attracted her to the Food Court, Shania responded:

What attracts me there is all the different options that we have for food. I usually only go to Chick-Fil-A because it’s the only thing I really like in there. Or I’ll go to the Sandwich Shack, but it’s a space where you can go with your friend and hang or you go by yourself and just eat and go if you like. It’s a louder space, like, more noise when you’re doing work. I mean, you can really go there for anything.

When asked if Shania did any of her homework while seated in the Food Court, she replied that she did not because she needed a quiet place to work without distractions. When asked how the Food Court made her feel, Shania responded, “Well, with friends, I did feel good, you know. You’re just sitting there eating and talking to friends. Nothing better than that.” Next, I asked how she feels when she is alone. She replied, “Still feel good because I’m just kind of like in my own head space just eating, you know, whether I’m watching the show, just going through Instagram.” When I asked Joaquin what attracted him to the Food Court, he replied simply, “The food…It’s not so much the space itself. It’s what I do there. You know?” He also simply replied that the Food Court makes him feel “hungry.” He described the Food Court as follows:

This is where I spend a lot of my time waiting for food. So, the dining hall is, I wouldn’t say it’s necessarily comfortable. But it’s like so mundane to my daily life. Like, it’s just somewhere that I go.
In the Food Court, Joaquin appeared less concerned with the social aspects of the space. On the other hand, Shania enjoyed eating with friends. Shania and Joaquin noted how busy the space can get, but it did not appear to detract from their sense of belonging in the Food Court. In comparison, Betty and Emily also had the physiological need for food, but they categorized the Food Court as a space of unbelonging. Emily selected the Food Court as a space of unbelonging due to the busyness of the space. She responded:

From a lot of the times [that] I’ve been here, [there] have been, like, a lot of cases where people have just been, like, sort of rude and impolite, like, both students and people who work in the food court places.

When probed for more detail, Emily clarified that people were not rude or impolite directly to her. She did not offer any examples. She also mentioned that she believed the food options in the Food Court were unhealthy. Like Emily, Betty also shared that the busyness of the Food Court made her feel uncomfortable and rushed since “you can feel that everyone has different schedules in there.” She observed:

But, yeah, there’s always some kind of movement going on. Someone’s doing something at one table, whether it be, like, people are using tables or vending tables or people who are sitting down or people who are waiting for their food and they’re getting upset. So, yeah, I just… I could feel like everyone has, like, different missions or like different things are going on. And it’s just really overwhelming for me.

Betty’s description echoed Joaquin’s highway analogy. She added:

I mean, overall, I just I usually just feel uncomfortable in there just because there’s so many people all the time. And I don’t know, this is like a spot to me that’s like I just you know, I get my food, and I go. Like, I don’t really…especially by myself, like, it’s not a
place where I would feel comfortable going and sitting most days. Yeah. So, I’m uncomfortable almost rushed. That’d be another feeling I have. Yeah...Everyone’s, like, you can feel that everyone has different schedules in there.

Six of the eight participants, including Joaquin, Sydney, Betty, Oliver, Emily, and John, connected their sense of belonging to their involvement in a student organization or on-campus employment. As previously mentioned, Joaquin enjoyed the photographs in the first floor lounge due to his job with the cheerleading team. Sydney photographed the university store as a place of belonging because of her experiences working there. Betty and Oliver worked as building managers for Golden College Union and referenced their work and responsibilities in many responses. Betty and Emily also referenced their leadership role in the University Programming Board as the reason why they photographed office spaces and meeting rooms. Emily confirmed that if UPB did not hold meetings in the second floor meeting room, she would not have photographed that space otherwise. Finally, John explained that he was drawn to the Commuter Center initially because the organization for commuter students routinely held its meetings there.

Summary of Findings

This qualitative study revealed how students experienced belonging and elements of space that enhanced or diminished students’ sense of belonging in Golden College Union. First, participants defined belonging as fitting into the community and feeling comfortable. They also emphasized the interpersonal aspect of belonging. When asked to explore the environmental aspects of belonging, participants shared several elements of space in Golden College Union that affected their sense of belonging. I grouped the elements into five themes. The first theme was light, including artificial and natural light sources. Students noticed when the lights were too harsh and appreciated access to sunlight through windows. The second theme was art, color, and
signage. Participants were also drawn to murals, photographs, and attractive paint colors. Some participants noted a negative effect on their sense of belonging when they observed signage representing exclusive communities and when they encountered signage that sent mixed messages. The third theme was layout and furniture. Some participants experienced sense of belonging in big, open spaces, while others did not. Participants highlighted comfortable furniture and tables that encouraged community. Responses also indicated a preference for furniture they could move to meet their needs. However, some participants noted that mobile furniture could create isolation. The fourth theme that emerged was custodial and maintenance. Participants observed that spaces needing custodial or maintenance attention sent mixed messages about whether the space managers cared about the space. Finally, the fifth theme highlighted non-space elements that affected sense of belonging, including food, busyness, and student involvement.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss the connections between the research findings and my conceptual framework as part of the discussion and limitations. To conclude, I will make recommendations for future practice and research.
Chapter 5

This qualitative study aimed to explore how undergraduate students experience sense of belonging in Golden College Union, a college union on the campus of a public, regional university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. This chapter begins with a summary of the study, followed by a discussion of the results organized around the conceptual framework and a brief review of the study’s limitations. Next, I present implications for practice and future research, followed by a discussion of the significance of the study. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a final summary.

Summary of the Study

This qualitative study delved into how eight full-time undergraduate students experienced a sense of belonging in the physical environment of Golden College Union. Data collection included two semi-structured interviews and a photo-elicitation activity to identify spaces of belonging and unbelonging throughout the building.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked, “How do undergraduate students enrolled at a public, regional university in the mid-Atlantic experience belongingness, particularly in the college union?” Data revealed that students experience belongingness when they fit in as part of a community, share identities with individuals in that community, have fun, and feel comfortable enough to express who they truly are without concern for judgment. Conversely, participants described feelings of isolation, exclusion, fear, and being ignored when they considered experiences of unbelonging. Participants shared experiences of belonging in Golden College Union, their academic buildings, residences, workplaces, and the library. Overall, an emphasis on the interpersonal aspects of belonging arose as a theme, namely seeing familiar faces in the
locations mentioned above and spending time there with friends, coworkers, and classmates. However, this study aimed to broaden the focus of sense belonging to explore the influence of the physical environment. This segues into the second research question.

**Research Question 2**

The second question asked, “Which specific elements of space enhance or diminish students’ sense of belonging in the college union, and how do they do so?” To answer this question, students took photographs of various spaces around the college union building and then described their feelings of belonging or unbelonging related to each space. The findings revealed that natural and warm artificial lighting, attractive murals, student-centered photography, and consistent signage enhanced belonging. Furthermore, comfortable furniture that encouraged relaxation and mobile furniture that allowed students to arrange the space to meet their needs also boosted their sense of belonging. Additionally, spaces that were well-kept sent positive non-verbal messages to students. Finally, the data indicated that some non-physical elements, including food, busyness, and involvement, also contributed to students’ sense of belonging. Therefore, spaces that incorporated the elements above to encourage the aforementioned feelings had a greater chance of creating a sense of belonging for students.

**Additional Insights**

The findings indicated that all spaces in the college union do not have to be all things to all people. In other words, it is normal for students to have mixed senses of belonging in the same space. Disagreement between any two individuals on a space’s sense of belonging does not devalue the space for everyone. This is an especially important consideration for identity-centered spaces such as the Center for Multicultural Students and the LGBTQIA+ Center. Identity-based centers serve specific purposes for historically marginalized populations,
including fostering community, sense of belonging, and providing a safe space. While all are welcome in those places, the centers should not be expected to risk diluting their specific missions by catering to all populations.

In contrast, common areas such as lounges and food courts should strive to inspire a sense of belonging for all. It may not be possible for college union professionals to achieve sense of belonging for all, but that should not deter practitioners. Routine assessment helps professionals understand how students experience belonging from year to year and adjust the spatial elements accordingly. I highlight the use of assessment below in implications for practice. The following section will explore how the findings connect to the conceptual framework of this study.

**Application of the Conceptual Framework**

In this section, I apply Strayhorn’s (2019) College Student Sense of Belonging Theory and Strange and Banning’s (2015) Campus Ecology Framework to the findings of this study. My findings connected well with the conceptual framework I presented in Chapter 2. Linking Strayhorn’s (2019) College Student Sense of Belonging Theory to Strange and Banning’s (2015) Campus Ecology Theory for application in the college union environment offers guidance on how college union buildings can serve to both satisfy the needs of students and achieve student outcomes such as curricular and co-curricular success, greater social engagement and involvement, and persistence (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2009; Hoffman et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2019).

Figure 18 below illustrates Strange and Banning’s (2015) Campus Ecology Theory alongside Strayhorn’s (2019) College Student Sense of Belonging Theory connected by an arrow. The arrow represents the non-verbal messages communicated via aspects of the physical
environment that influence sense of belonging. Figure 18 shows the elements of space that students reported enhanced their sense of belonging (i.e., big, open space and furniture) aligned with Strange and Banning’s (2015) Campus Ecology Framework on the left. In the middle, some of the non-verbal messages that participants reported “hearing” from spaces in Golden College Union appear below the functional and symbolic non-verbal messages arrow that links Strange and Banning’s (2015) Campus Ecology Framework to Strayhorn’s (2019) College Student Sense of Belonging Theory at the “love and belonging” stage of the hierarchy of needs. This image matches Figure 1 from Chapter 2, but it incorporates findings from this study to explain how the findings align with the conceptual framework.

Figure 18
Golden College Union and Sense of Belonging Framework

To clarify, Figure 18 takes the findings from this study and places them within the context of Strange and Banning’s (2015) aspects of place and Strayhorn’s (2019) modified hierarchy of needs. For example, one participant reported that photographs of student life (an
artifact within the first floor lounge) enhanced his sense of belonging because it signaled the message “This place is student-centered” to him. The non-verbal messaging connects the artifacts in the first floor lounge to love and belongingness.

As previously stated, this study aimed to explore belonging, or “love and belonging” according to Strayhorn’s (2019) modified hierarchy of needs. However, as participants shared experiences of belonging, their responses also included examples of how the college union addressed the first two foundational aspects of Strayhorn’s (2019) hierarchy of needs, specifically physiological needs and safety and security. The right side of Figure 18 highlights aspects of the participants’ responses that correspond to certain elements of each level of the hierarchy of needs (noted in capital letters), such as food, emotional safety, and friends. According to participants, spatial, social, and physiological elements such as lighting, color, food, friends, furniture, and cleanliness provided the foundation of the hierarchy of needs. With those needs met, Strayhorn’s (2019) theory posits that students can focus on developing higher-order needs such as esteem and self-actualization. The connections in this framework indicate the role and value of Golden College Union’s physical environment. The next section of this chapter will discuss the limitations of the study.

Limitations

Since small-scale qualitative studies such as this cannot be generalized or replicated, my priority as a researcher shifted to establishing reliability and trustworthiness (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This next section discusses limitations and potential threats to the validity of the study. It also addresses the practices I implemented to ensure greater credibility and trustworthiness (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).
Researcher Bias

According to Martin (2013), ethical research is grounded in *The Belmont Report*, which established guidelines for conducting research on human subjects. The report prioritized respect for participants’ autonomy, avoidance of harm, and the equitable distribution of risks and benefits (Martin, 2013). Qualitative research regarding college unions does not appear to have unique tensions or special ethical considerations, especially considering the present study was expected to cause minimal risk to the participants. However, as with any social science study, the researcher must respect their human subjects, protect their anonymity, and make choices for the course of the study that inflict no harm on them (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Considering this, I distributed a thorough Informed Consent document (Appendix D) at the beginning of the study. The Informed Consent form encouraged the participants to evaluate the risks or benefits of participating in the study and to independently make an educated decision about their participation.

Reflexivity. My identity as a white female created another power dynamic involving the risk of coercion or participant discomfort with sharing their lived experiences. With this awareness, I designed my data analysis and presentation processes to maintain the integrity of the participants’ words through inductive coding, honest reporting, and the inclusion of unidentifiable quotations in my findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Seidman, 2019). I highlighted my dedication to centering their voices and disrupting systemic power and privilege structures by describing all of this “behind the scenes” information with my participants in the Informed Consent document.

It is a common misconception that ethical risks can only occur during the data collection phase (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As such, I ensured that memoing occurred at all stages of the
study to achieve proper reflexivity. Iterative reflection and memoing about my identities, background, positionality, opinions, underlying beliefs, and motivations guided me to honestly assess my status as a white female in relation to the study, its participants, and any potential biases that arose (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Ultimately, if participants felt uncomfortable discussing their experiences in the college union despite my efforts to minimize risk and discomfort, they had access to the instructions for withdrawal from the study in the Informed Consent form. None of the participants that signed the Informed Consent form withdrew.

**Memoing.** Memoing allowed me to reflect on the data collection process and detect patterns and themes as they developed (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researcher reflexivity was important to maintain awareness of any bias I brought to each phase of the study considering my positionality as the researcher. Throughout the study, I wrote memos about the effect of my presence, various thoughts and feelings I experienced, choices I made regarding sampling, data collection, and time spent with participants. Performing a constant evaluation of myself as the researcher via memoing was also a key activity through the data analysis phase of this study because I maintained awareness of what I was doing, thinking, and how I was feeling while doing it, which further built trustworthiness.

**Implications**

A desired outcome of this study was to establish tangible ways college union professionals could design and maintain their spaces to foster students’ sense of belonging. This study yielded many valuable implications that connect physical space to sense of belonging. In the following sub-sections, I present several suggestions for practice and future research.
Implications for Practice

As indicated in Chapter 2, the relationship between people and their environment is reciprocal; people influence environments, and the environments influence people (Banning & Strange, 2015; Strange, 2003). Based on the findings of this study and my professional experience, physical elements such as lighting, art, color, layout, furniture, and upkeep can also enhance or diminish students’ sense of belonging in addition to the people who use the space. In this section, I propose three ways to leverage people and elements of space to foster sense of belonging in the college union including 1) incorporating students in design, 2) encouraging student stewardship 3) initiating routine belonging assessments. Equipped with this understanding and the findings from this study, college union professionals should consider the following practices to utilize space to influence sense of belonging.

Incorporating Students in Design. The findings illustrated that students care about décor and furnishings and that these elements of space contribute to their connection to the institution. Therefore, college union professionals should also consider fully involving students in the design of space. One example of incorporating students in space-related decision-making is hosting a “chair fair” as an engaging practice that invites student opinion in the process of selecting new furniture. I envision a lively event in a high-traffic area such as the lobby or ballrooms with music, decorations, and refreshments. The “chair fair” provides samples of potential new furniture for students to test, move, and cast a vote for their favorites.

Another method of student-centered design that practitioners could consider relates to art in the college union. Professionals could develop an art selection procedure and replacement cycle that genuinely centers the student perspective. They could also establish a collaboration with the university’s art, graphic design, or photography programs to feature the work of student
artists to enhance the art displays throughout the building further. Establishing a replacement cycle as part of the procedure offers a built-in method to keep the art fresh and relevant to the current student body. According to this study, appealing art and comfortable, functional furniture contributes to a student’s sense of belonging. Therefore, including students in selecting and installing such spatial elements could give them more ownership of the space and inspire a sense of belonging to the space.

**Encouraging Student Stewardship.** Participants noted that dirty spaces had a negative effect on their sense of belonging. Thus, college union professionals should make caring for the building a communal experience by placing suggestion boxes or QR codes that link to a form through which students can place maintenance or custodial requests. Practitioners can rely on students as their eyes when they cannot be everywhere. For example, if a student notices the blinds are broken and need attention, signage with QR codes makes reporting the issue to building administration convenient. It also opens a line of communication between the student and administrators so that when the work is complete, the administration can follow up with the student. This accomplishes a maintenance task and builds a relationship between the student, the building, and its administration. Incorporating students in the aforementioned way folds them into the college union community and involves them in creating and maintaining their own spaces of belonging.

**Initiating Routine Belonging Assessments.** As demonstrated by this study’s findings, there is much to learn about one’s building through the eyes of students. College union professionals should consider employing a similar photo-elicitation activity to audit if and how space in the college union fosters sense of belonging. The assessment method could be as formal as my photo-elicitation activity or as informal as a TikTok video or Instagram photo contest.
Another approach could involve organizing an “audit week” that focuses on a different element of space each day of the week. For example, QR codes located near each art installation, lounge, lighting element, or food concept in the building would elicit student feedback. A strategic marketing campaign leading up to the week would capture the attention of the campus community and tell the story of student-focused design and stewardship.

Practitioners could use the data collected from routine belonging audits to inform small and large-scale upgrades such as updating the charging stations or changing the paint color to add more personality to an entire renovation or reallocation of space. In response to the proposed “audit week,” a follow-up event or event or culminating report would demonstrate the influence of the data collected. The student body’s needs, interests, and how they define sense of belonging will be ever-changing as generations and demographics shift over time. Belonging audits keep the college union environment on pace with the needs of students at the time. The practice of implementing a belonging audit could move beyond the college union environment to other spaces on campus including the library, dining halls, and student-facing administrative offices such as financial aid or public safety.

**Implications for Research**

Considering the scarcity of research on the role of the college union, many recommendations for future research stem from this study alone. In this section, I propose four ways to expand upon this study including 1) conducting holistic campus ecology research, 2) utilizing a critical race spatial theory as a framework 3) engaging non-users as participants, and 4) utilizing other arts-based methods and analysis. Equipped with this understanding and the findings from this study, college union professionals should consider the following practices to utilize space to influence sense of belonging.
**Conducting Holistic Campus Ecology Research.** First, as evidenced by my findings, there is more to space than the physical environment alone. In acknowledgment that the campus environment consists of four aspects—physical, organization, human aggregate, and constructed—I recommend a study focused on the role of the college union in fostering sense of belonging through the lens of all four aspects together (Banning & Strange, 2015). The proposed study could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the college union as it explores how the four aspects interact. Findings from such a study could provide more nuanced recommendations for practice in fostering sense of belonging in the college union.

**Utilizing a Critical Race Spatial Theory as a Framework.** Next, I recommend replicating this study by sampling only students of color at a “white normed” college union on the campus of a PWI (Jackson & Hui, 2017). Researchers should consider using Perez’s (2020a) Critical Race Spatial Theory as a framework for the study, which argues that spaces are not racially neutral. This type of study is important to explore students’ of color lived experiences of belonging and unbelonging in the college union. The proposed study should evaluate the sense of belonging for historically marginalized populations to gauge the efficacy of spaces that claim to be inclusive in the college union.

**Engaging Non-users as Participants.** Based on the findings and my experience, I also recommend launching an inquiry into non-users of the college union to explore why they do not visit the building and what, if anything, could change their minds and behaviors. Since research has shown the benefits of the college union on a student’s postsecondary experience (Barrett, 2016; Lang, 2020; Rullman & Harrington, 2014), college union professionals should strive to expand the reach of the college union to as many students as possible. This includes seeking out and engaging the non-users. One way to do this type of study is to employ an intercept survey in
areas of campus away from the college union building. To elaborate, the researcher might stand in the entrance to the dining hall across campus or at the recreation center and ask passers-by if they visit the college union, thereby capturing non-users for a series of brief questions as to why not and what might need to change to encourage their use. The proposed study could help inform new ways to make the college union’s spaces, services, and programs more appealing to a broader audience.

**Utilizing Other Arts-Based Methods and Analysis.** Finally, there is also room for more college union research that utilizes arts-based methods to see what is revealed about the college union. For example, a study asking students to draw their ideal college union could be analyzed for themes related to sense of belonging and community building. Such a study could guide the researcher in making sense of the participants’ worlds and surroundings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Findings from such a study could further inform choices for designing and maintaining inclusive spaces that inspire belonging.

**Significance**

Belonging is a multifaceted yet basic human need. As postsecondary student enrollment declines and student retention becomes vitally important to the longevity of institutions (D. Rocco, personal communication, February 9, 2023), higher education administrators can tap into the power of belonging as a key practice that contributes to student retention and success (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Kitchen & Williams, 2019; Museus et al., 2018; Samura, 2018; Strayhorn, 2019). Given their unique role in providing a space for community building on campus, college unions can enhance student success simply by designing spaces that foster belonging (Barrett, 2016; Camputaro, 2018; Clapp, 2020; Lang, 2020; Tierno, 2013a). This study highlighted the elements of physical space such as lighting, art, layout, furniture, and maintenance that makes a case for
this unique and vital role and included recommendations for both practice and continued inquiry that can contribute to the conversation around space and belonging.

**Summary**

This chapter summarized the study, connected the findings to the conceptual framework, discussed limitations, and offered recommendations for practice and continued research on fostering sense of belonging via the college union. The study of the college union’s role in fostering a sense of belonging for undergraduate students is important when the value of an on-campus college experience is called into question. An intentionally designed college union provides a comfortable, safe, homey environment for students seeking belonging within the broader campus community.
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Appendix A

SEEKING PARTICIPANTS FOR RESEARCH

[Golden College] Union

Eligibility
- Be at least 18 years old
- Be enrolled as an undergraduate at [GU]

Requirements
- Complete two interviews
- Take photographs of spaces in [Golden College] Union

Compensation
- $30 Amazon gift card

Scan the QR code to complete the intake form or email areilly@gcu.edu for more information

[Golden] University
IRB#: IRB0000xxxx

College of Education and Social Work
Appendix B

Dear [GU] Undergraduate Student,
My name is Adriane Reilly, and I am a doctoral student at [GU]. I am researching the essence of undergraduate student experiences of belonging in [Golden College] Union.
I hope you are interested and willing to participate in the study. To be eligible, you must be at least 18 years old, an undergraduate student at [Golden] University, and complete the Informed Consent form agreeing to participate in this study.
Participation includes two interviews and a photo collection activity to showcase specific spaces around the building and how they make you feel. In addition, I am offering compensation of a $30 Amazon gift card which I will distribute after completion of the second interview.
If you are interested in participating, please complete this participant intake form [insert link to Qualtrics form] with a few screening questions. Then, if you’re deemed eligible, I will reach out to obtain your Informed Consent to participate and schedule our first interview.
Thank you for your time. I look forward to meeting you and learning from your experiences on campus!
Warmly,
Adriane Reilly

Dear Colleague,
My name is Adriane Reilly, and I am a doctoral student in the Ed.D. program at [GU]. I am researching the essence of undergraduate student experiences of belonging in the college union, specifically in [Golden College Union].
I hope you can forward the email copied below and the attached flyer to any eligible student employees or leaders you think would be interested and able to participate in the study.
Participation includes two interviews and a simple photo collection activity (which they complete on their phones) to showcase specific spaces around [Golden College Union] and how they make the student feel. In addition, I am offering compensation of a $30 Amazon gift card which I will distribute after completion of the second interview.
Thank you for your time. I appreciate your support in my dissertation journey!
Warmly,
Adriane Reilly
[copy student email and attach flyer]
Appendix C

Participation

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study conducted by Adriane Reilly as part of her doctoral dissertation. Participation in this research project is voluntary. The purpose of this study is to explain the essence of undergraduate student belongingness in the college union located on the campus of a public, regional university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. If you consent to participate, you will be asked to complete the first interview, take photographs of spaces around the college union building, complete a second interview, and confirm the accuracy of the interview transcripts.

If you're willing to participate, please complete this intake form to determine your eligibility. If you're deemed eligible, Adriane Reilly will contact you again to obtain your Informed Consent and schedule an interview.

I am interested in participating in this study.

☐ Yes
☐ No

Eligibility

Your Name

Email address
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phone number</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you at least 18 years of age?</td>
<td>Yes, No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On average, how frequently do you visit the Union per week during the semester?</td>
<td>Never, Some of the days, Most of the days, Every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you currently or have you ever worked for the department?</td>
<td>Yes, No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D

Informed Consent

College of Education and Social Work

Informed Consent
Sense of Belonging in the College Union

Thank you for your interest in participating in Adriane Reilly's dissertation research.

Investigator(s):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adriane Reilly</th>
<th>Orkideh Mohajeri, Ph.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Researcher</td>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

areilly@college.edu omohajeri@college.edu

Project Overview:
Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Adriane Reilly as part of her doctoral dissertation to explain the essence of undergraduate student belongingness in the college union on a campus of a public, regional university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. If you consent to participate, your participation will take about 1-2 hours over two interviews. Participants are asked to complete the first interview, take photographs of spaces around the college union building, complete a second interview, and confirm the accuracy of the interview transcripts.

There is very little risk in participating in this study. However, reflecting on and sharing difficult experiences may result in mild emotional discomfort. If you experience any discomfort, you may withdraw your participation at any time. In this study, your identity will be kept confidential by asking you to select and participate under a pseudonym and store all documentation related to the study on password-protected university-administered cloud storage. However, despite all safeguards to protect your confidentiality, a minimal threat of data exposure still exists as my computer or the computer systems could be hacked.
Some personal benefits of participating in this study include the opportunity to talk about belonging and reflecting on your undergraduate experiences. The insights gained from participants will contribute to scholarship regarding the role of the college union and could influence future university and campus policies and practices within space design and use. Your responses could inform improvements in the college union spaces for the benefit of all students to create inclusive spaces.

The research project is being done by Adriane Reilly as part of her doctoral dissertation to explain the essence of undergraduate student belongingness in the college union on a campus of a public, regional university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. If you would like to take part, requires that you agree to and sign this consent form.

You may ask Adriane Reilly any questions to help you understand this study. If you do not want to be a part of this study, it will not affect any services from . If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of this study at any time.

1. **What is the purpose of this study?** The purpose of this study is to explore undergraduate student belongingness in the college union. Particularly, this study focuses on a college union located on the campus of a public, regional university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States.

2. **If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:**
   - Grant informed consent through this Qualtrics form
   - Provide demographic information through this same Qualtrics form
   - Complete the first interview
   - Take a few photographs of spaces around the college union building, then send them to Adriane via email.
   - Complete a second interview
   - Read over and confirm the accuracy of interview transcripts
   - This study will take 1-2 hours over two interviews.

3. **Are there any experimental medical treatments?** No.

4. **Is there any risk to me?**
   - Possible risks or sources of mild discomfort include: Reflecting on and sharing difficult experiences.
   - If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri, omohajeri@, or the Counseling Center (610-436-2301).
   - If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

5. **Is there any benefit to me?**
   - Participants will receive a $30 Amazon electronic gift card which I will distribute after completion of the second interview.
Another benefit for participants of this study include the opportunity to talk about belonging and reflecting on your undergraduate experiences. Other benefits may include contributing to the scholarship regarding the role of the college union and could influence future university and campus policies and practices within space design and use. Your responses could inform improvements in the college union spaces for the benefit of all students to create inclusive spaces.

6. **How will you protect my privacy?**
   - The in-person interview sessions will be recorded by audio.
   - Your records will be private. Only Adriane Reilly and Orkideh Mohajeri will have access to your name and responses.
   - Your name will not be used in any reports. Participants will be asked for pseudonyms at the beginning of the study.
   - Should this study ever be published, photographs will be credited to the participant's pseudonym and copyrighted under my name.
   - Original records such as contact information sheets, Informed Consent documents, photographs, reflections, and audio and video recordings will be stored:
     - Password-protected computer
     - Password-protected cloud storage
   - Records will be destroyed three years after study completion.

7. **Do I get paid to take part in this study?** Yes, Participants will receive a $30 Amazon electronic gift card which I will distribute after completion of the second interview.

8. **Who do I contact in case of research-related injury?**
   - For any questions or concerns about this study, contact:
     - Primary Investigator: Adriane Reilly at areilly@ or areilly
     - Faculty Sponsor: Orkideh Mohajeri at omohajeri@.

9. **What will you do with my identifiable Information?** Your information will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

   For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at

What is your first and last name?

Consent to Participate
☐ Yes, I consent to participate in this study.
☐ No, I do not consent to participate in this study.

I have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

× SIGN HERE

Enter today's date.

Demographics

What is your age, in years?

How would you define your gender identity?

What is your sexual orientation?
With which racial and ethnic group(s) do you identify? (Check all that apply.)

- Asian
- Biracial or Multiracial
- Black or African American
- Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- Middle Eastern or North African
- Native American, Alaskan Native, or Indigenous
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- White or Caucasian
- Other (please specify)
- Prefer not to answer

What is your ethnicity?


What is your nationality?


What is your current marital status?

- Married
- Living with a partner
- Widowed
- Divorced/Separated
- Never been married

Would you describe your household as:
☐ Low Income
☐ Lower-Middle Income
☐ Middle Income
☐ Upper-Middle Income
☐ High Income
☐ Prefer not to answer

How do you describe your disability/ability status? I am interested in this identification regardless of whether you typically request accommodations for this disability. (Mark all that apply).

☐ A sensory impairment (vision or hearing)
☐ A learning disability (e.g. ADHD, dyslexia)
☐ A long-term medical illness (e.g., epilepsy, cystic fibrosis)
☐ A mobility impairment
☐ A mental health disorder
☐ A temporary impairment due to illness or injury (e.g., broken ankle, surgery)
☐ A disability or impairment not listed above
☐ I do not identify with a disability or impairment
☐ Prefer not to answer

Please type your specific disability/ability statuses in the space below. Examples of statuses include: Anxiety, Bipolar Disorder, Auditory Processing Disorder, Blindness, Colorblindness, Dyslexia, PTSD, Use of a mobility aid (e.g., wheelchair), etc. Note: you may report more than one.

What is your present religion?

☐ Agnostic
☐ Atheist
1. Buddhist
2. Hindu
3. Jewish
4. Mormon
5. Muslim
6. Orthodox (such as Greek or Russian)
7. Protestant
8. Roman Catholic
9. Something else
   
Do you consider yourself a parent?
10. Yes
11. No
12. Prefer not to answer

Are you enrolled an undergraduate student at [\(\text{[Blank]}\)]
13. Yes
14. No

What is your major?

What is your enrollment status?
15. Full-time
16. Part-time
What is your class standing?

- First year
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Other

The formal definition of a first-generation college student is a student whose parent(s) or guardian(s) did not complete a four-year college degree. According to this definition, are you a first-generation college student?

- Yes
- No

Do you describe yourself as a transfer student?

- Yes
- No

How do you describe your university living situation?

- Residential student (University or Affiliated Housing)
- Off-campus or Commuter
- Other (please specify)

What is the distance of your commute?
Are you or have you ever been employed by [REDACTED] in any capacity?

☐ Yes
☐ No

To protect your privacy throughout this study, please give 3 options for pseudonyms to use in place of your name.

1. 
2. 
3. 

Survey Powered By Qualtrics
Appendix E

Interview Guide for Interview 1 and 2

Interview 1: Background

Rapport, Consent
My name is Adriane Reilly, I’m a doctoral student exploring the important role that college unions play in influencing sense of belonging for undergraduate students. I work as the Associate Director of [Golden College] Union. College union professionals like me pride ourselves in creating inclusive spaces that support community building on campus. It’s really important to me that my actions align with my values as a person and a professional, so I’m conducting this study to get a sense of whether or not we’re missing the mark on creating spaces that foster belonging.

1. Can you confirm that you signed the informed consent form on Qualtrics earlier? Did you have any lingering questions about the study?
2. I’m so grateful you’re here with me today. What motivated you to participate in this study?

Warm up
3. What year are you and what is your major?
4. What do you want to do with your degree?

College Transition
5. Tell me about your college decision-making process -- where did you apply? How many colleges did you apply to? How did you make a final decision?
6. Sometimes transitions to college are hard. What was your transition to college like?
7. When you arrived on campus, what were your first experiences/impressions of [Golden College] Union?

[Golden College] Union
8. What is your relationship to [Golden College] Union? [Pause for participant’s response before moving to the clarifying questions below.]
   a. How often do you visit?
   b. What do you when you visit?
   c. How long do you stay?
   d. What do you like best about [Golden College Union]?
   e. What do you like the least?
   f. If you could change [Golden College Union] in any way (and money were no object), what would you suggest?
   g. Are there other student unions you have visited that you really liked? If so, tell me more.
9. College unions and student centers like [Golden College Union] tend to play an important role on the college campus. What is your understanding of their role?
10. How would you define belonging?
11. Where on campus do you feel like you belong? How does this compare to how you feel in the union space?
**Closing**
Thank you so much for your time and for sharing so openly with me today. Let’s schedule our next interview. [Schedule the interview for the following week if possible.] When you arrive for the second interview, we’ll meet in the lobby near the information desk. I’ll ask you to wander around and take photographs with your phone. I’ll explain the activity in more detail at that time, but I’m giving you a heads up now.

**Interview 2: Participant Driven Photo-Elicitation (PDPE) & Synthesis**

**Greeting**
[Meet the participant in the [Golden College Union] lobby at the information desk.] Thank you so much for coming! Did you bring your phone so you can take pictures?

For this activity, give yourself 5-10 mins. and wander around the building. Notice as you’re wandering where your eye gets drawn and how you’re feeling as you walk around. Go back and take two pictures of where you feel “Oh, I belong here.” Then, go take two photos where you’re like “Woah, this is not for me. I don’t feel like I belong here.”

I’m going to be in Room ___ while you wander around. Come back to me when you’re done.

**Synthesis**

1. Great, thank you so much. Do you mind sending me the photos right now? How many did you take, etc.?
2. How was the photography experience?
3. How did you select spaces to photograph? / How did you know what to take a picture of? How did you decide to frame the picture in THIS way rather than THAT way?
4. [Together we look at the photos. I make observations of an aspect of the photo (lighting, furniture arrangement, people in the space, décor).] What else would you want me to see in your photo? What jumps out to you?
5. [Go through the photo or photos that the participant has identified as spaces of belonging].
   a. What attracts you to this space?
   b. How does this space make you feel?
   c. What types of things do you do in this space?
   d. How much time do you spend here each week?
   e. What about this space works?
6. Spaces of exclusion/avoidance:
   a. What makes you avoid this space?
   b. How does this space make you feel?
   c. How much time do you spend here each week?
   d. Did you make a conscious or unconscious decision to avoid this space?
   e. How would you improve this space to make you feel a greater sense of belonging?
7. In the first interview you told me you felt like you belong in _____. What would need to happen to give you that same feeling in the union?
8. These are the questions I prepared for this interview. Is there anything else you think I should’ve asked like to share on this topic?
9. [Bonus question to keep it in your back pocket] What have you learned about yourself and space/union from these two interviews and the photo?

Closing
Thank you so much for your time and for sharing so openly with me today. In a few days, I’ll send you a transcript of our conversations and ask you to check them over for accuracy. Again, I appreciate your time and support for my research project.