

STUDENT BELONGING AT EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY AND
HOW IT AFFECTS ACADEMIC SUCCESS

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Abstract

Student belonging is important to the college experience and more specifically to ECU. Everyone wants to feel as though they belong; as Abraham Maslow states “it is something we as humans crave to feel” (pg. 370), especially when it comes to a college setting. Having that sense of community and feeling as though there are people in one's corner is something everyone deserves to feel. But realistically how many people feel as though they belong at college? More specifically, how many students at ECU feel as though they belong to ECU? Many things go into the college experience that influence belonging in a multitude of ways. What exactly are things that boost the feeling of belonging for students? It is as important to ask questions about why students do not feel like they belong at ECU, and why exactly is that? What has made them feel that way? Was it an experience or other people? When students feel like they belong in college, they have the motivation to live their college life to the fullest. Students go to class, try to make friends within those classes, bond with professors and numerous other things. But on the other side of that coin when students do not feel like they belong, their approach to college is quite different. They may not want to go to class, they stop trying to make connections, and it can be self-isolating and can produce a lot of negative feelings. While student belonging at ECU is an important thing to explore, the impact of sense of belonging on academic success is just as important.

Keywords: student belonging, academic success, student retention, college transition

Background

There are a few things that are important to know about this study and why it has been situated in the academic sphere. As a current first-year student and rising junior, the biggest two fears coming into college were trying to fit in and belong here as well as making sure to continue to be academically successful. Based on the four semesters that have passed thus far as a student, one can confidently say that the feeling of belonging here at ECU is strong and being successful academically has been simple. This is not the case for everyone here whether someone is a first-year, sophomore, junior, senior, graduate student, transfer student, etc. It is important to explore what really makes students feel as if they belong here and if it is one single entity on campus or multiple. Belonging has always been a fascinating concept especially since it is important to every human's life. This can easily be seen by looking at Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) where belonging has its home on the third level of the commonly seen pyramid shape. Now that the primary focus of the study is understood, it is easier to look at why the decision was made to situate this in the academic sphere. When looking at a couple of things on student belonging and academics, many ideas were intriguing. One concept that stuck out is Peddler, Willis, and Niewouldt's (2020) statement that "research has suggested that higher education students who have a greater sense of belonging usually have higher motivation, more academic self-confidence, higher levels of academic engagement and high achievement" (p. 397). Once finishing reading this piece, deciding to situate this study within the academics was easily decided.

Methodology

For this research to be successful and to get the fullest range of data, it was decided that collecting data quantitatively is the best approach. To collect and access quantitative data, a survey with questions about student belonging and academic success was produced. This survey

was distributed in a variety of ways on campus including email, in class, and other appropriate ways. The survey consisted of five different overarching topics which were perceived isolation, classroom comfort, academic success, peer support, and faculty support. In these overarching topics, anywhere from five to ten statements were included pertaining to the main topic.

Participants selected an answer off a Likert scale of five points, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. They were asked to choose a point on the scale they felt most reflected their thoughts on the statement. Participants were also asked to answer some non-identifying demographic questions after answering all the main survey questions. Once we had gotten the necessary number of responses we wanted, we closed the survey. After closing the survey, data was analyzed to make generalized conclusions from the responses. Qualtrics Stats iQ was used to determine common themes, these will be further explained in the results section below.

Results

Out of the 162 complete responses on our survey, the primary finding was that students of all ages, classifications and gender tend to feel a sense of belonging here at ECU. Also, while they continue to establish their sense of belonging here at ECU, they felt that their academic success increased along with it. An important thing to note regarding this finding was that even if students are still trying to establish their sense of belonging, they still feel as though they are academically successful. In general, from Freshman to Senior year, students felt as though their student belonging naturally increased along with their academic success.

Collected data indicated that most Freshman already feel comfortable with their peers even though at the time of the survey, they had only been in college a handful of months. On the opposite end of this, Juniors were the group that felt the most disconnected from their peers, specifically in the classroom setting. When it came to student belonging, most found it easy to connect with their peers both in and out of the classroom. Juniors were the group that had the

most uncertainty when it came to their peers, some possible reasons for this will be discussed in the discussion section.

Regarding the faculty component of student belonging and academic success, a majority of students feel supported by them and are comfortable asking for help or speaking with them on a more personal level. Additionally, students tended to agree that they don't feel isolated on campus. They feel like they know people that know them further than surface level and have made friends in and out of class that they recognize on campus. Overall, students generally feel as though they belong on campus, have friends and peers that support them, feel academically successful in and out of the classroom, and feel as though faculty are there to help and support them.

Discussion

ECU students' sense of belonging tends to be very strong along with students' feeling academically successful. Though sense of belonging is strong in all classifications, Freshman as a whole need to be supported to make sure that a strong sense of belonging is established early on. So, they can continue to be successful in and out of the classroom during their time at ECU. There are populations that do not necessarily have this comfortability, for example Juniors. It isn't mentioned specifically here in the study, but Junior's communication style may have been affected by COVID, which may be why they are not as comfortable with their peers. This may be a point of interest to look at in its very own study. The main limitation to this study was the population size. Within the study, we are worried we could not capture the full scope of students' opinions. We also feel a qualitative portion would have added another scope to the study to contribute a deeper perspective on this topic. If the research were to be continued or expanded upon, the two biggest things to expand upon would be the population size as well as that added qualitative portion for some more in-depth insight.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings in this study were very interesting to see and for sure help to prove that sense of “family” you feel when you step on ECU’s campus. Taking into account this study as a whole, even though the overall theme is positive doesn’t mean efforts to improve student belonging and academic success here at ECU should stay linear. Finding ways to continuously improve student belonging along with academic success is immensely important and will help to keep pirate nation the already great place it is but, also help to make it even better.

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