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College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students

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College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students

Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). New York, NY: Routledge.

Reviewed by David A. Lemley

54

Students' sense of belonging is significant for not only social development but also for retention and academic achievement. Student development professionals may find this intuitively apparent, but *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Understanding Success for All Students* provides empirical support for this assertion. Author Terrell L. Strayhorn is Ohio State University Associate Professor of Higher Education and the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity Senior Research Associate. Strayhorn is a highly visible and active scholar studying student experience, student success, and policy analysis. His research illuminates the experience of underrepresented and at-risk students. *College Students' Sense of Belonging* draws on his substantial research related to vulnerable student populations to support the thesis that strengthening students' senses of belonging is essential for student success.

The first chapters review relevant literature and Strayhorn's approach to sense of belonging. Essential research exploring retention, attrition, or emotional and social well-being is summarized and cited throughout the book, including work by Alexander Astin, George Kuh, Victor Tinto, and preface author Sylvia Hurtado. Strayhorn employs a social cognitive perspective on achievement motivation (p. 4) beginning with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), identifying sense of belonging as "a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior" (Strayhorn, 2013, p. 3). He supplies this working definition:

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of 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). It's a cognitive evaluation that typically leads to an affective response or behavior. (p. 3)

Chapter 2 describes seven core elements of belonging. Sense of belonging takes heightened importance in certain contexts (p. 20). Thus, college students' time of life and unique contexts heighten the importance of belonging (p. 17), and different campuses create different contours for experiencing belongingness. Social identities affect a sense of belonging (p. 22), so a diverse student body necessitates diverse approaches. Since a sense of belonging is relative to different life stages and contexts, it must be continually satisfied (p. 23) and evaluated. A sense of belonging must be established in order for students to move towards other developmental and educational goals, such as esteem or self-actualization (p. 25). Failure to satisfy students' sense of belonging can impair the likelihood of retention, academic achievement, or correlate to more tragic outcomes for at-risk students (p. 25).

The second set of chapters present qualities of belongingness for distinct student groups. Methodology varies somewhat by focus but is consistent with Strayhorn's commitment to present both research conclusions and students' personal stories. Each chapter demonstrates that social identity and context change the criteria of belonging. But, in any circumstances, a sense of belonging is a critical element in student success. Studies focus on Latino students (Chapter 4), gay students (Chapter 5), first-year bridge program participants (Chapter 6), science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) students (Chapter 7), Black male students (Chapter 8), graduate students whose socialization needs are distinguished from undergraduates (Chapter 9), and participants in clubs or student organizations (Chapter 10). Each chapter provides student interview excerpts, each sample's unique circumstances, and practical reflection for strengthening sense of belonging.


Strayhorn's focus on marginalized students results in some challenges to application. For example, the student sample in Chapter 5 offers qualitative data from interviews with an understandably limited number of gay students of color. This offers a narrow sample for "A Sense of Belonging and Gay Students," as the chapter is titled (p. 39). However, by introducing readers to individuals that make up each group, the experience of any student may echo in Strayhorn's conclusions. Even with these limitations, the book provides a fruitful model for examining students' sense of belonging on any campus.

College Students' Sense of Belonging contributes to framing strategic outcomes for student development and encourages campus collaboration. This slim volume could be shared with administrators, board members, or department leaders as a launching point. Strayhorn organizes and summarizes a great deal of material for accessible reference with frequent repetition of key points and clear concluding summaries. Strayhorn's empirically supported imperative to collaborate may motivate faculty and administrators to explore how a sense of belonging could enhance students' learning and the value of the extracurricular for curricular success. For example, student involvement off campus *and* time spent studying outside of class are shown to have a "tipping point" at which either can become counterproductive to educational goals (p. 113). Students may find the book reflects their experiences and perhaps influences their perspective on campus needs. It has potential to bring various readers to constructive collaboration.

Strayhorn's occasionally informal voice and personal touch opens his work to a broader audience and models attitudes and practices that build the community he describes. His familiarity with students, reflections on personal challenges pursuing a sense of belonging, and invitation to authentically engage and value the individuals described resists abstracting students and their needs. The reader is reminded that researcher, subjects, and reviewer are all part of this human pursuit.

The book does not address confessional schools, but Strayhorn's thesis bears special relevance for institutions committed to academic excellence and Christian formation. Believing, behaving and belonging are essential components of Christian formation for this generation of students (e.g. Murray, 2004; Bass, 2012). However, Astin, et. al. (2011) suggest that "some of the college experiences that strengthen students' religiousness... show little or no effect on students' spiritual development" (99). A peer group may have the largest impact on religious engagement (98), and churchgoing is often motivated by the need to satisfy peer and family expectations (89). Strayhorn includes participation in religious student organizations among activities positively contributing to a sense of belonging among marginalized students (p. 12, 45). It would seem this must be qualified by involvement that contributes to connectedness, mattering, support, and trust that needs will be met by that spiritual community. Strategic support for programming and organizations that not only affirm religious identity but develop a sense of belonging to spiritual community may result in "a cognitive evaluation that leads to an affective response or behavior" (Strayhorn, 3) regarding faith formation. Strayhorn's thesis suggests that investing in students' sense of belonging in spiritual community can contribute to academic success and retention.

Finally, *College Students' Sense of Belonging* carries implications for the success of students whose identities place them at the fringes of confessional boundaries. Students whose religious, ethnic, or cultural identities are viewed askance by Christian peers, or students whose sexual identity or political affiliations create anxieties about their relationship to core institutional values, may experience a sense of not "fitting in" with their learning

community. These students are at a disadvantage not only socially or spiritually, but also academically. Strayhorn reports that, while underrepresented students are more at-risk when belonging needs are unmet (p. 10), peer interaction across diverse social identities contributes to *greater* sense of belonging (pp. 13, 58, 81) for all students. Perhaps the goals of retention and academic achievement are best served when spiritual programming and Christian campus organizations provide a sense of belonging for the “least of these” among us. 

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