Student Experience Council:
Sense of Belonging Focus Group and Online Survey Report

Purpose

This study was conducted in order to explore the development and evolution of students' sense of belonging at IUPUI. The Student Experience Council (SEC) task force on belonging defined sense of belonging at IUPUI as "feelings of sufficient identity with, and connectedness to, some aspect of the institution that compels them to degree completion." The focus groups and questionnaire used in these analyses were designed to explore the process of forming an identity or becoming connected to other students, faculty and student organizations, or any other attribute of IUPUI in a way that encouraged them to remain enrolled and ultimately complete their degree.

Method

Participants

Students were recruited for the focus groups in one of two ways. First, a random sample of 250 bachelor's degree seeking students enrolled at IUPUI who were 18 years of age or older by the time of the Spring 2019 university census (January 14, 2019) were invited to participate in focus groups. Three students responded to this invitation, of which one student attended a brief focus group that became a focused interview. Secondly, students from several key groups who might have been missed by the random sample were identified and invited to participate in focus groups at specific times. These groups included students participating in the Diversity Enrichment and Achievement Program (DEAP, 8 students), International Peer Mentoring Program (IPMP, 10 students), and students in the School of Engineering and Technology (8 students). Attempts to reach students in other organizations (including the Degree Completion Office, School of Nursing students, and other identified groups of interest) were not successful. A total of 26 students participated in one of these groups, making 27 total students who participated in one of the focus groups.

Students who were randomly selected but did not participate in one of the focus groups were invited to participate in an online survey that included the items from the focus group protocol. Of the 249 students who were invited to participate, 21 responded to the survey for a response rate of 8.4%. All participants were entered into a drawing to receive a $100 Amazon gift card for their participation. Ten students who participated in either the focus groups or the survey were selected to receive one.

Differences between focus groups and survey participants are included in Table 1 below. Focus group participants were significantly more likely to be international and less likely to be US citizens, not surprising considering that international students were specifically targeted as a group of interest. Focus group participants were also more likely to indicate that they had a disability, were a transfer student, were receiving a Pell grant, or were first generation. Survey respondents were more likely to indicate that they were living with a spouse or partner or that they identified as LGBTQ+.

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Table 1
Demographics of Focus Group and Survey Participants

	Focus Group Participants (N=27)	Survey Participants (N=21)
	Percentages	
Sex		
Female	50.0%	52.4%
Male	50.0%	38.1%
Transgender or gender-nonconforming	0.0%	9.5%
Race/Ethnicity*		
Native American/Alaska Native	0.0%	0.0%
African American	24.0%	14.3%
Latinx	8.0%	4.8%
Asian American	8.0%	4.8%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.0%	0.0%
White	32.0%	76.2%
International	28.0%	0.0%
Two or More Races	0.0%	0.0%
Age Group		
18-19	15.4%	14.3%
20-22	53.8%	71.4%
23-25	26.9%	0.0%
Older than 25	3.8%	14.3%
Current Living Location		
Campus Housing	34.6%	19.0%
Off campus in downtown Indianapolis (less than 1 mile from campus)	30.8%	23.8%
Off campus within 15 miles of campus (in nearby town or suburb)	34.6%	42.9%
Off campus more than 15 miles from campus	0.0%	14.3%
Current Living Situation		
I live by myself	14.8%	19.0%
I live with other students	70.4%	38.1%
I live with friends or others not attending IUPUI	7.4%	19.0%
I live with caregivers, parents, or other family members	7.4%	23.8%
Marital Status		
Single, never married	92.0%	90.5%
Married	8.0%	9.5%
Separated, widowed, or divorced	0.0%	0.0%
Live with spouse or partner*		
No	92.6%	66.7%
Yes	7.4%	33.3%
Children at home		
No	100.0%	95.2%
Yes	0.0%	4.8%

Table 1
Demographics of Focus Group and Survey Participants (cont.)

	Focus Group Participants (N=27)	Survey Participants (N=21)
	Percentages	
Citizenship Status*		
US Citizen	55.6%	95.2%
Not a US Citizen	44.4%	4.8%
Other characteristics		
Has a disability*	18.8%	4.8%
Identifies as LGBTQ+*	0.0%	23.8%
Veteran	0.0%	0.0%
Transfer student*	31.6%	14.3%
Currently receiving a Pell grant*	44.4%	19.0%
First generation student*	52.6%	23.8%

Focus group protocol and questionnaire

Before participating in the focus groups, participants were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire in order to understand the characteristics of students who participated. This same demographic questionnaire was included in the online survey. Fifty-two percent of survey respondents identified as female, while 38% identified as male and 10% identified as transgender or gender non-conforming. Approximately 76% of survey respondents identified as white, while 14% identified as African American and 5% each identified as Latinx or Asian American. In addition, 24% of respondents identified as LGBTQ+, 24% identified as first generation, 19% indicated they were currently receiving a Pell grant, 14% were transfers, and 5% indicated they had a disability. Focus group participants were significantly more likely to be African American or International, mostly because of the groups that were recruited to take part in focus groups. Full demographics for the focus groups are still being calculated and will be available as part of the full report.

For the focus groups, students provided an informed consent document which detailed the study procedures, risks, and benefits. All their questions were answered and students were asked for their consent before recording began. All focus group recordings will be destroyed one year after the release of this report. For the survey, students were provided with the same Informed Consent Document in electronic form and asked if they agreed to participate. The full focus group protocol and survey are available upon request and will be included in the full report.

Major Conclusions/Highlights

Students define "sense of belonging" as feeling "welcomed", "comfortable", and "safe".

When asked how they would describe a sense of belonging, students indicated that it meant feeling comfortable or welcomed in a space. Students also used the term "safe", referring to a space where they felt safe to be themselves. "Family" was also used on a few occasions. To students, feeling a sense of belonging was not necessarily about forming connections to reach their degree, but about finding a protected place from which they could explore other opportunities.

A strong sense of belonging can drive students to seek other opportunities for engagement.

Students who feel comfortable and welcomed may also feel safe to reach out to other students, faculty, and staff in their environment. Students who felt a sense of belonging in DEAP reported that they felt safe reaching out to faculty and staff as mentors. Other students reported that a strong sense of belonging in their major encouraged them to reach out to faculty about opportunities for research. Sense of belonging with a friend group encouraged some students to join student organizations. These comments revealed that sense of belonging may have an indirect effect on retention. Feeling as if they belong seems to help students feel secure enough to become engaged in a wide variety of opportunities, and that subsequent engagement further encourages students to remain at IUPUI.

When it comes to developing a sense of belonging, expectations matter.

Some students who leave IUPUI because of low sense of belonging expected a stronger social environment. Others expected IUPUI not to have much of a social environment and were pleased to find stronger connections than they expected. Still others are more academically focused and enjoyed that IUPUI is not a "traditional" university. Several African American students also reported that they felt a lower sense of belonging initially, as the structural diversity of IUPUI did not match what was presented in marketing materials. Unmet expectations will likely not prevent students from experiencing a sense of belonging, but can delay belongingness and, in some cases, cause students to find an environment that is a better fit.

Commitment and other factors can overcome a lack of sense of belonging.

When asked about what drove students to remain enrolled, finances and a desire to complete their program were mentioned more often than belonging. In fact, a few students mentioned that they lacked a sense of belonging to IUPUI, but remained enrolled because other barriers (losing a scholarship, credits not transferring, etc.) prevented them from leaving IUPUI. Other students were so committed to their degree program that lacking belonging was not a factor in their decision to stay. Strayhorn (2012) suggests that sense of belonging becomes a major factor in retention when other needs (such as finances, housing, or security) are not met. While this was not explicitly examined in this study, the results do indicate that sense of belonging may be a factor only when the real or perceived barriers to leaving are not too great.

Students may feel they belong to other groups outside of IUPUI (such as family, friends, and community organizations). Belonging to these groups can drive retention as well.

Several students reported that they maintained strong connections with family who were supportive of their education. International students reported feeling a strong sense of belonging with their host family, while other students mentioned finding a strong sense of belonging with friends outside of IUPUI or groups in the community. While not explicitly connected to IUPUI, the sense of belonging that students felt from family or other external groups may also facilitate retention.

When asked what IUPUI could do to help them feel more connected, students mentioned housing frequently. Events, faculty, and services for students were also mentioned.

One of the focus group questions specifically asked what IUPUI could do to improve students' sense of belonging. Housing was mentioned in every single focus group. Specifically, students mentioned how living in student housing would make it easier to form connections with other students and participate in activities across campus. Students in the DEAP group also mentioned the importance of having other faculty of color, while other students mentioned the importance of events and learning about what is happening on campus. Some specific student services were also mentioned.

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Spring 2019 Focus Group and Questionnaire
Major Themes and Quotes

1. **Students define "sense of belonging" as feeling "welcomed", "comfortable", and "safe".**
   When asked to develop a working definition of "sense of belonging" the SEC task force
   defined it as ""feelings of sufficient identity with, and connectedness to, some aspect of the
   institution that compels them to degree completion." However, students defined sense of
   belonging using different terminology when prompted in our focus groups. The most frequently
   used terms included "welcomed", "fitting in", "comfortable", and "safe".

   • Welcomed/Included (x9)
      o "Basically, when I look into things, I want to get involved, I'm always welcomed with
        open arms."
      o "sense of belonging to me is kind of like feeling like everyone is open and kind. You are
        welcomed in the community, and that the community tries to include you in their activities."
      o "People here generally are accepting, or at least the people that I have come into contact
        with in clubs and that kind of thing."
   • Place where you belong/ Fitting in (x8)
      o "Feeling like you fit in"
   • Comfortable (x7)
      o "Being part of the community, having friends, making memories which can be treasured."
      o "Making you feel comfortable being here. Like, you don't want to walk around campus
        and feel like you're out of place or something."
   • Safe to be self/share ideas (x7)
      o "sense of belonging to me means that I have a place I can share ideas, thoughts and passion.
        Even if they don't match with the group, I don't feel less."
      o "Feeling safe and affirmed"
      o "Having friends, and just being free to be myself."
   • Family/Home away from home (x6)
      o "I feel like at IUPUI there is a family for everyone. It doesn't matter if you are different
        because obviously we are all different. Most of us are international students right here right
        now, and we come from really different communities and cultures, but we still find our
        people here. And I'm sure, like, obviously local Americans find their families here too, be
        it on campus or off campus."
   • Community (x3)
      o "It is building that continual connection with people that you see around you all the time.
        Having that connection with someone else that is different than you in terms of race, in
        terms of what they do, in terms of career opportunities. And their experience with the
        world. I feel like that's the little community that we have here at IUPUI in IPMP. Which
        makes it…great!"
   • Culture (x2)
      o "sense of belonging has to do with the culture the school provides. Not only the teachers,
        the faculty, the academic advisors; there are also the peers that you're around."
   • Other positive terms ("Part of something", "having your voice heard", etc.) (x7)
   • Indifferent
   • Nothing

2. **A strong sense of belonging can drive students to seek other opportunities for engagement.**
   Once students feel as if they belong, their sense of belonging may facilitate other opportunities for
   students to become engaged on campus. This may include increased collaborative learning with

other students, more interactions with faculty, participation in student organizations, or finding engaged learning opportunities. In this way, belonging can indirectly effect retention and other positive outcomes.

- "I would say it's important. I would say that you know like my freshman year I was not involved, I didn't wanna do anything with anybody, um you know. I wasn't involved in campus spaces um and it affected you know kinda my pysche and you know how I was feeling overall. I just know it kind of affected me even wanting to be here. But once I was able to get more integrated into the DEAP program and student organizations and um to find black faculty and staff um I can kind of see myself in it did make me feel more affirmed and like I did belong. Then I was able to kind of feel like okay I could make it through this journey."
- "I came here and it was just like made my head spin with how many things were going on. How many things I could look into and get involved with. And now as a senior, I really feel like the campus is like a neighborhood. I can pop into this house, or go over here and I really feel I know everybody, I have a connection to people."
- "If you find the right people, if you feel like you belong to something it makes you feel more like, I don't know, it makes you want to go to school or makes you want to do other stuff. It motivates you. It's not the priority, but it actually helps you a lot."
- "I live on campus and I'm part of the STEM floor in North Hall. So, that's really been like the pivotal place for me since like all the people there are science majors, and like math majors and Engineering and Technology, of course. And so like everyone there is they're all interested to help each other. Like you have class of like dozens of people from the same hallway. And it's really nice because like you can just walk down the hall and you can be like, "Hey, yo! Can you help me with this assignment?", or something like that. And then it'll be like that easy. And like study groups, they come up like that. Like before an exam, just talk to anyone."
- "It's hard to stay connected to a campus if you aren't connected to the community of said campus. Finding your people is more important than we often think."
- "I know that my professors are happy to have me in class and I wouldn't want to let them down. They make me feel welcome."

3. **When it comes to developing a sense of belonging, expectations matter.**
   Students had differing expectations when they came to IUPUI. The fact that IUPUI is predominantly a commuter campus caused many students to expect that the social environment would be lacking. Some of these students were pleasantly surprised that they were able to make connections with faculty and other students on campus. Other students were pleased that IUPUI offered an environment where students were more academically committed and focused on their future. On the other hand, several students also mentioned that they were disappointed that IUPUI did not have a more traditional college environment.

- "I expected IUPUI to be less commuter-college ish, and more of a traditional school that was located in downtown Indy. … I have realized the stigma of the commuter-college is becoming more and more true."
- "I expected to be the "odd man out" because I commute. I thought most people would live on campus….Many more people commute than I thought. There are also more non-traditional, older students."
- "I feel like I've had more of a college experience than I expected. Because I thought because it was a commuter campus, like, no one would ever talk to each other, and you'd just come to class and leave. I would say it exceeded my expectations."
- "I have lots of friends at IU Bloomington, and other universities. And a lot of the kids that you speak to who transfer from IU to here is because they just can't take that much noise, that much

- craziness, that much like dodging keg rolling down the street. Not that that actually happens, but you know. And I find that more people here at IUPUI are more involved and get deeper into the university than at a bigger university where it is more of a party atmosphere or social atmosphere. And at the end of the day, you finish four years with a lot more going for you into the future than you would have had spent all that time immersed in that kind of playground environment."
- "I thought maybe it'd be kind of hard to make friends being a largely commuter school. [Because] a lot of people, they just go to class and they just leave and go wherever they live; an hour away or something. But I live in the area, so I wanted to make friends even if they don't live in the area. And I ended up making a lot of friends, so I was a bit surprised by that, I suppose."
- "I used to see commercials for it [IUPUI] like on my local channels back home and I expected it to be a little more diverse than what I saw and what I've experienced since I've got here. … I saw a lot more students of color. Students who were just diverse and had multiple identities, but I don't necessarily experience that in the classrooms or you know when I'm in different places on campus."
- "It has gotten more of a 'Collegey' feel since I started attending. There is a very inclusive student body and the activities on campus that occur bring the student body together like your standard university."
- "My best friend … went to North Carolina A&T and all the times we snapchatted, when we would video chat it looked like she was having so much fun. She was in there with all the people, and I was just like "man I'm not getting that here." So that was definitely another reason why I thought about transferring because it was like I'm not getting the experience that I thought I was going to get."
- "On a more positive note, I expected to come here solely to get my degree um and you know go to class and go to my dorm and I found a lot more opportunity than I thought I would find here."
- "Well I'd say, when I first read about IUPUI, I'd see, 'Oh! Indy is like the 13th most biggest city in the US.' I was like, 'Oh wow! It's gonna be like parties, and there will be lots of events.' Turns out maybe not."

4. **Commitment and other factors can overcome a lack of sense of belonging.**

Sense of belonging is not always the most important factor in students' decision to remain at IUPUI. A few students reported struggling with belonging, but remained because of the potential loss of scholarships or credits that would be lost in a transfer. Other students mentioned that they were committed to their degree program or the opportunities offered on campus, such as internships.

- "Even though my main reason for staying with it isn't belonging but having a space here in Business that means a lot."
- "I don't think belonging affected my decision to stay here much. … Basically it [IUPUI] has the best scholarships for international students, is has good opportunities. So there were there these motivators like money, finances, and also the reason I'm here is that I have a host family so I don't pay for like living expense and that kind of thing and if I were to go to IU or Purdue or out of state I would lost that.
- "I was losing friends because I couldn't fit in. Went through a break-up, as well. Family troubles were going on and at one point, I tried talking to CAPS but all their timings conflict with student class and work timings. How is that helpful? ... [I didn't leave because] I would have lost out on scholarships and credits were not transferring. I also did not have the courage to leave behind all the certificates and honors degree that I was getting. It seemed too late in the game."

- "It [sense of belonging] was not that important. I went here because of IUPUI's forensic science program that was my major at the time. Now, it is my minor."
- "My experience is a little bit different. I didn't like the people at IUPUI. It wasn't the faculty or like anything like that, it was just the students I wasn't connecting well with, which has been an issue throughout my whole life. But I stayed for the opportunities and then I met different people I wanted to hang out with."
- "One of the reasons that made me stay at IUPUI is the opportunities I have. Like, personally as an engineering student I know the engineering school has a lot of internships. I just felt if I wanted to achieve my goals, it was better for me to stay here at IUPUI."

5. **Students may feel they belong to other groups outside of IUPUI (such as family, friends, and community organizations). Belonging to these groups can drive retention as well.**

Our definition of sense of belonging emphasized a need to form connections to people and institutions at IUPUI in order to facilitate retention. However, students emphasized how connections to family, friends, and organizations outside of IUPUI also made them want to stay and succeed. Family members proved to be an especially important force in facilitating retention for some students.

- "I really didn't like Computer Science. Not because of the school or anything. Just [because] I probably shouldn't have gone into it in the first place. I was so upset with it at one point. I was like, 'I'm leaving! I'm dropping out!' And then my friends and parents were like 'No, don't. Just change your major.' And I'm like 'All right, all right.'"
- "I'm taking a vocal class. I've been taking vocal classes since last summer and it's ongoing to like what one, two, three, four, four semesters now and the same teachers, same room, every week, yeah, every week. It kind of melts all my worries away."
- "My sense of belonging came from my host family more than from the university itself for a long time. Not that I don't have a sense of belonging, I'm just saying that I don't think the sense of belonging to the university had much to do with me staying. It made me glad I stayed, but it didn't, there were more different pieces that made me stay. My responsibility to my family, like 'don't quit because there are a lot of people that depend on you doing well'. The host family. Having a place to live, having that kind of support and belonging."
- "And I think what made me want to stay is my little sister. She is a senior in high school now and we were talking about the future. You know [because] sometimes we have deep conversations when we not arguing. She was saying, 'You know college is pointless there's no point in going,' and this and that. And then I was like, 'Dang, I gotta come back.' Because that's my little sister and I want to set a good example for her."

6. **When asked what IUPUI could do to help them feel more connected, students mentioned housing frequently. Events, faculty, and services for students were also mentioned.**

Several students mentioned that housing was a key resource that could enhance IUPUI students' sense of belonging. Specifically, living on campus removes travel time barriers that prevent some students from being engaged, and create more opportunities for students to have meaningful interactions with one another. Students also mentioned the importance of communication, particularly about events on campus. Enhancing racial and ethnic diversity was also mentioned, both as a strategy for helping students of color find connections and also as a strategy for helping white students work across difference.

Housing

- "Like all the events they hold at the Campus Center; there's tons of them. And if people live on campus, like laziness doesn't factor into it nearly as much. [Because] they don't have to drive 30 minutes out of their way, or whatever. They could just walk over to anywhere on campus in, like, 10 minutes or less."
- "On-campus housing availability is a mess and so like with all the construction going on, it's kinda up in the air as to like what's next for campus housing. And so I know we kind of touched on that; how the issue is that like it's a commuter school and people aren't going to things. But I think that if we can grow on campus housing, it'll become more like IU or Purdue, where more people are here and you need to be here for sporting events and stuff. But these, of course, are very long-term projects."
- "You want to give a lot of housing options. I walked in my first day and saw a confederate flag, so that could have been avoided if I chose someone who had a similar cultural or ethnic background. Now I worry. Do I have to watch my stuff?"

Other Suggestions

- "Being a person with a hearing disability, I get judged daily by my professors and I feel like that should never happen. … Like if your professor says something and you ask them to repeat it, I'm hearing impaired and they may not know and then I have to point it out to them. It takes them a while to process everything. You have to bring all this documentation to them in order for them to actually believe you and sometimes they think you're just trying to get out of doing your work which I understand but like you have other people that may have a disability who aren't treated the same way. Being a person of color, they ask all these other questions and I've seen it happen in a few of my classes."
- "I am unaware of a lot of clubs and events going on. I am unsure on how to get involved more and feel more connected to other students."
- "I have thought of group, club or orientation for students that may be older to help them get adjusted and how to get the full experience of where they are at."
- "More events!"
- "One of the main reasons why black students don't feel comfortable on predominantly white campuses is because there's not enough teachers that look like them so they have a hard time connecting so definitely more black faculty on campus."
- "Yeah because I grew up in a small, very 100% white town so when I came to IUPUI it was my first time meeting someone who was a Hijabi and learning about what Islam is and things like that. So definitely have some, maybe like an FIS or something like that, have some culture training about how to go about learning about other peoples cultures. [Because] there's lots of times where I'd be like trying to learn about their culture and you just kind of like stumble and say the wrong thing and you don't realize you're say the wrong thing or stuff like that."
- "We have a lot of stuff available and there's always new stuff being added."

What can we at IUPUI do?

Based on results from the focus groups and subsequent surveys, IUPUI should consider the following strategies for improving students' sense of belonging:

- Further consider the impact of financial aid and the reputation of IUPUI academic programs on retention. These factors may make IUPUI a stronger option for students even if they are questioning whether or not they belong on campus.

- Continue to encourage engagement in programs and activities designed to foster a sense of belonging, particularly activities early in the fall semester or programs that develop over several weeks. Students can benefit from the connections they develop in ways beyond retention.

- Expectations surrounding the social environment on campus should be communicated early during the admissions process. This will provide appropriate level setting for the social environment and improve the likelihood that students will develop a sense of belonging more quickly. Communications professionals should also find ways to streamline communications about events and other possibilities for engagement on campus so that students can find opportunities that match their interests.

- Continue initiatives to hire a more diverse faculty, especially in terms of race/ethnicity. Students of color were quick to mention that having faculty from similar backgrounds is important for making them feel as if they belonged on campus.

- Provide support for programs that encourage engagement from family and provide ways for students to become engaged beyond the campus community. Belonging that facilitates retention can come from a variety of sources beyond IUPUI.