Exploring a Sense of Belonging in Undergraduate Commuter Students

Joanna Beituni

May 2022

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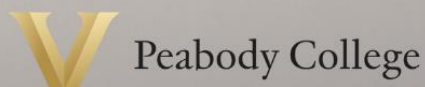
Dedication & Acknowledgments

"Verily with hardship comes ease."
[Quran 94:6]

As a first-generation college student, I have overcome many challenges during my academic career, and this doctoral journey was no different. However, for the past three and a half years, I have faced obstacles that have tested me, taught me lessons, and repeatedly reminded me of my resiliency, and for that, I am eternally grateful. Thank you to my family, friends, and loved ones for your support. This achievement is as much yours as it is mine*.*

This capstone is dedicated to all first-generation college students – always remember that **you belong**. *May your future be bright and free of educational barriers – and the world see, respect, and appreciate your diverse contributions to society!*

Dr. Erin Henrick – thank you—I would not have made it this far without your encouragement, support, and guidance. You took me on mid-capstone, listened as I talked through my ideas, and provided insightful feedback to help bring those ideas to fruition. You were a patient capstone advisor and compassionate mentor while I navigated the challenges of life and this project. Thank you, Dr. Henrick, for helping me (proudly) cross the finish line!

My passion for reading has shaped me to become a lifelong learner. And that love for reading was instilled in me by my dearest mother at a young age. Mummy, thank you for always encouraging me to keep reading and supporting all my academic endeavors and adventures! Thank you for giving us everything you had, even in the hardest times – I love you!

Thank you to my dad (may you be in the highest of heavens) for being the best girl dad before it became a movement. I wish you were here to celebrate with us. Love, Dr. Joanna Sami Beituni.

To my sisters, Jenna, Jannann, and Samyah – thank you for your constant support, love, and pep talks. And for always thinking I'm the smartest in the family (I hope that never changes!). I love you and am so proud to call you my sisters, even if you don't know what I do half the time!

To my niece and nephew, Saja and Anas – I love you to the moon and back! I look forward to celebrating your continued success and achievements. You have already accomplished so much, and I know you are only getting started. I cannot wait to see what your futures hold!

Last but never least, my dearest husband, Hussam. You have only known me as a student—so I thank you for putting up with me and ensuring that I survived the past 3.5 years. You do such an excellent job reminding me of all my accomplishments and believing in me, even when I do not believe in myself. I love you more than you know.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research describes a sense of belonging as a feeling contributing to one's connection to a group, further motivating individuals to engage in group activities (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990) and can be nurtured through a welcoming campus environment with positive student-faculty relationships (Eccles et al., 1993; O'Keefe, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000, as cited in O'Keefe, 2013). While much of the research identifies which factors play an essential role in creating a sense of belonging—whether it be engagement or positive relationships—Hausmann et al. (2007) define a sense of belonging as "the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community" (p. 804), suggesting that students who feel welcomed and supported on campus will believe they represent a valued addition to the student body and thus encourage more student engagement.

The client organization for this capstone project is the Office of Student Affairs at Virginia University*. Virginia University is a private university in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area serving over 3,500 students from 45 states and over 75 countries. As of Fall 2021, 65% of the student population were from the DMV (District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia), with about 30% of undergraduate students living on campus (Virginia University, 2021). University surveys and Student Affairs observations show an evident disconnect between commuter students and engagement on campus. Student Affairs stakeholders believe that a diminishing sense of belonging contributes to commuter students not participating in student life on campus. Through interviews and focus groups, this quality improvement project sought to examine a sense of belonging in undergraduate commuter students at Virginia University.

The conceptual framework for this project was informed by Tinto's (1993) Model of Institutional Departure and Pascarella's (1980) Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model and the literature. The framework developed for this project included four variables that enhance a student's sense of belonging. The four variables are: (1) faculty and staff interactions with students, (2) student engagement, (3) physical environment, and (4) institutional programming and resources. The framework aligns with Virginia University's problem of practice, which is focused on a sense of belonging in commuter students and the factors that impact student engagement on campus.

*Virginia University is a pseudonym.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS & FINDINGS

RQ 1: What does a sense of belonging mean to undergraduate commuter students? How do undergraduate commuter students experience a sense of belonging?

» First-generation* students and students of color* were less likely to feel like they belonged at Virginia University.

» Students who feel like they belong at Virginia University described having strong connections to others on campus.

» A lack of resources and support contribute to a diminished sense of belonging and weaker relationships with faculty and staff, especially in first-generation students.

RQ 2: What do undergraduate commuter students feel impacts their sense of belonging? How can faculty and staff nurture a sense of belonging?

» Physical campus environments do impact an undergraduate commuter student's sense of belonging.

» Student engagement levels do not impact a student's sense of belonging.

» Students of color are more likely to express dissatisfaction with DEI efforts at Virginia University.

*A first-generation college student is a student whose parent(s) did not complete a four-year college or university degree (NASPA, 2020).
*Students of Color include any student who identifies as African American, Black, Hispanic, or Latino(a).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, four recommendations were offered to Virginia University as ways to increase a sense of belonging and institutionalize support for undergraduate commuter students on campus.

Build opportunities to integrate commuter students into campus life.

Create learning communities for social and academic benefits for students (Engstrom & Tinto, 2007; Taylor et al., 2003; Tinto, 1999; Zhao & Kuh, 2004, as cited in Tinto, 2012). Restructure the first-year seminar course at Virginia University to include a peer mentor component, allow staff to teach sections, and offer sections for specific student populations, such as commuters, first-generation, or other majors (Virginia University currently offers specific sections for nursing majors only).

Reinstate the Office of Commuter Students.

Research shows that commuter students are becoming a marginalized group on campus (Jacoby, 2020) and will need more support on campus. With Virginia University transitioning to a live-on campus university in fall 2022, the university anticipates a large number of students receiving exemptions to live off-campus. This office will serve as advocates for commuter students, providing another opportunity for informal interactions between peers and students and staff.

Increase Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) efforts and implement additional engagement opportunities on campus.

Virginia University is a designated Minority Serving Institution (MSI). MSIs "are critical in providing access and opportunities for traditionally underrepresented and low-income students' (CASE, n.d.). Virginia University needs to ensure that all administrative and academic departments are aware of the designation and their role in supporting this designation. Additionally, all departments should consider including an anti-bias and cultural awareness program and training as part of Virginia University's DEIB efforts to ensure the campus community is committed to building and maintaining an atmosphere where all Virginia University community members feel safe, accepted, included, and seen.

Create additional space to encourage collaboration and informal interactions on campus.

Research proves that campus facilities designed in welcoming ways go a long way in making students feel like they matter and are included on campus (Strange & Carney, 2015; Jacoby & Garland, 2004).

Organizational Context

University Background

Virginia University[1] is a private Catholic University in Northern Virginia, just minutes from the nation's capital. It offers bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees on-campus and online. The university serves over 3,000 total students from 45 states and over 75 countries. As of Fall 2021, 65% of the student population were from the DMV (District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia), with about 30% of undergraduate students living on campus (Virginia University, 2021). Despite the university's large commuter population, the university prides itself on providing a high-quality education for all students. In 2021, the commitment to student success was recognized, earning the university a spot in the top 50 (and a six-step ranking increase from 2020) in U.S. News & World Report *Best Regional Universities in the South* (U.S. News & World Report, 2021).

The university is in an urban region, where the cost of living is one of the highest in the nation. The metropolitan Washington, D.C. area is ranked the seventh most expensive place to own and eighth most expensive place to rent in the United States (Wheelwright, 2020). Coupled with the cost of tuition, independent living can be extremely expensive and unaffordable for some students. Virginia University's prime location makes sense that it is a popular choice amongst commuters, as it allows them to continue living at home and easily access Washington, D.C. attractions. University leaders say they feel that Virginia University is a second choice for many of their students, due to their location in a competitive region. Virginia

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[1] The name of the university has been changed for anonymity

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University has long been renowned as an economically valuable option for college students seeking to remain in the Washington, D.C. area. Nearly all—over 95%—of first-year students receive financial aid compared to 45% at Georgetown and 44% at George Washington University. With practically all of Virginia University students receiving financial aid, it allows students to continue their education at a more affordable rate. Recently, Virginia University jumped up more than five spots in the country on the list of *Best Regional Universities in the South* (U.S. News & World Report, 2021). Thus, statistics reveal that the school has maintained a level of success and commitment to providing an affordable education that does not compromise the college student experience.

Along with affordability, Virginia University is home to over 150 full-time faculty with a 12:1 student-to-faculty ratio. A small student-to-faculty ratio is attractive to many students because it allows students to build relationships and interact with faculty on a personal level. As a result, faculty was named as an attractive factor in university choice by students. In a survey sent to alumni who graduated between 2008 – 2018, results showed that alumni still hold strongly to their belief that faculty is Virginia University's greatest strength (Office of Institutional Planning and Research, 2020). And, in a 2019-2020 *Graduating Student Survey*, undergraduate-level graduates identified "professors" as the most substantial aspect of their education at the university (Office of Institutional Planning and Research, 2020). Universities with small classes tend to promote the benefits of a small student-to-faculty ratio, including allowing students the opportunity to gain hands-on experiences in the classroom and build close relationships with faculty. The surveys further reinforce the allure of a small student-to-faculty ratio to Virginia University students.

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Stakeholders

The Office of Student Affairs is part of the university's leadership team responsible for driving efforts related to a sense of belonging and student involvement. For this project, I worked closely with two senior leaders in Student Affairs. The Associate Vice President (AVP) of Student Affairs has been with Virginia University for less than five years and her main concern was with data from commuter students on senior exit surveys. During the last four years, student data has revealed an ongoing lack of belonging in undergraduate students. Specifically, students reported that they do not have enough extracurricular activities in the division of student life and that the university does not have accommodations and facilities to cultivate student belonging. The AVP is concerned that this is a recurring theme that has been unaddressed since prior to her arrival. Her main priority is to implement initiatives that increase students' sense of belonging on campus.

The Senior Director of Student Affairs has been at Virginia University for over a decade. She has seen many changes unfold at the university and feels strongly about increasing pride amongst students on campus. According to the senior director, evidence of a sense of belonging would include an increase of participation in student organizations and more students showing school pride by wearing branded clothing. When further probed on this, she shared that Virginia University students wear more sweatshirts and hats representing the University of Maryland or Georgetown University than they do representing Virginia University. In other words, more Virginia University students touting apparel representing other universities on Virginia University's campus than their own university brand or logo implies that students are dissatisfied with Virginia University.

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Student Affairs Background

Certainly, Student Affairs senior leadership believe that the faculty keeps the students enrolled at the university, especially since there is not a high turnover rate amongst faculty, the way there is with staff (personal communication, May 26, 2021). To strengthen the first-year experience and relationships between students and faculty, Academic Affairs recently assigned faculty to lead *Evolve,* the university's First-Year Experience program. Student Affairs leadership expressed frustration with *Evolve's* transition from Student Affairs to Academic Affairs. University staff previously taught the course to expose students to campus leadership and encourage student integration outside of the academic or classroom life. It can be inferred that the frustration of senior leaders may be due to ineffective implementation of *Evolve,* as Student Affairs professionals are the ones tasked with "improving outcomes for all students by championing innovative programs and services" (NASPA, n.d.) or simply put, ensuring students are successful and engaged on campus. With faculty now teaching the course, fostering a connection to campus life is thought to be replaced by an emphasis on classroom connection instead. While all students—regardless of commuter or resident status—take the course, faculty teaching the course may prove to be problematic for students. The course is an opportunity for students to be introduced and encouraged to be involved in student organizations, but not all faculty may encourage participation in student organizations. Evidence shows that extending first-year programs past orientation—by providing a course like *Evolve*—further reinforces the importance of involvement in campus life and is the time when "students' sense of belonging emerges" (Tinto, 2012, p. 16). Resident students often receive

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additional options targeted to entire dormitory buildings and through specific programming

conducted by the Office of Residence Life.

During the fall 2021 semester, Virginia University announced a four-year live-on campus

policy. The policy would go into effect in fall 2022 but was not very well-received by the campus

community. Students held a protest on campus and started a petition calling for the policy to

be rescinded. While there is a current live-on campus requirement for the first two years, it has

been described as a very lax policy (as previously stated there are approximately 30% of all

undergraduate students living on campus). The recent announcement will require students to

live on-campus for all four years and was created based on feedback from current resident

students who say that living on campus helped them have a more engaging college experience.

There is, of course, an exemption process for students who wish to continue living off campus.

And in conversations with stakeholders, they do expect to receive a large number of requests.

Upon further review of the exemption process, students may submit waivers for an exemption

to the housing policy, but they are not guaranteed to be approved, and do require proof of the

requested exemption. Married or single-parent students, for instance, will be required to

submit a copy of their marriage certificate or child's birth certificate to submit a request to

continue living off campus.

Commuter Student Resources

Virginia University previously had an Office of Commuter Students, which fell within the

Student Affairs administration. While no longer in existence, the office still has a departmental

webpage on the institution's website. The office's goal was to engage commuter students in

campus life in order to foster a sense of community (Virginia University, 2021). In 2017 the

office was dissolved because of a reorganization, and the department funding was allocated to another university office. Additionally, some university leaders believe that all offices should be working together towards one goal and not dedicated to working with specific populations (personal communication, September 14, 2021).

There was also a Commuter Student Board student organization, but that student organization is no longer active. The Commuter Student Board's social media accounts last showed activity in 2019. When I inquired about this organization, I was told that the organization's student leaders graduated. The university went remote shortly thereafter due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At this time, it is unknown if the other student leaders will take over ownership of the Commuter Students Board once campus activities resume.

Problem of Practice

Between discussions with Student Affairs leaders and survey results described below, a diminishing sense of belonging has been prevalent on campus. Virginia University Student Affairs leaders define a sense of belonging as having students involved in campus life—whether it be student organizations, campus work-study, or Campus Ministry—and choosing to be active participants. College is painted as an exciting chapter in a young adult's life, and a sense of belonging is pivotal to success and enjoying the entire experience. Research on student affairs strongly suggests that "for students, feeling rejected and not being able to develop a sense of belonging within higher education is a key cause of student attrition" (O'Keefe, 2013, p. 612). To paraphrase, for students, the feeling of being rejected and unable to develop the feeling of belonging within their institution is a major cause of them likely to dropout. If students feel

supported, they are more likely to engage on campus and persist in the classroom. Suppose a

university has a variety of student organizations that are attractive to a student; the campus

climate would then make students feel additionally supported, signaling to students that

diverse interests and identities are welcomed. An example from one student's testimonial in

the 2016-2017 *Graduating Student Survey* divulged that it "felt as though the commuter board

was more focused on non-working students. I appreciate the effort that was made, but I often

felt as though I was left out because of having to work." The illustrative example echoes what

most commuter students feel based on the conclusion made in the survey. Furthermore, the

quote shows that the university is trying to represent all students, regardless of their living

status.

 While the university has known that a sense of belonging is different for resident and

commuter students and diminishing for their commuter student population, the Office of

Student Affairs has yet to develop a strategic plan to address the disparity. However, the

problem has not gone unacknowledged. Virginia University considers commuter students as

any student who does not live in university-provided housing. With the university's location,

many students who do live off-campus are (independent) commuters. Types of commuter

students are defined in more detail in the *Literature Review*.

 Virginia University recently hired a new director of Residence Life. The university's

administration hopes that new leadership can create a stronger sense of belonging amongst

resident students. When focusing on supporting students, university leaders need to focus on

the whole student body, and as described, all commuters were not considered for the

opportunity to engage on campus. A valuable example of engagement on campus is seeing

commuter students hold leadership positions within student organizations. However, it has been proven that a sense of belonging is described as students that feel connected to social groups (Hausmann et al., 2007). The organizational problem of practice lies in the lack of a strategic plan to address commuter students at the university and encourage social aspects that contribute to a sense of belonging.

Previously, Student Affairs, Residence Life, and Career Services were housed under their own department within the university. In a recent restructure, all three departments continue to work independently but report directly to the Executive Vice President of Student Affairs. The Senior Director of Student Affairs has described this change as "welcoming" because now all three departments are housed in the same office, and there are more opportunities for collaboration. This organizational restructuring has allowed for easier interaction between departments to increase a sense of pride and belonging on campus. By seeing three major university organizations together, a sense of camaraderie is felt amongst the campus community.

For Virginia University stakeholders, a sense of belonging and student engagement is correlated. This includes having more commuter students serving on Student Government and participating in other student organizations. Part of the Student Affairs vision is to prepare students to be empowered leaders in the community and strengthen student connections to one another and those within their extended communities.

The evident disconnect between commuter students and a sense of belonging is deeply concerning for the Student Affairs department and a phenomenon Student Affairs has been attempting to remedy. University leaders have found that students are often siding with their

major or sport when belonging to a group. Still, since Virginia University does not have a

football team for students to "belong" to, this has also been an area of frustration for some

students. Along with COVID-19 creating a further disconnect amongst students, both the

Associate Vice President and Senior Director of Student Affairs agreed that Virginia University

previously had a robust first-year experience, but that experience has diminished in recent

years. As previously discussed, transitioning the leadership of *Evolve* courses has impacted

student engagement with the greater campus community. According to the senior director,

though, the Student Affairs department is equipped to design the program with the whole

student in mind, designing a program that encourages students to engage on campus both

academically and socially rather than only academically.

University Content Review

An in-depth content review of institutional policies about commuter students was

conducted with the goal of understanding how Virginia University institutionalized support for

commuter students and to what extent the policies consider the specific needs of commuter

students. The institution's website has a page dedicated to commuter students but does not

share any specific institutional policies. It is a page of information regarding student parking,

food plans, and lounges. It does not outline any university policies or services specific to

commuter students only.

To find university policies such as the student code of conduct, academic integrity code,

Title IX, withdrawal policy, etc., one must visit the Student Affairs Administration webpage to

browse the university handbook. There are no specific policies that pertain to commuter

students within the Student Handbook. Without any institutional support directly outlined in

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supporting commuter students, much of the Virginia University community lacks commitment to retention and persistence of supporting their commuter student population.
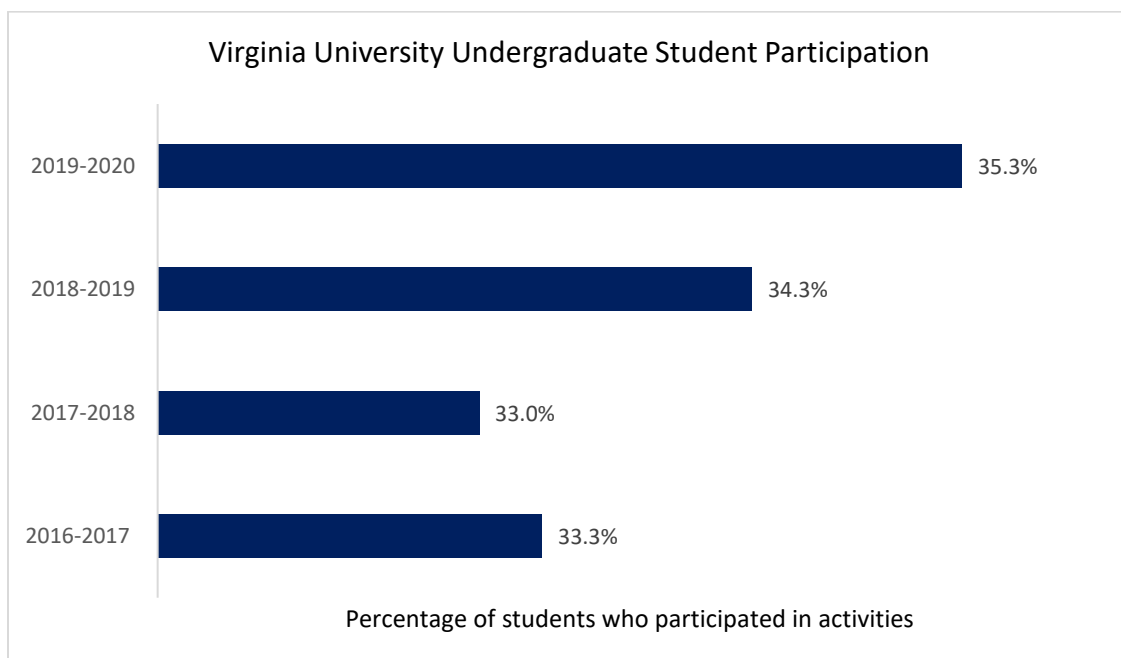
University Survey Results

Qualitative survey data provided by Virginia University stakeholders were used to contextualize commuter student experiences. The data included two surveys administered by the Office of Institutional Planning and Research. The *Graduating Student Survey* is sent to graduating students every spring semester. The online survey asks students about their satisfaction with university academic experiences, facilities, and services. The *VU Campus Climate Survey* is conducted every two years and asks current undergraduate and graduate students about their experiences and perceptions of the institution. The *VU Campus Climate Survey* uses a performance benchmark of 4.0 on a 5-point scale, with 5 being strongly agree. Any score below a 4.0 is an area of concern for the university. Reviews of these two surveys and their results allowed for identifying significant themes related to the research questions for this study. I will share survey findings relevant to the problem of practice and later discuss how they informed my instrument development in the *Project Design* section of this paper.

In two of the three years of the *Graduating Student Survey* distributed between 2018 – 2021 (displayed in Figure 1), less than half of the undergraduate class responded, raising questions about the reliability and validity of the surveys. Of the students who participated, less than 35% reported participating in student activities each year. Second, undergraduate students must complete the survey to receive graduation tickets. However, this condition was lifted due to the COVID-19 pandemic and did not impact graduation tickets for 2020-2021 undergraduates. Third, the results show combined participation for all undergraduates who

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responded "yes" to participating in activities, but the survey does not specify what the level of

participation should entail. Respondents may have selected *yes* if they attended **one** event or

meeting, voluntarily or involuntarily. For example, it is not uncommon for professors to

encourage student participation at events for extra credit or as required coursework.

Moreover, some academic programs—such as honors programs—require students to

participate in a certain number of hours of campus engagement.

Figure 1

Undergraduate Student Life Participation

Virginia University Undergraduate Student Participation

Year	Percentage
2019-2020	35.3%
2018-2019	34.3%
2017-2018	33.0%
2016-2017	33.3%

Percentage of students who participated in activities

Note. Includes participation in academic clubs, social organizations, and/or student government.

Connectedness to Virginia University aligns with this capstone project's exploration of a

student's sense of belonging. The *VU Campus Climate Survey* for 2014, 2016, and 2018 found

that students were least likely to agree with questions related to connections to Virginia

University. While stable from 2014 and 2016, there was a decrease in 2018. Regardless, all

three years surveyed failed to meet the desired threshold of 4.0 when students were asked

about feeling connected to Virginia University, as presented in Table 1. In 2019, the *VU Campus

Climate Survey* was changed, and benchmark scores were unavailable. Qualitative themes,

however, are consistent with previous findings related to belonging. In the 2020 report,

undergraduate students felt less comfortable being their authentic selves on campus and

considered leaving Virginia University due to feeling unwelcome in comparison to graduate

students.

Table 1

Trend Snapshot of Campus Climate

Undergraduate Students	2014	2016	2018
Academic Challenge	3.99	4.04	4.03
Global Perspective, Diversity, and Service	3.90	4.00	3.95
Connections to Virginia University	3.48	3.48	3.44

(Virginia University, 2018)

Thus far, it is evident that the commuter student experience is related to a diminishing

sense of belonging. Part of Virginia University's mission is to create a student-centered

environment. Without specific measures in place to support and accommodate commuter

students, the university is inadvertently contributing to the creation of a social hierarchy on

campus. Rather than only assessing students' sense of belonging at the exodus of their senior

year, Virginia University should explore ways to assess undergraduates' sense of belonging

throughout their academic tenure at Virginia University. The exploration and implementation of

policies and procedures to address all students will only continue to create an accessible

community at Virginia University. This capstone project seeks to address a lacking or diminishing sense of belonging in undergraduate commuter students and inform Virginia University on the institutionalization of policies and practices pertaining to a sense of belonging and student engagement of its undergraduate commuter student population.

Literature Review

The review of related literature will focus solely on factors contributing to a sense of belonging amongst undergraduate commuter students. Hausmann et al. (2007) deduce that students' social and academic integration tacitly determines a sense of belonging. Similarly, the premise of sociological theories including Tinto's (1994) renowned theory of student departure is that social and academic integration play a role in student persistence. As such, the underlying issue regarding student persistence and integration is how to achieve a level of student belonging for students who commute to campus, which in turn results in an improved academic experience.

With almost 85% of undergraduate students living off-campus nationwide (Horn et al., 2002; Kelchen, 2018), college campuses are filled with commuter students (Horn & Berktold, 1998). Trends in living arrangements, as exemplified in Figure 2, show a preference for living off-campus or with parents. However, the research on this group is minimal (Dugan et al., 2008), with most of the scholarship focusing on resident students. A lack of research on commuter students is highlighted by Baum (2005), Jacoby (1989), and Slade & Jarmul (1975), who establish that commuter students are an overlooked majority of the college experience.

Figure 2

National Postsecondary Student Aid Society (NPSAS), 2018
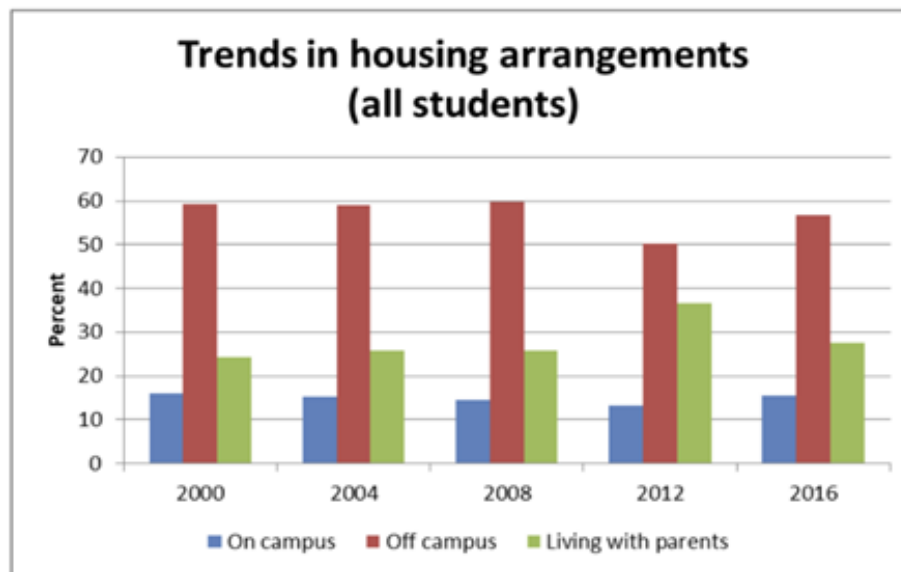
The definition of *commuter* has varied over time. Jacoby (2000) defines it simply as students who do not live in institutionally owned housing. However, Dugan et al. (2008) elaborate further, creating a more complex definition that splits commuter students into two categories: *dependent* or *independent* commuters. Dugan et al. (2008) define dependent commuters as those who live at home with their parents and independent commuters who do not live on campus or at home with parents. Independent commuters include students who live with friends or rent their own homes. While Dugan's distinction between dependent and independent commuters is essential for furthering the scope of research on commuter students, they are insignificant to this study.

Sense of Belonging

Critical studies (O'Keefe, 2013; Eccles et al., 1993; Ryan & Deci, 2000) demonstrate how a sense of belonging is essential to motivate students towards success in college and can

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be nurtured through a welcoming campus environment with positive student-faculty relationships (as cited in O'Keefe, 2013). Despite the little scholarship exploring a student's living status and a sense of belonging, many researchers have pointed out that students who commute do face issues that can impact their sense of belonging. Transportation issues, work and family responsibilities that do not allow students to fully engage in student organizations, or build relationships with faculty (Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Kim & Rury, 2011, Kuh et al., 2001, as cited in Museus, et al., 2017) can all impact a student's sense of belonging. Museus et al. (2017) describe an analysis of national survey by Kuh et al. (2001) that found commuter students reporting lower engagement levels in student organizations and with faculty than resident students, "both of which have been linked to greater sense of belonging" (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nunez, 2009, as cited in Museus et al., 2017).

Based on the review of literature, "it is not simply the degree of involvement that affects retention, but the way involvement leads to forms of social and academic membership and the resulting 'sense of belonging'" (Harris, 2006; Hoffman et al., 2003, as cited in Tinto, 2012, p. 66; Schlossberg, 1989; Tucker, 1999). Bollen and Hoyle (1990) describe a sense of belonging as a feeling contributing to one's connection to a group, further motivating individuals to engage in group activities. While much of the research identifies which factors play an essential role in creating a sense of belonging, most studies utilize the Hausmann et al. (2007) sense of belonging definition to study the phenomena. Per Hausmann et al. (2007) a sense of belonging is "the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community" (p. 804) and is critical for persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007; O'Keefe, 2013). This definition suggests that students who feel welcomed and supported on campus will believe they are a respected

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addition to the entire student body and thus inspire more student involvement in campus life.

NSSE (2021) also emphasizes the importance of persistence to the student experience including

engagement, belonginess and safety, and institutional support. Scholarship suggests that

students with a positive sense of belonging tend to be more academically confident, motivated,

and achieve higher academic results (Freeman et al., 2007; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015; Ostrove &

Long, 2007; Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2011, as cited in O'Neel, 2016). A

student's strong subjective sense of belonging or factors that contribute to a sense of belonging

have been positively associated to persistence (Bean, 1980, 1985; Bennett & Okinaka, 1990;

Berger & Milem, 1999; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Einarson & Matier, 2005; Fischer, 2007; Mayo et

al., 1995; Nettles et al., 1986; Nora et al., 1996; Suen, 1983; Zea et al., 1997; Hausmann, 2007,

2009, as cited in Hausmann et al., 2009; Tinto, 2012).

Persistence is a student's continued enrollment through graduation. Kuh et al. (2006)

describe studies on persistence as focusing "on institutional factors and programs that promote

continuous student enrollment" (p. 21). Overall, research concurs that a positive sense of

belonging and student engagement impact student persistence. Student persistence

scholarship is multi-faceted with many factors affecting a student's likelihood of degree

completion, with most focusing on academic and social integration. First, academic integration

has been found to positively effect persistence (Kuh et. al., 2008; Lundquist, et al., 2002, as

cited in Ishitani & Reid, 2015; Pascarella, et al., 2008) and the more students academically

integrate, their sense of belonging increases (Hausmann, et al., 2007). Social integration has

also been found to be a contributing factor of persistence (Berger & Millem, 1999; Milem &

Berger, 1997, as cited in Hausmann, et al., 2007; Wolfe, 1993, as cited in Ishitani & Reid, 2015).

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Conversely, two studies found that social integration was a strong element at residential institutions and not commuter institutions (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella & Smart, 1991). Race and ethnicity are a another major factor that impacts persistence, in which researchers agree that students of color are at a higher risk of dropping out (Brown & Robinson-Kurpius, 1997; Carter, 2006; Cater, 2006, as cited in Ishitani & Reid, 2015; D'Lima et al., 2014; Keller & Rollins, 1990; NCES, 2014) and that racial climate is a predictor of persistence (Cabrera, et al., 1999; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Hurtado, 1992; Nora & Cabrera, 1996, as cited in Hausmann et al., 2007).

Other research has focused on common factors as predictors of persistence such as a student's financial aid or financial need (Cabrera et al., 1990, 1992; Herzog, 2005, as cited in Ishitani & Reid, 2015; Johnson, 2006; Hu & St. John, 2001; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991; Nora, 1990; Nora et al., 1996, as cited in Hausmann, et al., 2007; Whalen et al., 2009) and institutional fit (Bean, 1985; Cabrera et al., 1992, 1993, as cited in Hausmann et al., 2007). There are also a plethora of student background characteristics and pre-college experiences that influence student persistence (Kuh et al., 2006) but not discussed as they are not within the scope of this current study.

Academic and Social Systems

According to Tinto (1994), colleges are made up of academic and social systems, which include formal and informal structures within each system. Academic systems include a student's academic performance and interactions with faculty and staff, whereas social systems include a student's interactions with their peers and extracurricular activities. Formal domains refer to classroom settings or "patterns of faculty teaching" (p. 108), and informal domains

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refer to locations outside the classroom. These factors work simultaneously to create the

critical need for a sense of belonging within the framework of the entire student body. Thus,

informal interaction between students and faculty and student-to-student relationships are

crucial contributors to student persistence, which can contribute to a sense of belonging (Tinto,

1982).

Interactions and activities occur within formal and informal domains of academic and

social systems. First and foremost, while Tinto separates academic and social integration, other

researchers do agree that "the degree of interaction with faculty, peers, and other socializing

agents of universities is frequently the best predictor of student persistence" (Braxton et al.,

1997; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977, as cited in Braxton, 2000), further

supporting academic (faculty interaction) and social (peer interaction) integration systems.

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement aligns with both academic and social integration,

as he postulates "the greater the student's involvement in college, the greater will be the

amount of student learning and personal development" (p. 308). Astin (1984) however, does

not differentiate between academic and social integration, as he classifies involvement as

"academic work, participation in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and

other institutional personnel" (p. 307), further advocating for both academic and social

systems. Nonetheless, the conceptualization of academic and social integration are two terms

in which scholarship differs.

As a result of Tinto's (1975, 1993) student integration theory revision, there are

inconsistencies regarding the conceptualization of academic and social integration (Beekhoven

et al., 2002, as cited in Meeuwisse et al., 2010). In his 1975 model, Tinto defined faculty and

staff interaction as social integration and in his 1993 model, redefined faculty and staff

interactions as academic integration, while "others still define it as social integration" (Berger &

Mille, 1999; Braxton et al., 2000, as cited in Meeuwisse et al., 2010). To illustrate, Braxton

(2000) cites the following scholarship as social involvement: "development of informal

relationships with faculty, [are] often student initiated (Pascarella, 1978; Pascarella & Terenzini,

1977). It is important to note that "academic and social involvement, though conceptually

distinct, overlap and influence each other" (Tinto, 2012, p. 65). Further clarification and

differentiation between academic and social systems are discussed in the *Conceptual*

Framework designed for this project.

Student Engagement

Several researchers agree that the more students are academically and socially involved

with others on campus, the more likely they are to persist (Astin, 1984, 1993; Borglum &

Kubala, 2000; Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Carini et al. , 2006; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella,

1980; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Terenzini et al., 1981; Tinto 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012, as

cited in Tinto, 2012). In fact, researchers describe involvement as a condition (of retention) that

is "now commonly referred to as engagement" (Astin, 1984; Kuh et al., 2005, 1991; Tinto, 1975,

1993, 2012, as cited in Tinto, 2012). For this study, student engagement will refer to student

involvement in any university-sponsored organizations, and activities.

Tinto (1982) reminds us that "not all engagements positively impact students' sense of

belonging" (p. 4). On the contrary, "exploring the impact of the collegiate social life is critical to

our understanding of a sense of belonging because a sense of belonging by definition evokes a

social connotation" (Kaser, 2016, p. 2). Previous research findings conclude that student

engagement is correlated to a sense of belonging on campus (Baker, 2007; Tinto, 1994). Most of the existing research contributes a blend of informal and formal factors to a sense of belonging, but some researchers specify that students find that connection outside of the classroom (Attinasi, 1989; Rendon, 1994; Terenzini et al., 1994). First, the array of organizations or group cultures in which students become members impacts persistence (Tinto, 1994). Second, Baker (2007) delves further into examining the impact on students within the specific type of extracurricular activity.

For instance, schools without popular sports teams may disappoint students. This frustration is understandable since Baker (2007) describes athletic organizations as "the most visible student organizations on college campuses" (p. 276). Nor is it unheard of that some students will even choose a college based on its sports teams. The literature suggests that a lack of a specific athletic team can still contribute to a diminishing sense of belonging. Astin (1984) describes participation in any type of intercollegiate sports as having a "pronounced, positive effect on persistence" (p. 301). Football—a popular U.S. collegiate sport—is exciting because it allows students the opportunity as fans to form an attachment with one another and their school allegiance. In a study by Elkins et al. (2011), 48% of commuter students contributed a sense of belonging by virtue of campus sports programs.

Developing traditions is a way to engage students but is a timely attempt. The unsuccessful implementation of new traditions may be due to the university's lack of interaction of culture and structure. When talking about change at an institutional level, one researcher, Thomas (2020), explains the need for alignment between culture (values, attitudes, and practices of stakeholders) and structure (institutional policies and processes). Alternatively,

as Jacoby and Garland (2004) conclude, "a thorough understanding of the needs of commuter students" (p. 77) must be developed.

Some students simply cannot commit to participating in student life. In the same vein, Alfano and Edjuljee (2013) note that commuter students expressed higher stress levels due to work, which results in scheduling problems between travel time to and from campus and tight work schedules. Their research also recommends that universities develop on-campus activities for all students but emphasize creating resources for those who reported higher stress levels. Other non-academic commitments affecting student engagement include work, family, and time. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), in 2018, 43% of full-time undergraduate students were employed. Commuter students have been found to feel guilty when missing family time, which further keeps them from engaging (Lowe & Gayle, 2007, as cited in Burlison, 2015). Other research pointed to family finances, student employment, level of academic preparedness, family structure, and less family support as difficulties integrating commuter students into campus life (López Turley & Wodtke, 2010; Turley, 2006).

Faculty-Student Relationships

Numerous researchers describe positive student-faculty relationships as a contributing factor to a sense of belonging (Komarrju et al., 2010; Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Myers, 2004; Martin et al., 1999; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, as cited in O'Keefe, 2013) and as having positive effects on student development (Astin, 1993; Endo & Harpel, 1982). Additionally, research shows that formal and informal student-faculty interactions have greater educational results (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Reason et al., 2006; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980). In contrast, O'Keefe (2013) argues that the relationship can be with any university staff

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and is not limited to only faculty. By drawing on the concept of student-faculty relationships and student engagement, Tinto (1994, 2004) notes that if students are actively engaged in the classroom, they will become engaged outside of the classroom. A study conducted by Kim et al. (2016) confirmed Tinto's views about faculty engagement, where faculty paying attention to a student through course-related conversations outside of the classroom and classroom interactions can predict a positive sense of belonging amongst students. To further synthesize, having a positive engagement experience in the classroom will encourage student persistence or campus engagement.

A theoretical model by Meeuwisse et al. (2010) in Figure 3 reveals the relationships between student-faculty interaction and a sense of belonging. The study investigated the relationship between formal and informal peer and faculty interactions in diverse student groups. The study confirmed connections between the learning environment, peer and teacher interactions, sense of belonging, and study success for majority[2] students to be true. And for the ethnic minority[3] group, the more formal the relationships with peers and faculty, the more students felt like they belonged. However, "what was remarkable in the accepted model for minority students was that their study progress could not be predicted from the learning environment nor from their sense of belonging" (Meeuwisse et al., 2010, p. 539), which I would attribute to a cultural difference within academia.

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[2] Student is from the Netherlands

[3] Student is from Surinam, Turkey, the Netherlands Antilles, or Morocco

Figure 3

Theoretical Model of Meeuwisse et al. (2010)
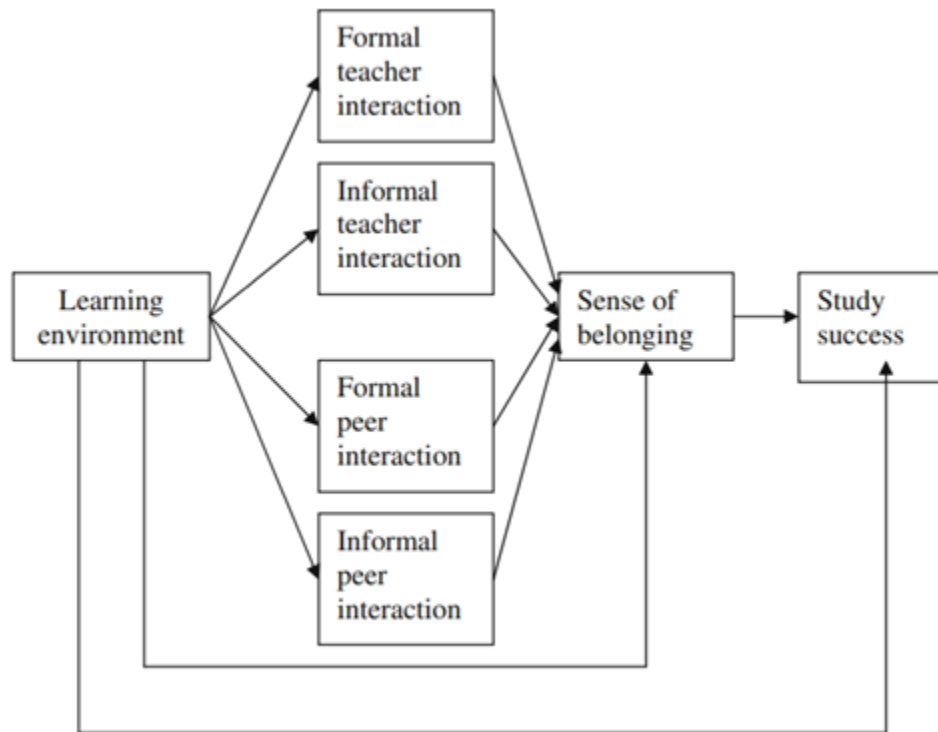
In Tinto's (1994) seven principles of practical implementation, he stresses that institutional commitment must apply to all university stakeholders and not "just those few whose job descriptions call for particular forms of student-centered activity" (p. 149). A commitment to such a campus-wide strategy requires more intentional planning for first-year seminars, so that faculty and staff may work together, even if staff no longer teach first-year seminars. This planning includes appropriate faculty and staff training and the distribution of resources. Tinto (1994) highlights successful cases such as The University College at Indiana University, which requires a seminar that is "team-taught by a faculty member, a librarian, an academic advisor, and a peer mentor" (p. 96). Additional support is provided for faculty through a professional development program and supports faculty instructing new students (Tinto,

1994). Successful execution of first-year programming supports student persistence, contributing to a stronger sense of belonging amongst students.

Faculty mentor programs are formal ways to encourage student-faculty interactions outside of the classroom. Some institutions design mentoring programs as part of first-year seminars or learning community opportunities as described in later sections. And some other institutions design mentor programs to focus specifically on first-generation students or underrepresented groups, as students who are the first to attend college "tend to be intimidated by faculty" (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 212). Mentor programs focused on such groups ensure that students are comfortable approaching faculty whose goal is to teach, support, and guide students during their college journey. Other methods utilized to encourage informal interactions and faculty-guided lifelong learning beyond the classroom include encouraging faculty and students to eat lunch together in the dining hall or have coffee chats to increase interaction (Kuh et al., 2005). Two days a week, faculty members can eat lunch for free at the University of Maine's dining hall when escorted by a student. Having to be invited by a student "inverts the typical power relationships between students and faculty, a role reversal that encourages students to initiate interactions" (Kuh, et al., 2005) and encourages informal interaction also initiated by the student.

Campus Environment

Further consideration of the impact on commuter students belongs to the physical campus environment. In his *Theory of Dropout,* Tinto (1975) describes an institution's facilities as one characteristic that may limit a student's academic and social integration. The existing literature focuses on encouraging commuter students—who are facing challenges finding

personal space on campus—to spend time between classes, hang out with friends, or even

store their textbooks between classes (Thomas, 2020; Strange, 2001). Resident students have

the advantage of returning to their residence halls between classes to relax or go to their dorm

to drop off materials from one class and gather books for another. Informal interactions are

more likely to occur outside of the classroom. However, if an institution's campus design only

offers commuter students space in the library—for example—sitting in a cubicle does not

encourage or allow for informal interactions the way a lounge or residence hall does. "Place

does matter, and it influences behavior" (Strange & Banning, 2015, p. 14) and a lack of social

spaces implicitly implies that commuter students should spend their free time studying rather

than engaging with peers socially. Social spaces include student lounges or student unions,

cafes, and outdoor spaces. Researchers agree that "social learning spaces are effective in the

levels of engagement, peer-to-peer interactions, and collaboration they promote, albeit at

times at the expense of individual study" (Matthews et al., 2009; Matthews, 2010; Matthews et

al., 2011, as cited in Strange & Banning, 2015, p. 31).

In support of encouraging informal interactions, Jacoby's research (2015) depicts

campus environments as places that should "stimulate, support and challenge individuals to

learn and grow" (p. 8). Strange and Banning (2015) further explain that campuses should be

flexible, where they adapt to multiple purposes to support both academic and social

engagement. Such disregard of facilities for commuter students insinuates that those students

do not physically belong on campus, which contributes to a diminishing sense of belonging

(Jacoby & Garland, 2004) and diminished engagement (Strange & Banning, 2015). To recap, if

commuter students are forced to spend their free time in the library—or dedicated study

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spaces only—due to a lack of space or campus design, they are provided with limited

opportunities to engage or persist, eventually leading to students feeling like they do not

belong.

Best Policies and Practices

Jacoby and Garland (2004) affirm that universities can purposefully develop

engagement opportunities for commuter students. There are many avenues that universities

can take to encourage active student involvement on campus and increase positive student-

faculty relationships. For these actions to be effective, university administrators need to

institutionalize policies supporting student persistence and not further marginalize commuter

students. The institutionalization of policies and practices pertaining to student engagement is

foundational to forming campus culture. Below are specific examples of select policies and

practices implemented at institutions that support students' sense of belonging and

persistence.

Dedicated Spaces

Providing commuter students with a dedicated space—like a residence hall for resident

students—designed with the commuter student in mind is the most obvious way to make

commuter students feel welcomed. Specifically, researchers such as Strange and Banning

(2001) and Jacoby and Garland (2004) note the need for a designated space where commuters

can relax and study between classes, enabling them to stay focused without thinking about

where to spend their free time between classes. Such facilities "allow students to feel physically

connected to campus" (Jacoby & Garland, 2004, p. 65) and encourage emotional connections if

it is dedicated solely to commuter students. Designated commuter students' spaces allow

students who have similar schedules to be in community with one another. Seattle University

created an innovative space to encourage student interaction. The *Collegium*[4] is a space on

campus described as club rooms for commuters with a kitchen, a small library, internet access,

and offices for faculty. Students are invited to join the *Collegium*, a membership-based

structure, allowing students the opportunity and space to build relationships with peers and

faculty that belong to the university's collegium. Successful themes to the pilot program

showed that students developed relationships and felt more connected to people; students

became more involved because they had a place to stay on campus; and students felt like they

belonged to a community (Orlando, 2000). Since the pilot program in 1996, Seattle University

has implemented three Collegia Programs at Seattle University. Since then, one of the current

Collegia programs has been dedicated solely to commuter students and serves as a resource

space that is open for all commuter students.

New Student Orientation and First-Year Programs

One of the most popular programs for new students is orientation programs. Successful

orientation programs can ensure students begin college feeling comfortable and aware of

resources available, including an introduction to the pathways of student engagement. Braxton

et al. (2013) assert that "the preparation of students for success in the academic and social

environments of their institution forms the underlying intent of first-year orientation programs"

(p. 98). If students are satisfied with the institution's first-year orientation programming and

feel prepared to participate within social systems, they are more likely to engage in peer

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[4] 'Collegium' is from the Latin root meaning 'gathering place.' The Collegia (plural) Program was the inspiration of a former president of Seattle University, Fr. William J. Sullivan, SJ. ('78-'98).

relationships and engage in campus activities and organizations (Braxton et al., 2004, as cited in

Braxton et al., 2013). Vanderbilt University's *Ingram Commons* is a residential campus for all

first-year students. While this model is designed to build community for first-year students

living on campus, the *Commons Center* is a building within the *Ingram Commons,* that is open to

all. Described by Vanderbilt University as "the community crossroads of the Ingram Commons

living and learning community," the *Commons Center* includes a dining hall, living room (with a

variety of seating options), a grand piano (that can and is used!), a fitness center, meeting

rooms, and academic support services including The Writing Studio and Career Center with

dedicated advisors for first-year students. The space allows students to have space to work,

relax, dine, and collaborate with others regardless of living status.

On the other hand, Tinto (1993) explains "institutions should coordinate the work of the

faculty who teach freshman courses with those in admissions, orientation, counseling, learning

support, advising, and where appropriate, residential affairs, to ensure that student academic

and social needs are addressed from the very outset of their first year on campus" (p. 152). This

key point is imperative to ensuring institutional programming is successfully implemented—a

continuous feedback loop and open collaboration and communication—between all

stakeholders involved in programs related to first-year student programming. More universities

are offering orientations geared toward families and not just students. This effort is especially

practical with first-generation students, as families can impact a student's academic and career

trajectory, "so maintaining a strong level of engagement can help a college proactively mitigate

any potential barriers that student may confront" (Farris & Chan, 2022). Universities with New

Student and Family Programs that focus on such efforts include Virginia Tech, University of Colorado Boulder, and UNC-Chapel Hill.

Some universities have extended the first-semester orientation course beyond the semester to support students feeling connected. Shenandoah University's first-year experience offers over two dozen first-year seminar courses on global themes, such as Taiwanese culture and etiquette, sports and racial justice, and even *The Walking Dead.* Course descriptions and a video are available so that students can learn (and see) more before registering for the class of their choice. In addition, Shenandoah University has a dedicated Director of First-Year Seminar, further institutionalizing support to the success of first-year programs. There are applications for students to learn more about being a peer mentor for First-Year Seminar and an application for faculty members to submit a proposal for a new course. Full and part-time faculty are encouraged by the university to get involved: "Going Global First-Year Seminar has been successful because of the diverse faculty involved. We need representation from all undergraduate programs—please consider teaching one yourself!" (Shenandoah University, 2022).

By encouraging part-time faculty to teach a course, Shenandoah University further institutionalizes support and encourages formal interactions between all faculty and students. It also fosters a sense of community between two groups that often feel isolated on campus: part-time faculty and new students. First-year students are not the only demographic being supported, as some schools are responding to the "sophomore slump" that appears to affect second-year students (Tinto, 2012). Institutions including Bridgewater State College, Emory

University, Syracuse University, and the University of Washington have offered additional

support through advising, counseling, and sophomore seminar courses.

Learning Communities

In *Learning Communities from Start to Finish,* Mimi Benjamin (2015) dates learning

communities being credited as far back as John Dewey and supported by Astin's (1984)

Involvement Theory and Tinto's (1993) Departure Theory. Tinto (2012) asserts that students

attend college to be involved, but it is up to the institution to determine how students want to

be involved and design communities to encourage such involvement. One way to do this is

through teaching strategies that encourage collaborative learning and engagement (Chickering

& Reisser, 1993, as cited in Benjamin, 2015; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Tinto, 2012), such as

learning communities. Most scholarship agrees that learning communities are "connected by

some common goal or theme" (Chapman et al., 2005; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Hotchkiss et al.,

2006; Howles, 2009; Janusik & Wolvin, 2007; Stebleton & Nownes, 2011, as cited in NSSE,

2021).

While there are numerous strategies to implement learning strategies, many of which

use pedagogies of engagement (Tinto, 2012), they are already in play at many universities for

new students through first-year seminars. Ultimately, dedicating first-year seminars strictly for

commuter students can encourage participation in that learning community, connect

commuter students to one another, and encourage engagement outside of the classroom.

Braxton et al. (2013) agrees and further postulates that learning communities have positive

influences on the academic and intellectual development of students specifically in commuter

institutions, which aligns with this sample in this project.

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Learning communities are not one-size-fits-all and have been implemented in many different forms at universities. At larger universities where lectures are 200 or 300 students (like at the University of Washington or the University of Oregon), a learning community follows the lecture where students meet for smaller-discussion groups led by graduate assistants. The Thompson Scholars Learning Communities Program takes place at the University of Nebraska and is designed to support first-generation and underrepresented students in a cohort model. The comprehensive program provides support through mentoring, financial support, specific academic courses, social programming, and staff and peer support, and space for its students (Kezar & Kitchen, 2020). Another successful example is a mentorship program at the University of Michigan, where groups of first-year students are matched with both a peer mentor and faculty or staff member with shared academic interests for additional support during their first semester (Kuh et al., 2005). The University Mentorship Program is a non-residential learning community designed to support first-year students to become more adjusted to campus life through activities and social events, and in ways that are easy to navigate and provide support. By matching students with mentors who have similar academic interests, it allows students to feel less intimidated when it comes to voicing an opinion or seeking assistance.

The impact of learning communities at Wofford College in South Carolina has impacted its entire campus. Wofford College sponsors faculty learning communities that are academic inquiry-based and focus on topics fundamental to teaching and learning (Wofford College, 2022). The text *Student Success* (Kuh et al., 2005) explains that *learning community* is part of the "Wofford lexicon, as first-year students identify themselves by the learning community they are in as often as they claim affiliation with a Greek organization" (p. 144). As exhibited,

learning communities can be strategically designed to fit the needs of the student population

and be impactful for students and faculty. Critically, learning communities "teach students that

their learning and that of their peers are inexorably intertwined, and that regardless of race,

class, gender, or background, their academic interests at the bottom are the same" (Tinto,

1996).

Application to Problem of Practice

To conclude, Gillen-O'Neel's (2021) research found that a sense of belonging goes

beyond student engagement and is a component affiliated with student success. Because of all

that has been mentioned so far, it is inferred that an inclusive campus that encourages students

to develop a sense of belonging is vital to student success. Additionally, a physical campus that

feels welcoming and led by supportive faculty can also contribute to a sense of belonging,

encouraging persistence and success for the university and student outcomes. While the

educational goals of Virginia University may be alignment for commuter and resident students,

campus life may not be Hausmann et al. (2009) aptly state that when students are academically

and socially integrated "they develop a psychological sense of belonging to the university,

which is an important precursor to desirable outcomes such as increased commitment and

persistence" (p. 650). Simply put, to ensure students feel like they belong and engage on

campus, a variety of formal and informal opportunities need to be readily available for all

students to access and participate in, regardless of their student status.

Conceptual Framework

As stated earlier, the purpose of this project is to explore a diminishing sense of belonging in undergraduate commuter students at Virginia University, including what a "sense of belonging" means, how students experience it on campus, what impacts it, and how faculty and staff can nurture it. The conceptual framework for this project is informed by Tinto's (1993) Institutional Departure Model's integration stage and Pascarella's (1980) Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model's institutional factors. I combined variables from both models to create a conceptual framework that applied to the institution, problem of practice, and project questions. Below is an overview of both models, reviewing the application of the selected variables to this project.

Tinto's Theory of Student Integration

Tinto's (1975, 1993) *Institutional Departure Model is* a student retention theory rooted in social and academic integration that impacts student persistence. Within that framework, Tinto categorizes variables into three experiences that shape persistence. The first experience is self-efficacy, which refers to the support students receive to believe in their ability to succeed (Tinto, 2016). A sense of belonging is the second experience that indicates the student's connection to their campus environment and daily interactions with the campus community (Tinto, 1994, 2012, 2016). The third experience is the value of a student's curriculum, pointing to the student's chosen field of study and their responses to learning communities on campus (Tinto, 1994, 2016).

Outlined in his *Model of Institutional Departure* in Figure 4, Tinto's Theory of Student Integration includes five categories over the course of three stages that lead to a student

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outcome or the ability to persist. The three stages are separation, transition, and incorporation.

Based on this theory, upon interaction and fulfillment of the three phases, students become

participating or valued members on college campuses (Hausmann et al., 2007; Tinto, 1994). As

mentioned earlier, a sense of belonging is a foundation of persistence, also known as student

engagement and activities.

Figure 4

Tinto's (1993) Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure
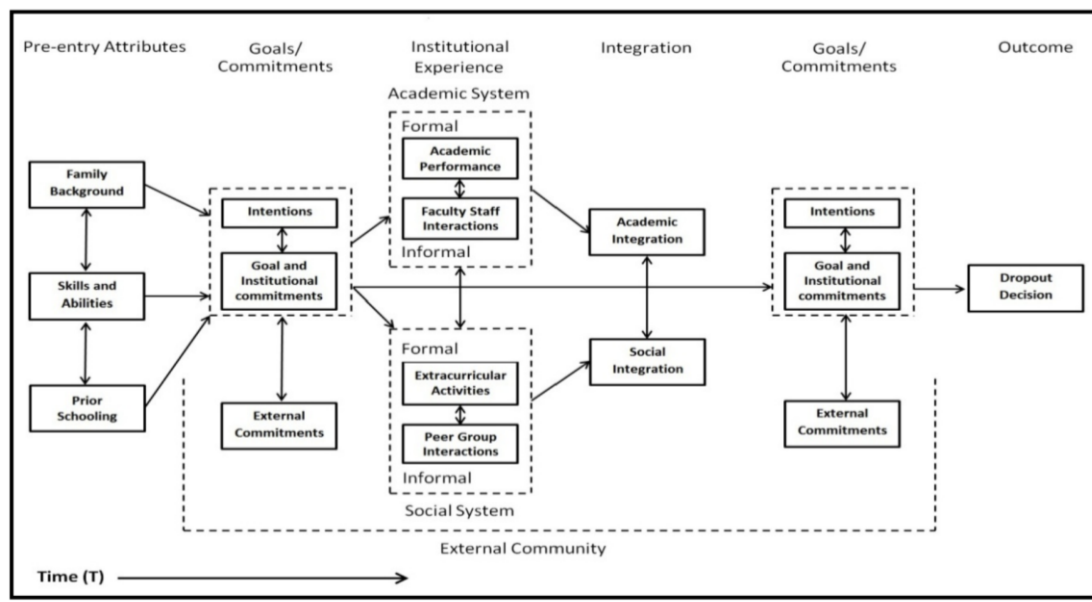
The separation stage includes pre-entry attributes, such as family background, skills and

abilities, and prior schooling. As the first stage of a student's college career, it "requires

students to dissociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in the past

communities" (Tinto, 1994, p. 95). The transition stage is next and is a period during which the

person begins to interact in new ways with members of the new group into which membership

is sought" (Tinto, 1994, p. 93). This phase includes setting expectations through

goals/commitments.

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The third stage is incorporation, in which a student is integrated into the campus community through formal or informal academic and social systems. While Tinto (1994) explains that students do not experience all three stages the same, persistence is not guaranteed even if a student has made it to the incorporation stage. Becoming integrated is especially important for commuter students since residence life focuses on creating formal interactions or traditions for students to engage in, further encouraging incorporation into the campus community.

### *Pascarella's Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model*

Pascarella's (1980) Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model was constructed based off his argument that there is a lack of research supporting informal student-faculty benefits on student persistence (Aljohani, 2016), as Tinto's model theorizes. The longitudinal model "suggests that what transpires between students and faculty outside of class may have a measurable, and possibly unique, positive impact on various facets of individual development during college" (Pacarella, 1980, p. 571). As seen in Figure 5, Pascarella's model does consider the *academic* and *social* integration factors, despite not delineating them as such. *Peer culture* and *extracurricular* are classified as *other college experiences,* while Tinto categorizes them as interactions within the social system.

More relevant to this project is the variable of *institutional factors*, which Pascarella (1980) posits influences *informal contact with faculty* and *other college experiences*. Included in *institutional factors* are "the kinds of students enrolled, faculty culture, institutional size, organizational substructure, administrative decisions, and policies bearing on curriculum, faculty reward structures, faculty advising and counseling programs, student orientation, and

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residence arrangements" (Pascarella, 1980, p. 570). To ensure that students feel like they

belong, institutional support to integrate students within college systems begins at the top. This

includes ensuring that administrative policies are strategically designed and implemented at an

organizational level to encourage students and promote persistence. As discussed in the

Problem of Practice, upon conducting a content review of institutional policies, no programs or

policies specifically designed to support commuter students were present.

Figure 5

Pascarella's (1980) Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model
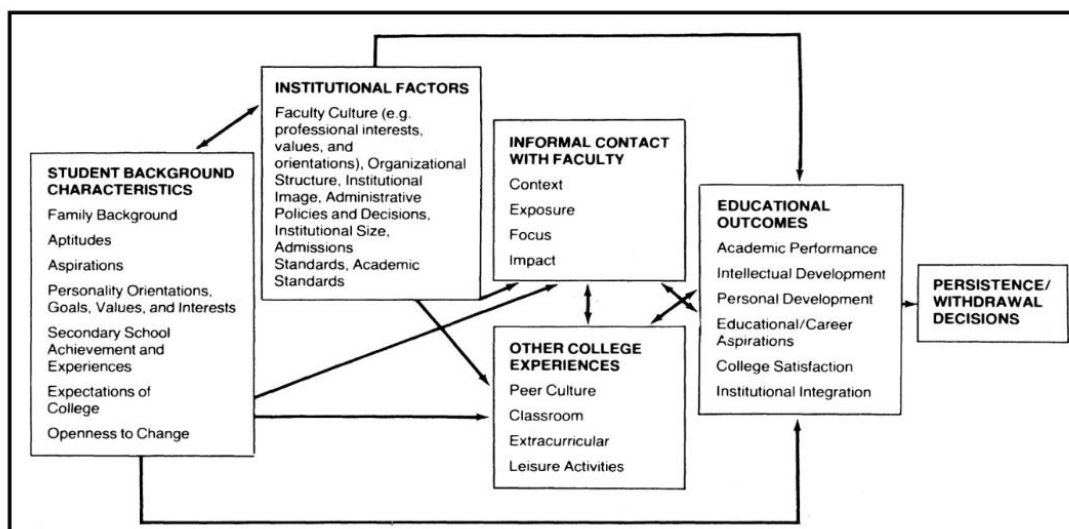
Project Framework

Drawing on Tinto's (1993) model, I created a conceptual framework adopting variables

within the incorporation stage, as that is the stage a student will most likely feel a sense of

belonging. I also used Pascarella's (1980) model, and the literature to support additional

variables. While all stages are critical for student persistence, incorporation is key to a sense of

belonging. Belongingness has also contributed to increased levels of motivation, self-

confidence, and academic achievement in students (Freeman et al., 2007; Murphy & Zirkel,

2015; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2011, as cited in

Gillen-O'Neel, 2021).

According to NSSE's (2012) conceptual framework, "informed by Tinto's work, the

conceptualization of student engagement incorporates a student's interactions with peers and

faculty and the extent to which the student makes use of academic resources and feels

supported at the institution." Based on this conceptualization, we can conclude that academic

and social integration is equivalent to engagement. I have decided to keep them as separate

variables (*faculty and staff interactions with students* and *student engagement*) as a way to

better understand the needs of undergraduate commuter students at Virginia University.

The third variable I included in my project's framework was *institutional programming*

and resources, as this indicates established measures in place to support undergraduate

commuter students. This variable is adopted and modeled off *institutional factors* from

Pascarella's (1980) Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model. Lastly, I added *physical*

environment, as the literature describes it as a variable that impacts student behavior and

engagement (Holahan, 1982, as cited in Braxton, 2000; Jacoby, 2015; Strange & Banning, 2015;

Strange, 2001; Tinto, 1975; Thomas, 2020), thus affecting a sense of belonging.

Designing this framework was relevant for this project because it draws on academic

and social systems that Virginia University believes contribute to a diminishing sense of

belonging and includes factors to support commuter students and further boost their sense of

belonging and engagement on campus. This project will attempt to address these variables in

interviews and focus groups to provide recommendations to the university on ways to better

understand how its undergraduate commuter students experience a sense of belonging and

ways to design institutional policies and programs that contribute to an increase in belonging.

To recap, this project's conceptual framework focused on (1) faculty and staff interactions or

relationships with students, (2) student engagement, (3) institutional programming and

resources, and (4) physical environment, as outlined in Figure 6.

The framework developed aligns with Virginia University's problem of practice, which is

solely related to a sense of belonging in commuter students. Ideally, Virginia University would

approach commuter student engagement with the various dimensions of student engagement

in mind. Utilizing this customized framework to understand further student engagement (or a

lack of) translates to nurturing a sense of belonging amongst commuter students' life cycle at

the institution.

Figure 6

Project Conceptual Framework
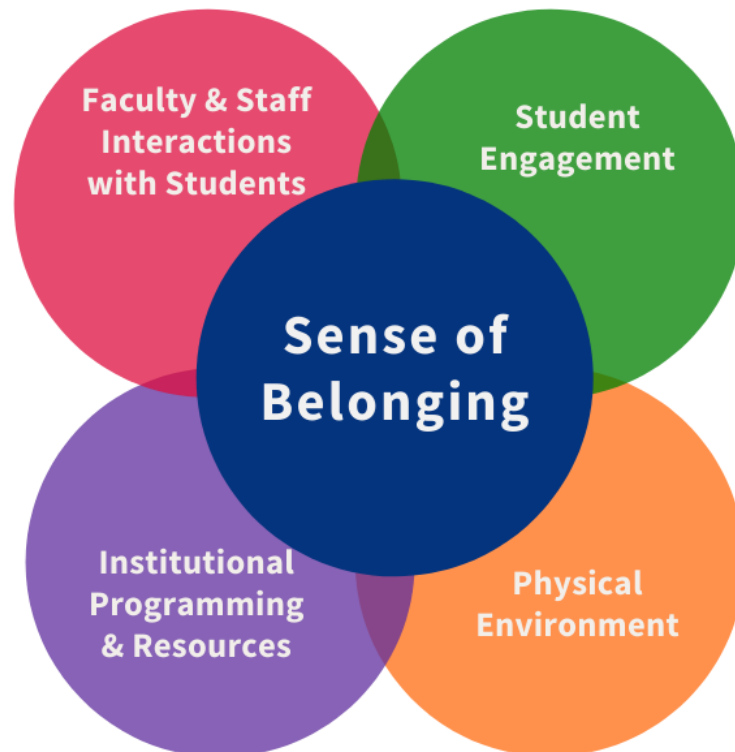
Project Questions

This quality improvement project explores a diminishing sense of belonging in undergraduate commuter students at Virginia University. Drawing on the conceptual framework described above and guided by the literature review and conversations with Virginia University Student Affairs leadership, the project questions are as follows:

1. What does a sense of belonging mean to undergraduate commuter students? How do undergraduate commuter students experience a sense of belonging?

2. What do students feel impacts their sense of belonging? How can faculty and staff nurture a sense of belonging?

Project Design

Data Collection

Data for this project was collected using a qualitative method approach. This included semi-structured interviews and focus groups with undergraduate commuter students. Interviews and focus groups were designed to gather and examine attitudes of commuter students' interactions at Virginia University. To answer both research questions, open-ended questions focused on three categories: a sense of belonging on campus, student engagement, and relationships with faculty and staff. The full interview and focus group protocol and questions can be found in Appendices IV and V. While there is a separate protocol for one-on-one interviews and focus groups, the questions are the same for both groups. The key differences include minor edits to welcoming and closing remarks. Additionally, probing

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questions for the focus group ask participants to reflect on comments made by other participants and whether they agree with responses.

To inform the open-ended questions that guided the interviews and focus groups, I relied on university survey results discussed in the problem of practice. The first included reviewing survey results previously administered by Virginia University's Office of Institutional Planning and Research. My review focused solely on any qualitative responses mentioning commuter students and any quantitative responses about student involvement, belonging, and faculty. To understand a student's feeling connected to Virginia University, questions will focus on their journey to choosing Virginia and their day-to-day experiences. This will attempt to address a decreased sense of belonging or connectedness to Virginia University.

In the 2018-2021 *Graduating Student Surveys,* each spring's results showed faculty as the prime aspect of undergraduate students' educational experience at Virginia University. This aligns with research findings outlined in the *Literature Review* on faculty-student relationships. As positive student-faculty relationships are predictors of a sense of belonging and persistence, I included interview and focus group questions to further understand students' experiences with faculty. I also asked about their relationship with university staff as I wanted to explore additional ways to increase student engagement and belonging through all university stakeholders that interact with students.

In-depth and focus group questions were then developed to dig into the university survey responses. Per the university's recommendation, I conducted a qualitative study since Virginia University's Office of Institutional Planning and Research regularly conducts quantitative surveys. Conducting interviews and focus groups allowed in-depth interaction and

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the opportunity to gather specific student experiences surrounding a sense of belonging, including recommendations for the university on implementing policies that may encourage or further nurture a sense of belonging amongst commuter students.

Data collection took place during the 2021-2022 fall semester at Virginia University. The initial plan was to have an email invitation sent to all undergraduate students in October 2021. The email invitation included a link to a Google Form, where students selected if they wanted to participate in a one-on-one interview or a focus group and share their availability for scheduling. The email initiation and sign-up form can be found in Appendices I and II. However, as the data collection period approached, the organization experienced staff turnover that resulted in a need to change the participant recruitment approach. Because of these circumstances the data collection period was pushed from October 2021 through December 2021 to November 2021 through January 2022.

The study was included in a weekly student newsletter for three weeks; beginning in November. In December, the Office of Student Affairs also sent the email invitation to a group of student leaders. Included in that email were members of Student Government, Resident Assistants, Peer Coaches, and all student organization leaders. Once a participant was recruited, I used a snowball sampling approach to ask other students to participate. Notably, when I asked participants how they found out about the study, one interviewee responded that she saw it posted on the app *Snapchat.* I also posted the study in community social media groups and had a local D.C. public school coach share the study with her caseload of Virginia University students.

Participants

Sixteen responses were received from undergraduate commuter students interested in participating in the study. One individual voluntarily signed up for a focus group but withdrew participation upon scheduling of the focus group, and one individual did not meet the qualifications of a commuter student for purposes of this study. There was a total of fourteen eligible participants with seniors being the largest group to participate in the project. A full breakdown of student classification can be found in Figure 7. Eight one-on-one interviews and two focus groups (displayed in Figure 8) were successfully completed. Half the sample (50%) were first-generation[5] students and 57% were students of color[6].

All interviews and focus groups were conducted remotely via Zoom. At the end of the study, I entered all participants into a raffle and two winners were selected using an online random name picker. Each winner received a $25 electronic gift card to their choice of Amazon, Starbucks, or Target. The winners were selected and awarded their gift cards in January 2022, once the data collection window closed.

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[5] A first-generation college student is a student whose parent(s) did not complete a four-year college or university degree (NASPA, 2020).
[6] Students of Color include those who identified as African American, Black, Hispanic, or Latina(o).

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Figure 7

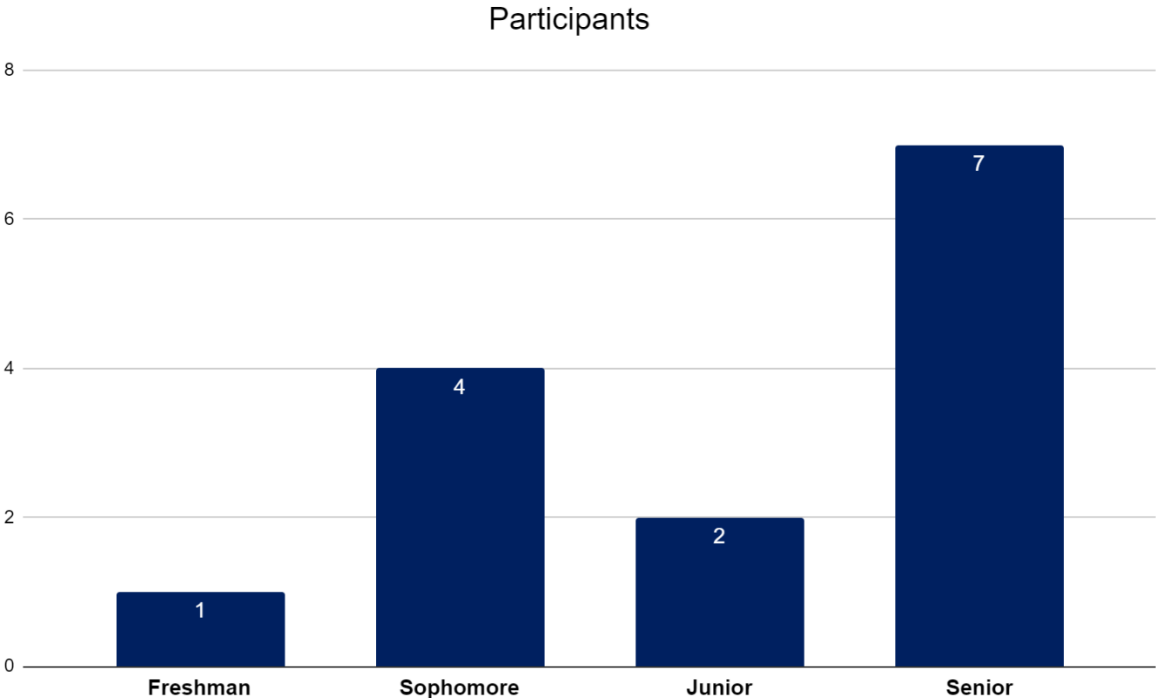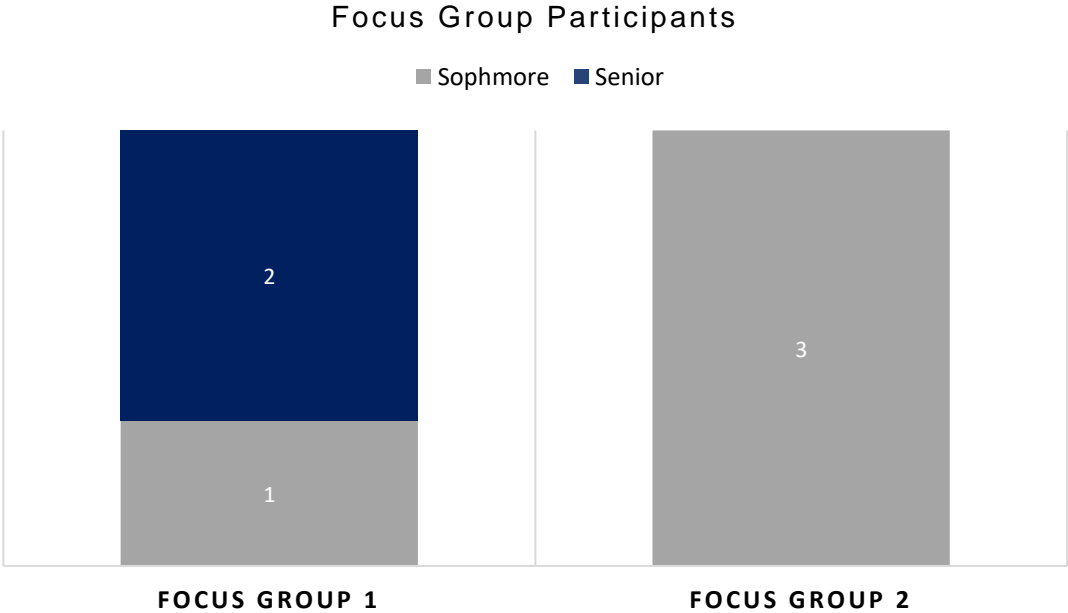*Student Classification of Participants*

Figure 8

Breakdown of Focus Groups

I began each interview and focus group with introductions and reminding participants

that sessions would be recorded for transcription purposes and all information is confidential.

The sessions were allotted up to one hour and 15 minutes; however, no interviews or focus

groups lasted this long. All interviews and focus groups lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, with

one of the two focus groups lasting up to 1 hour. I concluded each interview and focus group by

asking participants to reflect on what was discussed and if they had any additional information

to add. Before ending the Zoom session, I asked participants to share the study details with any

friends or classmates that were undergraduate commuters.

Qualitative Data Protocols

The semi-structured interview and focus group protocol (see Appendices III and IV)

sought to understand how undergraduate commuter students experience a sense of belonging

at Virginia University and how Virginia University faculty and staff contribute to that sense of

belonging. To contextualize the in-depth interview and focus group guides and ensure that

significant student life experiences were captured, responses from the *Graduating Student*

Survey conducted by Virginia University's Office of Institutional Planning and Research

supported the development of interview and focus group questions. The *Graduating Student*

Survey's most salient themes were faculty as the strongest aspect, a lack of student

involvement in academic clubs, social organizations, and student government, and a decrease

in students feeling connected to Virginia University.

These themes, along with the three stages (separation, transition, and incorporation) of

Tinto's Theory of Student Integration, informed the creation of three main categories in the

semi-structured interview protocol: (1) a sense of belonging; (2) student life; and (3)

connections to faculty and staff. Delving into these three allowed me to gather specific student experiences related to undergraduate commuter students' sense of belonging.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The goal is that results from the data source will provide insight into what matters for a positive student experience at Virginia University. Additionally, the data will provide essential discernments into persistence and integration for commuter students. While the purpose of the interviews and focus groups was to draw conclusions and provide recommendations to the university on ways to increase a sense of belonging amongst commuter students, it may also inform recommendations on further survey questions for the University's Office of Institutional Planning and Research.

To inform the first research question, I reviewed the data to look for specific ways that commuter students feel like they belong at Virginia University or feel excluded from the campus community. To inform my second research question, I looked for trends in student interactions with faculty and staff and university policies or events that may contribute to a sense of belonging.

During each interview and focus group, I engaged with participants and responded to their answers, leading to in-depth conversations, and building rapport with participants. For example, two interviews were very emotional, and I was very humbled that participants entrusted me with such personal information about their personal experiences. In addition, notes I made during the sessions included *buzzwords* and comments I wanted participants to elaborate on or further explore later during the session.

After each interview or focus group, I added final thoughts, potential themes, or trends from the session to my notes. For each first pass, I watched the recording and added any additional details to my notes. My second pass consisted of watching the recording again and cleaning the transcripts, as needed. For my final pass, I read through the updated transcripts and then compiled all my notes into analytic memos recapping each session. These analytic memos informed codes and emerging themes.

I used two software services to support my qualitative data analysis: Otter.ai and Dedoose. Otter.ai automatically transcribed all interviews and focus groups. Once the Otter.ai transcriptions were completed, I reviewed the Zoom recording against the Otter.ai transcription and manually corrected the transcriptions. All transcripts were downloaded as .txt files and then uploaded to Dedoose and coded.

After coding, I analyzed the data at the individual level and by how many times certain things were mentioned. In some findings, it was more relevant to analyze data by mentions for three reasons. First, the interviews and focus groups were semi-structured and very conversational, allowing participants to share their thoughts and as many experiences as they wanted. On some occasions, this resulted in participants voluntarily sharing additional details about issues relevant to the project that may not have been topics covered by the interviewer. Second, when coded, some responses did not answer a specific question, but were significant enough to be reported as findings. Finally, with such responses not answering a specific question, it was unreliable to report it as a finding applicable to the entire sample. Four advantages of quantifying data for my qualitative study as described by Maxwell (2010) include overcoming the challenge of internal generalizability, appropriately identifying and

characterizing perceptions of beliefs in the setting studied, identifying patterns, and producing

evidence to support my findings.

Qualitative Coding

Transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose where I used a hybrid thematic coding

approach of inductive and deductive analysis. Initial deductive codes were created based on the

literature, conceptual framework, and interview and focus group questions. As I read each

passage and applied codes, a few inductive codes surfaced. For instance, while *safety* was not a

topic covered in any questions or the conceptual framework, it was discussed in one focus

group and two interviews, thus earning its own code because it represented a "summative,

salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4) of the data.

I also deleted some codes I initially created, such as *campus resources and support.* The

initial goal with the *campus resources and support* code was to identify participants that used

campus resources. After multiple passes of reading the passages and listening to the

recordings, it was more fitting to "rearrange and reclassify coded data" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 12)

related to campus resources as *faculty* or *staff,* depending on who provided support (or any

other applicable code). *Sense of belonging* and *student engagement* were two codes where I

created sub-codes to specify between positive and negative experiences as they related to

sense of belonging and whether participants attended or engaged in students' organizations.

This allowed for both enriched and "nuanced qualitative data analysis (Saldaña, 2016, p. 83). A

full codebook—including code descriptions and examples—is found in Appendix VII.

Findings

After analyzing the interview and focus group data, I have six key findings. Findings one and two answered research question one by exploring negative and positive feelings related to participants' sense of belonging as undergraduate commuter students at Virginia University. The third finding addressed both research questions as it addressed a students' not belonging and factors that impact a sense of belonging. Finally, the fourth, fifth, and sixth research findings addressed research question two as they explored ways the institution—including resources, faculty, staff, and events—can impact or nurture a sense of belonging for undergraduate commuter students.

Research Question 1	What does a sense of belonging mean to undergraduate commuter students? How do undergraduate commuter students experience a sense of belonging?
Research Question 2	What do students feel impacts their sense of belonging? How can faculty and staff nurture a sense of belonging?

Finding 1: First-generation students and students of color are more likely to feel like they do not belong.

- 6 out of 14 participants (43%) felt like they did not belong at Virginia University
- 4 out of 6 participants (67%) who felt like they did not belong are first-generation students
- 6 out of 6 participants (100%) who felt like they did not belong are students of color

When asked to describe their sense of belonging, students tended to describe their sense of belonging as feelings related to campus observations or campus resources. For instance, Participant A, a senior, responded to *how would you describe your sense of belonging at Virginia University* by saying:

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If you're a commuter, you're probably going to make friends with other commuter students […] [O]h, just a sense of belonging comes from other commuter students that have the same, I guess, struggle as you do with trying to participate on campus.

To further examine their personal feelings about their sense of belonging in similar situations, the follow-up question of *"Are you a proud Virginia University student?"* was beneficial in learning more about participant's **personal feelings** and attitudes about a sense of belonging. Continuing with Senior A, she felt:

Proud in the sense that there are faculty and staff and other students, as well, that you can find your community with on campus, but you do really have to search and put yourself out there. And that can be very scary for people just coming out of high school that maybe still struggle with anxiety, or just being shy in general. But I'm proud in the sense that I have grown a lot. And I do see people grow from their first year to the third or fourth year on campus.

In one focus group, all three participants felt they did not belong at Virginia University, especially when first starting at Virginia University. Participant B, a first-generation sophomore, said:

At the beginning, no, not really. To state the obvious, it's a predominantly white, private school. So [I] think it's all about finding your crowd. Because at the end of the day, as vast as college is, you don't interact with everybody. You may have classes together and, you know, talk to each other for a semester because you're classmates, but you generally don't have to talk after that. And it's like, I've been able to do that with some people. But I've also been able to find the people that I can generally say I've made, like,

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college friends, and that made me feel comfortable. And like I belong at Virginia

[University] now, but the beginning wasn't like that.

Participant B and two others shared sentiments of *not finding others of similar*

backgrounds when becoming Virginia University students. All three participants identified as

students of color and are first-generation students. Though the literature tells us that belonging

is indeed important for students, Hurtado and Carter (1997) further explain that "students on

predominantly White campuses face specific stresses associated with their minority status" (p.

330). Stakeholders, however, believe the issue is a **diminishing** sense of belonging (based on

the data described in university survey results of the *Organizational Context*); but these feelings

expressed by participants refute that it was never present, to begin with. These feelings, along

with Hurtado and Carter's research, confirm that Virginia University deals with additional

complexities related to a sense of belonging and marginalized communities in the

undergraduate commuter student population, such as first-generation students and students of

color. Gopalan and Brady (2020) believe that if a student feels like they belong, they are more

likely to persist, but evidence points to first-generation students facing inequalities in both

persistence (Ishitani, 2016) and feelings of belonging (Terenzini et al., 1996, as cited in Museus

& Chang, 2021). The apparent problem is two-fold for Virginia University: a diminishing or lack

of feeling of belonging among commuter students and the disparities facing first-generation

students about feeling welcomed and supported by the campus, its administration, faculty, and

staff.

In contrast, Participant D, is a first-generation student, who felt like he belonged at

Virginia due to the diversity of students:

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It is pretty much international, and we have a lot of students from all around the world.

And I like that part, instead of having all students from the United States, that would

have made me feel a little weird being just the only one different there. And it was easy

for me to adapt.

Approximately 36% of all participants who felt like they were not proud Virginia University students were all students who felt like they did not belong. While one student who felt she did not belong was proud to be a Virginia University, she explained that she did not immediately feel like she belonged and continues occasionally struggle with that feeling but is proud overall to be a student because she really likes the business program that Virginia University offers. Of the participants who are not proud Virginia University students, they were all proud of themselves for either persisting or being given the opportunity to go to school. The shared sentiment was that Virginia University did not necessarily assist them in attaining their current level of success or they did not agree with university policies. All 36% were female students of color.

Finding 2: Students who feel like they belong described having strong connections on campus.

- 8 out of 14 participants (57%) felt like they belonged at Virginia University
    - 3 out of those 8 participants (38%) who felt like they belonged are first-generation students

Of the 57% who identified a positive sense of belonging, the shared variable was that all participants contributed their sense of belonging to positive experiences related to community or people. This finding is consistent with definitions of a *sense of belonging* described in the *Literature Review*. O'Keefe (2013) further elaborates that "a sense of connection can emerge if

the student has a relationship with just one key person" (p. 607). Participant C, a senior, admitted his response might be biased as he is a transfer student who was not there for the entire four years, but he still felt like he belonged at Virginia University. All eight responses included some mention of support, faculty, friends, teammates, or students.

Three first-generation students identified feeling like they belonged at Virginia University. Participant K, a first-year student, and member of the Honors Program, felt isolated during her first few weeks. She admitted it was partly due to feeling vulnerable because of her disability but quickly overcame that and immersed herself in campus life. In a lab group, she had peers ask her if she was quiet because English was not her first language. While English is not her first language, she explained that her quietness was more about her hearing loss. It led to her becoming excited to see that they wanted to learn more about hearing loss and that experience made her realize it is about finding where you fit and not about hiding who you are. As a part of the Honors Program, she is required to complete a certain number of hours of activities, but she eagerly explained:

> Serving is the greatest thing I can do for my community, so now I am doing community service with this club. I'm tutoring second to third grade students and help distribute food with the food bank in D.C. It's really exciting and interesting how I saw myself at Virginia University that having a disability is not something that can stop me from reaching my goal and they [university] were so supportive.

Museus and Chang (2021) reference scholarship suggests that service projects are one aspect of campus environments that can impact a student's sense of belonging (Museus, 2014).

Finding 3: A lack of resources and support contribute to a diminished sense of belonging and weaker relationships with faculty and staff, especially in first-generation students.

- 9 out of 38 mentions of *faculty* (24 %) were negative
    - 5 out of 9 negative mentions (56 %) were from first-generation students
- 11 out of 24 mentions of *staff* (46 %) were negative
    - 8 out of 11 negative mentions (73 %) were from first-generation students

Resources and Support

When discussing resources, students felt irritated when dealing with issues that take away from their schoolwork or include additional challenges that resident students may not necessarily have to confront. Participant E, a first-generation junior, feels like resident students are:

> *protected by the campus because they're already here and they don't need to worry about—like Wi-Fi—at home that doesn't work or things like that. I feel [resident students are] protected because the university will take care of it or will send somebody to take care of it if you have a problem, like a plumber. You don't have to hire a plumber to come over to your house and wait for them to come to fix the toilet; the university will figure it out. You just call somebody. You know, like those types of things. I think that it's easier because they [residents] don't worry about that.*

Participant E's observation that on-campus students have easier access to resources and support is true, which (Kuh et al., 2006) explains also encourages this (resident) group to be more engaged than other groups.

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Adding to other stressors, commuter students must deal with "transportation stress," which includes their mode of travel, traffic, parking, and other inconveniences related to travel (Newbold, 2015, p. 81). Students who use public transportation shared opinions about issues such as the cost of the metro and how they wish they received metro cards like other schools. Participant F, a first-generation sophomore, explained how she received a free card to use the metro and buses as a high school student attending D.C. public schools, which tremendously helped her commute between work, school, and home. According to the District Department of Transportation (2022), eligible D.C. Public School (DCPS) students could receive free SmarTrip cards to ride Metrobus, Metrorail, or DC Circulator as students. While that program applies only to students under 21 enrolled in elementary or secondary schools within the District of Columbia, there have been numerous examples of universities providing transportation funds to students.

In *A Review of Reduced and Free Transit Fare Programs,* Saphores et al. (2020) described a pilot program at a private university in Washington, D.C. that successfully provided unlimited bus and rail rides for all its full-time undergraduate, graduate, and law students for less than $150 per semester. The cost was mandatory; however, it was covered by financial aid and utilized by almost 100% of its students. The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) earned almost $3 million from this pilot program, and the university incurred no cost by providing this benefit to its students for the school year.

Additionally, a more regular—or consistent—shuttle rotation between campus and the metro station impacts students' feelings and their sense of safety. As one first-generation sophomore described it, "most commuters are taking the metro, and the metro is not exactly

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the safest depending on where you live*"* when explaining how she feels if the shuttle is delayed, causing her to miss her train, sometimes delaying her departure by upwards of 40 minutes.

<u>Faculty</u>

Based on university survey data, conversations with stakeholders, and this project's data, faculty is one of the university's strongest aspects. Nevertheless, I draw attention to the 24% of negative mentions only because they were similar in theme, with 56% of the negative mentions belonging to first-generation students. Negative feedback was related to a lack of understanding of stressors related to diverse student backgrounds and a better understanding of life commitments.

In the 2018-2019 *Graduating Student Survey,* one example of faculty improvement was "faculty lacked an understanding that students are also human." This graduate's survey feedback aligns with many of the negative experiences I heard in interviews and focus groups. Participant A, a senior, shared that:

> *The demographic of the commuter students is not the same demographic as most of the*
>
> *faculty. So just trying to understand where we are coming from and how our personal*
>
> *lives are structured differently than how you, as a professor, life is structured. Just*
>
> *knowing where your commuter students are coming from. Okay, it goes a long way.*

Participant G, a sophomore, expressed frustration with faculty not being understanding of other class commitments:

> *Because for people who take multiple classes, like, five classes, and for example, if*
>
> *each of them, each of the classes has, like a crazy amount of work do at the same time,*
>
> *it's going to be almost impossible.*

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Many researchers report that first-generation college students are more likely to work more hours and often come from lower-income families compared to their peers (Bui, 2002; Inman & Mayes, 1999, Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998, as cited in Mehta et al., 2011), and more likely may be responsible for providing financial support. Because of this, families of "first-generation students may not understand the time and energy that must be invested in college to be successful" (Mehta et al., 2011, p. 21) outside of the classroom. Participant H, a first-generation sophomore described such an example, where a professor did not understand what was feasible for her outside of class. She explained:

> *I only had one bad experience with one professor. They didn't understand that I didn't have time for, like, group projects because I had to work and take care of my sister and like all the family issues that I couldn't stay late.*

When it comes to ensuring that commuter students are intentionally being kept in mind during course designs, Jacoby (1996) recommends that faculty "consider commuter students' lifestyles when structuring assignments (for example, offering alternatives to group projects or projects that require extensive time in campus libraries or laboratories)" (p. 32). The literature also describes the importance of informal student-to-faculty relationships contributing to a sense of belonging and mentorship development. However, if students are not feeling supported by faculty formally—in the classroom—it is unlikely they will engage with them through informal means and lead to mentorship. We know that mentors can enrich an individual's experiences on campus or in the workplace (Kuh et al., 2001). Hence, a lack of support on campus will affect students after graduation. For example, a recent *Harvard Business Review* study found that First-Generation Professionals (FGPs) faced more inequalities

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when finding a job, and once there, felt less included (Burwell & Maldonado, 2022). Suppose students feel like their professors do not understand them in the classroom. In that case, they are less likely to approach them outside the classroom, further distancing themselves and contributing to a diminishing sense of belonging.

Staff

Academic advising received much of the negative feedback related to staff, as a few students expressed frustration with constant turnover or change of their advisor. The frustration with restarting a relationship further contributed to a diminishing sense of belonging. During my early conversations, university stakeholders did reveal that Virginia University tends to see a higher turnover with staff. Unfortunately, I can confirm that it has not gone unnoticed by students.

Participant I, a first-generation senior, shared that "in my four years here, I lost count how many advisors I had." Darling (2015) explains that academic advisors need to be strategic in setting up commuter students for success while being aware of their other commitments that may impact their academic trajectory. If a student is constantly being transferred between advisors—mainly a first-generation or at-risk student—negative feelings of belonging increase, contributing to a diminished likelihood of persistence. Participant I continued by sharing:

> *It's frustrating because you are afraid...my friend had one advisor say, oh you're good to go and then a new advisor came in and was saying you need to take all these classes. It was a mess, and then she had to raise her concern, to like, the Dean or something because now she is wasting her time and money, and nobody can agree on what to follow…*

There is a vast opportunity for Virginia University to create strong relationships between academic advisors and students; as Darling (2015) asserted, "academic advisors are in a unique position to support commuter student success and to service as campus advocates" (p. 95). Student satisfaction with academic advising, or advising without frustrations similar the formerly described, implicitly signal to students that they are valued by their institution (Braxton et al., 2013).

As discussed in the *Organizational Context,* the university's recent update to its housing policy caused an uproar within the community — especially the commuter student population. One student said that the policy is an attempt by the university to get itself out of financial trouble. However, research indicates that students do benefit from living on campus. Compared to commuter students, resident students display increased student engagement and faculty interactions (Astin, 1984; Chickering, 1971, 1974; Pascarella, 1984; Pascarella et al., 1994; Welty, 1976, as cited in López Turley & Wodtke, 2010).

Participant J, a senior, connected her personal belonging to school mandates. When asked if she was proud to be a Virginia University student, she explained, "I have some issues with some of the [new housing] mandates the school is trying to force, so I'm not proud of that. But I am proud that, like, I have the opportunity to go to school."

Finding 4: Physical campus environments impact an undergraduate commuter student's sense of belonging.

- 7 out of 9 mentions (78%) referenced dissatisfaction with physical campus environments
  - 80% of dissatisfied participants were first-generation students

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The overall theme with Finding 4 is that undergraduate commuter students are dissatisfied with facilities, which is also consistent with university survey results from 2019 – 2021. Dissatisfaction was mainly related to a lack of or access to parking and a space to relax between classes. Participant D, a first-generation senior, explained that one semester he had a break between classes from 11:00 am and 6:00 pm and would go back home via public transportation and come back for his evening class. He would spend double the money on transportation for one school day as he did not want to spend hours at a table in the student lounge.

While the university does offer study rooms and a lounge for students or groups, the only other options include the library and café. The dedicated spaces are limited to working spaces and do not allow commuters to socialize or rest between classes. Based on the literature, we know that campus environments should encourage informal interactions between peers and between students and faculty, as described in the conceptual framework.

Finding 5: Student engagement levels do not impact a student's sense of belonging.

For decades, researchers have emphasized that the more students are involved in campus life, the more likely they are to persist (Astin, 1984; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991; Nora, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977, as cited in Tinto, 1997); and as explained in the conceptual framework, a sense of belonging is a foundation of persistence or engagement. While data collected in this study does confirm low student engagement, surprisingly, it is not due to a lack of belonging. However, it is important to bear in mind the small sample size (as a limitation).

As displayed in Figure 9, 50% of students participate in student organizations, and 50% of students do not participate. Of the 50% who participate, 29% said they regularly attend events, and 21% are active members or leaders of student organizations. Of the 50% who do not participate, 14% are student-athletes, and 36% do not regularly attend or participate in any organizations.

Figure 9

Breakdown of Participation

Participation in Student Organizations
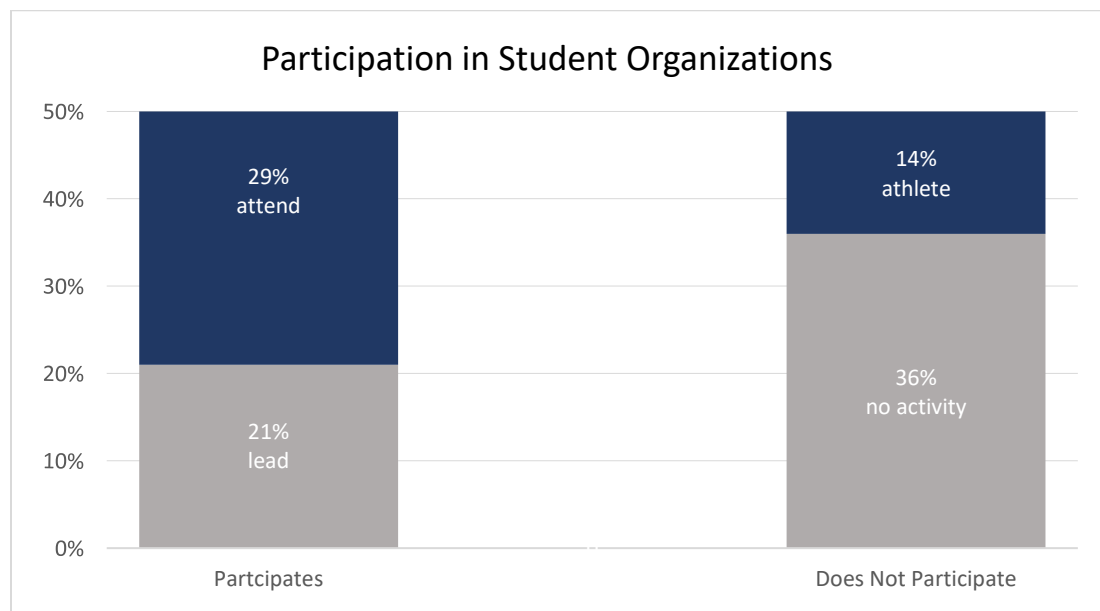
Participates

Turning now to the group of participants, a consistent theme is that there are a variety of events being offered on campus. Of the 29% who attend events, they enjoy attending events with friends and join organizations that align with personal or academic interests, such as the nursing majors who all belong to the Student Nursing Association. Participant L, a senior, attends a lot of events "to show support to students who are leading those clubs because they are friends." According to Kuh et al. (2001), "proximity to campus makes a difference in

commuter students' level of engagement," (p. 5) but Participant L does not miss anything because "even though I am living off-campus, I can go there, it is, like, 20 minutes biking." When asked why they chose to participate but not be active student leaders of organizations, most responses were related to not having the time to commit and schedules. Participant L works multiple jobs and feels involved in so many campus initiatives that he enjoys spending his little free time attending events, supporting his friends who planned the events, and engaging with others in attendance. Participant K has a clear engagement plan for her time at Virginia University. She is spending her first year attending events and "experiencing and adjusting just [in] my freshman year and then in my sophomore year, I will try to look for different organizations to be a part of." As described in Finding 2, she is already an active member of service clubs, but she looks forward to being an active student leader of international student organizations and the Latino Student Association in the next few years. Her sense of awareness of balancing responsibilities as a newcomer also speaks volumes to her college preparation experience, especially for first-generation students who typically require more guidance in their first year (Farris & Chan, 2022).

Participant A is the most active participant and has held multiple board positions with different student organizations over her tenure at Virginia University. She found herself choosing to participate in organizations that were a "continuation of high school habits," such as student advocacy groups like the Black Student Union. She also expressed her own observations of student engagement being low and "on the decline." When I asked why she thought student engagement was on the decline, she explained that:

Virginia University is a campus whose population is primarily introverted students.

Students will likely go to an event with friends or will not go at all. Students will rarely

take themselves to an event or meet by themselves and meet new people.

<u>Does Not Participate</u>

Let us turn now to the remaining 50% who do not participate in student organizations.

About 14% who do not participate in student organizations are athletes. As previously

described in the *Organizational Context,* we know that Virginia University students who identify

as athletes tend not to participate in any other extracurricular activities. Participant M, a junior,

confirms this as she explained, "my time is pretty consumed with school and lacrosse." She

further explained that one of her teammates does participate in the Student Government

Association, which takes up a lot of her time. A common theme among this group—aside from

being an athlete and commuter student—is that free time is spent supporting other athletic

teams, as Participant M continued by explaining, "my team and I usually go to all the basketball

teams during the winter." While she did identify feeling a positive sense of belonging, the

intrinsic issue is that athletes do not engage with various extracurricular activities within the

social system—aside from sports—as described in the *Literature Review.*

Almost all 36% of students who do not attend or participate in student organizations are

first-generation students. Of the 36% who do not participate, 60% of them are students who

previously reported feeling like they do not belong at Virginia University. The common theme

for their lack of participation is that they do not have time between work and family

commitments. What Participant A described with a decline in student engagement was verified

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by this group of non-participants. Participant E shared that she and a friend "tried to attend an event once, but our schedules did not align, and we gave up."

A relationship between distance and engagement was reported by Kuh et al. (2001), and "the further away from campus (walking distance, driving distance), the less likely a student is to take advantage of the educational resources the institution provides" (p. 5). Multiple participants shared sentiments that commuting and spending extra money on the metro to come back to campus just for an hour or two to attend an event was not worth it. Equally important was the mention of safety with taking public transportation later in the evening if attending events. Based on participant feedback, it also appears that Virginia University tends to host events on a specific day of the week when there are not many classes in sessions, further discouraging commuter students from wanting to trek back to campus. Regardless of all the research asserting positive associations between engagement and persistence, "more than two-fifths of students . . . at 4-year colleges . . . spend *no time* on these activities" (CCSSE, 2004; NSSE, 2005, as cited in Kuh et al., 2006).

As previously described, first-generation students face more stressors compared to their non-first-generation peers and the global COVID-19 pandemic added even more stress for all individuals. The first-generation students interviewed in this project disclosed their desire for more institutional support and guidance. While "first-generation students are breaking new ground in their families" with the support of parents, they are often navigating the process alone as their parents do not have the experiences to share or necessarily understand how to help (O'Brien & Shedd, 2001). Students would like to participate in student life, but when having to make a decision between academic or social integration, they defer to academic

integration. While it may seem uncommon for there to be no relationship between student engagement and belonging, this was a small sample, which may not be representative of the entire student population. However, these findings do establish that students are looking for more guidance and resources for success from their university as most first-generation students are getting all their advice from their institution, such as academic advisors, faculty, or peers.

All students (100%) responded that they believe that the university provides an ample amount of student organizations and events. For those who do not currently participate, if time permitted, and there was a student organization that aligns with their interest, they responded that they would join. Other key points include some disappointment with most student events being hosted on the same day of the week, as that is when most students do not have evening classes, and surveyed students would like events planned throughout the week at various times.

Finding 6: Students of color are more likely to express dissatisfaction with current DEI efforts on campus at Virginia University.

The final finding was unexpected in the sense that it emerged based on themes from conversations. There were no direct questions related to *diversity* asked in interviews or focus groups. Diversity was mentioned as a strength of the university when participants were describing the student body on campus. Their responses included diversity not just in terms of geography but also culture and race. One first-year student and one senior also shared appreciation that Virginia University is a fairly conservative university yet promotes and welcomes other religions and student organizations. Participant J went on to explain that "they

promote things that I may not associate with Catholicism, which I think is important because it's a university and more people are going to come."

- 4 out 14 (29%) of participants expressed concerns with a lack of inclusivity on campus

    ○ 100% of participants with concerns are students of color

    ○ 75% of participants with concerns are first-generation students

While some Virginia University students recognize and appreciate the diversity on campus, others believe there is still work to be done regarding cultural competency in faculty and staff. College campuses have seen an increase in student activism calling for widespread change to make campus more diverse and inclusive of its current student population versus their connections to historical customs or legacies, which often root back to slavery (Wong & Green, 2016). Hurtado and Alvarado (2015) note "there are consequences of a hostile racial climate for underrepresented groups in all contexts" and unfortunately, 100% of students who were dissatisfied with current DEI initiatives on campus are students of color.

 Participant A explained that to be an effective educator, "you really have to connect with your students and realize that not everyone is going to be the same. You have to know how to reach out and understand students to educate everyone effectively." Kuh et al. (2006) agree as they contend that "diversity shouldn't only be focused on a number, but the processes that contribute to equitable educational outcomes." Faculty should be designing their classrooms with practical and interactive teaching methods prepared to support an inclusive community. The student feedback and literature are also consistent with student feelings related to faculty in finding three, where first-generation students felt like faculty were not understanding of their commitments outside of the classroom.

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Project Limitations

Access to Participants

The first limitation of this project was access to participants. Given staff turnover, Virginia University Office of Student Affairs was unable to email the entire student body as initially planned. Thus, the project was included in a weekly newsletter, and I relied on a snowball sampling method with students who participated in the study.

Selection Bias

The Office of Student Affairs also sent the project invitation directly to student organizations and club members, leaders, and Student Government Association members targeting students who are actively engaged in campus life to participate in the study. I found no inconsistencies in the sample, as participation and a lack of participation in student life was equally split between the sample.

Sample Size

Despite over 60% of the student population being undergraduate commuters, the response rate was only 1.1%. If I were to do this project again, I would try to set up a time to visit campus and recruit participants in person. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, this was not an option at the time of this project.

University Content Review

With the elimination of the Office of Commuter Students discussed in the *Organizational Context*, it was not surprising to find inconclusive policies or information regarding commuter students. This limited the in-depth interviews and focus groups on

targeting questions on how to **support** and **enhance** the commuter student experience rather than exploring ways to continue **strengthening** and **improving** the goals of the Office of Commuter Students.

Lack of Quantitative Data

The final limitation was the inability to administer a survey. Surveys are a reliable method of inquiry and would have allowed me to reach a larger group of students (Babbie, 2017). I believe that a brief survey would have elicited a higher response rate as it might have been more attractive to students than an interview or focus group since the time commitment would have been shorter.

Recommendations

The six findings of this project and relevant literature led to the development of four recommendations for Virginia University related to increasing a sense of belonging in undergraduate commuter students. Tinto (2012) affirms that student success requires that "institutions commit themselves to intentional, structured, and systematic forms of action that involve faculty, student-affairs staff, and administrators alike" (p. 9). The following recommendations are opportunities for Virginia University key stakeholders to recommit (and engage with students in the process) to enhance student success and support through institutional actions and programs on campus.

Recommendation 1: Build opportunities to integrate commuter students into campus life.

This can be done by creating different learning communities and restructuring the first-year seminar course. Students benefit socially and academically from learning communities

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(Engstrom & Tinto, 2007; Taylor et al., 2003; Tinto, 1999; Zhao & Kuh, 2004, as cited in Tinto,

2012) and Tinto (2012) also notes that learning communities can actually "enhance students'

self-efficacy" (p. 27). Notable examples of effective learning communities at universities are

described in more detail in the *Literature Review*.

In addition to creating learning communities, the second opportunity for integrating

commuter students is implementing a comprehensive first-seminar course at Virginia

University. The first year of college is stressful for students as they learn to navigate many

transitions and successfully "transition into their new academic and social environments"

(Ishitani & Reid, 2015, p. 13). I recommend restructuring the current seminar to include the

following three components:

1. Add a peer mentor to encourage informal peer interaction and provide additional

   support. Mentoring has been found to have academic and social benefits on

   students and be especially important for low-income, first-generation college

   students (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Torres, 2004, as cited in Tinto, 2012) and provide

   support for students on predominantly white campuses (Fleming, 1984; Hurtado &

   Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007, as cited in Tinto, 2012).

2. Utilize a team-taught method like the University College at Indiana University

   described in the *Literature Review* or allow student affairs staff to resume teaching

   sections.

3. Implement student feedback of wanting additional ways to meet students with

   similar backgrounds by creating first-year seminar sections or learning communities

   for specific populations, such as commuters, first-generation, or other prominent

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populations on campus. Virginia University currently offers first-year seminar

sections specifically for nursing majors. These sections will add value by encouraging

formal and informal peer-to-peer interactions and show students that Virginia

University administration sees, welcomes, and provides supportive spaces for all

students.

Recommendation 2: Reinstate the Office of Commuter Students at Virginia University.

The goal of this department would be to support the largest student populations on

campus—commuters (Horn & Nevill, 2006, as cited in Burlison, 2015). Ironically, research

shows that this majority is becoming a marginalized group on campus that is viewed as

"nontraditional" (Jacoby, 2020). This includes the "nontraditional" commuter student

population, such as international students or adult learners.

As advocates for commuter students, the Office of Commuter Students' roles and

responsibilities would align with other university student success departments. Strategically

planned programming for commuter students can include workshops on time management,

building mentorships, and other areas of interest for this population and hosting events at

various times—such as lunchtime versus late night. When asked if this office would be helpful if

available to students, a first-generation freshman stated they "can do workshops on time

management because it is a lot," which aligns with research stating "first-generation students

typically have less well developed time management and other personal skills, less family and

social support for attending college, less knowledge about higher education, and less

experience navigating bureaucratic institutions" (Attinasi, 1989; London, 1989; Nuñez &

Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini et al., 1996; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991, as cited in Kuh

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et al., 2006). Once again, this provides another opportunity for informal interactions between peers and student-to-staff interactions, further contributing to a sense of belonging. The office can also serve as a hub for commuter students by providing resources necessary for commuter students to be productive while they are on campus.

In the *Graduating Student Survey* for 2018-2021, students suggested improvements to the shuttle for all three years. In 2019-2020, it was recommended that the shuttle schedule run consistently with the evening course schedule. Again, these are concerns that have been on the radar of Virginia University administrators for years, but, with no effort or communication of changes, those unaddressed concerns can contribute to students feeling ignored. Ensuring a consistent shuttle service for commuters can fall within the scope of this office. When this issue was discussed with Virginia University stakeholders, it was explained that students should be reporting inconsistencies with the shuttle online. Until enough students report their concerns, the university has no way of knowing there are issues or the need to increase services. One student even recommended that the Office of Commuter Students spearhead a carpool initiative for commuter students.

With the potential of the commuter student population at Virginia University becoming further isolated due to the housing policy change that would attempt to require all students to live on campus for all four years, there is an integral need for a department with its leadership providing specialized services for the commuter student population. As Virginia University transitions to a four-year residential university, they do, however, expect a significant percentage of students to qualify for campus residency exemptions. Furthermore, with Virginia University institutionalizing a policy for the fall semester after its announcement, it can be

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expected that university programming will focus on integrating students through residential life initiatives, further disconnecting those who receive waivers to continue living off-campus. Given that Virginia University still expects to grant many waivers, I recommend the university revisit the policy to determine if becoming a residential campus is a viable option for the university and its students. This includes analyzing trends within the student population and what students tend to live on campus. Are all students who live on campus from a specific demographic or socioeconomic level? If so, does this model support all students or further ostracize students from disadvantaged backgrounds? It may be that programming needs to change at an organizational level that focuses more on integrating all students in campus life.

Findings from this study already confirm students feeling like they do not belong and point to the need for more robust support systems for commuter students. This will further be exacerbated if commuter students are continued to be siloed on campus. University and college systems have seen "increased demands for greater efficiency, productivity, and entrepreneurial management" (Pusser & Loss, n.d.) and based on the data and feedback from students, the Office of Commuter Students is a prime example of an increased demand for efficiency and support at Virginia University.

Recommendation 3: Increase Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging efforts and implement additional engagement opportunities on campus.

Virginia University is a designated Minority Serving Institution (MSI). Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) "are critical in providing access and opportunities for traditionally underrepresented and low-income students" (Council for Advancement and Support of Education, n.d.). which will also support underrepresented students (including commuters and

first-generation that this study focused on). One in three college students is a first-generation

student (NSSE, 2005, as cited in Kuh et al., 2006), and first-generation students are more likely

to come from low-income families (Choy, 2001; Kuh et al., 2006; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin,

1998, Terenzini et al., 1996, as cited in Ishitani, 2016; Reford et al., 2017, as cited in Antonelli et

al., 2020); it is not surprising to see Virginia University designated as an MSI. Unfortunately, it is

surprising—and sad—that most first-generation students feel like they do not belong despite

this designation. Moreover, it explicitly shows that specific strategies Virginia University

implements in support of this designation are ineffective. To effectively support this MSI

designation, Virginia University needs to ensure that all administrative and academic

departments are (1) aware of the designation and what it means for the university and its

population (2) how their specific department or individual position plays a role in supporting

this designation and its students and (3) where to access additional resources about questions

or support on Virginia University's specific MSI designation and strategies.

Including an anti-bias and cultural awareness program and training as part of Virginia

University's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging efforts will ensure the campus

community is committed to building and maintaining an atmosphere where all Virginia

University community members feel safe, accepted, included, and seen. The current Diversity

Committee at Virginia University includes diversity and inclusion training for committee

members each semester; however, my recommendation requires training for *all* university

administrators, faculty, and staff to encourage and foster a safe space for meaningful

conversations. Cornell University, for example, has educational requirements for faculty and

staff. In addition, staff completes a six-course certificate program with courses that focus on

inclusive working environments, culture and belonging, creating change, engaging with different perspectives, and empowering staff to commit to advancing DEI. Cornell University faculty are required to participate in an anti-racism initiative, which is also six courses, and "parallels the student educational requirement" (Cornell University, 2021). As students described their dissatisfaction with faculty in Finding 3, researchers such as Tierney (1999) and Stanton-Salazar (1997) "have long argued for the importance of institutional agents who help students navigate the culture of higher education contexts and feel a sense of belonging on campus" (as cited in Schademan & Thompson, 2016, p. 196). Kuh and Love (2000), Museus and Quaye (2009) "argue for the role of cultural agents who connect students to campus resources, validate students' cultural and racial identities and provide smaller, more supportive learning environments" (as cited in Schademan & Thompson, 2016, p. 196). Regardless of the role of the agents, they all need comprehensive, culturally relevant, and inclusive training to be able to provide support that contributes to increasing a student's sense of belonging or validating cultural and racial backgrounds.

Students would like to see additional partnerships with the community based on student recommendations since they are so close to D.C. In alignment with supporting minority students, D.C. is home to many professional, non-profit, and volunteer organizations and associations that support African American, Latin/Hispanic, First-Generation, LGBTQ, Veteran, and other student and professional populations. Building partnerships for students is an excellent way for Virginia University to set up students for success with mentorships, future job or volunteer opportunities, and network expansion through formal interactions.

Recommendation 4: Create additional space to encourage collaboration and informal interactions.

Virginia University needs to create a warm and welcoming space for all students, including commuter students who may have hours of breaks between classes. Research proves that campus facilities designed in welcoming ways go a long way in making students feel like they matter and are included on campus (Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Strange & Carney, 2015). While structural changes do take time and money, students shared that having more university events during the day would help break up their days, or a foosball table or something similar in the lounge, to allow breaks between studying. These are examples of smaller, more affordable ways that Virginia University can show students that they are trying to "develop a more commuter-friendly campus environment" (Jacoby, 2000). The Office of Commuter Students would play a key part in ensuring Virginia University's campus is commuter-friendly, as Jacoby (2000) explains that "advocates for commuter students must be assertive about sharing [our] knowledge of commuter students and what works (and does not work) for them" (p. 83).

Sutton (2018) recommends capitalizing on campuses in the urban area through community partnerships. Virginia University's location near Washington, D.C. – a city full of history, rich with politics, and a tech hub, is the perfect opportunity to build partnerships discussed in Recommendation 3 while (re)designing a campus for student success. One example Sutton describes is internships with local businesses and connecting with the community to bring prospective students to campus, allowing prospective students to use resources (like Wi-Fi) and increasing the (Virginia University) brand (Sutton, 2018).

Discussion and Conclusion

The COVID-19 global pandemic disrupted students at every level, including higher education. Students struggled with the adverse effects of quarantine, and institutions dealt with an increase in student psychological distress and mental disorders (Camacho-Zuñiga et al., 2021). These feelings exacerbate isolation, negatively impacting a student's sense of belonging.

Commuter students encompass over 85% of college students in the nation (Kelchen, 2018; Horn & Nevill, 2006, as cited in Dugan et al., 2008; Horn et al., 2002); but there is little research specific to the engagement and college experiences of commuter students (Baum, 2005; Krause, 2007, as cited in Dugan et al., 2008). There is also consensus that "existing research treats commuter students as homogenous and ignores the need to examine within-group differences (Baum, 2005; Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Kodama, 2002; Roe Clark, 2006, as cited in Dugan et al., 2008, p. 282); such as themes specific to first-generation or minority commuter students identified in this study.

The purpose of this capstone project was to help Virginia University examine a sense of belonging and lack of engagement in their undergraduate commuter students. Through my interviews and focus groups with undergraduate commuter students, I explored themes related to belonging, student engagement, and relationships with faculty and staff to help Virginia University better understand their undergraduate commuter student population's feelings and attitudes towards a sense of belonging. The findings and recommendations may also be relevant to other universities and colleges struggling with a lack of engagement or diminishing sense of belonging among undergraduate commuter students. Moreover, since my study uncovered themes explicitly related to first-generation and students of color, it may be

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beneficial to institutions with high student-of-color populations or designated MSIs that struggle with engaging diverse students or implementing applicable campus programming.

Through a total of 10 semi-structured interviews and focus groups, data revealed that students of color and first-generation students were less likely to feel like they belonged at Virginia University. Overall, students who felt like they belonged at Virginia University expressed positive relationships or connections to others. A lack of resources and support contributed to a diminishing sense of belonging and weaker relationships with faculty and staff at Virginia University, especially for first-generation students. Students want support and resources for success to help make their day-to-day commute or collegiate experiences easier to navigate. What we know about the *typical college student* is changing. More collaboration is needed to fully integrate commuter students to ensure that faculty and staff provide the support that matters to students. Those resources include having welcoming spaces on campus that do not include the library or café where students can relax and engage with peers, faculty, and staff. Virginia University students also identified that the university is a diverse campus filled with students from a wide variety of backgrounds but does need to strengthen its commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.

In summary, given that all students of color interviewed for this project expressed feeling like they did not belong at Virginia University, this is an area of opportunity for Virginia University. First-generation students also felt like they did not belong and expressed dissatisfaction with support from faculty and staff. While it is hard to draw too much of a conclusion given the small sample size, it does emphasize an indispensable need to increase integration, particularly among students of color and first-generation students. Commuter

students expressed that resources that enhance their learning and support student success are more critical than engagement. While first-generation and students of color would like to participate in student life more, they are less likely to return to campus in the evenings and would rather spend their time focusing on academic integration than social integration. With what the research tells us about first-generation students' commitments and the impact of COVID-19 on the education system, it can be inferred that the profile of a *typical commuter student* may be changing. What the typical profile of a college student once was may not be applicable to today's student. To elaborate, based on the results of this project, some commuter students—especially those from underrepresented populations—are looking for more support and resources to support and guide their entire collegiate experience, and not necessarily ways to get involved on campus. As this project showed, many Virginia University students are looking to their institutions for accessibility to tools and support to be successful in this fast-paced society.

As Virginia University focuses on transitioning to a residential university, they cannot forget about the current obstacles that commuter students face, which will only increase if commuters become a further ostracized population on campus. Virginia University can continue to develop a variety of engagement measures that support formal and informal academic and social activities that increase a sense of belonging and to support student persistence. Bringing Student Affairs and Academic Affairs together to discuss a sense of belonging and this projects results provide an opportunity to identify enhancing engagement practices and policies within the institution and implementing project recommendations.

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Appendix I: Invitation Email

Dear Undergraduate Commuter Students,

My name is Joanna Beituni, and I am an Ed.D. candidate at Vanderbilt University. I am working with Student Affairs to better understand a sense of belonging amongst commuter students at Virginia University.

You are invited to participate in a study about your experiences at Virginia University, including your interactions with university faculty and staff and participation in student life. You may choose to participate in a one-on-one interview or a focus group.

The interviews and focus groups will last up to 1 hour and take place via Zoom between October and December. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and your responses will be kept confidential.

Agreement to participate will be interpreted as your informed consent to participate. Interviews and focus groups will be recorded for the purposes of this study, and only the researcher will have access to recordings. All recordings will be stored on Vanderbilt University platforms, which utilize a secure two-step verification login.

Participants will be entered into a raffle to receive a gift card at the end of the study.

If you have any questions about this project, please reach out to me at joanna.beituni@vanderbilt.edu or contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Sayil Camacho, at sayil.camacho@vanderbilt.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the Vanderbilt Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 615.322.2918.

To participate, please click the link below.
 Sign up for an interview or focus group

Thank you,

Joanna Beituni
Vanderbilt University Ed.D. Candidate

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Appendix II: Participant Sign-Up Form

Interview and Focus Group Sign-Up

Thank you for participating in my study on a sense of belonging amongst undergraduate commuter students at Virginia University. This study will explore your experiences at Virginia University, including your interactions with university faculty and staff, and participation in student life.

This study is only for undergraduate commuter students at Virginia University. You may choose to participate in a one-on-one interview or a focus group with other undergraduate commuter students.

The interviews and focus groups will last up to 1 hour and 15 minutes.

All events will be held via Zoom. You will receive a confirmation email with a Zoom invite to your email within 72 hours of submitting this form. Please be sure to check your spam or junk folder.

You will be entered into a raffle to receive a gift card for your participation at the end of the project.

Please contact me at joanna.beituni@vanderbilt.edu with any questions or concerns.

* Required

1. Email *

   _____

2. Name *

   _____

3. What is your current status? *

   Mark only one oval.

   ( ) Freshman

   ( ) Sophomore

   ( ) Junior

   ( ) Senior

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4. Are you a commuter student? *

   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ Yes

   ◯ No

5. Are you interested in participating in a one-on-one interview or a focus group? *

   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ One-on-one Interview

   ◯ Focus Group

6. What times are you available? Interviews and focus groups can be scheduled from 9 am - 9 pm. *

   Please select all that apply

   Check all that apply.

	Morning (9 am - 11 am)	Midday (12 pm - 2 pm)	Afternoon (3 pm - 5 pm)	Evening (5 pm - 9 pm)
Monday	☐	☐	☐	☐
Tuesday	☐	☐	☐	☐
Wednesday	☐	☐	☐	☐
Thursday	☐	☐	☐	☐
Friday	☐	☐	☐	☐
Saturday	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sunday	☐	☐	☐	☐

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7. If you have specific day(s) and time(s) that work for you, please enter them below.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

8. Any other comments and/or questions?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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Appendix III: Interview Protocol

Beginning the Interview
The beginning of the focus group includes introductions, how the individual found the study, and an overview of what participants can expect during the process.

Hi, thank you so much for joining me today. My name is Joanna Beituni, and I am a doctoral candidate at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College. I am studying a sense of belonging in undergraduate commuter students at Virginia University for my capstone.

Before we get started, I would like to go over some guidelines. I am recording our interview today for transcription purposes. I am the only individual with access to the recordings and all data will be kept confidential. The interview will last a maximum of 1 hour and your participation in the interview is voluntary. There are no right or wrong answers, I am here to learn about your experiences. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Sense of Belonging – Research Question 1
Since this study focuses on the needs of commuter students, I would like you to start by going back in time and talking about your journey coming to Virginia University.

- Tell me about what motivated you to apply and accept admissions into Virginia University. Why did you choose to be a commuter student?
- What was your initial experience as a commuter student?
- Studies talk about how important it is that you feel a sense of belonging here on campus. How would you describe your sense of belonging at Virginia University?
- Are you a proud Virginia University Saint?
- Thinking about what was just discussed regarding your sense of belonging, what do you think is a strength of the university?
- How else can the university support commuter students with your needs in mind?
    o   Can you recall any specific examples of events or interactions that made you feel welcomed or unwelcomed?
- Do you feel a sense of separation between commuters and residents on campus?
- If Virginia University had a university-led Office of Commuter Students, do you think it would be beneficial in supporting commuter students?
    o   Talk to me about why or why not.
    o   What would you like to see the organization do for you?

Student Life – Research Question 2
Transition to talking about student life.

- How would you describe student life at Virginia University?
- Do you feel like this description is reflective of your own student life at the university, or is there a disconnect between what student life is and your experience?

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- Can you talk about your involvement in student organizations and why you chose that organization(s) to participate in?
- **If they are not involved:** What are some factors in your life that prohibit you from being involved or keep you from attending events?
    - What would you like to see happen on campus related to student organizations?
- What are your thoughts on the student organizations offered at the university?
    - Is there an organization that interests you? If not currently involved, is there an organization that interests you if you were to participate?
    - Do you feel like there's enough happening on campus?

Connections to Faculty and Staff – Research Question 3
Transition to final topic, the university's faculty, and staff.

- How would you describe your relationships with your professors and university staff?
- Do you think they can do things differently to better support commuter students? If so, can you talk about how you think they can do so?
- One of the major themes from alumni is that they have valuable and close relationships with faculty and staff. Has this been your experience, or are there other ways they can be fostering relationships?
    - Do they provide academic support or guidance?
    - Do they advise you on personal and professional decisions?

Concluding the Interview
Wrap up and next steps.

That concludes all the questions I have for you. Thinking back to what we just discussed over the past hour, is there anything you would like to add? Thank you again for your participation. It was a pleasure getting to know you all and I appreciate you sharing your experiences with me. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me. At the end of the study, I will be selecting two raffle winners for a $25 gift card. For any interviews before the university's winter break: The study is still open so if you do have any friends that are undergraduate commuters, please feel free to share the study details with them.

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Appendix IV: Focus Group Protocol

Beginning the Focus Group
The beginning of the focus group includes introductions, how they found the study, and an overview of what participants can expect during the process.

Hi, thank you so much for joining us today. My name is Joanna Beituni, and I am a doctoral candidate at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College. I am studying a sense of belonging in commuter students at Virginia University for my capstone.

Before we get started, I would like to go over some guidelines. As a reminder, I am recording our focus group today so that I don't miss any of your comments. I am the only individual with access to the recordings and all data will be kept confidential. The focus group will last a maximum of 1 hour and your participation in the interview is voluntary. There are no right or wrong answers, only differing points of view. You do not need to agree with one another, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views. My role as today's moderator will be to guide the discussion. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Sense of Belonging – Research Question 1
Since this study focuses on the needs of commuter students, I would like us to start by going back in time and talking about your journey coming to Virginia University.

- Can you tell us about what motivated you to apply and accept admissions into Virginia University? Why did you choose to be a commuter student?
- What was your initial experience as a commuter student?
- Studies talk about how important it is that you feel a sense of belonging here on campus. How would you describe your sense of belonging at Virginia University?
- Thinking about what was just discussed regarding your sense of belonging, what do you think is a strength of the university?
- How else can the university support commuter students?
    - Can you recall any specific examples of events or interactions that made you feel welcomed or unwelcomed?
- Is there a sense of separation between commuters and residents on campus?
- Are you proud Virginia University Saints?
- If Virginia University had a university led Office of Commuter Students, do you think it would help commuter students?
    - Talk to us about why or why not?
    - What would you like to see the organization do for you?

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Student Life – Research Question 2
Transition to talking about student life.

- How would you describe student life at Virginia University?
- Do you feel like this description is reflective of your own student life at the university, or is there a disconnect between what student life is and your experience?
- Can you talk about your involvement in student organizations and why you chose that organization(s) to participate in?
- **For those not involved:** What are some factors in your life that prohibit you from being involved or keep you from attending events?
    - o What would you like to see happen on campus related to student organizations?
- What are your thoughts on the student organizations offered at the university?
    - o Is there an organization that interests you? If you are not currently involved in student organizations, is there an organization that interests you?
- Do you feel like there's enough happening on campus?

Connections to Faculty and Staff – Research Question 3
Transition to the final topic, the university's faculty, and staff.

- How would you describe your relationships with your professors and university staff?
- Do you think they can do things differently to better support commuter students? If so, can you talk about how you think they can do so?
- One of the major themes from alumni is that they have valuable and close relationships with faculty and staff. Has this been your experience, or are there other ways they can be fostering relationships?
    - o Do they provide academic support or guidance?
    - o Do they advise you on personal and professional decisions?

Concluding the Focus Group
Wrap up and next steps.

That concludes all the questions I have for the group. Thinking back to what we talked about and what everyone shared over the past hour, is there anything else you would like to add? Any additional questions? Thank you again for your participation. I appreciate you all joining us today and sharing your experiences with one another. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me. At the end of the study, I will be selecting two raffle winners for a $25 gift card. For any focus groups before the university's winter break: The study is still open so if you do have any friends that are undergraduate commuters, please feel free to share the study details with them.

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Appendix V: Codebook

Code	Type	Description	Example
Academics	Inductive	The code *academics* refers to majors or academic programs at the university.	" I think that having a lot of close friends definitely helps. Especially in the nursing program sense. We're all in the same classes, and we kind of just move together. It's easy for us, at least to know there's always going to be a few of us in the building where we can go and like, meet up or study."
Athletics	Inductive	The code *athletics* refers to university sports or sporting events.	"My time is pretty consumed with school and lacrosse. But I know that some of my teammates actually are involved in other campus activities."
Campus Environment - Physical	Deductive	The code *campus environment - physical* refers to any physical descriptions of campus facilities including parking.	"I think definitely just making more, not only more space, but more areas for commuter students to like gather, and just other spaces that aren't the library or the cafeteria."
Community	Inductive	The code *community* refers to any mention of friends, peers, classmates, or community.	"You're either with a very small group of students and you all know each other, or your kind of like a loner with stray friends in different groups, and you kind of see each other during school times and stuff like that."
Commute	Deductive	The code *commute* refers to commuting to and from campus.	"Last semester, I had a class in the morning that was from 10 to 11. And then the next one was just at 6 o'clock. And it was a huge gap. And I just pretty much have to come back home and then go back to school."

Diversity	Inductive	The code *diversity* refers to any mention of diversity at the university.	"And Virginia just celebrates diversity not just in terms of geography, but also in terms of race, color, gender, and it's a very lively community gets people from everywhere are there and you can talk to them."
Faculty	Deductive	The code *faculty* refers to any mention of university faculty members.	" I have met a lot of professors, during my time at Virginia, who are very supportive and are willing to help students, even on a personal level."
Office of Commuter Students	Deductive	The code *Office of Commuter Students* refers to whether the university could use such a department.	"It would be nice to have a centralized office that would focus on commuter students only."
Recommendations	Deductive	The code *recommendations* refer to any recommendations for support made by participants.	"I want to see a lot of outside partnerships with the community because we live in the DMV."
Safety	Inductive	The code *safety* refers to any mention of safety or feeling safe on campus, while commuting, or as students.	"With commuter students understanding that not everyone necessarily lives in a very safe community."
Sense of Belonging	Deductive	The code *sense of belonging* refers to how students feel as Virginia University students and their sense of belonging.	"A sense of belonging comes from other commuter students that have the same, I guess, struggle as you do on trying to participate on campus."

Negative Belonging *Sense of Belonging Sub-Code*	Inductive	The code *negative personal experience* refers to any negative personal interactions or experiences related to being students and a sense of belonging.	"It was actually kind of pretty hard for me to adjust. And I thought I didn't belong there because I didn't see people like me."
Positive Belonging *Sense of Belonging Sub-Code*	Inductive	The code *positive personal experience* refers to any positive personal interactions or experiences related to being students and a sense of belonging.	"I'm happy to be here. I love the community. Love that everyone is so supportive"
Staff	Deductive	The code *staff* refers to any mention of university staff.	"My academic advisor and I have been talking a lot and she's really helpful."
Student Engagement	Deductive	The code *student engagement* refers to any organization or event hosted by a student organization or the university.	"I feel like student led events are the most attended because they know what the other students want."
Does Not Participate *Student Engagement Sub-Code*	Deductive	The code *does not participate* refers to not attending events or participating in organizations.	"Basically, if I had time to actually join a group, I would, but you know, life didn't turn out that way for me. So, there was no way for me actually join a group."
Participates *Student Engagement Sub-Code*	Deductive	The code *participates* refers to attending events/participating in organizations.	"I always find myself being involved in student advocacy groups or trying to get involved in the community."
University Choice	Deductive	The code *university choice* refers to why participants chose to attend Virginia University.	"I saw that Virginia had a lot of options and just the way Virginia works and its purposes."