Creating a Sense of Belonging for Latinx Students in Community College: You Matter, You Fit in, and You Belong

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ABSTRACT

CREATING A SENSE OF BELONGING FOR LATINX STUDENTS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE: YOU MATTER, YOU FIT IN, AND YOU BELONG

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Northern Illinois University, 2022
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This dissertation examines the perceptions of Latinx sense of belonging in a Midwest community college and how their academic and social experiences are impacted. Sense of belonging is meaningful to community college students because Latinx students are historically underserved in postsecondary education. The goal is to better understand the perceptions of Latinx students in a community college setting and to find out what factors impact sense of belonging. This study is significant because Latinx student retention outcomes in higher education are very low. The Latinx population is the fastest growing group in the United States. Therefore, providing support and an inclusive environment can foster a sense of belonging for Latinx student to be successful in higher education.

This quantitative case study found perceptions of sense belonging in Latinx student’s academic environments, co-curricular activities, peer engagements, and campus environments. This research was guided by Hurtado & Carter’s (1997) conceptual framework on sense of belonging, which discusses how Latinx students think about how they see themselves in relation to groups to which they belong or would like to belong, which can influence how students may feel. The different social identities affects belonging which makes Latinx students to experience belonging in many ways within the institution.
CREATING A SENSE OF BELONGING FOR LATINX STUDENTS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE: YOU MATTER, YOU FIT IN, AND YOU BELONG

BY

FRANCISCO J. BATAZ JR
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:
Xiaodan Hu
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to dedicate this body of work to my family. The first person that I would like to thank is my mother for raising me to be the man that I am today. Also, thanks to my stepfather for being the father that I never had. In addition, I send a special acknowledgement to my three younger sisters to create goals and follow their dreams.

Many say that “behind every successful man, there is a woman,” but I say that next to every successful man, there is a woman. I cannot express enough love, gratitude, and appreciation to my wife for being by my side all this time that I have been in school, which may have felt like an eternity. My wife has been my rock to get me through the tough times and our two sons have gave me the motivation to keep moving forward. A shout out to my in-laws, friends, colleagues, and mentors that have extended their support.

Starting my college experience at a community college as a first generation and low-income student I met many people that helped and mentored me. The first person that I met in college was a former Academic Counselor that has been my mentor ever since. I thank you for always being there unconditionally and your wise advice that I have received over the years. The second person that I met in college and that gave me a job after graduating with my undergraduate degree has been an influential person with an exemplary work ethic that has been leading student success efforts for all students. I thank you for trusting me and being a role model to follow.

A special thanks to my dissertation committee and editors for walking me through my higher education journey and guidance to complete this research study. Without my dissertation chair, I could not have done this. To all the students that I have served in way or another, ¡Sí, se puede!
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PREFACE

The aim of this dissertation project was to understand the perceptions of Latinx students’ sense of belonging in a community college setting. The case study approach researched the experiences of 16 Latinx students in the Midwest. The resulting chapters describe this research project from the proposal stage to a report on the study findings, as well as a scholarly reflection on my process and learning at the conclusion of the study.

Chapter One is a case study from the dissertation proposal defense. The proposal was defended in summer of 2020, and this chapter outlines the initial plans to carry out the research. The original conceptual framework for this study was Hurtado and Carter’s (1997) sense of belonging that aims to understanding students’ sense of belonging and how particular forms of social and academic experiences affect these students. As the study progressed, it became apparent that this framework is suitable for application of Latinx sense of belonging in Midwest Community College (MCC).

Chapter Two is a publishable paper that reports findings using the conceptual model by Hurtado and Carter (1997). This chapter details the procedures that were carried out in the fall of 2020, participants that were involved in the research, as well as presents the study findings. The findings reflected four major themes that impacted their sense of belonging in academic environments, co-curricular activities, peer engagements, and campus environments.

Chapter Three is a scholarly reflection of my process and learning at the conclusion of the study. This chapter discusses the research process on what was aimed to be accomplished,
what ended up happening, what went well and what did not, and what the researcher would do differently if were to do this again. Also, the researcher stated how this study can be applied to its own professional practice and how the findings found can be used and shared in higher education. This chapter also examines what I learned by conducting this research and how it can be applied to future research, and applications to professional practice. Key take-aways include the importance of sharing scholarly research with peers and building upon findings to conceptualize framework that is customized to the institution.
CHAPTER 1

PROPOSAL

Introduction

Sense of belonging is important to college students because it largely drives student motivation and influences their behaviors (Maslow, 1954; Strayhorn, 2019). Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) asserted that sense of belonging can impact students’ academic achievement, retention, and persistence. Strayhorn (2019) defined sense of belonging as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by (e.g., faculty, peers), and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus” (p. 28-29). Sense of belonging matters to community college students in particular because without meaningful academic and social experiences, students might not persist to the second year of college (Tinto, 1993).

The mission of community colleges is to provide access to higher education. This mission impacts the lives of about half of all undergraduates in the United States (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Historically, community colleges serve a disproportionate number of underrepresented students, such as low income, immigrants, first generation, and ethnic minority students (Bailey et al., 2015). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), as of July 1, 2015,
there are about 56.6 million Hispanics living in the United States\(^1\); by 2043, the Latinx population will be the majority-minority in the United States, which will have implications for higher education institutions\(^2\). In other words, one in six college students in the United States is Latinx and more than 51.3\% are enrolled in community colleges (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). Bailey et al. (2015) pointed out that less than 40\% students finished a degree or certificate within six years, and the majority of them are low-income Hispanic students who attended community colleges.

Latinx students are historically underserved in postsecondary education. Latinx social and economic mobility will rely heavily upon how public higher education institutions focus on degree completion as well as preparation for graduate school for this specific population. However, degree completion for Latinx college students keeps falling below the national averages where less than one third completed a degree or certificate in 2011 (NCES, 2015).

Batista, Collado, and Perez (2018) stated that,

With Latinx/a/o students entering college already willing to transfer or stop-out, higher education institutions must pay closer attention to student experiences if they want to reverse the chances of these students dropping out and support the success of those who do transfer. (p. 12)

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1 The U.S. Census Bureau refers to Hispanics “as a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” and the origin can be “the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the person or the person’s parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States (“Hispanic or Latino Origin,” 2019).

2 The term Latinx is used in some literature to be gender-neutral instead of using Latino and Latina (Loveland, 2018) that also identifies individuals as trans, queer, agender, non-binary, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, and for intersecting identities and racial backgrounds. (Batista et al., 2018.). For the purpose of this research, the terms Hispanic, Latino, Latina, Latin@, Latinx, and Latinx/A/OS will be used interchangeably.
There is a need to increase completion rates for Latinx students and to reach their educational goals (Villalpando, 2010) to realize the full benefits of a college education.

Key issues surrounding Latinx students are “enrollment, representation, and degree completion” (Batista et al., p. 15). Building Latinx students’ sense of belonging can contribute to their success by creating environments that will influence persistence intentions (Haussmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). The creation of diverse learning environments that emphasize identity affirmation, talent development, validation of capability, and the cultivation of positive interactions also contribute to the advancement of Latinx student success (Batista et al., 2018). In addition, campus climates infused with equitable and inclusive practices, and visibility throughout the institution are important to the positive experiences of Latinx students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). More importantly, Batista et al. (2018) explained that inclusive environments would be spaces where students can express their “identities without the fear of judgment or discrimination” (p. 15).

Problem of Practice

The purpose of this qualitative study is to research the sense of belonging that Latinx students at Midwest County College (MCC) experience during the fall 2020 semester and how those experiences impact their academic success. The goal is to better understand the perceptions of Latinx students in a community college setting and to find out what factors impact sense of belonging. In addition, this study is significant because student retention outcomes in higher education are very low. According to Salinas and Friedel (2016), meeting the needs of increased numbers of underprepared students is a challenge and opportunity for community colleges.
Strayhorn (2008) conducted a study that predicted sense of belonging of Latino students in college. Strayhorn (2008) translates "Sense of Belonging" to Spanish as "Sentido de Pertenencia"; the author’s study compared Latino students with their white counterparts. At MCC, there is a population of 36% Latinx college level students and it does not include students in adult education programs. (Quick Facts, Fall 2019). MCC shows some progress in overall graduation rates, but there are gaps in completion between Latinx students and white students.

There are major disparities in college attendance with 75% of white high school graduates enrolling college compared to the Latino population; less than 50% attended college (Baum & Payea, 2004). A 2017 Midwest County Annual High School Feedback Report showed that about 42% of Hispanic students attended CLC (2017-2018 Annual High School Feedback Report). A MCC Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) cohort from 2011-2014 revealed that the retention gap between Latinx and white students was about 15% (Measurement of MCC’s Achievement Gap, April 2018).

Another reason why Latinx students do not complete college is because, compared to white students, Latinx students withdraw from school more often for personal, academic, and financial reasons (Equity Plan Draft Overview, 2019). There is social and cultural capital that the students need to experience for academic success (Strayhorn, 2008). Social capital is the sharing of information and networks that can improve student success (McDonough, 1997) such as resources and relationships within the institution (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital is referred to as preferences that are derived from one’s parental system of belief tastes, and choices that determine socioeconomic status (McDonough, 1997).
The benefits of sense of belonging not only benefit Latinx students, but the whole institution as well. In fall’s 2015 3-year cohort, only 14% of Latinx students transferred out to a four-year institution. From 2014-2017, about 42% of Latino students graduated and transferred compared to 56% of whites. A MCC survey stated that Latinx students do not transfer for a variety of reasons (Measurement of MCC’s Achievement Gap, April 2018). Familial obligations are additional reasons why Latinx students do not establish a sense of belonging and struggle to move away from family (Dayton, Gonzalez-Vasquez, Martinez, & Plum, 2004; Ortiz, 2004).

In Midwest County, Illinois there is a 13.6% projected growth of Latinos from 2015-2025 (E. Tanner, Personal Communication, April, 2016). To lessen the achievement gap between Latinx and white students, MCC aims to create a more equitable and inclusive environment to eliminate the 13% percent achievement gap (Measurement of MCC's Achievement Gap, April 2018). MCC has a goal of achieving a 45% graduation rate of all students by the year 2024. More large scale, customized, and cultural relevant experiences will be developed to improve the inequities that will benefit all students (Equity Plan Draft Overview, 2019). Sense of belonging for Latinx students is a personalized and culturally relevant experience that MCC will need to address to overcome systemic barriers that affect Latinx college students.

Research Questions

Sense of belonging for Latinx students on a community college campus is the primary subject the researcher would like to explore. This study aims to reveal: 1) the perceived meaning of sense of belonging to Latinx students, and 2) how the perceived benefits and barriers of sense of belonging impact student success. The guiding questions for this study will help us better
understand the needs and experiences of Latinx students in a community college setting. The guiding questions are as follow:

1) How do Latinx students at MCC understand sense of belonging?
2) What perceived barriers do Latinx students identify in establishing sense of belonging (to support student success)?
3) What recommendations do Latinx students propose to increase sense of belonging at MCC?

Literature Review

The literature review for this research study focused on sense of belonging, primarily how different Latinx populations experience inadequate spaces that do not foster a sense of belonging. The following sections include extant literature on college student sense of belonging, such as structural barriers Latinx students face, student engagement and well-being, and campus climate. I also reviewed best practices utilized by community colleges to improve sense of belonging for Latinx students.

Sense of Belonging and Student Success

According to Strayhorn (2019), “belonging – with peers, in the classroom, or on campus – is a critical dimension of success at college. It can affect a student’s degree of academic adjustment, achievement, aspirations, or even whether a student stays in school” (Para. 1). Abraham Maslow (1954) created a hierarchy of needs and asserted that belongingness is a basic human need. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) shared an overall definition that sense of
belonging is one’s important feeling of connectedness or mattering to others. The opposite of sense of belonging is “sense of alienation,” which leads to rejection, social isolation, loneliness, dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, depression, substance abuse, and suicide (Hagerty, Williams, & Oe, 2002). Research by Joiner (2010) suggested that suicidal ideation is related to social alienation, perceptions of burdensome, and the lack of belonging. Baumeister and Leary (1995) explained that when students feel burdensome and alienated, there is an increase of suicidal ideation, but argued that belonging increases positive outcomes such as happiness.

Student engagement practices implemented by institutions impact students’ sense of belonging and their college outcome and other life situations. The lack of sense of belonging can lead to stress and dissatisfaction with life. Also, alienation contributes to increased levels of pain, emotional distress, mental, and physical illness; in college specifically, it leads to being less social and academically engaged, lower academic achievement, and leaving the institution (Strayhorn, 2012). Sense of belonging is even important before a student starts college. Interventions by the institution can improve college success, especially for underrepresented students (Walton & Brady 2017; Yeager et al., 2016).

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) defined student success as “attainment of learning outcomes, personal satisfaction and goal/intent attainment, job placement and career advancement, civic and life skills, social and economic well-being, and commitment to lifelong learning” (Fain, 2018, p. 1). Strayhorn (2008) expressed that sense of belonging is influenced by academic and social involvement that leads to productive outcomes in education (Haussmann et al., 2007). Maestas, Vaquera, and Zehr (2007) mentioned that sense of belonging is critical to the retention of students of color. Joiner (2005) argued that the lack of belonging decreases interest
in engagement with life activities and education. These actions lead to reduced motivations, impaired development, lower engagement, and low performance on assignments and exams (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Strayhorn (2019) asserted that for students to be academically excellent they need to feel a sense of belonging. Colleges need to have educators that create an engaging learning environment, give academic support, provide campus activities, “build learning communities where everyone’s voice matters,” and for educators to be concerned with sense of belonging otherwise they are setting students up for failure (p. 17).

Kuh (2003) expressed that what matters the most to the success and development of a student’s is what they do as a student. Engagement contributes to sense of belonging and well-being for students. Trowler (2010) noted that,

Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution (p. 2).

Diener (2009) described well-being as pleasure, happiness, and a lack of stress, anxiety, and depression. Research by Eagan et al. (2014) stated that more students are coming into college with low levels of emotional health; Sax, Bryant, and Gilmartin (2004) mentioned that the college transition along with changes in the environment, new responsibilities and the potential of failure played a role in college adjustment. Emotional distress during the adjustment process can undermine a students’ well-being and their academic performance and retention (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003).

More specifically, the study conducted by Bowman, Jarratt, Jang, and Bono (2019) concluded that when a student skipped class once or twice, was involved on campus five hours or less, spent time exercising and sleeping had an increase in belonging. Also, visiting their
professor once increased belonging by “feeling successful in class, feeling academic productive, all forms of interpersonal satisfaction (with roommates, resident assistants, parents, and home friends)” (Bowman et al., 2019, p. 281). Peer interactions, faculty support, and campus climate play an important role in providing students with a sense of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002). Hagerty, Williams, and Oe (2002) found that opportunities to be involved on campus helped students to feel a sense of belonging.

Campus Climate and Environment for Latinx Students

Haussmann et al. (2007) stated that a support network for others on campus should be the aim of creating environments that foster a sense of belonging. Campus environment “is influenced by a historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion of groups, by the structural diversity or numerical representation of diverse people, the nature of interactions among diverse groups, and individual perceptions of the environment” (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005, p. 236). Strayhorn (2008) revealed that Latino students’ sense of belonging matters more to them when compared to white students at a predominantly white institution (PWI). To better understand a student’s process of college adjustment, an evaluation of environmental changes need to be tracked for ongoing responses. While students’ engagement with faculty, study time, and extracurricular activities contribute to adjustment during the first semester of college, their interpersonal relationships with other groups impact students’ well-being (Bowman et al., 2019). On college campuses, students of color can feel a lower sense of belonging when compared to white students due to a hostile and/or discriminatory campus environment (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). For example, Oliver, Rodriguez, and Mickelson (1985) reported that Chicano students felt
alienated due to the university’s discriminatory environment. Nora and Cabrera (1996) gathered student perceptions of prejudice that lead to the lack of social integration between minority and white students.

A study conducted by Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993) revealed that Latino students on PWI’s campuses reported facing stressors that were related to their Latino status and that freshmen displayed more psychological sensitivity to the campus social climate. Campbell-Whatley and Wang (2015) define “Campus climate is the interplay among people, processes, institutional culture, and represent important aspects of an organization including perceptions and expectations of the people in the academic community” (p. 40). Also, having a minority status increases interpersonal tensions with white students and faculty. Racism and discrimination were perceived, and actual feelings led to alienation on campus. Hispanic students that attended PWI’s felt marginalized, alienated, not supported, and not welcomed by other students and faculty members (Bennett & Okinaka, 1990).

The first semester of college is a period of adjustment where sense of belonging and other well-being components are critical to a student’s college success. However, college adjustment is an ongoing process and research designs that are repeated over shorter timeframes can show the changes that students go through (Bowman et al., 2019; Sharpe & Curran, 2006). Bowman et al. (2019) conducted a longitudinal study where they collected weekly data from students to explore factors that “predict ongoing changes in college belonging and well-being” (p. 274). The research considered the changes that occurred within each student instead of comparing between student groups. The first semester and even the first weeks of college are critical to support a student’s adjustment and college success (Bowman et al., 2019).
Overall, social and cultural capital are essential in helping minorities to be engaged in and out of the classroom. Sense of belonging is fostered through relationships (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). For example, a member of a sorority joins to belong, but without members the sorority would not exist. The member needs the sorority and the sorority needs its members to support and care for each other (Strayhorn, 2019). Krause (2005) found that working in learning communities enhanced full-time student’s sense of belonging. Learning relationships can be fostered through engaged and collaborative environment. Students that are collaborative, engaged, or active can be predicted for engagement (Ahlfeldt, Mehta, & Sellnow, 2005). In addition, sense of belonging is highly predicted by an increased satisfaction of college friends and social connectedness (Bowman et al., 2019). Without social and cultural capital, it is challenging for students to develop a strong sense of belonging (Krause, 2005).

The Intersectionality of Race and Socioeconomic Status (SES) in Higher Education

There is much known about the causes and impacts of sense of belonging in college students, but there is not much known about how belongingness is different among students’ social identities that include race, gender, social orientation and the conditions that the campus offers (Strayhorn, 2019). According to a 2014 National Journal Poll, 66% of Hispanic high school graduates did not enroll in college due to needing to help out their families financially (Krogstad, 2016). In 2017, about 19% of all Hispanics in the United States lived in poverty (Noe-Bustamante & Flores, 2019) and Strayhorn (2008) mentioned that “Latinos are disproportionately represented among low socioeconomic status income groups as compared to their nonminority counterparts” (p. 302).
Another phenomenon that poor and working-class people face is “class straddling”, which is when a person lives in between two different class identities and how to maneuver through each identity (Archer & Leathwood, 2003). Also, low SES individuals have a difficult choice to decide between being true to their roots or assimilating to the norms, behaviors, and expectations of the bourgeoisie in order to succeed (Hurst, 2007). There is a price that poor and working class have to pay, which is the lack of feeling at home in both environments (Ardoin, 2018). Rubin and Wright (2017) found that students with low SES have less access to economic, material, social, and personal resources, which impacted sense of belonging and their participation in social activities that can improve social integration (Rubin & Wright, 2017).

From the race and ethnicity intersectionality, SES is a common cultural barrier for Latinx students to establish sense of belonging. Latinx student success is impacted by not having a sense of belonging due to the isolated circumstances that they face in the United States (Loveland, 2018). The cultural difference of the English language not being the primary language spoken at home, the cost of college, the fear of assuming college loan debt, the problem of navigating the process of admission applications, the other problem of navigating the financial aid process, and the roles that students contribute to the Latinx family structure factor in whether Latinx students succeed or fail in college. Therefore, it is important for Latinx students to talk to their parents as early as ninth grade about their future in college to prepare the family for the processes of attending college (Loveland, 2018).

The stage for success needs to be set by overcoming sociocultural barriers. Besides having conversations with parents, Latinx students need to have experiences such as overnight stay at college campuses to mentally prepare the parents for their future college life. In addition,
Latinx community organizations and institutions should work together to foster a sense of belonging and remove barriers of accessibility. When Latinx students visit colleges, students may not feel socially and culturally welcomed to attend college or university (Loveland, 2018).

The NCES (2019) reported that 18-24-year-old Hispanics in college increased in 2000 from 22% to 36% in 2017. Latinx students having accessibility to college does not necessarily mean that they will complete college. After six years of college, about 35% of Latinx students drop out without graduating (Loveland, 2018). Like many college students, Latinx students attend community colleges due to their cost, the close proximity to home, and flexibility of schedules. Latinx students face barriers before they begin college and it comes in as early as kindergarten where they do not have adequate social, economic, and resources. Immigrant parents of Latinx students are at a disadvantage financially and with language barriers (Loveland, 2018). Not belonging becomes a recurring cycle that is passed on through generations and Latinx students should succeed and help other Latinx students succeed (Loveland, 2018).

Best Practices and Strategies

Morphew and Hartley (2006) claimed that most colleges and universities have a mission statement that supports a welcoming environment to foster academic and career goals for all students. According to Smith, Yosso, and Solorzano (2007), the ideal higher education environment would include a diverse campus “that admits, enrolls, retains and graduates underrepresented racial and ethnic groups by extending equal opportunities to guidance, support, and resources for academic success” (p. 560). Latinx experiences can be enhanced by not labeling this specific group and by allowing them to describe themselves in how they are

A concept that supports minoritized students is the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (ADAF) in higher education. By addressing systemic and historical oppression, Latinx students can be recognized as a unique student population that fosters a learning and equitable environment that deals with social justice and inclusion (ACPA, 2015). In student affairs administration, there needs to be more than just offering courses, workshops, professional development, and other social justice and inclusion initiatives to disrupt deficit thinking. Perez II et al. (2018) suggested that student affairs professionals “integrate empirically grounded, anti-deficit scholarship that advances research, policies, and practices intended to increase Latinx/a/o college student success” (p. 119). Strayhorn (2019) urged more research on sense of belonging to advise administrators, faculty, staff, and other practitioners in fostering practices that inform on college students belonging.

Strayhorn (2019) suggested that practitioners do not forget about the opposite of belonging, which is alienation. Alienation refers to resistance or rejection from a society that one belongs to or would like to be part of. Strayhorn (2019) refrained from using alienation to provide an anti-deficit model to foster sense of belonging. The anti-deficit model aims not only to identify gaps between Latinx and other racial/ethnic populations, but also to refrain from using such models to avoid reinforcing deficit-based narratives (Gandara & Contreras, 2009).

To disrupt deficit thinking, there are different belief systems that need to be addressed and using the ADAF can advance student’s college experiences (Harper, 2010). One of the contexts that influences college experiences is the social context. Perez II et al. (2018) referred to
social factors as a student’s “upbringing, beliefs, traditions, customs, environment” and everything that impacts academics and decisions (p. 123). In order to have a better understanding of the Latinx population, student affairs professionals need to look at the intersectionality of “personal stories and sociocultural factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and cultural identity” (Perez II et al., 2018, p. 123). The institutional context informs us about creating inclusive campus climates to improve educational outcomes (Harper & Hurtado, 2007) that are formed by psychological, behavioral, and structural dimensions of climate (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999). Therefore, hostile campus climates affect a student’s psychological well-being and academic performance (Crisp, Taggar, & Nora, 2015).

A study from University of Colorado Boulder found that writing exercises of self-affirmations were critical to increase Grade Point Average (GPA) and belonging. The study was more helpful in supporting that students with lower senses of belonging and GPA’s were those who benefited the most from affirmations (Layous et al., 2017). Latinos were spontaneously more self-affirming and had less self-threatening thoughts when faced with stressors (Brady et al., 2016). The community context informs us that there is a cultural inconsistency between home communities and college environment (Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997). For example, Latinx students grapple with family and cultural responsibilities that are different from what they can negotiate on campus (Abrica & Martinez, 2016; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Students need academic validation from faculty and staff and cultural empowerment to foster a sense of belonging (Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005).

Field (2018) confirmed that about a third of freshmen college students disappear after the first year. Since, first generation and low income students tend to feel a lower connection with
their college, Field (2018) points out that “first-generation and minority students are less likely to feel a connection to their colleges, and more likely to struggle with self-doubt and impostor syndrome -- feeling like an intellectual fraud” (p. 1). At Southern Utah University, the first-year experience model has been re-built to make a connection with students before they even walk on campus. To mitigate the feeling of self-doubt, mentors are assigned to participate in activities that new students are interested in. An approach that the University of Texas at Austin took was to give freshmen students an online pre-orientation session that shared how current students dealt with feelings of not belonging or impostor syndrome (Broda, Yun, Schneider et al., 2018).

Another way to explain terminology and college knowledge is to create first-year experience courses (Ardoin, 2018) and living learning communities where students can connect with other students, staff and faculty (Soria, 2015). The use of jargon can cause confusion and limit how the communication is transmitted to a student (Stuber, 2011). In addition, a focus on class identity should be made clear to support first generation, poor, and working-class college students. Ardoin (2018) suggests higher education institutions to support students in building social capital by having a designated space such as a Hispanic/Latino Student Center. If a student does not have access to the first-year experience course or a learning community, the classroom environment can be a place where students can have dialogues about classism and incorporate how identity has an impact in higher education. Another point that Ardoin (2018) made is that the acknowledgement of faculty and staff who share the same or similar identity can help students raise class identity, which can summon a sense of belonging.

Familial context is the last anti-deficit perspective to student success. There is a myth that Latinx students fall behind in achievement because their families do not value the power of
education (Valencia, 2010). The perspective of “familismo”, in which a student maintains “strong familial ties” is essential to Latinx student success (Williams & Dawson, 2011). The mentorship, guidance, and support of the nuclear family and extended family advance college-going processes, college experiences, persistence, and post college outcomes (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004). Latinx families can create relationships with institutions to support social, cultural, and intellectual capital that can increase academic achievement (Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, & Moll, 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2005).

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by the conceptual model of sense of belonging for Latinx students by Hurtado and Carter (1997). The authors built upon Tinto’s (1993) theoretical model on student departure and further “contend that understanding students’ sense of belonging may be key to understanding how particular forms of social and academic experiences affect these students” (p. 324-325). Hurtado and Carter (1997) argued that there is a theoretical and empirical difference to measure integration by researchers in higher education. Integration has been put aside by researchers to focus on developments of participation in social and academic experiences. Also, integration is a term that emphasizes a notion of acculturation, which diminishes ethnic groups and instills a submissive practice to the dominant culture in order to be successful; membership is the best-suited term (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

The conceptual framework from Hurtado and Carter (1997) will be used to support the conceptualization and implementation of this study. Specifically, sense of belonging “contains both cognitive and affective elements in that the individual’s cognitive evaluation of his or her
role in relation to the group results in an effective response” and what sense of belonging means to Latinx college students (p. 328). To have a deeper understanding of Hurtado and Carter’s (2007) conceptual framework is to know that Latinx students think about how they see themselves in relation to groups to which they belong or would like to belong, which can influence how students may feel. Hurtado and Carter (1997) sought to understand the social interactions that strengthened the affiliation between students and college (Strayhorn, 2019).

Hurtado and Carter (1997) also suggested the need to use “various measures of students’ participation in a wide range of activities and memberships in multiple communities in the college environment to understand which activities contribute to an overall sense of belonging or cohesion among diverse students” (p. 328). Bollen and Hoyle (1990) stated that perceived cohesion, which is based on individual’s perceptions expresses a “stuck to” social groups that are made up of sense of belonging and moral feelings. Hurtado and Carter (1997) used Bollen and Hoyle’s (1990) first dimension of perceived cohesion, which is the sense of belonging scale “to understanding a variety of collective affiliations, formed in large environments, that can contribute to an individual's sense of belonging to the larger community” (p. 328). Therefore, the proposed study starts by researching the perceived meaning of sense of belonging by Latinx students. It will then allow the researcher to explore different forms of academic and social interactions Latinx students experienced, aiming to enhance the student affiliation and identity with their colleges (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).
Research Design

The research design for this study is qualitative case study. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) stated that qualitative research poses questions about understanding and uses words as data. In addition, Merriam and Tisdale (2016) interpreted that “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 6). Overall, qualitative research is “how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 15). A qualitative case study searches for meaning and understanding to provide a very rich descriptive research study. In short, Merriam and Tisdale (2016) describe that “case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 37). Yin (2014) provided a more detailed definition by stating that “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 38). In this study, the “case” is Latinx college students and the bounded system is the perception of sense of belonging among Latinx students at a community college.

Research Site

The research will take place at Midwest Community College (MCC), a predominantly white community college located in Midwest, Illinois. MCC is comprised of 3 campuses that are located throughout Midwest County, Illinois along with satellite locations. As of spring 2020 census day data, 14, 947 students were enrolled in all credit courses and 5,954 were Latinx
students. Adult Education comprises 15% of all students at MCC and about 70% are Latino (Quick Facts, Fall 2019).

Metvhin and Markham (2015) stated that as few as eight percent of students in remedial programs actually earn a degree. At MCC, eight out of 10 Hispanic students are placed in remedial math classes compared to seven out of 10 whites, which is an 11% difference (Measurement of MCC’s Achievement Gap, April 2018). One of the factors that deter Latino college students from attaining a degree is a lack of college preparation (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). In fall 2017, only 14% of Latinx students at MCC completed at least 30 credits during their first year of college due to the majority of Latinx students being part-time and placed in remedial education (Equity Plan Draft Overview, 2019). This is an alarming rate of completion, and if higher education institutions are given the proper tools and supports, students in remedial courses will be able to achieve their goals outside of the classroom (Metvhin & Markham, 2015).

The departure of Latino college students is also connected to socioeconomic status compared to non-minorities (Cuadráz, 2005). At MCC, low-income students usually graduate at almost the same rate as their peers who do not receive financial assistance such as the Pell Grant. Both Pell and non-Pell recipients have low graduation rates. MCC has researched this topic, which has plagued low-income students and has developed many programs to address student success. The results of the efforts have not shown enough evidence to suggest that it has impacted the institution at a large scale (Equity Plan Draft Overview, 2019). MCC aims at improving efforts related to social services and financial resources in which a new intake tool
will be introduced to assess the needs of students such as “finances, childcare, food, housing, internet access, and transportation, among others” (Equity Plan Draft Overview, 2019).

A full-time fall 2015 cohort that looks at 3-year graduation rates showed that Latinx students graduated at a 25% rate while white students were at 33% (Equity Plan Draft Overview, 2019). In a MCC fall 2017 survey where 476 responded showed that Latinx withdrew because of academics (66%), employment (49%), personal (29%), and finances (10%) (Measurement of MCC's Achievement Gap, April 2018). Understanding the reasons why Latinx students do not feel a sense of belonging at MCC will be essential to redesign its support services, processes, and policies that create inequities to be more efficient and effective (Equity Plan Draft Overview, 2019). Therefore, more research is needed to explore the factors that describe Latinx Sentido de Pertenencia (Strayhorn, 2003).

Participants

All subjects will come from the same campus location and a sample of 20 currently enrolled community college students that identify as Latinx in the spring 2020 semester will be chosen to participate. Current students would have started at MCC between fall 2018 and fall 2020. Criteria for inclusion are as follows:

a. Age range: 18-25
b. Sex/gender distribution: All genders and identities
c. Race/ethnicity: Latinx population from a variety of ethnic backgrounds
d. Socioeconomic Status (SES): Any SES

Also, the sample can include students from different college majors, undecided major, college level, developmental course taker, full-time, part-time, first generation, or a student with a
disability. The sample is open to get insight from a diverse population of Latinx college students who can share experiences about sense of belonging.

The researcher has identified students from various programs at the research site. Some of the Latinx students that have been targeted are from the following on-campus groups and/or programs; first year students, Coaching for Academic Success (CAS) participants, TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) participants, Éxelencia Program mentees, Latinx Club members and athletes. Besides the researcher identifying participants on its own, staff from the aforementioned groups and/or programs will refer participants that can speak on their perceptions of sense of belonging. The researcher will contact the students by phone, email, text, or face to face to confirm their participation. The participants will receive a $25 gift card as an incentive for their cooperation and time. Also, a written consent that outlines the research will be given to the participants and they can opt out at any time without pressure to complete the interview.

The type of purposeful sampling method for this study is snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a type of convenience sampling where the researcher can choose participants that are willing and available to study. This sampling strategy is appropriate for this study because the researcher will be able to find participants that meet the criteria for inclusion (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). The snowball sampling has a feature to interview a few participants and the interviewees can refer other participants to acquire information-rich cases (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). An example would be for participants to identify other students who have different experiences that can inform the researcher about the student’s perceptions on sense of belonging and student success. The researcher will be able to describe the attitudes, opinions, behaviors, or
characteristics of the population to gain in depth understanding of situations and meaning (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017) for Latinx students.

Data Collection

The qualitative research method design for this study will be using face-to-face interview questions. The face-to-face interview design was selected to generate open-ended questions and hear personal experiences that relate the sense of belonging of Latinx students. Face-to-face interviews are appropriate for this study because without interviewing, people cannot see behaviors, feelings, and the way the participants experience the world (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Another advantage of interviews is the historical information that the participants share that can shed light on the central research question. Latinx students in higher education are portrayed in a certain way and this research can uncover perceptions that students have to provide support and enhance their sense of belonging in college. Some of the interview questions have been adopted and modified from Esquivel (2010) to fit the needs of the research questions.

The second step in data collection would be to select students who meet the criteria for inclusion and for students to fill out intake and consent forms. The sample population will be interviewed at Midwest Community College campus for about an hour and their responses will be audio recorded for data analysis. By having the audio recordings available, the conversations will get transcribed and get coded to see patterns and themes from the data.

The students will be asked 25 open-ended questions to get quality responses and for students to share as much as they want. The interviews can last up to an hour depending on how much is shared. Also, some notes will be taken to keep track of the interviewees with general
information and any key words or phrases that can be used to probe. The goal of note taking is not to interfere with the interview flow, and to write insightful information. The interviewing structure will be semi-structured to allow participants to share their unique perspectives and how students understand the world. Also, semi-structure interviewing allows the asking of flexible open-ended questions that describe the world in unique ways (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

Data Analysis

After the interviews have been completed, the next step in data analysis would be to transcribe the audio recordings and write any notes from observations. Transcribing includes writing down everything that was said in the interviews from the researcher and the responses of the participants. In order to get a sense of all the information that was collected, the researcher must gather and read all the data (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

The next step would be to code the data. Creswell and Creswell (2018) confirmed that “Coding is the process of organizing the data by bracketing chunks (or text or image segments) and writing a word representing a category in the margins” (p. 193). Coding involves identifying themes and patterns to understand what was said, condense themes, and identify connections among different themes (Miles et al., 2019). Once the data is categorized, codes can be generated to describe information about the participants. Then, themes will emerge and inform research findings. Creswell and Creswell (2018) acknowledged that case studies provide a detailed description of the individuals that follow themes and other issues that become visible. A story will emerge from the interconnections that are found through the data analysis of coding into categories (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Miles et al., 2019).
Criteria of Quality

The epistemology of the investigation distinguishes a justified belief from an opinion. Through precise control of the research process and data interpretation, qualitative researchers gain trustworthiness in the data they collect and the findings that are reported. In other words, trustworthiness is the rigor that is used to ensure the quality of the study. There are four criteria that are important to qualitative research: credibility, reliability, consistency, and transferability (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

Credibility refers to the believability and trustworthiness of the findings. Trustworthiness depends on the richness of the information that is collected on the quantity of data. To have credible and accurate findings, the results from the participants’ responses are what decide if the phenomenon reflects the actual case being studied (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Since participants in this study are sharing their own construction of reality and come from different backgrounds, it is difficult to prove or be taken for granted. Through the interviews, the researcher will be able to interpret the analysis of reality (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). To increase credibility of the findings, triangulation is used to support internal validity. The use of multiple methods to collect data can consist of crosschecking what a participant’s answers with observations made from the interviewer’s note taking. Multiple investigators will include the college’s Institutional Effectiveness, Planning and Research (IEPR) department to collect and analyze data independently to compare findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Another strategy to ensure credibility is to member check, which consults with participants to receive feedback from emerging findings and judge if the data is credible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
Reliability is another way to measure the goodness of data. Due to the nature of student experiences, the same study will not yield the same results if it was replicated. The consistency in human behavior is not fixed and the same students in the study will report sense of belonging differently at different points in their college experience. The intention of reliability is not to expect the same results, but to ask if the findings are consistent with the data that was collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Transferability refers to applying the same study findings to other instances. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that a variation of services and population samples would not generalize the findings to other Latinx students in community colleges. There may be some similarities in college experiences, and it can be used to improve and increase sense of belonging to apply what was learned at the community college (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Positionality

We all want to belong! Even people that hide behind social media want to belong. Many look at their cell phones for notifications, messages, “likes” on social media, emojis, phone calls, and other communication through technology to have a sense of community (Henry, 2012). Growing up, my first instance of belonging came in when I was in second grade. My mother, sister and I immigrated to the United States when I was six years old. I started second grade with no friends and did not speak English. I did not feel like I belonged with other kids that looked different from me or spoke differently. It took time and adjustment to integrate or semi-assimilate to the new environment.
Another personal example was when my family moved into an apartment complex where there was a pool, basketball court, and a park. Those were some of the earlier experiences of belonging to a community. It felt good to go out and play with other kids from my neighborhood. I played soccer with other Latinx kids, played basketball with mostly African Americans, and even floor hockey with mostly white kids. I think that the pool was a place where all races and ethnicities would spend time together and that brought us closer to each other.

Fast forward to my early experiences at Midwest Community College (MCC). After high school, I lost many friends because most of them dropped out, got a job, or did not attend college. During my first semester of college I met with a counselor that helped me select my classes, introduced me to other staff on campus, and even helped me get a job on campus. I really connected with my counselor and felt that he really cared about me. Also, I joined a mentoring program where my mentor was the counselor who helped me when I first started MCC. By joining a support group, it created a sense of belonging at a place that I did not know much about. Being involved in my first semester of college opened the opportunity to be part of clubs, such as the Latino Club, Asian Student Alliance, International Club, and Black Student Union. By taking part in multi-cultural clubs it expanded my social and cultural capital to belong within each group.

In fall 2017, Strayhorn visited our community college to give a keynote for a conference that focused on male student success. Dr. Terrell Strayhorn is currently Interim Vice President of Academic & Student Affairs and Professor of Urban Education at LeMoyne-Owen College. Since then, I have been thinking about the sense of belonging and how it is everywhere around us. As a Latinx man, I ask myself how do I belong in higher education, at home, with family, and
friends? People join sports, clubs, academic programs, and other extracurricular activities to be part of something. At work I have felt lack of sense of belonging when joining a new team, department, or committee. Isolation sets in when I am not being considered, heard, listened to, or welcomed. Under those circumstances, why would somebody want to join such groups? As a professional, I know that being uncomfortable can make me grow and position me to advocate for others and for myself. The risks of feeling uncomfortable or not belonging within an organization are worth it due to the connection that I have with not only Latinx students, but for every student I serve.

In my current role as an Academic Success Coach, I mainly work with students in developmental courses. If I often feel no sense of belonging to my institution, I think about how students in developmental courses feel alienated and influenced by not feeling the sense of belonging induced by factors or experiences at the college. Hopefully, with this research I can create a space for my students to explore what belonging on campus means, feels, or looks like.

From a professional standpoint, this study is important to me because for the past ten years I have been working for student success programs. Currently, I mainly work with students that are in developmental or pre-college courses. More than 35% of Latinx students are enrolled at MCC. As an Academic Success Coach, we use an early alert system where faculty lets us know if a student is missing class or not doing well in assignments, quizzes, or tests. From institutional data, we know that about half of the students that are alerted by faculty do not seek help from an Academic Success Coach. Besides coming underprepared for college, I think that there are other factors that can predict a student’s success. Dr. Strayhorn’s keynote speech at
staff development week gave me more insight on why students do not persist, are retained, graduate, or transfer to a four-year college or university.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that the interviewing occurs at only one point in time. The research conducted by Bowman et al. (2019) stated that there is no research that measures sense of belonging and well-being over time. Sense of belonging and situations change all the time and Bowman et al. (2019) affirm that college students face high and lows. The longitudinal study of weekly responses predicted ongoing changes related to sense of belonging and well-being. The first weeks of college adjustment are critical to a student’s success and we need to explore other factors besides the usual social and academic experiences (Bowman et al., 2019)

Another possible limitation is the relationship between researcher and participant. There is a gap of students that are not being interviewed such as those that are not currently enrolled, have transferred/ and or graduated from MCC. Since the participants are selected by the researcher there can be an impact on how students respond. Some students may know the researcher or have interacted before. By having an established relationship with the researcher it can affect how students answer by either being more open to respond or limit the responses due to the student’s perceptions. According to Whipp (1998) there is a challenge to retain independence of judgment to maintain trust and to avoid the projection of assumptions to participants. Qualitative techniques can rely on participants whom the researcher has close contact, but there needs to be clear expectations of previous relationship and commitments.
Using a reflexive approach will help the researcher to reflect on their role and the interactions with the participants and circumstances being studied (Whipp, 1998).

There is a gap of students that are not being interviewed such as those that are not currently enrolled, have transferred/and or graduated from MCC. How does researcher-participant relationship impact how students respond to you given your position at MCC? Since the participants only include current students, the project does not hear from students who are taking a break/may have already left.

Significance

In general, MCC seeks to help all students, but creating a sense of belonging looks different for racial and ethnic populations. Latinx students lack the cultural capital of being familiar with the dominant culture and the capability to understand and use “educated” language (Sullivan, 2001). In addition, the sociocultural capital perspective needs to be gained to increase the chances of student success (Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005). Strayhorn (2008) found in a hierarchical analysis that "grades, time spent studying, and interactions with diverse peers" impacted their sense of belonging (p. 301). Moreover, “Cultural straddlers” are required to master being bicultural, which is a second curriculum that is necessary to be successful (Fleming, 1981).

The significance of this study relates to the U.S. Census Bureau predictions about the Latinx community, which is continually growing at a faster rate than any other race or ethnicity. In 2016, the Latinx population reached an all-time high of 58 million (Flores, 2017). Loveland (2018) stated that in order for the nation to succeed, Latinx students need to succeed. If this
population is not properly taken into consideration in every part of society it would be tough to drive economic mobility. Education is an opportunity for many Latinx to increase social mobility and contribute to this country’s environment whether it is political or financial. In order to advance the success of Latinx college students, a sense of belonging must be created, fostered, and maintained at higher education institutions. Being proactive and not reactive is going to create a greater impact on college campuses all over the nation and address the needs of Latinx students.
Sense of belonging is important to college students because it largely drives student motivation and influences their behaviors (Maslow, 1954; Strayhorn, 2019). Hausmann et al., (2007) asserted that sense of belonging can impact students’ academic achievement, retention, and persistence. Strayhorn (2019) defined sense of belonging as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by (e.g., faculty, peers), and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus” (p. 28-29). Sense of belonging matters to community college students in particular because without meaningful academic and social experiences, students might not persist to the second year of college (Tinto, 1993).

The mission of community colleges is to provide access to higher education. This mission impacts the lives of about half of all undergraduates in the United States (U.S.) (Bailey et al., 2015). Historically, community colleges serve a disproportionate number of underrepresented students, such as low income, immigrants, first generation, and ethnic minority students (Bailey et al., 2015). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), as of July 1, 2015, there were about
56.6 million Hispanics living in the United States\textsuperscript{1}; by 2043, the Latinx population will be the majority-minority in the U.S., which will have implications for higher education institutions\textsuperscript{2}. In other words, one in six college students in the U.S. is Latinx with more than 51.3\% are enrolled in community colleges and Bailey et al. (2015) pointed out that less than 40\% students finished a degree or certificate within six years (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015).

Latinx students are historically underserved and rely on postsecondary education for social and economic mobility. However, degree completion for Latinx college students keep falling below the national averages where less than one third completed a degree or certificate in 2011 (NCES, 2015). There is a need to increase completion rates for Latinx students and to reach their educational goals to realize the full benefits of a college education (Batista et al., 2018; Villalpando, 2010). Building Latinx students’ sense of belonging can contribute to their success by creating environments that will influence persistence intentions (Haussmann et al., 2007). The creation of diverse learning environments that emphasize identity affirmation, talent development, validation of capability, and the cultivation of positive interactions also contribute to the advancement of Latinx student success (Batista et al., 2018). In addition, Hurtado and Carter (2017) supported campus climates infused with equitable and inclusive practices, and visibility throughout the institution are important to the positive experiences of Latinx students where they can express their “identities without the fear of judgment or discrimination” (Batista et al., 2018, p. 15).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to research the sense of belonging that Latinx students at Midwest Community College (MCC) have experienced and how those experiences impacted their academic success. The goal is to better understand the perceptions of Latinx
students in a community college setting and to find out what factors impacted sense of belonging. In addition, this study is significant because student retention outcomes in higher education are very low. According to Salinas and Friedel (2016), meeting the needs of increased numbers of underprepared students is a challenge and opportunity for community colleges. At MCC, there is a population of 36% Latinx college level students and it does not include students in adult education programs. (Quick Facts, 2019). MCC shows some progress in overall graduation rates, but there are gaps in completion between Latinx students and white students. In fall’s 2015 3-year cohort at MCC, only 14% of Latinx students transferred out to a four-year institution. From 2014-2017, about 42% of Latino students graduated and transferred compared to 56% of whites. Familial obligations are additional reasons why Latinx students do not establish a sense of belonging and struggle to move away from family (Dayton et al., 2004; Ortiz, 2004).

In Midwest County there is a 13.6% projected growth of Latinos from 2015-2025 (E. Tanner, Personal Communication, April, 2016). To lessen the achievement gap between Latinx and white students, MCC aims to create a more equitable and inclusive environment to eliminate the 13% percent achievement gap (Measurement of MCC’s Achievement Gap, April 2018). MCC has a goal of achieving a 45% graduation rate of all students by the year 2024. More large scale, customized, and cultural relevant experiences will be developed to improve the inequities that will benefit all students (Equity Plan Draft Overview, 2019). Thus, this study aims to explore sense of belonging for Latinx students on a community college campus in academics, co-curricular activities, peer engagements, and campus environment.
Literature Review

The literature review for this research study focused on sense of belonging, primarily how different Latinx populations experience inadequate spaces that do not foster a sense of belonging. The following sections include extant literature on college student sense of belonging, such as structural barriers Latinx students face, student engagement and well-being, and campus climate. Also, the researcher reviewed best practices utilized by community colleges to improve sense of belonging for Latinx students.

Sense of Belonging and Student Success

According to Strayhorn (2019), “belonging – with peers, in the classroom, or on campus – is a critical dimension of success at college. It can affect a student’s degree of academic adjustment, achievement, aspirations, or even whether a student stays in school” (Para. 1). Abraham Maslow (1954) created a hierarchy of needs and asserted that belongingness is a basic human need. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) shared an overall definition that sense of belonging is one’s important feeling of connectedness or mattering to others. The opposite of sense of belonging is “sense of alienation,” which leads to rejection, social isolation, loneliness, dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, depression, substance abuse, and suicide (Hagerty, Williams, & Oe, 2002). Baumeister and Leary (1995) explained that when students feel burdensome and alienated, there is an increase of suicidal ideation, but argued that belonging increases positive outcomes such as happiness. Alienation contributes to increased levels of pain, emotional distress, mental, and physical illness; in college specifically, it leads to being less social and
academically engaged, lower academic achievement, and leaving the institution (Strayhorn, 2012).

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) defined student success as “attainment of learning outcomes, personal satisfaction and goal/intent attainment, job placement and career advancement, civic and life skills, social and economic well-being, and commitment to lifelong learning” (Fain, 2018, p. 1). Strayhorn (2008) expressed that sense of belonging is influenced by academic and social involvement that leads to productive outcomes in education (Haussmann et al., 2007). Maestas et al. (2007) mentioned that sense of belonging is critical to the retention of students of color. Joiner (2005) argued that the lack of belonging decreases interest in engagement with life activities and education. These actions lead to reduced motivations, impaired development, lower engagement, and low performance on assignments and exams. Deci and Ryan (2020) shared that colleges need to have educators that create an engaging learning environment, give academic support, provides campus activities, “build learning communities where everyone’s voice matters,” and for educators to be concerned with sense of belonging otherwise they are setting students up for failure (p. 17).

Kuh (2003) expressed that what matters the most to the success and development of a student’s is what they do as a student. Engagement contributes to a student’s sense of belonging and well-being, and institutions should optimize student experience by enhancing students’ learning outcomes (Trowler, 2010). Diener (2009) described well-being as pleasure, happiness, and a lack of stress, anxiety, and depression. Research by Eagan et al. (2014) stated that more students are coming into college with low levels of emotional health; Sax, Bryant, and Gilmartin (2004) mentioned that the college transition along with changes in the environment, new
responsibilities and the potential of failure played a role in college adjustment. Emotional
distress during the adjustment process can undermine a students’ well-being and their academic
performance and retention (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). More specifically,
the study conducted by Bowman et al. (2019) concluded that when a student skipped class once
or twice, was involved on campus five hours or less, spent time exercising and sleeping had an
increase in belonging. Also, visiting their professor once increased belonging by “feeling
successful in class, feeling academic productive, all forms of interpersonal satisfaction (with
roommates, resident assistants, parents, and home friends)” (Bowman et al., 2019, p. 281).

Campus Climate and Environment for Latinx Students

Haussmann et al. (2007) stated that a support network for others on campus should be the
aim of creating environments that foster a sense of belonging. Campus environment “is
influenced by a historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion of groups, by the structural diversity
or numerical representation of diverse people, the nature of interactions among diverse groups,
and individual perceptions of the environment” (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005, p. 236). Strayhorn
(2008) revealed that Latino students’ sense of belonging matters more to them when compared to
white students at a predominantly white institution (PWI). While students’ engagement with
faculty, study time, and extracurricular activities contribute to adjustment during the first
semester of college, their interpersonal relationships with other groups impacted students’ well-
being (Bowman et al., 2019). On college campuses, students of color can feel a lower sense of
belonging when compared to white students due to a hostile and/or discriminatory campus
environment (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).
A study conducted by Smedley et al. (1993) revealed that Latino students on PWI’s campuses reported facing stressors that were related to their Latino status and that freshmen displayed more psychological sensitivity to the campus social climate. Campbell-Whatley and Wang (2015) defined “Campus climate is the interplay among people, processes, institutional culture, and represent important aspects of an organization including perceptions and expectations of the people in the academic community” (p. 40). Also, having a minority status increases interpersonal tensions with white students and faculty. Racism and discrimination were perceived, and actual feelings led to alienation on campus. Hispanic students that attended PWI’s felt marginalized, alienated, not supported, and not welcomed by other students and faculty members (Bennett & Okinaka, 1990).

The Intersectionality of Race and Socioeconomic Status (SES) in Higher Education

There is much known about the causes and impacts of sense of belonging in college students, but there is not much known about how belongingness is different among students’ social identities that include race, gender, social orientation and the conditions that the campus offers (Strayhorn, 2019). According to a 2014 National Journal Poll, 66% of Hispanic high school graduates did not enroll in college due to needing to help out their families financially (Krogstad, 2016). In 2017, about 19% of all Hispanics in the United States lived in poverty (Noe-Bustamante & Flores, 2019) and Strayhorn (2008) mentioned that “Latinos are disproportionately represented among low socioeconomic status income groups as compared to their nonminority counterparts” (p. 302).
Another phenomenon that poor and working-class people face is “class straddling”, which is when a person lives in between two different class identities and how to maneuver through each identity (Archer & Leathwood, 2003). Also, low SES individuals have a difficult choice to decide between being true to their roots or assimilating to the norms, behaviors, and expectations of the bourgeoisie in order to succeed (Hurst, 2007). Rubin and Wright (2017) found that students with low SES have less access to economic, material, social, and personal resources, which impacted sense of belonging and their participation in social activities that can improve social integration (Rubin & Wright, 2017). The NCES (2019) reported that 18-24-year-old Hispanics in college increased in 2000 from 22% to 36% in 2017. Latinx students having accessibility to college does not necessarily mean that they will complete college. After six years of college, about 35% of Latinx students dropped out without graduating (Loveland, 2018). Like many college students, Latinx students attend community colleges due to their cost, the close proximity to home, and flexibility of schedules.

Best Practices and Strategies

Morphew and Hartley (2006) claimed that most colleges and universities have a mission statement that supports a welcoming environment to foster academic and career goals for all students. According to Smith et al. (2007), the ideal higher education environment would include a diverse campus “that admits, enrolls, retains and graduates underrepresented racial and ethnic groups by extending equal opportunities to guidance, support, and resources for academic success” (p. 560). Latinx experiences can be enhanced by not labeling this specific group and by
allowing them to describe themselves in how they are perceived by race, language, nationalities, immigration status, gender, and sexual identity (Torres et al., 2003).

A concept that supports minoritized students is the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (ADAF) in higher education. By addressing systemic and historical oppression, Latinx students can be recognized as a unique student population that fosters a learning and equitable environment that deals with social justice and inclusion (ACPA, 2015). Perez II et al. (2018) suggested that student affairs professionals “integrate empirically grounded, anti-deficit scholarship that advances research, policies, and practices intended to increase Latinx/a/o college student success” (p. 119). Strayhorn (2019) urged more research on sense of belonging to advise administrators, faculty, staff, and other practitioners in fostering practices that inform on college students belonging.

In order to have a better understanding of the Latinx population, student affairs professionals need to look at the intersectionality of “personal stories and sociocultural factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and cultural identity” (Perez II et al., 2018, p. 123). The institutional context informs us about creating inclusive campus climates to improve educational outcomes (Harper & Hurtado, 2007) that are formed by psychological, behavioral, and structural dimensions of climate (Hurtado et al., 1999). Therefore, hostile campus climates affect a student’s psychological well-being and academic performance (Crisp et al., 2015).

Field (2018) confirmed that about a third of freshmen college students disappear after the first year. Since first generation and low-income students tend to feel a lower connection with their college, Field (2018) points out that “first-generation and minority students are less likely to feel a connection to their colleges, and more likely to struggle with self-doubt and impostor
syndrome -- feeling like an intellectual fraud” (p. 1). At Southern Utah University, the first-year experience model has been re-built to make a connection with students before they even walk on campus. To mitigate the feeling of self-doubt, mentors are assigned to participate in activities that new students are interested in. An approach that the University of Texas at Austin took was to give freshmen students an online pre-orientation session that shared how current students dealt with feelings of not belonging or imposter syndrome (Broda et al., 2018).

Another way to explain terminology and college knowledge is to create first-year experience courses (Ardoin, 2018) and living learning communities where students can connect with other students, staff and faculty (Soria, 2015). The use of jargon can cause confusion and limit how the communication is transmitted to a student (Stuber, 2011). Ardoin (2018) suggests higher education institutions to support students in building social capital by having a designated space such as a Hispanic/Latino Student Center. Another point that Ardoin (2018) made is that the acknowledgement of faculty and staff who share the same or similar identity can help students raise class identity, which can summon a sense of belonging. Students need academic validation from faculty and staff and cultural empowerment to foster a sense of belonging (Maldonado et al., 2005).

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by the conceptual model of sense of belonging for Latinx students by Hurtado and Carter (1997). The authors built upon Tinto’s (1993) theoretical model on student departure and further “contend that understanding students’ sense of belonging may be key to understanding how particular forms of social and academic experiences affect these
students” (p. 324-325). Hurtado and Carter (1997) argued that there is a theoretical and empirical difference to measure integration by researchers in higher education. Integration is a term that emphasizes a notion of acculturation, which diminishes ethnic groups and instills a submissive practice to the dominant culture in order to be successful; membership is the best-suited term (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Hurtado and Carter’s (1997) sense of belonging “contains both cognitive and affective elements in that the individual’s cognitive evaluation of his or her role in relation to the group results in an effective response” and what sense of belonging means to Latinx college students (p. 328). To have a deeper understanding of Hurtado and Carter’s (2007) conceptual framework is to know that Latinx students think about how they see themselves in relation to groups to which they belong or would like to belong, which can influence how students may feel.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) also suggested the need to use “various measures of students’ participation in a wide range of activities and memberships in multiple communities in the college environment to understand which activities contribute to an overall sense of belonging or cohesion among diverse students” (p. 328). Bollen and Hoyle (1990) stated that perceived cohesion, which is based on individual’s perceptions expresses a “stuck to” social groups that are made up of sense of belonging and moral feelings. Hurtado and Carter (1997) used Bollen and Hoyle’s (1990) first dimension of perceived cohesion, which is the sense of belonging scale “to understanding a variety of collective affiliations, formed in large environments, that can contribute to an individual's sense of belonging to the larger community” (p. 328). This study aims to reveal how Latinx students develop and perceive a sense of belonging at MCC. In particular, the guiding research question is: How do Latinx students develop and perceive a sense
of belonging in academics, co-curricular activities, peer engagements, and campus environments?

Research Design

The research design for this study was a qualitative case study. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) stated that qualitative research poses questions about understanding and uses words as data that “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 6). Overall, qualitative research is “how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 15). In short, Merriam and Tisdale (2016) describe that “case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 37). Yin (2014) provided a more detailed definition by stating that “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p. 38). In this study, the “case” as the bounded system is the community college in which Latinx college students develop their perception of sense of belonging in academics, co-curricular activities, peer engagements, and campus environment.

Research Site

The research took place at Midwest Community County (MCC), a predominantly white community college located in Midwest County. MCC is comprised of 3 campuses along with satellite locations. As of spring 2020 census day data, 14,947 students were enrolled in all credit
courses and 5,954 were Latinx students. Adult Education comprises 15% of all students at MCC and about 70% are Latino (Quick Facts, Fall 2019). At MCC, eight out of 10 Hispanic students are placed in remedial math classes compared to seven out of 10 whites, which is an 11% difference (Measurement of MCC’s Achievement Gap, April 2018). One of the factors that deters Latino college students from attaining a degree is a lack of college preparation (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). In fall 2017, only 14% of Latinx students at MCC completed at least 30 credits during their first year of college due to the majority of Latinx students being part-time and placed in remedial education (Equity Plan Draft Overview, 2019).

The departure of Latino college students is also connected to Socioeconomic Status (SES) compared to non-minorities (Cuadráz, 2005). At MCC, low-income students usually graduate at almost the same rate as their peers who do not receive financial assistance such as the Pell Grant. MCC has researched this topic, which has plagued low-income students and has developed many programs to address student success. The results of the efforts have not shown enough evidence to suggest that it has impacted the institution at a large scale, but MCC aims at improving efforts related to social services and financial resources (Equity Plan Draft Overview, 2019).

A full-time fall 2015 cohort that looks at 3-year graduation rates showed that Latinx students graduated at a 25% rate while white students were at 33% (Equity Plan Draft Overview, 2019). In a MCC fall 2017 survey where 476 responded showed that Latinx withdrew because of academics (66%), employment (49%), personal (29%), and finances (10%) (Measurement of MCC’s Achievement Gap, April 2018). Understanding why Latinx students do not feel a sense of
belonging at MCC will be essential to redesign its support services, processes, and policies that create inequities to be more efficient and effective (Equity Plan Draft Overview, 2019).

Participants

All subjects came from the same campus location and a sample of 16 community college students that identified as Latinx and have completed at least one semester at MCC as early as spring 2020. Criteria for inclusion were as follows:

a. Age range: No age restrictions
b. Sex/gender distribution: All genders and identities
c. Race/ethnicity: Latinx population from a variety of ethnic backgrounds
d. Socioeconomic Status (SES): Any SES

Also, the sample included students from different immigration status, college majors, undecided major, college level, developmental course taker, full-time, part-time, first generation, or a student with a disability. The sample was open to get insight from a diverse population of Latinx college students who can share experiences about sense of belonging. The type of purposeful sampling method for this study is snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a type of convenience sampling where the researcher can choose participants that are willing and available to study. This sampling strategy is appropriate for this study because the researcher was able to find participants that met the criteria for inclusion (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). With a convenience sample, I was able to describe the attitudes, opinions, behaviors, or characteristics of the population.

The researcher identified students from various programs at the research site. Some of the Latinx students that participated were first year students, Coaching for Success participants, TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) participants, Éxcelencia Program mentees, Latinx Club,
Student Government Association (SGA), and the Honor Society. The researcher contacted the students by phone, email, or text to confirm their participation. The participants received a $25 gift card as an incentive for their time and participation. Also, a written consent that outlined the research was given to the participants where they could have opted out at any time.

There were a total of 16 participants; nine women and seven men that ranged from 19 to 28 years old. The student that has been longer at MCC started in fall 2016 and the most recent student began on summer 2020. Within the Latinx ethnic background, there was a mix of students that were born in a variety of Latin American countries such as Mexico and Honduras with 11 of them being born primarily in Illinois with the exception of one that was born in Wisconsin. Table 1 shows the demographic and intake information that was collected from the participants.

Data Collection

The qualitative research method design that was used for this study were virtual interview questions through Zoom, a web-based conferencing tool. The virtual interview design was selected due to the implications of Covid-19, to generate open-ended questions, and were appropriate for this study because without interviewing, people cannot see behaviors, feelings, and the way the participant’s experience the world (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 90 minutes and students self-reported their demographic information and chose a pseudonym before asking the 25 questions. Some of the interview questions have been adopted from Esquivel (2010), but modified to fit the needs of the research questions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnic Background</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Transferring</th>
<th>Started MCC</th>
<th>Worked</th>
<th>Received Financial Aid</th>
<th>Student Organization Participation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Anna Marie</td>
<td>Woman</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Pre-Pharmacy</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Josh</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Farita</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<td>19</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>19</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Half Mexican, half White</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Pastry</td>
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<td>Fall 2018</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</table>
The following steps in data collection was to select students who meet the criteria for inclusion, students filled out intake and consent forms, and video recorded for data analysis. By having the video recordings available, the conversations were transcribed and coded to see patterns and themes from the data. The students were asked 25 open-ended questions in a semi-structured format to allow participants to share their unique perspectives and how students understand the world in unique ways (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

Data Analysis

After the virtual interviews were completed, the next step in data analysis was to transcribe the video recordings using the web version of Microsoft Word and write any notes from observations. Transcribing included writing down everything that was said in the interviews from the researcher and the responses of the participants. Then the data was coded using Dedoose software. Creswell and Creswell (2018) confirmed that “Coding is the process of organizing the data by bracketing chunks (or text or image segments) and writing a word representing a category in the margins” (p. 193). Coding involved identifying themes and patterns to understand what was said, condensed themes, and identified connections among different themes (Miles et al., 2019). Once the data was categorized, codes were generated to describe information about the participants and themes emerged to inform research findings. Stories emerged from the interconnections that were found through the data analysis of coding into categories (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Miles et al., 2019).
Trustworthiness

The epistemology of the investigation distinguishes a justified belief from an opinion. Through precise control of the research process and data interpretation, qualitative researchers gain trustworthiness in the data they collect and the findings that are reported. In other words, trustworthiness is the rigor that is used to ensure the quality of the study. There are four criteria that are important to qualitative research: credibility, reliability, consistency, and transferability (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

Credibility refers to the believability and trustworthiness of the findings. Trustworthiness depends on the richness of the information that is collected on the quantity of data. To have credible and accurate findings, the results from the participants’ responses are what decide if the phenomenon reflects the actual case being studies (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Since participants in this study shared their own construction of reality and come from different backgrounds, it is difficult to prove or be taken for granted. Through the interviews, the researcher was able to interpret the analysis of reality (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

Reliability is another way to measure the goodness of data. Due to the nature of student experiences, the same study will not yield the same results if it was replicated. The consistency in human behavior is not fixed and the same students in the study will report sense of belonging differently at different points in their college experience. The intention of reliability is not to expect the same results, but to ask if the findings are consistent with the data that was collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Transferability refers to applying the same study findings to other instances. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that a variation of services and population samples would not generalize the
findings to other Latinx students in community colleges. There may be some similarities in
college experiences, and it can be used to improve and increase sense of belonging to apply what
was learned at the community college (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Findings

In this section, the findings of the research on perceptions of sense of belonging from 16
MCC Latinx students will be presented. I will discuss the students that participated by providing
related demographic information. Emerging themes and a discussion will follow and provide a
better understanding of how Latinx students at a community college perceive sense of belonging
in their academic environments, co-curricular activities, peer engagements, and campus
environments. In general, students perceived sense of belonging as not feeling judged, treated
differently, or isolated, feeling respected, welcomed, and accepted, and having stability and a
sense of purpose, and the ability to “be myself.” Anna Marie shared that, “Someone feels a sense
of belonging when they are accepted there and that they are welcomed. And that they will not be
ridiculed or punished for being the way that they are.” The four themes that emerged to answer
the research question were how Latinx students perceive a sense of belonging in academic
environments, co-curricular activities, peer engagements, and campus environments at MCC.

Perceptions of Sense of Belonging in Academic Environments

“I don’t want to sound stupid!”

An important classroom dynamic is that most of the participants stated that there were not
many Latinx students in their classes. In some classes they were the only Latinx student, and in
some classes there was a maximum of six to seven Latinx students. Some students mentioned that they assumed based on their last names or if they actually spoke to them to find out. When a student did see someone else like them it made them feel more connected and the student would gravitate more to another Latinx student. In the case of Blake, he felt surprised that there were actually a lot of Latinos in one of his classes:

I went in and I feel like that's a lot of Latinos students. I mean oh wow, you know, I felt like I felt comfortable. I feel like I could be myself, you know, 'cause I feel like it would always seem like a while, like you know white people are much smarter than me or so on and so forth.

Kristina has encountered an average of two to three Latinx students in her classes and while that does not make her feel uncomfortable it does make her think that there is a lack of Latinx representation at MCC. Kristina wished that she could do something to help with the under-representation of Latinx students. Fernanda also experienced having few Latinx students in her classes, and said that she does not have any control over that, but it does make her feel like she is left out. According to Betty, “it’s kind of weird” to be in a class full of white people. Most of the participants did not feel like it affected their comfort level or felt some type of way for having less Latinx in their classes, but having students from a similar background did make them feel more comfortable and relatable to each other.

Within the classroom interactions between Latinx and white students resulted in a range of responses. Blake shared that since going remote for classes, some students have used social media to expose other MCC students who have said racist comments to other students. He stated that a student was being called names and he did not believe that this was actually happening. In one of his classes, his friend was called the “N” word: “As soon as I saw that I was really surprised and I feel like. Wow, like you know, being discriminated by these girls, you know, I
just feel like I was really was really, I was really mad.” Penguin mentioned that if students can call somebody the “N” word without being reprimanded, how is that going to stop students from using other racial slurs such as spick or wetback. Nothing was done about the incident. Kristina is comfortable with other Latinos, but is uncomfortable with white students. She asserts that people are nice and that it does not matter what race they are, but she perceived that uncomfortable feeling with “Like right now I think, especially because of like the political kind of tension.”

Participants have their own perceptions on communication and relationships with faculty. Positive interactions with faculty included being heard and listened to, receiving response emails, making eye contact, praise, and professionalism. In the case of Angel, his mentor helped him out to address a situation with his professor. Angel was a student worker and he had a student email and an employee email in which he was only getting emails to his work email that he did not used much. He repeatedly emailed and asked the professor for the class Zoom link and was ignored. Zoe was a student that dropped a biology class because the group dynamics in the classroom were not conducive to her learning. If her biology professor would have noticed that students in her group were not collaborating to get their work done then she may have stayed in the class.

Not all professors have been rude or unapproachable. Kristina explained that “One of my professors actually would place us into groups, and sometimes you would choose the groups, but other times they were like numbered off, so you would meet with different students like throughout that semester”, which gave the opportunity for everybody to get to know her. That activity kind of helped her to speak out because she felt more comfortable within the small
groups than speaking for the whole class. Joy said that “The most approachable professors are
the ones that are like, remember to breathe and remember that like your career education,
although it's important, your life is priority.” Joy was impacted by a faculty member when she
was going through a mental health breakdown, but after talking one on one with her professor
she was understanding and caring. The professor would email Joy to check on her to see how she
was doing and when she saw her in the hallways they would engage with a conversation.

Some additional negative interactions with faculty included being ignored, felt
intimidated, put down and used sentiments such as “Don’t want to sound stupid.” Anna Marie
shared her story about a negative experience with a math professor that was rude and not
welcoming. It was during the first semester of online classes due to Covid-19 and she turned in
an assignment using her Mac laptop and mistakenly submitted her assignment in a format that
the professor was not able to open. Anna Marie asked the professor if she could show him a
timestamp that she completed the assignment on time and save it as a Word document to make
up for the zero points she received, but he refused. During finals week, Anna Marie asked the
same professor for help; he did not help her and even said that he was going on vacation even
though the semester had not ended. The professor was not flexible due to the complexities of
going from an in-person class to an all virtual class. The following semester, Anna Marie had a
more positive experience with a different math professor who allowed other students to gather
during his office hours to get help.

Penguin said that her speech professor would get mad for different things, which made
her feel as if that was the most negative and “disastrous” class she had. Her professor would yell
and curse at them, “When she was mad, she was mad” when students would ask questions, not
Blake had a negative experience with a math faculty where he asked the professor if he could be given a study guide to prepare for an exam and the professor dismissed his question. This situation made Blake feel that his opinion did not matter. In a biology class, Logan felt that he was treated unfairly because he would turn in his assignments on time while other students would be able to turn them in two days late or even a week late and not get points deducted for late assignments. Also, Logan experienced a biology faculty who was rude and did not like to be asked questions. He would just tell the students to look at their notes and was agitated when someone asked questions.

Logan is Puerto Rican and mentioned that he has not “had very much Hispanic professors with if that makes sense now that I’ve seen I’ve seen other races and I’m not to say I’ve never seen a Hispanic teacher that I have, but I haven't had very many teach me.” Logan would like to see more Hispanic faculty and staff like him. Ardoin (2018) also discussed the notion of “class straddling” and how students live in two different worlds of identity. Within the college community, Joy shared her definition of sense of belonging:

The realistic definition I would say is you know the feeling that there's a place for you there, whether it be a club, whether it be an individual, you know, whether it be a class, whether it be a specific activity or just a room where you're like I find privacy and space in this room, I think sense of belonging is really determined by the person and their interaction with their environment.

Joy was a student that struggled with her white and Latinx background of not being white or Latinx enough to be around her peers. Her sense of belonging is determined in herself, but at the same time she pulls from external factors to self-assure that she belongs.

Covid-19 has had implications of not having in person classes, students having their cameras off during virtual classes, lack of technology such as laptop or reliable internet
connection, and harder to interact in the classroom through breakout rooms in Zoom. The welcoming part of online courses feels different when compared to the start of traditional college experiences. In particular, when students cannot be seen through a webcam, it makes it tougher to get to know each other and learning becomes more challenging. Ana, for instance, feels less welcomed in the online classes where she can’t see and talk to other students. She stated, “It does feel better when you see other people there and I don't feel like I don't feel welcome as much as I used to because I know I would, but I don't feel as invested as much” and is really all about physical interactions. Manny felt empowered to participate more when other students did not want to talk in class. He said, “I was able to open up because I feel much more openly to talk through a computer screen rather than standing up in the front of the class and giving a big speech or talking about political topics or discussions.” Manny said about his professors that “We're all in the same boat together. I guess you can say that when personal stuff starts happening in our lives… they have to be willing to work with us as much as we're willing to work with them.” Some students prefer the virtual experience to avoid certain students in the classroom, so they do not need to confront them if a sensitive topic is being discussed. Some participants like to see students in-person to be able to talk to them, see their faces and make eye contact to communicate with each other. Jacob enjoys building friendships and interacting with others to build confidence and grow during their first semester of college.
“I feel like my voice has been heard!”

All participants except for one were involved in at least one co-curricular activity such as a club, organization, or program. Even though some students were more or less involved on campus, some felt that they did not play an important role on campus. Manny, Manuel, Josh, and Blake did not feel like they played an important role because they are not as active on campus and prioritized their classes as being more important. Anna Marie, Betty, and Angel considered themselves less social or introverts that minded their own business and did not feel comfortable standing out as a leader. Manny felt that he played an important role though he is not very involved; he is a part time student that feels “appreciative” for being a first-generation college student.

There were 10 students that felt they played an important role. Fernanda was an active student that felt that her voice has been heard through her co-curricular involvement. Fernanda had the idea to create a scholarship for all students through Student Government Association (SGA). Her idea and leadership made it possible, “And they actually like listened to me… they heard me, you know, and they actually take an action and hopefully that scholarship is available by next year.” She was also the Vice-President for the Honor Society. During the pandemic she was able to organize virtual and in-person events and volunteer opportunities. She was proud of her role as President of the Dreamer’s Club where she coordinated one of the biggest events of the Dreamer’s Panel of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) where undocumented students shared their stories. Zoe was one of the students that participated in the Dreamer’s Panel
and that was one of her highlights where she played an important role. Talking in front of a crowd is not something that she enjoyed doing, but it made her feel “that people were listening to what I had to say, it made me feel important and whatever feedback I was saying or because of my own experience there could be an impact in the undocumented community.” Zoe shared that hearing other students is “cool” and “nice” to understand cultural experiences and interact with a diverse group of students. In her speech class, she heard a student that went to a study abroad trip and brought pictures and other memories for the class to see. Hearing from ethnic groups, makes students feel that this is the place where they want or should be in.

Involvement in co-curricular programs such as the former Éxcelencia Program gave the opportunity for students like Jose to explore beyond their academics. He attended a Hispanic Leadership Institute and that helped him to meet new people and get to know other students that attended with him. Ana was another student that attended the Hispanic Leadership Institute conference and said that it was the best experience that she has had through MCC.

Farita was majoring in Theatre and Creative Writing, which was a strong connection from her major to other departments on campus. As an editor for MCC’s newspaper, she wrote many articles. In one article that she felt that made a significant contribution, she talked about an upcoming show that was not getting much attention. Once she released the article, many students were talking about the show, which was well attended “mostly because of my position in the arts and entertainment I am basically trying to give as much attention to all of the fields of art and media, or in entertainment.” Involvement in extra-curricular activities have been a positive perception of students to feel that they play an important role on campus. During Josh’s first semester at MCC he was not interested in any clubs, but a year later he made a list of clubs and
programs that he would like to explore. He decided to join the Éxcelencia Program, Latinx Club, TRIO-SSS, and the Dreamer’s Club. His mindset was to see if he liked them or not, but he benefited by meeting a lot of people and opportunities like working on campus.

“It's gonna help me stay on track and not lose focus.”

Just with any MCC experience, students have had positive and negative feelings when they arrived at MCC. MCC has been a great decision for all the students. Blake said that “MCC was a good fit and, “I feel like I did a perfect decision. as long as I know what I wanna do, as long as I'm taking the right classes and as long as I'm getting the right knowledge, I'll be prepared or my job.” Manuel felt that he mattered, fit in, and belonged because the Éxcelencia Program staff and TRIO specialist welcomed him. Manuel mentioned, “So from the beginning. It was kind of like normal, it was just like I don't have to like try to fit in. It was just like allowing me to fit in.” Logan had a great example of what it meant for him to matter, fit it, and belong. Logan said,

So for matter I do like when teachers, they encourage me to keep going. I know you're going do things for the world. They helped motivate me and it makes me feel like I do matter. For fit in, I do like the diversity at MCC for sure when it comes to ethnicity, I don't feel like I stand out at that point. And also there's a lot of people my age, which helps… So that also helps me fit in and how no one treats me differently… I feel like I belong there because there are many other students pursuing different goals. Other zoologists, there was a zoologist in my calculus class. I'm like, you know, I think I'm where I'm supposed to be, 'cause I do really want to be a zoologist as well as you, all these students around me all want to be something. Drawn here for the same reason that I am and they completely understand and I understand we all have our differences. Some things that we’re going through life, we all have a similar goal, different fields, but we all have a similar path to take, so I do feel like I belong there for sure.
Perceptions of Sense of Belonging in Peer Engagements

“They hate me because I'm undocumented!”

There have been a variety of events and activities in which participants have engaged where they have interacted with other students on campus. From the students that shared about their undocumented identity, some participants felt discriminated against, stereotyped, and/or faced racism from peer students. In an Intercultural Communications class, Penguin experienced a situation where a “Republican” student was anti-immigrant and said they all should be deported. Penguin said “When I dealt with people who are like anti-immigrant now is kind of rough and awkward.” Penguin questioned herself by asking where she is supposed to go if her parents brought her here. Penguin felt that the actions taken by the white students were stereotypical when they did not know Mexican identities and wanted to prove that they are not racist.

Zoe is an undocumented student that has also experienced racism from peer students. In a biology class, Zoe felt rejected by her classmates when doing group work: “I don't know if it was because of my race, but they were not looking at me and made me feel like they hated me and made me feel uncomfortable that I didn't belong. They made me feel angry too.” Another undocumented student was Fernanda who was very involved on campus. When she was a senator for SGA and wanted to run for an officer position, she was unable to provide a social security number and other paperwork to apply. Fernanda mentioned, “I know that I don't have to tell everybody my situation or why I can't or could just be like 'cause I can't, but I feel like that made me feel like I didn't belong or I had a limit.” Zoe and Fernanda were a couple of the
students that felt uncomfortable with their immigration status and how they were treated in or out of the classroom. There are specific campus policies that do not protect students or give alternatives for students to access work opportunities. Anna Marie thinks that resources for undocumented students have greatly improved compared to when her undocumented brother attended MCC.

“Just hear me out to what I have to say!”

Most of the participants felt comfortable interacting with student clubs, organizations and programs in which they were involved such as the Éxcelencia Program and being around other Latinx students. Other reasons that students felt comfortable on campus included the staff and faculty that supported them and academic coaches that motivated them. A few students mentioned that controversial debates that were held on campus by a student club named Conservative Americans sparked a lot of conversations that made them uncomfortable. Joy, a student involved in SGA, felt helpless because nothing was done about incidents related to discriminatory remarks. Joy mentioned that for two straight years and every semester, she heard disrespectful comments made about immigrants, minority groups, and women’s rights on pro-choice.

Anna Marie remembered that when she was in the Welcome Center there were these debates going on: “Like a Republican club or something like that and the things that they were saying were so ridiculous” making her feel uncomfortable. Zoe talked about this particular club and she mentioned that the debate on building “the wall” was discriminatory towards undocumented people. Next to her there were “100% Trump supporters and all these and all that,
but their comments were like hurtful because they hate me because I'm undocumented and things that they were saying,” which made her feel scared. Penguin also mentioned that she was uncomfortable with Conservative Americans club members that reiterated Trump’s rhetoric.

Manny encountered “a group of students that were Trump supporters ’cause they had the MAGA hats, Make America Great Again, while these other students didn't agree to it, it started a big up roar, worst argument” and campus police officers had to come to deescalate the situation.

Outside of the classroom setting, Zoe faced a situation at the bookstore that she did not like while trying to get her textbooks. A staff member that was trying to help her was “like demanding, you know, so I don't know why she was demanding like, oh wait, why are you doing that? Why did you go there, you didn't read the instructions and things like that.” This experience decreased her level of comfort and she did not have the opportunity to explain why she came in through the wrong entrance to the bookstore. Zoe mentioned that sometimes students need to watch what they say because it can cause more problems and she does not want to stand out in the crowd.

“I don't try to let that get to me.”

A theme when interacting with other students is that some participants did not feel comfortable at first. As they become more involved and networked with others then they start to be more comfortable on campus. Karl mentioned that when he started being part of the Math Club that he did not feel that he belonged there because there were older students and students more advanced in math than him. Since he was the social media officer for the Math Club, other members would talk to him about social media and had discussions on math struggles that they
have had. Karl had failed Calculus II before and he received help with his class and felt that he enjoyed the math club that also involved games and other fun events.

There have been some students that have thought about leaving MCC at some point. Motivation and support have been essential components for students to continue their education. Joy had a unique start of her college experience because her mother was also a student at MCC. Her mother as a peer student was a main component in her feeling a sense of belonging at MCC by holding her hand throughout her initial college experience that connected her to other staff on campus.

Perceptions of Sense of Belonging in Campus Environments

“Keep going and keep pushing me to do better.”

Students in this research study started classes between fall 2016 and fall 2020, so some students have experienced more or less depending on their campus involvement. Students reflected back on what they would do differently if they would start MCC all over again and what advice they would give to incoming Latinx students to foster a sense of belonging. Suggestions include increasing resources for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and undocumented students because there are some opportunities that students miss due to their immigration status. Anna Marie would like MCC to have more resources for undocumented students, since her brother tried attending MCC, but was unable to get scholarships and academic support. Anna Marie shared that “I wish that I could have helped him and or given him the resources that I know are available now, but I remember like at the time like it was really heartbreaking to see.” Her parents did not care and matter that they wanted to pursue a higher
education. Anna Marie felt privileged for being able to receive financial aid, otherwise she would not be in college either.

If he were to start all over at MCC, Blake said, “If it wasn't too attached with the money, I feel like I would have been much better off and be motivated to have that confidence to go and go to college.” Betty offered some advice for incoming Latinx students: “I would tell them to be themselves. And not be afraid to voice your opinion or if there's anything that is going on, you know to report it because they could make a difference for someone else.” Also, Betty feels that MCC might be intimidating, but she thinks that students should not be scared.

“I want to handle it myself.”

The Intersectionality of Race and Socioeconomic Status (SES) in Higher Education was present within some of the Latinx students. Most of the participants were working part-time and one of the reasons why many chose MCC was for their affordability. Penguin gave an example where she felt that her SES has impacted her sense of belonging at MCC. She was preparing to graduate and transfer to a university and she had an insecurity of asking for $30 to cover her college admission application.

Angel felt inferior in one of his classes; he felt unwelcomed because most of his classmates were from affluent cities compared to where he is from. From a different perspective, Joy felt that since she was older than most students, she was conscious about her SES. Joy was a student that worked two part time jobs to not only be able to support her education, but her husband’s education as well. Regarding students, Joy mentioned: “Perhaps they drive like a better car or they don't have to work as much or you know, maybe they're married and they don't
have to work at all. They're just focusing on school.” Kristina had to walk to the bus stop and felt that in a way it affected how she connected with others. Everybody else had their own car and knew how to drive, which made her feel like she was not a college student.

Anna Marie only had $100 when she moved out of her parent’s house at the age of eighteen due to family issues. She found herself sometimes comparing herself to other students that are better dressed or have the latest phone. She has realized that, “It's not important what backpack you have, what laptop you have and what's important is what grades you have, but also how much money you have saved.” Some students did not want to ask for help even though they acknowledged that they should and in some cases they did not want to burden their parents with their financial responsibilities. Most of the students also worked and/or received financial aid or applied for scholarships to alleviate some of the financial stress.

“A person who I always go to make sure I'm on track.”

Mentoring has been a fundamental connection for students to build relationships with faculty and staff. Zoe, an undocumented student from Honduras, was pursuing Nursing, but after connecting with her mentor from the Éxcelencia Program, she found out that she will not be able to get her licensure to practice her career even though she had disclosed to her academic advisor that she was undocumented. Her mentor is an undocumented ally and was aware that certain careers would be problematic for undocumented students. There is some work for the MCC community to be better informed, so students can make better decisions. Definitely, mentors are one of the person who's been there for the students involved in the Éxcelencia program.
“At least you made it to college and that's what matters.”

An essential component that impacts sense of belonging outside of the campus environment is the parent involvement in the student college experience. Not many Latinx students have had the opportunity like Joy where her mother was very supportive on and off campus. Zoe’s parents didn’t know much about college, so they could not provide her with any insight on what college entails. Also, Anna Marie lacked parental support because she moved out of her parent house when she was a senior in high school, so her parents have not been involved with her college experience. Also, Manuel lives on his own and his mother lives far from him, but still encourages him to keep pursuing his education. Most of the participant’s parents do not know much about what college entails and they just know that it is something good and only know that they need to pay the tuition if they can. Most parents care about their child’s education and are happy that attending MCC will save them money and plan better for the transfer school.

To conclude the findings, there has been a variety of influencing factors that have contributed to sense of belonging for Latinx students at MCC. Betty mentioned that she used to come along with her older sister to MCC and at first it was intimidating, but as she grew older, she noticed that MCC is a place to be more independent, “Time for yourself there. They have a lot of resources, café, you have libraries, a lot of places to like chill.” The library and tutoring center have been a safe and comfortable space for many of the participants where they feel at home. Most professors and staff have been supporting in and out of the classroom by being flexible during the pandemic. Being part of student clubs and programs have been motivating to keep them stay on track with any challenges that they have faced.
Discussion

Sense of belonging is key in how student’s perceptions are affected by their social and academic experiences (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Integration and membership are used interchangeably to make a point of acculturation in which to be successful, students need to be submissive to the dominant culture. For example, experiences in the classroom of facing language barriers and being able to communicate with other students and professors are signs of Latinx students managing to assimilate into a dominant culture. Guided by Hurtado and Carter’s previous work on (1997) the sense of belonging of Latinx students, this study centers Latinx students’ sense of belonging in academics, co-curricular activities, peer engagements, and campus environments. Consistently, one of the findings of the study was that some students felt that their language and the way they communicated with faculty can be a barrier. Professors may get upset if students cannot communicate well with them or understand the lectures or assignments. There were 12 students that Spanish was their first language that they learned, 15 of them speak Spanish, 14 know how to read Spanish, and all of them know how to write in Spanish. Their diverse language and Latinx cultures are important components that foster and increase belonging in the classroom.

At MCC, Latinx students’ sense of belonging in academic and social involvement leads to positive outcomes in education with an increased interest in campus engagement. According to Hurtado and Carter’s (1997) framework, Latinx students feel or perceive themselves in relation to other extra-curricular groups that they belong or would like to belong. Bollen and Hoyle (1990) supported the notion that Latinx student are attracted or “stuck to” belonging to similar groups where their culture and identity are reflected. It is apparent that Latinx students’
sense of belonging in MCC has an impact on their success. It is possible that a Latinx student’s happiness and college experiences contribute to their sense of belonging via academic and social involvement (Strayhorn, 2008; Joiner, 2005). Baumeister and Leary (1995) mentioned that happiness is a positive outcome of belonging and Strayhorn (2008) argued that being accepted and respected are indicators of belonging and mattering within a community. Diener (2009) also supported the idea that happiness or well-being of a student contributes to an increase in belonging.

The findings also highlight how being involved with student success programs, student clubs and organizations exposed Latinx students to experiences that led to seeking support and other opportunities to be successful in and out of the classroom. Belonging with others on campus can considerably affect student persistence (Strayhorn, 2008). Some students wanted to leave because they could not afford college, felt overwhelmed, online classes were not conducive to learning, or lost the motivation to continue with their education. Latinx students found ways to seek scholarships and mentors were helpful to provide students with resources to get them back on track.

Faculty is an essential component to a student’s sense of belonging in the classroom setting. For example, at least visiting the professor during their office hours can increase sense of belonging to be successful (Bowman, 2019). Having a diverse campus and offering resources for academic success is an ideal higher education environment supported by Smith et al. (2007). While Crisp et al. (2015) emphasized having a non-hostile climate to improve educational outcomes such as retention and graduation of Latinx students. To raise class identity, Ardoin (2018) argued that having faculty and staff with the same or similar ethnic background can
increase belonging. Class identity is a reality that many students face when they arrive on campus. Students like Joy created their own sense of belonging through class straddling and self-authorship to maintain a connection between home and the campus environment.

The campus climate and environment have been key contributors to belonging for Latinx students at MCC. There is a wide range of perceptions and Haussmann et al. (2007) mentioned that the inclusion or exclusion of students is determined by the campus climate. Throughout history the Latinx community has been marginalized in every aspect including access to higher education. Strayhorn (2019) believes that belonging “provides a sense of security or relatedness” where people aim to be worthy of membership within a group or institution (p. 34). There was a student club named The Conservative Americans Club as a Pro Trump Group that has caused insecurity and lack of relatedness to Latinx students at MCC. The damage of this group has been done and left a mark on the students that either experienced or heard about how this club discriminated them for their beliefs or for who they are. Belonging applies to everyone, but it is not equally applied to everyone. Strayhorn (2019) stated that social identities such as gender, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation intersect and affect belonging, which makes students to experience belonging in many ways. The findings of this study revealed that many Latinx students believe that MCC is working towards a more inclusive campus towards all cultures and backgrounds. Community colleges have a continuous challenge to put forward efforts of equity and to foster a sense of community with cross cultural groups.
Practical Implications

In general, MCC seeks to help all students, but creating a sense of belonging looks different for racial and ethnic populations. Latinx students lack the cultural capital of being familiar with the dominant culture and the capability to understand and use “educated” language (Sullivan, 2001). In addition, the sociocultural capital perspective needs to be gained to increase the chances of student success (Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005). Strayhorn (2008) found in a hierarchical analysis that "grades, time spent studying, and interactions with diverse peers" impacted their sense of belonging (p. 301). Moreover, “cultural straddlers” are required to master being bicultural, which is a second curriculum that is necessary to be successful (Fleming, 1981).

The significance of this study relates to the U.S. Census Bureau predictions about the Latinx community, which is continually growing at a faster rate than any other race or ethnicity. In 2016, the Latinx population reached an all-time high of 58 million (Flores, 2017). Loveland (2018) stated that in order for the nation to succeed, Latinx students’ needs to succeed. If this population is not properly taken into consideration in every part of society it would be tough to drive economic mobility. Education is an opportunity for many Latinx to increase social mobility and contribute to this country’s environment whether it is political or financial. In order to advance the success of Latinx college students, a sense of belonging must be created, fostered, and maintained at higher education institutions.

Most of the participant’s had a mix of positive and negative interactions with all aspects of the campus. The recommendations made in this section comes directly from the participants that would like to be listened for changes to take place. In some of their experiences that dealt with discrimination or racism, most of the students felt that nothing was done about those
specific instances. Issues of freedom of speech have left Latinx student to feel insecure on campus without any direction on how to make students feel better. It is critical to Latinx college students to be heard through their empowering stories to be able to relate to others on campus.

Through some student clubs, organizations and programs, some students have used panels and discussions to share their stories. In order to better understand other ethnicities, it is recommended the college to increase the visibility of multiculturalism through membership and presentations. There are small pockets of Latinx groups on campus, but the majority of students that are seen on campus are mostly white. There is a misunderstanding of other ethnicities and through the Multicultural Center more students can join to have more expressive and welcoming voices. Educating students to understand Latino and undocumented students can be a goal for the Multicultural Center to better promote Latinx Heritage Month because during remote learning the virtual events were not promoted as much as if it was on campus. Therefore, there is a need to continually develop and implement different strategies to not lose touch of Latinx students and to be persistent with efforts of inclusion.

Student Success support was also a re-occurring recommendation where students sought a variety of support systems such as faculty, staff, and mentors. The Éxcelencia Program at MCC offered many resources such as mentoring and scholarships. Some students would have liked for the college to be more vocal about scholarships, specifically for Latinos because there are a lot of opportunities that do not get claimed. More parent involvement is needed, so they can understand what their children go through in college. Latinx students are family oriented and have the task to try explaining their parents what college entails even they do not fully understand themselves.
Continuing programs aimed at Latinx student success are initiatives and efforts that have provided positive outcomes to connect students with on campus resources.

Experiential learning can be used to connect academic programs to co-curricular activities. Through experiential pedagogy, students can engage in learning, undergraduate research, academic internships, service learning, learning portfolios, and connect with community partners. Engaged learning encourages students to participate out of the classroom within a community agency or research site to provide reflection on their experiences.

Undergraduate research gives the opportunity for students to make a contribution to knowledge. Academic internships encourage experiential learning that blends knowledge and theory for practical application, or skill development. Service learning partners with community based agencies to volunteer and advance the goals of the student and agency, and a learning portfolio is created to display a collection of the work that has been done through their experiential learning (CELTS, n.d.).

As we discussed in the implications of Covid-19, many students would have liked for faculty to be more flexible during these crucial times. Students have faced many challenges due to Covid-19 and there are unforeseen events that students don’t know how to act or proceed to get help. Professional development for faculty to have inclusive pedagogy would be a continuous effort to assess how students learn in the classroom. Inclusive pedagogy is a student-centered approach to teach in an engaging classroom environment that invites students from all backgrounds to feel valued. Ambrose et al. (2010) stated:

Even though some of us might wish to conceptualize our classrooms as culturally neutral or might choose to ignore the cultural dimensions, students cannot check their sociocultural identities at the door, nor can they instantly transcend their current level of development… Therefore, it is important that the pedagogical strategies we employ in the
classroom reflect an understanding of social identity development so that we can anticipate the tensions that might occur in the classroom and be proactive about them” (p. 169-170).

Inclusive teaching strategies can help professors to connect with a broad range of students, better prepared for controversial topics and conversations in the classroom, students are able to connect with content that is relevant, students are able to voice their ideas, and support various activities that enhance student’s learning modalities, abilities, and backgrounds. Inclusive pedagogy can help Latinx students to increase their sense of belonging in the classroom and eliminate many of the experiences and barriers that they encountered.

Staff also make a difference in contributing to sense of belonging and providing customer service. Additional training in handling high stress situations for MCC employees to increase customer experiences would be an initiative to improve relationships with students. To make students feel safe an important recommendation for MCC is to suggest the campus to have better guidelines on racism and sexual discrimination. The researcher would have liked a deeper conversation on this topic since a student felt that the college did not have a good policy on sexual discrimination.

In regards of student services and programs, there is an immense need for DACA and undocumented support services. A student mentioned that in class syllabi, there are statements on no discrimination or support for GLTBTQ+ community or support for students with disabilities and it is suggested to include a message that can ensure the undocumented and DACA students to know that they are protected and respected in the classroom. Just like faculty and staff go through some type of diversity and inclusion training, student can benefit from a module in their student success seminar where they learn about marginalized groups and why it
is important to have a safe classroom environment, so everyone learns and has the opportunity to share and be heard. Students come in to college with biases and student’s emotions or feelings can affect the college environment.

Overall, based on the findings, MCC should continue seeking to become a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) to improve their resources and services to support Latinx students. According to Garcia (2019) having an HSI designation would increase funding to create programs and services that support Latinx students by having additional staff that work directly with students. Being an HSI also aims at developing and assessing current policies that are barriers to Latinx student success. Within the classroom setting and faculty development, HSI’s can provide training for culturally sensitiveness, multicultural competencies, instruction strategies and holistic approaches that are equitable and welcoming to improve the classroom culture. There are many initiatives that HSI funding can provide a community college with a high population of Latinx students. Some students mentioned having language barriers or their parents not being able to understand English. The translation of many important documents and website can help students and their parents to learn more about the institution’s policies or services that MCC offers. Providing and committing to open access of higher education for the Latinx community also extends the needs of other minoritized groups at PWI’s regardless of race, immigration status, and native language (Garcia, 2019).

Conclusion

We all want to belong! Even people that hide behind social media want to belong. Many look at their cell phones for notifications, messages, “likes” on social media, emojis, phone calls,
and other communication through technology to have a sense of community (Henry, 2012). Gray et al. (2028) stated that “Belonging is a fundamental human need that all humans possess . . . and when you don’t have that, there’s several negative consequences cognitively, emotionally and in terms of the types of behaviors one might engage in” (p. 104). The results of this research based on Latinx perceptions on their sense of belonging at MCC reflects their experiences from various areas of the campus. By understand the students’ perceptions and listening to their stories we can hear what has worked or is working and what can be changed to foster a sense of belonging. Creating a sense of belonging does not fall on the students and the institution have a task to implement services and programs to make the students feel that they are cared and considered before making decisions that impact their well-being on campus. Latinx students want to be included, respected, valued, accepted for who they are, welcomed, and have a purpose within the institution.
CHAPTER 3
SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

The Journey of Dissertation Writing

I aimed to explore the perceptions of Latinx students’ sense of belonging at a community college. Out of many topics to choose from, I decided to research sense of belonging because as a concept, it is a great indicator on how students perform in college. Dr. Terrell Strayhorn, former Associate Professor and Director of Ohio State’s for Higher Education Enterprise and currently is Professor, Provost and Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs for Virginia Union University, was brought to my campus to talk about sense of belonging, intersectionality, and other barriers that are primarily faced by students of color. I was intrigued by his myriad research findings, and I decided to probe into how sense of belonging is perceived at community colleges.

Ultimately, I used a case study approach to examine Latinx students’ sense of belonging at Midwest Community College (MCC) by interviewing 16 students. Choosing the participants was an easy task; I asked several departments to refer students to me who might be interested in participating. I emailed consent forms to the recruited sample that included all the information, and I followed up to address any questions about the research study soon thereafter. There were about three or four students who did not respond, but I was able to recruit more student participants later in the process. My goal was to interview 15 students, however, a student responded after I had already selected the participants. I did not want to reject the student or exclude her out from the study since she did reach out to participate.
What went well was having one-on-one conversations and asking open-ended questions enabled me to hear the participants’ stories and share as much as they liked. Also, asking for demographic and participant information was helpful to learn more about who they are. Something that did not go well was that I had prepared too many questions for the participants and I should have prepared less. For the most part, students liked answering the questions, and though some interviews lasted an hour and a half, I was able to listen to the participants without cutting them off. There were a few longer interviews, but the participants had much to say about their perceptions of sense of belonging. Even though the interviews were more than what I asked, the results and findings were important to understanding the contexts related to their experiences. If I were to do this again, I would have asked 15 or less questions instead of the 25 questions I initially prepared. For the most part, I do not think that students experienced interviewing or Zoom fatigue, but I did. I could have created more concise questions that were more specific. Another factor was that I had some probing questions as well that directed the interviews in many different ways. Long interviews led to spending more time to transcribe, code the data, and see patterns. The rich data collected via semi-structured interviews set the ground for important findings on Latinx student belonging in the community college setting for this research.

The research provided general findings, but may not completely explain the lived experiences of each participant. All of the participants came from a wide range of backgrounds and in many instances every student brought unique life experiences. It was hard to determine themes when every student’s sense of belonging in academic environments, co-curricular activities, peer engagements, and campus environments differed in many ways. Most of the
students had a specific viewpoint on how they perceived their sense of belonging at MCC and community colleges are tasked with creating and fostering an inclusive environment for Latinx students.

It was challenging to view certain experiences that the students shared. Through my data analysis and positionality, I was triggered and affected me in positive and negative ways. As a Latinx of Mexican descent, it saddens, enrages, and worries me to hear what the students that I interviewed went through. I share their frustrations and pains because all my life these inequities and treatments in higher education have not changed much. As an advocate for students, community college administrators need to listen to students’ stories and hear from them personally to try to understand, since many would not be able to empathize with their struggles. I am certainly empathetic towards Latinx students, but this research just made me have a deeper sense of empathy for this student population and a more keen awareness of where action needs to take place. I learned that qualitative research gives the opportunity to paint a picture. There are many details in the stories that students shared. It was interesting that they had so much to say and this was only based on one phenomenon. The Latinx community has many needs and within higher education there are gaps that still need to be researched to give additional insight on sense of belonging or other factors that impact Latinx students.

In the beginning it was an intimidating process to write a journal article. Even though I have read many articles before this project and many more for this specific research, there are several components that can be included in a journal article. One of my issues with writing is that I tend to over-write and have more than what I need, that there is a maximum amount of words for each article, and the content needs to be clear and concise. In my mind I think that all the
details are important to share, but in the case of article writing, less is more. There are many journal outlets in which I can publish and I have not yet made a decision where I would like to enter a submission for my dissertation. I debated submitting it to a journal that primarily publishes on Latinx, Latino, or Hispanic populations in higher education or just a general higher education journal. I am not sure which one is a better avenue to present my research, and I will ponder this issue further after completing my degree.

Conducting research at MCC exposes additional information that we do not necessarily ask from students. Adding scholarly research to higher education literature is a personal accomplishment in hopes of addressing a gap with Latinx students. With more than 12 years of experience in higher education, writing a journal article would make me a credible source when I discuss strategies to help Latinx college students. Being legitimate and relevant to the existing needs of college students is important to keep fostering a sense of belonging and for others to see the inequities in higher education. If I move forward with publishing an article, I will learn more about the process and other requirements to complete this experience.

Professional Growth and Practical Implications

There is an increased number of Latinx students enrolling at MCC, and as a higher education practitioner I have seen hundreds of students in my professional career. Every semester I advise many Latinx students and there is a connection that I try to establish with every student I see, but I think that stronger connections are made with people of similar backgrounds. With this research I am not only seeking to improve relationships with Latinx students, but to use some of my research to support initiatives that will enhance the overall experience of all
students. By learning the perceptions of Latinx students, we can focus on this group as a pivotal part of the student population at MCC. It is not an exaggeration to state that if Latinx students succeed then the whole institution succeeds. Latinx students are marginalized and underserved in the U.S. higher education landscape. If their needs are met and services are increased, then many of the barriers they encounter can be removed and overcome by addressing how a student perceives their sense of belonging in the various campus spaces.

In my current role as an Academic Success Advisor, I seek to use a combination of strategies to problem solve issues that students face. I think that before I go into identifying strategies to help students, it is important to establish a relationship with them by being interested in their goals. Self-defined ambitions are what drives student motivation to reach their goals at MCC. Besides the academic component, it is also important to listen to students’ non-academic concerns and personal stories that inspires each student to pursue higher education at MCC. Active listening and providing resources and support are important tactics for to establishing rapport with students. When students are heard, they feel that I care and that I am there to help them as their advisor. My second language is Spanish, which allows me to connect with Latinx students from a cultural perspective. I have met with many Latinx students whose first language is not English and even though my Spanish is not perfect, I am able to understand why they think a certain way. My research study has affirmed that the qualities and skills I possess are building blocks to keep improving student sense of belonging. In a way it has magnified my experiences to dig deeper and see beyond what a student does not reveal about themselves in a meeting or conversation. Sometimes it can take time to build trust with some students and that is another piece where making a great first impression matters to the student.
The interview questions have shifted my views on how I ask questions. The academic advising field can be very transactional for students due to time constraints, but if there is enough time, it is important to take notes and remember details about the students. Sometimes small things like remembering where they work or how many siblings they have, or just ask how their family is doing really means a lot to many students. I have completed training in *Appreciative Advising* through Florida Atlantic University. There are six phases to the training: 1) disarm, 2) discover, 3) dream, 4) design, and 5) deliver and don’t settle (Bloom, 2008). According to Florida Atlantic University website, “Appreciative Advising is the intentional collaborative practice of asking generative, open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials” (Mission Statement, 2022). In my practice, I look to combine and embed our new advising model and success framework with sense of belonging. For example, the first phase in appreciative advising is to disarm the student by building rapport and creating a welcoming space. The first phase is closely connected with how a student feels a sense of belonging; thus, first impressions can have an everlasting student experience. The ability to expand on Strayhorn’s (2008, 2012, 2019) literature with college students’ sense of belonging and implementation of specific initiatives to include on a campus can improve outcomes at MCC.

**Connecting Research to Practices**

Now that I have completed this research project, I look at research different and I have more respect for the articles that I have read throughout my research experience. In a way, I see the hard work that others have done and that the research of others is relatable to similar topics.
Knowing what I know now, if I were to continue researching this same topic I would be able to apply similar steps when developing new literature. In particular to my research, it is very specific to the institution from one point in time. Even though the research took place at one campus with Latinx students that were interviewed in the fall 2020, many conditions like Covid-19, racism, or discrimination are still present and topics that can be continuously explored. The research focus opens the door to opportunities that have not been fully explored so that scholars and administrators can have a better understanding on how students are currently perceiving the college experience and to continue fostering a sense of belonging for Latinx students and other ethnic backgrounds.

The most important way I can use this research in my professional career is to share the knowledge and stories that was shared by the participants. I plan on sharing the findings of this research to MCC and during Professional Development Week or other conferences where I find it can useful and appreciated. As a long term goal, it would be helpful to develop some type of model or framework where existing and new literature is used to explain sense of belonging. Also, the feedback from other practitioners in the field would be instrumental in learning about Latinx-centered initiatives at other community colleges and four-year institutions. Professional development is a never ending journey that I seek to improve myself as a practitioner and to stay abreast of trends and current practices. Completing my dissertation journey will add to my professional development and enable me to share my findings and implications with other institutions.

As a higher education practitioner, I am positioned to use my research in my daily practice. As I mentioned in the application to research section, implementing and embedding my
findings at my institution would be an effective approach. The goal would be to take certain recommendations and use them to increase sense of belonging. A recommendation that I can make to MCC is to continue researching how the institution can impact Latinx sense of belonging. It would be a disservice if the students’ stories are dismissed and a quote by Stewart Stafford states that “If you turn a blind eye to the world now, history will turn a blind eye to you later. Ignoring an issue makes you a tacit supporter of it” (Goodreads, n.d.). Latinx students at MCC keep growing every academic term. The more time that is wasted on not addressing the needs of this population will hinder not only the success of Latinx students, but the whole college itself. Community colleges have the responsibility to serve its community and MCC, like other community colleges, should be held accountable for creating a more inclusive environment for its students.

Directions for Future Research

It would be interesting to take the findings to different programs, student clubs, and organizations to find out what makes the participants feel a sense of belonging. In general, using research is important and informs the higher education field on ways to improve the well-being of Latinx students. Moving forward, using institutional data along with other collected data from students can show additional gaps that have not been addressed. Data changes over time, so continuing research efforts will be an iterative process that will result in offering Latinx students an enjoyable college experience. In addressing the limitations of this research, by continuing to survey or interviewing incoming students can be a way to assess new data at more frequent times instead of only one point in time. Future research can aim to search for voices from those that
were not represented to listen to their perceptions in the ever changing landscape of higher education.

One area of interest would be to focus on specific experiences that relate to faculty, staff, and peer interactions, classroom and campus interactions, intersectionality of race and socioeconomic status, mentor connections, resources, co-curricular activities, and Covid-19 implications. By analyzing Latinx student perceptions in these areas it can highlight other opportunities for MCC to explore. To get a higher volume of participants, focus groups can be coordinated to reach a lot more Latinx students from diverse backgrounds. MCC has other extension campuses and future research efforts can be extended to other campus locations that can lead to unique perspectives to foster a culture of sense of belonging.

Building upon the findings, re-assessing and expanding on Hurtado and Carter’s (1997) conceptual model to provide an additional framework to MCC can be a step to develop future studies. MCC has a success framework that integrates experiences from beginning to end with points of contacts such as career exploration, planning for success, experiential learning, academic progress, timely completion and transition to the workforce or four-year school. Including sense of belonging for Latinx students within MCC’s success framework can lead to positive outcomes that can help achieve the mission and goals of the community college.
REFERENCES


Equity plan draft overview. (2019, November 1). *Equity plan draft overview*.


Quick Facts Fall 2019. (2019, September 1).


APPENDIX A
IRB APPROVAL NOTICE
 Approval Notice  
 Initial Review  

21-Sep-2020  

TO: Francisco Bataz (Z128182)  
Counseling, Adult and Higher Education  

RE: Protocol # HS21-0014 “Sense of Belonging”  

Your Initial Review submission was reviewed and approved under Member Review procedures by the Institutional Review Board on 21-Sep-2020. Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:  

Protocol Approval period: 21-Sep-2020 - 20-Sep-2021  

It is important for you to note that as an investigator conducting research that involves human participants, you are responsible for ensuring that this project has current IRB approval at all times. If your project will continue beyond the above date, or if you intend to make modifications to the study, you will need additional approval and should contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety for assistance. In addition, you are required to promptly report to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems or risks to subjects or others.  

Please note that the IRB has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.  

Informed Consent:  

Unless you have been approved for a waiver of the written signature of informed consent, this notice includes a date-stamped copy of the approved consent form for your use. NIU policy requires that informed consent documents given to subjects participating in non-exempt research bear the approval stamp of the NIU IRB. This stamped document is the only consent form that may be photocopied for distribution to study participants.  

If consent for the study is being given by proxy (guardian, etc.), it is your responsibility to document the authority of that person to consent for the subject. Also, the committee recommends that you include an acknowledgment by the subject, or the subject’s representative, that he or she has received a copy of the consent form.
You are responsible for retaining the signed consent forms obtained from your subjects for a minimum of three years after the study is concluded.

Continuing Review:

Continuing review of the project, conducted at least annually, will be necessary until data collection is complete and you no longer retain any identifiers that could link the subjects to the data collected. Please remember to use your protocol number (HS21-0014) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

Closing the Study:

Please note that a final report submission should be created in the record in lieu of an annual continuation form if data collection has ended and the data are free of identifiers. The final report is a separate submission form in the list of options in the InfoEd record, and it may be submitted prior to the annual review deadline.

With all of this said, the IRB extends best wishes for success in your research endeavors!
Northern Illinois University
Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Creating a Sense of Belonging for Latinx Student in Community College: You matter, you fit in, and you belong

Investigators

Name: Francisco Bataz  Dept: HESA  Phone: ____________________________
Name: Xiaodan Hu  Dept: HESA  Phone: ____________________________
Name: ____________________________  Dept:  Phone: ____________________________

Key Information

- This is a voluntary research study on the sense of belonging that Latinx students at Midwest Community College (MCC) perceive and how those experiences impact their academic success. The goal is to better understand the perceptions of Latinx students in a community college setting and to find out what factors impact sense of belonging. This study is significant because Latinx student retention outcomes in higher education are very low.
- This one-hour study involves answering intake and demographic characteristics, along with twenty-five questions that relate to sense of belonging.
- The benefits include sharing perceptions on sense of belonging to create a sense of belonging on campus and add knowledge to the community college field of research; there are low potential (or expected) risks.

Description of the Study

The purpose of the study aims to reveal: How does Latinx students develop and perceive a sense of belonging at MCC? The guiding questions for this this study will help us better understand the needs and experiences of Latinx students in a community college setting to propose recommendations to increase sense of belonging at MCC. The guiding questions are as follow: How do Latinx students develop and perceive a sense of belonging in academics, co-curricular activities, peer engagement, and campus environment? If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: agree to video recording with the Zoom application for about an hour to answer twenty-five questions.

Risks and Benefits

This research has very low potential risks such as collection of personal or sensitive information through the interview

The benefits of participation are that you will give valuable information and knowledge to create and develop a sense of belonging for Latinx students at Midwest Community College (MCC). The research can benefit the participant or other Latinx students for the institution to take initiatives to increase sense of belonging on campus.
Northern Illinois University
Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Confidentiality [or ANONYMITY]
- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be secured using a password protected file. The video recording made through the Zoom application will only be accessed by the researcher and only be used for educational purposes. Once the research is completed the video recordings will be erased/destroyed from the researcher’s laptop. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.
- Your identity will not be made known and you will choose a pseudonym to maintain anonymity

Compensation
You will receive the following compensation for your time: A $25 gift card will be mailed to an address that you provide once you complete the virtual interview that consists of twenty-five questions. The $25 gift card will not be disbursed to an incomplete virtual interview.

Your Rights
The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to skip any question or research activity, as well as to withdraw completely from participation at any point during the process.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact the researcher, Francisco Bataz at z128182@students.niu.edu or by telephone at [redacted]. You can also contact my faculty mentor, Dr. Xiaodan Hu at xiaodan.hu@niu.edu or by telephone at [redacted]. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at (815)753-8588.

Future Use of the Research Data
After removing all identifying information from your data, as appropriate, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from you.

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other materials sent by email deemed necessary by the study investigators.

_______________________________________________           _____________________
Participant’s Signature                        Date
Northern Illinois University
Consent to Participate in a Research Study

I give my consent to be video recorded, as appropriate during the virtual interview through Zoom.

________________________________________________________________________________________
Participant’s Signature                                      Date
APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Creating a Sense of Belonging for Latinx Students In Community College: You Matter, You Fit In, and You Belong

Interview Questions

Intake Characteristics

Date: __________
Student Name: ______________
Pseudonym Name: ________________
Birthplace: ________________ Birth Order: _____________
Your first language learned? ____________ Do you speak, read, write Spanish? (Circle)
Major: ____________________
Do you plan on transferring? No: ___ Yes: ___ If yes, where? ________________
Semester in college: 1___ 2___ 3___ 4___ 5___
Course(s) taking: Math___ English___ Other(s) ________________ ________________
Do you work? No: ___ Yes: ___ If yes, how many hours a week on average? ___
Do you receive or are eligible for FAFSA/financial aid? No: ___ Yes: ___
Are you involved in any clubs/organizations or program(s)? No: ___ Yes: ___
If yes, which ones? ________________ ________________

Demographics

Age: ___
Ethnic Background: ____________
Sex/Gender/Identity: ____________
Residence Town: ________________

Interview Questions

Introduction

1. Can you tell me about yourself; high school you attended, major (if any) and why you chose it, any hobbies, or other personal information you?

2. What is your definition of sense of belonging in the community college setting? (Give students the definition that is used in this study: “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by (e.g., faculty, peers), and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 28-29).

Academic Environment

Classroom Interactions

3. How would you describe white and Latino students’ comfort levels when interacting with each other during your classes? (Probe: How comfortable are you in interacting with students who are
a different ethnicity than you? Do you feel a part of your classes? Do other students make you feel welcomed or a sense that you belong? Please explain without revealing any identities.

4. Can you tell me of a time when you experienced and/or observed any situations that you’d describe as instances of discrimination or unfairness during any of your classes? If so, please explain without revealing any identities.

5. On average, how many students like you in regards of ethnicity are in your classes and how does that make you feel?

Faculty Interactions

6. How would you characterize or describe the faculty/student interactions that occur during your classes? (Probe: How do professors and students speak to each other?)

7. Would you please describe your one-on-one interactions with professors inside and outside of class? (Probes: Do you feel comfortable approaching your professors? Why or why not? What makes some professors more approachable than others?)

8. How have you been encouraged to engage in classroom discussions? Please give examples. (Probes: How does that make you feel? Have they valued your opinions/presence? Do your professors ever praise you or put you down? How?)

Co-curricular Activities

9. Can you tell me if you feel like you play an important role at MCC? If so, can you tell me of a time when you felt like you played an important role on campus?

10. Were you involved in any MCC co-curricular activities such as clubs/organizations, athletics, the arts, music related, school’s newspaper, community service…. etc. or off campus affiliations? If not, why not? (Probes: Do you always attend or participate? How does being part of co-curricular activities make you feel?)

11. Who/what/how has impacted your sense of belonging at this community college? (Probes: Can you tell me what makes you feel you matter, you fit in and belong on campus? How would you describe your interactions with the different student services, departments, divisions, etc…on campus? Have you connected with certain faculty and/or staff from any offices?) Please explain.)

12. Is there a particular group of people on campus or off campus with whom you feel most comfortable or uncomfortable? Why or why not? (Probes: Do you receive academic, emotional financial or other support from any of them?)

Peer Engagement

13. Can you share a story of a time when you felt like your Socioeconomic Status (SES) played a role that made you feel like you lacked a sense of belonging with your peers? (Probe: Was there any other instances when this happened in the classroom or within MCC?)
14. Can you think of a time when you felt discriminated, stereotyped, or faced a racist experience from a peer student? (Probes: What happened, how did you feel and what did you do? Have you experienced any other discrimination or racism within other departments, offices, inside or outside the classroom, or in general at MCC due to your SES, ethnicity, language, identity, or other components of who you are and what you believe in?)

**Campus Environment**

15. How do you feel about your decision to attend this community college?

16. Was there ever a time you wanted to leave this community college? If so, please tell me about it. (Probe: What made you change your mind?)

17. What motivated you to want to come and stay at this community college to complete your career/educational goals? Give examples. (Probes: Were you recruited? Have you felt valued at this college? Did anybody influenced you to stay? If so, who and please describe. How did your family feel about you coming to this community college?)

18. What were your greatest feelings of confidence about coming to this community college to begin with? (Probe: How did you feelings of confidence lead you to graduate?)

19. What have been (if any) your reassurances while here at this community college? Please explain past or current experiences. (Probe: What resources on campus/off campus did you find useful to support the situation?)

20. Did you feel welcomed when you first arrived? What kinds of things made you feel welcomed/unwelcomed? (e.g., welcome week, group activities) (Probes: Is there a place on campus that makes you feel at home? A group or organization?)

21. How welcomed or unwelcomed do you feel now compared to when you first arrived here?

22. How would you describe your level of comfort at this community college? (Probe: 1 being not comfortable at all and 10 being extremely comfortable. Explain.)

23. As a Latinx student, what is MCC missing to make you feel a greater sense of belonging? (Probes: Is there any area of MCC where you feel less a sense of belonging? Can you share any examples?)

24. Can you tell me what would you do different if you were to start at MCC all over again to feel that you belonged? (Probe: What advice would you give to new or current Latinx students to feel or have a greater sense of belonging at MCC? Now, what is your definition of sense of belonging?)
25. Please describe any other things (questions/experiences/perceptions) that you haven’t had the chance to talk about during this interview, which you find important regarding the topic of sense of belonging here at this community college. (Probe: Is there anything else you would like to add about the faculty and how they make or made you feel, interactions in co-curricular activities, peer engagement concerns, and/or how the campus environment lacked to foster a sense of belonging on campus?)