What a Difference a Day Makes. a Qualitative Case Study on Student Experiences of Involvement In Clubs and Organizations During Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES. A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY ON STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF INVOLVEMENT IN CLUBS AND ORGANIZATIONS DURING COVID-19

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Northern Illinois University, 2023
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This qualitative case study explores the experiences and sense of belonging for Valiant Region College (pseudonym) students who served as club leaders/officers during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school year. Twelve students total were interviewed either individually or within focus groups and shared their personal experiences, trials and triumphs as they navigated through the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study highlighted four themes: (a) the importance of in-person activities, (b) participants felt a sense of belonging with face to face (F2F) engagement prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, (c) students struggled to create involvement activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (d) students felt like an outsider at the institution during the COVID-19 pandemic. Implications for practice are discussed.
WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES. A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY ON STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF INVOLVEMENT IN CLUBS AND ORGANIZATIONS DURING COVID-19

BY

LUEVINUS MUHAMMAD
@2023 Luevinus Muhammad

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:
Gudrun Nyunt, PhD
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First, I’d like to thank Almighty God Allah for the strength to endure to the end. I’d like to thank the students (past and present) that are/have been involved in clubs and organizations at my institution and institutions of higher education all around the world. You are the fire that ignites the spirit of the campus. I’d like to thank all those who participated in my research and provided me with a wealth of knowledge and understanding of your experiences. These will forever afford me the foresight to see the value our student clubs and organizations have on you, your peers, the campus, and the community.

Thanks to my amazing dissertation committee Dr. Nyunt, Dr. Hu, Dr. Jaekel for your ongoing support of a black girl from the Westside Chicago that chose education as a way out and seeks to pour into all students and encourage and empower them towards greatness. Thanks to my mentors, colleagues and supporters at Rock Valley College, NIU and all over, who have shown me nothing but encouragement and love as I’ve ventured throughout this journey. There are way too many to name but I’d like to personally acknowledge a few, Dr. Howard Spearman, Terrica Huntley, Tekkahmah Curry and Keith Barnes. I appreciate you all! Thanks to all my Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Sisters, Aunties, and Momma’s for your encouraging words, mentorships, support and belief in me. To all my sister friends, my A1’s from Day 1, that have given me energy, laughs and love when I needed it the most, I thank you and I appreciate you.

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DEDICATION

To all the students that found their tribe and their purpose through their involvement in clubs and organizations.
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INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION OF PRACTICE

This dissertation of practice consists of three artifacts: (a) The dissertation of practice research proposal (Chapter 1); (b) a manuscript for publication (Chapter 2); and (c) a scholarly reflection on the dissertation process. Chapter 1 showcases the proposal that guided the research. The purpose of my dissertation was to explore the experiences and sense of belonging for Valiant Region College (pseudonym) students who served as club leaders/officers during the 2020/2021 academic year, which saw universities operating differently due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This topic was personal to me as I have worked in Student Life for the last 6 years. I served as the Manager of Student Life and currently serve as the Director of Student Life and Intercultural Student Services. I was traveling with a student club in March 2020 and experienced this trip’s impact on the students. During the trip, students shared their appreciation and gratitude for being able to participate in the trip as well as sharing the jewels they got throughout the week. Towards the end of the trip, I received a call from our Dean of Students stating that our trip needs to come to an end. I was informed we needed to check out of the hotel and return to the college. The message received was the college was closing due to a pandemic, and we needed everyone back to campus to wrap up as we’d be closing for a couple of weeks. Everyone on the trip was devastated and confused. Their faces, reactions, and experiences during the months following fueled my dissertation of practice. At the time of my proposal, I had hoped to utilize the information to assist me to better understand what the student experienced and the impact, as they were still expected to program and manage their clubs at home and through a pandemic.
Chapter 2 is a manuscript for a scholarly publication. After conducting my dissertation research, I developed a manuscript that could be published in a scholarly journal in my field. I sought to understand student’s perspectives working within clubs and organizations. How the COVID-19 pandemic impacted them? However, throughout the research, I learned that student leaders struggled to maintain while continuing to program through the pandemic. The research began to shift towards how maintaining their clubs and organizations yielded stress and pressure resulting in emotional anguish and feelings of failure. Students invested time and energy into maintaining their clubs and organizations during the pandemic yet had feelings of doubt and sadness as a result of their efforts.

In the final chapter, Chapter 3, I reflect on the dissertation process and discuss applications of the research and newly gained skills to my professional practice and future engagement in research. I shared my challenges, triumphs, and lessons learned and jewels I wished someone shared with me as I toiled through this process. I was able to highlight the value in-person engagement had on clubs and organizations. I was also able to share the sadness the participants experienced when they weren’t able to maintain their clubs and organizations in the manner they were accustomed. As an administrator, the research has allowed me to look closer at how we can better cultivate their experiences on and off campus. It has given me the desire to further research student involvement and assessment of clubs and organizations on our campus to see what is working and what needs improvement so that we can make a greater impact on our students in and out of the classroom.
CHAPTER 1: DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

The research in higher education is replete with tying student success to student involvement (Ivanova & Moretti, 2018; Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Webber et al., 2013). Student involvement has been paramount in providing students with intangible benefits. Research suggests that involved students are motivated, they build leadership skills, improve upon various skills such as critical thinking and teamwork skills, as well as have an enhanced sense of belonging (Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Webber et al., 2013; Zuniga et al., 2005). The positive outcome of an enhanced feeling of belonging is developed through in-class activities, clubs, and activities on the college campus. Strayhorn (2018) argued that "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” (forward). An enhanced sense of belonging, and the other benefits of involvement, can lead to increased academic achievement, retention, and student success (Ivanova & Moretti, 2018).

Strayhorn created this definition of sense of belonging to be used in this research:

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

Based on Strayhorn’s definition, research on sense of belonging should focus on student perceptions as well as their interactions with the campus community.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, how student involvement occurred on university campuses drastically changed, thus likely also impacting students’ sense of belonging. In March
2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the Coronavirus disease a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). The virus began in Wuhan, China, and spread quickly into Europe (Fauci et al., 2020). Within a two weeks of the virus touching down in Europe, thousands tested positive in the area (Gostin, 2020). Soon after, governments began to shut down and insisted that the residents work and school from home. This development started a new beginning for everyone (Spinelli & Pellino, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic hit the country hard and caused the world to review and rethink how they lived and functioned. The pandemic challenged everyday rituals and affected every aspect of human life (Zayapragassarazan, 2020).

Educational institutions shut down and moved to remote learning with little warning (Blankstein et al., 2020). This shift left educators worldwide struggling to provide quality education despite the pandemic (Dorn et al., 2020). Education professionals faced challenges adjusting curriculums to asynchronous despite technology barriers that some may have already met and developing at-home teaching environments incorporating their own families (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). Educators were left to maneuver teaching and providing students with a quality education and support services while managing their households and supporting their family needs (Bevins et al., 2020). However, institutions were concerned with their budgets due to withdrawals, loss of tuition, housing refunds, and drops in enrollment (Bevins et al., 2020).

The pandemic not only affected educators and administrators, but it changed student’s lives overnight. Many students were sent away in the middle of their college semester and forced to do virtual learning despite what their at-home conditions consisted of (Thiry & Hug, 2021). Many had to get acclimated to online instruction, leave their employment, residence halls, on-
campus educational projects or activities, internships, and study abroad due to COVID-19 (Thiry & Hug, 2021). Participation in and out of the classroom also decreased (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020).

Research documents the challenges students faced and continue to face during these uncertain times. Students experienced feelings of isolation, confusion, and disconnectedness, as they could no longer connect or interact with others face to face (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). Many students had to learn to maneuver working from home and schooling from home (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). Students also expressed difficulty staying focused as many learning institutions were closed, including libraries that limited their available resources (Thiry & Hug, 2021). These obstacles hindered their learning and student involvement (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). They expressed disappointment and uncertainty on how to move forward and adjust to the effects of COVID-19 and its impact on their educational experiences (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). In addition, students dealt with anxiety levels due to being moved from their usual learning environment and the uncertainty of these times (Thiry & Hug, 2021).

Recognizing the impact and implications of COVID, university administration strove to put resources in place to assist students and staff with coping (Daniel, 2020). To provide continued opportunities for involvement, institutions implemented synchronous and asynchronous learning and engagement opportunities through clubs and organizations virtually or using strict safety guidelines (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). Little is known about student’s experiences with these altered involvement opportunities. Research suggests that lack of in-person contact and limited opportunity for students to meet with faculty and staff to develop mentoring relationships negatively influences student involvement and success (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to understand better how students experienced student
involvement in clubs and organizations during the 2020/2021 academic year. Specifically, more research is needed to understand how these altered involvement opportunities influenced student’s sense of belonging at the institution. Moreover, as institutions strive to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic, information on student’s experiences in different types of involvement opportunities could shed light on promising practices for the future.

Purpose and Research Question

This single qualitative case study explores the experiences and sense of belonging for Valiant Region College (pseudonym) students who served as club leaders/officers during the 2020/2021 academic year, which saw universities operating differently due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study strives to answer the following research questions:

- How did student involvement in student organizations and clubs at Valiant Region College in 2019/2020 differ from 2020/2021?
  - How did the quantity and quality of student involvement opportunities offerings change from 2019/2020 to 2020/2021?
- How did students involved in student organizations during 2019/2020 experience student involvement in 2020/2021?
  - What challenges did students encounter (if any) to staying involved in the 2020/2021 academic year?
- How did the altered involvement opportunities in 2020/2021 influence students’ sense of belonging to the institution?
The study will explore student involvement during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing specifically on the 2020/2021 academic year. For this study, student involvement is defined as involvement in clubs and organizations on campus. Once completed, the research findings will guide the practices of club advisors and student services personnel in support of student leaders. Doing so may help the field to further support student retention and persistence by helping develop the sense of belonging due to on-campus participation.

Literature Review

This study builds on research related to student involvement and sense of belonging. In this literature review, I will discuss the importance of student involvement, focusing on involvement in clubs and organizations, and how student involvement can contribute to students’ sense of belonging at the institution. The theoretical framework, theory of involvement (Astin, 1984) will be introduced.

Student Involvement

Student involvement and student success in higher education are related. Much research supports the intangible value of student involvement in college students (Astin, 1984; Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Hernandez et al., 1999; Kahu, 2013; Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Strayhorn, 2018). Whether that value encompasses behavioral improvement, retention, academic achievement, or a sense of belonging, it is a component of student success (Parsons & Taylor, 2011). The research does not differ by race and gender; it consistently supports that student involvement positively impacts the student, manifesting through their commitment to persistence (Hausmann et al., 2009; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002).
Students develop a sense of satisfaction with their institution, which ultimately improves their loyalty and can lead to increased enrollment and funding (Montelongo, 2019; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). In addition, data supports students involved academically and in extracurricular activities build comradery with other students, learn the lay of the land (find their way around campus), and have improved communication skills (Webber et al., 2013). Hence, student organizations have developed and become popular over the years (Rosch et al., 2017).

Research shows that involved students on campus persist at high rates; their educational aspirations are high, they display high self-esteem and improved leadership and interpersonal skills (Foreman et al., 2013). Student involvement is multi-faceted. It ranges from student (on-campus) employment, socialization and relationship building with faculty and staff, on-campus residence life, hanging out and building relationships with friends on campus, and participation in clubs and organizations (Strayhorn, 2018). For the sake of this case study, I will focus on student involvement through student clubs and organizations on the college campus.

**Clubs and Organizations**

The development of clubs and organizations has occurred as far back as the development of colleges and universities (Rosch & Collins, 2017). Clubs and organizations have helped shape the college experience for many involved students (Forrester, 2006; Rosch & Collins, 2017). In addition, these clubs and organizations have also served as the conduit to student development and success (Hernandez et al., 1999). Students have inherently been attracted to campus clubs and organizations, and institutions have supported them as proponents of the college's missions. These organizations have been instrumental in providing students leadership skills and opportunities through co-curricular or extracurricular involvement. The goals of clubs and
organizations are aimed at social and civic development (Rosch & Collins, 2017). Whether it's Greek letter organizations, civic organizations, religious organizations, athletics, or others, students find connection and sense of belonging within their campus clubs and organizations (Strayhorn, 2018).

The research consistently supports involvement in clubs and organizations that benefit the students and the institutions. For example, involvement in clubs and organizations has provided students with academic success, leadership skills, a sense of belonging, and reason to persist (Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998; Montelongo, 2019; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Strayhorn, 2018). In addition, institutions have benefitted from clubs and organizations through student involvement.

**Theories supporting the importance of student involvement**

Several theories have tried to explain how students benefit from student involvement. Tinto's theory on retention explores student success and suggests options supporting student success (Tinto, 2009). According to Tinto, students achieve in environments that hold them accountable and set clear objectives and expectations for student success (Tinto, 2000). He proposed that students also need to be supported in these academic environments and highlighted the importance of social interaction and involvement to a student's academic success (Roberts & McNeese, 2010). College students range from many different social and academic levels. Tinto argues the importance of providing services, programs, and opportunities to combat the needs of all levels of college students to ensure academic and social success (Tinto, 2000).

Arthur Chickering’s theory on student development is yet another prominent student engagement theory. Chickering’s theory explains how a student’s development throughout
college is impacted socially, physically, and intellectually throughout seven stages of identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The seven stages or vectors of development include developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). These developmental stages have become pivotal in the area of student involvement.

Finally, Schlossberg's theory on marginality and mattering focuses on students’ believing they matter when they are in their comfort zones and around those they feel connected and comfortable with (Schlossberg, 1989). At the same time, students feel marginalized when they are in situations where they are isolated or outside of their comfort zone (Schlossberg, 1989). Many have researched Schlossberg’s theory and examined the effect and negative impact of a student feeling marginalized (Roberts & McNeese, 2010). Roberts & McNeese proposed that students who find difficulty fitting in and finding their place on the college campus have negative experiences that lead to social and emotional problems (Roberts & McNeese, 2010). Schlossberg suggests that students who join clubs and organizations may initially feel marginal. However, upon meeting and developing relationships the student will begin to feel central to the group and ultimately the involvement will increase their opportunity for success (Schlossberg, 1989). The relationships and connectivity built through peers foster feelings of mattering and allow students to develop a sense of belonging at the institution (Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Roberts & McNeese, 2010).
Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging is pivotal in understanding factors contributing to student success. Hausmann et al. (2009) concede that students who connect with the institution and create their sense of belonging to the campus are better positioned to thrive and persist at the college. According to Morrow & Ackerman (2012), a "sense of belonging can be defined as the sense that members of a community feel that they belong and that they matter to one another" (p. 2). Hausmann et al. (2009) further explained the sense of belonging as a psychological relationship with the campus and college community. Strayhorn (2018) expanded on this conceptualization of sense of belonging in the college setting by focusing on “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers” (p. 4). Whether students develop this sense of belonging through clubs and organizational involvement, relationship with peers or faculty, working on campus, or participation in athletics, the research consistently supports the essential value of belonging on the college student (Hausmann et al., 2009; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Strayhorn, 2018).

Donaldson (2020) explored involvement and sense of belonging. In Donaldson’s study on involvement and a sense of belonging, a student shared that the recipe for college engagement was finding his tribe. Doing so allowed the student to immerse himself and enjoy the college experience. This student's efforts to find his tribe were through his student worker experience. Specifically, he found his sense of belonging through the network he created as a student
employee. Involvement in clubs and organizations may be another way for students to find their tribe.

Strayhorn (2018) revealed that some students have positive experiences with student involvement, while others have not-so-positive experiences. However, whether the incidents are positive or negative, students can learn and grow from their involvement experiences and eventually find ways to connect to the campus community. Thus, Strayhorn (2018) concluded that, overall, student involvement has a positive impact on students' sense of belonging.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the theory of student involvement (Astin, 1984). Astin (1984) developed the theory which has helped frame the study of involvement for scholars over the years. Astin provided insight into student involvement, focusing on the quality of involvement. Specifically, the involvement theory asserts an innate value for the student in participating in campus activities, and the more they get involved, the more they benefit (Kahu et al., 2018). Furthermore, Astin posited that student involvement in their education's academic and social aspects would positively impact their learning (Albayrak & Yildirim, 2015).

The theory of student involvement is broken down into five basic postulates. Astin (1984) explained what an involved student looks like through these postulates. He focused on the characteristics and the qualities of involvement. Astin posited that the value student’s gain from their involvement depends on their level of involvement. The first postulate indicates that involvement requires physical and psychological energy (Astin, 1984). The involved student displays an overall commitment to the development of their education. That commitment may
encompass academics as well as the social activities. This physical and psychological energy is determined by the number of hours invested into their clubs, homework assignments, tests, and papers or preparing to defend a dissertation. It can include simply joining a club or being the president of student government (Astin, 1984). Students learn and understand that there is a level of physical and psychological energy invested in anything they do.

The second postulate posits that involvement occurs along a continuum (Astin, 1984). Involvement is the commitment to devote levels of energy across the spectrum. As a result, students can express their commitment and wealth of energy in many areas and involvement may manifest in different ways.

Involvement is a skilled art of spreading energy to multiple areas. Time, energy, and effort can fluctuate depending on the task. There is a continuum of students not being involved at all and extremely involved. Some students may be involved in one club, while others may be involved in many; some may spend a ton of time on their involvement, others may spend limited time. Ultimately, the involvement can change and vary depending on the student and the time. Moreover, for some students, involvement in student organizations and clubs may be about "finding your tribe" while others may look for professional development opportunities or to learn a specific skill. Thus, engaging in campus life and involvement may look different depending on who or what it is (Donaldson, 2020).

The third postulate posits that involvement has both qualitative and quantitative features (Astin, 1984). Understanding this aspect of involvement notes that involvement is a measurable investment. Therefore, this postulate acknowledges the qualitative and quantitative components.
It posits quantitative as the number of clubs and qualitative as the depth and investment in involvement in clubs and organizations.

The fourth postulate indicates that *development is proportional to quantity and quality of involvement* (Astin, 1984). The more involved and engaged a student is, the more benefit they will yield from their investment. Whether a student is looking to progress into a leadership role within a club or organization or gain co-curricular transcript credit, the investment is pivotal to the benefits. It goes back to the adage; you get out of something what you put into it.

Finally, the fifth postulate posits that *educational effectiveness is related to capacity to increase involvement* (Astin, 1984). A way to determine a policy’s success is primarily by the impact on student involvement. If more students become involved in implementing a new policy or procedure, then one can ascertain that it works. This reminds me of another adage, you can determine the growth of a tree by the fruit that it bears.

Astin’s theory of involvement has been used in previous research throughout the field of education. The theory has been used to portray the importance of student involvement and how involvement impacts student success. According to Astin’s theory, the more involvement on the student’s part, the more benefit the student will gain. For example, one specific study researched using technology and social media to increase student engagement (Heiberger & Harper, 2008). This study looked at multiple social media engagement tools and determined more students utilized Facebook at the time of this study. It then reviewed the windows of time students spent on Facebook and compared their involvement in clubs and organizations. The results determined that students who spent more time on social media were also the students that were more engaged with clubs and organizations (Heiberger & Harper, 2008).
This study supported Astin's theory of involvement by utilizing the five tenets outlined in the student involvement theory and explaining how each proves student's social media activity only enhances their student engagement. For example, one tenet states that involvement requires physical and psychological energy, which is very much in alignment with social media, which requires physical and psychological energy (Heiberger & Harper, 2008). In addition, many believe that social media is distracting, and that too much time is spent engaging in social media; however, this study determined that it is not limiting their physical and psychological energy toward other things (Heiberger & Harper, 2008). Therefore, this article goes through each tenet, explaining the relationship with student engagement.

A separate study examined the relationship between undergraduate participation and leadership development utilizing Astin's involvement theory (Foreman et al., 2013). Foreman studied traditional-aged college students engaged in extracurricular activities (Foreman et al., 2013). Their time commitment while engaged and their level of focus during the engagement were also considerations in this study (Foreman et al., 2013). Students were surveyed, and the data analysis reviewed the average weekly hour participating in extracurricular activities, individual leadership development, and those who held leadership roles (club officers). Ultimately, this study concluded that involvement and leadership development are critical elements of the student experience. It concluded that the energy and involvement put forth in clubs and organizations strongly proposes leadership development (Foreman et al., 2013). It also reinforces how much effort and energy involved determines the benefit received, hence the leadership success.
The above-noted examples indicate that, while Astin’s theory was developed a long time ago, it continues to shape research and praxis in higher education and student affairs. Thus, I will use Astin’s theory to guide my study. Precisely, Astin’s postulates will provide guidance on how to understand involvement and will sensitize me to pay attention to the quantity and quality of students’ involvement and to explore how changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the capacity to increase involvement. I will, however, also keep an open mind to identifying areas in which my findings diverge from Astin’s theory or add to the theory. By doing so, my study will add to the literature using Astin’s theory and examine whether this theory still provides valuable guidance in our current contexts.

Research Design

I will use a qualitative case study design to explore students’ involvement experiences during the 2020/2021 academic year. A case study is an in-depth exploration of a clearly defined system or case within its real-world context (Yin, 2014). A case study is a qualitative research methodology or a particular study that is an extensive and complex analysis of a phenomenon or an event (Yin, 2016). It is a bounded system whereas it falls into specific parameters. Case studies mainly focus on multiple individual's perspectives and experiences of an event that occurred over some time. I chose a case study design because it allows the researcher to evaluate and analyze a particular event or bound system (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 14). This specific research design also allows the researcher the flexibility and autonomy to draw conclusions based on experiences, perceptions, and interpretations (Saldana, 2011 pp. 8-9). I will use a single
case study design (Yin, 2016), focusing on student experiences at Valiant Region College (pseudonym) community.

**Qualitative Methodology and a Constructivist Worldview**

Qualitative research explores everyday situations and events from the social science perspective or essential human experiences (Saldana, 2011 pp. 3-4). Whether it's sociological, psychological, anthropological, or other, the research evaluates events, conditions and circumstances using this sociological lens (Creswell, 2018, p. 13). The research approach for this study will be from a qualitative research lens. I chose a qualitative research design to study and understand the viewpoints of participants engaged in student involvement pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19 and to better understand their experience from their perspective (Yin, 2016, pp. 9-10). In order to find out why things change, it is imperative to listen and hear the voice of those involved. Understanding this information will offer insight into the value of student involvement and the importance of maintaining student involvement on-campus, off campus and hybrid.

The qualitative case study seeks to understand viewpoints and experiences through a humanistic lens. The research is a case study using a constructivist worldview. The constructivist view posits that learners understand people, places, and things within this world (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). Using the constructivist view, the researcher must examine the subjects’ perceptions of specific events to understand their perspectives. The constructivist view considers the whole individual's understanding, including their background and life experiences. The researcher formulates questions that primarily focus on the events specific circumstances to understand better their perspective (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). The constructivist view
shapes this research as the goal is to understand the perspectives of students experiencing student involvement before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important for the researcher to understand their views, perspectives and experiences as those on the front lines of student involvement and how it impacted them.

This study seeks to understand the perceptions, experiences, and sense of belonging for student leaders involved in clubs and organizations before and during the COVID 19 pandemic. Their total experience will be considered using the constructivist's view, including interactions with clubs’ members and others. It is also imperative that the student's backgrounds and, ultimately, the experience that shapes them are considered throughout the study. The goal is to understand the students' experiences as they maneuvered through the pandemic.

Description of the Case

Many institutions have experienced challenges due to COVID 19, including Valiant Region College (a pseudonym), which will serve as the research site for this study. VRC is a public community college in the rural Midwest with a student population of approximately 5,000 students. The institution's mission is that Valiant Region College empowers students and the community through lifelong learning. In addition, VRC enables the community to grow as a society of learners through well-designed educational paths leading to further education, rewarding careers, cultural enrichment, and economic-technological development.

Valiant Region College is a degree-granting community college offering Associate of Arts and Sciences and Career Services degrees. In addition, VRC offers three transfer degrees, an Associate of Arts, an Associate of Science, and an Associate of Engineering. According to the
spring 2021 Student report, 77% of the students registered were pursuing transfer degrees, while 22.3% of the population were identified as pursuing a degree in Career Education. Valiant Region College offers over 20 Career and technical education degrees. VRC operates under a semester-based academic year with an open admission policy. According to the Student Profile Report from the Office of Institutional Research at VRC for spring 2021, the demographic breakdowns include Asian students (185), American Indian/Alaskan Native (20), Black or African American (394), Hispanic and Latino (1070), Native Hawaiian (20), White (2911). The average student age at the college was 24 years old.

As with most institutions of higher learning, VRC offers several co-curricular activities to assist students along the road towards persistence, retention, and completion. VRC encourages student involvement and houses its clubs and organizations through the Office of Student Life. To assist with the administration and maintenance of the clubs and organization, the college subscribes to a virtual platform called Campus Labs. Clubs and organizations at VRC give the student body with a sense of belonging. If students are involved on campus, outside the classroom, they would be more likely to persist until graduation (Kuh, 2007; Thiry & Hug, 2021; Webber et al., 2013).

During the 2019-2020 school year, VRC housed 35 functioning clubs and organizations under the Student Life Department. Each club met weekly or bi-weekly. Between fall 2019 and March 2020, student clubs members attended 28 off-campus events/programs or conferences. The executive council was held monthly and included a consortium of student club officers. They met to discuss upcoming events, share ideas, get information, and connect. During this time, Executive Council consistently maintained attendance of 70% representation from active
clubs and organizations. Clubs and organizations held programs and events on campus daily. 

Student life organized annual and bi-annual programming, including Welcome Week, Homecoming, Finals Frenzy, and Midterm Mania. Welcome Week in 2019 brought in 30% of the student population, while Finals Frenzy and Midterm Mania gave away 100% of their promotional items and food.

At VRC, the number of active clubs during fall 2020 dropped significantly from fall 2019. Approximately 25 active clubs occurred during the 2020-2021 school year (Appendix 5). Participation decreased to roughly ten clubs from 2019-2020 (Appendix 6). During the 2020-2021 school year, clubs met less frequently or not at all. Due to the pandemic, all club and organization travel was suspended indefinitely.

VRC’s COVID mitigation strategies shifted all aspects to 100% virtual. Faculty, staff, and students were denied access to campus and pushed to work/school from home. Student life offered a flexed programming schedule via Zoom and Google meets. Activities were limited, however Student Life continued to provide a robust program that mirrored campus life. Student Life purchased a Zoom account for up to 300 participants and resumed club and organizations student involvement.

Major annual and bi-annual programs such as Welcome Week, Stress-Free, Homecoming, and the Leadership Award Ceremony were amongst the programs that transitioning to virtual. As a result, virtual Welcome Week in Aug. 2020 consisted of 2% of the student population, and Virtual Homecoming week consisted of 1%. However, virtual homecoming king and queen voting included approximately 4% of the student population. Therefore, homecoming royalty participation was a huge differential from fall 2019. Students also held their monthly
executive council meeting (monthly club president meet-up) virtually. Overall, student club attendance and involvement decreased drastically despite efforts to maintain some normalcy during the COVID–19 pandemic.

Participants

Participants for this study will be purposefully selected to ensure they can “provide richly-textured information, relevant to the phenomenon under investigation” (Vasileious et al., 2018, p. 1). Specifically, students will be eligible to participate if they were students at VRC and served as officers during the 2019/2020 school year and the 2020/2021 school year.

Student participants will primarily be comprised of student officers who participated in the executive council. The executive council is a consortium of student leaders that attend monthly meetings to discuss upcoming events and programs to support one another and collaborate on events. These students are ideal candidates because they were/are club officers that were/are expected to participate in executive council before and throughout the pandemic.

Students will be invited to participate via email along with posting of flyers across campus to invite them to participate. A follow-up email will be sent seven days later to anyone who has yet to respond. My goal is to interview at least 10-15 students. As is typical for qualitative research, my sample will be small in order to “support the depth of case-oriented analysis that is fundamental to this mode of inquiry” (Vasileiou et al., 2018, p. 1).
Data Collection

I will conduct semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups with each participant or group of participants. These will be in person or via zoom when needed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants will be asked interview questions for 60-90 minutes in a quiet space free from distractions. The purpose of semi-structured interviews and focus groups are to better understand the experiences by gathering and coding the interviewees and responses and building on the answers to get a broader understanding of their overall experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Students will be interviewed in a natural setting at the institution in the student life office. I chose this setting because it is the area and location where participants find familiarity in that clubs meet, interact and program in this area. The student interviews will revolve around their general experiences of club involvement before and during COVID 19. In addition, they will address any challenges faced or benefits gained (if any) from their involvement with clubs and organizations (Student interview questions see Appendix 1, and student focus groups questions see Appendix 2). The interview and focus groups will also focus on students’ perceptions on how involvement influenced their sense of belonging at the institution.

In addition to interviews and focus groups, I will engage in document analysis (Bogdan, 2007 p. 133). This process requires analyzing the information by evaluating and reviewing documents related to the research topic (Staines, 2008 p. 43). I will use student flyers, general student life information, club events, and marketing materials. All student clubs must submit flyers and promotional materials to the student life office for review and approval before posting around campus. They can either drop them off in person or submit them to the Campus Labs.
ENGAGE electronic engagement platform the college utilizes for student engagement. I will also review club events attendance, meeting, and membership numbers. This information is gathered via Campus Labs ENGAGE as students are required to register the club each year and include rosters of their membership. We can also able to track attendance at events utilizing the Campus Labs ENGAGE. Clubs must capture attendance with their meeting minutes and submit their minutes to the Student Life Office. I plan to look at the flyers and attendance to determine their level of involvement during the pandemic and identify changes to the previous years. I want to understand increases or decreases in participation. Gathering this information will lend to the analysis of how the pandemic impacted student involvement.

Ethical Considerations

The study will require informed consent from all participants and include volunteer participation. Participants will be well informed of the purpose of the study, the process, the benefits, and any possible risks. Participants will be aware of all aspects of the study before participating. Participants will also be informed that they can leave the study at any point without any penalty. My research will display the highest form of professionalism and integrity.

Data Analysis

The data will include interviews and documents. I will first analyze documents. Then, I will use the information from documents to better understand the case and, in particular, how involvement changed from pre-pandemic to during the pandemic. With that information in mind, I will then engage in analysis of the interview data.
I will use multiple rounds of coding to analyze the interview data. In a first coding round, I will analyze my interview data for participants’ descriptions of how involvement changed from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021. I will use descriptive coding for this round (Saldaña, 2016), focusing on how participants describe involvement.

In a second coding round, I will use emotion coding to examine students’ feelings regarding their experiences (Saldaña, 2016). I hope to ask questions in the interviews and focus groups and utilize the documents to help me better understand of the feelings, emotions, and their overall experiences of what they encountered. I expect that everything may not come out verbally, so paying close attention to non-verbal cues is just as important as verbal cues (Saldaña, 2016). I will also utilize frequency counts and be aware of repetitive messaging (Saldaña, 2016).

In a third coding round, I will analyze how students’ perceived involvement during the COVID-19 pandemic shaping their sense of belonging at the institution. I will again engage in emotion coding and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2016). Descriptive coding will allow me to examine how students perceive involvement being related to students’ sense of belonging. Emotion coding, on the other hand, will allow me to analyze data for students’ emotions related to their sense of belonging and how involvement played into their sense of belonging.

I will also analyze documents collected to determine if changes occurred in involvement through a change in the total number of flyers circulated on Engage before and during the pandemic. I will also review and compare the number of active clubs and attendance in clubs from 2019-2020 vs 2020-2021. Lastly, I’ll review the travel docs submitted for travel during 2019-2020 vs 2020-2021 to determine involvement or lack thereof through travel.
In a final round of analysis, I collapse my codes into themes. I will rely closely on my research questions to understand the experiences of students and advisors with involvement during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this round of analysis, I will also utilize the findings from my document analysis to pull in information from the document to provide contextual information for student and advisor comments and to compare students’ perceptions of what involvement looked like during the pandemic to the insights I gained through document analysis.

Limitation of the Research

In viewing limitations that I may face, students who are still actively involved may be the first to step up for the study, whereas those who were previously involved may not. This is not necessarily a negative thing but could be more so understood. Nevertheless, only being able to talk to the more actively involved students may limit my understanding of what student involvement, looked like at the institution.

As a current student or advisor who interacts with me daily and is still involved with clubs and organizations, they would be expected to be considered for the research. Therefore, they would be regarded as easy targets. Yet these same students have a relationship with me, and I see daily could also skew my results. They may, for example, feel comfortable sharing certain experiences with me due to our professional relationship or may share information that they think I want to hear.

Another limitation may be that previously involved students may need help to contact or have graduated and moved on. Again, this can pose an issue in attracting a large enough pool of participants to reach data saturation. I'm trying to get a specific and viable subject pool to garner
a good study. With the understanding that students are transitioning out of college yearly, I may also be looking at alumni.

Yet another limitation could be that since the pandemic has passed, students may not be able to recall their experiences vividly. Students may not care anymore, and their focus and goals may have shifted and changed. However, time passed could go both ways. Maneuvering through the pandemic, being off-campus and back on-campus, the experience may be etched in students’ minds.

Researcher Positionality

At the start of this research in 2019-2020, I served as the Manager of Student Life. I worked primarily with student clubs, organizations, and advisors. I assisted in all aspects of programming, club travel, events, trainings, data tracking etc. I serve as the Director of Student Life and Intercultural Student Services and understand that bias may or may not exist due to my position at the institution. I’ve worked closely with these students, helping them with their programming efforts. I’ve allowed them to utilize space within the office, assisted them with contracts, budgets, and travel needs, as well as traveled with many of them as a chaperone for club conferences and events. My relationship with many of them can impact students’ responses. I facilitated each executive council meeting, and they sometimes openly expressed their feelings about programming during the pandemic. In one vain, they would be highly comfortable sharing their experiences because of our relationship; considering our conversations during the pandemic, it may not be an issue. However, asking them to recall and record their programming experiences during the pandemic could make them uncomfortable. If they had a bad experience
with student life, they may feel their honesty might hurt my feelings or make me feel uncomfortable. Hence, they may want to hold back and not be entirely forthcoming. This can skew my research because their responses would not be honest.

Significance of the Study

This study will inform my own practice. The study will also add to practice, more generally, by providing transferable information to other practitioners. Finally, the study will add to the literature of student involvement by providing insight into ways students experienced student involvement during the pandemic and how that may have impacted their sense of belonging.

First, this study will inform my practice by seeing the importance of contingency planning. We had no way of knowing that the pandemic would happen, and we did not know the long term effects the pandemic has had on student involvement. My hope is that the findings will provide us with an understanding of student experiences that will help us to better understand how the contingency planning impacted their experiences. We know is that under the pandemic and our swift contingency planning, we have been provided with tools to continue to provide our students with programming and activities despite the availability of being on or off campus. We can’t foresee what is next, but we will always plan for the possibility.

My practice will be informed by my key findings are in the research; these findings can thus drive strategic planning. It is important to now create strategies and processes that account for the findings. In doing so, Valiant Region College will implement a multiple step process as it relates to student involvement. This process will include a pre-post questionnaire for planning
and assessing all programs and activities. This questionnaire will address the quality of programming, quantity of participants, challenges and did the program provide students with a sense of belonging.

Second, this study will inform practice, more generally. Most of the research on student involvement was from an in person, traditional college, or university perspective (Rosch et al., 2017). Until recently, prior to the advent of clubs like E-Sports, virtual involvement was rare. Post the COVID-19 pandemic, students may be more interested in engaging virtually. Virtual involvement opportunities could allow students that are not typically the involved type, or students that don’t spend a lot of time on the campus to still experience student involvement through clubs and organizations.

This study will also provide insights into ways virtual students’ involvement shapes students’ sense of belonging. Based on the study’s findings, the study may highlight ways to foster a sense of belonging through virtual involvement. At the same time, the study could also highlight the value and importance of in-person involvement. By doing so, the study can provide insights into ways to foster students’ sense of belonging, and thus improve their retention and persistence in college (Strayhorn, 2018).

Finally, the study will add to the literature on students’ involvement experiences during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Most research on COVID-19 has focused on students’ mental health and well-being (Dorn et al., 2020) and their academic struggles (Bevins et al., 2020). However, little is known about how the pandemic shapes students’ involvement, particularly through clubs and organizations. Shedding light on what that involvement looked like may provide further insights into students’ experiences during COVID-19.
CHAPTER 2: WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES. A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY ON STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF INVOLVEMENT IN CLUBS AND ORGANIZATIONS DURING COVID-19

Introduction

The research in higher education is replete with tying student success to student involvement (Ivanova & Moretti, 2018; Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Webber et al., 2013). Student involvement has been paramount in providing students with intangible benefits. Research suggests that involved students are motivated, build leadership skills, improve upon various skills such as critical thinking and teamwork and enhanced sense of belonging (Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Webber et al., 2013; Zuniga et al., 2005). The positive outcome of an enhanced feeling of belonging is developed through in-class activities, clubs, and activities on the college campus. Strayhorn (2018) argued that "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.” An enhanced sense of belonging, along with the other benefits of involvement, can lead to increased academic achievement, retention, and student success (Ivanova & Moretti, 2018).

Strayhorn (2018) created the definition of a sense of belonging to be used in this research:

In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 4).
Based on Strayhorn’s definition, research on sense of belonging should focus on student perceptions as well as their interactions with the campus community.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, student involvement on university campuses drastically changed, thus likely impacting students’ sense of belonging. In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) determined the outbreak of the Coronavirus disease a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). The virus began in Wuhan, China, and spread quickly into Europe (Fauci et al., 2020). Within two weeks of the virus touching down in Europe, thousands tested positive in the area (Gostin, 2020). Soon after, governments began to shut down and insisted that the residents work from home and school from home. This development started a new beginning for everyone (Spinelli & Pellino, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic hit the country hard and caused the world to review and rethink how they lived and functioned. The pandemic challenged everyday rituals and affected every aspect of human life (Zayapragassarazan, 2020).

Educational institutions shut down and moved to remote learning with little warning (Blankstein et al., 2020). This shift left educators worldwide struggling to provide quality education despite the pandemic (Dorn et al., 2020). Education professionals faced challenges adjusting curriculums to asynchronous despite technology barriers that some may have already met and developing at-home teaching environments incorporating their own families (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). Educators were left to maneuver teaching and providing students with a quality education and support services while managing their households and supporting their family needs (Bevins et al., 2020). Nevertheless, institutions were concerned with their budgets due to withdrawals, loss of tuition, housing refunds, and drops in enrollment (Bevins et al., 2020).
The pandemic not only affected educators and administrators, but it changed students' lives overnight. Many students were sent away in the middle of their college semester and forced to do virtual learning despite what their at-home conditions consisted of (Thiry & Hug, 2021). Many had to get acclimated to online instruction, leave their employment, residence halls, on-campus educational projects or activities, internships, and study abroad due to COVID-19 (Thiry & Hug, 2021). Participation in and out of the classroom also decreased (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020).

Research documents the challenges students face and continue to face during these uncertain times. Students experienced feelings of isolation, confusion, and disconnectedness, as they could no longer connect or interact with others face to face (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). Many students had to learn to maneuver working from home and schooling from home (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). Students also expressed difficulty staying focused as many learning institutions were closed, including libraries that limited their available resources (Thiry & Hug, 2021). These obstacles hindered their learning and student involvement (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). They expressed disappointment and uncertainty about how to move forward and adjust to the effects of COVID-19 and its impact on their educational experiences (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). In addition, students dealt with anxiety levels due to being moved from their usual learning environment and the uncertainty of these times (Thiry & Hug, 2021).

Recognizing the impact and implications of COVID, the university administration strove to put resources in place to assist students and staff with coping (Daniel, 2020). To provide continued opportunities for involvement, institutions implemented synchronous and asynchronous virtual learning and engagement opportunities through clubs and organizations or used strict safety guidelines for in-person events (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). Little is known about
students’ experiences with the altered involvement opportunities. Research suggests that the lack of in-person contact, and limited opportunity for students to meet with faculty and staff to develop mentoring relationships, negatively influences student involvement and success (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). Understanding better how students experienced student involvement in clubs and organizations during the 2020/2021 academic year is essential. Specifically, more research is needed to understand how these altered involvement opportunities influenced students’ sense of belonging at the institution. Moreover, as institutions strive to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic, information on students’ experiences in different types of involvement opportunities could shed light on promising practices for the future.

Purpose and Research Question

This single qualitative case study aimed to explore the experiences and sense of belonging for Valiant Region College (pseudonym) students who served as club leaders/officers during the 2020/2021 academic year, which saw universities operating differently due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Percisely, the study strove to answer the following research questions:

- How did student involvement in student organizations and clubs at Valiant Region College in 2019/2020 differ from 2020/2021?
  - How did the quantity and quality of student involvement opportunities offerings change from 2019/2020 to 2020/2021?
- How did students involve in student organizations during 2019/2020 experience student involvement in 2020/2021?
What challenges did students encounter (if any) in staying involved in the 2020/2021 academic year?

How did the altered involvement opportunities in 2020/2021 influence students’ sense of belonging to the institution?

The study explored student involvement during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing specifically on the 2020/2021 academic year. For this study, student involvement is defined as involvement in clubs and organizations on campus.

Literature Review

This study builds on research related to student involvement and a sense of belonging. In this literature review, I will discuss the importance of student involvement, focusing on involvement in clubs and organizations and how student involvement can contribute to students’ sense of belonging at the institution. The theoretical framework, involvement theory (Astin, 1984), will be introduced.

Student Involvement

Student involvement and student success in higher education are related. Much research supports the intangible value of student involvement in college students (Astin, 1984; Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Hernandez et al., 1999; Kahu, 2013; Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Strayhorn, 2018). Whether that value encompasses behavioral improvement, retention, academic achievement, or a sense of belonging, it is a component of student success (Parsons & Taylor, 2011). The research does not differ by race and gender; it consistently supports that student involvement positively
impacts the student, manifesting through their commitment to persistence (Hausmann et al., 2009; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002).

Students develop a sense of satisfaction with their institution, which ultimately improves their loyalty and can lead to increased enrollment and funding (Montelongo, 2019; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). In addition, data supports students involved academically and in extracurricular activities build comradery with other students, learn the lay of the land (find their way around campus), and have improved communication skills (Webber et al., 2013). Hence, student organizations have developed and become popular over the years (Rosch et al., 2017).

Research shows students involved on campus persist at high rates; their educational aspirations are high, and they display high self-esteem and improved leadership and interpersonal skills (Foreman et al., 2013). Student involvement is multi-faceted. It ranges from student (on-campus) employment, socialization and relationship building with faculty and staff, on-campus residence life, hanging out and building relationships with friends on campus, and participation in clubs and organizations (Strayhorn, 2018). For the sake of this case study, I will focus on student involvement through student clubs and organizations on the college campus.

**Clubs and Organizations**

The development of clubs and organizations has occurred as far back as the development of colleges and universities (Rosch & Collins, 2017). Clubs and organizations have helped shape the college experience for many involved students (Forrester, 2006; Rosch & Collins, 2017). In addition, these clubs and organizations have served as the conduit to student development and student success (Hernandez et al., 1999). Students have inherently been attracted to campus clubs and organizations, and institutions have supported them as proponents of the college's missions.
These organizations have provided students with leadership skills and opportunities through co-curricular or extracurricular involvement. Clubs and organizations aim at social and civic development (Rosch & Collins, 2017). Whether it is Greek letter organizations, civic organizations, religious organizations, athletics, or others, students find connection and a sense of belonging within their campus clubs and organizations (Strayhorn, 2018).

The research consistently supports involvement in clubs and organizations that benefit the students and the institutions. For example, involvement in clubs and organizations has provided students with academic success, leadership skills, a sense of belonging, and a reason to persist (Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998; Montelongo, 2019; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Strayhorn, 2018). In addition, institutions have benefitted from clubs and organizations through student involvement.

Theories supporting the importance of student involvement

Several theories have tried to explain how students benefit from student involvement. Tinto's theory on retention explores student success and suggests options that support student success (Tinto, 2009). According to Tinto, students achieve in environments that hold them accountable and set clear objectives and expectations for student success (Tinto, 2000). He proposed students also need to be supported in these academic environments and highlighted the importance of social interaction and involvement in a student's academic success (Roberts & McNeese, 2010). College students range from many different social and academic levels. Tinto argues the importance of providing services, programs, and opportunities to combat the needs of all levels of college students to ensure academic and social success (Tinto, 2000).
Arthur Chickering's theory on student development is yet another prominent student engagement theory. Chickering’s theory explains how a student’s development throughout college is impacted socially, physically, and intellectually throughout seven stages of identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The seven stages or vectors of development include developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). These developmental stages have become pivotal in the area of student involvement.

Finally, Schlossberg's theory on marginality and mattering focuses on students’ believing they matter when they are in their comfort zones and around those they feel connected and comfortable with (Schlossberg, 1989). At the same time, students feel marginalized when they are in situations where they are isolated or outside of their comfort zone (Schlossberg, 1989). Many have researched Schlossberg’s theory and examined the effect and negative impact of a student feeling marginalized (Roberts & McNeese, 2010). Roberts & McNeese proposed students who find difficulty fitting in and finding their place on the college campus have negative experiences that lead to social and emotional problems (Roberts & McNeese, 2010). Schlossberg suggests that students who join clubs and organizations may initially feel marginal. However, but upon meeting and developing relationships, the student will begin to feel central to the group and ultimately, the involvement will increase their opportunity for success (Schlossberg, 1989). The relationships and connectivity built through peers foster mattering and allow students to develop a sense of belonging at the institution (Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Roberts & McNeese, 2010).
Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging is pivotal in understanding factors contributing to student success. Hausmann et al. (2009) concede that students who connect with the institution and create their sense of belonging to the campus are better positioned to thrive and persist at the college. According to Morrow & Ackerman (2012), "sense of belonging can be defined as the sense that members of a community feel that they belong and that they matter to one another" (p. 2). Hausmann et al. (2009) further explained the sense of belonging as a psychological relationship with the campus and college community. Strayhorn (2018) expanded on this conceptualization of a sense of belonging in the college setting by focusing on “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers” (p. 4). Whether students develop this sense of belonging through clubs and organizational involvement, relationships with peers or faculty, working on campus, or participation in athletics, the research consistently supports the essential value of belonging to the college student (Hausmann et al., 2009; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Strayhorn, 2018).

Donaldson (2020) explored involvement and a sense of belonging. In Donaldson’s study on involvement and a sense of belonging, a student shared that the recipe for college engagement was finding his tribe. Doing so allowed the student to immerse himself and enjoy the college experience. This student's efforts to find his tribe were through his student worker experience. Specifically, he found his sense of belonging through the network he created as a student.
employee. Involvement in clubs and organizations may be another way for students to find their tribe.

Strayhorn (2018) revealed that some students have positive experiences with student involvement, while others have not-so-positive experiences. However, whether the incidents are positive or negative, students can learn and grow from their involvement experiences and eventually find ways to connect to the campus community. Thus, Strayhorn (2018) concluded that, overall, student involvement has a positive impact on students' sense of belonging.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement. Astin's theory has helped frame the study of involvement for scholars over the years. Astin’s theory provides insight into what student involvement looks like, focusing on the quality of involvement. Specifically, the involvement theory asserts an innate value for the student in participating in campus activities, and the more they get involved, the more they benefit (Kahu et al., 2018). Furthermore, Astin's theory posits that student involvement in their education's academic and social aspects will positively impact their learning (Albayrak & Yildirim, 2015).

Astin's theory (1984) is broken into five basic postulates. The first postulate indicates that involvement requires physical and psychological energy (Astin, 1984). The involved student displays an overall commitment to the development of their education. That commitment may encompass academics as well as social activities. This physical and psychological energy is determined by the number of hours invested into their clubs, homework assignments, tests, and
papers or preparing to defend a dissertation. It can include simply joining a club or being the president of student government (Astin, 1984). Students learn and understand that there is a level of physical and psychological energy invested in anything they do.

The second postulate posits that involvement occurs along a continuum (Astin, 1984). Involvement is the commitment to devote levels of energy across the spectrum. As a result, students can express their commitment and wealth of energy in many areas and, involvement may manifest in differently.

Involvement is the skilled art of, spreading energy to multiple areas. Time, energy, and effort can fluctuate depending on the task. There is a continuum of students not being involved at all and extremely involved. Some students may be involved in one club, while others may be involved in many; some may spend a ton of time on their involvement, and others may spend limited time. Ultimately, the involvement amount can change and vary depending on the student and the time. Moreover, for some students, involvement in student organizations and clubs may be about "finding your tribe" while others may look for professional development opportunities or to learn a specific skill. Thus, engaging in campus life and involvement may look different depending on who or what it is (Donaldson, 2020).

The third postulate posits that involvement has both qualitative and quantitative features (Astin, 1984). Understanding this aspect of involvement notes that involvement is a measurable investment. Therefore, this postulate acknowledges the qualitative and quantitative components. It posits quantitative as the number of clubs and qualitative as the depth and investment in involvement in clubs and organizations.
The fourth postulate indicates that development is proportional to the quantity and quality of involvement (Astin, 1984). The more involved and engaged a student is, the more benefit they will yield from their investment. Whether a student is looking to progress into a leadership role within a club or organization or gain co-curricular transcript credit, the investment is pivotal to the benefits. It goes back to the adage; you get out of something what you put into it.

Finally, the fifth postulate posits that educational effectiveness is related to the capacity to increase involvement (Astin, 1984). A way to determine a policy’s success is primarily by the impact it has on student involvement. If more students become involved by the implementation of a new policy or procedure, then one can ascertain that it works. This reminds me of another adage, you can determine the growth of a tree by the fruit that it bears.

Astin (1984) explained what an involved student looks like. He focuses on the characteristics and the qualities of involvement. Astin posited the value student’s gain from their involvement depends on their level of involvement.

While Astin’s theory was developed over 40 years ago, researchers and practitioners continue to use Astin's theory of involvement to examine and highlight the importance of student involvement and how involvement impacts student success (Ivanova & Moretti, 2018; Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Weber et al., 2013). I used Astin’s theory to guide how to understand involvement. Specifically, the postulates sensitized me to pay attention to the quantity and quality of students’ involvement and to explore how changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the capacity to increase involvement. Recognizing the limitations of the theory, I also considered
aspects of involvement that the theory may not explain, which could lead to revisions or expansion of Astin’s theory of involvement.

Methodology

Utilizing a qualitative case study, the goal is to understand viewpoints and experiences through a humanistic lens. A case study is an in-depth exploration of a clearly defined system or case within its real-world context (Yin, 2014). A case study is a type of qualitative research methodology or a particular study that is an extensive and complex analysis of a phenomenon within the boundaries of the case (Yin, 2016).

I approached this research project through a constructivist worldview. The constructivist view posits that learners understand people, places, and things within this world (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). Using the constructivist view, the researcher must examine the subjects' perceptions of specific events to understand their perspectives. The constructivist view considers the whole individual's understanding, including their background and life experiences. This research looks at the student’s experiences as they maneuvered through student experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Case Description

The research site was Valiant Regional College, a pseudonym. It is a degree-granting community college offering Associate of Arts and Sciences and Career Services degrees. In addition, VRC offers three transfer degrees, an Associate of Arts, an Associate of Science, and an Associate of Engineering. According to the spring 2022 Student report, 75% of the students registered were pursuing transfer degrees, while 25% of the population were identified as
pursuing a degree in career education. According to the Student Profile Report from the Office of Institutional Research at VRC, the demographic breakdown include Asian students (185), American Indian/Alaskan Native (152), Black or African American (303), Hispanic and Latino (934), Native Hawaiian (3), White (2432) made up the demographics in Spring 2022.

VRC continued to encourage the involvement of students through clubs and organizations. During the 2021-2022 school year, VRC had 20 active clubs. Student clubs ranged from Student Life required clubs like Student Government Association (SGA) and Campus Activities Board (CAB) to hobby, general interest, and culture clubs like Students for Responsible Environmental Sustainability (GPA), Philosophy Club, Gay Pride Alliance (GPA) and Black Student Union (BSU). Students were welcome to join and participate in clubs throughout the school year with the hope their involvement would contribute to students’ persistence and retention (Kuh, 2007; Thiry & Hug, 2021; Webber et al., 2013).

During the 2019-2020 school year, VRC housed 35 functioning clubs and organizations under the Student Life Department. Each club met weekly or bi-weekly. Between the fall 2019 and March 2020, student clubs attended 28 off-campus events/programs/conferences. The executive council was held monthly, including a consortium of student club officers. They met to discuss upcoming events, share ideas, get information, and connect. During this time, Executive Council consistently maintained attendance of 70% representation from active clubs and organizations. Clubs and organizations held programs and events on campus daily. Student life organized annual and bi-annual programming, including Welcome Week, Homecoming, Finals Frenzy, and Midterm Mania. Welcome Week in 2019 brought in 30% of the student population, while Finals Frenzy and Midterm Mania gave away 100% of their promotional items and food.
At VRC, student life continued to thrive and grow the number of active clubs and organizations. At 20 active clubs during 2021-2022, the number still hadn’t surpassed the pre-COVID-19 pandemic numbers, although the department takes every opportunity to encourage students to start and join clubs and organizations on campus. The number of active clubs during the fall of 2020 dropped significantly from the fall of 2019. Approximately 25 active clubs occurred during the 2020-2021 school year (Appendix 5). Participation decreased by roughly ten clubs from 2019-2020 (Appendix 6). During the 2020-2021 school year, clubs met less frequently or not at all. Due to the pandemic, all club and organization travel was suspended indefinitely.

Participants

I recruited participants through flyers posted throughout campus, email invitations, and by word of mouth. I used purposeful sampling, whereas students were purposefully selected to participate in the case study. Previous and current students that met the requirements, which included having been students at VRC and serving as officers during the 2019/2020 school year and the 2020/2021 school year. Students either volunteered or were asked to participate in the research study. I also notified campus club advisors to share the information and flyers with current and former students. Once students were identified or contacted me with interest in participating, I reached out to them via phone or email to thank them for their willingness to participate. I explained the research study, and if they were still interested, we scheduled an interview date and time. Before the start of each interview, participants were asked their
demographic information, i.e., preferred pronouns, office, clubs, etc. This information is outlined in the demographic information of participants chart.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Club</th>
<th>Office Held</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender Pronouns</th>
<th>Traditional age students (18-23) vs. Non-Traditional age Student (24 and older)</th>
<th>Focus Group vs Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Veteran’s Club</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>She, Her, Hers</td>
<td>Non-traditional</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porsha</td>
<td>Black Student Union</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>She, Her, Hers</td>
<td>Non-traditional</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amina</td>
<td>Black Student Union</td>
<td>Committee Chair</td>
<td>African, International Student</td>
<td>She, Her, Hers</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romero</td>
<td>TRIO Club</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>He, Him, His</td>
<td>Non-Traditional</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
<td>Philosophy Club</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>African-American and White</td>
<td>He, Him, His</td>
<td>Non-Traditional</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Association of Latin American Students</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>She, Her, Hers</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan</td>
<td>E-Sports</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>He, Him, His</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Black Student Union</td>
<td>Immediate Past President</td>
<td>African American,</td>
<td>He, Him, His</td>
<td>Non-traditional</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>Circle K Club</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>He, Him, His</td>
<td>Non-traditional</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marco</td>
<td>Association of Latin American Students</td>
<td>Committee Chair</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>He, Him, His</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>Multicultural Club, Secretary</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>Vietnamese, International Student</td>
<td>She, Her, Hers</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>Multicultural Club and ALAS</td>
<td>Committee Chair</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>He, Him, His</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

Participants were interviewed over a 6 months. Six individual participant interviews took place and two focus groups comprising three participants. The interviews were randomly selected first. The first group of participants that responded were placed into interviews. I then scheduled specific times for focus groups, and those that were available during that time slot were added to the focus groups. I continued to accept interview participants until I believed I had a good number for the research.

I chose to conduct both interviews and focus groups. I chose interviews to understand students’ personal experience better. As I sought to explore their experiences, I found interviews to be an effective way to get information to understand their experiences better. Focus groups were invaluable in understanding perspectives and experiences while participants fed off one another. The combination of the two allowed for rich, thick descriptions of students’ individual experiences. It also created a sense of shared experiences among students.

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups ranged from 45 minutes to an hour and a half, with the focus groups lasting the most extended amount of time. Individual participants were asked specific questions, while focus groups were asked a different set of questions. All interviews started with questions that built rapport, then followed by questions about their club involvement including offices held and dates. The following questions surrounded a sense of belonging before the COVID-19 pandemic and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the interview categories and questions were similar between individual interviews and focus groups, the focus group questions included discussion questions that allowed for all participants to share and discuss their experiences with each other, building on each other’s’ responses and coming to
a consensus on common themes among their experiences. All interviews took place over Zoom and were recorded with the participants’ permission.

In addition to interviews and focus groups, I also collected documents related to my case and the research purpose. Specifically, I collected flyers from their clubs, yearly active club lists, club rosters, and travel documents for the year before the COVID-19 pandemic and during the pandemic. I hoped to show analyze these documents for changes (if any) in involvement opportunities and participation.

**Data Analysis**

The data included interviews and documents. I used multiple rounds of coding to analyze the interview data. In the first coding round, I analyzed my interview data for participants’ descriptions of how involvement changed from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021. I then used descriptive coding for this round (Saldaña, 2016), focusing on how participants described involvement.

In the second coding round, I used emotion coding to examine students’ feelings regarding their experiences (Saldaña, 2016). I was able to ask questions in the interviews and focus groups and utilize the documents to help me better understanding their feelings, emotions and the overall experiences of what they encountered. I understood that everything would not come out verbally, so I paid close attention to non-verbal cues, which were just as important as verbal cues (Saldaña, 2016). I also utilized frequency counts and was aware of repetitive messaging (Saldaña, 2016).

In my third coding round, I analyzed how students’ perceived involvement during the COVID-19 pandemic and if it shaped their sense of belonging at the institution. I again engaged
in emotion coding along with descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2016). Descriptive coding allowed me to examine how students’ perceived involvement was related to students’ sense of belonging. On the other hand, emotion coding allowed me to analyze data for students’ emotions related to their sense of belonging and how involvement played into their sense of belonging.

In a final round of analysis, including the document analysis, I reviewed club flyers that were circulated on Engage during the fall 2019–spring 2020 vs. fall 2020–spring 2021. Student clubs could still circulate flyers and materials through ENGAGE (the electronic engagement system utilized by student life). Therefore, I looked to see if that number of student clubs utilizing ENGAGE to circulate club materials had changed or remained the same.

I also looked at the number of active clubs and club rosters from 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. I reviewed them to see if there was a change in the number of active clubs in 2019-2020 vs. 2020 – 2021 and the attendance of members from one year to the next. I also reviewed travel documents as travel is a large piece of our student involvement. I looked at the amount of travel that occurred in 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 and the number of students that traveled during those periods.

Lastly, I collapsed my codes into themes and relied closely on my research questions to understand the experiences of students with involvement during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this round of analysis, I utilized the findings from my document analysis and pulled in information from the documents to provide contextual information to students’ perceptions of what involvement looked like during the pandemic.
Limitation of the Research

A few limitations that need to be considered when interpreting my findings. Throughout the actual interviews, as the questions progressed (precisely questions regarding their sense of belonging to the institution and questions related to connectedness to the institution) I noticed a level of discomfort in a few participants due to what appeared that they did not know if their honesty would be used against them. I noticed squirming in their seats, sarcasm, and laughter outbursts prior to answering the question. I had to continue to remind these participants to be honest and share their truth for me to get the best perspective and understanding from the students. I reminded them that the information would be kept confidential. The data was for information purposes only and to better understand their experiences of club involvement through the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the document analysis, in reviewing the amount of activity that took place in ENGAGE (flyers and information upload), a limitation could be introducing so many other virtual engagement tools that students prescribe to, such as Discord. So, although they were not uploading flyers to ENGAGE, they may have been using other virtual engagement tools to communicate. Finally, I am aware that Astin’s theory of Involvement is grounded in whiteness. There’s definitely a needed for revisions to this theory as the consideration of the unique experience of students of color is missing.

Findings

My findings highlight how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted participant experiences with student engagement. The data gathered suggests that students preferred in-person student
engagement over virtual programming. Specifically, four significant themes showcase differences in student engagement pre-pandemic to during the pandemic: First, after the COVID-19 pandemic, students realized the importance of in-person activities to their happiness and contentment with involvement in clubs and organizations. Second, students felt they mattered and had a greater sense of belonging with face-to-face (pre-pandemic) programming. Third, students struggled to create involvement activities for their peers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fourth, students felt like outsiders at their institutions during the pandemic. I will discuss each of these themes next.

**Importance of in-person activities**

After the COVID-19 pandemic, participants realized the importance of in-person activities to their happiness and contentment with involvement in clubs and organizations. For example, Rose, a senior citizen, Army veteran, President of the Veterans club, and member of the Black Student Union, shared how she enjoyed her experiences with involvement before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. She said, "I felt good about my involvement. I enjoyed being involved." Rose's involvement before the COVID-19 pandemic involved in-person service activities such as assisting with serving food to veterans or attending parades. Activities included interacting with veterans and other volunteers. During the pandemic, involvement opportunities were moved to virtual spaces. Rose lacked familiarity with technology, which hindered her ability to engage in activities. She explained:

I had a hard time. I didn't know how to zoom in. I tried calling [the members of the Veteran's club] and trying to help and get them, like 'can I have you do this or that' and it was hard.
Barriers to involvement due to technology and the lack of service opportunities led Rose to be less involved during the pandemic. Rose shared:

"It wasn't easy. I was stressed. It was bad enough that I was stuck in the house by myself all time and having to keep up with work and stuff, but I had to deal with the stress of trying to help other veterans. It was tough, and a lot of times I wanted to quit but I knew they [the veteran students] were depending on me.

Rose’s comment highlights how the lack of in-person involvement opportunities negatively impacted her, to the point where she was considering dropping her engagement completely.

Like Rose, President of TRIO, member of the Multicultural Club, and non-traditional student Romero spoke of how easy and comfortable it was to be involved in clubs and organizations prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. He shared that he enjoyed the normalcy of in-person involvement. He said:

"It was a lot easier during those years before the pandemic started because everybody was here on campus, so it was very easy to see people, to put up displays like flyers and promote things on campus. It was just very easy before the pandemic as well as, like some, the time you see somebody who maybe showed up to an event or something, and they recognized you, or you recognized them, and you two engage in conversation with them.

For participants like Romero, connecting with others - from getting them to attend your events to engaging in conversations at those events - was more leisurely and required less effort before the pandemic. Romero smiled as he reminisced about his experiences before the COVID-19 pandemic, showing how involvement in the clubs and organizations brought him joy and contentment.

Porsha, President of the Black Student Union, shared the differences she experienced with clubs and organizations before the pandemic. She said:
It was very active; I noticed that more members was willing to come up to you without being afraid of touching you due to germs or anything. They were more friendly and hyper and just active in their involvement, which made me want to get in more clubs.

The increased engagement and higher level of interaction made participants like Porsha more interested in and willing to get involved. She also shared her satisfaction and enjoyment with her involvement in clubs and organizations before the COVID-19 pandemic by explaining, "I was happy. It gave me purpose. It gave me a sense of knowing that Region Valiant College does activities on campus and there's something to do besides going to classes and doing your homework." For Porsha, involvement not only provided an opportunity to get more engaged on campus but also gave her a sense of "purpose" and brought her joy. She excitedly shared her enjoyment with in-person engagement, but when asked about her experiences with clubs and organizations after the pandemic, her energy and enjoyment subsided. She shared:

It just didn't feel as if other clubs and organizations were engaging the same anymore, or it just didn't feel how it felt before COVID, it wasn't mainly any activities going on, and I noticed every club was struggling. So participation, it just felt low.

Porsha's comment highlights the differences between pre-pandemic involvement and involvement during the pandemic, with the first bringing her joy and fulfillment while the latter a struggle due to low participation and challenges related to organizing activities. Similarly, Eddie, who was the philosophy club president and was actively involved in student activities before the pandemic, shared about his pre-pandemic involvement:

It was a very positive experience. It was nice having monthly meetings because it created a network of students who were interested in participating in the school. It gave me an outlet to try some new things. I mean, I got to do a research study on my own, which was exciting, as well as getting the business cards, getting involved with the band, and things like that. I had a really good experience.
Reflecting on involvement pre-pandemic, students at Region Valiant College noted the value and the impact that in-person involvement had on them. Participants unanimously spoke of their favorable experiences with in-person participation. In addition, they consistently shared their happiness and delight with programming and activities within their clubs and organizations before the pandemic.

**Participants felt a sense of belonging with F2F engagement Pre COVID-19**

Participants felt a greater sense of belonging with face-to-face (pre-COVID-19 pandemic) engagement. Specifically, participants noted that in-person involvement allowed them to find a community. For example, Elizabeth, President of the Association of Latin American Students, shared she found her group during Welcome Week. She said:

> Since the first student life event, I felt like I could ask for help whenever I needed to. Even though I just met people that first day. Everyone had a professional level and I would say I felt very welcome. Ok, so this first student life event they had for clubs was in the atrium. It was called Welcome Week. So, there was tables and food that was set up with these organizations, and they were in person. They had activities to hand out and even little gifts as well. You know, in person, you could talk. I met the ALAS members there, and the same day there was a meeting going on, so I was able to be in the same room, and you have the resources there and have easier access for that as well.

Elizabeth's first casual encounter with in-person clubs and organizations led her to feel welcomed which made her comfortable to attend the meeting, join the club, and ultimately become President of the club. Involvement also allowed her to become more aware of resources on campus and in the community:

> Meeting everyone that day changed things for me. It made me get involved and made me more aware. Well to be specific, joining ALAS (Association of Latin American Students) made me more aware of not just what was going on in school but outside in the community. There were more resources for us (Latin American students). The club
opened more doors for resources. You know, for example, ALAS opened doors and provided resources for students who were undocumented, for one. You know, you had the DACA students. That was one too. You had involvement in the community with local community organizations that would help out ALAS. You had public places where they would also help outside of the school too. So I would say it [F2F involvement] opened a lot of doors for me, not just in the college but in the community. It opened my eyes more.

By virtue of in-person engagement opportunities, participants like Elizabeth were exposed to others that could provide them with resources on and off campus, in particular on- and off-campus organizations that relate to their identities. Being able to connect and relate to others that come from similar backgrounds and have similar needs (i.e., DACA and resources for Latin American students), participants like Elizabeth found their community.

Similarly, Amina, an international student and member of the Black Student Union (BSU) executive board shared how involvement helped her gain a sense of belonging. She said:

I definitely, 1000% felt like I belonged. I'm trying to think of an example that I could share. Maybe the group activities that we would do. It was always very inclusive, and because I had my sister, BSU, as well as my friend, they always made sure to include me in things, especially my first month or first semester at VRC. Cause like I said, I did feel intimidated a little bit, but BSU always made sure to have a sense of belonging with the kind of activities that we would have. So that was good. I'm trying to think of an example of certain activities that we did, but honestly, most of them were very team, teamwork-based, or team-based, in which I would have to work with other people, and they would have to work with me, and we all liked the tasks that we had to do and depend on each other.

While Amina had a sister and friend at school with her, she was intimidated by trying to connect with others on campus. The collaborate nature of in-person engagement in the Black Student Union allowed Amina to get to know others, find a community, and develop a sense of belonging at the institution.

Terry, the President of Circle K also shared his struggles with finding and connecting with his people but in-person involvement helped him overcome these challenges. Terry said:
As a black male, non-traditional student with a disability and a disability that people can’t see, I didn’t think my college experience was gonna be a good one. I was constantly ignored and dissed in high school. I didn’t roll with a lot of people then, but I met John here at Valiant Region College and he invited me to a club meeting. Man, I was shocked cause when I got there everyone treated me nice, everyone was cool. I mean, they pulled me right in and by my second year I was an officer. I mean, it was weird cause no one ever made me feel like I wasn’t welcome or that I was different. I felt they seen me. I felt they seen me for who I really am and not my disability. From the students to the staff and the institute as a whole, just like them [speaking of other participants in the focus group], I felt like I belonged.

Terry, who had negative experiences in high school, was worried that his experience in college would be similar. However, getting involved in a club allowed him to find a peer group that valued and respected him, which made him feel like he belonged at college. Participants like Terry emphasized the importance of feeling welcome and finding a group of peers to developing a sense of belonging at the institution. In-person involvement pre-pandemic allowed him and others to do so.

Students struggled to create involvement activities during the COVID-19 pandemic

Involvement opportunities for student decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Document analysis indicated a decrease in club flyers being circulated on Engage from fall 2019–Spring 2020 to Fall 2020–Spring 2021 by 58%. The clubs submitted 130 flyers to Engage in 2019-2020 and 55 flyers during 2020-2021. Interestingly, Student Life generated flyers increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019-2020 Student Life had 14 flyers in Engage whereas in 2020-2021 Student Life had 62 flyers in Engage which was a 77% increase of Student Life initiated involvement. These numbers indicate that programming responsibilities shifted from student-led initiatives to programming planned and executed by Student Life staff. In addition, while in
2019-2020, 22 clubs traveled to conferences, conventions, college and university tours, campgrounds, cultural events and more, there was no travel in 2020-2021.

Active clubs and club rosters attendance showed a decrease in participation. In 2019-2020 there were 35 active clubs with a total membership of 259 students (some students could be repeated if they’re involved in multiple clubs). In 2020-2021 there were 26 active clubs with a total membership of 99. Nineteen of 26 clubs dropped 50% or below in membership between 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 resulting in a 73% decrease of membership (looking specifically at clubs that were active in both years). There was only one new club that was developed in 2020-2021 during the pandemic and that was E-Sports which had a groundbreaking year with a membership of 16 members.

Interview data highlighted the challenges student leaders encountered as they tried to create involvement opportunities for their peers. Most students were familiar and accustomed to the in-person involvement and appreciated the connectedness they felt because of it. They found it extremely difficult and somewhat foreign to create engagement opportunities in a virtual format, which did not lead to the same feelings of connectedness and community as in-person engagement. For example, Porsha, President of BSU shared:

Participation went low. It just didn’t feel as if other clubs, or it just didn’t feel how it felt before COVID. It wasn’t, there wasn’t mainly any activities going on, and I noticed that every club was struggling. So participation, it was just very low. It felt like we had to do everything we could to just still make it a good club, or an active club.

Student organization leaders like Porsha struggled to get others involved and excited about their club. Porsha noted how involvement did not feel the same as when they met in person
and she attributed this lack of feeling connected to the low participation. Clubs also functioned differently, as Porsha explained:

I noticed everything was virtual. So in order to bring in members, a lot of people had to do online meetings, which was kind of a struggle as well, so that was a change. It was not very hands-on as it was before, and it was just a difficult time to get members to be involved. Yeah. I could say that. It was just very difficult and everything had to be virtual.

The virtual format did not lend itself to providing “hands-on” involvement opportunities, which likely led to feelings of not being connected and a lack of interest in participation.

Having to meet virtually also created challenges for students, who were unable to find a quiet space for these meetings. For example, Romero, President of TRIO club, shared:

It was kinda weird and it was kinda hard because were so use to always meeting up in person in one of the club rooms or conference room and it’s usually kinda beside like friends hanging out as opposed to now you’re at home in your room and you kinda find somewhere quiet because you have either your parents or siblings or something like that yelling in the background and you got to hurry and mute and say I need a couple of minutes of quiet time but it was very very hard to try to assume to do club meetings and to try to plan or virtually plan things through online.

Romero found it quite difficult trying to balance and maneuver being home and running the club with all the background distractions. Due to the distractions, participants like Romero were unable to focus on the club meeting, the way they had been when meeting in person. In addition, Romero, like Porsha, noted how meeting virtually felt differently because of a lack of connectedness. The struggles with running his club impacted Romero personally. He said:

Me personally, it was very stressful. At some point in time I began to feel like quite a failure. Because at one point in time I had a decent amount of followers and the next thing you know everyone’s not coming and not participating even though we’re sending out reminders like hey we have a club meeting coming up tomorrow at 1 o clock, here’s the zoom link and everything, can’t wait to see you there so we can talk about some club events and try to do virtually and yeah just trying to do that it felt a little like me personally it just felt like I let the club down because I couldn’t I know it was out of my hand because of the pandemic but to me personally but I kinda felt like a little bit of a
failure because I couldn’t keep the club members coming back every week for the meetings and everything.

Being unable to create excitement and get more student involved, Romero felt like he was failing in his responsibilities of a president. Rather than bringing participants joy, as involvement had prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, their engagement in clubs now created new stressors and frustration.

Students felt like an outsider at the institution during the COVID-19 pandemic

Participants shared experiences of feeling like an outsider at the institution. Participants found it challenging and in fact struggled staying connected to the institution during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gabe, member of ALAS and Multicultural club shared:

Yeah, I really felt like an outsider during COVID because like I said I took classes during this time and in between class I would just go into the student life room and I’m used to just being with friends there or with other club members and during COVID, it was just like I would just go to class and then go straight home or if I do go to student room, I’d just be by myself. So, it made me really feel like an outsider. It went from us feeling all together to feeling all alone. Man, I hated COVID.

Gabe was upset with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of interactions and social connections led him to feel like an outsider. Even when he tried to connect, by going to the Student Life office, he would not encounter others in the space, which only reinforced feelings of loneliness.

Like Gabe, Elizabeth, an ALAS officer felt like an outsider due to limited involvement. Elizabeth explained:

I did feel like an outsider because umm, in order to be an active member you have to attend the meetings. In order to attend the meetings, you have to know when those meetings are. In order to know when the meetings are there’s gotta be people getting together and planning stuff. During COVID it was just hard for people to come together and it just felt like giving up.
Participants like Elizabeth highlighted the challenges of planning events, when nobody was interacting with each other in person. These challenges led to fewer events, which led to fewer involvement opportunities, creating a lack of community on campus.

For some participants, the stark contrast between involvements pre-pandemic and during as well as after the pandemic intensified feelings of loneliness and disconnection. Lydia, a Vietnamese participant and Secretary of the Multicultural Club, shared:

Just getting used to the fact that we weren’t gonna see all of our friends or talk to all our friends every day was enough to feel like an outsider. Having that experience pre-COVID knowing how things used to be, it definitely makes you feel more like an outsider because then you know even then, coming back after COVID, you know people are just kind of starting to get, you know, trying to start back up these friendships and these connected parts, but you know nothing can compare to what it was before, so you really, definitely feel like, oh, you know, it’s awesome that they're starting to do this but I remember back in the day how it was and how it just ended so quickly. COVID will forever be our legacy and it’s sad.

Participants like Lydia had a hard time dealing with the fact that she lost so many of her friendships due to the pandemic. Experiencing how quickly friendships they built can end due to external circumstances made it difficult to fully immerse themselves in campus life after the pandemic.

Participants also questioned the motives and priorities of the institution during the pandemic, which intensified feelings of being an outsider. For example, Eric a non-traditional black man and immediate past Black Student Union president and member shared:

Certain dynamics that students of color went through because of cultural reference and lived experiences already causes them to feel like an outsider. But during the pandemic, I can’t say it got any better. Hell, I was a student and during this time I was just a number. So during COVID-19, I felt like the institution itself wasn’t prepared and they was left to focus on what was important and what was important to them was retaining numbers, not the needs of the individuals. It was more like, so how can we retain numbers or keep enrollment up during the pandemic? But it wasn’t focused on the needs of specific
students. This left students of color in a worst situation and you know as usual, feeling like outsiders.

Participants like Eric felt that the institution chose to focus on enrollment numbers over the needs of students during the pandemic. Being a student of color, Eric already felt like an outsider due to systemic oppression at U.S. higher education institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges. Feeling like his institution did not care about his needs during the pandemic and treated him like a number intensified feelings of being an outsider for Eric.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted students’ experiences with involvement on campus. When students were no longer able to participate in in-person involvement, they recognized how much they had enjoyed these activities and how important they were to fostering their sense of belonging on campus. Facilitating virtual programming during the pandemic did not lead to the same joy but instead created additional stressors for student leaders. The lack of interactions with others and questions about the institution’s commitment to supporting them led students to feel like outsiders at their institution during the pandemic.

Students shared their individual experiences of how they fared maneuvering the COVID-19 pandemic. They candidly communicated challenges and obstacles they experienced as club leaders, trying to function through the pandemic. They imparted much work, energy, and effort into maintaining involvement in their clubs during the pandemic. As Astin (1984) postulates that
mental and physical energy is needed to create involvement. Participants seemed to utilize mental and physical energy during 2019-2020, as evidenced by the quantity of events and travel but also their stories on the value of involvement pre-pandemic. Strayhorn (2018) posits students that are involved in on campus (in-person) activities and engagement have a greater sense of belonging.

In-person involvement offered participants a level of quality engagement that made them feel connected to the institution as well as a level of growth and development. Being able to consistently meet up in-person, share ideas, plan programs, learn from one another, take trips together and have lived and shared experiences offered them time to bond and get to know one another better. Donaldson (2020) asserted that benefits from involvement include developing a sense of belonging. He also shared that a part of finding that sense of belonging includes finding your tribe or your community. Strayhorn (2018) posited that positive experiences are created and developed through student involvement. Findings of this study related to in-person pre-pandemic involvement support these assertions. Participants built relationships and shared stories of positive experiences gained through student involvement, and it was clear that they developed a sense of belonging. They expanded on how these experiences made them feel welcomed and gave them a sense of belonging to the institution and campus. These were the good times they remembered and boasted about and the desire to return to these times.

Involvement drastically changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite their many efforts and the amount of time invested, participants shared their struggles of trying to keep involvement strong and alive during the pandemic. Participants spoke of feelings of failure and feeling like they let their clubs down during the pandemic. They spoke of the overwhelming
stress of trying to keep things afloat academically and socially as well as stories of experiencing isolation and loneliness during these times (Fitzgerald & Hill, 2020). Participants shared their struggles and woes with online engagement and technology. Many didn’t have operable internet service at home and weren’t technologically savvy and didn’t understand how to work Zoom, TEAMS, or other virtual communication tools (Thiry & Hug, 2021). Participants also found difficulty finding quiet spaces in their homes (with everyone in the households being home) to have meetings (Daniel, 2020). With entire families being forced back into the home, they were faced with yet another dynamic during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, participants emotionally shared experiences of losing campus friendships and connections that they worked so hard to make during in-person engagement. Working with one another on events, engagements and being in class together helped them forge relationships or better yet friendships. It is these experiences that lead to a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). Participants genuinely looked forward to seeing their friends each day.

In-person involvement offered participants a level of quality of engagement that made them feel connected to the institution; virtual involvement did not. Astin’s (1984) theory emphasizes that the more energy students put toward involvement the more rewards they will get out of being involved. However, during the pandemic, participants shared putting a lot of energy into involvement with little reward, which led to frustration and feeling like a failure. This study thus indicates that virtual involvement may not be as fulfilling as in-person involvement and that Astin’s (1984) theory cannot be applied to virtual involvement.
Implications for Practice and Future Research

This study informs and adds to the practice by providing transferable information to other student affairs practitioners. The study also adds to the literature of student involvement by providing insight into ways student involvement was experienced by students during the pandemic and how that may have impacted their sense of belonging. My hope is that future student affairs practitioners will find value in this research as it is timeless, in that we’ll be uncovering the impact of the pandemic for many years to come.

First, this study will inform practice by highlighting the importance of contingency planning. As seen through this experience, having lived through a pandemic, everyone must be able to navigate the predictable as well as the unpredictable. Contingency planning is key. It is now understood that having alternative options for student involvement is pivotal to the institution’s overall success. In order to mitigate zoom or teams as a barrier, a possible technology workshop during orientation could support their usage. Addressing the barrier of internet connectivity in the home, through connecting them community resources or the technology department at the institution for free or economical ways to access the internet serves as yet another alternative to a barrier. Clubs like E-Sports were at the forefront of contingency planning and by virtue of contingency planning throughout student life, the institution can continue to provide students with tools to usher in programs and activities despite the availability of being on or off campus.

It is also important for student affairs professionals to consider contingency planning throughout the entire department. However, it is difficult to prepare for what is unknown, so only
so much contingency planning can be undertaken. All the institution can do is make its best attempt at planning.

Second, this study informs practice by highlighting the value of in-person student involvement. With most of the research of clubs and organizations coming from the perspective of in-person involvement, by virtue of the pandemic, we’re forced to explore virtual engagement (Rosch et al., 2017). What we found was that students found the most enjoyment and successes through in-person involvement. Clubs thrived and members experienced the most joy with in-person involvement. Understanding the in-person success of student involvement, practitioners should work to provide these spaces and opportunities for students to meet and fellowship. Practitioners should also cultivate welcoming and functional spaces for students to meet. In doing so, this will continue to navigate environments that are conducive to the success of all students. On the other hand, we did the best we could with what we had. Due to the nuances of the pandemic and the immediate implementation of virtual club involvement, there was so much that we couldn’t explore. Exploring online engagement tools, which if any, clubs found successes in their virtual engagement, and exploring other similar institutions and their implementation of online engagement would have assisted in providing a better understanding of virtual involvement.

Future research may need to revolve around programs like discord for student engagement. eSports was established in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and found success in communicating and engaging with students through discord. Investing student leadership in online engagement is important to understand its use. As the world was unexpectedly catapulted into an online environment because of the pandemic and as technology
continues to grow and develop, these are but a few reasons to value and understand the importance of future research with technological advancements like discord.

Lastly, we are led to continue to explore creative ways and options of engagements because the research informs us that virtual engagement failed to provide participants with a sense of belonging. Practitioners must continue to search for alternative engagement tools and formats that will not only engage but will also lead to a sense of belonging. Based on the research, in-person involvement is pivotal to a sense of belonging in club involvement.

Conclusion

This research is timely and pivotal to future research. Whereas institutions of higher education have been developed to provide online degrees, little research exists on virtual student involvement with clubs and organizations and even less research exists with clubs and organizations during a pandemic. This research delves into examining student leaders’ experiences of maneuvering their clubs and organizations during the pandemic. The research also touches on student’s sense of belonging as they grappled to find understanding and balance during the pandemic.

The findings indicated through the research determined students were resilient throughout the pandemic. Participants shared their struggles to maintain their clubs and organizations despite the support offered through student life. The participants shared the importance of club involvement in their lives and how they developed and maintained lasting friendships which brought them joy. However, many lost hope in their clubs and their personal leadership as they failed to get the participation and support of their club members. Many also expressed feeling
like an outsider as they had trouble connecting during the pandemic. These participant experiences will add to the field as well as contribute to an unwavering belief in themselves and the future possibilities. I also hope that this work adds to the literature and puts the fire behind other researchers to find the joy in student involvement through clubs and organizations.
CHAPTER 3: SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

Overview

This dissertation of practice sought to explore student experiences and sense of belonging for Valiant Region College students involved in clubs and organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. By researching this topic, it was hoped to get a better perspective of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the student leaders in clubs and organizations. I wanted to get a better understanding of their experiences and learn directly from them how they were impacted by the pandemic. Did they continue to thrive programmatically during the pandemic? Were they able to easily transition their clubs from in-person to virtual? How did they feel about having to readjust and shift as it related to their clubs and organizations? These were pressing questions for me that inspired me to want to pursue this topic.

Through my research, I was able to bring to light the value and importance of in-person engagement within clubs and organizations. I’ve been able to highlight the impact of the pandemic through the eyes of students in extracurricular activities. I was also able to show how engagement impacts students in different ways. Furthermore, I was able to spotlight the emotions, feelings, growth, and challenges student leaders experienced while they led clubs and organizations during the pandemic.
Importance of the Research Topic

This topic was near and dear to me because I have a background in student affairs and in student life in particular, and working closely with the student leaders, I noticed a few things that caused me to desire a better understanding. I experienced their journey as they maneuvered each day to lead their clubs and organizations through a pandemic. I experienced firsthand their tenacity, endurance and strength while planning and implementing programmatic initiatives. Through our conversations, zoom calls, team meetings, and texts I saw their challenges, struggles of sadness, hopelessness, and in some instances their desire to quit the clubs and organizations.

The Process

Many articles and information surfaced on the challenges in and out of the classroom the pandemic had on students and student learning (Hill & Fitzgerald, 200; Thiry & Hug, 2021). This research led me to want to better understand the impact from the student affairs and student life perspective. Having a background in student affairs and in student life in particular, and working closely with the student leaders, I noticed a few things that caused me to desire a better understanding. First, the students need to engage is important to their overall development (Ivanova & Moretti, 2018; & Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Webber et al.; 2013) and second, the pandemic had a greater effect on students that expand beyond academics. I experienced their journey as they maneuvered each day to lead their clubs and organizations through a pandemic. I experienced firsthand their tenacity, endurance, and strength while planning and implementing programmatic initiatives.
Throughout the interviews, I was able to help participants reflect on their experiences before and after the pandemic. Participants were able to reminisce on their experiences and understand how the pandemic impacted so many aspects of their lives. They were also able to reflect on how they learned from their experiences; where they sought out, created, and developed innovative ways they kept their clubs engaged. Participants were able to recognize and acknowledge how in-person engagement gave them a sense of belonging and left them feeling happy and content.

Internal Struggles

Personally, as I struggled through my own challenges of completing this dissertation, I understood better their feelings of hopelessness and their desire to quit. Throughout the process, I experienced imposter syndrome in the worst way. I submitted so many drafts until I began to believe it wasn’t going to happen. I had so many obstacles I was faced with (mentally and physically health related) that I began to believe completing a doctorate degree was just not in my future. I also had so much to learn as I worked through my writing.

I would say, if I knew then what I know now, I would have done a few things different. As I was coding my data, I realized some things that I could have done that would have helped me as I maneuvered through my findings section. For instance, I would’ve elaborated more within my interviews. Although I gained a wealth of information throughout the interviews, as I began to process the data, I realized I had so many more questions. I acknowledge however this could have been a blessing and a curse, but the information took me down way too many rabbit holes in search for more answers.
Another jewel I would have adhered to was I would’ve invested in a dissertation journal. I would have taken every thought, question, concern etc. and included in a journal (under subheadings of course). There were so many times throughout the process that I wanted to go back and refer to things I had encountered but forgotten. Whether it was an idea, a note, or a feeling I had about something, having a journal would have allowed me to do so and refer as needed.

Enlisting a mentor to assist through this process would have also been instrumental. In fact, having a recent graduate from the program as a peer mentor (volunteering of course) could have been a game changer. The volunteer mentors would not be meant to review or edit the dissertation but to share in questions and answers (e.g., what should be included in your chapter 3, what were some expectations and experiences you encountered). This type of information overall would’ve been important when considering what might be beneficial in completing the dissertation.

In completing the dissertation process, I learned organization is key. There are so many moving parts to the dissertation that staying organized would simply be an asset to the progression. I would also ask more questions and do more research on the dissertation process. Despite having support and a committee to guide me, there were still pieces that I missed because I did not ask the right questions. I could have also solicited additional support and answers from people that have already gone through the process.

Another thing I would have done was to have taken time away from work, home, and personal commitments, to just write and focus on the dissertation. During the process, I maintained every commitment, engagement and work responsibility required of me. At points
throughout the process, I even added to the already required expectations by taking on more responsibilities and duties. I also received a promotion at work during this time and had additional employees assigned under my leadership. Having gone through this, I understand now this requires a different level of commitment to complete the process.

On top of everything else, I experienced some health challenges along the way because the process caused a high level of stress. I live with an auto-immune disease (Lupus) that is triggered by stress. I realized I need to take better care of my health as I was trying to achieve a goal. I have been dealing with lupus for years and stress is a trigger for lupus flares. Throughout this process, I’ve undergone multiple flares so my takeaway and advice would be to take care of yourself.

As far as the research is concerned, I would have interviewed more participants which would have allowed me more voices to understand their experiences. Through the 12 participant interviews I was able to gauge similar themes throughout the responses. Although the themes themselves may have remained consistent, the individual experiences were unique and important to the research.

Successes

Despite the challenges and learned lessons, I also experienced triumphs. I was grateful to be able to reconnect with student leaders that I had not heard from in years. I was able to hear their firsthand experiences of their student engagement and leadership while at the institution. I also received clarity on many things I assumed along the way but had no research to back and
now I will be able to utilize the data to understand how I can better assist students maneuvering through alternative engagement options.

The program itself despite the changes that have occurred over the years, has been great. I absolutely love the meet ups and feedback provided to the doctoral students. For those who experience imposter syndrome, like me, the meet ups offer support and encouragement, which I’ve found is half the battle. The support and mentorship from the faculty and chair has also been pivotal to my success in the program.

I am further grateful to the process as this research has caused me to look at student engagement through a different lens. Watching student leaders that were involved in clubs and organizations prior to and after the COVID-19 pandemic has shown me so much. In the future I hope to cultivate student involvement through clubs and organizations as I’ve experienced firsthand the value and takeaways of student involvement on the students. Since I have completed my research we have developed a program called *What’s the Tea Tuesdays* where we invite students into the student life office for chats and tea because of the value of face to face interactions identified in my findings. This program is a partnership with our Intercultural Student Services department yet brings in students from clubs and organizations weekly for general chats, random questions, and answers and just an opportunity to bond.

Student life is also undergoing an uplift and developing a more welcoming space for our students to engage. We’ve brought in bean bags chairs, a new carpet, and we’re planning a few more up uplifts and environmental changes to create a space that students will enjoy. We’ve also initiated Student Life Open House. We have an open house each semester to let the campus and students know that we exist for all students. We have food, popcorn and cotton candy machines
and provide a fun and engaging environment for students in hopes that they return and take advantage of the student life office. These are just some of the initiatives that have been implemented from my research. My hope is to continue to develop programs and initiatives that will benefit the students in clubs and organizations as they engage in their face to face activities and involvement.

Ultimately, this entire experience has helped me to develop into a better college administrator. It has allowed me to think intentionally about our students and the impact student life has on their overall development. It has forced me to consider the value Student Life has in Student Affairs. In many instances, Student Life is simply viewed as the department that provides fun and activities for our students. This research has shown that Student Life is much more than fun. It is an integral piece of the higher education structure and is pivotal to providing students with a sense of belonging to the institution. Therefore, I am forever grateful to provide this important piece of the college experience to our students.

Personal Future Goals

Because I have completed my degree, I now have the ability to reach more colleagues in Student Affairs. This research can crossover to two and four year colleges and universities. I hope to present and publish my findings throughout academia, e.g. NACADA, NASPA, etc. These findings can impact the way student affairs professional view students in clubs and organizations.

In the future I would like to continue researching student clubs and organizations and the benefits of face to face engagement. Additionally, I would also like to investigate how we can
enrich online student interactions and engagement. Because the virtual environment has proven to be successful academically, it is now time to ensure positive student engagement online utilizes best practices. Those must be identified and shared across institutions.

Changes Post COVID-19

As we move through the endemic, clubs and organizations are slowly rebuilding their momentum and membership. Clubs members are slowly beginning to take advantage of student life and student organizations. Programming initiatives are increasing to promote and encourage student involvement. The office of Student Life has developed Open House days and is undergoing a revamp of the office to make it more welcoming. The office of Student Life has also collaborated with the Intercultural Student Service department to hold bi-monthly What’s the Tea Tuesdays to discuss different topics and issues including how students will move past the challenges faced during the pandemic.

Conclusion

I found this research to be timely, eye opening and necessary. As we move through the endemic and seek to learn more from our experiences behind the COVID-19 pandemic, I’m excited about future research. I’m excited about how I can utilize the research to assist our students in higher education. This research, case study has given me a new outlook. I have so much admiration for the strength and persistence these students embodied, having to maneuver through a pandemic. I believe their shared experiences are a true testament to their resilience and power to lead. I have so much hope for our future, at my current institution and in the field
of academia and higher education. I look forward to seeing our former college club leaders grow, develop and pave the way for future generational leaders.
REFERENCES


Yin, R. K. (2016) *Qualitative research from start to finish.* Guilford Press.


APPENDIX A

STUDENT INTERVIEWS QUESTIONS
Appendix A: Student Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study. The purpose of this single qualitative case study is to explore the experiences and sense of belonging for Valiant Region College (pseudonym) students and advisors involved in clubs and organizations. Please feel free to notify me if you have any questions. Now I’ll review the consent process. Do you have any questions at this point?

Rapport Building Questions:
- Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your experiences at the institution?

Involvement in 2019-2020:
- What club/s were you involved in the 2019-2020 school year?
- What office did you hold in the 2019-2020 school year?
- What was your experience with club involvement before COVID?
- How did club recruitment and retention look before COVID?
- How did you feel about your involvement before COVID?

Sense of Belonging:
- How did your involvement influence other aspects of your experiences at the institution?
- Who are the peers you spend most of your time with?
  - How did you meet those peers?
- How connected do you feel to the institution?
  - Do you ever feel like an outsider at the institution? If so, can you share an experience or incident where you felt like an outsider?
Do you ever feel like you belong at the institution? If so, can you share an experience or incident where you felt like you belonged?

Do you feel like you matter to others at the institution? If so, can you share an experience or incident where you felt like you mattered?

Involvement in 2020/2021:

- What club/s were you involved in the 2020-2021 school year?
- What office did you hold in the 2020-2021 school year?
- What changes occurred in the participation of club members following COVID?
- How did club recruitment and retention change during/following COVID?
- What was the connection to the club and the campus in a remote setting like?
- What was your personal experience like with club involvement during COVID?
- What efforts, if any, were taken to sustain the club or organization?
- What aspects pre-COVID did you retain during COVID (i.e., meeting times, dates, and frequency)?
- How would you explain support received from campus during COVID?

Sense of Belonging during COVID:

- How, if at all, did your feelings of connectedness and mattering to the institution change during COVID?
  
  - Did you ever feel like an outsider at the institution during COVID? If so, can you share an example?
- Who, if anyone, from the institution did you spend time with during COVID?
- How did involvement play into your feelings of connectedness and belonging at the institution?
APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Appendix B: Focus Group Student Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study. The purpose of this single qualitative case study is to explore the experiences and sense of belonging of students involved in clubs and organizations. Please let me know if you have any questions. Now I’ll review the consent process. Do you have any questions at this point?

Rapport Building Questions:

- Can we go around and have everyone introduce themselves? Please share your name, pronouns (if you would like), and what clubs or organizations you are involved with in the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years and in what capacity?

Involvement in 2019-2020/2021-2022:

- Discuss the temperature/climate within your specific club before and during COVID?
- Discuss your experiences in dealing with club involvement before and during COVID (positive, negative or indifferent)?
- In dealing with those experiences before and during COVID, if you could make any changes, what would they be (positive, negative or indifferent)?

Sense of Belonging:

- Did you feel connected to the institution before COVID (2019-2020)? Did you feel connected to the institution? (2020-2021)? If yes, please share how you feel connected to the institution? If you didn’t feel connected to the institution, share why?
- Can you remember and share a particular situation that cause you to feel connected or not connected to the institution?
- Can you share, if your feelings of connectedness and mattering to the institution changed during COVID?
APPENDIX C

EMAIL INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE (STUDENTS)
Appendix C: Email Invitation to Participate (Students)

A Qualitative Case Study on Student Experiences of Involvement in Clubs and Organizations during COVID-19

Date: ________________

We invite you to participate in a research study conducted by Luevinus Muhammad, students at Regions Valiant College. Our faculty advisor is Dr. Gudrun Nyunt, Associate Professor, Higher Education. The purpose of this single qualitative case study is to explore the experiences and sense of belonging for Valiant Region College (pseudonym).

Eligible participants must be:
- Students who served as club/leaders/officers during 2019/2020 academic year.
- Students who served as club leaders/officers during the 2020/2021 academic year

We will interview participants which should take approximately 45-60 minutes in a natural setting. This interview contains questions about student’s experience being involved in clubs and organization before and during the pandemic and the impact, if any. Your responses will be anonymous and confidential.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate you may choose to discontinue participation at any time and you may choose any of the interview questions that you do not wish to answer. Your completion of the interview indicates your consent to participate in this study. Feel free to contact me at lmuhammad@niu.edu or 815-757-2044 if you have questions.

Sincerely,

Luevinus Muhammad
APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT AGREEMENT
Appendix D: Participant Informed Consent Agreement

[DOWNLOAD THIS DOCUMENT AND THEN TYPE WITHIN IT]

What a Difference a Day Makes? A Qualitative Case Study on Student Experiences of Involvement in Clubs and Organizations during COVID-19

Investigators

Luevinus

Name: Muhammad Dept.: CAHE Phone: 815-757-2044

Key Information

- This is a voluntary research study on student experiences of involvement in clubs and organizations during COVID 19.
- This 60-90 minute dissertation study involves students (past/present) being interviewed in person or via zoom.
- The benefits include this research will add and inform the practice as well as the literature on student involvement; the risks include are minimal to none.

Description of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore student experiences of student involvement in clubs and organizations before and during COVID-19. If you agree to be a part of this study, you will be asked to volunteer and participate in a 60-90 minute interview or focus group. You will be asked to answer the questions to the best of your knowledge; however, no pressure will forced upon you (if you don’t feel comfortable answering specific questions you may skip the question).

Risks and Benefits

There are no reasonably foreseeable or expected risks. The benefits of participation are it will allow for future contingency planning, strategic planning, it will ultimately inform the practice, it will provide insight into ways virtual student involvement can shape student belonging and lastly, it will add to the current literature. This benefits can impact the students as well as the practice.

Confidentiality [or ANONYMITY]

- This study is anonymous. We will not be collecting or retaining any information about your identity.
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 coded and secured using a password protected file. Zoom files will be available to the researcher only and will be deleted upon completion of the study. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

With your permission, your identity will be made known in written materials resulting from the study. However, you will be given the opportunity to review and approve any material that is published about you.

It should be understood that, when participating in a focus group, confidentiality among the members of the group cannot be guaranteed.

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, Luevinus Muhammad at luevinusmuhammad@gmail.com or by telephone at 815-757-2044 or Dr. Gudrun Nyunt at gnyunt@niu.edu or by. [If you are a student, you must also include your faculty mentor’s contact information.] 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.

[For research involving more than minimal risk, or involving risk of physical harms, the following statement should be included:] Northern Illinois University policy does not provide medical treatment or compensation for treatment of injuries that may occur as a result of participation in research activities. The preceding information shall not be construed as a waiver of any legal rights or redress which the participants may have.

Future Use of the Research Data

Your information collected as a part of this research will not be used or distributed for future research, even if all identifiers are removed.

Disclosure of Research Results to Participants

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 printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

I agree to participate in this research study through an interview ☐ or focus group ☐ or both ☐

__________________________________
Participant’s Signature

___________
Date

[If audio or videotaping will occur, add a second signature and date line preceded by a sentence such as I give my consent to be audio recorded (or video recorded, as appropriate) during the (insert a description of the research activities that will be recorded)]

_______________________________________          _______
Participant’s Signature          Date
APPENDIX E

STUDENT RECRUITMENT FLYER (INVITE TO PARTICIPATE)
Appendix E: Student Recruitment Flyer (invite to participate)
APPENDIX F

ACTIVE CLUBS AND ORGANIZATIONS
2019-2020 & 2020-2021
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alpha Delta Nu – Nursing Honor Society</th>
<th>Future Problem Solvers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALAS – Association of Latin American Students</td>
<td>Molar Bears – Dental Hygiene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aviation Club</td>
<td>Multicultural Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belegarth Medieval Combat Society</td>
<td>Outdoors Activities + Recreation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Student Union</td>
<td>Peer Mentoring Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowling Club</td>
<td>Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Activities Board</td>
<td>Promise Scholars Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry Club</td>
<td>Psychology Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circle K International</td>
<td>Rock Valley Visuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta Alpha Pi International Honors Society</td>
<td>Table top Gaming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitness, Wellness &amp; Sport Club</td>
<td>Running Start Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>InterVarsity Christian Fellowship</td>
<td>RVC- Students of Service Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese Multimedia and Culture Club</td>
<td>RVC Veterans Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Mic Club</td>
<td>Student Government Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRIO Club/TRIO COMPLETE</td>
<td>Students for Responsible Environmental Sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay Pride Alliance</td>
<td>RVC Fencing Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Generation Student Club</td>
<td>That Club Than Which None Greater Can Be Conceived – Philosophy Club</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 2020 – 2021 Active Clubs and Organizations

| ALAS – Association of Latin American Students | Molar Bears – Dental Hygiene Multicultural Club |
| Belegarth Medieval Combat Society | Peer Mentoring Club |
| Black Student Union | Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society |
| Campus Activities Board | Promise Scholars Students |
| Chemistry Club | Running Start Club |
| Circle K International | RVC- Students of Service Club |
| Delta Alpha Pi International Honors Society | RVC Veterans Association |
| E-Sports | Student Government Association |
| Future Problem Solvers | Students for Responsible Environmental Sustainability |
| InterVarsity Christian Fellowship | RVC Fencing Club |
| Japanese Multimedia and Culture Club | Table top Gaming |
| Queer Pride Alliance | That Club Than Which None Greater Can Be Conceived – Philosophy Club |