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## **Belonging in Context: An Exploration of Sense of Belonging Among College Students**

LaDonna L. Gleason

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BELONGING IN CONTEXT: AN EXPLORATION OF SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG  
COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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## DEDICATION

To my mom, Audrey Noble – I miss you. Thank you for setting the best example of how to be a selfless and loving person who fully sees and values others. I wish you could be here to see how it all turned out, but I am so grateful that you got to know where it was going. I will never forget the night your pain would not let you sleep but your joy for life and your love for the outdoors would not let you stay inside. We sat out under the stars, talking belonging and love and life for hours. You knew where this work was going before anyone else. I will cherish that memory forever. Love you.

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are and for guiding them to their highest potential (even when they assure you that they have no interest in pursuing a clinical career – ha!). Your authenticity, genuine care for clients and supervisees alike, and your unwavering support have provided the model for the kind of clinician I hope to become.

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## ABSTRACT

Feeling a sense of belonging is essential to human health and functioning and has been well documented in the literature. However, questions of context remain. Research in belonging has focused on social aspects of belonging, leaving broader contextual frames unexplored. There has been little work in identifying and differentiating the contexts in which belonging is experienced or in developing an understanding of how the experience of belonging differs across contexts. Current belonging theory lacks this important contextual perspective that could inform the ways in which belonging is constructed and reconstructed through disruption. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, new social distancing policies and guidelines changed the ways in which people maintain their sense of belonging in social relationships. Campus closures, abrupt transitions to virtual learning, and new policies around social gathering suddenly and drastically changed the social landscape for college students. As there has been no research in this area to date, little is known about how these disruptions have affected the ways in which college students experience sense of belonging. The current study took an exploratory, hypothesis-building approach to determine the contexts in which sense of belonging is constructed for college students, and how the experience of belonging has changed since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. A cross-sectional, mixed-method design was used to gather data about the experience of belonging for 21 college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results suggest that college students' overall sense of belonging is constructed across multiple contexts, both social and nonsocial, with discrete experiences of belonging that vary by context. This study captured the early impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on college students' sense of belonging by illustrating contextual shifts in students' composition of social and nonsocial contexts of belonging. These findings reflect and elaborate on recent research supporting theories of multiple pathways to belonging (Hirsch and Clark, 2019) and the role of social surrogates in comprising an overall sense of belonging (Gabriel et al., 2016). Findings from the current study have implications for belonging theory, research, and clinical settings. To support and extend belonging theory, this work contributes a contextual framework for belonging and offers new avenues of investigation for future research to follow.



## PREFACE

In the tradition of locating oneself within qualitative study, I offer some of my experiences of belonging that led to the questions underlying this work. I was fortunate to be raised in a family where my sense of belonging was strong and certain. Our little band of five was *closely knit*, as they say, and created a stronghold of security from which all manner of challenges were withstood. My father's interesting line of work created opportunities for travel unusual for most kids, and the numbers of homes, classrooms, neighborhoods, and states climbed ever higher as I grew. As an extraverted person who enjoys being around others, I was always able to find my people. Still, with each new neighborhood and classroom, there was always an initial pondering – how do I belong here, in this new place? Beyond the constant presence of family, the budding friendships and other social ties, there were connections to space and activity that were meaningful to me – first more and then less so as my tenure in each new place lengthened. Even while navigating these experiences, I noticed these things and wondered about them. As an adult creating the secure base and strong ties within my own family and communities of choice, echoes from my early belonging experiences rang through. Having felt the importance of belonging in my own life and having seen the ways that people, space and activity impacted my experience, questions about the role of context arose for me. I brought these life experiences to this work in the form of curiosity and openness to learn from others who reconstructed their sense of belonging following disruption.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Belongingness has long been considered essential to human health and functioning and research has privileged belonging as foundational to health and wellbeing. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, first posited in 1943 and later refined (1954, 1987), places the need for love and belonging among a set of deficiency needs, following physiological (e.g., air, food, water) and safety (e.g., protection from elements, freedom from fear) needs that motivate people to attain them when unmet. Maslow described love and belonging needs as "*hunger for relations with people in general – for a place in the group or family*" and suggested that the thwarting of these needs may be at the core of "*cases of maladjustment and more severe pathology*" (Maslow, 1954, pp. 20-21). Research has shown that, even in infancy, the need for sense of place and belonging among others is tantamount to the need for food and shelter; just as lacking the latter is detrimental to physical health, lacking an assured bond with others withers the psyche. For instance, babies raised in socially impoverished institutional settings go on to develop poorly from what has been termed failure-to-thrive (Spitz, 1945; Johnson et al., 1992; Kaler & Freeman, 1994). Across the lifespan, thwarted belongingness has been implicated in the desire for suicide (Joiner, 2007). Conversely, those with positive and enriched connections to others have better mental and physical health, and even lowered mortality (Brummett et al., 2001; Umberson & Montez, 2010). So pervasive were

findings such as these, that Baumeister & Leary (1995) established belonging as an essential human need. Given this, it is unsurprising that Fiske (2018) counts belonging as the root need among the core social motives that underlie all of social decision-making and behavior.

The essentiality of belongingness to human health and functioning has been well documented in the psychological literature, yet questions of context have been far less explored. There has been little work in identifying and differentiating the contexts in which belonging is experienced or in developing an understanding of how the experience of belonging might be qualitatively different across contexts (Wallace & Chhuon, 2012). Less attention has been paid to belonging outside of interpersonal social relationships. With notable exceptions in the fields of sociology (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Antonisch, 2010) and human geography (Fenster, 2005), there is scant literature on the experience of belonging in other-than-social contexts like public, private, or nature spaces, systems of productivity (e.g., skill, work), or within the self. In the psychology disciplines, belongingness inquiry has centered on social belonging, or sense of belonging among other people, leaving broader contextual frames unexplored. Yet, with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 that led to new social distancing guidelines in the United States, the ways in which people establish and maintain social relationships have changed considerably and possibly permanently (Rosenfeld et al., 2020). For college students, the campus closures, abrupt transitions to distance learning, and new policies for social gatherings suddenly and drastically changed the social landscape. It is unknown how these disruptions have affected sense of belonging among this group.

Given the essentialness of the need to belong and the adverse consequences of thwarted belongingness, a contextual exploration of the experience of belonging could have research and clinical implications for college students facing these and similar challenges to belonging now and in the future. To these ends, the purpose of the current exploratory study was to describe the contexts in which sense of belonging is experienced for college students, and how the experience of belonging was disrupted and reconstructed during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the global pandemic and resulting social isolation policies as the backdrop, this study aimed to (1) describe the meaning, experience, and importance of belonging for college students, (2) determine and describe the contexts in which college students experience sense of belonging, (3) enumerate and quantify the contexts of belonging experienced by college students, (4) explore how college students' overall sense of belonging relates to contextual experiences of belonging, and (5) explore how sense of belonging within and across contexts has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This dissertation begins with a review of the literature on belonging theory that will provide background for the study. A description of the modified grounded theory approach that guided the study is followed by the specific aims and research questions. The method section describes the sampling and recruitment procedures and provides an account of the mixed method research procedures for both the qualitative and quantitative portions of the study. Included in this section are descriptions of the three interview instruments that were utilized in the qualitative portion of the study. Also presented are details for the quantitative portion of the study and the quantitative instruments that were integrated through a convergent mixed method design. A results section outlining the



qualitative and quantitative findings, organized by aim and research question, follow the method section. Finally, a discussion of the study's outcome and significance for this research concludes the dissertation. An appendix with the qualitative interview instruments, quantitative measures, recruitment and consent documents, and supplementally results tables are included at the end of the references section.

## **Literature Review**

This modified grounded theory study was designed to be both exploratory and systematic in nature. The study's research questions were informed by belonging theory and the literature base. However, principles of emergent knowledge underlay the collection and synthesis of data. To provide background for this study's exploration of belonging and to identify gaps in the literature, the following section presents an overview of existing belonging theory. While not intended as an exhaustive review of belongingness, in general, the following section outlines a number of papers that define sense of belonging as a construct, summarize belonging theory, or build conceptual models for sense of belonging in ways that may be relevant for exploring contextual patterns in belonging.

**Belonging Defined.** Before exploring belongingness (i.e., the state of belonging) and its theoretical bases in greater depth, it may be helpful to clarify what is and is not meant by *belonging* in order to distinguish it from similar constructs and narrow the focus of discussion within this paper. The Oxford English Dictionary offers three definitions of interest to the current endeavor. First, when used as a noun, belonging is defined by interpersonal acceptance and relationship or membership with other people: “*the fact of appertaining or being a part; relationship, affiliation; a person's membership of, and*

*acceptance by, a group or society.*” The examples cited in the entry speak to the interpersonal/relational aspect of belonging as a felt sense experienced by the individual, as in:

- *He had little sense of belonging, of being necessary to the world he lived in.*
- *Within a family, children devise all sorts of strategies to increase their status and feeling of belonging.*

Second, when belonging is used as an intransitive verb (i.e., to belong) it is again characterized by membership but with a reflexive accounting of the personal qualities of “fit” within the person seeking to belong: “*to have the right personal or social qualities to be a member of a particular group; to fit in.*” Finally, when used as an intransitive verb alongside adverbs or prepositional phrases indicating position (e.g., with whom or where one belongs), belonging encompasses contextual and place referents inclusive of both spatial and interpersonal belonging: “*to be rightfully or fittingly situated in, or have an affinity for, a specified place or situation.*” Cited examples illustrate external social and spatial referents:

- *I saw you took to each other. I saw you belonged with each other.*
- *A soothing feeling of being where I belonged.*

Place or spatial belonging is most often discussed as place attachment (Anton & Lawrence, 2014) and has been studied in geographical, architectural, and environmental disciplines. Social belonging with an interpersonal referent, on the other hand, is the most commonly studied form of the term within psychology and is often discussed as “sense of belonging” because it is experienced by individuals as a felt sense. Thus, a generally acknowledged definition of social belonging is *an individually felt sense of fit, membership, and acceptance.*

**Theoretical Grounding for Sense of Belonging.** In an early paper, Anant emphasized the subjective, felt sense of belonging, and likened it to the feeling of being “an indispensable and integral part of the system” (Anant, 1966, pp. 21-22). He also put forth ideas about the connection between personal and social need satisfaction and one’s sense of belonging to the group that satisfies those needs. Anant, like Maslow, discussed belongingness in relation to pathology, suggesting that sense of belonging may be the missing link separating a state of mental illness from healthy emotional growth (Anant, 1966). Although his paper did not present empirical evidence, Anant mused that a sense of belonging would be experienced less by people with mental illness than among people randomly chosen from the general population.

Many years following Anant’s initial ideas around belongingness, Hagerty et al. (1992) developed a conceptual model of belonging steeped in experiences working with patients in psychiatric hospitals. By reviewing literature, observing clinical cases, conducting interviews with psychiatric nurses, and analyzing focus group data collected from participants without psychiatric treatment history, they arrived at a definition and two key attributes. Building off of Anant’s definition, Hagerty and colleagues defined sense of belonging as “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment” (Hagerty et al., 1992, p. 173). They were careful to note that systems could be relational (i.e., person-to-person) or organizational, and that environments could be natural or cultural. Further parsing this definition into two dimensions, they posited that the defining attributes of sense of belonging were *valued involvement* and *fit*. With an emphasis on the subjective and affective elements of sense of belonging, Hagerty et al.

defined *valued involvement* as “the experience of feeling valued, needed, accepted” and defined *fit* as “the person’s perception that his or her characteristics articulate with or complement the system or environment” (1992; p. 173). By emphasizing the subjective and affective experience, Hagerty and colleagues privileged the felt sense of belonging firmly within the individual’s evaluation of their own fit and valued involvement among others.

While other researchers had previously presented conceptual models of belonging or incorporated ideas about belongingness into clinical work, Baumeister & Leary (1995) were the first to fully develop a theory for the concept. In Baumeister’s & Leary’s (1995) Need to Belong theory, satisfaction of the need to belong relies on two central requirements: a) that interpersonal relations consist of mutual concern and caring that are not simply momentary interactions, but extend into the dyad’s shared past and future, and b) that these interactions are both frequent and non-negative. In other words, to fulfill the need to belong, one’s relationship with others must be affectively concerning, enduring, and, if not strictly positive in nature, at the very least must not be negative. Baumeister & Leary (1995) proposed that various types of interpersonal relationships (e.g., friendships, romantic bonds) might be substitutable to some degree in fulfilling a generic need to belong. As an example, they noted that people entering new romantic relationships often partially withdraw from platonic relationships because their need for interpersonal fulfillment is largely being met by the new relationship, thereby lessening the interpersonal dependence on friendship (1995). By locating belonging as an essential human need, the theory emphasized the importance of establishing and maintaining a sense of belonging.

**Contexts of belonging.** Very little research has explored belonging as a multidimensional concept or as arising from contexts other than interpersonally social in nature. The following section reviews papers that have synthesized the literature in ways that may be helpful in building a more nuanced understanding of belonging.

Yuval-Davis (2006) reviewed sociological theory and research to provide a framework from which belonging could be analyzed, particularly as it relates to the “politics of belonging” (i.e., boundary drawing of citizenship, status, and entitlement) for people who are marginalized. Here, belonging was posited to have three analytical levels from which it could be studied, namely *social locations*, *identification and emotional attachments*, and *ethical and political values*. The first analytical level, *social locations*, refers to the state of belonging to one or more of a particular race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, age-group, social class, profession, or other group from which a “positionality along an axis of power, higher or lower than other such categories” within a society exists (p. 199; Yuval-Davis, 2006). It was noted that these positionalities are not static, but fluid, and vary by historical and social contexts. The second analytical level, *identification and emotional attachments*, discussed belonging as constructed partly from identity narratives (based in both individual attributes and group memberships of the past, present, or conceived future) and partly from emotional attachments to, or yearnings for, connections that reinforce these narratives (2006). These too were noted as fluid and varying by context. The third analytical level, *ethical and political values*, concerns the ways in which social locations, identity narratives, and attachments are valued and judged (2006). These arise from attitudes and ideologies about where and how identities and social categories should be bounded in the political community of belonging (i.e.,

citizenship, status, and entitlement). Yuval-Davis's review outlined key approaches to the study of belonging across disciplines that could be relevant to a contextualized exploration of the experience of belonging.

Mahar et al. (2013) undertook a transdisciplinary narrative review aiming to conceptualize belonging and guide measurement approaches for people with intellectual disabilities. Despite the stated purpose being of particular benefit to those with disabilities, the review provides a broad synthesis of the sense of belonging literature, nonspecific to any group. From their synthesis of this literature, Mahar et al. (2013) conceptualized belonging as consisting of five elements: subjectivity, groundedness, reciprocity, dynamism, and self-determination. Through these five elements, Mahar et al. (2013) defined belonging as:

*A subjective feeling of value and respect derived from a reciprocal relationship to an external referent that is built on a foundation of shared experiences, beliefs, or personal characteristics. These feelings of external connectedness are grounded to the context or referent group, to whom one chooses, wants, and feels permission to belong. This dynamic phenomenon may be either hindered or promoted by complex interactions between environmental and personal factors.*

Their discussion of the subjectivity of belonging that one experiences as a felt sense through connectedness to others (i.e., shared experiences, beliefs, and personal characteristics) is relevant to the study of belonging for any population but may be

particularly salient for those who identify as members of underrepresented or marginalized groups that have similar backgrounds, characteristics, or life experiences.

With the goal of determining how belonging has been conceptualized in contemporary research, Lähdesmäki et al. (2016) searched a single, widely sourced database (i.e., EBSCO Academic Search Elite) for literature published within a single year (2014) to identify articles in which belonging was used as a central concept (i.e., belonging was listed among the author-selected keywords). Following their analysis of articles published in 50 journals across a range of disciplines, the authors arrived at five intersecting topoi of belonging: spatiality, intersectionality, multiplicity, materiality, and non-belonging. From these, Lähdesmäki et al. (2016) suggested that belonging is comprised of:

*situational relationships with other people and social and cultural practices stemming from these relationships, which are fundamentally political and include emotional and/or affective orientations. Belonging is best understood as an entanglement of multiple and intersecting, affective and material, spatially experienced and socio-politically conditioned relations that are context specific and thus require contextualized definitions.*

Lähdesmäki et al. (2016) highlights the contextual quality of belonging that is at once “multiple and intersecting, affective and material,” requiring contextual understandings not yet fully explored. Their analysis finds evidence for contexts that go beyond the strictly interpersonal experience of belonging to include “social and cultural practices” that arise from those relationships. Of particular note are the inclusions of

spatial belonging and the materiality of belonging in their conceptualization. Spatiality concerns the experience of place-making and “feeling at home” in a space – be it private or public. The study of spatial and material belonging is largely overlooked in psychology where group and interpersonal belonging predominate the literature. However, the materially grounded experience of place and home may represent meaningful attributes of belonging that would enrich avenues of study more typically explored in psychology.

Through the study of belonging motivation, social psychology researchers have contextualized social spheres of belonging into broad social collectives. Building upon Kirkpatrick’s and Ellis’s (2001) evolutionary-focused work that identified four fundamental social collectives, Leary and Cox (2008) added *supportive friendships* to posit five collectives in all, each with distinct belonging motives: *macro-level communities* (i.e., tribes, communities, nations), *instrumental coalitions* (i.e., committees, teams, work groups), *mating relationships* (i.e., brief liaisons, monogamous relationships), *kin relationships* (i.e., mutual relationships with shared genetics), and *supportive friendships* (i.e., relationships for mutual support and companionship). Although not concerned with other-than-social contexts of belonging, Leary and Cox (2008) and Kirkpatrick and Ellis (2001) began the work of contextualizing social belonging by introducing a framework into which other contexts may fit. For example, social location as a focus of belonging study suggested by Yuval-Davis (2006) could be conceived as ethnic, cultural, or shared experiential group identities that coalesce to form macro-level communities.



Sandstrom and Dunn (2014a; 2014b) further parsed social spheres of belonging beyond close interpersonal relationships and group membership through their extension of Granovetter's (1973) work on the informational importance of weak social ties. By tasking research participants with having genuine social interactions (vs. efficient transactional interactions) with baristas in a coffee shop, Sandstrom and Dunn (2014a) showed that those who made an effort to smile, hold eye contact, and make pleasant conversation experienced more positive affect, which they found to be mediated by belonging. Similar findings were demonstrated with college students who intentionally chatted with other students in classes and on campus (2014b). The interactions described in these studies were not facilitated with others that were known to participants, meaning that many were likely strangers talking for the first time. Given the findings of these studies, it is reasonable to speculate that positive interactions with familiar acquaintances developed over frequent, repeated interactions (e.g., daily coffee run, weekly shopping trip) could spark distal relationships that exist somewhere between close interpersonal relationships and pleasant interactions with complete strangers. A contextualized study of belonging that includes these types of distal relationships is largely absent from the literature but could provide greater understanding of how sense of belonging might be constructed.

In recent years, researchers have explored how solitary human behavior affects sense of belonging. The work of Shira Gabriel and others (2016) examined symbolic social connections, or "social surrogacy," as contributing to the fulfillment of the need to belong. Gabriel et al. (2016) classified social surrogates in three ways: *social worlds* (i.e., immersive narratives found in books, movies, and TV shows), *reminders of others* (i.e.,

reminders of real relationships, such as pictures of loved ones, comfort food from childhood, and social media updates), and *parasocial relationships* (i.e., one-sided psychological bonds with celebrities, media figures, or fictional characters). Through their Social Surrogacy Hypothesis, they posit a mechanism whereby solitary behaviors serve a strong social function, often without people's knowledge, exhibiting a "*strong, subtle, and sneaky social self*" (Gabriel et al., 2016). The authors suggest that engagement in solitary activities that provide the experience of belonging (e.g., reading or watching beloved narratives, eating comfort food, keeping up with celebrities' lives) provides a relatively risk-free way of meeting belongingness needs while reducing the negative effects of isolation and social rejection.

In summary, belonging has been primarily conceptualized and studied as a fundamental need, inherently social in nature, that motivates people to remain of relational value to others. Motivational drives to belong promote the construction and maintenance of social ties within collectives both interpersonal (i.e., friendships, mate relationships, kin relationships) and group (i.e., instrumental coalitions, macro-level communities). When the need to belong is fulfilled, a sense of belonging leads to feelings of fit, acceptance, and being valued by others. When thwarted, senses of rejection, isolation, and exclusion arise that lead to poor health and psychosocial functioning. Research has illustrated that people may partially fulfill their need to belong through weak social ties (i.e., acquaintances or distal relationships) and social surrogates (i.e., social narratives, reminders of others, parasocial relationships), suggesting that belonging may have greater contextual nuance than traditionally defined. Discussions within the literature have proposed that belonging may be context specific, requiring contextual

conceptualizations and additional levels of analysis for belonging that represent gaps in the psychology literature, including through social location and the spatiality of belonging. Because belonging is inherently a social construct, nonsocial contexts in general have been left unexplored, with the recent exception of social surrogacy research, and may represent an avenue of investigation important to the study of belonging. Also absent from the literature is an understanding of the experience of belonging and whether experience varies by context. A contextual exploration of belonging and how it is experienced across contexts could yield a more nuanced understanding of this fundamental need. Importantly, a contextual understanding of this type could uncover how sense of belonging is constructed and maintained, or reconstructed, following major disruptions to belonging like those that occurred as a result of the social isolation policies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **The Current Study**

The current study sought to provide a more nuanced understanding of belonging by exploring the contextual experience of belonging among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. With little theoretical grounding for the experience of belonging across contexts, and a nearly empty literature on the belonging effects of COVID-19, a hypothesis-driven quantitative inquiry alone would have been insufficient for an initial exploration. To advance this area of research, it was important to explore themes of belonging across contexts through qualitative inquiry. To leverage the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research designs, a mixed-method approach was used to elucidate the contextual experience of belonging for college students in the wake of COVID-19.

**COVID-19 pandemic.** It is important to note that the data for the current study was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students were interviewed in the spring semester of 2021, approximately one year after the initial public response to COVID. Interviews took place in February and March of 2021. All of the students interviewed for the study attended USC during the 2019-2020 academic year that included the closure of campus in March 2020 and the switch to virtual learning for the remainder of the spring and summer semesters. Students in the study also experienced the partial return to campus in the fall semester of 2020 that included a hybrid learning environment in the fall and spring semesters of the 2020-2021 academic year. As the backdrop for this study, student interview excerpts and discussion will interchangeably refer to these circumstances as the pandemic, COVID-19, or COVID.

### **Methodological Approach**

The current study adopted a modified grounded theory approach based on the systematic methods of collecting, coding, and structuring qualitative data, as discussed by Corbin & Strauss (1990; also 2008). This method was chosen for its methodological rigor and for its potential to guide the development of theory on the contextualized experience of belonging. Several defining features of grounded theory, as summarized by Creswell & Poth (2018), guided this research, including the generation of data-led theory, the constant comparative analytical method, and a number of theory development techniques that aid in the rigorous analysis of qualitative data. Many of the guiding principles of classical grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) have been preserved in more recent modifications (Corbin et al., 2008) and will be followed in the proposed study, with noted exceptions due to the context of this work being conducted within the bounds of a

doctoral dissertation. In addition, studies that have successfully used approaches similar to the modified grounded theory described here guided the design of the current study (Kloos et al., 2005; Golden et al., 2022).

Traditional and many modified grounded theory approaches eschew theoretical grounding within existing literature and instead allow the discovery of theory to emerge from the data itself. However, strong theoretical models for belonging (Baumeister et al., 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992) exist in the literature, to which this work hopes to extend through the development of a contextualized theory of belonging. This study departs from the theoretically naïve approach espoused by pure grounded theory in that a substantive literature review and a conceptual framework of contextualized belonging that underlies the study's purpose preceded the research. These were included to provide background for the research, address gaps in the literature, and to fulfill the expectations of doctoral dissertation work. Nevertheless, efforts were made to keep the guiding principles of grounded theory in the forefront of the research. A post-positivist approach to data collection was taken during the qualitative interview through the primacy of questions designed to orient research participants to their own understanding of belonging and to the contexts within which they construct their own sense of belonging. Context specific prompts to which participants were asked to respond were intentionally placed after open-context questions in order to separately gather responses that were self-generated from those that were endorsed following prompts. Likewise, quantitative data was intentionally gathered after the interview so as not to bias qualitative data. Quantitative measures were selected to be complementary to the qualitative aims of this study and were used to support the qualitative findings.

## **Specific Aims and Research Questions**

Two overarching aims of this study are to form a conceptual model for the experience of belonging across contexts and to generate hypotheses for later testing of the model. These are seen as initial steps toward building a contextualized theory of belonging. To accomplish these overarching aims, a more nuanced understanding of belonging must be constructed. The proposed study will do this through five specific aims, which are to (1) describe the meaning, importance, and experience of belonging for college students, (2) determine and describe the contexts in which college students experience sense of belonging, (3) enumerate and quantify the contexts of belonging experienced by college students, (4) explore how college students' overall sense of belonging relates to contextual experiences of belonging, and (5) explore how sense of belonging within and across contexts has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following specific research questions guided the exploration of the contextualized experience of belonging for college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Aim 1 – to describe the meaning, importance, and experience of sense of belonging for college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Research Question 1.1 – How do college students define and understand belonging?
- Research Question 1.2 – How do college students describe what it means to feel a sense of belonging?
- Research Question 1.3 – How do college students describe the importance of belonging?

- Research Question 1.4 – How do college students describe their experience of sense of belonging?

Aim 2 – to determine and describe the contexts in which sense of belonging is experienced by college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Research Question 2.1 – In which social contexts do college students describe feeling a sense of belonging?
- Research Questions 2.2 – How do college students describe feeling a sense of belonging in social contexts? How do descriptions of felt sense of belonging differ across social contexts? How are they similar?
- Research Questions 2.3 – In which nonsocial contexts do college students describe feeling a sense of belonging?
- Research Question 2.4 – How do college students describe feeling a sense of belonging in nonsocial contexts? How do descriptions of felt sense of belonging differ across nonsocial contexts? How are they similar?
- Research Question 2.5 – How do descriptions of felt sense of belonging differ by social and nonsocial contexts? How are they similar?

Aim 3 – to quantify the contexts in which sense of belonging is experienced by college students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Research Question 3.1 – What are the total numbers and averages of the contextually open, contextually unprompted, and contextually prompted contexts of belonging endorsed by students for social and nonsocial context categories?

- Research Questions 3.2 – What is the ratio of social-to-nonsocial contexts described by students? Of social-to-total? Of nonsocial-to-total?

Aim 4 – to explore whether overall sense of belonging for college students during the COVID-19 pandemic varies by the number and ratio of social and nonsocial contexts of belonging.

- Research Question 4.1 – How does overall sense of belonging relate to the total number of contexts of belonging described by college students?
- Research Question 4.2 – How does overall sense of belonging relate to the number of social contexts of belonging described by college students?
- Research Question 4.3 – How does overall sense of belonging relate to the number of nonsocial contexts of belonging described by college students?
- Research Question 4.4 – How does overall sense of belonging relate to the ratio of social-to-nonsocial contexts of belonging described by college students?

Aim 5 – to explore how college students’ overall sense of belonging has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, to determine how the contexts in which students’ experience sense of belonging have changed since COVID, and to determine how students’ experience of sense of belonging within and across contexts has changed since COVID.

- Research Question 5.1 – How do college students feel their overall sense of belonging has been affected by COVID?
- Research Question 5.2 – How have the contexts in which college students experience sense of belonging changed since COVID?



- Research Question 5.3 – How has college students’ experience of belonging in social contexts been affected by COVID?
- Research Question 5.4 – How has college students’ experience of belonging in nonsocial contexts been affected by COVID?
- Research Question 5.5 – How have college students been able to affect their own sense of belonging since COVID?

## CHAPTER 2

### METHOD

#### **Research Design**

To explore the contextualized experience of belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic, the current study utilized a cross-sectional, convergent mixed method design that is primarily qualitative with complementary quantitative measures (Creswell et al., 2018). However, quantitative data was not the primary data source in the current study. In order to gain the in-depth interview data necessary to understand students' experience of belonging in different contexts, a large quantity of qualitative data was generated.

Because of the amount of interview data generated, a relatively small sample size ( $n = 21$ ) was needed to feasibly manage and analyze the data. While sampling of this size was sufficient for the qualitative analyses performed, it was too small for traditional hypothesis testing of the quantitative data collected. As a result, quantitative data was used to support, elucidate, and enrich qualitative findings. Integration of qualitative and quantitative data occurred through qualitative data transformation and subsequent quantitative analyses (Creswell et al., 2018). To answer research questions in Aim 4, qualitative data gathered through research questions in Aim 3 were quantified in order to perform correlation analyses with the data gathered through quantitative study measures.

Qualitative data for the study was collected from interviews with undergraduate students attending the University of South Carolina. Interviews were conducted in single

sessions, designed to be approximately 90-minutes in total length, using three 30-minute interview instruments (detailed below). The approximate timing of interviews was tested in two pre-study pilot interviews with volunteer undergraduate students known to the researcher. Both pre-study interviews were completed in just under 90 minutes and were therefore thought to be in range of the intended interview lengths. During actual study data collection, interview lengths varied from just over 60 minutes to two hours, depending on the rate and length of student responses. Quantitative data for the study came from quantitative study measures that students were asked to complete following their interviews. For all students, quantitative study measures took less than 5 minutes to complete.

### ***Recruitment and Sampling***

**Eligibility, Email Requirement, and Compensation.** Eligibility for the study included being a) aged 18 or older, b) currently enrolled as a USC student, c) and having a valid USC email address. To prevent duplicate and/or non-student participation, a USC email address was required to participate in the study. The USC email address requirement offered the additional benefit of internal end-to-end encryption between USC email addresses with the inclusion of “<encrypt>” in the subject line. Encrypted email provided a secure platform for discussing research appointments, sending study links, and transferring virtual gift card codes for study compensation. To create a centralized location for study communications, separate from the researcher’s student email account, a temporary study-specific email address was provided by the USC IT department. Student research participants were compensated with a \$40 Amazon gift code for completing the study.

**COVID-19 Considerations.** Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and CDC-recommended social distancing guidelines, all recruitment and research activities were conducted virtually. The interviews for the study were conducted over Microsoft Teams, an online meeting platform that offers HIPAA compliant security features, audio-only options, a chat box for sending study-related information, and recording capabilities. Quantitative study measures were administered through online links using Qualtrics, a quantitative data collection software that eliminated the need for paper measures and in-person data collection.

**Recruitment and Informed Consent.** Student research participants were recruited from an undergraduate Social Psychology class taught in the USC Psychology Department with approximately 70 enrolled students. This participant pool was chosen because students taking this Social Psychology course were thoroughly introduced to the concept of belonging, a key topic covered throughout the course, and were considered well-prepared to speak to their own experiences of belonging in a manner helpful to the exploratory nature of the study. Students were offered the opportunity to participate in the study through three class-wide emails distributed by their professor. The emails contained information about the study, including the name and contact information of the study PI, the purpose of the study, methods of data collection, approximate timeframe for the study interview, and information about compensation. The email also contained the IRB approved informed consent document and a Calendly link through which students who elected to participate could schedule their interview. Calendly is an online scheduling service that allows study participants to reserve designated interview appointments from a scheduling calendar that is linked to the study PI's Outlook calendar. Upon scheduling

their interview appointment, students were sent a welcome email that reiterated the study methods, anticipated timeframe for their interview, and compensation information. The welcome email also included their interview date and time, a link to their online interview appointment, the consent document, initial study instructions (described below), and the study PI's contact information. When students logged onto their scheduled interview, the study PI went over the consent document with them and then obtained verbal consent, as approved by the IRB, to continue with study participation. All students who elected to schedule an interview gave informed consent and participated in the study.

### ***Qualitative Interview Procedures***

All qualitative interviews were conducted between 2/8/2021 and 3/5/2021, approximately one year after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students who consented to participate in the study were scheduled for a single two-hour interview appointment. In their welcome email, students were instructed to join the online meeting at the scheduled time with their video turned off. The researcher also joined the session with video turned off so that the full interview was audio recorded only. The decision to collect audio-only interview data was three-fold. First, streaming quality is highly variable through online meeting platforms and the transferring of high-quality video data through WIFI may be disrupted or disconnected due to low signal strength. It was anticipated that audio-only meetings would be less prone to disruption and loss of data. Second, because the experience of belonging is of a personal nature, it was anticipated that students might feel less comfortable talking about their personal experiences of belonging in an "exposed" setting (i.e., with video/in-person). In order to foster a virtual

space where students felt comfortable sharing their experiences, they were encouraged to leave their video off for the entirety of the interview. Third, because the interviews were recorded and temporarily saved for later transcription, disabling the video feed provided an additional layer of confidentiality for the students who participated.

At the beginning of each interview meeting, the study PI confirmed the name and email address of the student participant and recorded the information in a spreadsheet created for keeping a record of research compensation. In order to de-identify the interview video, the study PI provided the participant a non-identifying Participant ID and instructed them to replace their name as displayed on their video. Interview recording began only after the participant's profile was de-identified. Before proceeding with the interview, the study PI briefly went over the informed consent document that had been provided to the participant and affirmed the participant's verbal consent to participate and to be audio-recorded.

Three qualitative interview instruments, created for the current study, were used during the research interview. The interview began with the Sense of Belonging Qualitative Interview (SBQI; see Appendix B), followed by the Contexts of Belonging Qualitative Interview (CBQI; see Appendix C), and ended with the COVID-19 Sense of Belonging Interview (SBQI-COVID; see Appendix D). Each interview instrument was designed to take approximately 30 minutes to complete. At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher asked the participant to remain in the meeting while they completed the quantitative study measures.

### ***Quantitative Survey Procedures***

As part of the study, participants were asked to complete three brief quantitative study measures (described below). The quantitative study measures were given after the qualitative interview to prevent priming or biasing the participants' interview responses. Before exiting the interview, participants were sent a unique Qualtrics survey link that was associated with their assigned Participant ID via the Microsoft Team's chat feature. In order to reduce potential data loss from skipped items or measures, participants were asked to remain in the interview meeting while they completed the study measures. Quantitative measures took participants approximately five minutes to complete. The study PI received an email notification from Qualtrics when the participant completed all the measures and submitted the survey. The study PI checked the submitted survey for completion and face validity of apparent effort (e.g., varied responses) and then sent the student participant a thank you email and the \$40 Amazon gift code as compensation for participating.

### ***Measures***

**Qualitative Interview Instruments.** As the current study is exploratory in nature, qualitative interviews were the primary research instruments in the study. Three qualitative interview instruments were developed for the purposes of this research and were used during the single interview session: the Sense of Belonging Qualitative Interview (SBQI), the Contexts of Belonging Qualitative Interview (CBQI), and the COVID-19 Sense of Belonging Interview (SBQI-COVID). These interviews can be found in Appendices B, C, and D. Descriptions for each instrument follow.

***Sense of Belonging Qualitative Interview (SBQI).*** The SBQI (see Appendix B) is one of three qualitative instruments developed for the current study to guide the first of three portions of a semi-structured, in-depth interview. The SBQI includes open-ended questions related to participants' definition, understanding, and experience of belonging within broadly defined social and nonsocial contexts (e.g., when other people are involved/not involved). Prompts for more information follow main questions when more information is needed (e.g., "Tell me more," "When did you experience..."). To prevent bias in participants' self-generated contexts of belonging, there were no specific context prompts in this interview. For this reason, the SBQI was the first instrument given in the interview. The SBQI was designed to be completed in approximately 30 minutes.

***Contexts of Belonging Qualitative Interview (CBQI).*** A second interview instrument designed to explore specific contexts of belonging was developed to guide the second portion of the semi-structured, in-depth interview. The CBQI (see Appendix C) includes open-ended questions related to the experience of belonging within specific social and nonsocial contexts. Individual, context-specific prompts for more information follow main questions if participants do not mention the specific prompt (e.g., "Do you experience a sense of belonging with family?"). The CBQI was administered in the second portion of the interview session, after the SBQI, to prevent bias in participants' self-generated contexts of belonging. The CBQI was designed to be completed in approximately 30 minutes.

***COVID-19 Sense of Belonging Qualitative Interview (SBQI-COVID).*** A third interview instrument was developed to explore experiences of belonging specific to the COVID-19 pandemic. The SBQI-COVID (see Appendix D) asks participants to consider



the ways in which their experience of belonging has been affected by COVID-19. Prompts, both general and context specific, asked participants to describe the ways in which they experience sense of belonging at the time of the interview (i.e., during the pandemic) and how they did so before the pandemic. The SBQI-COVID is intended to be the third and final instrument in the interview. Like the other interview protocols, it was designed to be completed in approximately 30 minutes.

**Quantitative Study Measures.** To support the qualitative findings, three quantitative measures were designed or selected for the current study and completed by student participants following the interview: the study developed demographic form and participant information form, and the psychological subscale of the Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI-P; Haggerty et al., 1995). These interviews can be found in Appendices A, E, and F. A description for each instrument follows.

**Demographic Form.** Following the qualitative interview, participants were asked to complete a short, 7-item demographic form that asked them to report their participant ID (assigned during the qualitative interview), date of birth, gender identity, race and/or ethnicity, sexual orientation, year in school, and major. The demographic form was used in descriptive reports of the sample.

**Participant Information Form.** A 12-item, multiple-choice questionnaire that was developed for the current study asked participants to indicate whether specific scenarios (e.g., is a member of military, has a spouse or partner) apply to them. With the exception of one item that asked participants to select their current living situation (e.g., college dorm, single-family home), answer choices for items are “Yes,” “No,” or “No, but I would like to [...].” The form was designed to gather contextual information about

participants lives that could impact belonging. The participant information form was used in descriptive reports of the sample.

***Sense of Belonging Instrument – Psychological (SOBI-P)***. The SOBI-P (Hagerty et al., 1995) is a validated and widely used, 18-item self-report measure designed to indicate the extent to which a person feels themselves to be valued, accepted, and considered an integral part of the system or environment to which they seek to belong. The SOBI-P contains a mix of statements indicating feelings of belonging (e.g., “I generally feel that people accept me.”) and not belonging (e.g., “I feel like an outsider in most situations.”). Items are rated on a 4-point scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree) and items indicating a lack of belonging are reverse scored. Higher total scores relate to greater sense of belonging. Validity of the SOBI-P was established by the measure authors through psychometric testing with a sample of college students, a sample of patients diagnosed with depression, and a sample of retired Roman Catholic nuns (Haggerty et al., 1995). Using data from these samples, the developers of the measure used contrasted groups (as described), factor analysis with student data (interfactor correlation of .36), and correlation with measures of similar constructs (loneliness and social support) to establish validity (Haggerty et al., 1995). The SOBI-P has illustrated strong reliability in previous studies (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.91 - 0.93$ ; Hagerty et al., 1995).

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The current study utilized a convergent mixed-methods design that allowed for separate analysis of the qualitative data and combined analysis across qualitative and

quantitative data through data transformation methods (Creswell et al., 2018). The following sections outline the analytic methods by data type and aim.

### ***Data Preparation***

The primary data source in the study were transcriptions of qualitative interviews conducted with student participants. Audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim using the automatic transcription software within the NVivo qualitative data management program. Because automated transcription software remained an imperfect tool at the time of data preparation, the study PI reviewed and corrected transcriptions line-by-line to achieve accurate qualitative data. Qualitative data was managed and analyzed using NVivo versions 12 Plus and NVivo Windows (Release 1).

Quantitative data was derived from responses to questionnaires and measures administered to student participants through online survey links using Qualtrics survey software. Data management occurred throughout data collection by performing quality and validity checks when each survey was submitted by participants. Quantitative data was managed during the collection phase by the integrated Qualtrics software. Upon completion of data collection, quantitative data was managed and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS (Statistical Product and Service Solutions), version 26.

### ***Qualitative Analyses***

Qualitative analyses were used to answer research questions in Aims 1, 2, and 5. All analyses were conducted by the study PI, in consultation with research advisors. The current study utilized several resources for qualitative data analysis. The principles and strategies for grounded theory analysis were guided by Corbin et al. (2018) and a procedure for modified grounded theory outlined by Kloos et al. (2005) and used by

Golden et al. (2022) was followed for data coding and analysis. Additional techniques specific to coding were sourced from Saldaña (2015) and the creation of data displays was guided by Miles et al. (2020). Quality standards for analysis, data checks, and reporting were guided by Lincoln and Guba (1986) and Levitt et al. (2018). Using each of these resources, a process of analyzing transcripts that included text reduction, code synthesis, and categorical combining of emergent themes was used throughout data analysis.

**First-Cycle Coding.** First-cycle coding began with an initial coding of themes from a systematic review of interview transcripts. As described by Kloos et al. (2005), emergent themes were identified through first-cycle, line-by-line coding of five randomly selected transcripts. Following this, thematic diagrams were created for each of the five initial transcripts in order to organize the codes and emergent themes. Diagramming, the process of relationally connecting codes in network displays (Corbin et al., 2018; Miles et al., 2020), was used in this early stage of coding to organize codes and to identify higher-level themes. In consultation with the study author's primary research advisor, a single set of initial codes was identified and aggregated into one diagram using themes that emerged across the five randomly selected interviews. From this iterative coding process emerged a list of codes that was used to code all 21 interviews in second-cycle coding.

Code selection in first-cycle coding was based on a blend of Structural Coding (i.e., use of study-relevant conceptual phrases), In Vivo Coding (i.e., use of participants' own words), Descriptive Coding (i.e., use of summative labels of words or short phrases), and Magnitude Coding (supplemental use of directional phrases to enhance description; Saldaña, 2015). Structural coding was used most extensively in Aims 1 and 2, as these

aims were focused on answering questions about the meaning, experience, and importance of belonging (Aim 1) as well as about the specific contexts in which belonging was experienced for students (Aim 2). Since questions related to these aims were posed directly in the interviews, structural coding of students' responses to these questions was the most expeditious initial method of analysis. However, once structural coding was applied to the interview text, the other first-cycle coding processes described were used within selected text to identify initial codes.

**Second-Cycle Coding.** As described by Kloos et al. (2005), the initial codes developed in first-cycle coding were applied to all 21 interviews in second-cycle coding. Any new themes that emerged were identified and determined to be either conceptually unique or similar to existing codes (e.g., a subtheme). These codes were set aside for an additional round of coding/re-coding across interviews to ensure that all relevant themes were captured.

Focused Coding was used following the second and third rounds of coding to organize and categorize the data. Focused Coding, a process wherein frequently appearing codes are condensed into categories representing broader themes that emerge from the data (Saldaña, 2015) is a streamlined adaptation of Axial Coding, a traditional grounded theory technique that uses extensive analytic memoing to bring together first and second-cycle codes generated by initial coding (Saldaña, 2015). In the current study, Focused Coding did not fully replace Axial Coding since analytic memoing and reflection were incorporated throughout analyses and discussed during ongoing coding-focused meetings with the primary research advisor. However, Focused Coding as a complementary process helped to expedite the coding.

**Validity.** To build confidence in the study's findings, a number of validity-focused processes were integrated into the design of the study as were validity checks that were implemented throughout the analytic process.

**Data Audits.** Data audits were conducted at several points before, during, and after coding. Data audits prior to coding consisted of pre-reading interview text to ensure the raw data was complete and that blocks of text were accurately attributed to participant versus interviewer. Data auditing during coding included recoding earlier transcripts for emergent codes that were identified in later interviews. For example, during second-cycle coding, the COMPETENCY experience code emerged across several transcripts after the initial codes list had been created, prompting a recode of earlier transcripts. Finally, once coding was complete, individual codes were audited to ensure that relevant codes were not missed during first and second-cycle coding. In the case of highly frequent codes (e.g.,  $n \geq 18$ ) that were not coded for all 21 participants, data audits for the missing code were conducted to confirm the absence of the code. This was accomplished through keyword searches within the NVivo software and through re-reading/re-coding relevant interview text.

**Construct Checks.** Construct checks were conducted regularly during the coding process to confirm that coded text was internally consistent within the construct. This was completed by reading through coded text after initial coding and prior to any focused coding. Construct checks for external validity were also undertaken to ensure that each coded construct was conceptually distinct from other codes. Discussions about conceptually similar codes were discussed in coding meetings between the study PI and the primary research advisor.

***Representativeness and Reduction of Bias.*** To increase confidence in the results of the study, principles of representativeness and reduction of bias were intentionally set into the study design and analysis (Miles et al., 2020). When student quotes were used to illustrate results, a concerted effort was made to select representative quotes from across the sample rather than from a select few students. Wherever brevity could be maintained, multiple student responses were presented for each result to show converging evidence. To avoid the potential for biased data from participants due to response bias, interview questions were intentionally ordered from broader to more specific to preserve participants' self-generated responses to open-context questions about belonging. Likewise, quantitative measures that ask about belonging and contexts of belonging were placed after the qualitative interview to reduce response bias. To reduce social desirability bias during the interview, participants were encouraged to keep their video feeds turned off in an effort to foster a sense of comfort in responding openly to questions about their subjective experiences of belonging.

***Transparency.*** To increase the reader's confidence in the findings, substantial effort was made to ensure that the methods of data collection, coding, and analysis were reported with transparency. This was done by including study developed and selected measures in the appendices and by presenting findings with sufficient tables and figures to illustrate how results and conclusions were obtained. Transparency in coding decisions was offered by including the totality of Aim 1 coded responses for Research Questions 1 – 3 in Appendices H, I, and J. While it was not feasible to exhaustively tabulate coded responses for all research aims, the comprehensive inclusion of a single aim was intended to show the way in which coding decisions for that and other aims were made.

Furthermore, the choice to present coded responses for Aim 1 allowed for the illustration of belonging concepts that underlie many other study aims.

**Reporting Conventions.** A number of reporting conventions were included in the presentation of results that were dually intended to ease the processing of large amounts of qualitative data and to provide additional transparency in the reporting of results. An enumerated list of reporting conventions are as follows: (a) parenthetical reporting of the number of students from the full sample endorsing a given code (e.g., 15/21); (b) bracketed citations for representative quotes that include the participant ID and the interview timestamp (e.g., [COB107, 00:01:17] ); (c) “*italicized quotes*” for representative student responses (e.g., “*I think that to belong means that you are accepted by your peers*”); (d) Capitalization Of Every Word for any reference to Themes (e.g., Experiential Belonging Aspects) or to specific social and nonsocial contexts (e.g., Romantic Partnership, Nature); (e) UPPERCASE CAPITALIZATION when referencing higher order subthemes (e.g., VALUED INVOLVEMENT), and (f) “quoted, nonitalicized lowercase” for lower order subcodes within subthemes (e.g., “acceptance,” “needed,” and “valued”).

### ***Mixed-Methods Analyses***

Mixed-methods analyses were used to answer research questions in Aims 3 and 4, as described by Creswell et al. (2018), integration of qualitative and quantitative data occurred through qualitative data transformation and subsequent quantitative analyses.

**Aim 3.** The purpose of Aim 3 was to quantify the contexts in which participants endorsed experiencing a sense of belonging to support analyses in Aim 4. Contexts described by participants were coded as social or nonsocial and then recorded in an Excel



spreadsheet for arithmetic transformations. Sums of social, nonsocial, and total contexts of belonging as well as ratios of social-to-nonsocial, social-to-total and nonsocial-to-total contexts of belonging were computed for every participant. Transformed qualitative data from Aim 3 were merged into the quantitative database (SPSS) with participants' ratings of sense of belonging from the SOBI-P.

**Aim 4.** Because the research questions in Aim 4 sought to relate overall sense of belonging to the quantified contexts of belonging identified in Aim 3, transformed data (i.e., sums and ratios of social, nonsocial, and total contexts of belonging) were analyzed in a series of Pearson correlations with SOBI-P scores.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

This study was conducted to develop a more nuanced understanding of sense of belonging by exploring the contextual experience of belonging among college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the study was to describe the contexts in which belonging is understood and experienced by college students, and how the sense of belonging was disrupted and reconstructed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this chapter, a description of the participants is provided, followed by the results of the mixed-methods data collected through semi-structured interviews and supporting quantitative measures. Findings are organized using the guiding aims and specific research questions of the study.

#### **Description of the Participants**

A total of twenty-one undergraduate students were interviewed for the study. The majority of participants identified as Caucasian/White ( $n = 19$ ) and female ( $n = 18$ ), with the remaining participants identifying as Asian ( $n = 2$ ) and male ( $n = 3$ ). All participants were traditionally aged undergraduate students ranging from 19 to 23 years with the average age approximately 21 years old. Most participants identified as heterosexual ( $n = 17$ ) with others identifying as homosexual, bisexual, or queer. Participants were in their sophomore ( $n = 6$ ), junior ( $n = 8$ ), and senior ( $n = 7$ ) years of college with no freshmen represented in the study. In all, 38% of the sample self-identified as part of an ethnic, sexual, gender, or religious minority. The majority of students in the study were majoring

in psychology (n = 12), but roughly 40% of students came from other disciplines, including public health (n = 3), natural science (n = 3), and business or computer science (n = 3).

In addition to more conventionally collected descriptive data, study-relevant contextual data was collected from all students. At the time they were interviewed, over half of student participants were employed (n=12), nearly all were members of a club or student organization (n=19), and a quarter were current collegiate athletes (n=5) on competitive teams. More than one-third of students were romantically partnered (n=8) and all but two students lived with roommates, family, or significant others (n=19). Nearly three-fourths of students identified as affiliated with an ideological, spiritual, or religious tradition they found meaningful (n=15).

### **Aim 1 Results**

A central focus throughout the aims of this study is to understand the felt sense of belonging experienced by college students within and across contexts. The research questions in Aim 1 set the stage for this focus by (a) defining belonging as it is understood for the college students in this study, (b) describing how students experience a felt sense of belonging, and (c) elucidating the importance of belonging for this group. As discussed previously, Aim 1 was chosen as an exemplar of the way coding decisions were made throughout the study. As such, tables containing comprehensive lists of themes, subthemes, grouped codes, and representative quotes can be found in Appendices H, I, and J. It is important to note that references were coded uniquely, with no references multiply coded. However, in occasional cases where students listed multiple belonging

aspects that shared a common stem (e.g., “Belonging feels like warmth and comfort”), the individual aspects were reported with the common stem for clarity.

***Research Question 1.1: How Do Research Participants Define and Understand Belonging?***

To learn how belonging is understood, and to prime this understanding for later questions about their experience of belonging, students were first asked to define belonging as a concept and then asked to describe what it means “to belong.” See Appendix B for the interview protocol that contains these questions. The two-part question was posed to both elicit the understood definition from students as well as to guide them into thinking about the state of belonging to some referent of importance to them. Emergent subthemes, grouped codes, and selected quotes for the Understood Definition of Belonging theme are presented below. See Appendix H for a table containing a comprehensive list of student quotes for this theme.

When asked about their understanding of belonging, students tended to use language that captured both their cognitive understanding and their affective experience of belonging. In these descriptions, the majority of students (18/21) included definitional language that was grouped by subthemes of VALUED INVOLVEMENT (13/21) and FIT (14/21). However, roughly three-fourths of students’ (15/21) responses included language that described an AFFECTIVE INDICATOR of their felt sense of belonging. Over one-third of students defined belonging in terms of their understanding of its opposite state, NONBELONGING (8/21).

Table 3.1 provides a brief summary of these results including sums and averages for the number of participants and references for each of the subthemes and grouped

codes in the Meaning/Definition of Belonging theme. See Appendix H, section 1.1 to view all of the subthemes, grouped codes, and representative quotes for this research question.

**Valued Involvement.** As reported, nearly one-third of students (13/21) understood belonging in terms of VALUED INVOLVEMENT – a subtheme that emerged from a group of codes described as being “accepted,” “needed,” and “valued.” Nearly three-fourths of students who understood belonging as VALUED INVOLVEMENT (9/13) described the concept in terms of acceptance, both directly, as in the student who responded, “*I think that to belong means that you are accepted by your peers*” [COB107, 00:01:17], and through the concepts of nonjudgment and freedom to be oneself:

*I would define it as just a sense of like being completely comfortable in who you are and just like being surrounded by people who won't judge you, won't do anything to bring down your happiness and where you just feel like yourself, I guess [...] knowing that the people you're surrounded by accept you for who you are. [COB121, 00:05:59 & 00:06:26]*

About a quarter of students overall and about half of those who understood belonging as VALUED INVOLVEMENT (6/13) described being “needed,” purposeful, or contributing in some way, like this student:

*I feel like belonging can be your sense of purpose and meaning in your own life with yourself but also in others as well [...] For me, I had sports...that allowed me to join different groups of people and communities - that gave me a purpose. At the same time, being a part of those groups and communities, I had an impact on other people's lives. [COB113, 00:03:34]*

Two students who understood belonging as VALUED INVOLVEMENT described being “valued” by others, as in “*feeling wanted*” [COB119, 00:05:18] and being “*where you feel welcome and it feels warm to be there*” [COB120, 00:00:10].

**Fit.** As reported above, two-thirds of students used language that described the subtheme FIT when defining belonging. FIT included the grouped codes “fitting in,” “part of/in place,” and “relating to others.” Six of these students described belonging through the concept of “fitting in,” as exemplified by the following response:

*For me, I think belonging looks more like where you fit in to-- I kind of think of it as a machine, so we're all different cogs and where you fit in, in that, not so much being the same as everybody else, but just using your individuality to fit in with other people [...] just knowing what your place is and where your strong suits are. [COB114, 00:00:16]*

Alternatively, nine students defined belonging FIT in terms of being “part of” or “in place,” as in:

*I think belonging just means that you feel you're where you need to be. You don't necessarily have to fit into the group or the category or the place that you're at or in, at that moment, you just are, you're just a part of it, and you can feel that you're an equal part of it. [COB105, 00:01:12]*

Three students defined belonging FIT as “relating to others,” including one student who described this as including representation:

*I think that in order to feel you really belong, you have to see people that look like you and people that think like you. In cases where maybe you don't see people that look like that, maybe you don't feel like you belong automatically, which is why I think diversity and inclusion is really important. [COB107, 00:00:02]*

**Affective Indicators of Belonging.** A third subtheme emerging from students’ definitional descriptions of belonging focused on experiential or AFFECTIVE INDICATORS OF BELONGING (15/21). AFFECTIVE INDICATORS included grouped codes of “comfort,” “calm,” “openness to others,” and “safety/security/trust.” Descriptions of comfort were prominent among students, with roughly half of those interviewed (11/21) and two-thirds of those who understood belonging in terms of

AFFECTIVE INDICATORS described being “comfortable,” as exemplified in this student’s response:

*I think that I would define belonging as having a sense of being really comfortable, like truly, actually comfortable in whatever setting you're in, whether that's professional or social or academic.*  
[COB107, 00:00:02]

Among those who defined belonging through AFFECTIVE INDICATORS, the code “calm” captured the understanding of three students who described belonging in terms of feeling peaceful or not anxious, like in this response:

*For me, specifically, I know I have social anxiety, being in a large group of people, I'm consistently and constantly in my head thinking about what I just said, what I just did, how does that fit the whole group dynamic, and feeling belonging is subsiding that for me. Whenever that social anxiety has subsided, that's when I know, I feel I'm belonging in a group that I'm in.* [COB105, 00:00:14]

A final AFFECTIVE INDICATOR of students’ understood definition of belonging was described as “openness to others.” This code was endorsed by three students who described it as being “willing to share your experiences with them” [COB101, 00:06:04] and saying, “if I can talk about my troubles, my doubts, my goals, that’s whenever I really feel like I belong” [COB117, 00:02:03].

**Nonbelonging.** Belonging was also defined by contrasting it with a state of NONBELONGING. One-third of the sample (8/21) referenced NONBELONGING, as in “essentially, like the opposite of an anxious situation” [COB118, 00:00:21], or by giving examples of not belonging, as in this student’s response:

*Not feeling otherwise ostracized - I think there's a difference between being a part of a group and the group actively accepting you and making you feel a part of it in contrast to where you are part of a group, but it's more passive on your end and you are just more like existing, rather than having a relationship with that group.* [COB117, 00:00:08].

***Research Question 1.2: How Do Research Participants Describe Feeling a Sense of Belonging?***

The focus of Research Question (RQ) 1.2 was to explore students' felt sense of belonging. To get at this felt sense, students were first asked to describe what belonging feels like and then asked how it was for *them* to feel a sense of belonging. As with RQ1.1, the second question was meant as a follow-up to the first to elicit referent and personal experiences of belonging beyond abstract or nonpersonal descriptive aspects of the experience of belonging. Emergent subthemes, grouped codes, and a selection of quotes for the Felt Sense of Belonging theme are presented below. See Appendix I for a table containing a comprehensive list of student quotes for this theme.

RQ1.2 differed from the definitional aspect of RQ1.1 in that students were asked about how belonging feels to them in RQ1.2. However, students tended to respond to questions about their felt sense of belonging in both conceptual and affective language. As with RQ1.1, the definitional sub-themes of FIT (4/21) and VALUED INVOLVEMENT (13/21) emerged for students who discussed their felt sense of belonging in conceptual terms. Affective language was used by students in both research questions, but to varying degrees. While in RQ1.1, three-fourths of students responded affectively to conceptual questions about belonging, almost every student responded in affective language for all or part of their responses when asked to share their felt sense of belonging (20/21) in RQ1.2. Comparatively, four-fifths of students responded in conceptual language when asked about their understanding of belonging in RQ1.1, but just over two-thirds of students responded in conceptual language again when asked



about their felt sense of belonging in RQ.1.2 (15/21). Only one student described the feeling of belonging in conceptual language only:

*I feel like belonging, feels you fit in, like you're not going to be ostracized in any way, and feeling like you're liked by the people in your group [...] I think it also just is about feeling liked by your peers and not feeling like an outsider.*  
[COB112, 00:05:30 & 00:06:04]

This student's conceptual description of their felt sense of belonging lacks the type of affective language shared by all other students in the sample, but their repeated use of the verb "feel" belies an experiential aspect that may underlie the conceptual language chosen. While all other students responded affectively to the questions posed for RQ1.2, the majority also used conceptual language in their response. Students' understanding of belonging appears to be so closely aligned with their affective experience of belonging that the two become interchangeable for many students. Because students' conceptual descriptions to questions posed about their felt sense of belonging were so similar to the responses already shared in RQ1.1, no further representative quotes were chosen for RQ1.2. See Appendix I to view all of the subthemes, grouped codes, and representative quotes for this research question.

**Affective Felt Sense of Belonging.** When students discussed their experience of belonging, the subtheme AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE (20/21) emerged from nearly all student interviews through grouped codes of "comfort," "positive emotion," "calm," "safety/security/trust," and "understood." The AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE subtheme is similar to the AFFECTIVE INDICATORS subtheme that emerged in RQ1.1, but key differences exist between the two. In RQ1.1, students often responded affectively to questions that were posed to elicit conceptual responses. These affective responses were perceived by the researcher as AFFECTIVE INDICATORS of students' understanding of

the state of belonging. In RQ1.2, students were asked directly about their affective experience of belonging. As a result, the responses tended to contain language more descriptive of their AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE of belonging. These affectively richer descriptions in RQ1.2 emerged as two additional grouped codes for the subtheme not found in RQ1.1: “understood” and “positive emotion.” While the grouped codes “comfort,” “calm,” and “safety/security/trust” emerged in both research questions, “openness to others” was unique to RQ1.1. Because students’ descriptions of feeling “comfort,” “calm” “safety/security/trust” were similar between the two research questions, no further representative quotes for these codes have been selected for this research question; see Appendix I for more examples for these. When describing their AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE of belonging, one student discussed the felt sense of belonging as related to feeling “understood:”

*I guess a sense of belonging feels like I'm understood. I have people that I don't have to explain myself to [...] We've had these shared experiences that create history and create a level of understanding that builds and creates a sense of belonging that I feel like is very rare. I feel like I'm having that with someone else when I'm not feeling the need to have to catch up when I go and talk to them or explain myself. I guess that's how I would feel for a sense of belonging. It's just like a base-level understanding of one another. [COB113, 00:19:07]*

Nearly half of students (9/21) offered experiences that portrayed “positive emotion”, as in these responses: “*definitely like a very positive, happy feeling*” [COB101, 00:06:31], “*belonging makes me feel warm [...] you could call it the warm fuzzies*” [COB117, 00:03:45], and “*I would say, I guess euphoric - just in between euphoria and just happiness - it's definitely a feeling of joy*” [COB105, 00:01:52].

**Nonbelonging.** As with RQ1.1, nearly half of students (9/21) responded to questions about their felt sense of belonging by discussing their experiences with

NONBELONGING. However, in RQ1.2, students tended to describe the feeling of not belonging in more affective terms, as in this student's response:

*I might say, my best way to answer that would be to give you the scenario of when you don't belong [...] it feels like you're sitting on the sidelines, like life is moving around you, that you're uncomfortable, you're uneasy, which I think can be particularly troublesome in situations where you would expect to belong. Relating to my own life and experiences, a lot of family situations where I don't feel like I have that sense of belonging: it can feel very unsettling to be in a situation where you think you should belong and you don't. Belonging to me is essentially gratifying and satisfying that need that's not met in other situations.*

[COB118, 00:02:25]

As in RQ1.1, Table 3.1 provides a brief summary of these results including sums and averages for the number of participants and references for each of the subthemes and grouped codes in the Felt Sense of Belonging theme.

### ***Research Question 1.3: How Do Research Participants Describe the Importance of Belonging?***

RQ1.3 explored the importance of belonging. To understand the value placed on belonging, students were asked whether they believe having a sense of belonging is important, and if so, in what ways. All students said that belonging was important, and their responses tended to align along one of two subthemes. Nearly two-thirds of students (13/21) described belonging as ESSENTIAL TO WELLBEING, whereas roughly one-third of students (8/21) discussed belonging as a FOUNDATIONAL HUMAN NEED. Emergent subthemes, grouped codes, and a selection of quotes for Importance of Belonging theme are presented below. See Appendix J for a table containing a comprehensive list of student quotes for this theme.

**Essential to Wellbeing.** The subtheme ESSENTIAL TO WELLBEING emerged from two-thirds of student responses within the Importance of Belonging theme which

were coded as “emotional wellbeing,” “lost/alone,” and “mental health.” The first of these included descriptions of belonging that emerged as important to “emotional wellbeing,” which was discussed in this way: *“I think that without it, your life would be sad and miserable”* [COB121, 00:08:16] and *“I feel like it really changes a person's mindset. I feel like you get a lot more confident when you feel like you belong [...] you're able to enjoy everything in life a lot more”* [COB110, 00:02:34]. One student offered a personal example of a time when they felt a lack of belonging and it affected their sense of emotional wellbeing:

*I definitely think feeling that sense of belonging is important. Whenever I first came to campus it was really hard because I didn't really have any base friends. I didn't really know anyone here. My relationship with my roommate wasn't the best that it could have been, unfortunately. With all that mixed together, it really made it hard to enjoy that first semester on-campus because I didn't really feel that sense of belonging. I didn't feel anyone was really 100% open to me or that I was 100% open to them. I feel a lot of people are in that same boat the first year on campus, especially. I think that just shows your sense of belonging is really, really important because it affects so many different aspects of your life in general.* [COB117, 00:06:00]

The second grouped code that emerged as part of the ESSENTIAL TO WELLBEING subtheme came from three students who described the importance of belonging as avoiding a “lost/alone” feeling, as in this student’s response: *“I think that without it, you would feel lost, like you don't have a purpose, I guess, and a little bit lonely and on your own”* [COB106, 00:01:32]. The final aspect of the ESSENTIAL TO WELLBEING subtheme was captured by four students who talked about belonging as being important to “mental health,” some of whom offered their own mental health-related struggles due to lacking belonging, like this student:

*Even on a personal level, like my freshman year - I'm from the North, so coming down here was a big adjustment. I didn't know anyone, didn't have any friends, and I frankly didn't feel like I belonged. I really*

*struggled with my mental health my freshman year until I met my group – my friends and the clubs I'm in – and really found my sense of belonging. I think it's social connectedness, sense of belonging. Finding your people is really important to your mental wellbeing as a whole.* [COB116, 00:03:56]

**Foundational Human Need.** The second subtheme within the Importance of Belonging theme was FOUNDATIONAL HUMAN NEED. This subtheme emerged from about a third of students who described belonging as a “fundamental need” that is important to “personhood/sense of self” and “growth.” Two students talked about belonging as important to “personhood/sense of self,” as in “*I think everybody needs to feel like they belong somewhere - without it, I feel like you're kind of missing a core part of being a person*” [COB101, 00:07:03]. The importance of belonging in terms of personal or human “growth,” (n=4) was described in this student’s response:

*I think it might take some time, especially like with new groups or new jobs or new environments, but I feel like in order to succeed to your highest potential or at your highest level, you need to feel a sense of belonging so that you're not afraid to do whatever it takes or feel silly or do something you're unsure about in order to achieve your greatest version of yourself.* [COB115, 00:08:12]

Alternatively, belonging was described as a “fundamental need” (n=3) like this student:

*Since humans are social creatures, we will all want to find that belonging in one way or another. I think it's very important for everyone to have that. If they don't, then they'll actively seek it out because it's a basic need.* [COB109, 00:02:47]

**Nonbelonging.** While some students talked about the importance of belonging in terms of its beneficial impact, the majority of students (16/21) discussed its importance by describing the detrimental effects of lacking a sense of belonging, as exemplified in several of the quotes above and in the following student’s response:

*Well, it is really important. And to say that it's important implies that if you didn't feel belonging that there would be maybe some psychological effects, not anything crazy, but it would certainly wear*

*down on your self-esteem or your ability to feel comfortable. I think it's important because I think that to not feel belonging would weigh on you over time, especially.* [COB107, 00:03:41]

As in RQ1.1 and RQ1.2, Table 3.1 provides a brief summary of these results including sums and averages for the number of participants and references for each of the subthemes and grouped codes in the Importance of Belonging theme.

***Research Question 1.4: How Do Research Participants Describe Their Experience of Belonging?***

The purpose of RQ1.4 was to capture the ways that students describe experiential aspects of belonging. To set the stage for Aim 2 questions that explore how sense of belonging compares across contexts, students' full interviews were coded for experiential descriptions of belonging that emerged whenever students discussed their personal experiences of belonging in any context. However, student responses to questions about the meaning, affective felt sense, and importance of belonging that were already coded for RQ1.1 – RQ1.3 were not double coded for RQ1.4. See Table 3.2 for a brief summary of the subthemes and grouped codes for the Experiential Aspects of Belonging theme that emerged across full interviews. It should be noted that subthemes, codes, and representative quotes for RQ1.4 were not included as part of the comprehensive lists in Appendices H, I, & J since the many hundreds of references to students' experiences of belonging that emerged across interviews were too numerous to be feasibly included.

The Experiential Aspects of Belonging theme was captured as eight subthemes, three of which were nearly identical to those that emerged when students were directly questioned about their conceptual understanding and felt sense of belonging (i.e., responses to RQ1.1 and RQ1.2) including, VALUED INVOLVEMENT (21/21), FIT (14/21), and AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE (21/21). The consistent reappearance of these

three subthemes throughout interviews provided converging evidence for how students conceptualize and experience belonging across contexts. The only difference in grouped codes between the subthemes for Experiential Aspects of Belonging theme in RQ1.4 and those in the Meaning and Felt Sense of Belonging themes in RQs 1.1 & 1.2 was the addition of the “closeness/connection” code (21/21) in the AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE subtheme in RQ1.4.

In addition to the three repeated subthemes, five new subthemes emerged as students described their sense of belonging across contexts, including SIMILARITY (20/21), IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT (19/21), FAMILIARITY (18/21), PERCEIVED SHARED EXPERIENCE (17/21), and COMPETENCE (15/21). Students who described SIMILARITY as an experiential aspect of belonging often talked about it in terms of social location, like this student:

*With people with a queer identity such as myself, I absolutely feel like an automatic sense of belonging with them, and that's probably the strongest automatic relationship I have regarding the different sectors that people could be similar to me [...] but I feel like it's so much easier to feel that sense of belonging the second I see a rainbow flag, or a queer quote, or a sticker, or something that someone has [COB118, 00:57:43]*

Students who endorsed IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT as an Experiential Aspect of Belonging often talked about the effect of shared beliefs in this way:

*I feel belonging with someone if we're engaging in a conversation and I see a lot of overlap, and we can build on each other's points and hype each other up, for lack of a better term. I definitely think that that fosters a sense of belonging. There's no better feeling than being verbally affirmed like, "Oh, yes, I totally agree with you." That feels awesome. I'm automatically going to like somebody more and feel more belonging with them if they agree with me. [COB111, 00:55:51]*

FAMILIARITY was endorsed by students as an Experiential Aspect of Belonging in relationships that represented more distal or weaker social ties, like in this student's response:

*I used to work at a brewery before I got a new job. It was one of those more relaxed things where I actually fostered connections with the regulars I had that were really awesome. It was really cool to have a sense of belonging of knowing those people's names when they walk in the door and they know your name and you know, "Hey, how's school?" Stuff like that which is super awesome and made me feel more belonging. [COB116, 00:34:56]*

However, some students discussed FAMILIARITY as an Experiential Aspect of Belonging in public spaces, like this student:

*If I see a competition pool, that's something where I automatically feel belonging. I love being in water, but I think whenever I see a competition pool, I just know it. It's like it's very-- what's the word? Familiar. It's familiar. I know it, and I look at it, and it's my whole life. That's how I met the people I met, it's how I met the people I know now, it's why I went to this school, it's the opportunities I got. I feel like when I look at that pool, it's just like something I know. It's just a familiar environment, because I had to be in it every single day for my whole entire life. [COB113, 01:39:34]*

Students who described PERCEIVED SHARED EXPERIENCE as an Experiential Aspect of Belonging talked about feeling this with classmates, even those with whom they were not meeting face-to-face:

*Like with asynchronous classes, we all consistently just feel like we're missing something because everything's online and we're not getting that face-to-face interaction or communication as much. While that does create a separation and less belonging to our classes, it also facilitates belonging between students because while we all feel like we're missing something, we're missing something together. [COB114, 00:47:32]*

Students described COMPETENCY as an Experiential Aspect of Belonging, particularly while engaging in activities in which they feel skillful, like this student:



*Whenever you start a new thing, you may not feel like you fit in right away. If you've never taken a yoga class in your life, you're going to feel out of place and weird at first until you get to know the terminology and the poses and you get to build that self-efficacy in terms of you start to a little bit, you know more about what you're doing. I think that's pretty much the same with other sports as well. You feel more sense of belonging when you have a higher skill in it and you are more educated in that sport or that activity or anything like that as well.*  
[COB116, 01:29:00]

Importantly, these eight Experiential Aspects of Belonging subthemes that emerged in RQ1.4 were used to explore the different ways that students experience belonging in subsequent aims by analyzing the commonality, frequency, saliency, and complexity of experiential aspects that are endorsed across contexts. Table 3.2 provides a brief summary of RQ1.4 results including sums and averages for the number of participants and references for each of the subthemes and grouped codes in the Experiential Aspects of Belonging theme.

### ***Summary of Research Aim 1***

The findings presented above are briefly summarized in Tables 1 and 2. Additional tables containing comprehensive arrays of the themes, sub-themes, codes, and representative quotes for Aim 1 research questions RQ1.1, RQ1.2, and RQ1.3 can be found in Appendices H, I, and J.

Students' conceptualization of belonging (RQ1.1) encompassed both cognitive and affective aspects. In general, they understood belonging as being in a state of valued involvement, including being accepted, needed, and valued by others. Students also conceptualized belonging as having fit, which includes fitting in, being part of a group, feeling in place within an environment, and relating to others. In addition to their cognitive understanding of belonging, students perceive themselves as being in a state of

belonging when they experience certain affective indicators of belonging, including feelings of comfort, calm, safety/security, and openness to others.

Students' felt sense of belonging (RQ1.2) included their conceptual understanding of belonging as well as their affective sense of belonging. When students feel a sense of belonging, they have positive emotions and experience states of comfort, calm, and safety/security. Subthemes of valued involvement and fit were repeated when describing their conceptualized felt sense of belonging.

Students placed a high value on having a sense of belonging (RQ1.3), saying it is a foundational human need and is essential to wellbeing. Belonging was described as essential to emotional wellbeing and mental health, as well as necessary to avoid a sense of being lost and alone. Students also saw belonging as a fundamental need that is foundational to human growth, personhood, and sense of self.

Nonbelonging was a prominent theme across Aim 1 research question responses (RQ1.1 – RQ1.3). Students often positioned their understanding, experience, and conceptualization of the importance of belonging adjacent to its opposite state by describing a lack of belonging. These descriptions were presented as counter-state definitions, anecdotes of lived experience, and cautionary tales that exemplified the essentiality of maintaining a sense of belonging.

Students tended to discuss their experience of belonging throughout the remainder of their interview responses (RQ1.4) similarly to how they described their felt sense of belonging in RQ1.2, including through valued involvement and fit, as well as in affective terms. In addition, as students discussed their experience of belonging across various

contexts, they described a sense of similarity, ideological agreement, and perceived shared experience with others, as well as familiarity and competence.

## **Aim 2 Results**

To understand the contextual experience of belonging for college students, Aim 2 explored specific social and nonsocial contexts in which students endorse feeling a sense of belonging. The research questions in Aim 2 reveal how students experience belonging within each context and highlight the similarities and differences of their experience across contexts.

Throughout the interview, students were asked context related questions about belonging in three ways, intentionally ordered from a broad to a narrow contextual focus: *contextually open*, *contextually unprompted*, and *contextually prompted*. *Contextually open* responses refer to contexts of belonging endorsed by students naïve to the study concept of social vs. nonsocial belonging as well as any belonging-specific context prompts. In other words, *contextually open* responses answer the question, “What are some examples of when you feel a sense of belonging these days?” *Contextually unprompted* responses refer to contexts of belonging endorsed by students who were asked about broad social contexts of belonging (i.e., “Do you ever/What are some examples of when you: feel a sense of belonging and other people ARE involved?”) and broad nonsocial contexts of belonging (i.e., “Do you ever/What are some examples of when you: feel a sense of belonging and other people are NOT involved?”). *Contextually prompted* responses refer to contexts of belonging endorsed by students who were asked about specific social and nonsocial contexts (i.e., “Do you feel a sense of belonging with

family?”, “...in nature?”, etc.). In all cases, follow-up questions were asked to determine how students experience belonging within the endorsed context (e.g., “What is it about family that makes you feel a sense of belonging?”).

To understand how students experience belonging across contexts, the experiential aspects of belonging coded for RQ1.4 (e.g., VALUED INVOLVEMENT, AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE, COMPETENCY) were analyzed against each endorsed context of belonging (e.g., Friendship, Family, Nature). Similarities and differences in how students experience belonging within and across social and nonsocial contexts were explored by parsing the commonality, frequency, saliency, and complexity of belonging aspects across each context. Commonality refers to the number of contexts in which belonging aspects were endorsed. Frequency refers to the number of belonging aspects endorsed across contexts. Saliency refers to the frequency of belonging aspects relative to other or total belonging aspects within a given context. Complexity refers to the variability of belonging aspects within each context. In the following sections, Tables 3 – 6 and Figures 1 – 3 illustrate the results for each of the Aim 2 research questions presented below.

***Research Question 2.1: In Which Social Contexts Do Students Endorse Feeling a Sense of Belonging?***

The purpose of RQ2.1 was to identify the social contexts in which students experience a sense of belonging. As described above, contexts of belonging were identified and enumerated separately for *contextually open*, *contextually unprompted*, and *contextually prompted* questions. Table 3.5 shows how many and which social contexts were endorsed across these question types.

As a group, across questions, students endorsed experiencing a sense of belonging in a total of fourteen separate social contexts. However, these fourteen contexts were endorsed in stages across *contextually open*, *unprompted*, and *prompted* questions. When asked *contextually open* questions about where/in which situations they feel a sense of belonging, all students (21) endorsed at least one social context, with seven specific contexts emerging across their responses, including Friendship (19), Family (8), Romantic Partnership (3), Work (3), Competitive Teams (2), Mentorship (1), and Social Location (1; i.e., identity/demographic context). Notably, Friendship and Family were the predominant social contexts endorsed for *contextually open* questions, far outnumbering other contexts less frequently endorsed. Friends and family are generally available contexts for college students, whereas some of the less frequently endorsed contexts may not be relevant or available contexts for all students (e.g., Sports Teams, Romantic Partnership). Interestingly, those endorsed by students spanned interpersonal (e.g., Friends), group (Competitive Teams), and community (e.g., Social Location) domains of belonging.

When were asked *contextually unprompted* questions about where/in which social contexts they feel a sense of belonging (i.e., when other people are involved), students endorsed Distal Relationships (6; i.e., people they don't know well or at all, but see frequently), School/Classmates (4), and extracurricular Clubs/Organizations (3) in addition to a few of the previously endorsed social contexts among students who didn't endorse the context previously or who endorsed the same context again. These responses show that when asked about contexts of belonging in a different way (i.e., explicitly social in nature), additional social contexts are elicited but are generally less closely

interpersonal, representing instead group (i.e., Classmates, Clubs) and distally interpersonal (Distal Relationships) domains.

When asked *contextually prompted* questions about specific social contexts, students endorsed several contexts not previously endorsed, including Shared Spiritual/Religious/Ideological Philosophy (20), Animals/Pets (18), Helping Professionals (8), and Neighborhood (7) in addition to all of the social contexts previously endorsed.

There are a few interesting things to note about the additional contexts that were endorsed upon prompting. The Shared Spirituality/Religion/Ideology context was frequently endorsed but broadly defined by students. Some students endorsed this context by talking about people with similar religious beliefs. Others, particularly those who did not identify as religious, endorsed the context for people with whom they share political, ethical, or similar views, including COVID-19 related views. It is likely that the shared philosophy context overlapped with other endorsed contexts as people with whom students describe as sharing beliefs may be part of Friendships, Romantic Partnerships, or Clubs/Organizations. Likewise, there were a few examples of students becoming particularly close with their Neighbors, such that closer friendships ensued.

Helping Professionals represented another context for which students' reasons for endorsing were varied. Half of the students who endorsed Helping Professionals as a context of belonging described close relationships with their mental health providers, like this student:

*I've been in counseling every week for the past four years with the same therapist. I totally have a sense of belonging with her, it's different. I don't consider her a friend, but at the same time, everything about the sense of belonging that I experienced with my friends, I experienced*

*with her. I'm not scared of her judging me. I don't think that she loves me, that part is not there. There's always a reminder that this is her job. Listening to me and making me feel important and valid is her job, but also it works. It's different, but it's definitely there. [COB111, 00:43:08]*

Interestingly, the other half of endorsing students described a future-oriented sense of belonging to an intended profession of which the provider with whom they felt a sense of belonging was part, as with this student:

*Especially with the pharmacist – there is definitely a sense of belonging because there's a feeling of, "Oh, yes, I'm going to do this one day," sort of thing, or like when I went for my physical a few weeks ago, being in the doctor's office being like, "Oh, yes, I could definitely be here one day" because I don't know exactly where I want to go with pharmacy, what type of pharmacist I want to become. I was like, "Oh, yes, I could definitely be here, and work with this person in this environment and it would feel comfortable for me, I would belong here." [COB109, 00:44:47]*

Unlike the other contexts described here, the Animals/Pets context was endorsed frequently and uniformly among students who described their pets as a source of belonging for them, as in this student's response:

*Even though you're needed by them, you're also wanted by them, and they just have a calming way about them to just really bring you a sense of peace and a sense of belonging because they're giving you attention, and you're also giving them attention [...] Humans can express the way they feel with their words, whereas animals have to show with their actions, and they do. They show you attention because animals follow you. If you have a dog, they're going to follow you wherever you go. They show you support. Have you ever been crying, and you had a dog, and they came up and sat their head in your lap? They show with their behaviors and their actions that they are supporting you, that they're accepting you, and they're showing you attention. While it's not as direct a way as humans, they do show their own sense of belonging and you reciprocate that as well. Just because you feel that you're not only needed but wanted by them and they're there for you. [COB103, 01:20:55]*

See Table 3.5 for an enumerated list of these social contexts, organized by the type of question (i.e., open, unprompted, prompted) in which the responses were made.

***Research Question 2.2: How Do Students Describe Feeling a Sense of Belonging in Social Contexts? How Do Descriptions of Felt Sense of Belonging Differ across Social Contexts? How Are They Similar?***

To answer RQ2.2, the eight experiential belonging aspects gathered in RQ1.4 (i.e., VALUED INVOLVEMENT, FIT, AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE, COMPETENCE, SIMILARITY, IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT, FAMILIARITY, AND PERCEIVED SHARED EXPERIENCE) were used to analyze how students experience belonging in each social context endorsed. The relative commonality, frequency, complexity, and saliency of the eight belonging aspects were analyzed to explore similarities and differences in students' experience of belonging across social contexts.

Table 3.3 and companion Figure 3.1 show the results of the analyses for RQ2.2. In Table 3.3, the total number of references to belonging aspects endorsed within each context are shown, with the individual number of references listed parenthetically alongside each aspect. Rows are ordered top to bottom, from most to least belonging aspect references made per context. Other columns within the table show the number of students that endorsed each context, the average number of belonging aspect references made per student, and the number of belonging aspects endorsed per context. Figure 3.1 presents this information graphically, with the range of belonging aspect references along the horizontal axis and the social contexts along the vertical axis ordered, top to bottom, from greater to fewer number of belonging aspect references made across contexts. In



Figure 3.1, the number of students who endorsed each social context is listed parenthetically along the vertical axis, while color coding shows the belonging aspects endorsed for each context at the subtheme level (e.g., AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE, VALUED INVOLVEMENT, etc.). More granular code-level detail (e.g., “accepted,” “valued,” and “needed” for the VALUED INVOLVEMENT subtheme) is shown in companion Table 3.3.

Overall, affective responses and an evaluation that they and their contributions were valued by others were the most prevalent experiences of belonging among students within social contexts. VALUED INVOLVEMENT was the most commonly endorsed belonging aspect and the only aspect to be endorsed for every social context.

AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE was endorsed second-most commonly, appearing in every context except School/Classmates. However, AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE (204) was the most frequently endorsed aspect with 1.4 times the total number of belonging references as VALUED INVOLVEMENT (145), the next most frequently endorsed aspect.

COMPETENCY was the least commonly and frequently endorsed belonging aspect among social contexts, with references showing up sparingly across only three contexts: Work/Job (1), School/Classmates (2), and Competitive Teams (2).

Complexity of constituent belonging aspects within each social context could be considered a broad measure of the richness of belonging experience. In terms of complexity, students did not endorse all eight belonging aspects in any one social context. However, Family, Friendship, and Spirituality/Religion/Ideology came closest with seven of the eight belonging aspects endorsed, each missing only COMPETENCY. The Animal/Pet social context had the least complexity in terms of varying belonging

aspects, with only three aspects endorsed: AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE (12), VALUED INVOLVEMENT (22), and FAMILIARITY (2). In addition to being the most and least complex, these four social contexts are also the most endorsed by number of students, ranging from 18 – 21 student endorsements. Finer grained analyses of complexity across the remaining contexts lose meaning as the number of student endorsements go down; ranges for these were as low as 5 to 16 student endorsements per context. Saliency may be a better tool than complexity for comparing across contexts with widely varying endorsements, as patterns of frequency in belonging aspects relative to other aspects emerge regardless of the number of endorsements.

In terms of saliency of belonging aspects within individual contexts, a few interesting patterns of note emerged. AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE was the most salient belonging aspect for seven of the fourteen social contexts, but among these, Mentorship had, by far, the highest magnitude of saliency for the aspect with students' affective experience being more than seven times greater than the other aspects. Grouped codes within the AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE aspect show that students felt belonging through experiences of “comfort,” “trust,” “understanding,” and “connection” in their mentorship relationships (see Table 3). IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT (40) was the most salient of the seven belonging aspects within the Shared Spirituality/Religion/Ideology context, with more than 1.5 times the references as the next most salient aspect within the context, AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE (24). It is perhaps unsurprising that students would describe their experience of shared beliefs among those that occupy similar religions or other ideological/cultural philosophy systems, but it may illustrate convergence for both constructs. Another interesting pattern emerged with the salience primacy of VALUED

INVOLVEMENT (22) over AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE (12) in the Animals/Pets context. While students often described their experiences of “comfort,” “pos+ affect,” and “connection” when speaking about their pets, it was their experiences of being “valued” and “needed” that were most salient in their sense of belonging.

Other patterns of note included FAMILIARITY as most salient within Distal Relationships, and SHARED EXPERIENCE as most salient within the School/Classmates context. Face validity for these experience-context pairings is evident in that the most prominent belonging aspect fits the given context in relatable ways. A closer look at representative student experiences provides further evidence. Students tended to describe the experience of FAMILIARITY in Distal Relationships developed at restaurant and retail locations, like this student:

*I think that when you start to see the same people over and over again, it becomes part of your daily or weekly or monthly routine. It's like, you both knew that you were going to be there, and it's exciting because it's a familiar face. When I walk into Starbucks and they already know what my order is and they're like, "Yes, it's ready, here you go." It's kind of like I feel like I belong in Starbucks, which is so funny to say. I don't feel like just another person or like a stranger, because I feel like with daily activities and stuff, it's easy to feel like just another number, but whenever you can walk in somewhere and recognize someone and feel important to them, it creates a sense of belonging. [COB106, 00:24:09]*

Students’ sense of belonging with classmates centered on SHARED EXPERIENCE in the School context, which was notable in that it was the only context, social or nonsocial, in which AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE did not emerge as an aspect of belonging. This student compared their experiences of belonging in virtual vs. in-classroom learning:

*I think I like being with other students and knowing that we're all working towards something together, but if I'm by myself, having my experiences with homeschool, I get so much done. I do achieve more, I*

*guess, by myself than I would on campus, but I feel more belonging on campus. [COB117, 01:30:40]*

This student described the sense of belonging created by shared experiences of adversity:

*I think that some students are actually more connected and feel more like a sense of belonging in specific courses and classes, just because, again, it's sort of like students don't know how to learn on here and teachers don't know how to teach here, it's both. No one knows what's going on, it's just complete chaos and it's like all of us feel like that in the chat. [COB112, 01:19:23]*

These examples illustrate how each aspect within the given context emerged as the most salient experience of belonging.

In another saliency pattern of note, students tended to describe SIMILARITY as the most salient aspect within the Social Location context, although this was discussed in various and complex ways. Students described experiences of belonging in the Social Location context as involving those having similar sex, gender, race, or sexuality, as in these student's responses about their sense of belonging with others of the same sex or gender:

*Yes, I think being a girl, you have an immediate sense of belonging with a girl over a guy because you have the same anatomy. You go through similar experiences. Whether it's, I don't know, it could be anywhere from shopping to getting your period to talking about boys. I feel like there's just so many similar experiences you have that it's just there. You don't have to explain some of the things that go on with yourself because they're also a girl. I think there is definitely a sense of belonging with that. [COB113, 01:24:02]*

*Definitely, as a woman, when you get to hang out just with all your girlfriends, it's an immediate sense of belonging. It just facilitates similar conversations. There could be a whole group of women you're hanging out with, your girlfriends, and if one guy comes in, the mood shifts because you're like, "Well, I can't relate to you as much." It's just they can automatically relate to each other just from what we experience as a woman. That is what sparks belonging initially. Just being able to recognize since we are all women, or we're both women,*

*there's things you automatically both experience that are similar. That immediately creates a sense of belonging [COB114, 00:45:11]*

*I have a lot of guy friends and also a lot of girl friends. I think it's interesting to see the comfortability that guys have as compared to girls interacting with one another. There's just like things that guys just don't talk about. I'll be like hanging out with my guy friends and then I'm super comfortable with them, whatever. Then the girls come over and then it's just a totally different dynamic. It's like a different level of comfortability. It just is interesting to see the way some of us change our behavior once the opposing gender is involved. [COB108, 00:54:27]*

A few students talked about belonging experiences with those who identify similarly in their sexual orientation, like this student:

*People who share my sexual orientation, whenever I find that out, there's almost an immediate thought that goes off in my mind that is like this person has been through a lot of the same things I've been through. It's that similar experience. You just know right then and there that if you all were to start talking about it especially in a private setting where you could be open and honest with each other, you would definitely feel that strong sense of belonging. A lot of the times, for me, whenever I find out someone shares my sexual orientation, it makes me trust them just a little bit more right then because of that shared sense of belonging and our similar experiences. [COB105, 00:57:29]*

Some students talked about the SIMILARITY of cultural background or race that fosters an initial sense of belonging, like this student:

*Yes, there is sometimes an initial or automatic belonging with race or background. I'm half Filipino, and it's always funny because I feel like Filipino people love being Filipino. It's like something that they're super—it's like how Maryland people love Maryland. It feels like that. Whenever we'll go to like a wedding or anything, maybe we haven't all seen each other, maybe we don't even know each other, but somehow everybody's my aunt or uncle, and everybody just like loves you and loves that you have that thing in common. [COB106, 00:40:38]*

Other students, namely those who did not self-identify as part of a minority racial or ethnic group, seemed to grapple with the impact of similarities in racial or cultural

background on belonging. This was evident even in cases where students acknowledged the impact in other areas of Social Location similarity, as in this student's response:

*I would say for me that just being a girl makes me like have a sort of sense of belongingness, like towards other females, just because I know that we go through a lot of the same things that, like guys could never relate to or experience. So, I think that that does create a sense of belonging. I'd like to say that ethnicity or race doesn't play a part in it. But like looking at my friends and their ethnicities, I'd say maybe subconsciously it plays a part in who I feel belonging with because my friend group isn't ethnically or racially diverse. [COB102, 00: 57:07]*

Students who endorsed the impact of SIMILARITY on belonging often described it as a subconscious factor, like this student:

*Like when I think about it, I do end up feeling like since I'm more like someone, I am more comfortable and belong with them better. At least at first. It's not something I necessarily consciously notice. It's like when I think back on it, I kind of realize, like most of my friends are, you know, the same gender, the same ethnicity. You know, so I kind of realize that it's kind of I guess easier to just start off a sense of belonging there. I think really it's more so just the similar versus different experiences. Because when we've had different experiences, I don't know how they'll relate to mine or if I'll totally relate to theirs. So, it's a bit harder to start something there. [COB101, 00:39:50]*

Several students identified as being from the racial majority and acknowledged privilege in belonging as it relates to being racially similar to most others in a given space, as this student did:

*Well, I mean, I'm a white woman. I think that I would automatically feel that I belong in places more than someone who has darker skin might feel, and I can never understand that experience [...] I have to be aware when I'm speaking about my experience, that there are people that have had much worse experiences than I have, especially with regards to belonging. That's something that I definitely wanted to talk about because I can't ever say that I feel like I don't belong somewhere in terms of race because I don't think that I truly understand what that feels like especially with regards to my skin color. [COB107, 00:56:28]*

The same student went on to talk about SIMILARITY and dissimilarity in regional differences that affected their experience of belonging:

*For example, if I were to rush a social sorority on Greek Row in this very Southern school that I am finding myself in as a Northerner, I might not feel like I belonged in a sorority that's filled with true Southern people, because I don't really share that experience with them. I grew up in the North. I grew up in a blue state [...] I definitely still associate myself with the North because it's where all of my family has been from, from the start of when my family got to the US. My family is very Northern. We have very strong ties to the region. We're very ingrained in that kind of culture. I've lived here for three years. I don't necessarily feel like I don't belong. I do, especially since I'm a college kid living in a college town, but maybe if I were an adult that moved here and just started a new job here, it would be a little harder for me to feel like I belonged because of that regional difference. [COB107, 00:58:59]*

A few students described experiences of belonging and nonbelonging where similarity, or lack thereof, interacted with their own multicultural backgrounds in complex ways. This student described feeling an ease of belonging with different groups because of her upbringing:

*I am a White female, so I'm the majority. I'm very lucky that I, on a daily basis, feel comfortable around people. I know people in minority groups don't always feel that way [...] My mother is from France [...] My little brother is from Haiti [...] My stepfather's Black, my best friend is Black. I definitely grew up around a super diverse culture and I loved it [...] I do feel a good sense of belonging in a lot of groups because with most of the groups, I do have some sort of similarity or identifying factor to. There are certain subgroups on campus that I may not feel comfortable with just because I don't have those shared lived experiences or anything like that. [COB116, 00:58:19]*

Another student described being raised in a different culture than their birth culture, which presented complicated belonging experiences in terms of SIMILARITY in Social Location:

*I'm Asian, but I'm adopted. My parents are Caucasian, and the people around me have mostly been Caucasian. Well, there's just not a lot of Asian people where I grew up and not really here either I guess [...] There's only ever been like one or two other Asian students in my elementary and middle school and you get those weird questions like, "Oh, are you related to that only other Asian kid in school?" You're like, "Wow, great question. The answer is no." [...] My mom loves doing cultural festivals. We go to Chinese New Year at the community but it's interesting because she was also raised Jewish, so we go to the Menorah Lighting and such too. I remember in middle school there were some weird cultural club things. They asked me, "Oh, can you bring some Asian stuff?" I'm like, I could talk about Hanukkah and that kind of thing. People don't expect that [...] It is a bit weird because my other two roommates...when they first approached me and started talking to me and I was like, "Oh, this is nice making friends." They're Asian. They're like, "We just went talk to you because you're Asian." I'm like, "Oh, okay." Then they're like, "When we talk to you, we can immediately tell that you weren't raised Asian American." I'm like, "Well. That doesn't make me feel great." Part of it's like, "Well, you just picked me because of superficial things," which makes me feel odd. We still became friends regardless. It's a little blip. It doesn't really matter in the whole thing, but it's something I think about, I guess. It's interesting to me because as I said, the school I went to there wasn't a big Asian community and from what I've heard from them, is that you stick together racial-wise, make friends within your race and such. I'm like, "Oh, well, that's never happened to me really." [COB109, 00:57:26 & 01:01:56]*

Throughout these examples, SIMILARITY emerged as a salient aspect of belonging in the Social Location context. Students discussed the impact of SIMILARITY in several areas of Social Location, including gender identity, sexuality, and racial and cultural background. However, for students with multicultural backgrounds, the impact of SIMILARITY was complex and interacted with their belonging experiences in unique ways.



***Research Question 2.3 – In Which Nonsocial Contexts Do Students Endorse Feeling a Sense of Belonging?***

The purpose of RQ2.3 was to identify the nonsocial contexts in which students experience a sense of belonging. As described previously, contexts of belonging were identified and enumerated separately for *contextually open*, *contextually unprompted*, and *contextually prompted* questions. Table 3.5 shows how many and which social contexts were endorsed across these question types.

In all, students endorsed experiencing a sense of belonging in eight separate nonsocial contexts. As with social contexts, the full number of nonsocial contexts were endorsed in stages across question types. However, nonsocial contexts were rarely endorsed for *contextually open* questions. When asked where/in which situations they feel a sense of belonging, only three students endorsed at least one nonsocial context, with two specific contexts emerging across their responses, including School/Learning (2 students) and Skill (1 student). When students were asked *contextually unprompted* questions about where/in which nonsocial contexts they experience a sense of belonging they endorsed Self (8), Work (3), Home (3), Nature (3), Spiritual/Religious/Ideological Practices (2), and Public Spaces (2), in addition to the previously endorsed nonsocial contexts. The large jump in endorsements from *contextually open* to *unprompted* illustrates that when asked to consider belonging in any nonsocial context (i.e., when other people are NOT involved), they could think about them and extrapolate relevant experiences, especially when their sense of belonging involved a physical space (e.g., Home, Nature, Public Spaces) or in what students described as an innate sense of belonging within themselves (e.g., Self). When students were asked *contextually*

*prompted* questions about specific nonsocial contexts, they endorsed the same eight nonsocial contexts previously endorsed, but in greater numbers overall: Skill (17), Self (17), Home (16), School/Learning (15), Public Spaces (15), Nature (14), Spiritual/Religious/Ideological Practices (14), and Work (11). See Table 3.5 for an enumerated list of these nonsocial contexts, organized by the type of question (i.e., *open*, *unprompted*, *prompted*) in which the responses were made.

***Research Question 2.4 – How Do Students Describe Feeling a Sense of Belonging in Nonsocial Contexts? How Do Descriptions of Felt Sense of Belonging Differ across Nonsocial Contexts? How Are They Similar?***

To answer RQ2.4, the eight experiential belonging aspects (i.e., VALUED INVOLVEMENT, FIT, AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE, COMPETENCE, SIMILARITY, IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT, FAMILIARITY, AND PERCEIVED SHARED EXPERIENCE) were used to analyze how students experience belonging in nonsocial contexts. As in RQ2.2, the relative commonality, frequency, complexity, and saliency of the eight belonging aspects that were endorsed within nonsocial contexts were analyzed to explore similarities and differences in students' experience of belonging across these contexts. Results are illustrated in Table 3.4 and Figure 3.2.

Table 3.4 and companion Figure 3.2 are organized identically to their social context counterparts that illustrated the results for RQ2.2. In Table 3.4, the total number of references to belonging aspects endorsed within each nonsocial context are shown, with the individual number of references listed parenthetically alongside each aspect. Table 3.4 also shows the number of students that endorsed each context, the average number of belonging aspect references made per student, and the number of belonging

aspects endorsed per context. Graphical depictions of this information are presented in Figure 3.2, with the range of belonging aspect references along the horizontal axis and the nonsocial contexts along the vertical axis ordered, top to bottom, from greater to fewer number of belonging aspect references made across contexts. In Figure 3.2, the number of students who endorsed each nonsocial context is listed parenthetically along the vertical axis and color coding shows the belonging aspects endorsed for each context at the subtheme level (e.g., AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE, VALUED INVOLVEMENT, etc.). Code-level detail (e.g., “accepted,” “valued,” and “needed” for the VALUED INVOLVEMENT subtheme) is shown in Table 3.4. The relative commonality, frequency, saliency, and complexity of the eight belonging aspects that were endorsed across nonsocial contexts are illustrated in Figure 3.2.

Overall, affective responses, purposive contribution (i.e., feeling “needed” in their VALUED INVOLVEMENT), and a sense of competency were the most prevalent experiences of belonging among students within nonsocial contexts. AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE was the most commonly and frequently referenced belonging aspect, with students describing this experience across every nonsocial context. VALUED INVOLVEMENT (29) and COMPETENCY (27) were the next most frequently referenced aspects, but each trailed far behind AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE (125) by a magnitude of more than 4:1. Notably, where VALUED INVOLVEMENT was experienced by students, they described purposive contribution (i.e., being “needed”) instead of feeling “accepted” or “valued.” The only exceptions to this were experiences of self-acceptance in the Self context and experiences of divine acceptance through Spiritual/Religious/Ideological Practices. Experiences of COMPETENCY were described

by students across productive contexts (i.e., School/Learning, Skill, Work/Job, Self) where evaluative aspects might exist, rather than in physical space contexts.

Two of the belonging aspects, IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT and SIMILARITY, were not referenced by students in any nonsocial context of belonging. The dropping off of these contexts makes sense within nonsocial contexts, and at face value, it would seem that SHARED EXPERIENCE (4) would have done so as well, particularly given the few references to it. However, a closer look at these references shows that students described nonsocial shared experiences as memories of their own experiences held within the physical spaces of these contexts (e.g., on campus, in their homes), like these students:

*I'd say I have a sense of belonging to just campus in general. I, in the past three years, have just gotten so comfortable and connected to campus. When I walk around and see certain spots, I just think of, "I did that with this person," or, "I had a meltdown right there because of a test." Those little memories I have around campus are really nice and they make me feel like I belong there. [COB108, 01:19:59]*

*I definitely feel like I belong in my Columbia home. I think just the fact that I've lived here for three years and like this is the apartment that I've had for most of my college time and just like thinking back to the memories and experiences I've had here, like within this apartment, definitely gives me a sense of belonging here. [COB121, 00:44:24]*

In the previous two examples, students noted a sense of belonging through “shared” experiences with the spaces they described, represented by their memories within the space. Just as students might describe having a shared experience with a valued other that is co-held through memory, the valued spaces described in the examples above trigger memories of experiences that create a sense of belonging to that space. The shared experiences described in these two quotes may carry echoes of social belonging where

the fond memories involved others, but in each case the referent of belonging is the physical space itself, rather than to social others.

In terms of complexity, the belonging aspects described by students across nonsocial contexts varied little. As reported, students described only six belonging aspects in all across the eight nonsocial contexts endorsed. Among the eight nonsocial contexts, four contained references to three belonging aspects (Nature, Home, Self, and Spiritual/Religious/Ideological Practices) and four contained references to four belonging aspects (Skill, Public Space, School/Learning, Work/Job).

In terms of saliency, affective experience was prominent in most nonsocial contexts, although purposive contribution (i.e., VALUED INVOLVEMENT) and a sense of COMPETENCY emerged as most prominent in evaluative contexts (Skill, School/Learning). For six of the eight nonsocial contexts, AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE was the most salient belonging aspect, with only School/Learning and Work/Job differing. Students endorsed VALUED INVOLVEMENT (10) as the most salient aspect for the Work/Job context and described their experiences in terms of purposive contribution (i.e., “needed”) in every case. Students described COMPETENCY (7) as the most salient aspect for School/Learning, although this was very close in saliency with VALUED INVOLVEMENT (6), which was again discussed as purposive contribution (i.e., “needed”) and not as feeling “accepted” or “valued.”

***Research Question 2.5 – How Do Descriptions of Felt Sense of Belonging Differ by Social and Nonsocial Contexts? How Are They Similar?***

Aim 2 RQ2.5 explored similarities and differences in how students experience belonging in social and nonsocial contexts. To determine patterns of experience across

contexts, the results of analyses in RQ2.2 and RQ2.4 were compared and new analyses at the grouped code level of belonging aspects were conducted. Figures 1 and 2 refer back to prior analyses and Figure 3.3 shows the combined distributions of belonging aspects for social and nonsocial contexts in a single chart for ease of comparison. All other elements of Figure 3.3 mirror those in Figures 1 and 2, previously described. Table 3.2 shows the frequency and average number of endorsements for belonging aspect subthemes and codes at the summative social and nonsocial context level. Columns provide the total number of students that endorsed each belonging subtheme and code, the number of references made for each context type, and the total and average number of references made across all contexts.

Aim 2 revealed a number of similarities and differences in how students experience belonging across contexts. All students endorsed belonging in both social and nonsocial contexts, but the experiences they described for social contexts were much richer and more complex. In general, affective responses and a sense that their contributive involvement mattered emerged as broad similarities between students' experience of belonging in social and nonsocial contexts. However, nuances in the expression of these experiences also emerged. Finally, feelings of competency were important in nonsocial belonging experiences but rarely emerged in social contexts.

While all students endorsed belonging in both social and nonsocial contexts, they tended to describe their experiences of belonging within social contexts more richly than they described their nonsocial belonging experiences. This was evident in the difference between the number of references made to belonging in each context category and in the varying complexity between contexts. Table 3.2 shows that references to belonging

aspects in social (S) contexts outnumber nonsocial (NS) contexts for nearly all aspects. The only exceptions to this trend are the greater nonsocial references for COMPETENCY (NS = 28; S = 5) and the “calm” code (NS = 33; S = 8) for AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE. As seen when comparing Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2, students’ descriptions of their belonging experiences in social contexts were also more complex in that students tended to describe a greater variety of belonging aspects in social contexts than they did in nonsocial contexts. Students shared their social experiences of belonging through descriptions of all eight belonging aspects, with half of the social contexts containing six or more aspects of belonging. This was contrasted by their nonsocial descriptions of belonging which contained only six of the eight belonging aspects in all. Half of the endorsed nonsocial contexts contained four of the six aspects and the other half contained only three belonging aspects.

Students described nuanced affective experiences in both social and nonsocial contexts of belonging. Students’ affective experiences emerged as important aspects of belonging in both context categories, although there were differences in how these were expressed at the code level of AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE. While students described feeling “comfort,” “positive emotion,” “connection,” and “safety/security/trust” in both social and nonsocial contexts, the code-level aspect, “understood,” was only described by students in social contexts. This makes sense, given the way students tended to describe the experience, as in this example:

*Just like having him and him knowing me just very intimately and differently than everybody else makes me feel like I belong with him because he has a unique understanding of who I am as a person. Having one person in a romantic relationship that knows you differently than everyone else does, that automatically makes you feel*

*like you belong when you're with them, because they know you differently than other people do. [COB114, 00:18:29]*

Students' experience of "calm" was the only affective belonging aspect that was more prevalent in nonsocial contexts, as in the nonsocial belonging experience described here:

*I've always, always felt a sense of belonging to nature. From the time that I could walk, I've always spent time outside. It's a feeling of just pure bliss to me to be outside and in nature. I would always just go outside and spend some time by myself in nature and it just always calmed me down... Before when I lived in a dorm and I didn't really view my space as a space where I could belong as much, I would take a pop-up hammock and go somewhere outside because it's where I felt like I belonged more so at the time. [COB105, 01:09:41]*

However, despite the difference in prevalence, students described the "calm" experience similarly when discussing the aspect within social contexts, as this student did when describing a time when they were invited to compete at a cultural event:

*I would classify this as one of the experiences that I can say I felt the greatest sense of belonging ever in my whole, entire life, it was when I was at the ceremony... It was very cool, being at the ceremony with thousands of people that are so proud to be Jewish, which there's so much antisemitism in the world that to be in an arena where people are celebrating you being Jewish and being a Jewish athlete, it was so calming. [COB113, 55:33]*

Interestingly, both students alluded to elements of nonbelonging and juxtaposed their found sense of "calm" in these belonging contexts with situations in which they may have experienced a lack of belonging.

Students' experience of belonging in social and nonsocial contexts were similar in that the feeling that their contributive involvement mattered emerged prominently in both context categories. However, while experiences of feeling "accepted," "needed," and "valued" were equally endorsed VALUED INVOLVEMENT aspects for social contexts, only the "needed" code-level aspect emerged in nonsocial contexts. Students described



this “needed” aspect in nonsocial contexts as purposive productivity and contribution, like this student:

*I would say the sense of belonging is like the same feeling I get whenever I'm with other people working towards a common goal. It's like me by myself working towards a goal that I have for myself...when I'm by myself and working on a specific task, it makes me feel like I belong because I'm contributing something that nobody else can contribute. Just knowing that my talents are needed in order to succeed or that I'm contributing and using my talents to improve something else gives me a sense of belonging. [COB106, 01:01:10]*

This student spoke similarly about their experience of purposive contribution in a School/Learning context:

*I feel like it might sound kind of weird, but I feel like sometimes when I'm doing schoolwork and I'm like making a good grade or I'm taking a subject in something that I'm very interested in, I feel a sense of belonging because it feels right. It feels like I'm doing the right thing for my future. [COB115, 00:10:37]*

Students described their contributive belonging experiences in social contexts similarly, but the referent of belonging was often to “the other,” like with this student’s description of their sense of belonging with animals:

*I think especially with animals like horses and cats and dogs, there's a sense of belonging because like what I said about caring about them, they rely on you, so it becomes a more interpersonal relationship. My dog is not going to be okay if I don't feed her or walk her. She can't open the doors by herself and so caring for my dog or my cat back home or my horse, it gives you a sense of belonging because you're important to them and you're essential to their life. [COB114, 01:04:23]*

Students described feelings of COMPETENCY as important nonsocial belonging experiences, but these descriptions rarely emerged in social contexts. In nonsocial settings, students often described belonging experiences involving COMPETENCY either in themselves or in contexts of productivity or activity, like this student who talked about competence in the School/Learning context:

*I feel belonging when I'm like doing something I'm pretty passionate about and I feel like I'm competent at. I guess even when I'm working on something that I feel like I'm pretty good at, you know, there's that sense of belonging. Like I have my own independent study research project right now. And I feel like when I when I work on that and it's going well, I feel a greater sense of belonging with myself. I think, just because it's something I feel is important and something I feel like is bettering myself. [COB101, 00:14:45]*

Likewise, another student discussed COMPETENCY in sport and activity contexts:

*Whenever you start a new thing, you may not feel like you fit in right away. If you've never taken a yoga class in your life, you're going to feel out of place and weird at first until you get to know the terminology and the poses and you get to build that self-efficacy in terms of you start to a little bit, you know more about what you're doing. I think that's pretty much the same with other sports and activities as well. You feel more sense of belonging in that thing when you have a higher skill in it, and you are more educated in that sport or that activity or anything like that as well... I play piano and definitely feel a sense of belonging in that. Music is very much a release for me emotionally and helps take my mind off of anything busy going on in life, similarly to yoga. Again, it's that skill level you can go back to. [COB116, 01:29:00]*

In social contexts, COMPETENCY was rarely described as a belonging aspect, but those who did talked about feeling a sense of belonging to others through school or skill-related belonging experiences, like this student:

*I recently picked up coding...I recently picked that up and I started to learn how to program things. Well, I learned the basics of programming a website. Completing that was just very gratifying. I guess it indirectly made me feel like I have a sense of belonging with people who also do that, who are in the computer programming field, even though I'm nowhere near them, but I think, understanding the basics of how something works gave me a connection to them. [COB104, 01:43:37]*

This student described a fluctuating sense of belonging depending on their perceived competence among other students:

*I would feel more comfortable if I knew that I wasn't doing well with something if I also knew that a lot of other people weren't. Conversely, if I thought that everyone in the entire class was getting A's and I was*

*getting C's, I would probably feel really disappointed with myself and be really discouraged from reaching out for help...I think that if you have this perceived sense that you're doing the worst in the class and that everyone is understanding something that you're just not quite getting, I don't think that you would feel like you belonged in that group.* [COB107, 01:09:22]

These social context examples of COMPETENCY varied slightly in that one discussed belonging in a distal way, while the other offered an experience of nonbelonging in a closer group setting. However, the COMPETENCY belonging experience for both of these students involved comparisons of their skill level against that of others, whether favorable or not.

### ***Summary of Research Aim 2***

The research questions in Aim 2 explored students' experiences of belonging in social and nonsocial contexts. The findings presented here are shown in Tables 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 and illustrated in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

Students endorsed experiences of belonging in a total of fourteen separate social contexts (RQ2.1) in stages, through *contextually open*, *contextually unprompted*, and *contextually prompted* question types. All students endorsed at least one social context for *contextually open* questions, with Friendship and Family the most prominent responses among the seven social contexts described. Subsequent questions that were contextually broad (i.e., *unprompted*) and contextually specific (i.e., *prompted*) elicited the remaining seven social contexts that tended to be less closely interpersonal (e.g., Classmates, Clubs, Animals/Pets) than earlier responses.

Descriptions of students' experience of belonging in social contexts (RQ2.2) centered on eight belonging aspects gathered through analyses in Aim 1. Affective responses and feeling as if their contributive involvement mattered emerged as the most

prevalent social belonging experiences for students. Students' social belonging experiences were generally complex, with rich descriptions of multiple belonging aspects within each context. While affective responses emerged as the most salient belonging aspect in most social contexts, key differences in saliency for particular contexts were evident, including within the Shared Spirituality/Religion/Ideology, Distal Relationships, Animal/Pets, School/Classmates, and Social Location contexts.

Students endorsed experiences of belonging in eight nonsocial contexts across *contextually open*, *unprompted*, and *prompted* question types (RQ2.3). *Contextually open* endorsements of nonsocial belonging were rare, with only three students initially sharing these types of experiences across two contexts. *Contextually unprompted* endorsements were garnered for all eight nonsocial contexts explored in this study, with greater numbers of students endorsing these in *contextually prompted* responses. Among these, students most commonly endorsed an innate sense of belonging (i.e., Self), productive or evaluative contexts (i.e., Skill, School/Learning), and physical spaces (i.e., Home, Public Spaces).

Students' descriptions of nonsocial belonging included six of the eight belonging aspects explored in this study, from which affective responses, purposive contribution, and sense of competency emerged as the most prominent experiences (RQ 2.4). Students' descriptions of belonging in nonsocial contexts were moderately complex, generally containing three or four aspects of belonging in each context. Affective responses were the most salient belonging experience among the majority of nonsocial contexts endorsed, with purposive contribution and competence emerging as more salient in School/Learning and Work contexts.

There were a number of similarities and differences in students' experiences of belonging across social and nonsocial contexts (RQ2.5). While all students endorsed both types of belonging contexts, their experiences in social contexts were richer and more complex than their nonsocial belonging experiences. Several aspects described for social belonging were absent in students' descriptions of nonsocial belonging, including perceptions of similarity, shared beliefs, relating to others, feeling understood, and feeling valued. Competency and affective experiences of "calm" were the only two aspects more prominent for nonsocial contexts than social contexts. Affective responses and a sense that their contributive involvement mattered emerged as similarly prominent subthemes within each context type, but nuanced expressions of these experiences were evident. Affectively, students experienced "calm" more often in nonsocial contexts but discussed the experience similarly in social contexts. Differences in students' experiences of contributive involvement emerged as well, with perceptions of feeling valued and accepted appearing equally prominently as feeling "needed" or purposeful in social contexts of belonging but were absent or rarely endorsed in nonsocial contexts. Instead, descriptions of purposive involvement (i.e., feeling "needed") emerged as the most prominent experience of contributive involvement.

### **Aim 3 Results**

The purpose of the research questions in Aim 3 were to quantify the social and nonsocial contexts in which students endorsed experiencing a sense of belonging. Quantifying qualitative data allowed for the exploration of the role of contextual complexity in students' overall experience of belonging through mixed-methods analyses in Aim 4. Aim 3 results were tallied separately for (a) *contextually open*, (b) *contextually*

*unprompted*, and (c) *contextually prompted* contexts of belonging endorsed by students.

Table 3.5 displays the quantity, range, and average number of contexts endorsed by students across these question types.

***Research Question 3.1 – What Are the Total Number of, and Averages of, the Contextually Open, Contextually Unprompted, and Contextually Prompted Contexts of Belonging Endorsed by Students for Social and Nonsocial Context Categories?***

Social and nonsocial contexts endorsed by students were tallied for *contextually open*, *unprompted*, and *prompted* responses. Students endorsed seven social ( $M = 1.76$ ,  $n = 21$ ) and two nonsocial ( $M = 0.14$ ,  $n = 3$ ) contexts of belonging when asked *contextually open* questions about their experience of belonging, for a total of nine contexts ( $M = 1.90$ ,  $n = 21$ ). When asked *contextually unprompted* questions about their experiences, students endorsed nine social ( $M = 1.95$ ,  $n = 21$ ) and eight nonsocial ( $M = 1.33$ ,  $n = 16$ ) contexts of belonging, totaling seventeen distinct contexts ( $M = 3.29$ ,  $n = 21$ ). Across all questions, including those that were *contextually prompted*, students endorsed fourteen social ( $M = 8.86$ ,  $n = 21$ ) and eight nonsocial ( $M = 5.52$ ,  $n = 21$ ) contexts of belonging, or twenty-two contexts in all ( $M = 14.38$ ,  $n = 21$ ). See Table 3.5 for a visual display of these data.

These data show that when asked to think openly about belonging, and without prompting (i.e., *contextually open* questions), students centered on contexts of import to them, the vast majority of which were social in nature. When asked to consider nonspecific, other than social contexts (i.e., *contextually unprompted* questions) as potential areas of belonging, three-fourths of students readily gave examples of nonsocial contexts wherein they do experience a sense of belonging. When these same examples of

nonsocial contexts were presented to students through *contextually prompted* questions, all students endorsed at least three of these as nonsocial contexts of belonging for them.

***Research Questions 3.2 – What Is the Ratio of Social-to-Nonsocial Contexts Described by Students? of Social-to-Total? of Nonsocial-to-Total?***

In all, students endorsed fourteen social contexts and eight nonsocial contexts. Ratios and percentages of total were calculated for social and nonsocial contexts across the full sample (see Table 3.5). As a sample, students endorsed social contexts for 62% of the total contexts endorsed (nonsocial = 38%), or at a rate of 1.75 to 1 over nonsocial contexts. The average social to nonsocial ratio for the full sample was 1.61 to 1.

Ratios and percentages of total were calculated individually for each student to explore whether group statistics had obscured variation in experience of belonging for individual students. Table 3.6 shows the results of these calculations. The smallest ratios were 1:1 as no student endorsed more nonsocial contexts than social contexts of belonging. The largest ratio, 3.67 to 1, was observed from a student who endorsed eleven social contexts and only three nonsocial contexts.

To determine whether the pattern of more social to nonsocial context endorsements held true for *contextually open* and *contextually unprompted* responses, these same calculations were repeated for the full sample at each question type. Social contexts were endorsed 3.5 to 1 over nonsocial contexts, or 78% of the total contexts endorsed, when asked *contextually open* questions about belonging. When asked *contextually unprompted* questions, students responded by endorsing social contexts 1.13 times more than nonsocial contexts, or 53% of the total. It should be noted that calculations for *contextually prompted* responses were reported as summary statistics at

the beginning of this section as responses to this question type represent the full accounting of context endorsements for the sample.

#### **Aim 4 Results**

The research questions in Aim 4 were intended to explore potential associations among (a) students' overall sense of belonging, as measured by the SOBI-P (Hagerty et al., 1995) (b) the number of social, nonsocial, and total contexts of belonging, and (c) the ratio of social-to-nonsocial contexts endorsed by students. Table 3.6 shows students' SOBI-P scores as well as the totals, averages, and ratios of social, nonsocial, and total contexts of belonging endorsed by students. Students' SOBI-P scores ranged from 19.00 to 46.00, with higher scores indicating greater overall belonging. In all, students endorsed an average of 14.38 contexts of belonging each, individually ranging between 12 and 17 total. These included an average of 8.86 social contexts that ranged between 6 and 11 social contexts, and an average of 5.52 nonsocial contexts that ranged between 3 and 7 nonsocial contexts. Ratios and percentages for these contexts have previously been reported in Aim 3 and can be found in Table 3.6.

To determine whether there were associations among total, average, or ratio of endorsed contexts and students' overall sense of belonging, Pearson correlations were run between students' SOBI-P scores and each of the ratio and tallied contexts described here and shown in Table 3.6. All results were nonsignificant and were not interpreted further. Table 3.7 presents the nonsignificant correlations.

#### **Aim 5 Results**

To understand the belonging effects of COVID, Aim 5 explored how students' belonging contexts and experiences of belonging within them had changed since the



advent of the pandemic. Findings in Aim 5 reveal the many ways that students' experiences of belonging were disrupted and reconstructed during this time. The themes presented below emerged throughout interviews as students were asked both context specific and generalized questions about how they perceived the pandemic had affected their sense of belonging.

To capture COVID related effects, several new codes were used in the analyses for Aim 5. A general timescale was constructed across students' retrospective reports by coding interview segments specific to COVID with one of three codes: COVID QUARANTINE, COVID RETURN TO CAMPUS, and COVID NOW. The COVID QUARANTINE code signified the period from March 2020 when students were first "sent home" after the closure of campus and throughout the summer until students returned for the fall 2020 semester. The COVID RETURN TO CAMPUS code typically captured descriptions of students' initial return to college homes and friends (e.g., "first got back") as the fall 2020 classes were starting. The COVID NOW code captured students' descriptions of "the new normal," "life as it is now," and general references to their experience at the time of the interview compared to before the pandemic. These three codes, collectively the Phases of COVID theme, emerged organically from interviews as students recollected distinct periods of their experience of the pandemic. The timeframes described by these codes were not meant to demarcate exact dates but to capture subjective student experiences about the differences between these perceived phases of the pandemic.

Several additional codes and emergent themes organized the effects of COVID on belonging. Coding that captured descriptions of COVID-related changes to students'

sense of belonging were themed together as Vectors of Belonging and included the codes DECREASING BELONGING, BELONGING MAINTAINED, and INCREASING BELONGING. The use of video, voice, and chat technology during periods of separation and isolation emerged as a subtheme that was coded TECHNOLOGY DURING COVID. These codes and those that captured the timeline of COVID phases were used in matrix analyses that allowed for the identification of overarching themes across codes. Additionally, context specific codes from Aim 2 analyses were used with these COVID effect codes in matrix analyses to determine changes to belonging across contexts.

Findings revealed overarching themes that illustrate COVID's primary effects on belonging, including (a) Belonging Disrupted, (b) Shifting Contexts of Belonging, (c) Social Belonging Weakened and Distilled, (d) Nonsocial Belonging Lost and Found, and (e) Belonging Reconstructed. The presentation of these findings is organized by Aim 5 research questions.

***Research Question 5.1 – How Do Students Feel Their Overall Sense of Belonging Has Been Affected by COVID?***

**Belonging Disrupted.** The disruption to sense of belonging was a universally experienced effect of COVID for the students in the study and was described as happening across phases of the pandemic. Every student described a sudden initial drop in sense of belonging at the beginning of the pandemic related to the closure of the university campus and the widespread public shutdowns that occurred across the country. Additionally, all students described experiencing decreased opportunities for belonging that affected the ways in which they met their need for belonging. Finally, some students

endorsed feeling an increased need for belonging that persisted past the initial phase of the pandemic.

***Quarantine-Related Decrease in Belonging.*** The quarantine phase of the pandemic created significant upheaval for students and led to an acute, initial decrease in belonging. All students (21/21) discussed the early quarantine phase of the pandemic that resulted in the mid-semester closure of campus as an initial major disruption to their overall sense of belonging. Many students went home to their families when the campus closed, which created an immediate barrier to accessing their social network of friends. These disruptions and others were represented by the experiences of the following students:

*There were definitely very low points of belonging in the beginning, like just when I couldn't really see anybody and it was just me and my dog all day, every day. [COB120, 01:32:02]*

*I would say because swimming was shut down, and I didn't get to see my friends, I definitely felt like family was the only avenue in that moment. Yes, I would say I did feel less belonging at the beginning. [COB113, 01:49:48]*

*I spent so much time away from like friends and, you know, Columbia and there were big lockdown restrictions, so I couldn't really see anybody anyway. I think that's what kind of decreased the sense of belonging [...] just being away from everyone and suddenly having to leave all my friends, essentially. [COB101, 01:05:38 & 01:06:40]*

*I feel like it came in waves for me. When I went home and back to New York I struggled a lot with the whole COVID situation. I just wanted it to be over. It just felt like it was dragging on, especially the fall semester, and my sense of belonging definitely decreased. I wasn't sure what I was doing with myself. [COB110, 01:28:14]*

*There was a time where my sense of belonging was definitely less towards the beginning of the pandemic when I was still trying to adjust. I was so pissed at the world because life wasn't fun anymore. It wasn't the same. I couldn't go see my friends if I wanted to. We couldn't just go out to eat if we wanted to. We were shut down. [COB111, 02:02:20]*

***Decreased Opportunities for Belonging.*** Lost opportunities for belonging were common experiences for students. All students (21/21) described decreased opportunities for belonging throughout the phases of the pandemic. These were described by students as occurring across many contexts in ways that affected their overall sense of belonging. Several students talked about missing opportunities to see old friends or to make new ones:

*Just the whole fact that there's not as much opportunity to meet as many new people. For me, that's a big part of feeling like I belong in general, just as a human being in society, is meeting new people and learning about new experiences from others. That's part of my sense of belonging in society is knowing that I have experiences that I get to share with others that they might not necessarily be acquainted with and vice versa. [COB105, 01:41:48]*

*I used to be part of a much larger friend group and everybody kind of had their own place in that, but with COVID, that's kind of fallen apart and we can't really see each other much more. [COB101, 01:09:41]*

The following student's description of feeling a sense of lost belonging to her sorority was echoed by others in similar clubs:

*I think the sense of belonging in a sorority, for me at least, was the functions and the events of all being together and coming together just to have fun. And then it was also, you know, seeing each other around either on campus or out in Five Points or just wherever. You know, seeing them and being like you say "hi" and on such a big campus, it's very nice to have familiar faces around because, you know, it makes you feel like more connected and like you belong even on a big campus. And I think that leveled off from COVID. I wasn't like going out. I wasn't going out or going on campus. I'm still not going on campus because I don't have in-person classes. So, I'm not really seeing other sisters ever and I'm not able to feel that like, "oh hey" feeling or whatever. We're also not having events or anything. So, there's really nothing keeping us together, really – nothing making that sense of belonging. I don't know, I feel like I'm just not very close with any of them and the fact that we're, quote-unquote "sisters" doesn't really mean anything anymore because I never see them. There's really no point. [COB112, 00:32:58]*

Some students experienced lost opportunities for belonging in the sports that they play. Descriptions of lost opportunities for experiencing instrumental belonging and making valued contributions were common among the athletes affected by COVID disruptions:

*I used to go to a gymnastics club here, and it allowed me to practice my sport. But now that COVID restrictions with the club are just really strict and you can't do the things that I would want to do while I was there, I don't do it anymore. So, I do miss that sense of belonging to the sport itself. [COB102, 01:20:46]*

*COVID affected my sense of belonging in my sport a lot because in March when we got sent home from school, my home gym was closed so I obviously couldn't get in the gym and work outside of practice [...] I couldn't really tumble in my yard. I probably took six months off of cheer. I just didn't tumble the whole time [...] When we got back to school, to practice, I was horrible, I fell in everything, I could not land my tumbling for the life of me [...] I was embarrassed to go to practice. I was so embarrassed that I couldn't land these easy skills. Every time I practiced, I absolutely did not want to go. There was nothing I wanted more than to not have to go to practice and embarrass myself. I didn't even want to go to our gym here. We have a gym around the corner that we can go to. I didn't want to go to our gym here because I was literally falling on such basic skills. It was so embarrassing. [COB120, 01:13:59]*

Other students described lost opportunities for belonging with classmates due to the shift to online learning. The following students described lost opportunities to feel a sense of shared experience with classmates.

*I would say I feel less of a sense of belonging in that I don't have the opportunities to feel the same belongingness that I talked about, even if it's just sharing a classroom with other students. You sort of feel belongingness because you're in this class together, but you have like a physical presence together and that's not there anymore, even like. Like, I just don't I guess I just say, like, the limited opportunities have really had an effect on the chances that you get to feel a sense of belongingness, right? [COB102, 01:27:20]*

*I think because of COVID and not having in-person classes and now having asynchronous classes where you don't even have Zoom meetings, there's a lot of miscommunication and it makes you feel like you're left out and you don't belong because you just don't know what's going on. While that is a common feeling for a lot of students, you*

*wouldn't know that because we're not communicating it. I definitely think COVID has created a feeling of un-belonging because you just feel like you're left out to the loop constantly. [COB114, 00:38:55]*

Students also described lost opportunities for belonging in distal relationships and interactions in public spaces.

*It's really taken a toll on how much we can hang out with each other, or even just go to the grocery store and get a compliment from a stranger. Like, that gives me a little bit of a sense of belonging. We just don't have that anymore. [COB111, 00:17:27]*

*There is some sense of belonging missing with people that I had established a connection with. There was a coffee shop that I used to go to really frequently that was attached to a building where my boyfriend lives. I would see the same barista frequently and it helps me feel more like I belonged there because he remembered my name and my drink order. Now with COVID and with masks, and with just the exhaustion that comes with it, I don't think that people are as likely to, I guess, initiate those bonds and strike up that conversation. [COB107, 00:38:56]*

Students also described the changes COVID brought to ideological contexts and the lost opportunities to practice their faith among others.

*Especially, oh, my goodness, not being able to go to church on Sundays and not having that interaction, whether it was just once a week with other Christians, having worship too, I'm a big worship person, and I love music. Not being able to have worship for like six months was really hard for me because that just brought a lot of joy and emotion out of me. I think that definitely affected just how I felt belonging with the Lord. I didn't feel as strong of a connection with the Lord because I wasn't able to worship and go and sit under that teaching. Having the facilitation of a church and an auditorium is very different than watching church at home on your laptop. Just not having that social interaction and that room facilitation of a church definitely made me feel like I just didn't belong to a church anymore and I didn't belong to the same group of people that I used to see every Sunday. [COB114, 00:40:54]*

***Increased Need for Belonging.*** Changes brought by the social isolation policies of the pandemic disrupted belonging for some students to the point that they felt a sense of deprivation. These students (8/21) described experiencing an increased need for

belonging that persisted beyond the early quarantine phase of the pandemic. The following students' descriptions of this need echoed others with similar experiences:

*You definitely have those little insecurities that come into play, especially when a situation like COVID happens and you're not able to have those physical reinforcements that reinforce that idea of belonging in your head. Those are lacking, which can definitely or has taken a toll on my sense of belonging, for sure [...] This constant need to belong is still the driving force into seeking out long-lasting relationships here. Even though I already have sustained relationships, I still want more [...] Just because I'm aware of it now, more aware of my sense of belonging and how important it is. I'm more aware of it now than I was before COVID because I'm more alone now than I was before COVID.*

[COB103, 00:21:08 & 01:03:41]

*It's kind of embarrassing to admit and it's not something I'm proud of, but I think that I catch myself doing things for attention because I like crave that sense of belonging. And again, this is something that, you know, I'm really proud of, but I feel like I've noticed I need to feel like I'm cared about because I haven't been receiving that sort of feeling. I'm just more isolated now with COVID. So, I think when I am with people, I put myself in a position to, like, get more attention so that I can feel like people care about me maybe. And that's something new, something that I never used to do. [COB112, 01:36:24]*

*I just noticed how much more important that feeling of belonging is and how much more I crave it than before. And it's been just a little harder to find. It's harder to feel connected now [...] I think prior to COVID, it was more about the experiences. Like the experiences and the physical place and proximity and all of those pieces versus like now it's just more about the people and those connections I'm missing. Like, I feel like I've actually become more of an extrovert and more of a people person now than I was before, just to get at those connections and that sense of belonging. [COB119, 01:20:12]*

### ***Research Question 5.2 – How Have the Contexts in Which Students Experience Sense of Belonging Changed Since COVID?***

**Shifting Contexts of Belonging.** The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the typical contexts in which students built and maintained their sense of belonging. As a result, students experienced shifts in the contexts that comprised their overall sense of

belonging. A common theme that emerged across all student interviews (21/21) was the shifting of contexts in which students experience sense of belonging. During the early days of the pandemic, when students were sent home from campus, many of them experienced an unwanted shift in belonging away from friends. For some students, this shift brought a renewed sense of belonging with their families.

*I guess the first period was when everything shut down between March and May. I definitely feel like my family just really bonded. We were all just confined to our house and just sort of like going through everything that was COVID together. I think that was a huge bonding thing for all of us because we definitely just got more comfortable with each other [...] I feel like our connectedness, like I'm just a lot more open with my parents now and the same for them with me. I feel like our relationships shifted. Like less of being parents and children and more being like adults together. I mean, they were still parents, but like the relationships shifted and it made our sense of family a lot deeper, I think.*

[COB112, 00:12:46]

*Definitely, I'd say my sense of belonging increased with my family. I actually got to quarantine down in Florida with my grandma and I got extremely close with her when I was there, and my cousin too because it's a long time of doing nothing with someone. We had a lot of conversations that brought us closer.* [COB110, 00:08:31]

*Honestly, I feel like COVID probably made my sense of belonging with my family even better because I was at home for three months with them, which I hadn't been home for more than a couple of days, like since being in college, because I have practice every day. But I was home living with them for three months, which honestly made me feel super connected because I got to spend a lot of time with them that I normally wouldn't.* [COB115, 00:45:33]

*I think in some ways, COVID has given me a greater sense of belonging, and in other ways, there's been a decrease. I think mainly with my family and friends. I feel more belonging with my family now because I'm around them so much. I still feel a sense of belonging with my friends, but it's just been hindered because I'm not with them much.* [COB117, 01:43:00]

*I would say my sense of belonging with my family when I was at home during COVID definitely increased. And even though I was like lacking in other relationships, I think my relationship with them and my sense of belonging at my home definitely made up for it.* [COB121, 01:03:09]



For other students, their pets provided a substitute for the sense of belonging that they felt lacking in other social contexts.

*I think my cat is something I might have relied on a bit more, just because if there's not as many people around, I still have, you know, someone to socialize with [...] I have definitely derived more of a sense of belonging from like solitary activities or, you know, like I said, like with my cat. Essentially, a lot of the time it has come less so from people than it did pre-COVID. [COB101, 01:08:49]*

*I always did feel a sense of belonging with my dog, but when I came home during COVID, I feel like it made me and my dog closer, if that makes sense. I don't even know if you can be closer with a dog [...] but we were together, all day, every day, and it was just the two of us. [COB120, 00:57:55]*

*I think that COVID honestly increased my sense of belonging with my dog because she gave me the opportunity to get out of the house. I can't not walk her. That's essential and so I think overall she made me feel I belonged in a time where I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere because I wasn't working, I didn't have school; I was stuck at home. I knew that I still had to take care of Ella. That was what was important, I belonged as her caretaker. [COB114, 01:05:07]*

In the examples above, students described how their pets provided both companionship and a feeling of purposive contribution (i.e., feeling “needed” through valued involvement). Connecting to earlier findings about the importance of VALUED INVOLVEMENT in many of contexts, this suggests that pets may have become a source of proxy belonging for the many contexts that were missing from their lives.

***Research Question 5.3 – How Have Students’ Experience of Belonging within Social Contexts Been Affected by COVID?***

**Belonging Weakened and Distilled.** The social contexts in which students typically experienced a sense of belonging were profoundly disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic. These disruptions came from the initial campus closure and switch to virtual learning, the widespread shutdown of public spaces, the social distancing policies that limited opportunities for socializing, and the polarization of public attitudes toward

COVID-19 public health policies. As a result, nearly all students (19/21) experienced a weakening of their sense of belonging in some contexts and a distilling of their sense of belonging in others. These disruptions and reconstructions of belonging were most profoundly seen in the loss of and/or distance from their existing relationships, lost opportunities for normative dating relationships, and the distilling of their sense of belonging within the relationships that remained available to them.

***Lost, Distanced, or Strained Relationships.*** Experiences of pandemic disruptions to belonging commonly included lost, distanced, or strained relationships. The majority of students (17/21) reported at least one negatively impacted relationship that weakened their sense of belonging within social contexts. Many of these students found it difficult to maintain their sense of belonging with friends from afar.

*You know, I did have friends and friendships developing last year, and then the world shut down, and then when I thought, like, I was only going to not have to see them for like two months really turned into, like, you know, six or seven. It's like that abrupt stop in that friendship really hurt just because none of them were near Georgia. We were all from out of state. And I'm someone who definitely needs to see people in order to feel that connection, and I feel that belonging in the friendship. And it's like COVID kind of like threw a wrench in that and it just made those relationships so much harder to maintain. [COB119, 00:18:36]*

*I think my sense of belonging with the team definitely changed because I wasn't able to do a lot of these things like in person with them. So, it was harder to feel connected or like the things that I was saying were really making a change, because a lot of what we talked about was like hard to see in action because, like, I never could really be around these people very much at that time if they weren't in my small group of teammates. [COB115, 01:01:35]*

Many students encountered strains in their belonging relationships because of tension related to diverging attitudes toward social distancing, masking, and other public health policies.

*Because I work in the Student Health Center and I am trying to be conscientious of who I'm around, I really only hang out with like my roommate and my boyfriend, rather than some of my other friends that I used to hang out with frequently. I'll talk on the phone, FaceTime, do those sorts of things. I really limited the number of people I'm around normally, which is a little bit hard because, again, with social media, you see some of those friends may not be doing the same. You see them going out and doing fun things and I have that ping of anxiety for a little bit thinking like, "Wow, because I want to be safe and don't want to see a bunch of people, now they have found new friends and have dropped me off." [COB116, 00:20:00]*

*There were definitely some people that I became more disconnected with and didn't feel as much of a sense of belonging with due to COVID or related to it. I think sometimes there's a...it's sometimes hard to not feel disconnected from a lot of people, not only because I don't see as many, but also because I see a lot of them that are doing things they probably shouldn't be doing right now. I feel like when I see people do things they shouldn't be doing, I feel like if they don't have a regard for other people and myself, and if they don't really respect me or other people, then I can't feel like I belong with them. [COB101, 01:11:40]*

*Since COVID, I feel a little bit of less belonging with my mom, I would say. I mean, I guess you could relate it to the entire family, but sometimes COVID brings about some sort of like political beliefs. It just brings out these differing perspectives that we have that I really don't want to discuss with them because I know there's no resolution to it. And the more we talk about it, the more I do feel sort of isolated in my own beliefs. [COB102, 00:28:09]*

*I had friends that I probably grew further from because they were maybe taking this less seriously. They were projecting hate in a way that I didn't like it. I mean there are things that COVID brought out in all of us that I think proved to be steppingstones either towards or away from people. [COB107:00:20:49]*

The following student talked about the COVID quarantine period leading to rifts in her family that resulted in lost relationships.

*During lockdown, I think my mom did start feeling that something was different about me. She did realize it had something to do with my sexuality. It changed the dynamic between me and my mother, specifically, a lot. I would say that I don't really have that sense of belonging that I used to have with my mother before COVID happened, and we went into lockdown, and everything kind of unraveled. I just think we both, at this point, just exist with each other for the sake of the rest of the family. I think I don't have that special connection you*

*usually have, or you're supposed to have with your mother. [COB104, 00:21:32]*

**COVID Singlehood.** Social isolation policies severely disrupted students' normative relationship building through romantic partnership. With less access to potential partners and new public messaging that frowned upon unnecessary social gathering, many students were left without this important social context. More than half of students (12/21) described COVID-related challenges to romantic partnership through lost opportunities for socializing.

*Developing new relationships, not just friendships but romantic relationships and new possibilities, but unlike any other college experience or any other time, those possibilities and opportunities to meet people are not near as present. Therefore, that sense of belonging and creating that friend group or creating that romantic relationship with somebody is hard to do if you can't meet that somebody. [COB103, 00:23:14]*

*I think if someone didn't have like a significant other before covid, it seems almost impossible to like go on dates or like meet someone new because you aren't supposed to be within six feet of someone like that isn't a family member or like in your group for school. And you don't know how exposed they've been or if they've had covid already or if they have it now. So, it's hard to like meet new people, especially significant others. [COB115, 00:19:46]*

*I'm not able to go out and meet people. So, I haven't been able to find someone that I'm even romantically interested in because of COVID. It was kind of a sore subject for me for a while because it was like I wanted to be romantically involved with someone, but I just wasn't able to really find that right person. But now I feel like as time has gone on, I've kind of accepted that I don't need that part in my life. I think that that frustration was definitely there in the height of the peak of COVID and stuff, though. I definitely felt frustrated and a little bit alone, actually. [COB112, 00:21:57]*

A few of these students described challenges in pre-existing romantic relationships spurred by COVID-related separations as well as the artificial acceleration of relationships brought on by pandemic isolation.

*COVID definitely took a toll on my romantic relationship. It was exceptionally difficult because, one, my partner is someone who needs physical touch. It was especially difficult on her to be physically apart because of COVID and not be getting that part that she needs to feel satisfied in a relationship. It was very difficult for her. Also, just the distance that we had to have because of COVID and lockdown and not being able to see each other in order to protect our own families or to prevent the virus from spreading. That definitely had a negative impact. [COB104, 00:32:46]*

*Well, I spent a good deal of QUARANTINE essentially living with someone that I had at the time only been dating for God only about like six months and I had never seen myself as the type of person that with a like college age, romantic partner that we would be the people that are constantly together and constantly staying over and all this, like doing everything together. I value freedom to a degree, and I don't think that relationships at my age should be super interdependent like that but with COVID, it completely changed that, and we found ourselves in a situation where we were essentially living together. It was, I don't want to say difficult because it wasn't, it was just more, you had to take a step back and realize that this could mean that it was a lot more serious than maybe you were intending it to be this quickly. [COB107, 00:24:52]*

***Distilled Sense of Belonging.*** A distilling of students' belonging experiences were seen through changes in their pre-pandemic relationships. Nearly all students (19/21) described a simultaneous deepening of select relationships just as other relationships and weak social ties were necessarily culled through pandemic social impacts.

*My circles have gotten smaller just with COVID, the people that I'm spending more of my time around. I've had opportunities to get a lot closer with the people who were just my fun friends in the past, or my neighbors who I didn't know super well. Now, I know deep stuff about them and just my friend groups have changed a lot based on what's accessible and what's realistic right now. [COB111, 02:09:23]*

*I don't know that COVID increased my sense of belonging, but it brought about a stronger sense of belonging I have with my close friends and family. But then it also, like certain friends, I realized I only had a feeling of belongingness with because of convenience and like this base we shared that when we didn't share that space anymore, there was really no sense of belongingness with them. The idea of that*

*you have to be in a large group to feel a strong sense of belongingness doesn't really exist to me anymore. Like I think you can feel an extremely strong sense of belongingness, with a singular person - like doesn't have to be a wide group. [COB102, 01:26:06]*

*I think since COVID, it has, overall, just lessened my sense of belonging to people and places, but it has helped me focus on the more immediate relationships to me. I think anything that I didn't have a deep connection to was just erased or just gone, but to people and things that I did have a deep connection to, I think, it helped me focus on them and to foster them even more. [COB104, 01:46:29]*

Several students talked about the loss of some relationships and the deepening of others as an overall positive outcome of the pandemic.

*It's like, at first, COVID stripped some of that belonging away or, at least on the surface, it seemed like it stripped it away. It stripped away swimming. It stripped away in-person classes and a lot of those interactions you have. Then as time went on, it brought to light those actual groups of people that I really do belong with that, without daily interaction, are still there. I think, in the end, it actually increased my sense of belonging because I left quarantine and came back to school knowing like, "Okay, these people called me, spoke to me every day and vice versa, and we live hours away. Like, easily, they could have just not called me. It's not like we have things to really update each other about every day. It's like they call me because they wanted to speak to me and I called them because I wanted to speak to them. I left quarantine feeling like I have such solid relationships and so it almost increased my sense of belonging. [COB113, 00:44:24]*

*I think, overall, just connections that weren't strong connections before COVID have faded away. I'm still super close with the people that I was closest to before COVID started, like my family and my closest friends, but those friends that I would hang out with, but we weren't besties, those relationships have kind of faded away [...] I think my outlook has changed a little bit. Before, I was just like, "Oh, I love being friends with everyone. I love having this huge friend group." Now, it's more like, "Oh, I'm so happy that I have these super close friends I can literally tell anything to." I wouldn't tell my huge friend group anything that was really going on in my life, but I tell these close people what's going on. I feel like it's just a slight change in my overall outlook of how important quality over quantity of relationships is, I feel like. [COB120, 01:27:33]*

***Research Question 5.4 – How Have Students’ Experience of Belonging within  
Nonsocial Contexts Been Affected by COVID?***

**Nonsocial Belonging Lost and Found.** Students experienced many COVID-related impacts within nonsocial contexts, both loss and gain, which affected their overall sense of belonging. Students described missing the sense of belonging they once had in certain nonsocial contexts. They also described turning toward more accessible nonsocial contexts of belonging, particularly when they experienced challenges and barriers to belonging within social contexts.

**Loss of Public Space.** Loss of public space was a common experience for students. Roughly three-quarters of students (15/21) described losing public spaces as a context of belonging when discussing COVID-impacted decreases in sense of belonging.

The following students’ descriptions capture some of these losses:

*I’m missing the feeling of belonging in libraries and coffee shops. Specifically, I like Thomas Cooper Library. I love that library. The ambiance of it was just so great before COVID. You would go there, and whether you were alone or not, you were there with people who were doing the same thing, whether that’s studying for a test or reading or researching, and just watching people doing that, getting coffee, reading, whatever it was they were doing, it was just really nice to be a part of even if you didn’t know those people or in a group of them, but it was just a nice sense of belonging because you were all doing the same thing. [COB104, 00:46:30]*

*Being in on a college campus, there’s so many places that I felt a sense of belongingness before COVID, like I said, in the dining halls, in a classroom, in my dorm, just places like that, that it’s kind of been taken away like I don’t. Just even just like walking into, like the buildings that my classrooms were in and seeing other people there, like I know that there you have sort of a sense of belongingness because you’re all students in the same building, going to the same classes, whatever. And that’s like we don’t have that anymore. [COB102, 01:29:45]*

*I feel like I belong in fewer places. With regard to physical places, I definitely feel like I belong in very few. That’s definitely due to COVID due to the anxiety I have around being around other people who are*

*not being COVID safe and not staying six feet apart and wearing their masks properly and everything. That's where I feel like other people are taking up too much space that I don't have any space left to take. I don't feel like I belong in most public spaces anymore due to COVID.*  
[COB118, 01:38:14]

**Greater Appreciation of Nature Spaces.** With the loss of public space and the decrease in social opportunities, some turned to nature spaces as a safe way to be outside of their homes. Many students (13/21) talked about gaining a greater appreciation for nature spaces during COVID. For some, nature spaces played an important role in their overall sense of belonging, particularly when belonging through typical social contexts was less accessible to them, as with the following students:

*I think, if anything, COVID made me appreciate being out in nature even more. I think I feel more of a sense of belonging because I got to explore a lot more. There were a lot more opportunities to do it. If you're going on a hike by yourself, you're staying away from people. You're isolated when you're in nature, you're not harming anybody versus if you're in a restaurant or a city affecting other people. It's like you don't have to worry about angering people as much as going to another place that people might be paying more attention to. You could post pictures of that and there's no judgment, no anything like that.*  
[COB110, 00:59:25]

*I feel like COVID increased my sense of belonging in nature because when I went home, it was starting to get warm out again and my mom was in the hospital a lot. She would periodically have to deal with COVID patients. We would have to go to my dad's house, so we wouldn't be around her, so we wouldn't potentially get COVID if she had it. So, I was always at the river. That's where I would do all my homework, was outside by the water on the dock with my dog and we were just out. It was just me and my dog all day every day just chilling. It felt really important for me to be outside in the sunshine.* [COB120, 00:53:37]

*I've had to make major changes to make that belonging happen. Like pre-COVID, all of my sense of belonging was rooted in other people and my interactions with other people but since COVID put a damper on all that like, I've had to find my sense of belonging in other things. Like, within nature or even like, just being comfortable being alone.*  
[COB111, 02:11:27]



***Newfound or Strengthened Belonging with Self.*** Increased time spent alone was a commonly reported experience for students. Many discussed this as an opportunity for them to build a stronger internal sense of belonging through self-reflection and personal growth. Two-thirds of students (14/21) described gains in their overall sense of belonging through a newfound or strengthened sense of belonging within themselves.

*I feel like COVID has definitely made me feel more alone and more maybe even more independent and more self-sufficient than before. There was a period of time where, like I said, I didn't have access to a lot of my friends that live far away. So, I feel like I definitely strengthened my personal sense of belonging during covid. So, like, that is a positive thing. While most other things are negative, like learning more about myself is something that COVID gave me the opportunity to do [...] I think it has kind of forced me to like self-reflect and discover a lot of things about myself that I didn't know or just even like hobbies or things that I never really had the time or the chance to do before COVID. So, I feel like establishing a personal sense of belonging is definitely just as important as belonging with other people. [COB115, 59:52 & 01:00:55]*

*I think it made me a lot more focused on my sense of belonging within myself. I think struggling with it socially was like, "Yes, whatever," but I think it put a huge factor on me wanting to feel a sense of belonging in my own ways. Being independent, taking care of myself, self-love, self-care type of things. I think that sense of belonging became more of a priority than the sense of belonging in social atmospheres and things like that. I think social opportunities decreased and there was just that huge time factor just being able to reflect a lot more and focus on myself. [COB110, 01:33:44]*

*I think with COVID, because you're seeing less people, or at least I'm seeing less people because I have to be socially responsible and isolate myself a little bit more and things like that, my sense of belonging has, I think, moved more towards the personal sense of belonging with myself. I feel a sense of belonging with what I'm doing in terms of my classes, my career, more of those personal things that I'm doing individually versus my relationship with others. That's the overarching big thing, I think, that I've seen shift in my sense of belonging during COVID. [COB116, 01:42:47]*

*The character development in myself has been crazy since COVID. I think at first, it was a lot more difficult shifting those perspectives and my expectations of how to feel belonging. I also went through a lot of*

*self-doubt in terms of what I wanted to do in terms of career. That sense of belonging was just really, really bad for me, because at some point, I was like, "I don't know what I want to do. There's not a group I feel comfortable in. I'm just really struggling individually with my mental health, and then externally with where I want to be in life." As COVID got through, it was a blessing and a curse to have to sit with myself. There was nothing I could distract myself with. I had time to think about, what do I want to do or what are my values, and how do I find a career that matches that. That was very helpful, it was really difficult for a while to have to sit with that and think about it. Then once I figured it out, it's been a lot easier because now I have this idea and something that I can continue to work towards and achieve. Before I didn't really have anything like that and losing my sense of belonging without having that was really difficult. [COB116, 01:45:19]*

**Meaningful Nonsocial Expressions of Belonging.** Some students described engaging in meaningful nonsocial activities that contributed to their overall sense of belonging when typical social contexts of belonging were less available to them.

*I definitely do things that I feel like I'm good at or that I enjoy, like guitar, video games. You know, I work on things that I consider important or at least try to try to make myself learn something new so I can feel a better sense of belonging with myself. [COB101, 01:10:13]*

*COVID forced me to take time for other crafts like cooking and painting and drawing. I think it forced me to explore other avenues of things I like to do, and I think that increased my sense of belonging with myself. [COB113, 01:54:46]*

*I can experience a sense of belonging now by myself, like it doesn't have to be a social thing anymore. I can feel belongingness with people on podcasts. I feel like I got really into podcasts over COVID. And I feel like I listen to these things, and I feel connected to them. And I feel like I have a sense of belonging to these people who are talking but who don't know I exist or like TV shows. I guess I feel like a sense of belonging watching it almost like it's something I'm involved in, even though I'm not really involved – I'm just watching. But it definitely like sort of does give you a sense of belonging. [COB102, 01:34:27]*

*Like the shows that I watch, I particularly enjoy watching like Japanese culture animes [...] and that's something that when I'm doing it, I definitely feel a sense of belonging, especially because I know there's a whole community of people who also enjoy doing the same thing. [COB105, 01:39:01]*

*You get close to the characters in certain books, you find common things. It's like you create a sense of belonging while reading and identifying with the characters. It's like you create it as you go along [...] I'll say, To kill a Mockingbird with Scout, the little girl. That book, you find little common interests. You see little childish tendencies in her, and as you go throughout the book, you see her grow and create these morals and build upon them. You try to identify that with yourself. [COB117, 01:34:54]*

*I think definitely athletics has played a huge part in maintaining my sense of belonging during COVID [...] I've been swimming for 16 years, and so I think I just feel comfortable when I'm swimming. And it's kind of like second nature to me now. And it's something that like how my home is, it's a constant in my life. And so, I think I just feel a sense of belonging even when it's just me in the pool, just because it's like so second nature for me to swim. So, it's definitely helped me keep that sense of belonging. [COB121, 01:01:51 & 01:04:07]*

### ***Research Question 5.5 – How Have Research Participants Been Able to Affect Their Own Sense of Belonging Since COVID?***

**Belonging Reconstructed.** In addition to meaningful nonsocial expressions of belonging, students described many social ways that they have been able to affect their own sense of belonging, including through intentional seeking out of opportunities for belonging, developing new relationships in unexpected contexts, and increasing the use of technology during COVID.

**Intentional Seeking of Belonging.** Students commonly described noticing changes in themselves in the intentional actions they take in order to feel a sense of belonging. Almost all students (18/21) described adopting an intentionality in seeking opportunities for belonging.

*Since COVID I would say when I do get the chance to interact with new people, I definitely am more extroverted. I mean, I've always been sort of extroverted, but now I kind of go out of my way to search for these people that I might have a connection with. Everyone's been so limited that, like, you want to reach out and, you know, everyone's kind of*

*feeling a little bit isolated and not having as much social interaction as they're used to. [COB102, 01:31:40]*

*A big thing is actively seeking opportunities, where, just in general, I feel a sense of belonging. So, opportunities to teach the yoga class outdoors when I can, actively making time out of my schedule to practice my hobbies and having that downtime. Then when I need, listening to my body and my mind and how I'm feeling, checking with myself and knowing I need social interaction, I need to talk to another person. I haven't talked to another person in a while, let me call this person or ask if they want to FaceTime or see if someone wants to go get coffee, or take that walk out in nature and take that deep breath. [COB116, 01:48:48]*

*I've been trying to go out of my way to send that extra text to my friends and just being like, "Hey, how are you today?" Extra things that I didn't do as much of before, just because I feel like I still need to reach out and make that contact with them. I want them to have that sense of belonging as well. I've been taking measures on my own to provide that with somebody else, just because I feel like if somebody else feels like they belong with you, they'll make more of an effort to make you feel like you belong with them. [COB103, 01:43:37]*

*I just want to talk and talk and talk. Just like a person at a grocery store, the person picking out cereal next to me. I was in the grocery store the other day and the person was picking out cereal next to me. I was like, "What's your favorite kind?" Hoping they would say Cinnamon Toast Crunch so that we could bond over it. It's just like little things like that. [COB106, 00:49:25]*

***New COVID-Facilitated Relationships.*** Despite the many losses to opportunities and relationships of belonging, students commonly described how the social changes brought by COVID led to relationships in unexpected places. Close to half of students (10/21) endorsed the development of new relationships that were facilitated by COVID-related restrictions in previous social contexts.

*There were fewer people that I really was allowed to see because of swimming and like the rules that we had to follow. So, it just emphasized the importance of, like, the people that I was allowed to see, like feeling belonging with them, because that was like my only option. [COB115, 01:06:14]*

*I don't go on campus at all and it's the same for most of my neighbor friends, and so we're all at home all day. We started seeing each other, and we started striking up casual conversations with each other, and then we started hanging out, and now we'll do our homework together outside every day, we're constantly together [...] I honestly think that the relationship with our neighbors was fostered by COVID because we weren't going out and meeting other people or inviting our friends over to our house. The people that were close by and the most convenient, it opened that door for us to realize how cool of people they are, and I wouldn't have it any other way now, but I don't know if, without COVID, we would have reached out and created such close bonds with our neighbors. [COB111, 00:24:49 & 00:28:14]*

*When it first went down there weren't as many people in this apartment complex who were living here. Most people went home, but with the people who were here, you kind of knew everyone because you'd see them around and they were the only people here and a lot of the girls would go up on the top of the parking garage, and I just felt like I knew a lot of people who were here. I hung out with a lot of different people that I normally wouldn't have that weren't in my direct friend group because they just happened to also be here. I don't know what it was about, but it was just like we're all here, we're all like going through it together, so let's all just hang out and make the best of it sort of thing. [COB112, 00:26:21]*

**Use of Technology During COVID.** Technology use during COVID was universally endorsed by students in the study as facilitating connections to others when in-person social opportunities were sparse. All students (21/21) described the impact of technology during COVID and its effect on their ability to maintain or reconstruct their sense of belonging in social contexts. Some students used video chats as a way to substitute in-person interactions and found these especially helpful for keeping in contact with family after returning to campus.

*I think it's definitely harder when I'm at school to feel that sense of belonging with my family just because we're not constantly around each other anymore. But I think, COVID, with all the new technologies and ways to stay in touch, I think it's still like heightened that feeling for me and I still feel like they're always there, even when they're not physically there [...] we've used just the basic like phone calls and texting, which we've always done, and then we've had like family Zoom calls, which we had never done before just when my grandparents were*

*all in quarantine. And so, I think just like that virtual face-to-face was something that we had never done but got to do because of COVID. I think being able to see someone and seeing like how their face lights up when you talk to them and seeing their emotions when you are like telling them about your day definitely increases that sense of belonging. [COB121, 00:13:18]*

*Being able to FaceTime with my family is a lifesaver, honestly. It changes the dynamic of COVID and social interactions during a pandemic, just because even though we aren't getting technical face to face time as much, we are able to still video chat, which is helpful, because I am able to show my boyfriend and show my family things in my life. I'm still able to have that face-to-face interaction, which I feel is important to that sense of belonging. [COB103, 00:17:17]*

Some students found video chats to be helpful, but generally not as good as face-to-face interactions for maintaining a sense of belonging with friends.

*The ways that I hang out with people aren't the same, and sometimes it's harder to get that social interaction. You have to seek it out a lot more these days. I wouldn't say that it's been totally lessened because I do choose to seek it out in safe and responsible ways. I feel I've been putting in the effort to FaceTime a friend. We might not be able to go out to eat and like hang out in person face to face, but we can still FaceTime and talk for hours that way, and it's not the same, but it's close, and it can help. [COB111, 00:19:07]*

*Being away from friends during quarantine, we tried to do phone calls and FaceTime calls. We tried to do just even texting. Just trying to keep in communication. It helped with keeping the friendships going, but I definitely didn't truly feel that relationship any longer. Like until we were back, and I could see them in person, that's when it felt more real and my sense of belonging with them was back. [COB119, 00:19:52]*

Others used social media and text-based platforms to feel closer to others.

*Someone put out a link to a Discord server last semester and I joined it, and I've made some good friends on there. I haven't met any of them in person, but it was really nice to meet those people, and most of them are from a similar major background, like biology, chemistry, that sort of thing, so those majors also meld well with my interests when we help each other study and everything. It's really great for the best we can do considering there's a pandemic going on [...] I never would have met that Discord server if there wasn't COVID or at least it wouldn't have been as important to me as it is now because of lack of other socializing. [COB109, 00:04:39]*

*I think that a lot of social media, like specifically TikTok would talk about very specific things about the quarantine and things that people were doing because they were bored and so then that was another thing to be connected through. So even though we were apart, we'd still do these random TikTok trends. And so, there were so many different ways to stay connected [...] And I feel like I've always had the GroupMes or the group chats with classes, but I think that I utilize them so much more since COVID. Like no one knows what's going on. No one knows the answers to anything because teachers are just struggling as much as we are. And so, I think that in our GroupMes in all of my classes, I really feel like we're all just trying to help each other in every way that we can. [COB112, 00:19:07& 01:19:23]*

One student talked about a strong experience of belonging cultivated in a virtual class setting where fellow students became a source of support for one another:

*I feel a sense of belonging in that class, for sure, because we're all painfully brutally honest about mental health. It's technically an English class. We read literature, and then we dissect it from a psychological perspective, honestly. We talk about the evidence of mental illness within the work and then the author's own experience with mental illness and how it all ties in. It's a fascinating class. It's my favorite class in the world. We also have an opportunity to be super vulnerable about our own experiences with mental illness. Everyone in that class, myself included, has had those episodes, and those times in their lives where things have been hard, and things have been difficult. I feel such a sense of belonging with that class because right off the bat, from day one, it was like everyone just decided, "I'm going to be honest; I'm going to be open and we're going to have the best discussions." None of us in the class had ever met. We have a group chat now, and we talk all the time. If people are struggling, they'll just say it. It's a group of random people that just flock to them to surround them and uphold them. It's so cool. I've never experienced anything like it with a class. It's crazy that it's happening in a virtual setting. [COB111, 01:47:47]*

### **Summary of Research Aim 5**

The purpose of Aim 5 was to explore the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' overall sense of belonging and on their experience of belonging within and across contexts. In discussing their overall sense of belonging since the pandemic began (RQ5.1), students described the initial quarantine-related disruption to belonging,

particularly within their friendships, as many were sent home to live with family when the campus was shut down. They also described the decrease in opportunities for belonging across contexts, including fewer opportunities to socialize or make friends, participate in clubs and sports, and interact with others in classrooms, public places, and churches. Some students described these changes as creating an increased need for belonging.

Students experienced many pandemic-related changes to the contexts in which they typically experience belonging (RQ5.2). Students described a shift, or reorganization, in the contexts that make up their overall sense of belonging, particularly in the beginning of the pandemic when the sudden disruption with friends and campus life meant a return to their families. For many students, a renewed closeness with family just when friends were necessarily distant meant a shift in their primary source of belonging. For others, pets provided a greater sense of belonging when other contexts were less accessible.

Students discussed how changes in their social contexts affected their sense of belonging (RQ5.3). For many students, lost, distanced, or strained relationships occurred through physical separations during quarantine or the continuing social distance policies once students returned to campus. For others, lost and strained relationships were the result of tension from diverging attitudes about pandemic-related public health policies. Students also described the pandemic's effect on romantic relationships, with many saying that few opportunities for meeting others had restricted their ability to foster romantic partnerships. A few students with pre-existing partners described pandemic-related challenges to maintaining relationships. Another common theme for students was



a distilling of their sense of belonging, in that they experienced greater closeness and belonging in some contexts, while other contexts were culled as a result of the pandemic.

Students also discussed changes in their nonsocial contexts and how these had affected their overall sense of belonging (RQ5.4). Students described a loss of public space due to pandemic closures and other social distancing policies. On the other hand, students also talked about the greater importance of nature spaces occurring at the same time. Many students discussed gaining a newfound or strengthened sense of belonging within themselves when their typical social avenues for belonging were less accessible to them. Other students described meaningful nonsocial expressions of belonging that had provided a substitute for declining social contexts, including hobbies, listening to podcasts, watching television shows, and through the physical engagement of sport.

Finally, students discussed many ways that they had been able to affect their own sense of belonging despite the challenges of the pandemic (RQ5.5). Students described intentionally seeking social belonging through a multitude of avenues by actively engaging others wherever there were opportunities to do so. They described friendships that were gained as a result of social disruptions that may not have been formed otherwise. They also described their use of technology as a way to maintain or reconstruct the sense of belonging that had been disrupted by the pandemic.

Table 3.1. Theme frequency of students' understanding, felt sense, and conceptualization of the importance of belonging (RQ1.1, RQ1.2, RQ1.3; n=21)

Theme	Subtheme (Grouped Code)	Number of References	Number of Participants who Referenced	Avg # of Theme/Code References per Participant
Meaning/ Definition of Belonging	<b>Valued Involvement</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>1.38</b>
	(Accepted)	(10)	(9)	(1.11)
	(Needed)	(6)	(5)	(1.20)
	(Valued)	(2)	(2)	(1.00)
	<b>Fit</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>1.50</b>
	(Fitting In)	(7)	(7)	(1.00)
	(Part of/In Place)	(10)	(9)	(1.11)
	(Relating to Others)	(4)	(3)	(1.33)
	<b>Affective Indicators</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>1.67</b>
	(Comfort)	(14)	(11)	(1.28)
(Calm)	(3)	(3)	(1.00)	
(Openness to Others)	(4)	(3)	(1.33)	
(Safety/Security)	(2)	(2)	(1.00)	
	<b>Nonbelonging</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1.00</b>
Felt Sense of Belonging	<b>Valued Involvement</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>1.38</b>
	(Accepted)	(9)	(8)	(1.13)
	(Needed)	(2)	(2)	(1.00)
	(Valued)	(7)	(6)	(1.17)
	<b>Fit</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1.00</b>
	(Fitting In)	(1)	(1)	(1.00)
	(Part of/In Place)	(3)	(3)	(1.00)
	<b>Affective Felt Sense</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>2.40</b>
	(Comfort)	(18)	(14)	(1.29)
	(Positive Emotion)	(10)	(9)	(1.11)
(Calm)	(8)	(8)	(1.00)	
(Safety/Security)	(4)	(4)	(1.00)	
	<b>Nonbelonging</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1.00</b>
Importance of Belonging	<b>Essential To Wellbeing</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>1.00</b>
	(Emotional Wellbeing)	(6)	(6)	(1.00)
	(Lost/Alone)	(3)	(3)	(1.00)
	(Mental Health)	(4)	(4)	(1.00)
	<b>Foundational Human Need</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1.13</b>
	(Personhood/Sense of Self)	(2)	(2)	(1.00)
	(Growth)	(4)	(4)	(1.00)
(Fundamental Need)	(3)	(3)	(1.00)	
	<b>Nonbelonging</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>1.00</b>

\*Note: theme frequencies for RQ1.1 – RQ1.3 were tallied across students' responses to the “defining and orienting” questions 1-5 of the SBQI interview only.

Table 3.2. Frequency of emergent subthemes and codes for experiential aspects of belonging endorsed by students throughout interviews (RQ1.4; n=21)

<b>Belonging Subtheme</b> (Code)	Number of Students <b>Subtheme/</b> (Code)	Number of Social <b>Subtheme/</b> (Code) References	Number of Nonsocial <b>Subtheme/</b> (Code) References	Total <b>Subtheme/</b> (Code) References	Avg References per Student
<b>Similarity</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>3.30</b>
<b>Competence</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>2.20</b>
<b>Familiarity</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>2.94</b>
<b>Ideological Agreement</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>2.84</b>
<b>Shared Experience</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>3.41</b>
<b>Valued Involvement</b> (Accepted) (Needed) (Valued)	<b>21</b> (21) (18) (16)	<b>148</b> (54) (45) (49)	<b>27</b> (3) (24) (0)	<b>175</b> (57) (69) (49)	<b>8.33</b> (2.71) (3.83) (3.06)
<b>Fit</b> (Fitting In) (Part of/At Place) (Relating to Others)	<b>14</b> (2) (11) (5)	<b>29</b> (2) (22) (5)	<b>13</b> (3) (10) (0)	<b>42</b> (5) (32) (5)	<b>3.00</b> (2.50) (2.91) (1.00)
<b>Affective Felt Sense</b> (Comfort) (Positive Emotion) (Connection) (Calm) (Safety/Trust) (Understood)	<b>21</b> (20) (21) (21) (17) (18) (15)	<b>218</b> (66) (32) (59) (8) (35) (18)	<b>124</b> (42) (23) (16) (33) (10) (0)	<b>342</b> (108) (55) (75) (41) (45) (20)	<b>16.29</b> (5.40) (2.62) (3.57) (2.41) (2.50) (1.33)

Note: experiential aspects of belonging theme frequencies for RQ1.4 were tallied from students' responses across all portions of the interview with the exception of the "defining and orienting" questions 1-5 of the SBQI interview, which were separately tallied (see Table 3.1) and reported for RQ1.1 – RQ 1.3.

Table 3.3. Aspects of experience of belonging endorsed by students in social contexts

Social Context	Number of References (avg # refs/student)	Number of Students	Number of Belonging Aspects Endorsed	Aspects of Belonging Experienced by Students (# references)
Friendship	92 (4.38)	21	7	Affective Felt Sense (34) <i>connection (9); comfort (9); safety/security/trust (8); pos+ affect (5); calm (2); understanding/understood (1)</i> Valued Involvement (28) <i>accepted (12); valued (12); needed (4)</i> Similarity/Commonality (10) Shared Experience (6) Ideological Agreement (5) Fit (5) <i>part of (3); relate to others (2)</i> Familiarity/Knowing/Known(4)
Family	91 (5.06)	18	7	Affective Felt Sense (39) <i>comfort (14); connection (13); safety/security/trust (8); pos+ affect (2); understanding/understood (2)</i> Valued Involvement (33) <i>accepted (18); valued (14); needed (1)</i> Similarity/Commonality (4) Familiarity/Knowing/Known(4) Fit (4) <i>part of (4)</i> Shared Experience (4) Ideological Agreement (3)
Shared Ideology	86 (4.30)	20	7	Ideological Agreement (40) Affective Felt Sense (24) <i>comfort (6); connection (5); safety/security/trust (5); understanding/understood (4); pos+ affect (2); calm (2)</i> Commonality/Similarity (8)

				Shared Experience (6) Valued Involvement (5) <i>accepted (4); needed (1)</i> Familiarity/Knowing/Known (2) Fit (1) <i>relate to others (1)</i>
Distal Relationship	54 (3.38)	16	6	Familiarity/Knowing (16) Affective Felt Sense (12) <i>pos+ affect (6); connection (4); comfort (2)</i> Valued Involvement (9) <i>needed (4); valued (3)</i> <i>accepted (2)</i> Similarity/Commonality (7) Shared Experience (6) Fit (4) <i>part of (4)</i>
Club/ Organization	43 (3.07)	14	6	Affective Felt Sense (16) <i>connection (5); comfort (4); pos+ affect (4); calm (1); safety/security/trust (1); understanding (1)</i> Commonality/Similarity (10) Valued Involvement (10) <i>needed (7); accepted (3)</i> Shared Experience (4) Familiarity/Knowing (2) Fit (1) <i>part of (1)</i>
Social Location	39 (2.79)	14	6	Commonality/Similarity (15) Affective Felt Sense (12) <i>comfort (4); connection (3); understanding/understood (2); safety /trust (1); pos+ affect (1); calm (1)</i> Shared Experience (6) Valued Involvement (4) <i>accepted (3); valued (1)</i> Fit (1) <i>relate to others (1)</i> Ideological Agreement (1)
Animal/Pet	36 (2.00)	18	3	Valued Involvement (22) <i>valued (11); needed (8); accepted (3)</i> Affective Felt Sense (12)

				<i>comfort (4); pos+ affect (3); connection (2); calm (2); safety/security/trust (1)</i> Familiarity/Knowing/Known (2)
Competitive Team	35 (7.00)	5	6	Affective Felt Sense (13) <i>connection (6); pos affect (3); comfort (3); safety/security/trust (1)</i> Valued Involvement (9) <i>needed (7); accepted (2)</i> Fit (5) <i>part of (5)</i> Shared Experience (5) Competence (2) Commonality/Similarity (1)
Romantic Partnership	26 (3.25)	8	4	Affective Felt Sense (14) <i>comfort (7); safety/security/trust (3); understanding/understood (2); connection (1); pos+ affect (1)</i> Valued Involvement (9) <i>valued (5); accepted (3); needed (1)</i> Familiarity/Knowing/Known (2) Fit (1) <i>part of (1)</i>
Mentor Relationship	24 (1.71)	14	5	Affective Felt Sense (15) <i>comfort (5); safety/security/trust (4); understanding/understood (3); connection (3)</i> Familiarity/Knowing/Known (3) Similarity/Commonality (2) Shared Experience (2) Valued Involvement (2) <i>accepted (1); valued (1)</i>
Neighborhood	21 (3.00)	7	6	Affective Felt Sense (7) <i>connection (5); comfort (1); pos+ affect (1)</i> Commonality/Similarity (5) Shared Experience (3) Fit (3)

				<i>fit in (2); relate to others (1)</i> Familiarity/Knowing/Known (2) Valued Involvement (1) <i>valued (1)</i>
School/ Classmates	18 (1.29)	14	4	Shared Experience (8) Valued Involvement (5) <i>needed (4); accepted (1)</i> Similarity/Commonality (3) Competence (2)
Helping Professional	12 (1.50)	8	4	Fit (4) <i>part of (4)</i> Affective Felt Sense (3) <i>connection (2); comfort (1)</i> Valued Involvement (3) <i>accepted (2); valued (1)</i> Commonality/Similarity (2)
Work/Job – co-workers	11 (1.57)	7	4	Valued Involvement (5) <i>needed (4); valued (1)</i> Affective Felt Sense (3) <i>connection (1); pos+ affect (1); safety/security/trust (1)</i> Shared Experience (2) Competence (1)

Note: See companion Figure 3.1 for a visual representation of these data.

Table 3.4. Aspects of experience of belonging endorsed by students in nonsocial contexts

Nonsocial Context	Number of References (avg # refs/ Participant)	Number of Participants	Frequently Experienced Aspects of Belonging (# of references)
Nature	46 (3.29)	14	Affective Felt Sense (39) <i>calm (17); comfort (9); pos+ affect (7); connection (4); safety/security (2)</i> Familiarity (4) Fit (3) <i>part of (3)</i>
Skill	39 (2.29)	17	Affective Felt Sense (21) <i>comfort (8); calm (6); connection (3); pos+ affect (3); safety/security (1)</i> Competence (14) Valued Involvement (2) <i>needed (2)</i> Familiarity (1)
Home – current	29 (1.81)	16	Affective Felt Sense (22) <i>comfort (8); safety/security (5); pos+ affect (4); calm (3); connection (2)</i> Familiarity (4) Shared Experience (3)
Self	23 (1.35)	17	Affective Felt Sense (14) <i>comfort (4); pos+ affect (4); calm (4); connection (2)</i> Valued Involvement (6) <i>needed (4); accepted (2)</i> Competence (2)
Public Spaces	22 (1.47)	15	Affective Felt Sense (11) <i>comfort (6); safety/security (2); connection (1); calm (1); pos+ affect (1)</i> Familiarity (7) Fit (3) <i>fitting in (3)</i> Shared Experience (1)
School/Learning Tasks	18 (1.20)	15	Competence (7) Valued Involvement (6) <i>needed (6)</i> Affective Felt Sense (4) <i>comfort (4)</i>



			Fit (1) <i>part of (1)</i>
Spirituality/ Ideology	18 (1.29)	14	Affective Felt Sense (11) <i>connection (4); pos+ affect (3); comfort (2); understanding (2)</i> Fit (4) <i>part of (4)</i> Valued Involvement (3) <i>needed (2); accepted (1)</i>
Work/Job Tasks	18 (1.64)	11	Valued Involvement (10) <i>needed (10)</i> Competence (4) Affective Felt Sense (3) <i>calm (2); comfort (1)</i> Fit (1) <i>part of (1)</i>

Note: See companion Figure 3.2 for a visual representation of these data.

Table 3.5. Quantity, range, and average number of contexts of belonging endorsed by students across contextually open, unprompted, and prompted interview questions

Broad Context Endorsed	Number of Contexts (students)	Average # of Contexts (range)	Ratio % (context: total)	Specific Contexts Endorsed (# students)
<b>Contextually Open</b>				
Social	7 (n = 21)	1.76 (1-3)	78%	Friends (19), Family (8), Romantic (3), Work (3), Teammates (2), Mentor (1) Social Location (1)
Nonsocial	2 (n = 3)	0.14 (0-1)	22%	School/Learning (2), Skill (1)
Social + Nonsocial	9 (n = 21)	1.90 (1-4)		
<b>Contextually Unprompted</b>				
Social	9 (n = 21)	1.95 (1-3)	53%	Friends (12), Family (7), Distal (6), Work (4), School/Classmates (4), Teammates (3), Clubs (3), Mentor (1), Romantic (1)
Nonsocial	8 (n = 16)	1.33 (0-3)	47%	Self (8), School/Learning (4), Skill (3), Work (3), Home (3), Nature (3), Spiritual/Ideology (2), Public (2)
Social + Nonsocial	17 (n = 21)	3.29 (1-6)		
<b>Contextually Prompted</b>				
Social	14 (n = 21)	8.86 (6-11)	62%	Friends (21), Spiritual/Ideology (20), Family (18), Animal/Pet (18), Distal (16), Mentor (14), School/Classmates (14), Social Location (14), Clubs (14), Helping Profession (8), Romantic (8), Neighborhood (7), Work (7), Teammates (5)
Nonsocial	8 (n = 21)	5.52 (3-7)	38%	Self (17), Skill (17), Home (16), Public (15), School/Learning (15), Spiritual/Ideology (14), Nature (14), Work (11)
Social + Nonsocial	22	14.38 (12-17)		

Table 3.6. Totals, averages, and ratios of social, nonsocial, and total contexts of belonging endorsed by students alongside SOBI-P scores

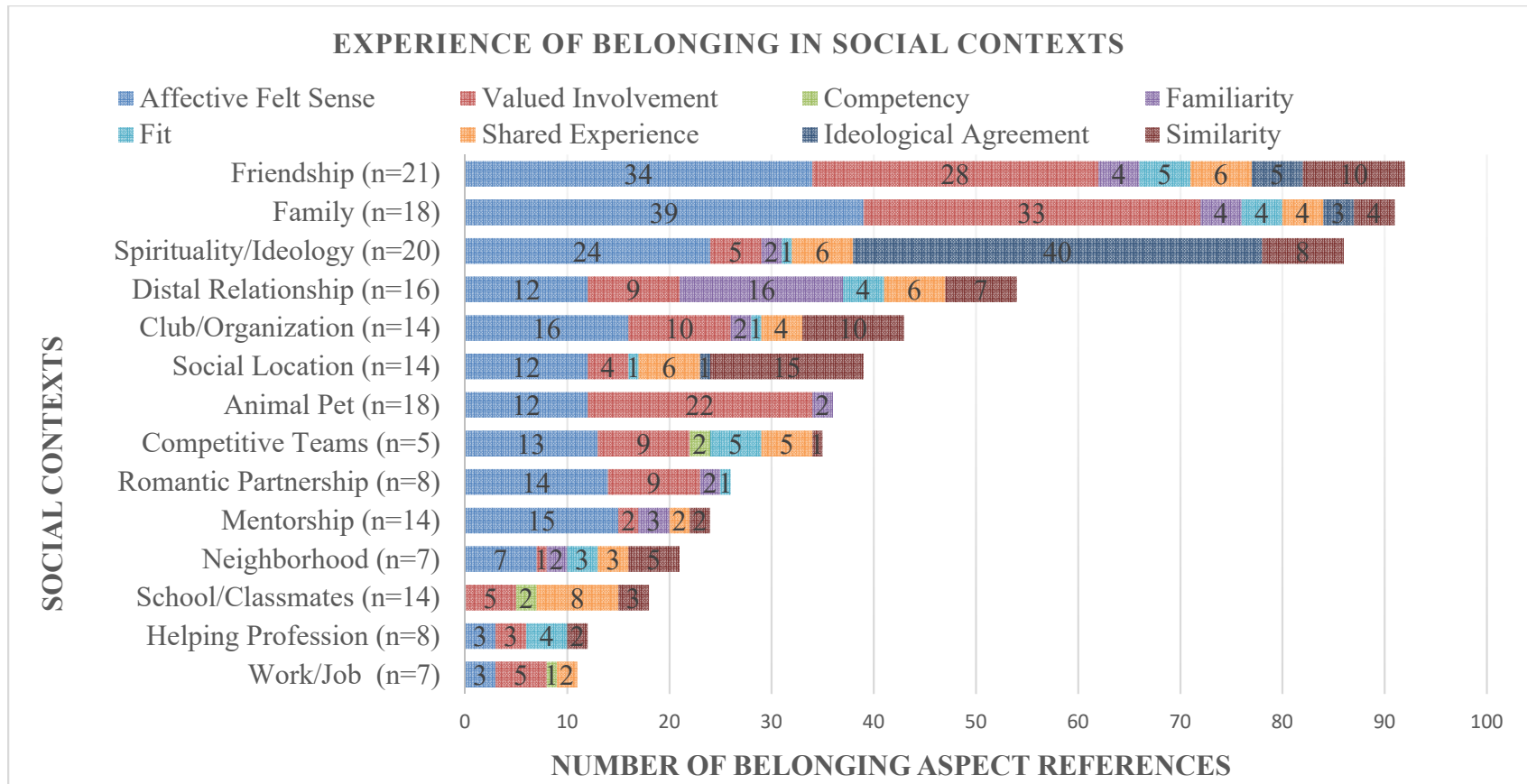
Student	Total Contexts	Total Social Contexts	Total Nonsocial Contexts	Ratio (%) (S: Total)	Ratio (%) (NS: Total)	Ratio (1:1) (S:NS)	SOBI-P Score
COB101	14	7	7	.50	.50	1.00	34.00
COB102	15	8	7	.53	.47	1.14	38.00
COB103	17	10	7	.59	.41	1.43	36.00
COB104	14	8	6	.57	.43	1.33	40.00
COB105	15	9	6	.60	.40	1.50	39.00
COB106	16	10	6	.63	.38	1.67	29.00
COB107	17	10	7	.59	.41	1.43	33.00
COB108	13	9	4	.69	.31	2.25	20.00
COB109	13	9	4	.69	.31	2.25	39.00
COB110	17	11	6	.65	.35	1.83	40.00
COB111	14	11	3	.79	.21	3.67	24.00
COB112	14	10	4	.71	.29	2.50	46.00
COB113	14	9	5	.64	.36	1.80	34.00
COB114	17	10	7	.59	.41	1.43	34.00
COB115	12	6	6	.50	.50	1.00	32.00
COB116	15	9	6	.60	.40	1.50	21.00
COB117	14	9	5	.64	.36	1.80	32.00
COB118	12	8	4	.67	.33	2.00	44.00
COB119	12	8	4	.67	.33	2.00	38.00
COB120	13	7	6	.54	.46	1.17	19.00
COB121	14	8	6	.57	.43	1.33	22.00
<b>AVG</b>	<b>14.38</b>	<b>8.86</b>	<b>5.52</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>1.72</b>	<b>33.05</b>

Note: Total context counts are derived from full student interviews, including contexts endorsed by students to contextually open, unprompted, and prompted questions.

S=Social, NS=Nonsocial, AVG=Average

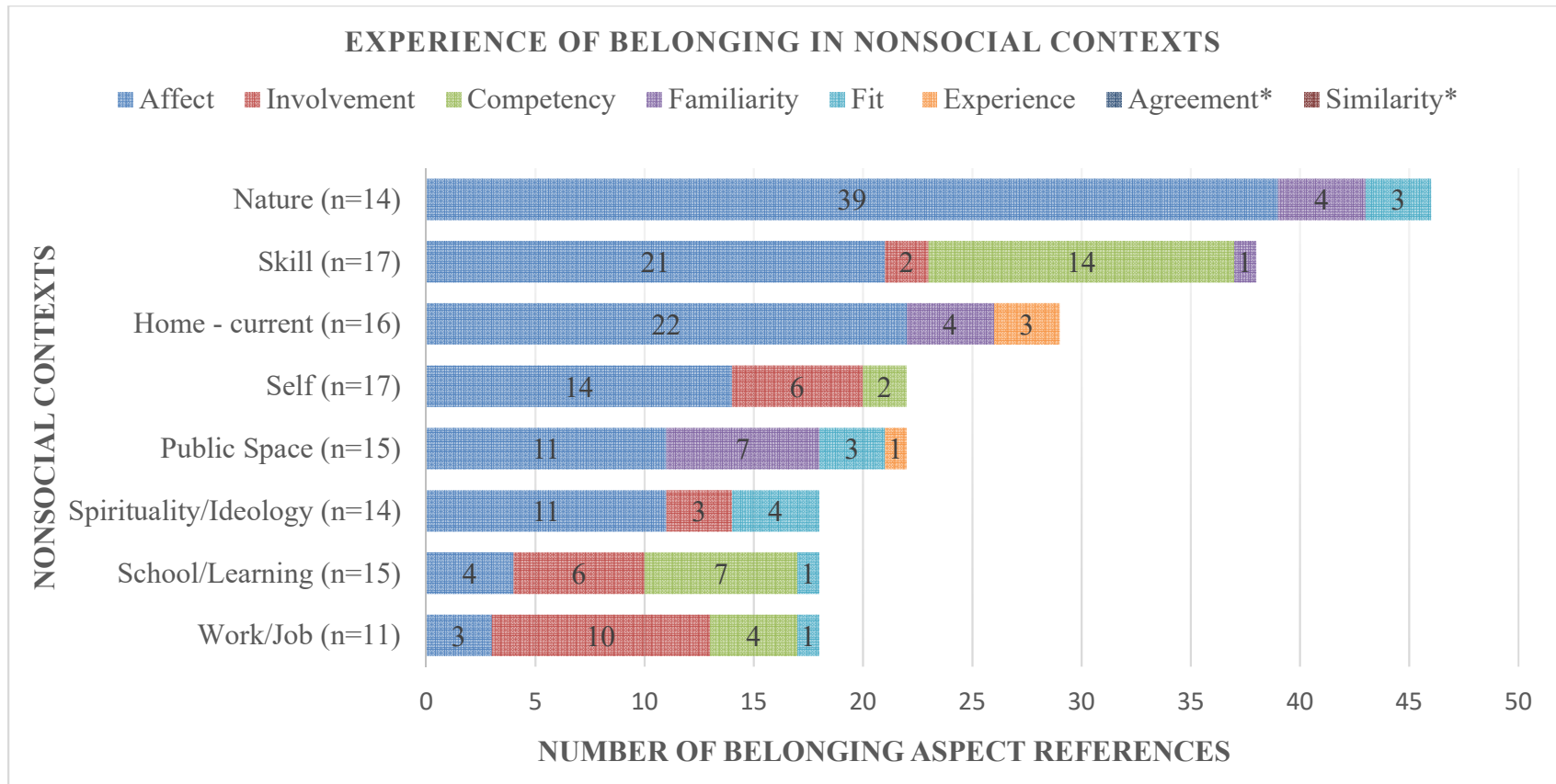
Table 3.7. Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables

Variable	n	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Correlation to SOBI-P	<i>p</i> value (2-tailed)
1. Sense of Belonging (SOBI-P)	21	33.05	7.91	---	---
2. Social Contexts	21	8.86	1.32	.10	.66
3. Nonsocial Contexts	21	5.52	1.25	-.03	.89
4. Total Contexts	21	14.38	1.66	.056	.81
5. Social : Total (ratio)	21	.62	.07	.087	.71
6. Nonsocial : Total (ratio)	21	.38	.07	-.09	.70
7. Social : Nonsocial (ratio)	21	1.72	.61	.01	.97



Note: Chart is ordered by the total number of experience of belonging references per social context. The number of endorsing students for each context are shown parenthetically along the vertical axis. Range of references across all social contexts was 11 – 92. The range for number of students endorsing the listed social contexts was 5-21. See companion Table 3.3 for additional code detail within each experience subtheme.

Figure 3.1. Aspects of experience of belonging endorsed by students across social contexts



Note: Chart is ordered by the total number of experience of belonging references per nonsocial context. See companion Table 3.4 for additional code detail within each experience subtheme. Range of references across all nonsocial contexts was 18 – 46.

\*No students endorsed “agreement” or “similarity” in any nonsocial context.

Figure 3.2. Aspects of experience of belonging endorsed by students in nonsocial contexts

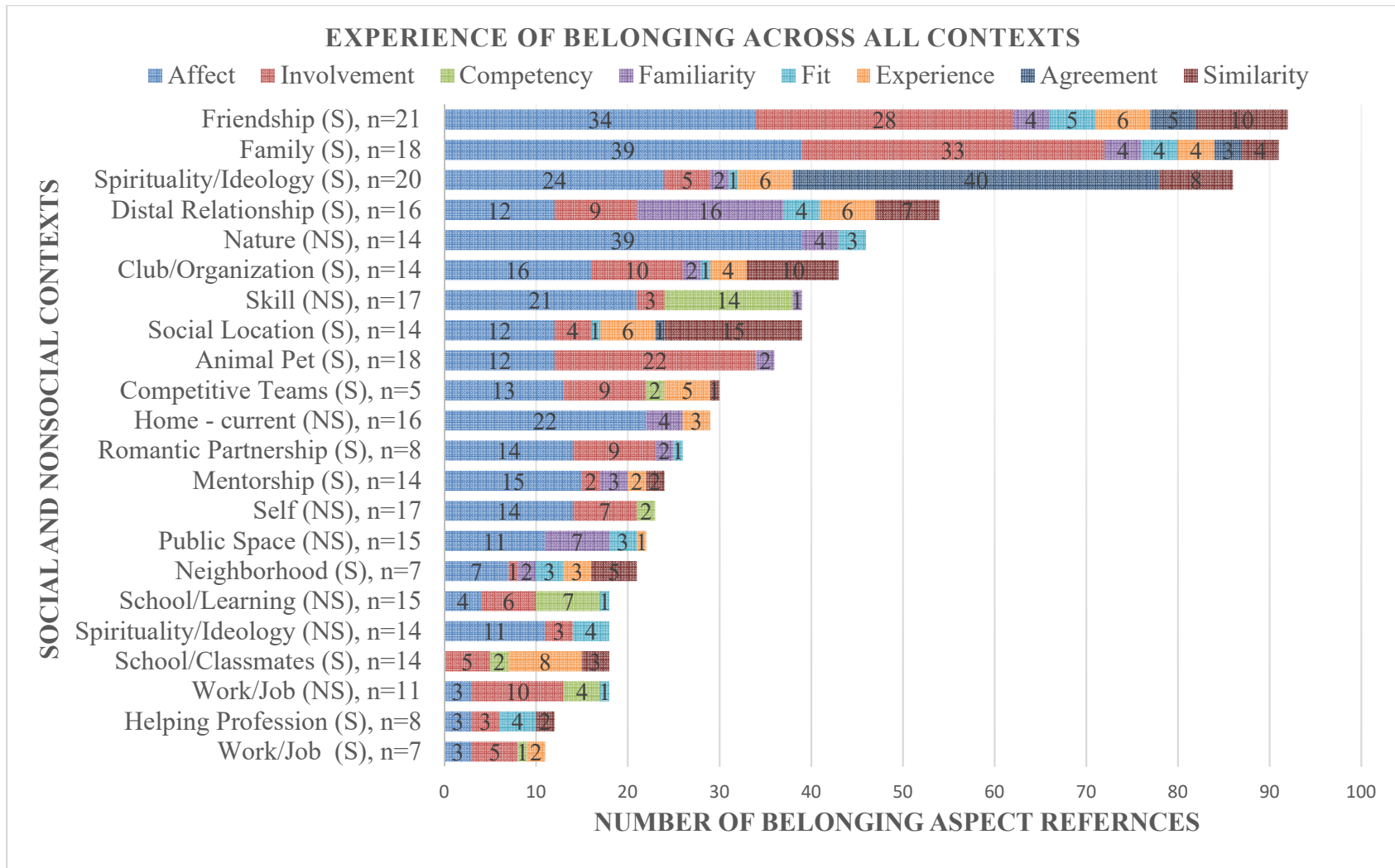


Figure 3.3. Aspects of experience of belonging endorsed by students across all contexts

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

#### **Principal Findings**

The current study is the first to illustrate that college students' overall sense of belonging is constructed across multiple contexts, both social and nonsocial, with discrete experiences of belonging that vary by context. This work presents a departure from literature focused exclusively on social constructions of belonging and suggests that nonsocial contexts play a role in overall sense of belonging. These findings reflect and elaborate on recent research supporting theories of multiple pathways to belonging and the role of social surrogates in comprising an overall sense of belonging. Additionally, this work contributes a contextual framework for belonging to the literature and offers several new avenues of investigation for future research to follow. Finally, the current study captured the early impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on college students' sense of belonging by illustrating contextual shifts in students' composition of belonging, the distilling of their sense of belonging within social contexts, and the resourceful and creative, multiply contextual reconstruction of belonging following disruption. Of particular note, the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic allowed for the importance of nonsocial contexts of belonging to emerge and be observed here.

#### ***Belonging Is Affectively Defined***

To begin this discussion, it is important to frame the findings presented here in students' affective understanding of belonging. The prominence of students' felt sense of



belonging was evident throughout interviews and led to the emergence of discrete aspects of belonging experience within contexts. Students' conceptualizations of belonging reflected widely accepted definitions from the literature but were also often affective and included nonbelonging. When speaking about belonging in conceptual terms, students gave descriptions of being accepted, needed, and valued as well as relating to, being a part of, and fitting in with others in ways that mirrored Hagerty et al.'s (1995) defining attributes of belonging as *valued involvement* and *fit*. However, students often struggled to differentiate their cognitive understanding of belonging from their affective experience of it, responding in affective language even when tasked explicitly with defining the concept. This speaks to the primacy of the affective experience of belonging and aligns with characterizations of belonging as an individually felt sense (Hagerty et al., 1995; Mahar et al., 2013) with "affective orientations" (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). Departing from standard definitions, students often described their understanding, felt sense, and perceived importance of belonging through its opposite state, nonbelonging. These emerged even though students were not asked about experiences or contexts within which they felt a lack of belonging. As an exploratory study with a primary aim of uncovering contexts in which a sense of belonging is experienced, interview questions were phrased neutrally (e.g., "Do you feel a sense of belonging in...") but not negatively or explicitly about experiences where they lacked belonging. Nevertheless, nonbelonging was a common theme that surfaced when students were invited to discuss the definition, experience, and importance of belonging. The readiness students showed in speaking about nonbelonging and the affective, sometimes cautionary descriptions they applied to

it illustrate a visceral understanding that the possibility of exclusion remains ever present alongside the drive for belonging through inclusion.

### ***Belonging Is Multiply Constructed and Varied by Context***

The current study's findings illustrate that overall sense of belonging is constructed from multiple contexts and provide evidence for a varied experience of belonging that is differentiated by context. The modified grounded theory approach of this work allowed for discrete experiences of belonging to emerge from college students' descriptions of their sense of belonging across contexts. In many contexts, students' affective responses and the feeling that their contributive involvement mattered were the most prominent belonging experiences described, with one or the other rising in saliency. However, distinct aspects of their belonging experience emerged as uniquely salient for other contexts. The following sections discuss each of these contexts alongside students' most salient belonging experiences. Together, each context and experience profile are fitted within a contextual framework that is proposed as a starting place for more nuanced investigations of belonging. This initial framework integrates social and nonsocial contexts into context categories that are organized by existing characterizations of belonging drawn from the literature and by the experience profiles that emerged from findings in the current study. The contextual framework as well as the following discussion is organized by these contextual categories of belonging and include Interpersonal Contexts, Identity Contexts, Instrumental Contexts, Spatial Contexts, and Minor-Sociability Contexts. Table 4.1 provides a summary of the context groupings described in this section and Figure 4.1 illustrates this framework by pairing individual

contexts in each category with salient belonging experiences. Where these findings reflect, expand upon, or diverge from the literature is discussed below.

**Interpersonal Contexts.** Several of the social contexts in the Interpersonal Contexts category represent traditionally studied sources of interpersonal belonging, including Family, Friends, and Romantic Partnership. To these three, the current study adds Mentorship and Animals/Pets to the Interpersonal Contexts grouping (see Table 4.1). The Family, Friends, and Romantic Partnership contexts reflect three of the five social collectives described by Leary and Cox (2008), as summarized in the introduction of this paper. This grouping of interpersonal contexts also aligns with more recent research that posits multiple pathways to belonging. Hirsch and Clark (2019) proposed that the *communal-relationship path* to belonging is built from interpersonal relationships with others characterized by mutual responsiveness, trust, and willingness for vulnerability. For the college students in this study, belonging experiences within Family, Friendship, Romantic Partnership, Mentorship and Animals/Pets contexts closely aligned with the descriptions of the *communal-relationship path* to belonging.

The organizing belonging experiences for each of the five interpersonal social contexts were students' affective responses (i.e., AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE) and the feeling that their contributive involvement mattered (i.e., VALUED INVOLVEMENT; see Figure 4.1). These findings reflect students' stated understanding of belonging as well as definitions of belonging found in the literature (Hagerty et al., 1992; Hagerty et al., 1995). For each of the four human/human relationship contexts, students' affective response was most salient, followed by their feeling of valued involvement. The saliency of affective felt sense reflects longstanding research on the affective processes of

interpersonal relationships (Clark & Reis, 1988), while the salience of valued involvement in close relationships has been established by belongingness theory (Hagerty et al., 1992), in the mutuality of relationships (Deci et al., 2006), and through the developmental importance of feeling useful in relationships in young adulthood (Fuligni et al., 2021). The two organizing saliency markers were repeated for the Animals/Pets context but were switched in prominence. While students often described their experiences of comfort, connection, and positive affect when talking about their pets, it was their feeling of being needed (i.e., valued involvement) that was most salient for them. Fuligni et al. (2021) illustrated the importance of feeling useful for college age young adults through research that showed an association of greater relationship satisfaction with support applied, regardless of the amount of support received. This was discussed as developmentally appropriate for emerging adults who were transitioning from the long period of childhood with its abundance of received support. Given the previous research in valued involvement, it makes sense that the students in the current study would highlight their sense of being needed by their pets as the more salient of their belonging experiences.

Taken as a whole, friends and family represented the most important contexts of belonging for students in terms of how commonly endorsed, frequently discussed, and complexly described they were compared to other contexts. The Friendship context was universally endorsed by students in this study and was the most frequently referenced context alongside Family. Although a few students described challenges to belonging with their families of origin and did not count Family as a context of belonging, most described secure relationships that bolstered their sense of belonging. In addition, all

students who were romantically partnered at the time of the interview endorsed Romantic Partnership as a context of belonging (n=8). While the majority of the sample was not partnered at the time they were interviewed, all but one currently unpartnered student endorsed Romantic Partnership as a past context of belonging (n=20). As described in Aim 5 findings, the social isolation effects resulting from COVID unwillingly led to prolonged singlehood for many of the college students in this study. It is likely that Romantic Partnership would have been more commonly endorsed were it not for pandemic conditions, suggesting the importance of this area of belonging for students.

The Animals/Pets context was frequently described by students as important to their sense of belonging and is proposed here as a contributor to the interpersonal context of belonging. Although relationships with beloved pets are often considered by their caretakers as communal relationships in their own right, and were counted as such in the current study, research has not always privileged them among belonging relationships. While often characterized as anthropomorphized proxies for human connections, research has shown that pets improve wellbeing, provide social support (McConnell et al., 2019), stave off negativity from social rejection (McConnell et al., 2011), reduce loneliness (Banks & Banks, 2002; Black, 2012), and protect against suicide (Douglas et al., 2021). Yet, for the students in the current study, pets also represented an important context for the experience of belonging, particularly when pandemic related social distancing policies meant that human relationships were less available to them, as described by this student:

*I think overall she made me feel I belonged in a time where I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere because I wasn't working, I didn't have school; I was stuck at home. I knew that I still had to take care of Ella.*

*That was what was important, I belonged as her caretaker. [COB114, 01:05:07]*

This student's description of taking care of their dog during the quarantine period of the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the importance of valued involvement in the Animal/Pet context.

Mentorship was commonly endorsed as a belonging context among students. Mentorship is not unique to emerging adulthood, but there are many natural and systemized avenues of development for this type of relationship on college campuses (McKinsey et al., 2016), including the mentorship relationships with professors, research advisors, coaches, and athletic trainers described by students in this study. In the current study, professors and research advisors were often described by students as filling mentorship roles. Research has shown that participation in faculty research is associated with stronger perceptions of faculty support and mentorship (Raposa et al., 2021), increased sense of competency and sense of belonging (Davis & Jones, 2020), adjustment to college, and academic achievement, particularly for students in underrepresented and minority groups (Hurd et al., 2016). Students who described these types of mentoring relationships talked about the sense of welcome and involvement they felt like this:

*I was a research assistant for one of my professors, who is just someone I really connected with, and I now count as my mentor – he really helped me. He taught me about research, and he brought me in on his research, and we definitely created a bond. He definitely made me feel very much like I belonged to the research group. I always felt welcomed there and like I was contributing to the work that was going on. [COB104, 1:00:21]*

Much of the literature on mentoring relationships between coaches and athletes are focused on motivation and performance (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003), but some research has shown that these relationships tend to increase sense of belonging for athletes as well

(Fraina & Hodge, 2021). Characteristics of coaching mentorship include individualized investment in the mentee's life and training, longer-term relationship, knowing the physical needs of athletes/mentees, and the shared goals of improvement (Salter, 2014). For the athletes in the current study, belonging in mentorship relationships was focused on trust, comfort, and long-term investment, as described by this student:

*I do feel like a sense of belonging with my coaches. I have a few that I'm really close with. I do feel like, obviously, it's a bit different relationship than family or friends, but I feel like the roles we play in each other's lives are very important and there is a trust there and I do feel a sense of belonging. This one coach specifically has been my college coach for all four years. They're involved in so much of what's going on with you that I feel like there is a lot of investment there -- at least with me, I put a lot of work into building that relationship so that I felt comfortable competing for them for four years and having them be like an extended family, because you go through a lot there. [COB113, 01:11:23]*

Students in the current study described several types of mentoring relationships developed for varied interests and goals, each discussing them as contributors to their sense of belonging. The transitional point for college students navigating emerging adulthood, athletic demands, education attainment, and career selection may make mentorship relationships especially important, and a sense of belonging within them particularly salient, in this developmental stage.

As discrete contexts of belonging, these five social contexts (i.e., Family, Friends, Romantic Partnership, Mentorship, and Animals/Pets) represent developmentally normative relationships for college students and were among the most prominently endorsed contexts of social belonging by the students in this study. While the degree of interpersonal closeness may vary across each of the contexts in the Interpersonal Context category, the one-to-one nature of positive relationships were described by students with

the same kind of responsiveness, trust, and vulnerability discussed by Hirsch and Clark (2019). Together, they represent an important collective of interpersonal contexts of belonging for students.

**Instrumental Contexts.** The contexts grouped into the Instrumental Contexts category were primarily characterized by an “instrumental” or productivity-based quality, including the social contexts: Competitive Teams, Work/Job (co-workers), and School (classmates). This grouping reflects the *instrumental coalition* collective described by Leary and Cox (2008) as groups that come together for the shared attainment of goals. However, in line with the instrumental/productivity quality of this grouping, the current study adds the nonsocial contexts Work/Job, School/Learning, and Skill (see Table 4.1). Together, these social and nonsocial instrumental contexts align with two of the pathways to belonging posited by Hirsch and Clark (2019): the *group-membership path* and the *general-approbation path*. How each of these contexts and their salient belonging experiences fit into and extend these models are discussed in further detail below.

The social instrumental contexts in the current study share the group characteristics described by the *group-membership path* (Hirsch and Clark, 2019) and the *instrumental coalition collective* (Leary and Cox, 2008). According to Hirsch and Clark (2019) sense of belonging through the *group-membership path* is built around sharing valued identities, activities, interests, and beliefs with others. This description fits fairly well for the social instrumental contexts in the current study since teammates, co-workers, and classmates would be likely to identify similarly within their organizing institutions (i.e., team, workplace, university/major of study) and engage in similar interests or activities together (e.g., sport, work tasks, course work). Shared beliefs may



be more or less relevant to group membership depending on the setting, but could include shared competitive values, work ethic, or school spirit. The *instrumental coalitions* description by Leary and Cox (2008) reflects the productive/instrumental quality of groups that strive toward a shared purpose. They theorized that individual motivation for finding belonging in this type of group would include opportunities to perform in such a way that one's competence might be valued by others (Leary & Cox, 2008). The social Instrumental Contexts in the current study fit the *instrumental coalition* description in that for each group context, students are working toward a purpose they share with others (e.g., winning a competition, completing tasks, learning new concepts). However, the productive/instrumental purposes that teammates and co-workers share may involve more communal striving than the learning tasks shared by classmates. Although learning happens in community in most School contexts, it is a less interdependent task than in most Team and Work settings. Likewise, while learning is a productive/instrumental task, striving in School contexts (i.e., learning) happens adjacent to community. This difference is reflected in the belonging experiences that emerged as most salient for each context.

The organizing belonging experiences for the Team, Work, and School social instrumental contexts were VALUED INVOLVEMENT, SHARED EXPERIENCE, and AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE (see Figure 4.1). For all three contexts, purposive contribution (feeling “needed”) was the primary VALUED INVOLVEMENT experience that emerged as most salient. For the Team and Work social contexts, VALUED INVOLVEMENT was paired with AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE, for which descriptions of “comfort” and “connection” were most prevalent. The social School context diverged

from these in that the most salient experience paired with VALUED INVOLVEMENT was SHARED EXPERIENCE. It is perhaps reasonable to assume that interdependent striving on Teams or in Work groups might engender comradery that would be characterized by positive affective responses like “comfort” and “connection” (i.e., AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE). However, even in social School contexts, learning is more individualized and less dependent on fellow classmates for one’s purposive contribution to be rewarded with success. In some classrooms, there may even be a competitive quality to communal learning, particularly where grading along a curve is practiced. For these reasons, it makes sense that affective responses may not be salient in the social School context – in fact, it was the only context in the study where AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE was not described as a belonging experience. While the absence of affective response in the School context is noted in this study, additional research with a larger sample, in a non-pandemic School environment would be suggested before broader conclusions could be drawn. The year-long virtual and socially distanced/masked classroom environment that had been the prevailing communal learning experience for students at the time they were interviewed may have biased their experience. In either case, the most salient belonging experience to emerge in the pandemic era School context, in this study, was SHARED EXPERIENCE, as described by these students:

*Then I guess around other people, it's the same thing that I said before about how there's people around me working towards the same goal, like succeeding in a class and the struggle of the class together. That makes me feel like I belong. [COB106, 01:13:42]*

*I feel belonging with my classmates, like my course mates, I guess you could call them, just because we're all striving for a common goal [...] I think that in classes, especially where maybe the entire class is struggling with a difficult professor or just a difficult chapter and you're all working on it together in a sense, especially like on a*

*GroupMe. If you're all working on a study guide together, then you would feel more belonging than if you were every man for himself type situation. [COB107, 01:06:27]*

*I always feel like I belong when I talk to the girls because educationally and just with the workload that we have, we consistently just feel like we're on the same page and able to help each other. I don't feel like what I'm struggling with in this assignment is not valid because I have other people who are struggling with the same thing [...] we all consistently just feel like we're missing something because everything's online and we're not getting that face-to-face interaction or communication as much. While that does create a separation and less belonging to our classes, it also facilitates belonging between students because while we all feel like we're missing something, we're missing something together. [COB114, 00:47:32]*

In each example above, students described a difficult striving experience where their sense of belonging with others in the School context was based in the shared struggle of learning.

The nonsocial instrumental contexts in the current study (i.e., Work, School/Learning, and Skill) are best captured by the *general-approbation path* – a proposed pathway to belonging that offers new ways of considering the construction of belonging, particularly for nonsocial contexts. The *general-approbation* pathway is discussed by Hirsch and Clark (2019) as “*people gaining others’ admiration through achieving status and wider general approbation, typically without revealing vulnerabilities and without establishing communal relationships.*” Here, general approbation is reached through actual or apparent success, valued performance, attractiveness, achievement, or association with attractive or successful people or institutions. By definition, the approbation achieved in this path is social in nature – it is “others” who provide or withhold the desired approbation. Certainly, those who literally bask in the approving presence of others (e.g., spectated demonstrations of skill,

personally delivered praise or compliments) gain general approbation from social interaction. Yet, as shown in the current study, the feeling of belonging gained from achievement, success, skillfulness, or a job well-done is still experienced when gained outside of the presence of others. Hirsch and Clark (2019) speculate as to whether sense of belonging always results from actual interpersonal belonging or if it sometimes comes through intrapsychic processes. They give a hypothetical example of downward social comparison of one's teammates' swim times and the resulting gain in sense of belonging through imagined or anticipated approbation. In this way, the feeling that one has outperformed others may reinforce feelings of competency and valued involvement that would be anticipated to increase relational value and therefore sense of belonging among others (Leary & Gabriel, 2022).

The organizing belonging experiences for the nonsocial instrumental contexts (i.e., Work, Skill, and School/Learning) were COMPETENCY and VALUED INVOLVEMENT (see Figure 4.1). Findings in the current study suggest that even without downward social comparison, the feeling that one has done well, regardless of whether they are socially admired or valued for their skillfulness, seems to impart a sense of belonging that was described by students as occurring within themselves. This was illustrated in the following student's comments about their independent study research project:

*I feel like when I when I work on that and it's going well, I feel a greater sense of belonging with myself. I think, just because it's something I feel is important and something I feel like is bettering myself. [COB101, 00:14:45]*

Here, another student talked about their sense of belonging when independently doing a valued activity skillfully, but noted the anticipated approbation that could come from their work:

*I've been recently getting into videography [...] I want to go into travel vlogging and things like that. I want to get better at it. When I work on something I'm pretty OCD about it. I want it to be perfect and I want myself to be proud of it, but then I think the aspect of sharing it with other people and getting compliments on it and actually getting noticed for it is a huge factor. [COB110, 01:23:14]*

In both cases, students described intrapsychic experiences of belonging while doing something well and independently of others but in the latter example, the anticipated approbation has a clear social referent. This is not explicitly so in the first example, but it is not unreasonable to imagine that there might be a subconscious anticipation of approval and therefore acceptance through a job well-done. Future research is needed to answer this question definitively. However, in the current study, the finding that the COMPETENCY and VALUED INVOLVEMENT aspects of students' belonging experience were particularly salient for the nonsocial contexts, Work, Skill, and School/Learning suggests this may be so. Connecting to previous research on social surrogates of belonging, the ability to garner skill or achievement-based sense of belonging experiences in nonsocial contexts may have evolved similarly to the mechanisms proposed in Gabriel et al.'s (2016) model of social surrogacy. In the way that watching or reading immersive social narratives by oneself subconsciously adds to one's overall sense of belonging, so too could independently achieved success or demonstrated skillfulness result in the feeling of belonging even before it can be appreciated by others. While it is also not unreasonable to speculate that actual social approbation from others would yield a greater sense of belonging than imagined or

anticipated approbation, quantifying the “amount” or extent of belonging achieved from any one context is beyond the scope of this study. The mere presence of approbation-based belonging through nonsocial contexts of Skill, School/Learning, and Work was illustrated here, and future research will be needed to extend the findings to these areas.

**Identity Contexts.** Several of the group social contexts in the current study were characterized by a shared identity aspect, including Social Location, Shared Ideology, Neighborhood, and Club/Organization. These contexts broadly fit the *macro-level communities* collective described by Leary and Cox (2008) as groups or communities that assimilate through shared heritage, attitudes, ideals, or interests. Similarly, the identity contexts in the current study fit the *group-membership path* to belonging described by Hirsch and Clark (2019) as sharing valued social identities or having shared activities, interests, or beliefs with others. To these four Identity Contexts (i.e., Social Location, Shared Ideology, Neighborhood, and Club/Organization), the current study adds the Ideological Practice nonsocial context (see Table 4.1).

The organizing belonging experiences described by students in the Identity Contexts category were their affective responses (i.e., AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE), sense of SIMILARITY, IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT, and FIT (see Figure 4.1). Among these, AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE was paired in saliency with either FIT or SIMILARITY in all contexts except Shared Ideology, where the IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT experience was paired with affect as most salient. As with nearly every context in the current study, affective responses emerged as highly important to students' belonging experience across all Identity Contexts and were overwhelmingly characterized by feelings of “comfort” and “connection.” The experience of

SIMILARITY emerged as particularly salient for three of the four social identity contexts, including Social Location, Neighborhood, and Club/Organization. For the nonsocial Ideological Practice context, the experience of FIT emerged as most salient. The co-occurrence of SIMILARITY, FIT, and IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT within the contexts grouped as Identity Contexts has conceptual validity. The tendency to perceive homogeneity among members within groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), to align oneself with the self-identified in-group, and to perceive similarities of beliefs, attitudes, norms, and values between oneself and the in-group (Turner et al., 1987) has been well-established in the literature. Given this, it makes sense that the cluster of salient belonging experiences within the Identity Contexts would be ones that reinforce the feeling of fitting into the in-group through perceptions of similarity and shared beliefs. These Identity Contexts and their most salient paired experiences of belonging are discussed below.

The Club/Organization context was characterized by students' experiences of belonging through SIMILARITY with fellow group members and their own affective responses of "comfort" and "connection." The following student's experience highlights these aspects:

*My first semester, I joined the mountaineering and whitewater rafting club. It's like a very outdoorsy type of club. Like I was saying before, I like that stuff, the adventurous type of vibe. I got to get to know people that share the same hobbies as me, I guess, or interests. [...] I felt a sense of belonging because the mountaineering and whitewater rafting club was all about being around other college students who shared the same interests as me. We could bond over having those same interests and enjoying going on the hikes, for example, or tubing down the river while actually getting to know each other. It's just strangers who grow comfortable together and become friends through mutual interests. [COB 00:16:57]*

However, students' experiences of belonging through VALUED INVOLVEMENT were referenced as often as their experiences of SIMILARITY. In this context, both SIMILARITY and VALUED INVOLVEMENT align with the belonging motivation strategies for maintaining relational value by (a) being a good social exchange partner, and (b) finding similarity with others to increase the chance of being liked (Leary & Gabriel, 2022). The following student's description of their experience of belonging in a club illustrates both of these aspects:

*I'm a member of a club on campus and I definitely would say there is belonging there. It just ties back to just having commonality. If you're a part of a club, you have something in common. You're all a part of this club. This club is geared towards a common goal and you're working on it together. Again, it's that commonality and having something that's relevant to both of you, that gives you that sense of belonging.*  
[COB103, 00:34:26]

While descriptions of the SIMILARITY (i.e., commonality) experience of belonging were alike across these two examples, the student's experience of VALUED INVOLVEMENT in the second example illustrated the shared goal/instrumental nature of the club to which they belonged. In the first example, the purpose of the club was to come together in shared interest rather than working together on a common goal as described in the second example. There may be some fluidity to Club/Organization contexts where certain clubs fit best within the Identity Context while others have an Instrumental Context quality. In the current study, the organizing characteristic experiences of these two context categories (i.e., valued involvement, similarity) were matched in saliency. However, this was not the case for groups within the Instrumental Context category where SIMILARITY was not a salient experience. More research with a larger sample is needed to confirm this finding, but the placement of Club/Organizations in the Identify Context seems to fit for the current sample.



Similarity was the most salient experiential belonging aspect for the Neighborhood context. In the literature, belonging within communities or neighborhoods is most often studied as *sense of community*. In one prominent conceptualization for *sense of community*, it is theorized to include four key elements: (1) a sense of belonging or personal relatedness to others, (2) a mutual sense of mattering between the member and the group, (3) a feeling of integration and assured fulfillment of needs, and a (4) belief that the shared “history, common places, time together, and similar experiences” will continue (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In the current study, the experience of SIMILARITY best aligns with the first and fourth elements, whereas FIT, VALUED INVOLVEMENT, and some affective responses closely align with the other elements of *sense of community*. For students in the current study, the saliency of the comfort and appeal of sameness in the communities in which they lived reflected an in-grouping of fellow college students. A few students in the current study either currently or previously lived in mixed neighborhoods of college students and families or adults of mid-to-older age. These neighborhood experiences were most often described as less appealing than a neighborhood that was primarily student occupied, as in the following students’ response:

*I'm not friends with any of my neighbors on my street, but knowing that the houses around us are also college kids is like a big weight off my shoulders, if that makes sense, just because I have lived in a house where two of our next-door neighbors were older, and if we had a party on a random Saturday, I could almost guarantee that person was going to call the cops and make a noise complaint. That's just super frustrating. Now living in a house where all of our surrounding neighbors are in college and understand like that there's going to be loud music at 12:00 on a Saturday, I think that helps a lot. Just being around kids our age increases the level of belonging, I'd say.*  
[COB108, 00:22:59]

In general, the Neighborhood context was not commonly endorsed as a current context of belonging. Those who did endorse it tended to describe the experience of being of similar age, life stage, and occupation (i.e., student) as most important to them. It may be that students in college are not looking for a more in-depth sense of community at this stage of their lives (i.e., mutual sense of mattering, assured fulfillment of needs), which may or may not become more important in different life stages. For students in the current study, the most important aspects of their belonging experience within their neighborhoods were a sense of personal relatedness (i.e., being of similar age and life stage) and having similar experiences (i.e., being in college).

Similarity also emerged as the most salient belonging aspect in the Social Location context. In one way, similarity as an organizing belonging experience was strongly illustrated in the Social Location context where references to belonging through similarity were made more frequently than affective response. However, social location is a complex, intersecting experience that defies simple characterization through a single aspect of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). In the current study, the endorsement of belonging through social location was multifaceted and complex. While similarity was the prevailing experience of belonging through social location overall, students' endorsements varied in how they chose to discuss the context. Most social location endorsements were made for sex/gender, both by those who did and did not identify with a gender minority group. Endorsements were also common among those who identified as a religious or sexual minority, but this was a small group. Endorsements for race and ethnicity as a social location of belonging were mixed and may have reflected complex experiences of racial or ethnic identity. While some found a similarity-based sense of

belonging with others of the same minority race or ethnicity, others did not. This was true for those who did and did not identify as a member of a racial or ethnic minority group. Several students had complex multicultural backgrounds and experiences that belie a simple yes/no endorsement of belonging through similarity within a social location. Because social location includes several individual characteristics of personal identity (e.g., age, race and ethnicity, sexuality, gender) and intersections across identities are meaningful and distinct, tallying experiences of similarity across a sample as small as the one in the current study loses significance quickly. While broader conclusions cannot be drawn from this data, these results are described here as potentially offering a future avenue of research in this area.

For the social Shared Ideology context, IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT emerged as most salient. There is substantial face validity to the finding that the experience of IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT would be integral to students' sense of belonging with those who share spiritual, religious, or ideological/political views. In some ways, SIMILARITY and IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT appear interrelated, and the argument could be made to collapse them into a single experiential aspect of belonging since IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT is a type of similarity with others. Indeed, IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT is conceptually closer to the SIMILARITY experience than to any other aspect, and they are conceptually closer to one another than any other two aspects studied here. However, the choice to code IDEOLOGICAL AGREEMENT as separate from SIMILARITY was made because of the distinctiveness of shared beliefs from other shared characteristics coded within the SIMILARITY experience (e.g., similar

age, background, college major, interests). It was also deemed a distinct experience because of the emphasis on agreement over similarity, like with this students' response:

*I feel belonging with someone if we're engaging in a conversation and I see a lot of overlap, and we can build on each other's points and hype each other up, for lack of a better term. I definitely think that that fosters a sense of belonging. There's no better feeling than being verbally affirmed like, "Oh, yes, I totally agree with you." That feels awesome. I'm automatically going to like somebody more and feel more belonging with them if they agree with me. [COB111, 00:55:51]*

Interestingly, the experience of FIT emerged alongside affective response as most salient in the only nonsocial context in the Identity Contexts category: Ideological Practice. The Ideological Practice context captured nonsocial activity that reflected spiritual, religious, or ideological beliefs. Belonging experienced while engaged in activities that were in the presence of others but for which the referent of belonging was not a *social other* or target were considered nonsocial. Here, students described FIT in terms of activities that gave them a sense of being “a part of” something representing an ideological belief. Students described their experience of FIT while engaged in nonsocial activities that gave them a sense of being “a part of” something that they feel strongly about. The following student described their experiences of belonging when they registered to vote and affiliated with their chosen political party:

*Ideologically, definitely advocating for women's rights or even just reading about certain political things that I'm passionate about makes me feel a sense of belonging [...] When I registered to vote, I felt a sense of belonging and I got to like, identify myself with the political party that I affiliate myself with. So that sort of gave me a sense of belonging, even though it wasn't really like a social thing. It was like registering to vote was me saying I was part of it, or I believe in these certain things, you know? [COB102, 01:13:50]*

Another student talked about feeling a sense of belonging while protesting:

*I protested this summer at a couple of Black Lives Matter protests, and I felt a sense of belonging because I believe very, very, very strongly in the movement and it's important to me to be a part of changing what's happening. However, I'm not Black. I'm just a random white girl that's there for support. I know my place, and I know that that space isn't really for me, but I can be there as part of this whole movement and be there to support it because I should. I guess it's hard to explain that you can feel belonging but that it's not your space [...] I feel like I belong there because it's something that I support. However, I don't have the shared experience of having my life threatened like others do, so I don't necessarily feel that kind of belonging with people who have had that experience. But I understand the experience that led to the movement if that makes sense. I can feel like I belong there because it's something that I support. [COB107, 01:24:13]*

In both examples, the students described their belonging experience as arising from their ideological activities and connecting to their ideological beliefs. They each described their belonging experience as feeling like they were part of a movement or set of beliefs they felt strongly about. However, each talked about the distinction between being part of the movement or belief versus feeling a sense of social belonging with others. In the second example, the student noted that it was her ideological belief and the activity supporting that belief that created her sense of belonging. She clearly stated that the social space at the protest was not her own and that her sense of belonging did not arise from a sense of shared experience or belonging with others. Belonging that is experienced in the Ideological Practice context as nonsocial, whether done in or outside of the presence of others, is a fine distinction. As with the activities of social surrogacy described by Gabriel et al. (2016) and the nonsocial Instrumental experiences of belonging described by students in the current study, Ideological Practices may ultimately serve a social purpose.

Looking back over the contexts in the Identity and Instrumental categories, it is easy to see how communal relationships could develop within the group contexts and

allow for a shift in context categories or in pathways, as described by Hirsch & Clark (2019). To return to an example that was discussed previously, the Shared Ideology context has the potential to include close interpersonal relationships with others who share beliefs (e.g., individuals in a religious congregation, roommates with shared political affiliations) or could remain grouped by ideological agreement alone (e.g., fellow supporters at a rally). The Neighborhood context is another example of potentially shifting context categories or pathways in that one could have a strong sense of membership to a particular neighborhood community as a whole (Identity Context or *group-membership path*) or develop individual relationships with neighbors into close friendships or romantic partnerships (Interpersonal Context or *communal-relationship path*). One student described this type of situation:

*Because of COVID and not going out to have fun, my group of best friends right now actually are my neighbors. All my neighbors are college students like myself, and we have backyards and they're not fenced in. We would just be hanging out in our backyards, and then we'd see our neighbors out, and eventually, we worked our way over, and now they're the people that I hang out with every day and we're all best friends. [COB111, 00:24:49]*

Similarly, friendships and romantic partnerships can, and do, develop between classmates, co-workers, club members and within any other context people gather. There is a *vice-versa* quality to belonging where interactions that build a sense of belonging within a group context often occur between individual members, and feelings of group cohesiveness may lead to the development of interpersonal bonds. This suggests a fluidity to the belonging experience and leads to empirical questions. Hirsch and Clark (2019) discussed the potential for overlapping pathways to belonging that could be additive, multiplicative, or conflicting with one another and suggested the integration of

pathways as a future direction of research. It was not the aim of the current study to parse interactions into communal vs group pathways, but to identify broad social and nonsocial context categories and their constituent belonging experiences to fit a contextual framework for belonging. As an initial and qualitative exploration into the experiences of belonging across contexts, this study does not attempt to delineate the integration effects discussed by Hirsch and Clark (2019) but echoes the call for future research at the contextual level of belonging.

**Spatial Contexts.** The contexts that were grouped into the Spatial Contexts category in the current study were place-based nonsocial contexts, including Home, Nature Spaces, and Public Spaces (see Table 4.1). Spatial belonging is most often discussed in the literature as place attachment and is scattered across several disciplines including humanistic geography (Antonsich, 2010) and environmental psychology (Scannell and Gifford, 2009, Morgan, 2010). Reviews of place-attachment in the belonging literature have emphasized the need to bring more focus to spatial belonging as a place-based attachment process (Antonsich, 2010; Lewicka, 2011). The findings here expand upon these multidisciplinary areas of research as many of the experiences shared by students reflect processes described in this literature. The organizing belonging experiences of these Spatial Contexts were AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE and FAMILIARITY (see Figure 4.1). Affective descriptions of “comfort” were prominent across all three spatial contexts and were paired with “safety/security” descriptions for the Home and Public Spaces contexts. The Nature context differed from these in that the experience of “calm” was most often described alongside “comfort” when students discussed their affective experiences of belonging in the natural world. The experience of

FAMILIARITY also emerged as important for belonging in each of the spatial contexts studied here. A discussion of students' belonging experiences in the Public, Nature, and Home Spatial Contexts and how they intersect with existing literature follows.

Public spaces were commonly described by students as contexts of belonging. The Public Spaces context was endorsed by the majority of students in the study and included places in the public/campus sphere like libraries, coffee shops, student centers, lecture halls, and downtown shopping/dining centers. Endorsements for these spaces were carefully coded as separate from Nature Spaces, particularly where potential overlap might occur, such as in public parks, riverwalks, or outdoor recreational spaces on campus. Descriptions of belonging in the Public Spaces context mirror the attachment processes outlined by research on place attachment. Scannell and Gifford (2009) put forth a tripartite framework for place attachment that organized the person-place experience of spatial belonging, including affective (positive emotion), cognitive (memory, meaning), and behavioral (proximity-maintaining) processes. The following student's description of how their place-based memories connect to meaningful expressions of belonging on campus reflect these processes:

*When I walk around and see certain spots, I just think of, "I did that with this person," or, "I had a meltdown right there because of a test." Those little memories I have around campus are really nice and they make me feel like I belong there. Me and my friends always talk about how much we miss just walking to class alone, having your headphones in, listening to music. It sucks that we don't get to do it really anymore. It does bring down the belonging part. Sometimes, I have a job on campus, so I've made a point of just walking around aimlessly if I have time. It feels like being a real student here again. [COB108, 01:19:59]*

Reflecting Scannell and Gifford's (2009) model, the place-based memories described by the student above help them connect to their sense of belonging on campus both with positive affective and cognitive processes (i.e., through memory, meaning-making). The



COVID related disruption to their experience of belonging on campus prompted them to seek out opportunities to maintain proximity to this spatial context. The following student's description of favorite study spaces on campus reflect these processes similarly and note the importance of FAMILIARITY to the experience of this type of belonging:

*Definitely, there are certain public places on campus where I feel a sense of belonging. There are study spaces around campus that I feel really comfortable in. For me, the amount of times I use them seem to correlate to my sense of belonging with those places because the more I use them the more comfortable I get with them, and the more I almost associate myself with those places. Like sophomore year, I associate with a study room on the fourth floor of Thomas Cooper library and things like that. I have a routine where it's like I go there every Tuesday and there's the whiteboard and the markers and I know the chair, or in this one study room the desk wobbles and I don't like that. It sounds weird, but it's almost like getting to know people, you get to know spaces, and the more a space you observe there's always that one marking on the wall or something like that. The more you get to know the space, the more comfortable I feel in it, the more I feel this almost is my space and I feel belonging in that space. [COB116, 01:17:07]*

Public spaces were described by students as common and important contexts of belonging. Connecting with previous research, these findings reflect the processes described by place attachment theorists and begin to map discrete belonging experiences important to the Public Spaces context.

Home was commonly endorsed as a spatial context of belonging, with the majority of students talking about their sense of belonging in their home. Because the college years represent a transitional stage of life for many students, "home" was described in two ways: "college home" and "childhood home." Students often reported having two bedrooms, one near campus and the other "back home," and sometimes more in the case of separated parents. For many students, the mid-semester COVID-19 disruption to in-person classes in spring 2020 meant an extended return to their family

homes. Because of this, students frequently talked about their experiences of “home” in both their college home and their childhood home. The primary experiences of belonging described by students in the Home context were their “comfort” and “safety/security” affective responses and their sense of FAMILIARITY. These experiences reflect Antonsich’s (2009) discussion of place-belongingness as a feeling of *home* he characterized as a “symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment.” The following student described this kind of symbolic space through feelings of homesickness:

*In my family home, I feel like I belong for sure. I know where everything is at, I mean it's probably the place I'm most familiar with [...] But I think a lot of the time, if I'm feeling homesick, it's a feeling of a sense of happiness or security that I'm wanting. And I think I mean, the closest thing to home when I am feeling homesick, that space is, you know, my family home, my family bedroom, because I think that's where I feel maybe like the most safe and most secure, happy, and isolated from any problems. [COB112, 01:04:18]*

They contrasted the familiar, safe feeling of their childhood home with a new space they recently came back to when they returned to campus after the quarantine phase of COVID. They also described the feeling of unfamiliar newness and their found feeling of belonging in their new home:

*I actually feel like I belong in my apartment and specifically my bedroom right now, but I didn't for a while. The past week or so is when I've started to feel like this is home to me. I have two random roommates and there was just something about my room that didn't feel like home, like familiar or completely set up, like completely mine or like moved into or whatever. I kind of took two full days and just reorganized everything. Now I feel like I've completely unpacked and made the space mine and now I feel like I belong here. But I mean, still just not as much as my family home. [COB112, 01:02:14]*

Similar to the example above, other students talked about building or rebuilding a sense of belonging in new home spaces where the experience of familiarity doesn't come automatically:

*I moved recently and I feel more that I belong now that I have my clothes intact in my closet and my decorations are put up. Things look more familiar with my stuff in here. I feel like I belong here, obviously, because I do live here. I pay to live here. But I think that you feel like you belong somewhere more when it's your own space. I think maybe it's that subconscious nesting, making a space comfortable and making sure you feel safe, secure, and knowing that it's where you'll go at night, it's where you'll wake up in the morning, it's where you have your food in the fridge. [COB107, 01:13:23]*

The experience of belonging at home was described by many students as distinct from their feelings of belonging with family, roommates, or other aspects of social belonging associated with home. The most salient belonging experiences in the Home context reflect characterizations of place-based home attachment, including comfort, security, and familiarity.

Time spent in Nature Spaces was a commonly described source of belonging for students. As the most referenced nonsocial context in the study and the fifth most frequently referenced context out of all twenty-two social and nonsocial contexts endorsed overall, Nature Spaces emerged as an important nonsocial context for students in the study. While it was not universally endorsed by students, Nature Spaces were described as particularly important by those for whom it was a space of belonging. Interestingly, some students' descriptions of belonging within Nature Spaces reflected a developmental aspect to spatial belonging discussed in the literature by place attachment theorists. Morgan et al. (2010) posited that sense of belonging in particular locations or regions is grounded in childhood experiences of belonging that persist throughout the

lifespan. To return to an earlier example, the following student described their lifetime tendency to seek belonging in the natural world whenever that sense was thwarted in social spaces:

*I've always, always felt a sense of belonging to nature. From the time that I could walk, I've always spent time outside [...] whenever something bad or just anything that upset me happened when I was younger, I would always, always just go outside and spend some time by myself in nature and it just always calmed me down or made me feel a little bit better, made me feel ready to confront whatever it was that I needed to face [...] Before, when I lived in a dorm and I didn't really view my space as a space where I could belong as much, I would take a pop-up hammock and go somewhere outside because it's where I felt like I belonged more so at the time. [COB105, 01:09:41]*

Morgan (2010) discusses the developmental importance for place attachment in the context of one's "home" region of childhood, describing it as a "*long-term affective bond to a particular geographic area and the meaning attributed to that bond.*" Geographic area could certainly include nature spaces, like those described by this student.

Antonsich's (2009) review of place-attachment literature suggested that the "at home" feeling of spatial belonging is held across multiple scales, from one's own home, to natural environs (i.e., island communities), to national homelands. In the example above, the student described a sense of being soothed ("calmed down") by finding belonging in nature spaces when they were upset. This may reflect the sensory based attachment discussed by Morgan (2010) wherein the "at home" experience of attachment provides a similar soothing interaction that is reminiscent of early caregiver interactions. Like in the example above, the AFFECTIVE FELT SENSE experience most frequently described by students in the Nature Spaces context was "calm." This was further emphasized as uniquely important to the experience of spatial belonging in nature since it was the only context in which "calm" held prominence over other affective responses. In addition to

affective response, students described FAMILIARITY most often when talking about their experience of belonging in Nature Spaces. The following student described their belonging experiences in the mountains near their childhood home:

*I love hiking and being outside, like that just - there's belonging there that keeps me calm and centered. I'm so comfortable with these certain hiking spots in the mountains. I know them so well and, I like know what to expect. But at the same time, like, every time I see it, like it's so beautiful and peaceful and it's so fun and just like it's the same experience of belonging every time. [COB102, 01:07:12]*

In the current study, Nature Spaces were commonly endorsed as important contexts of belonging. Both FAMILIARITY and the “calm” affective response described by students connected with previous research that suggests an attachment-based process to belonging within the natural world.

**Minor-Sociability Contexts.** The Minor-Sociability Context borrows language from Hirsch and Clark’s (2019) *minor-sociability path*, described as comprising pleasant interactions with mere acquaintances. The social context in the current study which best fits this pathway and context category is Distal Relationship and is categorized by casual, everyday encounters with people who live and work in one’s shared community. The choice to locate the Distal Relationship context within its own category rather than as part of the Interpersonal Contexts category or within either of the group context categories reflects the ambiguity of its fit within any of these categories. While there is little research on distal relationships to date, the following discussion of the existing literature provides evidence for its inclusion as a distinct context.

The Distal Relationship context originated from research on *distal supports*, which were defined as being built through friendly, low-demand interactions with familiar people like cashiers, waitstaff, neighbors, and librarians (Wieland et al., 2007).

Distal supports, as originally measured by Wieland et al. (2007), are those for which individuals can affirmatively answer at least three of the following five yes/no questions:

- 1) Do people there recognize/acknowledge you when you come in?
- 2) Do you feel welcome there?
- 3) Do you know the names of the people there?
- 4) Do they know your name?
- 5) Do they sometimes help you out in times of need?

The fifth question marks an important distinction between the terms distal support and distal relationship. As researched previously, the support component places it in the category of social support. As discussed here, the first four components are central to the idea of distal relationships in terms of belongingness. Each of the litmus test-like questions describe a sense of familiarity and being known, and as research has suggested, this sense of familiar knowing can lead to a sense of belonging. Wieland et al. (2007) found that having more distal supports in the community was associated with a greater sense of belonging among adults with schizophrenia. Following this, Townley et al. (2013) found that distal supports predicted sense of community for people with serious mental illness. Importantly, this relationship was found even after accounting for more traditional social support networks of friends and family (i.e., interpersonal relationship contexts; Townley et al., 2013). Although there has been very little research to date on distal relationships, the association found between distal support and sense of belonging/community places it adjacent to this research.

Existing research for distal supports/relationships illustrates the combined interpersonal and community nature of distal interactions and the ambiguity of this

distinction. Wieland et al. (2007) associated distal support with a broad measure of belongingness (SOBI-P; Haggerty et al., 1995) and described the construct as stemming from interpersonal interactions but did not explicitly define it as an interpersonal construct. Townley et al. (2013) did not include belongingness as a construct in their study, but they did associate distal support with community integration – a measure intended to capture a sense of acceptance and participation in one’s community. Again, the sense of acceptance comes close to belongingness as described in the current study, but community integration speaks more to a sense of belonging within community than to interpersonal belongingness. Outside of the psychology literature, there is similar ambiguity as to whether interpersonally “weak ties” like those described in the distal support domain are fostering interpersonal fit or group fit. In marketing literature for instance, the *Cheers effect* is described very similarly to the idea of Distal Relationship presented here. The *Cheers effect* describes a marketing strategy that attempts to garner brand loyalty by engineering a more personal experience for the customer; the strategy explicitly entails the use of customers’ first names during service interactions (Olenski, 2018). As in the popular television show for which it is named, personal interactions between staff and customers are intended to create an inviting, friendly space “where everybody knows your name.” Done well, the customer feels a sense of belonging and will want to return to the establishment more often (Olenski, 2018). Used in this way, the interaction seems closer to an interpersonal sense of belonging than that of group belongingness. Yet, Vianden & Barlow (2014) suggested that college campuses adopt the *Cheers effect* strategy widely as one way to foster a sense of fit as well as a “be-true-to-your-school” sense of loyalty among college students in order to promote persistence and

ultimately, higher graduation rates. This use speaks more to fostering group or community belonging than engendering a sense of interpersonal belongingness. In addition to these ambiguities, the one-to-one interactions that define distal relationships are neither close connections like others in the Interpersonal Contexts or shared identities, interests, or goals as in the Identity and Instrumental Contexts. Thus, Distal Relationships are categorized separately as part of the *Minor-Sociability Context* (see Table 4.1).

Students' most prominent belonging experience within the Distal Relationship context was a sense of FAMILIARITY, followed by affective responses including "positive affect" and "connection" (see Figure 4.1). Much of the prior research summarized by Hirsch and Clark (2019) in their discussion of the *minor-sociability pathway* to belonging involves stranger interactions, as in Sandstrom's & Dunn's (2014a; 2014b) classroom and coffee shop interaction studies (described previously), and in Wesselmann et al.'s (2012) study showing increases in belonging after friendly eye contact with strangers. In the current study, however, students most often talked about Distal Relationships as stemming from repeated positive interactions with others who were not well known to them (i.e., not considered friends) but were familiar and known by sight. These interactions involved people in public facing service positions (e.g., baristas, bartenders, cashiers) who recognized them as "regulars" or involved interactions with friendly others seen around campus or town who frequent the same locations as students:

*When I walk into Starbucks and they already know what my order is and they're like, "Yes, it's ready, here you go." It's kind of like I feel like I belong in Starbucks, which is so funny to say. I don't feel like just another person or like a stranger, because I feel like with daily activities and stuff, it's easy to feel like just another number, but*



*whenever you can walk in somewhere and recognize someone and feel important to them, it creates a sense of belonging. [COB106, 00:24:09]*

However, these distal relationships were often reported as having dropped off due to the social distancing effects of COVID, as in this student's response:

*With COVID you no longer really have that relational connection because mobile ordering became a huge thing. Now I just walk in and walk out, grab my things and walk out. I miss the social aspects of things. Definitely that sense of belonging decreased because there's no longer that relational connection or just the-- Even just the personable conversation of just ordering from a person that makes you feel more so like you belong than ordering over your phone and just tapping buttons. [COB114, 00:30:23]*

Although *minor-sociability* interactions seem minimal, even by name alone, students described feeling a sense of belonging from them and talked about missing that sense once it was gone. The findings from the current study support the *minor-sociability* pathway to belonging posited by Hirsch and Clark (2019), extend the *distal supports* research to focus on belonging more centrally, and demonstrate the presence of Distal Relationships as a unique context of belonging for college students.

### ***Primacy of Social Constructions of Belonging***

While the current findings suggest that nonsocial contexts do play a role in students' overall sense of belonging, the primacy of social contexts of belonging was clearly established in a number of ways. For instance, the total number and ratio of social and nonsocial contexts endorsed by students varied considerably but none endorsed more nonsocial than social contexts of belonging. Additionally, comparisons of the commonality, frequency, and complexity of belonging experiences between social and nonsocial contexts illustrated the greater salience of social contexts for the students in the study. Furthermore, students' first and primary references to belonging were about close interpersonal relationships, like family and friends. Although the focus of the current

study was not to quantify or sum individual contributions to belonging across contexts, these differences highlight the central importance for social contexts of belonging. In summary, the current study does not attempt to subvert the primacy of social belonging but suggests that primary social contexts, nonsocial contexts, and minor social contexts each contribute to overall sense of belonging in unique ways.

### ***Belonging Effects of COVID-19***

COVID related disruptions to belonging were swift and far-reaching for the college students in this study. Following the closure of campus after Spring Break 2020, students were sent home to their families, abruptly losing their college social network and the young adult autonomy many had recently found. Students were met with immediate barriers to normative social contexts that were typically available to them. Lost opportunities for belonging were evident across contexts and were most profoundly felt within important social contexts like friend groups, romantic partnership, classrooms, clubs, and teams. However, students described notable deficits in the sense of belonging they had previously experienced in distal relationships and public spaces as well. Cut off from previous social circles, students found that restricted belonging opportunities led to a decrease in their sense of belonging and an increased need for belonging overall. With so many of their typical belonging contexts closed to them, the reorganization of remaining contexts and the fostering of previously less important contexts were necessary for reconstructing their sense of belonging.

**Disruptions Led to Contextual Shifts in Belonging.** Prior to the pandemic, students' belonging experiences were multiply constructed across many contexts including friends, classrooms, team sports, shared interest clubs, distal community

connections, and potential romantic partners. During the early quarantine period of COVID, disruptions to social contexts that previously provided a sense of belonging caused a shift toward contexts that were more readily available to students, including family and pets.

**Family.** For many, families became a renewed, immediate, and primary source of belonging, particularly during the quarantine phase of COVID where social isolation policies and guidelines restricted socializing outside the home. Research suggests that sustaining positive relationships with family promotes healthy psychosocial development as young adults transition to work and family-formation roles of adulthood (Scales, et al., 2016), and the majority of students endorsed family as an important context of belonging for them. However, the adolescent developmental shift away from family and towards peers as the predominate source of socialization continues into young adulthood giving developmentally normative primacy to peer social contexts such as friends, romantic partners, co-workers, club members and/or teammates (Steinberg & Morris, 2001; Eccles et al., 2003). Despite the regressive nature of the shift away from peers and towards family as friends and other social contexts were unavailable to them, most students in the study described strengthened bonds with family as an unexpected benefit of COVID. However, there were students for whom increased time with family led to strain and relationship challenges. A qualitative study in the early days of COVID-19 found similar bimodal family effects during the quarantine/social isolation phase (Evans et al., 2020). Findings from the Evans et al. (2020) study suggested that families with pre-existing vulnerabilities, including relationship stress, were more likely to be further taxed by the strain of social isolation measures, whereas those without were more likely to have better

outcomes. In the current study, the few students for whom the pandemic had deleterious effects on family relationships described pre-existing belonging challenges, often centered on diverging political beliefs or issues of acceptance toward sexual and gender identity. For many students without these types of challenges, family seemed to provide a more immediate source of belonging when peer contexts were less available.

*Pets.* Increased closeness to pets represented another contextual shift for students that provided a greater source of belonging when other contexts were less or unavailable to them. Students often discussed the companionship, connection, and comfort provided by their pets, but also the sense of purpose that they felt by caring for them. Purposive contribution to their pets was frequently described as an important belonging experience among students during periods of social isolation. A qualitative study that looked at human-animal interaction in the United Kingdom (UK) during the initial lockdown phase of the COVID-19 pandemic found similar effects as those in the current study. Findings from the UK study suggested that interactions with animals were beneficial to mental health by providing distraction from distress, a sense of connection or normalcy, and a source of motivation to be productive (Shoesmith et al., 2021). This connects with findings in the current study about the overall importance of valued involvement for belonging, and the particular salience of purposive contribution in the Animal/Pets context. Research on the benefits of pet ownership for older adults has shown that pets can bring the sense of motivation, purpose, and meaning that social isolation and lacking productive activity can begin to strip away (Chippendale & Boltz, 2015; Hui Gan et al., 2020). During the pandemic, similar psychosocial challenges like loneliness, lowered motivation, social isolation, and languishing were experienced by individuals across the

lifespan and not just among older adults (Gloster et al., 2020). As with the students in the current study, pets may represent an important context of belonging by providing an opportunity to experience valued involvement, particularly when other contexts are less available.

The shifting contexts described above illustrate the resourcefulness of students in shifting their social energy toward contexts of belonging that were more readily available to them during the most intense periods of social distancing.

**Disruptions Led to Distilled Social Belonging.** A commonly experienced change in students' sense of belonging was the distilling of social belonging that occurred through the simultaneous weakening of some relationships and the strengthening of others. In contrasting their social lives before COVID, students described having larger friend groups before the pandemic and a varied social network of classmates, club and team members, and distal connections that all contributed to their overall sense of belonging. Students described rapidly dwindling social networks once the pandemic began that, at the time of the interview a year later, primarily consisted of small groups of friends and family with whom they were closest. This finding reflects research on network size showing that while people can cognitively hold as many as 150 meaningful social relationships at any given time, concentric layers among these relationships differ in that inner, smaller layers are characterized by greater emotional closeness and larger, outer layers are much less so (Dunbar, 1992; Mac Carron, Kaski, & Dunbar, 2016). Mac Carron et al. (2016) found that the smallest, closest layers consisted of as few as five to ten relationships. However, students experienced more than simply the culling of less emotionally close relationships during the pandemic. Students commonly described

feeling even stronger emotional bonds with those who they were already close to, like these students:

*I think, overall, just connections that weren't strong connections before COVID have faded away. [...] Before, I was just like, "Oh, I love being friends with everyone. I love having this huge friend group." Now, it's more like, "Oh, I'm so happy that I have these super close friends I can literally tell anything to." [...] I feel like it's just a slight change in my overall outlook of how important quality over quantity of relationships is, I feel like. [COB120, 01:27:33]*

*I don't know that COVID increased my sense of belonging, but it brought about a stronger sense of belonging I have with my close friends and family. But then it also, like certain friends, I realized I only had a feeling of belongingness with because of convenience and like this base we shared that when we didn't share that space anymore, there was really no sense of belongingness with them. [COB102, 01:26:06]*

*I think since COVID, it has, overall, just lessened my sense of belonging to people and places, but it has helped me focus on the more immediate relationships to me. I think anything that I didn't have a deep connection to was just erased or just gone, but to people and things that I did have a deep connection to, I think, it helped me focus on them and to foster them even more. [COB104, 01:46:29]*

Students still described a lessening of their overall sense of belonging compared to before the pandemic, but the increase in closeness to relatively few people was a common experience. These findings suggest that culling more distant social relationships and refocusing social investments from a large network to a smaller number of people leads to an increase of belonging in select relationships. This illustrates a distilling of social belonging overall and a strengthening of close relationships. However, despite the commonality of this phenomenon, students just as commonly endorsed feeling a lowered sense of belonging overall. This suggests the continued importance of broader, more distanced social contexts in the overall makeup of one's sense of belonging.

**Belonging was Multiply and Creatively Reconstructed.** As the first year of the pandemic wore on and social opportunities for belonging remained impoverished,

students began to reconstruct their overall sense of belonging through multiple contexts and creative means. With fewer social opportunities at hand, students described resourceful and creative methods of reconstructing belonging through nonsocial contexts and parasocial expressions. This was evident in students' increased engagement in nature spaces, skill-based activities of competence, and social narratives as well as through a newfound sense of belonging within themselves.

The increased importance of nature spaces for students during the pandemic is one example of the creative reconstruction of belonging. As discussed previously, attachments for place may provide reflections of the experiences of belonging from human attachment (Morgan, 2010; Antonsich, 2010). For some, solitary expressions of belonging like spending time in nature allowed them to reconstruct some of their lost social sense of belonging:

*I've had to make major changes to make that belonging happen. Like pre-COVID, all of my sense of belonging was rooted in other people and my interactions with other people but since COVID put a damper on all that like, I've had to find my sense of belonging in other things. Like, within nature or even like, just being comfortable being alone.*  
[COB111, 02:11:27]

As discussed previously, students' experiences of calm, comfort, and familiarity of favorite outdoor spots provided a sense of belonging in nature. For others, like the following student, spending time in nature spaces made up for some of the lost sense of belonging when norms against social gathering had lessened a sense of belonging in public spaces.

*I feel like COVID almost took away my sense of belonging in public spaces because certain people don't like that people go out, and then certain other people aren't as afraid to go out. And when you are going out, you're worried whether you're being judged for doing so. [...] I think, if anything, COVID made me appreciate being out in nature even more. I think I feel more of a sense of belonging because I got to*

*explore a lot more. There were a lot more opportunities to do it. If you're going on a hike by yourself, you're staying away from people. You're isolated when you're in nature, you're not harming anybody versus if you're in a restaurant or a city affecting other people. It's like you don't have to worry about angering people as much as going to another place that people might be paying more attention to. You could post pictures of that and there's no judgment, no anything like that.*  
[COB110, 00:59:25 & 00:59:44]

The increased experience of belonging that students described while spending time in nature spaces is one example of the creative adoption of nonsocial contexts to reconstruct their sense of belonging.

Students' descriptions of skill-based and parasocial expressions of belonging illustrated additional resourceful uses of other-than-social contexts to reconstruct a sense of belonging when typical social contexts were less available to them. Some students described experiencing belonging by watching television shows, listening to podcasts, and reading books. These nonsocial and parasocial activities of belonging connect to Gabriel et al.'s (2016) work on social surrogacy that illustrated people can partially fulfil their need to belong by engaging in social narratives (i.e., books, TV) and one-sided interactions (i.e., podcasts) that create the experience of belonging. Social surrogacy may also explain students' experiences of belonging in skill-based activities done alone. As discussed previously, the current study's finding that students experience feelings of competency and valued involvement during solo skill-based activities may reflect *general-approbation pathways* to belonging through a social surrogate mechanism (Hirsch & Clark, 2019; Gabriel et al., 2016). Leary and Gabriel (2022) discuss achievement-related behaviors as strategies to increase one's relational value by appearing competent, knowledgeable, and skilled to others. The experience of belonging through private exhibition of skill may provide a nonsocial expression of anticipated



approbation from others. More research on achievement-related behaviors and social surrogacy will be needed before definitive conclusions can be drawn about the mechanism of belonging in this context. However, these findings do suggest that students use the contexts available to them to creatively reconstruct their sense of belonging after disruption.

Another interesting reconstruction of belonging emerged from students' descriptions of their newfound sense of belonging within themselves. The self as both a separate and integrated entity within social belonging spheres has a dense literature that connects to social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987), determination (Deci & Ryan, 2012), self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), and a myriad of other self-constructs, self-processes, and self-phenomena (Leary & Tagney, 2003). Although students commonly endorsed a sense of belonging within themselves, and the context was counted within the nonsocial contexts described here, this study does not attempt to establish the Self as part of a context category in the contextual framework of belonging presented here at this time. Instead, students' experiences of belonging "within themselves" is described as another of the resourceful and creative ways that students reconstructed their internal sense of belonging while under the strain of disruption. Students shared many experiences of self-reflection and personal growth that was fostered through an abundance of time spent alone during the initial quarantine and following year of extended social isolation periods. Their descriptions included many experiences of belonging discussed here, including acceptance: "*I have conversations in my head with myself that have to include acceptance. [...] I think that sense of belonging is rooted in those feelings towards yourself and doing things that make you have those*

feelings” [COB107, 00:17:54]. Several students described the experience of belonging as building a relationship with themselves:

*I think since COVID I've picked up meditation and I've delved more into philosophy. Those are just some things that do make me feel like that. Now I incorporate that part of my daily routine to feel more in tune with myself, to have a feeling of belonging with myself and the activities that give me that feeling [...] I've been able to focus on more myself than I would've if it weren't for COVID. My relationships that were strong remained strong and did get stronger, but I think during COVID, I wasn't really as focused on my relationships as much as I was on my relationship with myself. [COB104, 01:50:51]*

*I'll definitely say that I have experienced a greater sense of belonging and comfort with myself given the amount of time that I've been able to spend alone. [...] During COVID, although I was initially scared of spending so much time by myself because I was scared of what it would do to me mentally, I found that I could see different things in being alone that were actually beneficial for me. [...] I have a new relationship with myself, I could say, when I'm alone, as opposed to how it was before COVID. [COB105, 01:55:55]*

Other students described a process of self-discovery that led to a sense of belonging within themselves:

*I think spending time just with myself and realizing like, "These are the gifts that I have, this is what I'm good at, this is what I'm passionate about," gave me a better sense of belonging within myself because the only belonging I had was outside of myself. I belonged with other students who have my same major, but I still didn't know what I wanted to do with it. Just having that time to figure out, talking to myself, "Hey, this is what we're good at. This is what we're gonna do," definitely changed the whole trajectory of my life in general. [COB114, 01:33:59]*

*The character development in myself has been crazy since COVID. [...] I had time to think about, what do I want to do or what are my values, and how do I find a career that matches that [...] now I have this idea and something that I can continue to work towards and achieve. Before I didn't really have anything like that and losing my sense of belonging without having that was really difficult. [COB116, 01:45:19]*

Some students talked about this experience as an internally felt sense of belonging through identity and confidence:

*I think I am at a stage in my life where I'm like confident enough in myself and who I am, where I always feel like I can rely on myself in a way. Even if it's not external, but internal, I know who I am and I'm very grounded in that. So, I feel like there are times when I feel like I belong, even when it's just me. [COB121, 00:09:36]*

For many students, the extra time afforded by social isolation gave them a chance, through self-reflection, to build an internal experience of belonging built around affective responses of comfort and valued involvement with themselves through acceptance and purposive contribution.

In addition to nonsocial and parasocial means of belonging, students reconstructed their social belonging through resourceful means of maintaining contact with others. Communication technology such as text, chat, phone, and video calls played a significant role in students' ability to remain connected to others while socially distanced but did not fully replace belonging previously attained through in-person interaction. Students commonly described using technology to connect with friends during social isolation periods and to maintain the stronger family bonds built over quarantine once students returned to campus. Pre-pandemic research about technology's effect on sociability suggests that digital communication with pre-existing offline relationships can improve perceptions of relationship quality, particularly when distance or circumstance prevents offline interactions (Waytz & Gray, 2018). Students in the current study typically described technology-based interactions as helpful but not as powerful as in-person interactions for maintaining sense of belonging in distanced relationships. This finding connects with research illustrating a decreasing effect on

bonding between friends when interactions become further distanced, with the greatest bonding for in-person interactions and decreasing for video, audio, and text chat, in that order (Sherman et al., 2013). Students clearly preferred meeting with others in-person, and commonly attributed the lack of face-to-face interactions as contributing to their decreasing sense of belonging. This was evident through descriptions of their intentionality in reaching out to others and in seeking out in-person social opportunities wherever they could. Recent longitudinal research on different modes of connection found that online interactions fostered wellbeing during intense isolation stages of COVID but not during mild isolation stages (Marinucci et al., 2022). This may be why students talked about feeling an intensified need for belonging as the pandemic continued that led them to become more extroverted or adopt new social behaviors. Students described contributing more to meetings and to social conversations, spending more time on their physical appearance, and striking up conversations with strangers in the hope of finding similarities in interests. These behaviors reflect belonging motivation strategies described by Leary and Gabriel (2022), including adopting pro-social affiliative behavior (e.g., exerting more effort on a collective task), presenting oneself as physically attractive, and seeking examples of similarity to others thereby increasing the chances of being liked.

Taken together, students' intentionality in pursuing social contexts despite challenges, their ability to experience belonging in nonsocial and parasocial contexts, and their investment in self-reflection and personal growth illustrate a great deal of resourcefulness and creativity in reconstructing a multiply contextual sense of belonging following disruption.

## **Limitations**

As with all studies, there are limitations that must be considered when interpreting the findings presented here. First, the exploratory, hypothesis generating nature of this mixed-methods study necessitated a modest sample size to allow for the collection and analysis of in-depth interview data. Therefore, the study was underpowered for finding small to medium effects with transformed or collected quantitative data. Although it was not sufficient for more traditional hypothesis testing with the quantitative data collected, the smaller sample enabled longer interviews and the cultivation of richer qualitative data. Second, the cross-sectional design of the study did not allow for causal inferences or confirmation of the direction of change in sense of belonging for the college students interviewed. A longitudinal study carried out before and during the COVID-19 pandemic would have been an ideal opportunity to causally investigate the effects of public and campus social isolation policies on belonging and context saliency in real time. However, the timing was such that the proposal and approval of the study occurred after these policies were in place. Nonetheless, with this limitation in mind, care was taken to question students about their experiences before and since the advent of the pandemic to uncover potential effects through retrospective report. These recollections were carefully coded as occurring before COVID, during the quarantine period, or at the time of report.

Another limitation to consider is that there may have been inherent sampling bias in the data resulting from the limited pool of participants from which this study sampled. The decision to narrow the participant pool to a single social psychology class provided the advantage of interviewing students knowledgeable in the study concepts who were already well-prepared to speak to their understanding and experience of belonging from

previous class discussions and assignments. While this narrowed sampling aided the study's in-depth interview process, it may have excluded the views and experiences of students from other USC colleges and majors who were unlikely to elect a social psychology course as part of their studies. However, the particular course sampled is often taken by non-psychology students as evidenced by the range of majors reported by students in the study. Furthermore, the recruitment of students from a single social psychology course may have limited the participants' understanding of belonging to the concepts taught in the course. For example, the course material for this particular class focuses exclusively on social contexts of belonging and does not cover parasocial or nonsocial contexts as contributors to belonging. This may have biased students' responses toward social contexts when asked contextually open questions about their experiences of belonging. However, belonging as consisting of other-than-social contexts is a nascent area of research and is less likely to be taught in typical psychology courses, particularly those in which the social aspects of psychology are most prominent. Therefore, it is unlikely that any other sampling pool (i.e., university class or wider campus context) would have included students who were familiar with both the belonging concepts taught in traditional social psychology courses and the study concepts of parasocial and nonsocial belonging. A third sampling limitation of the current study is that purposive sampling was not undertaken to ensure inclusion of those from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, sexual and gender minority groups, and disability or other minority status, nor was the total sample size large enough to fully represent views from any of these groups. Despite the lack of intentional sampling, a diverse range of voices was included in the study as seen by the racial, religious, sexual, and gender

minority groups with which students self-identified. Nevertheless, the students interviewed for the study do not fully represent all college students attending the University of South Carolina and therefore the findings may not generalize to all other students on campus. Similarly, a final sampling limitation is that the current study focused solely on emerging adults attending college and did not include young adults not in college or people from across the lifespan. As a result, patterns of belonging and contextual factors may be configured differently for research participants at different ages. Future studies with children at different developmental stages and adults across the lifespan would be needed to confirm and test the generalizability of the findings presented here.

A final limitation is that the setting for the current study may limit the representativeness of the experiences described here for college students in other regions. States varied in their COVID response regarding public gatherings, mask mandates, reopening of commercial establishments, and in placing limits on public capacity. Colleges and universities also varied in their decisions to return to campus in fall 2020 and in the extent of in-person classes and extracurricular activities that were offered (Marsicano et al., 2020; Klinenberg & Startz, 2022). Situated in a politically conservative Southern region, South Carolina and its colleges and universities tended to adopt less stringent COVID policies compared to other regions of the country (Felson & Adamczyk, 2021). Therefore, the experiences described by students in the study and the effects of social isolation may differ from students in other areas. However, even given the possibility that students in this study were under relatively more relaxed social distancing policies, the effects of the pandemic on their sense of belonging across contexts were

clear. Replication of the study in other regions of the country where student experience may differ could determine whether similar findings exist outside of the regional context of this study.

### **Implications and Future Directions for Research**

Despite these limitations, the current study has several implications for belonging theory and research. As an initial exploration, these findings were considered a first look at the ways that sense of belonging is experienced within and across contexts, both in general and under the strain of disruption. Thus, the primary aims of this study were to propose a contextualized framework of belonging and generate hypotheses that can be further tested in quantitative studies.

#### ***Implications for Theory***

The findings presented here have implications for the current understanding of belonging theory. As an initial conceptualization of an emerging area of knowledge, this study expands existing belonging theory to propose a contextualized framework that integrates social and nonsocial contributors to overall sense of belonging and includes experientially nuanced characterizations of these contexts. Thus, the current study suggests that belonging is multiply constructed, inclusive of both social and nonsocial contexts, and variably experienced by context. The proposed contextual framework is built around categories of belonging contexts that have been shown here to be differentially experienced, including Interpersonal Contexts, Identity Contexts, Instrumental Contexts, Minor-Sociability Contexts, and Spatial Contexts. While specific categories have been proposed within this framework, they are considered neither



exhaustive nor invariable. As a nascent theory of the contextualized experience of belonging, more research is needed to test the proposed framework presented here. The following section presents hypotheses emerging from these findings that may offer important directions for future belongingness research.

### ***Emerging Hypotheses***

A central hypothesis generated from the current study is that experiences within nonsocial contexts contribute to overall sense of belonging. While evidence for this was found in the current study through qualitative means, future research could test the relationship between nonsocial experiences and overall sense of belonging quantitatively. Exploring and testing the mechanisms by which nonsocial contexts contribute to belonging represents an opportunity for further developments in belonging theory. Further, longitudinal designs offer a potentially fruitful avenue of investigation as the relative importance of nonsocial contexts may fluctuate over time depending on the availability and/or success of relationships within social contexts of belonging.

Another hypothesis generated from the current study is that experiences of belonging vary by context. If overall sense of belonging is multiply constructed and varied by context as suggested by the qualitative findings of this study, experiences of belonging should be delineated and tested individually. As this has been unexplored prior to this study, avenues of investigation into the discrete experiences of belonging are fully open for future research. The eight experiential aspects of belonging that emerged from these student interviews and other potential or related aspects could be studied quantitatively through measure development, factor analysis, or means testing. Because experience of belonging may be affected by personal identity, lived experience, or the

vagaries of circumstance, research with those having particular connections to disrupted or reconstructed belonging may be insightful.

A final hypothesis generated by this study is that when belonging is threatened or disrupted, the fundamental need for it will lead to reorganization of contributive contexts in order to recoup lost or decreased sense of belonging. Students' descriptions of their change in sense of belonging across contexts before and after the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic suggested that they managed the disruption to belonging by shifting their focus to more available contexts. Because student descriptions of these shifts were retrospective and captured cross-sectionally, longitudinal investigations would be of particular benefit to this area of research. Commonplace and predictable disruptions to belonging that could present opportunities for longitudinal investigation include life transitions like moving away for college, starting a new job or retiring from one's career, entering or leaving the justice system, or emigrating from one's country of origin.

### ***Implications for Clinical Settings***

In addition to implications for theory development and to providing avenues for future research, the findings presented here have important implications for clinical work. The students in the current study were generally healthy young adults with relatively normative psychosocial functioning. Despite these strengths, the social challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic had major impacts on students' sense of belonging. At the time of interview, students were a year into the pandemic and its sustained social challenges. Despite this, they were still in the process of reconstructing their sense of belonging and universally endorsed a lessened sense of belonging overall. It is likely that these resilient, relatively healthy, and normatively functioning young

adults will go on to fully rebuild their sense of belonging across contexts and flourish in their lives despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic. However, those challenged by serious mental illness or with deficits in psychosocial functioning may find even non-pandemic disruptions to belonging to be detrimental to mental health. By having a contextual understanding of belonging, clinicians could help clients construct or reconstruct a sense of belonging by supporting efforts in multiple contexts, including nonsocial and distally social contexts. Connecting with Leary's (2008) sociometer theory that suggests self-esteem is an internal barometer of belonging, there could be a kindling effect to building a sense of belonging wherein small sparks of belonging across multiple contexts lead to a fledgling sense of belonging and increasing self-esteem, which could be fostered by targeted clinical work. Indeed, a common focus of individual therapy is dissatisfaction with or longing for social relationships. This is especially true of clients for whom episodes of serious mental illness have strained or damaged existing relationships. For people challenged by serious mental illness, family relationships often predominate their social network (Macdonald, Hayes, & Baglioni, 2000; Stain et al., 2012) because they tend to have fewer friends and confidants compared to the general population (Gayer-Anderson & Morgan, 2012) and be romantically partnered less or have relationships characterized by lower intimacy and fewer long-term commitments (Perry & Wright, 2006) than those without these challenges. Clinical work that supports the development of close interpersonal relationships can and should remain a central focus for clients who struggle with feeling a sense of belonging. Alongside this work, encouragement or support for nonsocial and distally social contexts could be an

additional strategy for building a sense of belonging and the resultant self-esteem that may foster stronger interpersonal connections in other contexts.

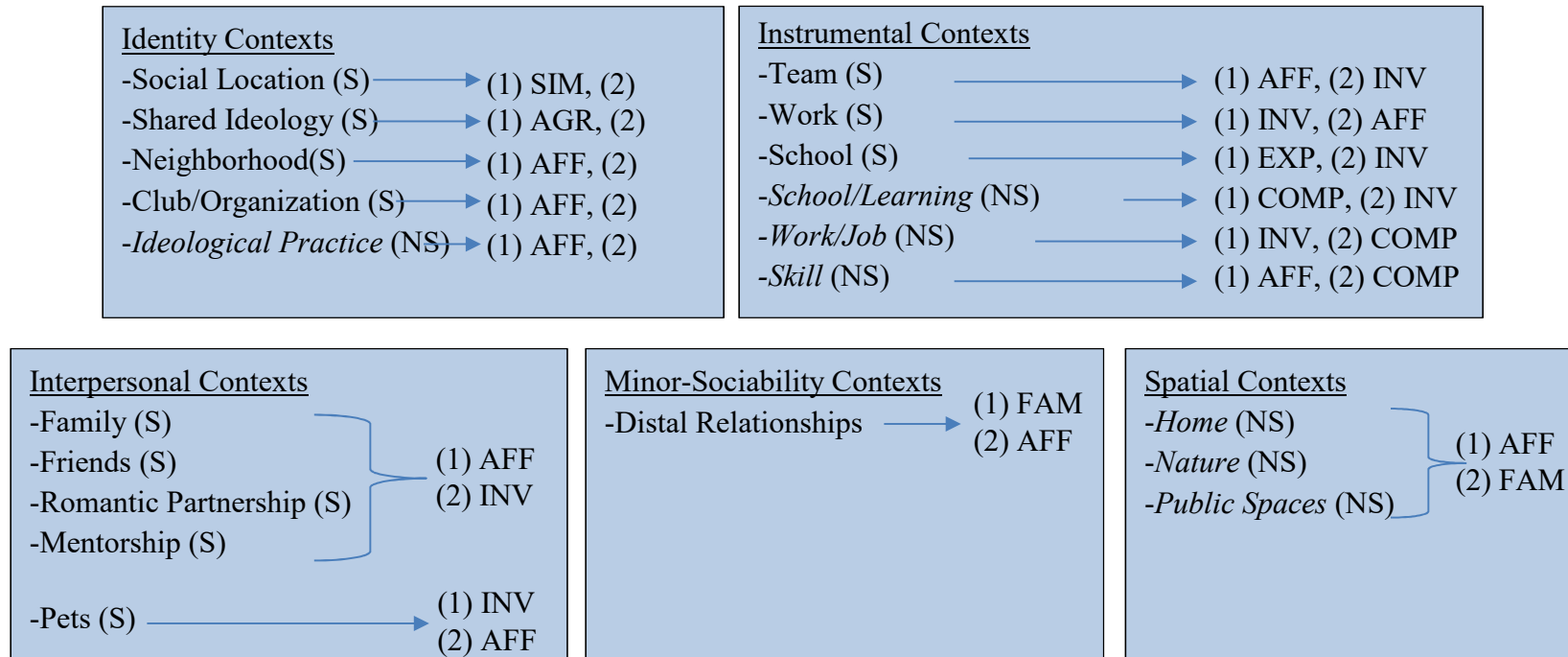
## **Conclusion**

In summary, this work provides a more nuanced understanding of belonging than current theory implies and proposes a contextualized framework for future research to follow. These findings illustrate the contextual qualities and varying experience of belonging for college students. They highlight the contributions of social and nonsocial contexts to overall sense of belonging and reveal discrete aspects of the belonging experience that vary across contexts. Findings also underscore the role of context in the maintenance and reconstruction of sense of belonging following disruption. As a first look at the early impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on college students' sense of belonging, this study describes several phenomena that followed major disruption to students' sense of belonging, including contextual shifts, distillation of belonging, and the creative, multiply contextual processes that characterized students' reconstruction of belonging. Although it is hoped that there is never another disruptive event of the magnitude and widespread reach of the COVID-19 pandemic, prosaic disruptions to belonging are unfortunately commonplace experiences throughout life. While this work was grounded in the unique experience of disrupted belonging for college students during a global pandemic, it carries implications for theory and research on the maintenance and reconstruction of belonging across lifespan and circumstance.

Table 4.1 Contextual framework for belonging merging social and nonsocial contexts

<b>Interpersonal Contexts</b>	<b>Instrumental Contexts</b>	<b>Identity/Community Contexts</b>	<b>Spatial Contexts</b>	<b>Minor-Sociability Context</b>
Family	Team: Teammates	Social Location	<i>Home</i>	Distal Relationship
Friends	Work: Co-workers	Shared Ideology	<i>Nature</i>	
Romantic Partnership	School: Classmates	Neighborhood	<i>Public Space</i>	
Mentorship	<i>Achievement</i>	Club/organization		
Pets	- <i>School: Learning</i>	<i>Ideological Practice</i>		
	- <i>Work: Job/Career</i>			
	- <i>Skill</i>			

Note: *Italicized contexts* represent nonsocial contexts. Social contexts are nonitalicized.



Note: Abbreviations for experience codes as follows. Affective Felt Sense (AFF), Valued Involvement (INV), Similarity (SIM), Fit (FIT), Shared Experience (EXP), Competency (COMP), Ideological Agreement (AGR), Familiarity (FAM)

Figure 4.1.1 Contextual framework for belonging with paired contexts and salient experiences

## CHAPTER 5

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## APPENDIX A:

### RESEARCH PARTICIPATION DEMOGRAPHIC FORM

Please fill out the following basic information form. Do not put your name or identifying information on this form. Be sure that your Participant ID is on this form. If you do not know your Participant ID, email [lgleason@email.sc.edu](mailto:lgleason@email.sc.edu)

1. My Participant ID \_\_\_\_\_
2. My Age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. I identify my gender as:
  - Female
  - Male
  - Trans female/trans woman
  - Trans male/trans man
  - Genderqueer/gender non-conforming
  - Different identity (please state): \_\_\_\_\_
  - Prefer not to answer
4. I identify my ethnicity as (select all that apply):
  - Asian
  - Black/African American
  - Caucasian
  - Hispanic/Latinx
  - Native American
  - Pacific Islander
  - Middle Eastern/North African
  - Prefer not to answer
  - Different ethnicity/race (please state): \_\_\_\_\_
5. I consider myself to be:
  - Straight (heterosexual)
  - Gay
  - Lesbian
  - Bisexual/pansexual/fluid
  - Asexual/aromantic
  - Prefer not to say
  - Different identity (please state): \_\_\_\_\_
6. My year in school is:
  - Freshman
  - Sophomore
  - Junior
  - Senior
7. My major is: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B:

### SENSE OF BELONGING QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW (SBQI)

#### Defining and orienting questions

1. How would you define belonging?
2. What do you think it means “to belong”?
3. What does belonging feel like?
4. What do you think it means to feel a sense of belonging?
5. Do you think feeling a sense of belonging is important? How so?

#### Personal experiences questions

*Note: If any answers are “No”, alter main question and context prompt stems to “Do you wish...?”*

6. Do you feel a sense of belonging these days?
  - Can you tell me more about that?
    - What is it like for you to feel a sense of belonging?
7. Tell me about the times you feel a sense of belonging and other people are directly involved. In other words, times when people are present with you either physically or perhaps in some online way.
  - (If nonsocial contexts are mentioned, reorient to the social context).
  - Based on content, follow up with open-context prompts.
    - Prompts: [...] you feel a sense of belonging when people are involved?
      - When do [...]? Any other times?
      - Where are you when [...]? Where else?
      - What is going on when [...]? What else?
      - What are you doing when you [...]? What else?
      - Who do you feel a sense of belonging with? Who else?
8. Next, I am going to ask you about times you feel a sense of belonging and other people are NOT directly involved.
  - (If social contexts are mentioned, reorient to the nonsocial context)
  - Based on content, follow up with open-context prompts.
    - Prompts: [...] you feel a sense of belonging when people are NOT involved?
      - When do [...]? Any other times?
      - Where are you when [...]? Where else?
      - What is going on when [...]? What else?
      - What are you doing when [...]? What else?
      - What do you feel a sense of belonging around?



## APPENDIX C:

### CONTEXTS OF BELONGING QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW (CBQI)

I would like to know more about the people with whom you feel a sense of belonging.

- For example, [...] Do you feel a sense of belonging with [...]?
- What is it about [...] that *makes/does not make* you feel a sense of belonging?"
- Has anything about your sense of belonging with [...]changed since COVID?
  - ...family?
  - ...friends?
  - ...romantic partner?
  - ...neighbors?
  - ...group or club members?
  - ...people you see occasionally but do not know well (cashiers, servers, librarians)?
  - ...physicians, therapists, other helpers?
  - ...trainers, coaches, teachers?
  - ...people with shared ideological/spiritual/religious beliefs?
  - ...people with a similar gender/background/ethnicity or other similarity to you?
  - ...any other people?
  - ...when you are around people that you do not know?

I would like to know more about the times, places, and activities that you feel a sense of belonging and people are NOT involved.

- For example, [...] Do you feel a sense of belonging with [...]?
- What is it about [...] that *makes/does not make* you feel a sense of belonging?"
- Has anything about your sense of belonging with [...]changed since COVID?
  - ...at home?
  - ...in nature?
  - ...in certain public spaces?
  - ...with animals or pets?
  - ...when engaged in an ideological/spiritual/religious activity?
  - ...at work or while doing your job?
  - ...at school or while engaged in learning?
  - ...when playing a sport or doing something athletic?
  - ...when playing a game?
  - ...when using a skill?
  - ...any other time people are not involved?

APPENDIX D:  
COVID-19 SENSE OF BELONGING QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW  
(SBQI-COVID)

Thinking about your sense of belonging now and before COVID:

1. What (if anything) has changed about feeling a sense of belonging since COVID?
  - Can you tell me more about that?
  - How would you describe the change?
  - Have you felt a greater sense of belonging since COVID? How so?
  - Have you felt less of a sense of belonging since COVID? How so?
  - Is it more difficult to feel a sense of belonging now? How so?
  - Is it easier to feel a sense of belonging now? How so?
2. How have the ways you feel a sense of belonging changed since COVID?
  - Are any of the ways you feel a sense of belonging new since COVID?
    - Can you tell me more about that?
      - Which ways are new?
    - Were there ways you used to feel a sense of belonging before COVID, that you don't feel anymore?
      - Can you tell me more about that?
        - Which ways of belonging have gone away since COVID?
3. What are some things you do on purpose to feel a sense of belonging since COVID?
  - Can you tell me more about that?
    - How well do those things work for you?
    - Did you do those things before COVID?
    - Will you keep doing those things after COVID?
4. How has your experience of belonging with people changed since COVID?
  - Can you tell me more about that?
    - What is your experience of belonging [...] like now?
    - What was it like before?
5. How about without people – Since COVID, how has your experience of belonging changed when other people are NOT involved?
  - Can you tell me more about that?
    - What is your experience of belonging [...] like now?
    - What was it like before?

## APPENDIX E:

### RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

Please fill out the following basic information form. Do not put your name on this form. Be sure to put your Participant ID and Date of Birth. If you do not know your Participant ID, email [lgleason@email.sc.edu](mailto:lgleason@email.sc.edu)

1. Participant ID \_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you have a job or volunteer position where you work or contribute time/effort/skill?
  - Yes
  - No
  - No, but I would like to have one.
3. Are you a member of the military or involved in a college ROTC program?
  - Yes – military
  - Yes – ROTC
  - No – neither
  - No, but I would like to join the military or ROTC program.
4. Do you regularly play, train for or engage in a sport, athletic pursuit or game (competitive or non-competitive)?
  - Yes
  - No
  - No, but I would like to do this.
5. Do you have a spouse or romantic partner?
  - Yes
  - No
  - No, but I would like to have this.
6. Is there at least one person in your life that you consider to be your friend (someone other than family members or romantic partners)?
  - Yes
  - No
  - No, but I would like to have this.

7. Are you a member of a social group, club, or organization where socializing with other members is a common activity?
- Yes
  - No
  - No, but I would like to do this.
8. Please select which of the following describes your current living situation?
- Apartment
  - College dorm
  - Single family home (in a neighborhood)
  - Multi-family home (e.g., duplex, triplex)
  - Communal living home with shared space (e.g., fraternity/sorority house, group home)
  - Homeless – temporarily sheltered or “couch surfing”
  - Homeless – unsheltered or living “on the street”
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
9. Do you intentionally seek out or spend time in “nature” or other outdoor spaces (e.g., parks, trails, lakes/ocean)?
- Yes
  - No
  - No, but I used to do this before COVID-19.
  - No, but I would like to do this.
10. Do you intentionally seek out or spend time in “public” spaces by yourself (e.g., libraries, cafés, pubs)?
- Yes
  - No
  - No, but I used to do this before COVID-19.
  - No, but I would like to do this.
11. Do you have a belief system, spiritual tradition or religion that you find meaningful?
- Yes
  - No
  - No, but I would like to have this.
12. Do you identify as a member of an underrepresented or minority group (e.g., by race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability or other status)?
- No
  - Yes (please indicate the group(s) with which you identify)

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## APPENDIX F:

### SENSE OF BELONGING INSTRUMENT (SOBI-P)

Instructions: *Here are some statements with which you may or may not agree. Using the key listed below, circle option that most closely reflects your feelings about each statement.*

1. I often wonder if there is any place on earth where I really fit in.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree
2. I am just not sure if I fit in with my friends.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree
3. I would describe myself as a misfit in most social situations.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree
4. I generally feel that people accept me.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree
5. I feel like a piece of a jig-saw puzzle that doesn't fit into the puzzle.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree
6. I would like to make a difference to people or things around me, but I don't feel that what I have to offer is valued.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree
7. I feel like an outsider in most situations.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree
8. I am troubled by feeling like I have no place in this world.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree
9. I could disappear for days and it wouldn't matter to my family.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree
10. In general, I don't feel a part of the mainstream society.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree
11. I feel like I observe life rather than participate in it.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree
12. If I died tomorrow, very few people would come to my funeral.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree
13. I feel like a square peg trying to fit into a round hole.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree
14. I don't feel that there is any place where I really fit into this world.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree
15. I am uncomfortable that my background and experiences are so different from those who are usually around me.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree
16. I could not see or call my friends for days and it wouldn't matter to them.  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree

17. I feel left out of things.

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree

18. I am not valued by or important to my friends.

Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Agree    Strongly Agree

APPENDIX G:  
STUDENT RESEARCH CONSENT LETTER

Dear Prospective Research Participant,

My name is LaDonna Gleason. I am a graduate student in the Psychology Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in Clinical-Community Psychology, and I would like to invite you to participate.

I am studying the experience of belonging and the ways in which sense of belonging is created and maintained. If you decided to participate, you will be asked to complete some surveys and meet with me virtually for an audio interview about your thoughts and experiences related to belonging.

**Audio Interview** – For the interview portion of the study, you will be asked questions about what belonging means to you and the ways in which you have or have not experienced sense of belonging. You may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. The audio-only meeting will take place on a virtual platform (e.g., Microsoft Teams) with video disabled, and will last about 90 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded so that I can accurately transcribe what is discussed. The recordings will be reviewed by members of the research team and destroyed upon completion of the study.

**Questionnaires** – For the survey part of the study, you will be asked to fill out questionnaires about belonging, relationships, your internal experiences around others (e.g., thoughts and feelings), and some general, non-identifying information about you (e.g., your age, gender, race/ethnicity).

**Confidentiality** – Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location at the University of South Carolina. Your name and contact information (e.g., email address) will only be collected in order to compensate you for your participation. Your interview recording, any transcripts of the recordings, and your answers to the survey questions will be saved with a non-identifying participant ID and will not include your name or any identifying information about you. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed.

**Compensation** – You will receive \$40 for participating in the study.

More Information – We will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me (863-288-0897, [lgleason@email.sc.edu](mailto:lgleason@email.sc.edu)) or my faculty advisor, Dr. Bret Kloos (803-777-2704, [kloos@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:kloos@mailbox.sc.edu)).

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please contact me by email or at the number listed below to discuss participating.

With kind regards,

LaDonna Gleason  
863-288-0897  
[lgleason@email.sc.edu](mailto:lgleason@email.sc.edu)



APPENDIX H:

TABLE H.1 CODED THEMES FOR STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF BELONGING

Theme	Sub-Theme	Code	Quotes [Participant, Timestamp]
1. Understood Definition of Belonging	1.1 Valued involvement (13/21)	1.1.1 Accepted (9/21)	1.1.1.1 Not feeling otherwise ostracized. I think there's a difference between being a part of a group and the group actively accepting you and making you feel a part of it in contrast to where you are part of a group, but it's more passive on your end and you are just more like existing, rather than having a relationship with that group. [COB104, 00:00:08]
			1.1.1.2 I think that to belong means that you are accepted by your peers [COB107, 00:01:17]
			1.1.1.3 being able to be myself around the people that I'm surrounded by [COB108, 00:0:19]
			1.1.1.4 I would probably define it as feeling like I'm accepted where I am by the people [COB110, 00:00:16]
			1.1.1.5 To belong is feeling like you are accepted by that community, like those people accept you as part of their group. [COB112, 00:05:08]
			1.1.1.6 (1) I would define it as just a sense of like being completely comfortable in who you are and just like being surrounded by people who won't judge you, won't do anything to bring down your happiness and where you just feel like yourself, I guess. [COB121, 00:05:59]
			1.1.1.6 (2) Knowing that the people you're surrounded by accept you for who you are [COB121, 00:06:26]

			<p>1.1.1.7 I probably would have to define it as just like being accepted by other people. I feel like there's also a lot to say about yourself belonging and like feeling like you belong in a group with other people. I guess if I had to say it, it would really just be like feeling that acceptance. [COB115, 00:05:32]</p>
			<p>1.1.1.8 Feeling comfortable to express yourself [COB118, 00:00:21]</p>
			<p>1.1.1.9 I think just to be accepted for who you are truly and for them to not judge you on things that you do. [COB120, 00:00:42]</p>
		1.1.2 Needed (5/21)	<p>1.1.2.1 I think of it as my relationship with my society as a whole, and my close personal circles, and feeling like I'm contributing something, but also like being poured into, I'm meeting people's needs, but also they're meeting mine and just having a strong relationship with other people. [COB111, 00:00:17]</p>
			<p>1.1.2.2 "I feel like belonging can be your sense of purpose and meaning in your own life with yourself but also in others as well [...] For me, I had sports...that allowed me to join different groups of people and communities - that gave me a purpose. At the same time, being a part of those groups and communities, I had an impact on other people's lives." [COB113, 00:03:34]</p>
			<p>1.1.2.3 For me, when I feel like I belong, I feel like I'm able to give something and I'm able to be productive, and just add to whatever I'm in. [COB114, 00:01:03]</p>
			<p>1.1.2.4 (1) Feeling like you contribute to a group. [COB115, 00:05:32]  1.1.2.4 (2) I think to belong would be just like you give more or you give the same amount to a group as you take. And so, I feel like belonging would be making sure that or feeling like you give just as much to your group of friends or coworkers or colleagues or whoever as like you were taking from them, and it's like an equal trade off that you guys are both, like, benefiting from. [COB115, 00:06:19]</p>

		1.1.2.5 Feeling [...] like you have a purpose. [COB119, 00:05:18]
	1.1.3 Valued (2/21)	1.1.3.1 Feeling [...] wanted [COB119, 00:05:18] 1.1.3.2 where you feel welcome and it feels warm to be there [COB120, 00:00:10]
1.2 Fit (14/21)	1.2.1 Fitting in (7/21)	1.2.1.1 To belong, I guess, in short, is to fit in, but to dive deeper into that, to belong. It's sort of like to line up. I feel like you line up with the beliefs of others and you have like a connection with these certain people and like a mutual understanding that you're all a part of this group. [COB102, 00:04:08] 1.2.1.2 that people see you as, or at least you perceive that people see you as having, I don't want to say a right to be there, but that you-- I guess, fit in there [COB107, 00:01:17] 1.2.1.3 I would say belonging is having a sense of wellbeing with where you are, but it also is very linked to social aspects, too. It's not just health well-being but also more feeling you fit in with the people around you as well. [COB109, 00:00:09] 1.2.1.4 I would define belonging as feeling as though you fit in with a friend group or a community. [COB112, 00:04:37] 1.2.1.5 For me, I think belonging looks more like where you fit in to-- I kind of think it as a machine, so we're all different cogs and where you fit in, in that, not so much being the same as everybody else, but just using your individuality to fit in with other people [...] just knowing what your place is and where your strong suits are. [COB114, 00:00:16] 1.2.1.6 That you are supposed to be there and you fit in there. [COB115, 00:05:32] 1.2.1.7 If you're in an organization or clubs, sports, anything like that, and feeling comfortable, feeling like you fit in, you can talk to people easily, make friends, stuff like that. [COB116, 00:00:24]
	1.2.2 Part of/in place (9/21)	1.2.2.1 when you belong, you don't feel out of place, you know, in a situation or with certain people. [COB101, 00:06:04]

		1.2.2.2 being a part of a group of people [COB102, 00:03:47]
		1.2.2.3 I would define belonging as being a part of a group, feeling that you are a part of a group. [COB104, 00:00:08]
		1.2.2.4 I think belonging just means that you feel you're where you need to be. You don't necessarily have to fit into the group or the category or the place that you're at or in, at that moment, you just are, you're just a part of it, and you can feel that you're an equal part of it. [COB105, 00:01:12]
		1.2.2.5 being at peace with where you are in your life and the circumstances that have led you there and everything coming together for where you are in this moment [COB111, 00:00:55]
		1.2.2.6 You feel that you are a part of a community. [COB112, 00:04:37]
		1.2.2.7 I would say having a sense of community and I guess that can be related back to having a group of people you belong to. I don't necessarily think that just has to be about other people like a group you're in. I think that can just be with yourself as well. Do you feel like you have a place in the world? [COB113, 00:03:34]
		1.2.2.8 (1) It's feeling a part of a community [COB119, 00:05:18]
		1.2.2.8 (2) To belong, I would say, is to have a place [COB119, 00:05:45]
		1.2.2.9 I think I would define it as having a place [COB120, 00:00:10]
	1.2.3 Relating to others (3/21)	1.2.3.1 I would define belonging as relating to a group of people [COB102, 00:03:47]
		1.2.3.2 I think that in order to feel you really belong, you have to see people that look like you and people that think like you. In cases where maybe you don't see people that look like that, maybe you don't feel like you belong automatically, which is why I think diversity and inclusion is really important. [COB107, 00:00:02]
		1.2.3.3 (1) Whether you have a community you identify with, either that be based on ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, anything

		<p>like that, or, in general, just groups. [COB116, 00:00:24]</p> <p>1.2.3.3 (2) In a similar sense of, to belong is that you almost have similar characteristics or something in common so that you belong with that group of people. [COB116, 00:01:07]</p>
1.3 Affective Indicators of Belonging (15/21)	1.3.1 Comfort (11/21)	1.3.1.1 You feel comfortable with them [COB101, 00:06:04]
		1.3.1.2 (1) I think that belonging is a sense of comfort [...] feeling comfortable around a group of people [COB106, 00:00:08]
		1.3.1.2 (2) just feeling comfortable in a space with people that you're comfortable talking to [COB106, 00:00:33]
		1.3.1.3 I think that I would define belonging as having a sense of being really comfortable, like truly, actually comfortable in whatever setting you're in, whether that's professional or social or academic. [COB107, 00:00:02]
		1.3.1.4 (1) I would say belonging for me would be having people around me that know me well and I feel as though I know them well, and that I have a sense of comfort around [COB108, 00:00:19]
		1.3.1.4 (2) I think to belong means that you're comfortable [COB108, 00:00:50]
		1.3.1.5 I would probably define it as feeling like [...] I'm comfortable in the place [COB110, 00:00:16]
		1.3.1.6 Feeling comfortable. [COB115, 00:05:32]
		1.3.1.7 (1) Really, belonging is that sense for me of feeling comfortable where you're at [COB116, 00:00:24]
		1.3.1.7 (2) To belong would be just that sense of being comfortable [COB116, 00:01:07]
		1.3.1.8 To belong, that would be more based on how comfortable I am in a relationship [...] really everything around just being comfortable, 100% comfortable with a person. [COB117, 00:02:03]
		1.3.1.9 to belong means that you feel [...] comfortable with the people you're around. [COB118, 00:00:57]
		1.3.1.10 To belong, I would say, is [...] just

			generally speaking, you feel comfortable in that space. [COB119, 00:05:45]
			1.3.1.11 To belong, I would say would be just having that sense of comfort [COB121, 00:06:26]
	1.3.2 Calm (3/21)	1.3.2.1	For me, specifically, I know I have social anxiety, being in a large group of people, I'm consistently and constantly in my head thinking about what I just said, what I just did, how does that fit the whole group dynamic, and feeling belonging is subsiding that for me. Whenever that social anxiety has subsided, that's when I know, I feel I'm belonging in a group that I'm in. [COB105, 00:00:14]
		1.3.2.2	To belong would be [...] not feeling a lot of anxiety towards the people you're around and things of that nature. [COB116, 00:01:07]
		1.3.2.3	Just feeling normal, not stressed out or anything. To be at peace to be wherever and with whoever it is. [COB120, 00:00:10]
	1.3.3 Openness to others (3/21)	1.3.3.1	you're willing to share your experiences with them. [COB101, 00:06:04]
		1.3.3.2 (1)	being able to openly communicate with other people about things that you're interested in [COB106, 00:00:08]
		1.3.3.2 (2)	feeling that you have common interests, and feeling that you're able to talk about them openly [COB106, 00:00:33]
		1.3.3.3	If I can talk about my troubles, my doubts, my goals, that's whenever I really feel like I belong. [COB117, 00:02:03]
	1.3.4 Security (2/21)	1.3.4.1	You don't have to question the way you're acting around other people and you feel secure, I think. Yes, security I think is a good word. [COB108, 00:00:50]
		1.3.4.2	Belonging for me is feeling safe in an environment [COB118, 00:00:21]

APPENDIX I:

TABLE I.1 CODED THEMES FOR STUDENTS' FELT SENSE OF BELONGING

Theme	Sub-Theme	Code	Quotes [Participant, Timestamp]
2. Felt Sense of Belonging	2.1 Valued involvement (13/21)	2.1.1 Accepted (8/21)	2.1.1.1 When I think of times where I've felt like without a doubt I'm experiencing belonging, like I belong here, it's always with people who make me feel safe and secure to be myself and just 100% authentic interactions [COB111, 00:01:28]
			2.1.1.2 Not have to worry about doing something or being weird or not being myself. [COB108, 00:02:37]
			2.1.1.3 I feel like belonging, feels [...] like you're not going to be ostracized in any way [COB112, 00:00:46]
			2.1.1.4 that is the feeling of acceptance [COB103, 00:05:30]
			2.1.1.5 (1) Belonging is being able to be, like, unapologetically yourself and like not trying to impress other people or trying to fit into the status quo of the group, but like being able to be who you truly are without judgment or being criticized by others. [COB115, 00:06:54] 2.1.1.5 (2) I think sense of belonging feels like not having to really think before you speak or think before you act or just knowing that you're completely comfortable and like you don't have to change yourself because you just feel the sense of being at ease and being like, I don't have to try to impress anyone that I'm around because they accept me exactly for who and how I am. [COB115, 00:07:31]
			2.1.1.6 Being able to be yourself is a really important one for me and my sense of belonging in different groups, and not feeling like I have to change myself towards the people I'm around [COB116, 00:02:10]

			2.1.1.7 Just knowing that [...] you have people that you can go to where you feel like you can be 100% yourself. [COB120, 00:01:33]
			2.1.1.8 knowing that you can completely and 100 percent be yourself around the people you're surrounded by. [COB121, 00:06:44]
	2.1.2 Needed (2/21)	2.1.2.1	2.1.2.1 You have a purpose and you're contributing in a way [COB106, 00:01:16]
		2.1.2.2	2.1.2.2 feeling purposeful [COB114, 00:02:05]
	2.1.3 Valued (6/21)	2.1.3.1	2.1.3.1 To feel a sense of belonging would be to feel that you're where you're supposed to be, that you're wanted there [...] feeling like you're in a place where you need to be and that you're wanted to be [COB103, 00:01:45]
		2.1.3.2	2.1.3.2 people value what you have to say [COB106, 00:01:16]
		2.1.3.3 (1)	2.1.3.3 (1) makes you feel like people like you for who you are [COB110, 00:01:34]
		2.1.3.3 (2)	2.1.3.3 (2) I feel like it comes a lot from the atmosphere I'm in. You could just read it. I feel like I read a lot through people's faces and emotions and the way they talk and their body language and things like that. If they're not receptive to my conversation and stuff, I feel like I don't belong. You know what I mean? [COB110, 00:02:00]
		2.1.3.4	2.1.3.4 feeling like you're liked by the people in your group [COB112, 00:05:30]
		2.1.3.5	2.1.3.5 It makes me feel welcomed. [COB117, 00:03:45]
		2.1.3.6	2.1.3.6 Belonging feels like being wanted [COB119, 00:06:26]
	2.2 Fit (4/21)	2.2.1 Fitting in (1/21)	2.2.1.1 I feel like belonging, feels you fit in [COB112, 00:05:30]
		2.2.2 Part of/in place (3/21)	2.2.2.1 I guess I can maybe speak for my experience of the opposite of feeling a sense of belonging. In high school I was a part of this group that I just would usually just sit in during lunch. I wouldn't really participate in their group activities, so I didn't really have a sense of belonging. I was in the group, but I was not part of the group. I guess that's how I would feel. I would describe belonging as feeling like you have a real sense of belonging in the group. Like you are really part of it.



			[COB104, 00:02:26]
			2.2.2.2 someone who's experiencing a sense of belonging feels like they're in the right place for them [COB111, 00:02:26]
			2.2.2.3 I might say, my best way to answer that would be to give you the scenario of when you don't belong, and rather to say that it's the opposite which would be in a scenario or a situation where you don't feel like you belong. It feels like you're sitting on the sidelines, like life is moving around you [COB118, 00:02:25]
2.3 Affective Felt Sense of Belonging (20/21)	2.3.1 Comfort (14/21)	2.3.1.1	Oh, man, I'd say definitely comforting. [COB101, 00:06:31]
		2.3.1.2	I guess that's related to the feelings of [...] comfort. [COB102, 00:04:35]
		2.3.1.3 (1)	I think belonging feels comfortable and secure. I guess to easier answer it, I feel like the feeling of not belonging is something that eats away at you and maybe your self-confidence or your ability to truly be comfortable or to be comfortable speaking or asking questions or even just performing your tasks. [COB107, 00:02:01]
		2.3.1.3 (2)	If you actually truly felt you belonged, you might notice it in passing and be like, "Oh, I'm really comfortable here," but in general, I don't think that you would really give it that much thought because it would be so natural that you wouldn't really notice it. [COB107, 00:02:43]
		2.3.1.4	I think comfortability probably, it almost is something that you don't have to think about, you-- I think you would probably know that you don't belong somewhere more than when you're realizing that you are belonging, if that makes sense, because it's so natural that you don't even have to think about it. [COB108, 00:01:35]
		2.3.1.5	Like home. I don't like to feel like I don't belong because it makes me uncomfortable. [COB110, 00:01:18]
		2.3.1.6	It's definitely a comfortable and a positive experience, I would say. [COB111, 00:01:28]
		2.3.1.7 (1)	I would say it feels like a huge comfort, like a relief [...] like it's just an

		<p>overarching sense of comfort. [COB113, 00:10:17]</p> <p>2.3.1.7 (2) I think there's a sense of understanding and comfort, knowing that there are these people that understand you to your core. [COB113, 00:19:07]</p>
		<p>2.3.1.8 Belonging feels really comfortable. I feel like when you belong, you don't really have to skew outside of your comfort zone. Just being comfortable. I feel like when we all know that we belong in a situation or a friend group or a relationship, there's no questioning of it. You're just aware and comfortable where you're at. [COB114, 00:01:33]</p>
		<p>2.3.1.9 (1) I feel like belonging feels comfortable [COB115, 00:06:54]</p> <p>2.3.1.9 (2) just knowing that you're completely comfortable [COB115, 00:07:31]</p>
		<p>2.3.1.10 It feels like you've known each other forever, and those sorts of things. That feeling is just, again, like being comfortable. [COB116, 00:02:10]</p>
		<p>2.3.1.11 Just feeling [...] comfortable. [COB117, 00:03:45]</p>
		<p>2.3.1.12 (1) Belonging to me feels like it feels comfortable. [COB118, 00:01:41]</p> <p>2.3.1.12 (2) in a scenario or a situation where you don't feel like you belong [...] you're uncomfortable. [COB118, 00:02:25]</p>
		<p>2.3.1.13 It's comfortability. [COB119, 00:06:11]</p>
		<p>2.3.1.14 I would say it feels like [...] that sense of comfort [COB121, 00:06:44]</p>
	2.3.2 Positive Emotion (9/21)	<p>2.3.2.1 Definitely like a very positive, happy feeling. [COB101, 00:06:31]</p>
		<p>2.3.2.2 I guess that's related to the feelings of like happiness [COB102, 00:04:35]</p>
		<p>2.3.2.3 Like a warm, fuzzy feeling. [COB104, 00:01:32]</p>
		<p>2.3.2.4 (1) I would say, I guess euphoric. Just in between euphoria and just happiness. It's definitely a feeling of joy [COB105, 00:01:52]</p> <p>2.3.2.4 (2) For me, the only way that I can really explain it in a personal sense, for me, belonging is a feeling of happiness. [COB105, 00:02:37]</p>

			2.3.2.5 I would probably tie it to happiness if that's fair? [...] I would noticeably be happy [COB108, 00:02:37]
			2.3.2.6 It's definitely a good feeling to have it, and you can most certainly tell when you lack it when you feel like you don't belong and you lack that sense of belonging. It's a good feeling, especially when you feel like you belong with people that you care about that are important to you [COB109, 00:01:14]
			2.3.2.7 belonging makes me feel warm [...] You could call it the warm fuzzies [COB117, 00:03:45]
			2.3.2.8 I think it feels very warm and positive [COB120, 00:01:08]
			2.3.2.9 I would say it feels like happiness and joy [COB121, 00:06:44]
		2.3.3 Calm (8/21)	2.3.3.1 A lack of you know, stress or anything like that, I'd say. [COB101, 00:06:31]
			2.3.3.2 That you are content in your situation because I feel like if you don't belong, then one would try to rectify that, find somewhere that they do belong, even if it's hard. [COB109, 00:02:27]
			2.3.3.3 I guess, just like relaxing, knowing that whatever I go through, I have people [COB113, 00:10:17]
			2.3.3.4 Probably just relief [COB114, 00:02:05]
			2.3.3.5 you just feel the sense of being at ease [COB115, 00:07:31]
			2.3.3.6 just feeling at ease [COB117, 00:03:45]
			2.3.3.7 in a scenario or a situation where you don't feel like you belong [...] you're uneasy, which I think can be particularly troublesome in situations where you would expect to belong. [COB118, 00:02:25]
			2.3.3.8 Belonging feels like being [...] at peace with where you're at. [COB119, 00:06:26]
		2.3.5 Security (4/21)	2.3.5.1 I think that it feels safe, maybe would be a good word to use. [COB106, 00:00:59]
			2.3.5.2 When I think of times where I've felt like without a doubt I'm experiencing belonging, like I belong here, it's always with people who make me feel safe and secure [...] there's some vulnerability and some trust there

			<p>[COB111, 00:01:28]</p> <p>2.3.5.3 [not] belonging to me feels like [...] an unsafe feeling in areas where you don't feel a sense of belonging [...] Relating to my own life and experiences, a lot of family situations where I don't feel like I have that sense of belonging. It can feel very unsettling to be in a situation where you think you should belong and you don't. The meaning of a sense of belonging is essentially gratifying and satisfying that need that's not met in other situations. [COB118, 00:02:25]</p> <p>2.3.5.4 you feel safe [COB120, 00:01:08]</p>
		<p>2.3.6 Understood (1/21)</p>	<p>2.3.6.1 I guess a sense of belonging feels like I'm understood. I have people that I don't have to explain myself to [...] We've had these shared experiences that create history and create a level of understanding that builds and creates a sense of belonging that I feel like is very rare. I feel like I'm having that with someone else when I'm not feeling the need to have to catch up when I go and talk to them or explain myself. I guess that's how I would feel for a sense of belonging. It's just like a base-level understanding of one another. [COB113, 00:19:07]</p>

APPENDIX J:

TABLE J.1 CODED THEMES FOR STUDENTS’  
CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF BELONGING

Theme	Sub-theme	Code	Example Quotes [Participant, Timestamp]
3. Importance of Belonging	3.1 Essential to Wellbeing (13/21)	3.1.1 Emotional Wellbeing (6/21)	3.1.1.1 If you are part of the group and you don't feel that it's almost pointless and also just draining. At some point, if you are just there and you're just existing, but you are not doing anything with that group or they're not making you feel like you belong and you guys just have this non-existent relationship, I think it's pointless. Honestly, I would say it's just better to be alone than to be part of a group and feel alone. That's worse. [COB104, 00:03:24]
			3.1.1.2 I think that without it, your life would be sad and miserable. [COB121, 00:08:16]
			3.1.1.3 I'd say just because there have been situations in which I don't feel as though I belong and that is, I think, directly tied to my happiness. Obviously, if I feel like I'm not belonging in a certain situation or with a group of people, I definitely notice a decline in my level of happiness. [COB108, 00:03:26]
			3.1.1.4 I feel like it really changes a person's mindset. I feel like you get a lot more confident when you feel like you belong [...] you're able to enjoy everything in life a lot more [COB110, 00:02:34]

			<p>3.1.1.5 Yes, I think without a sense of belonging, you know, why be around those people? And it just makes you feel sad to not feel like you belong somewhere. [COB112, 00:06:26]</p>
			<p>3.1.1.6 I definitely think feeling that sense of belonging is important. Whenever I first came to campus it was really hard because I didn't really have any base friends. I didn't really know anyone here. My relationship with my roommate wasn't the best that it could have been, unfortunately. With all that mixed together, it really made it hard to enjoy that first semester on-campus because I didn't really feel that sense of belonging. I didn't feel anyone was really 100% open to me or that I was 100% open to them. I feel a lot of people are in that same boat the first year on campus, especially. I think that just shows your sense of belonging is really, really important because it affects so many different aspects of your life in general. [COB117, 00:06:00]</p>
		3.1.2 Lost/Alone (3/21)	<p>3.1.2.1 I think that without it, you would feel lost, like you don't have a purpose, I guess, and a little bit lonely and on your own. [COB106, 00:01:32]</p>
			<p>3.1.2.2 I feel like if you don't have a sense of belonging, you'd be very, very lost. [COB113, 00:24:01]</p>
			<p>3.1.2.3 I think it's very essential to have a sense of belonging. Or else I feel like you would just feel lost all the time. [COB120, 00:01:59]</p>
		3.1.3 Mental Health (4/21)	<p>3.1.3.1 Well, it is really important. And to say that it's important implies that if you didn't feel belonging that there would be maybe some psychological effects, not anything crazy, but it would certainly wear down on your self-esteem or your ability to feel comfortable. I think it's important because I think that to not feel belonging would weigh on you over time, especially.</p>

			[COB107, 00:03:41]
			3.1.3.2 Even on personal level, like my freshman year - I'm from the north, so coming down here was a big adjustment. I didn't know anyone, didn't have any friends, and I frankly didn't feel like I belonged. I really struggled with my mental health my freshman year until I met my group – my friends and the clubs I'm in – and really found my sense of belonging. I think it's social connectedness, sense of belonging. Finding your people is really important to your mental wellbeing as a whole. [COB116, 00:03:56]
			3.1.3.3 it impacts everything, not only your own mental state and well-being, which your mental state then affects your physical state, but it also just, it affects the way that you interact in those situations [...] I definitely think that it's important for both your social aspect, your mental health, of course, and then that also plays a role in your physical health and in the way you relate with the world moving forward in your life. [COB118, 00:03:55]
			3.1.3.4 Well, I just know that, like - just to add my personal experience - I was an out of state student and belonging was something I struggled with a lot my freshman year. Now, like I'm a resident assistant mentor in housing and I feel like it's what makes a first-year experience. I didn't have that and I saw that I really struggled my freshman year. And then now that I'm kind of like in this position on the front lines, like I can immediately tell who feels like they belong and who doesn't. [COB119, 00:06:48]
	3.2 Foundational Human Need (8/21)	3.2.1 Personhood/ Sense of Self (2/21)	3.2.1.1 I think everybody needs to feel like they belong somewhere. Without it, I feel like you're kind of missing a core part of being a person. [COB101, 00:07:03]
			3.2.1.2 (1) When you don't belong to anything, it's sort of hard to focus on anything else. It's sort of like a good foundation to build your sense of self off of, or at least a lot of your sense of self.

		<p>3.2.2 Growth (4/21)</p>	<p>[COB102, 00:05:36]</p> <p>3.2.2.1 (2) Yeah, I feel like without belonging, it's hard to really focus on anything or grow in anything whether in yourself or academics or whatever. [COB102, 00:06:17]</p> <p>3.2.2.2 Humans being social creatures, that's the whole reason we've made it to the point we are today. Society itself is just a representation of the feats that humans can accomplish when they work together, whether it be like obviously, we don't have the best history, but when it does come to our history, we've overcome a lot of different things. [COB105, 00:05:25]</p> <p>3.2.2.3 I think it's probably impossible to thrive in this world if you haven't experienced that sense of belonging consistently in your life. And also, it's empowering, I guess. If you always feel like you're alone or like you're not supported, then you're not going to be able to effectively lead others or achieve your goals because you have to have a support system to do that. [COB111, 00:02:56]</p> <p>3.2.2.4 I think it might take some time, especially like with new groups or new jobs or new environments, but I feel like in order to succeed to your highest potential or at your highest level, you need to feel a sense of belonging so that you're not afraid to do whatever it takes or feel silly or do something you're unsure about in order to achieve your greatest version of yourself. [COB115, 00:08:12]</p>
		<p>3.2.3 Fundamental Need (3/21)</p>	<p>3.2.3.1 Since humans are social creatures, we will all want to find that belonging in one way or another. I think it's very important for everyone to have that. If they don't, then they'll actively seek it out because it's a basic need. [COB109, 00:02:47]</p> <p>3.2.3.2 belonging I think is really important because if you don't belong to anything, then you're just individually by yourself. We're made to be in community, we're made to</p>



			<p>work with each other, so I think belonging is super important. [COB114, 00:02:22]</p>
			<p>3.2.3.3 Belonging just affects so many things that's why I think that it is such a fundamental aspect to human nature is that this need to belong affects the way that we behave [...] This need to belong is so important that people will actually change themselves in what they're doing in order to have the feeling that they're where they're supposed to be and where they're wanted. [COB103, 00:01:45]</p>