

University of Nevada, Reno

**Sense of Belonging of Students of Color Participating in Living Learning
Communities: A Phenomenological Study**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in Education

by

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

While the national graduation rate has increased over the past ten years, Students of Color graduate at a much lower rate than their white counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Scholars boast that high-impact practices promote positive outcomes such as increased retention and graduation rates as well as student learning and sense of belonging, but little research has examined the extent to which high-impact practices benefit specific groups of students (Kuh, 2008; McDaniel & Van Jura, 2020; Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014). Students of Color still graduate at a much lower rate than white students despite the rise of high-impact practices, which raises the question, are these high-impact practices working for all students?

Living learning communities are one high-impact practice with substantial evidence of increasing college completion and sense of belonging for all students. While there have been separate studies on the impact of living learning communities and the sense of belonging of Students of Color, few scholars have conducted research on how Students of Color participating in living learning communities perceive their experience and sense of belonging. By understanding how Students of Color experience living learning communities and how they perceive their sense of belonging, institutions may be one step closer to increasing their graduate and retention rates.

The purpose of this study was to gain insight on the sense of belonging and experiences of Students of Color participating in living learning communities at a large, predominately white research university. This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach using two sets of interviews with nine participants to collect data on their life history, day-to-day experiences, and reflection on those experiences. Strayhorn's (2018) model of college students' sense of belonging served as a theoretical framework throughout the study. Through data analysis, four themes emerged when

exploring how Students of Color described their LLC experience and sense of belonging: shared identities & similar values, shared experiences & collective struggles, impactful connections & meaningful relationships, and a home away from home. Practical implications for practitioners and suggestions for future research are provided.

DEDICATION

Family has always been played a vital role for student success, and I am no exception.

To my dad, Kevin, thank you for taking that phone call after class when I could not speak up through my tears. To my mom, Maria, thank you for always being the rock of our family. You both always have the right things to say to ground me.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities are implementing more retention initiatives now than ever, yet Students of Color still graduate at a much lower rate than white students, whose graduation rate is consistently above the national average (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Gray, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). This “equity gap” is a result from postsecondary institutions’ failure to retain and graduate diverse students despite increasing access (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Bensimon, 2007). Furthermore, Banks and Dohy (2019) show that Black students are least likely to graduate, followed by Hispanic/Latino students, and point to institutional racism as a barrier for the success of Students of Color at the postsecondary level.

Diminished sense of belonging contributes to lower retention and graduate rates, and Students of Color often experience a lower sense of belonging on college campuses (Johnson et al., 2007; Ribera et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2018; Tachine et al., 2017). Many studies have shed light on how Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and Pacific Islander groups have reported a lower sense of belonging than white students at four-year institutions, even at institutions designated as minority-serving (Johnson et al., 2007; Ribera et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2018). The influence of sense of belonging on retention and graduation is reversed as feelings of isolation create barriers for Students of Color (Banks & Dohy, 2019).

Strayhorn (2018) defines sense of belonging as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group ... or others on campus” (pp. 28-29). Sense of belonging involves how students think and feel, and thus, impacts their actions (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Williams, 2020).

Sense of belonging is a complex phenomenon influenced by how a student experiences college. It impacts the likelihood that a student chooses to stay and eventually graduate (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2018). Strayhorn's (2018) model of college student belonging discusses this complexity and the influence on behavior, including its impact on positive student outcomes such as academic achievement, retention, and graduation.

To increase retention and graduation rates, postsecondary institutions have increasingly implemented *high-impact practices*, which still uphold a standard of quality education while boosting these rates (Humphreys, 2012). High-impact practices include undergraduate research, capstone courses, first-year experiences, and learning communities, among others (Kuh, 2008). The increasing popularity of high-impact practices have likely contributed positively to the national graduation rate for college students attending postsecondary four-year institutions, which is 62% today, up from 54% in 2008 (McDaniel & Van Jura, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). High-impact practices can also produce positive outcomes for students with a wide range of backgrounds, including Students of Color and first-generation college students (Humphreys, 2012).

To increase the retention and graduation rates of Students of Color, institutions must understand how high-impact practices influence Students of Color differently than white students. While high-impact practices significantly improve the college completion rates for students, as educators, we must reflect on and analyze these high-impact practices to discover if they are truly equitable for the students we serve (McDaniel & Van Jura, 2020; Sweat et al., 2013; Zilvinskis, 2019). Banks and Dohy (2019) suggest a comprehensive approach to closing the equity gap, with the goal of creating a sense of belonging and strengths-based environment for Students of Color.

While living on campus is not considered a high-impact practice on its own, residence halls do provide a venue for facilitating many high-impact practices. One high-impact practice with a remarkable impact on retention and graduation rates and sense of belonging for college students is living learning communities (Garvey et al., 2020; Inkelas et al., 2018; Spanierman et al., 2013). Living learning communities (LLCs) are structured learning communities that enroll students in common courses and designate a physical residential space on campus for students to live and learn together (Inkelas et al., 2018; Levine Laufgraben, 2005). The impact of LLCs has resulted in high popularity with LLC programs at over 600 four-year residential colleges and universities in the United States by 2018 (Inkelas et al., 2018). These 600 programs vary in many ways, including target student population, themes, and admission and participation requirements. However, the foundational elements of intentional student clusters and peer and faculty relationships influence their positive outcomes. Students who participate in LLCs are more likely to be retained and graduated in addition to developing a sense of belonging (Inkelas et al., 2018; Inkelas et al., 2007; Spanierman et al., 2013). LLCs are a high-impact practice that have the potential to promote sense of belonging for underrepresented students (Garvey et al., 2020).

Statement of the Problem

We know that institutions retain and graduate Students of Color at lower rates than white students, and we also know that sense of belonging is an influential factor that contributes to retention and graduation (Johnson et al., 2007; Ribera et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2018; Tachine et al., 2017). Therefore, it is imperative that high-impact practices continue to be examined to determine how they contribute to sense of belonging, especially for Students of Color who can benefit most from these practices (McDaniel & Van Jura, 2020; Spanierman et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2018). While Students

of Color tend to experience a lower sense of belonging, experiences such as summer bridge programs (Strayhorn, 2011; Williams, 2020), diverse peer interactions (Hussain & Jones, 2021; Strayhorn, 2008a), and developing formal relationships with faculty (Hausmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008b) promote a sense of belonging for these students at postsecondary institutions. High-impact practices that can provide these experiences may be an effective way to increase the sense of belonging for Students of Color and thus, increase retention and graduation rates. The positive outcomes produced from high-impact practices are well-established, and it is the responsibility of postsecondary scholars to examine how these high-impact practices influence Students of Color.

Purpose of the Study

While there have been separate studies on the impact of living learning communities and the sense of belonging of Students of Color, few scholars have sought to understand specifically how Students of Color participating in living learning communities perceive their experience and sense of belonging. What we know is that living learning communities have an impressive impact on retention, graduation, and sense of belonging for college students (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Inkelas et al., 2018; Spanierman et al., 2013). Researchers have suggested that future studies explore how Students of Color experience living learning communities and how this high-impact practice contributes to their sense of belonging (Johnson et al., 2007; Spanierman et al., 2013). The purpose of this study was to gain insight on the sense of belonging and experiences of Students of Color participating in living learning communities at a large, predominantly white research university to better understand how this high-impact practice specifically influences how Students of Color experience college.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do Students of Color describe their living learning community experiences and sense of belonging?
2. How do Students of Color make meaning of their living learning community experience?
3. What perceptions do Students of Color have regarding the impact of living learning communities on their sense of belonging?

Significance of the Study

With such limited information on sense of belonging of Students of Color who participate in living learning communities, a qualitative study served as a means to elevate their voices and shed light on their experiences and perceptions. The role that sense of belonging has in retention and graduation has been identified, as has the impact living learning communities have on sense of belonging (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Inkelas et al., 2007; Spanierman et al., 2013). By understanding how Students of Color experience living learning communities and their impact on sense of belonging, institutions can get one step closer to closing the equity gap between Students of Color and their white counterparts.

Definition of Terms

There are many key terms within this study that need to be defined, as some terms differ in meaning in previous literature. A list of terms and their definitions for this study are provided below:

- **Academic Performance Outcomes.** Academic performance outcomes include measurements or outcomes that contribute to student learning. Most studies that examine academic performance outcomes of living learning communities focus

on grade point averages, credit hour completion, retention rates, and graduation percentages, in addition to student engagement and sense of belonging (Doyle et al., 2019; Hall & O'Neal, 2016; Vincent et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2015).

- **Civic Engagement.** Jessup-Anger et al. (2020) define civic engagement as “one’s sense of responsibility to the broader community and actions that are consistent with that belief” (p. 838). Jessup-Anger et al. continue by acknowledging that civic engagement and social justice are often linked together, however, those seeking to work for social change must first “be aware of and feel responsible for social inequity” (p. 838).
- **Democracy.** Within the context of higher education, democratic education was derived from European colleges such as Oxford and Cambridge. Democracy in higher education takes form in the notion that public education is a social investment, where graduates seek to improve their communities and serve their societies opposed to a personal investment (Rudolph, 1962). One example of this is illustrated through the Experimental College developed by Alexander Meiklejohn at the University of Wisconsin, which used democracy as a core element and allowed students to partner with faculty in their learning (Inkelas et al., 2018; Ris, 2022). Democracy in this instance is not necessarily referring to a government system, however, it does have elements of it via involving all parties in decision-making processes, as students in the Experimental College were involved in the development of their learning experiences.
- **Equity Gap.** Students of Color graduate at a rate much lower than white students, whose graduation rate is consistently above the national average. The difference in completion rates between white students and Students of Color is commonly referred to as an “achievement gap” (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

However, McNair et al. (2020) argue that the use of “achievement gap” is rooted in deficit-minded thinking, placing the responsibility of achievement on the shoulders of students, and in this case, Students of Color. By using the term “equity gap” instead, institutions and practitioners are challenged to consider their role in addressing educational disparities and advancing equity.

- **First-Generation.** First-generation as a term can be defined in many different ways, most loosely as students who are the first generation of their family to attend college. Other definitions can restrict this definition to first in their immediate family or first to attend a four-year college, among other variations. Adams and McBrayer (2020) define first-generation students as those whose parents or legal guardians have not obtained a bachelor’s degree. Using this definition, first-generation college students can include those whose parents or legal guardians attended college but did not graduate.
- **Graduation Rate.** According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), “Graduation rates measure the percentage of first-time, full-time undergraduate students who complete their program at the same institution within a specified period of time.” Typically, institutions measure both 4-year and 6-year graduation rates to examine how quickly students are graduating with bachelor’s degrees.
- **High-Impact Practice.** High-impact practices are strategies that successfully retain and graduate college students while promoting student learning and engagement. Kuh emphasizes that high-impact practices should impact college students in terms of their learning, engagement, and retention (Kuh, 2008; Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014).

- **Learning Community.** Learning communities vary from institution to institution in form; however, they typically consist of clustering students together through coursework with a common curricular theme (Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014). Learning communities share five components that closely align with the definition of a high-impact practice: student collaboration, faculty collaboration, curricular coordination, shared setting, and interactive pedagogy (Love & Tokuno, 1999).
- **Living Learning Community.** Living learning communities (LLCs) are structured learning communities that enroll students in common courses and designate a physical residential space on campus for students to live and learn together (Inkelas et al., 2018; Levine Laufgraben, 2005).
- **Residence Halls.** Blimling (2015) asserts that residence halls are far different from the dormitories that existed previously within higher education. Residence halls are not just where students sleep, but where they learn and grow with each other. Today, residence halls typically offer more than just beds, including “a variety of facilities to aid students in their studies and to facilitate community, such as study lounges, recreational spaces, computer labs, social lounges, student meeting rooms, and classrooms” (p. 2).
- **Retention Rate.** According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), “Retention rates measure the percentage of first-time undergraduate students who return to the same institution the following fall.” Some studies specify this retention rate by referring to it as fall-to-fall retention.
- **Sense of Belonging.** There are varying interpretations of what sense of belonging means for college students. This study relies on Strayhorn’s (2018) refined definition which blends previous perspectives of its meaning with the concept of being a basic human need that can influence behavior. More

precisely, Strayhorn defines sense of belonging as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group ... or others on campus” (pp. 28-29).

- **Sense of Community.** Some researchers have used “sense of belonging” and “sense of community” interchangeably, and Hausmann et al. (2007) are among others who believe that sense of belonging is inherently connected to community, as it cannot exist without members possessing a sense of belonging. Widely cited in sense of community literature, McMillan and Chavis define sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (1986, p. 9).
- **Social Justice.** Jessup-Anger et al. (2019) mention that social justice is often linked with civic engagement and define social justice as “work toward ending the system of oppression that gives certain social groups greater privilege and power over others” (p. 195). As a theme for living learning communities, Jessup-Anger et al. discuss social justice as increasing awareness of social inequity and providing college students with “opportunities to work for social change” (p. 195). Social justice moves beyond the knowledge of inequities and is a movement toward ending systemic oppressive systems.
- **Student of Color.** A Student of Color refers to any college student who identifies as Hispanic/Latina/o/x, Asian, Black/African American, Indigenous, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or multiracial. Student of Color is used instead of “non-white” to include students who identify as multiracial with one of those races being white. “Students of Color” is capitalized to illustrate a commitment to

social justice and empowerment aligned with core tenets of critical frameworks (Abes et al., 2019; Pérez Huber, 2010). Pérez Huber (2010) explains that by intentionally leaving “white” lowercase and providing the power of capitalization to terms such as “People of Color” and “Communities of Color,” we can reject the grammatical norms to “move towards empowerment and racial justice” (p. 93).

Chapter Summary

Because of college completion initiatives and tied funding, higher education institutions have shifted their focus from increasing access to education to increasing retention of their students through the implementation of high-impact practices. While some scholars boast that high-impact practices promote positive outcomes such as increased retention and graduation rates as well as student learning and sense of belonging, little research has examined the extent to which high-impact practices benefit specific groups of students (Kuh, 2008; McDaniel & Van Jura, 2020; Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014). While the national graduation rate has increased, Students of Color still graduate at a much lower rate than their white counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Living learning communities are one high-impact practice with substantial evidence of increasing college completion and sense of belonging for all students. By examining how Students of Color experience living learning communities and how they perceive their sense of belonging, institutions may be one step closer to closing the equity gap.

In this chapter, a brief overview of the study was presented, including the statement of the problem, the research questions and design, and the significance of the study. Chapter II will present the theoretical framework used for this study. Chapter III will present a review of the current literature regarding sense of belonging for Students of Color and living learning communities. Chapter IV will present a more in-depth

discussion of the methodology of the study, including data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter V will present the findings from the study, and Chapter VI will present a discussion and conclusion to this study.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Strayhorn describes theory as a “lens to help you see things in a new and different way” and can help us to provide a framework for more complex phenomena and experiences (Strayhorn et al., 2022). As such, this study utilized Strayhorn’s (2018) model of college students’ sense of belonging as a theoretical framework that was used in the design, collection, and analysis stages. This chapter provides an overview of Strayhorn’s model of college students’ sense of belonging, Chapter III will detail a number of prior studies that have employed Strayhorn’s model, and Chapter IV will provide detailed aspects of how this model is applied as a theoretical framework for this study.

Strayhorn’s (2018) Model of College Students’ Sense of Belonging

Strayhorn (2018) discusses sense of belonging in his book, *College Students’ Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students*. Strayhorn provides a refined definition of sense of belonging and an overview of research on various student populations and their sense of belonging including Latino students, STEM Students of Color, and Black male students. Strayhorn connects his research findings and reflections to develop an evidence-based theory on college student sense of belonging. In this book, he identifies seven core elements of sense of belonging and applies them to the higher education environment. The core elements include the following:

1. Sense of belonging is a universal, basic human need.
2. It is a fundamental motive sufficient to drive behavior.
3. Context, time, and factors determine its importance.
4. It is related to mattering.
5. It is influenced by social identities.

6. It leads to positive outcomes and success.
7. It must be satisfied as conditions change.

One: Universal, Basic Human Need

First and foremost, Strayhorn (2018) affirms that sense of belonging is a basic human need that may be obvious and expressed and, other times, latent in nature. Strayhorn cites Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs when describing sense of belonging as one of these basic human needs and the requirement to satisfy this need before fulfilling higher-order needs such as self-actualization, knowledge, and understanding. Strayhorn applies the element of sense of belonging as a basic human need to college students by stating, "A college student's need for belonging must be satisfied before any other higher-order needs such as knowledge and self-actualization, which some would argue are the desired outcomes of a college education" (p. 31). If we, as higher education researchers and practitioners, cannot fulfill the basic need of sense of belonging for college students, we, therefore, will not be able to meet our institutions' educational mission statements.

Two: Fundamental Motive Sufficient to Drive Behavior

The second core element of sense of belonging states that it is a fundamental motive that drives human behavior (Strayhorn, 2018). Referring back to Hurtado and Carter (1997), this complex phenomenon of cognitive and affective aspects contributes to behavior. Strayhorn asserts that to fulfill the need for sense of belonging, people need to act. Behavior may appear in ways such as going to church and joining clubs. Although there are many positive examples of belonging to organizations, we can also see behavior such as joining gangs and partaking in risky behaviors such as drug use and binge drinking in order to feel a sense of belonging to a particular group. For college students, we can see that belonging impacts academic achievement both positively and

negatively (Strayhorn, 2018). Strayhorn discusses examples where students do not feel supported by faculty and find community in groups that take an “apathetic” approach to learning and may become disruptors in the college setting. We also see this in college settings when students join clubs and Greek-letter organizations. Although others may find avenues to give back to their communities and be academically successful, others may fall into risky behaviors such as binge drinking. In all cases, these students seek a community where they feel they belong and are valued by their peers.

Three: Context, Time, and Factors Determine Importance

The third core element is that in certain contexts, at certain times, and within certain groups, sense of belonging can take on a different level of importance (Strayhorn, 2018). This can include when someone is new to a setting, such as a city or place of employment, as well as adolescent years, among certain groups when someone may feel marginalized. All of these situations involve the possibility of the individual feeling vulnerable and a sense of uncertainty regarding who they are in relation to that context, time, and group. Many college students face the adjustment of the college course rigor, exploring their identities and values, and navigating social networks and relationships with peers and faculty. Altogether, college students face a heightened need to belong in these learning spaces. Strayhorn states that in order to help a college student develop a sense of belonging, “one needs to know something about their expectations, values, attitudes, interests, goals, and so on” (p. 35). How one student experiences a sense of belonging may differ from how other students experience a sense of belonging. As such, higher education administrators and educators must understand these varying expectations, goals, and other values to facilitate a sense of belonging in many different ways.

Four: Related to Mattering

Sense of belonging is related to and is a consequence of mattering (Strayhorn, 2018). Mattering is a concept that Strayhorn connects back to the research of Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) and their five dimensions of mattering and Schlossberg (1985) and her perspective of mattering as a feeling that one matters and is valued and appreciated. Strayhorn (2018) states that this core element of mattering connects to the relational aspect of belonging, stating that to “satisfy the need for belongingness, the person must believe one cares” (p. 36). This may appear in ways such as a person commanding attention or creating situations where the person feels needed or depended upon. These examples illustrate two of the dimensions of mattering identified by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981): attention and dependence. For college students, it is essential for their sense of belonging that they feel important and valued in their communities. This may prove more challenging for college students with marginalized identities, as they are in a space (higher education) that was not initially designed with them in mind.

Five: Influenced by One's Identities

Sense of belonging is also influenced by the social identities held by the individual (Strayhorn, 2018). As previously mentioned, sense of belonging is experienced and influenced differently for different college students. Identities such as race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, and faith can intersect in unique ways that impact how a person achieves a sense of belonging. Many studies explore the impact of one social identity such as race (Hausmann et al., 2009; Saenz et al., 2007) and socioeconomic status (Bettencourt, 2021) on sense of belonging, but often conclude that other identities such as gender, first-generation status, and sexual orientation add a different layer to how students experience college

and a sense of belonging differently. Strayhorn asserts that a “*true* sense of belonging is not about ‘fitting in,’ but rather about acceptance, authenticity, and finding community as one’s true self, just as you are” (pp. 38-39).

Six: Positive Outcomes and Success

Another core element of sense of belonging is that it generates other positive outcomes and success for those who achieve it (Strayhorn, 2018). This notion is supported by previous studies that found that students who have a greater sense of belonging are more likely to persist through college (Hausmann et al., 2007; Rainey et al., 2018) and are more satisfied with their college experience (Strayhorn, 2008b). It is here that Strayhorn also discusses how people devote energy to preserving existing relationships rather than establishing new ones, such as college students staying at an institution instead of transferring to a new one or leaving their postsecondary education altogether. If college students feel that they belong to a particular campus and have various sources of support, they are less likely to end this relationship and begin a new one elsewhere. We can see examples of this, such as students studying hard to earn high enough grades to avoid academic dismissal or remaining an on-campus resident to stay involved in their residence hall organization.

Seven: Must be Satisfied as Conditions Change

Last but certainly not least, Strayhorn (2018) states that sense of belonging must be satisfied as conditions change. Students want to feel valued and appreciated, and these feelings can change over time, both positively and negatively. Studies have shown that while some practices can boost a student’s sense of belonging, it can diminish over time if the practice or relationship is no longer experienced, such as when summer bridge programs end (Strayhorn, 2011). Disruptions to sense of belonging, such as experiences of bias or discrimination, can negatively influence a student’s satisfaction

and retention in college (Hussain & Jones, 2021; Rainey et al., 2018; Tachine et al., 2017). Higher education practitioners must understand that students' sense of belonging is fluid. Strayhorn (2018) firmly argues: "Just because a student feels a sense of belonging today doesn't mean that they'll feel it tomorrow" (p. 40). All core elements are essential; however, higher education practitioners must keep this seventh element at the forefront of their minds when building and implementing high-impact practices that foster a sense of belonging for their students.

Theoretical Model

Strayhorn (2018) proposes a theoretical model of college students' sense of belonging that is organized into Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs. This model provides a context of where sense of belonging is positioned in this hierarchy and emphasizes that it must be satisfied in order for students to achieve self-actualization, knowledge, and understanding to name a few higher-order needs. Strayhorn states that "sense of belonging is critical for student success in college" because of its placement on the hierarchy of needs (p. 41). Students who do not satisfy their need for belonging may experience loneliness, unhappiness, suicidal ideation, and worse. Strayhorn also incorporates the entirety of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs because they are not independent of one another. For example, Strayhorn states that students may believe they need confidence (a higher-order need), but what they truly need is sense of belonging and connection with others.

This theoretical model not only provides context for sense of belonging as a human need within Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, but it also illustrates the complexity of what sense of belonging is, not just a simple definition that can be measured easily. This model can be employed by researchers and practitioners interested in examining and fostering a sense of belonging for all college students.

Within research, the theoretical model can provide a framework that researchers can utilize to understand the phenomenon of sense of belonging within students' stories and experiences. This model serves as a theoretical framework for this study to frame the experiences of Students of Color participating in living learning communities. Some of the stories and experiences shared during this study describe core elements of sense of belonging, providing context for feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of Students of Color. The findings from this study highlight aspects of living learning communities that contribute to the sense of belonging for Students of Color at a predominantly white research institution.

Chapter Summary

Strayhorn's (2018) model of college students' sense of belonging provides an in-depth examination of the phenomenon of sense of belonging, including its position within Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs. This study utilized Strayhorn's (2018) model of college students' sense of belonging as a theoretical framework in the design, collection, and analysis stages. Chapter III will include supplemental literature on sense of belonging for Students of Color and on living learning communities. Chapter IV will provide detailed aspects of how this model was applied as a theoretical framework for the present study. Chapter V will present the findings from the study, and Chapter VI will present a discussion and conclusion to this study.

CHAPTER III

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on sense of belonging for Students of Color as well as living learning communities at four-year postsecondary institutions. This chapter discusses relevant and recent literature, identifies gaps, and suggests future research directly related to the current study.

Sense of Belonging of College Students of Color

As a result of an increased focus on student retention and high-impact practices, today, the national six-year graduation rate for college students attending a public postsecondary four-year institution is 62%, up from 54% in 2008 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). However, institutions graduated Students of Color at much below that rate compared to white students, whose graduation rate is consistently above the national average, which is referred to as an “equity gap” (McNair et al., 2020). Specifically, the six-year graduation rate is 57% for Hispanic students, 45% for Black students, and 40% for Indigenous students, while the six-year graduation rate for white students is 65% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Many institutions seek to close the equity gap with various programs to recruit and retain students from underrepresented backgrounds, including Students of Color (Strayhorn, 2011, 2018; Williams, 2020). To develop and implement programs that can successfully close the equity gap, institutions need to identify where and why Students of Color are not retained and graduated at the same rates as white students.

Many factors influence the retention and graduation of Students of Color, including socioeconomic status and family conditions, academic preparation and high school educational resources, and institutional environments (Fischer, 2007; Garcia, 2017; Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2018). However, recent studies have supported

the notion that sense of belonging on college campuses also contributes to the retention and graduation rates of Students of Color and that many of the previously mentioned factors can impact sense of belonging (Johnson et al., 2007; Pichon, 2016; Saddler, 2010; Saenz et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2018; Tachine et al., 2017).

Definition of Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging is a complex phenomenon that involves how an individual feels and thinks in their environment, influencing their behavior in that space. Many factors can impact how an individual develops and sustains a sense of belonging. However, in order to determine if an individual has achieved a sense of belonging, one must know what “sense of belonging” is and how various factors can influence the sense of belonging for each individual. There are many internal and external factors that can influence how an individual experiences a sense of belonging. Sense of belonging can be influenced by the background and experiences that an individual brings into an environment in addition to the environment itself (Strayhorn, 2018). The complexity and fluidity of sense of belonging makes it difficult to define but providing a model of sense of belonging can assist with understanding the phenomenon as researchers continue to examine it in various environments within different populations.

The complexity of sense of belonging means that there are many opinions on defining “sense of belonging,” especially as it relates to college students. Although there is no established universal definition of sense of belonging, Hurtado and Carter (1997) present an intriguing perspective of this phenomenon, pointing out its complex structure because it results from what students think and how students feel. Hurtado and Carter called for an empirical definition for this subjective variable, contending that sense of belonging consists of both cognitive and affective aspects because “the individual’s cognitive evaluation of his or her role in relation to the group results in an affective

response” (p. 328). This complexity opens the possibility that students' thoughts and feelings related to belonging can contribute to their behavior, such as staying in college and graduating or leaving. Williams (2020) supports the notion by confirming that sense of belonging is a cognitive process that impacts one's actions.

Hausmann et al. (2007) define sense of belonging as “the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community” (p. 804). Hausmann et al. (2007) are among others who believe that sense of belonging is inherently connected to community, as it cannot exist without members possessing a sense of belonging. Some researchers have even used “sense of belonging” and “sense of community” interchangeably. Strayhorn (2018) argues that while closely connected, sense of belonging involves the “feelings, perceptions, and mindsets that accompany gaining true membership in a community” (p. 16). Previous work by Strayhorn examined sense of belonging by defining it as students' sense of their integration on campus, with roots in Tinto (1975) and his theory of student departure (Strayhorn, 2008a).

More recently, Strayhorn (2018) presented a refined definition of sense of belonging that blends previous perspectives of its meaning with the concept of being a basic human need that can influence behavior. More precisely, Strayhorn defined sense of belonging as “students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group ... or others on campus” (pp. 28-29). Strayhorn goes on to explain what sense of belonging was *not*: feelings of alienation, marginalization, and isolation. As educators, Strayhorn affirms that our goal should be sense of belonging for all students, and as such, it should be the center of our attention rather than its absence. However, in environments where students do not experience a sense of belonging, it is critical that, as researchers and educators, we examine what

factors influence its absence to create environments that do the opposite: foster a sense of belonging.

Sense of Belonging and Experiences of Students of Color

Before Strayhorn (2018) introduced his model of college students' sense of belonging, many studies that examine sense of belonging employed Tinto (1975) and his theory of student departure and Astin (1999) and his theory of student involvement as theoretical frameworks. Although widely cited in both research and practice, Tinto (1975) and Astin (1999) have been criticized for their focus on assimilation and integration of students, shifting the responsibility of belonging and retention on the student, not the institution (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2018; Tachine et al., 2017; Williams, 2020). Specifically, Hurtado and Carter described Tinto's (1975) model as "problematic" and "does not acknowledge that integration is complicated by racially tense environments for diverse groups of students whose responses to adversity are complex" (1997, p. 341).

Hurtado and Carter (1997) are commonly cited in studies that explore sense of belonging of Students of Color because they examined how college experiences impacted Latino students' sense of belonging. This study found that when Latino students interacted with peers outside of class regarding their academics and joined co-curricular organizations, it increased their sense of belonging. The results also supported the positive impact of first-year experiences on sense of belonging, and the negative impact of discriminatory experiences and perceptions of a hostile racial climate on sense of belonging for Latino students. Hurtado and Carter suggested that future research examine minority college students' sense of belonging, especially as it relates to various experiences that impact this phenomenon.

Roughly a decade later, more quantitative research expanded on the Hurtado and Carter (1997) study on Latino students' sense of belonging by exploring the phenomenon of sense of belonging among larger and broader samples of college students. Johnson et al. (2007) examined the sense of belonging of a national sample of almost 3,000 first-year students. They found that Black, Hispanic/Latino/a/x, and Asian Pacific American students reported a lower sense of belonging than white students. Johnson et al. found that while institutional selectivity was not a significant predictor of sense of belonging, the institutional environment of residence halls contributes positively to a sense of belonging for all Students of Color. The findings from this study highlight the importance of relationships that develop in residence halls and the students' perceptions of residence halls being socially supportive and culturally inclusive. Johnson et al. suggest that researchers continue to focus on residence halls as an environment with the potential to improve the sense of belonging for Students of Color. Johnson et al. is instrumental in the development of the current study, as it highlights the potential for residence halls to improve sense of belonging for Students of Color.

Another important study in the sense of belonging literature is Hausmann et al. (2007). This study employed a longitudinal experimental design at a large, public, predominantly white institution that examined the role of college students' sense of belonging and retention. After controlling for background characteristics and other predictors of retention, the study found that sense of belonging predicted students' intent to persist through college. Hausmann et al. (2007) demonstrated that peer and faculty interactions and support from parents significantly impacted sense of belonging and thus, college retention. Although the sense of belonging to the institution declined over the academic year, these interactions and support greatly influenced how well students adjusted to college and the sense of belonging they developed. Like Johnson et al.

(2007), Hausmann et al. (2007) call for continued exploration of sense of belonging for college students and how it impacts their persistence and retention.

Hausmann et al. (2009) contributed further to the sense of belonging literature by finding that students' sense of belonging had a direct, positive impact on students' commitment to their institution and an indirect, positive impact on persistence. When analyzing the impact of the experimental intervention from Hausmann et al. (2007), Hausmann et al. (2009) found that the intervention had the intended impact on white students' sense of belonging. However, the intervention had no impact on Black students. Although sense of belonging plays a similar role regarding persistence and retention for both groups of students, the practices that increase sense of belonging for each group need to be specifically targeted to their needs. Hausmann et al. (2009) suggest that some of these strategies to increase sense of belonging for Black students need to address dismantling negative stereotypes and reframing to more positive mindsets regarding their academic ability.

Garcia (2017) asserts that sense of belonging for Latinx students may actually be a sense of belonging to subcultures rather than a sense of belonging to the campus as a whole. Through a multiple case study design, Garcia explored Latinx Greek-letter organizations' role on 14 Latinx college students' sense of belonging. In this study, Latinx participants described adverse effects resulting from being in predominantly white settings, including feeling unsafe. Latinx students reported a greater sense of belonging by establishing connections with ethnic-based groups and other communities where individuals "looked like them" (p. 173). Whether or not Latinx students felt a sense of belonging to their campus as a whole, feeling a sense of belonging to a subculture of the university was critical to their overall college experience.

Williams (2020) conducted a phenomenological study to examine how first-generation Students of Color perceived their sense of belonging. In particular, these students participated in a college readiness program, and Williams sought to determine if this experience influenced how Students of Color perceived their sense of belonging on campus. Participants shared that they had a greater sense of belonging when they were among peers with the same racial background, and the college readiness program provided these students with social and cultural capital. Participants also shared that they found others of the same racial background to discuss current events and issues, feel comfortable being their authentic selves without being stereotyped, and show unity among the Black community. In addition to finding community and developing a sense of belonging among peers, Black students also benefited academically from mentor relationships. The findings from this study support Strayhorn's (2018) theoretical model of college students' sense of belonging, especially the core element that states sense of belonging drives behavior. Williams (2020) asserts that sense of belonging is a cognitive process that can influence one's actions.

Another group of students that experience lower retention rates than white students are Indigenous students. In fact, Tachine et al. (2017) claim that Indigenous students are the least likely to persist of all racial and ethnic college student groups. Tachine et al. employed sharing circles with 24 Indigenous students to explore factors that influenced their sense of belonging in college. This type of data collection honors and supports Indigenous culture and ways of knowing. Through this study, Tachine et al. discovered that many Indigenous students experienced racism and felt disconnected from their families. Tachine et al. suggest that institutions support Indigenous students by validating their cultures and perspectives and incorporating these into college and university settings. At present day, postsecondary institutions are "centered around

Whiteness, which can create isolation and alienation for non-White students despite no overt racial animus” (p. 800). Even if there is no malicious intent, students who do not hold the identities and cultures that postsecondary institutions are founded upon can experience a lower sense of belonging.

Hussain and Jones (2021) studied more visible forms of racism through discrimination and bias and how they impact the sense of belonging for Students of Color. Hussain and Jones cite Hurtado and Carter (1997) when asserting that Students of Color experience a lower sense of belonging than white students, especially when they experience instances of discrimination and hostile climates. Hussain and Jones’ purpose was to better understand how positive experiences can alleviate the harmful impacts of discrimination and bias on the sense of belonging of Students of Color. By conducting regression analyses on Diverse Learning Environments Survey data from 626 Students of Color, Hussain and Jones not only confirmed once again that experiences of racism diminish the sense of belonging for Students of Color, but they also found that frequent diverse peer interactions can act as a “buffer against the effects of experiences of discrimination and bias” (p. 67). In addition, when Students of Color had a positive perception of how the institution was committed to diversity, the adverse effects of discrimination and bias were not as impactful on their sense of belonging. Hussain and Jones strongly suggest that postsecondary institutions develop a campus climate that supports Students of Color through both practice and policy.

Through these studies, it is evident that Students of Color experience college differently than their white counterparts. However, experiences such as summer bridge programs (Strayhorn, 2011; Williams, 2020), diverse peer interactions (Hussain & Jones, 2021), and developing formal relationships with faculty (Hausmann et al., 2007) have promoted a greater sense of belonging for these students at postsecondary institutions.

Additionally, it would be negligent to overlook the fact that even Students of Color experience college differently than other Students of Color because race/ethnicity is only one aspect that factors into how a student experiences college and satisfies a sense of belonging. Recent studies have explored how intersectionality of identities contribute to how students experience college and a sense of belonging.

Intersectionality of Identities. One of the core elements of college students' sense of belonging that Strayhorn (2018) identified was that it was influenced by the social identities held by the individual. It is imperative that we acknowledge the intersectionality of identities individuals hold and how this complexity influences how they experience college, including their sense of belonging. The literature described in the following sections explores how other identities, including gender, socioeconomic status, first-generation status, and sexual orientation, impact sense of belonging for Students of Color.

Gender. Gender differences have widely been examined in various fields of research, especially since the rise of feminist approaches in research (Hesse-Biber, 2010). The intersectionality of gender and race can impact how students develop a sense of belonging on college campuses. In 2008, Strayhorn conducted two quantitative studies on Black male college students and their sense of belonging. The first study employed linear regression models to determine predictors of sense of belonging for Black and white male college students. More specifically, Strayhorn (2008a) examined how male students' sense of belonging could be influenced by diverse peer interactions or the "frequency and nature of interactions between Black men and individuals whose background differs from their own" (p. 503). Although there was no significant difference in the sense of belonging between white and Black male students, Strayhorn (2008a)

found that diverse peer interactions significantly influenced both groups of male students' sense of belonging.

The second study explored the relationship between academic achievement, college satisfaction, and supportive relationships with peers, faculty, and other campus staff for Black male college students (Strayhorn, 2008b). With a sample of 8,000 Black male college students, Strayhorn (2008b) employed regression analyses on data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire to explore these associations. Even though supportive faculty and peer relationships did not directly influence academic achievement, these relationships were statistically significant predictors of college satisfaction among Black male college students, and college satisfaction has a direct impact on academic achievement. Strayhorn (2008a, 2008b) suggests that because Black male college students benefit from both faculty relationships and diverse peer interactions, practitioners should provide environments that foster these relationships, such as summer bridge programs and living learning communities.

Other studies have also examined the impact of sense of belonging for Students of Color who identify as women. Through interviews, Rainey et al. (2018) examined the intersectionality of race and gender of 201 college students in a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) major. Rainey et al. found that white male students were more likely to report a sense of belonging than female Students of Color. One of the influential factors for sense of belonging in STEM is representation in students' disciplines. For practitioners who work with STEM students, it is critical to acknowledge that STEM fields continue not only to be dominated by white male students but continue to privilege them over female students and Students of Color. Rainey et al. stress the urgency to address the cultural climates in STEM that impact sense of belonging and retention for both female students and Students of Color.

There are many studies that examine the traditional binary genders of male and female and how each group experiences college differently. While there are studies that examine transgender and gender non-conforming students and their sense of belonging (Cavanaugh & Luke, 2021; Parker, 2021), there is limited literature on transgender and gender non-conforming Students of Color and their sense of belonging on college campuses. Additionally, many studies that examine how transgender and gender non-conforming students experience college have the tendency to group these students with all members of the LGBTQIA+ community, hindering the ability to examine how gender influences sense of belonging in college (Hill et al., 2020; Parker, 2021).

Gay Men of Color. Students who identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community can experience hostility and difficulty navigating new environments like college campuses. Additionally, LGBTQIA+ students who also identify as Students of Color experience more difficulties as they attempt to find community and a sense of belonging in spaces that are not always welcoming to the intersectionality of identities they possess. Strayhorn (2018) discussed the intersectionality of race and sexual orientation and sense of belonging, specifically the sense of belonging of gay male Students of Color. In this study, Strayhorn conducted interviews with gay male Students of Color at both predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) over several years. Over time, three themes emerged from these interviews: the compelling need to belong, the ways participants sought satisfaction with belongingness, and the strive for a sense of self and esteem once belongingness was satisfied. The gay male Students of Color who participated in this study discussed facing rejection from their families and peers while navigating a new environment (college) with new peers. This context motivated the participants to satisfy their need to belong, whether it be by joining on-campus organizations or finding

community off-campus through ethnic or gay nightclubs, churches, or “hooking up” with different unknown partners in search of acceptance and intimacy. Once satisfying, or partially satisfying, their sense of belonging, gay male Students of Color discussed having greater self-esteem, greater satisfaction with their college experience, and a greater feeling of a sense of mattering to others. Those who reported a greater sense of belonging were more likely to be involved student leaders and more likely to have the intention to stay in college. Overall, this study contributes to Strayhorn’s (2018) theoretical model of college students’ sense of belonging through various core elements, including a motivating behavior; context, time and factors determining importance; relating to mattering; and being influenced by one’s identities.

As previously mentioned, there are other studies that explore how members of the LGBTQIA+ community experience college (Hill et al., 2020; Parker, 2021), but there is very limited literature on the intersectionality of being a Student of Color and a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. It is important to acknowledge that there are many ways students can express their sexuality and thus influence their sense of belonging on college campuses. Various cultural backgrounds based on race and ethnicity may also influence where students develop a sense of belonging on their college campus (Strayhorn, 2018). Future studies should also examine how gender also plays a role in how LGBTQIA+ Students of Color experience college and develop a sense of belonging.

Socioeconomic Status. Socioeconomic status typically refers to the class status of a student based upon their access to financial resources, their parent/guardian educational attainment, and the occupations held by their parents and themselves (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Typically, college students from a lower socioeconomic background are identified by being eligible for the federal Pell Grant and

are typically first-generation college students who have parents or guardians that have not attained a bachelor's degree. Students with a lower socioeconomic status face more tremendous obstacles when attending college, even more so when they hold other marginalized identities (Bettencourt, 2021).

Strayhorn (2010) examined the academic self-efficacy, academic success, and resilience of low-income Black students at a predominantly white institution through a sequential mixed methods design. Interestingly, Strayhorn examined academic success as a student's intention to remain in college and their sense of belonging in addition to their grade point average (GPA). Strayhorn asserted that the literature is essentially void of examining the resiliency and academic success of low-income Students of Color. The findings showed that low-income Black students who reported a higher sense of belonging were more likely to intend to remain at their college, and Black students who were more academically confident reported a greater sense of belonging. Based on these findings, higher education practitioners should engage low-income Black students in programs and activities that promote higher academic self-efficacy to increase their sense of belonging and retention at their institution.

In 2011, Strayhorn conducted a quantitative study to measure the effect of a summer bridge program for Students of Color from low-socioeconomic backgrounds or "economically disadvantaged" (p. 144). Strayhorn conducted correlation analyses and *t*-tests to determine if the participants of the five-week summer bridge program at a highly selective, predominantly white research institution had an impact on four outcomes: academic self-efficacy, sense of belonging, academic skills, and social skills. Although the results showed a slight increase in sense of belonging immediately after students participated in the summer bridge program, this increase was not statistically significant. Participation in the summer bridge program did significantly influence students'

academic self-efficacy and academic skills, such as interpreting their syllabi and interacting with faculty. This study supports the notion that high-impact practices like summer bridge programs significantly impact economically disadvantaged Students of Color who participate in them. Strayhorn asserts that because the program participation positively impacts academic self-efficacy, and because academic self-efficacy can improve academic performance, it is logical to conclude that when economically disadvantaged Students of Color participate in this type of program, they are more likely to be academically successful.

Most recently, Bettencourt (2021) conducted a qualitative study that explored how working-class students, or students who are both first-generation college students and hold “blue-collar jobs,” describe their sense of belonging at two different public research institutions. This study highlighted how working-class students experienced a lower sense of belonging than their middle- and upper-class peers. Bettencourt found that participants developed their own spaces of belonging, both inside and outside the classroom, in an effort to “challenge the broader campus culture that they saw as catering to middle- and upper-class students” (p. 2). These working-class students saw their sense of belonging as something they created for themselves rather than something their institutions provided for them. When Bettencourt explored how working-class Students of Color described their sense of belonging, they found that they reported an even lower sense of belonging and felt less supported by their institutions. Although these findings show that working-class students can still find community and develop a sense of belonging, they still did not feel valued by their institution, which can greatly impact their intentions of staying and eventually graduating.

Socioeconomic status is complicated and influenced by many factors including educational and financial resources that students have access to, and further

complicates how they experience college. Higher education researchers and practitioners must acknowledge that not all students come to college with the same level of preparedness and access to knowledge and resources. A student's socioeconomic status can greatly influence how they experience college and develop a sense of belonging. Future studies should examine structures and practices that can encourage a sense of belonging for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which may be very similar to structures and practices that encourage a sense of belonging among first-generation college students.

First-Generation Status. First-generation as a term can be defined in many different ways, most loosely as students who are the first generation in their family to attend college. Other definitions can restrict this definition to first in their immediate family or attend a four-year college, among other variations. Adams and McBrayer (2020) conducted a phenomenological study that examined how eight first-generation Students of Color experience college at a predominantly white institution. Using the data analysis procedures from Moustakas (1994), Adams and McBrayer found four emergent themes that exposed how the intersectionality of being first-generation and being a Student of Color impacted how students experienced college. Although these participants were not identified as low-income, one of the emergent themes was "money always matters," and another was a "college degree is a means to a better lifestyle," suggesting that these students were conscious of their own financial resources and the potential that comes from attending and graduating college (p. 741). Additionally, first-generation college Students of Color expressed concern for their safety and the need for a supportive and multicultural campus culture. Adams and McBrayer found that while these participants were grateful for the opportunity to attend college and valued their relationships with faculty and peers, higher education administrators must "be aware of

the social, financial, and cultural barriers that impede their progress” in order to retain them (p. 753). Although this is a tall order, implementing high-impact practices to support first-generation college Students of Color and increasing the diverse representation of faculty on campus can be the first steps toward reaching this goal.

Another study examining first-generation college Students of Color and their sense of belonging was conducted by Duran et al. (2020). However, this study was quantitative in design and sampled almost 8,000 participants. By employing multiple linear regression analyses, Duran et al. found that African American students reported a lower sense of belonging than white students, and first-generation college students reported a lower sense of belonging than continuing-generation college students. Additionally, Duran et al. found that students who lived on campus reported a higher sense of belonging than students who lived off campus, especially for continuing-generation Latinx college students and first-generation college students of another race, except for first-generation Asian and white college students. Findings from Duran et al. support how students' perceived peer network greatly influences their sense of belonging in college. This study contributes to the existing literature that supports the positive impacts residential environments and peer relationships have on students' sense of belonging. Additionally, this study highlights that students with marginalized identities (first-generation and Students of Color) still experience a significantly lower sense of belonging than continuing-generation and white students. Duran et al. assert that higher education practitioners should provide residential environments for first-generation college Students of Color, especially Black students, as these environments “may be a pivotal way to bolster these collegians' sentiments of belonging” (p. 149). Previously mentioned studies discussed many college environments that improve sense of belonging, and on-campus residential environments continue to be found in

suggestions for practitioners with regard to increasing the sense of belonging, and thus, persistence and retention, for all students.

Impact of Residential Communities

Many factors can influence the sense of belonging for college students. Outside of the identities they hold and previous experiences they have, sense of belonging for college students can also be influenced by institutional factors, including different programs and experiences students engage with once they arrive on campus. As previously mentioned, Johnson et al. (2007) and Duran et al. (2020) suggested that further research explore the impact that residence halls may have on sense of belonging and other measures of success, particularly for Students of Color.

López Turley and Wodtke (2010) conducted a quantitative study that supports the notion that living on campus in residence halls benefits Students of Color and further assert that this experience benefits Students of Color more than their white peers. When conducting this national study, López Turley and Wodtke found that for most college students, the type of residence they had during college did not influence their academic performance in their first year. However, for Black students, living on campus significantly improved their grade point averages (GPAs) compared to those who did not live on campus. López Turley and Wodtke claim that further research examining the relationship between Students of Color and living on campus is warranted, especially with the rise of living learning communities and other intentionally structured academic environments. Although this is positive news for Students of Color, it is essential to acknowledge that many Students of Color are also low-income students who may find more financial and cultural barriers that prevent them from living on campus, such as supporting their families, balancing part-time or full-time work, and paying for the substantial cost of on-campus room and board.

Spanierman et al. (2013) took a deeper dive into the residence hall experience and examined how living learning communities (LLCs) impacted sense of belonging for Students of Color at predominantly white institutions. Through this mixed methods study, Spanierman et al. found that LLC students reported a greater sense of belonging than non-LLC students in their residence hall, however, there were no differences between these two groups concerning sense of belonging with the greater campus community. Additionally, Spanierman et al. found that white students reported a higher sense of belonging on campus than Students of Color and while Spanierman et al. mention this finding, their study did not focus on how students of different identities experience LLCs differently. Spanierman et al. suggest that future studies explore more deeply the role that LLCs play in the sense of belonging for Students of Color at predominantly white institutions.

Garvey et al. (2020) conducted a mixed methods study that adopted Strayhorn's (2018) model of sense of belonging as a theoretical framework to explore this phenomenon among first-generation college students living in residence halls at a large, public university in the Southeastern United States. They found that female students, Christian students, and students from a higher-income background reported a higher sense of belonging than their counterparts. Garvey et al. (2020) encourage student affairs practitioners to embrace living learning communities for first-generation college students and other marginalized student groups as a means of promoting a sense of belonging in their communities. Spanierman et al. (2013) and Garvey et al. (2020) both call for future research that focuses on the influence living learning communities have on students with marginalized identities, especially Students of Color at predominantly white institutions.

Living Learning Communities as a High-Impact Practice

Although retention and student success have long been goals for postsecondary education, college retention initiatives have been at the forefront of higher education since President Obama's College Completion Agenda was presented in February 2009 (Gray, 2017; Humphreys, 2012; Russell, 2011). As a result of this agenda, higher education institutions began shifting their focus from increasing recruitment numbers to increasing retention and graduation percentages. Strategies that successfully retain and graduate students while promoting student learning and engagement are commonly referred to as *high-impact practices*, a term first coined by George Kuh in 2007 (Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014). Kuh emphasized that high-impact practices should impact college students in terms of their learning, engagement, and retention (Kuh, 2008; Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014).

There are many high-impact practices that postsecondary institutions have adopted, including undergraduate research, study abroad, and capstone courses. In 2007, the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) identified learning communities as a high-impact practice because of the many benefits they provide to undergraduate students (Inkelas et al., 2018; Kuh, 2008). Learning communities can be found in a variety of institution types, from four-year and two-year, to predominately white institutions and minority-serving institutions. Learning communities vary from institution to institution in form; however, they typically consist of clustering students together through coursework with a common curricular theme (Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014). Learning communities share five components that closely align with the definition of a high-impact practice: student collaboration, faculty collaboration, curricular coordination, shared setting, and interactive pedagogy (Love & Tokuno, 1999). Many

learning communities are known to increase retention and academic achievement for undergraduate students because of the interconnectedness of these five dimensions.

Each component has a continuum along which a learning community can identify. The more developed the component is, the more significant its impact on students and their success (Love & Tokuno, 1999). The *student collaboration* component includes how involved students are within their learning community and to what extent students are clustered together to facilitate connections and relationships for the purpose of learning (Love & Tokuno, 1999). In learning communities, student collaboration can be seen through study groups and group assignments, and can range in how often they are experienced, from one to all of their classes.

The *faculty collaboration* component consists of how faculty interact amongst each other and discuss issues within their classes (Love & Tokuno, 1999). In learning communities, this may look like faculty talking to each other about the students they have in common and brainstorming strategies for teaching in the classroom. Faculty collaboration may even look like team teaching, where faculty teach courses together. *Curricular coordination* builds upon this component and may not specifically involve team teaching but does connect courses in terms of content and approach (Love & Tokuno, 1999). Curricular coordination allows students to find connections between their courses and requires that faculty collaborate to deliver a highly coordinated curriculum. *Interactive pedagogy* is about how content is delivered, whether strictly lecture-based or requires students to take a more active role in their learning. Active learning methods can include peer teaching, discussion groups, peer reviews, and experiential learning (Love & Tokuno, 1999).

Lastly, *shared setting* is defined by what spaces and resources students share in the learning community. Shared settings can look like specific areas of a library or

lounges in offices. A highly structured learning community may provide a residential space where students live together and take courses based on a theme, often referred to as living learning communities or LLCs (Love & Tokuno, 1999). Some LLCs can also involve live-in faculty members or on-site faculty offices to promote visibility and interaction between faculty and students.

These components are flexible in terms of how developed each one is and how integrated they are with each other. Learning communities differ widely from institution to institution because of the varying complexity of their designs and the students they are designed to serve. Some learning communities are developed for specific populations of students, such as honors students, remedial students, first-generation college students, and residential students. Although learning communities can serve as an umbrella term for many programs that include these five components, they are not to be confused with one specific type of learning community, the *living learning community*.

History of Living Learning Communities

Living learning communities were the first type of learning communities (Inkelas et al., 2018). Living learning communities (LLCs) are structured learning communities that enroll students in common courses and designate a physical residential space on campus for students to live and learn together (Inkelas et al., 2018; Levine Laufgraben, 2005). The development of living learning communities aligns closely with how residential life's role in higher education has changed over time. The beginning of American higher education included student housing (Frederiksen, 1993; Rudolph, 1962). Blimling (2015) describes the evolution of residence halls throughout the history of colleges in the United States as changing with the student-institutional relationship, beginning with the foundational collegiate model that mirrored the educational traditions of Oxford and Cambridge.

In the United States, higher education began with Oxford and Cambridge alumni modeling Harvard and other early institutions after their alma maters (Rudolph, 1962). Within the collegiate model, residential experiences in higher education are somewhat similar to today's LLCs, fostering community where students lived and learned among their peers and faculty (Blimling, 2015; Inkelas et al., 2018; Winston Jr. & Anchors, 1993). The collegiate model promoted a holistic sense of learning and close relationships with peers and faculty within small communities. The English education system that Oxford and Cambridge illustrate is one of the holistic student experience, where students engaged with each other and faculty both inside and outside the classroom (Frederiksen, 1993). Residential dormitories had their fair share of critics, including Francis Wayland of Brown University and Frederick Barnard of Columbia University, deeming them "unnatural" ways of living and the root of many poor habits developed by their students, such as lack of exercise and heightened conflicts (Frederiksen, 1993; Rudolph, 1962). Additionally, at many postsecondary institutions, Students of Color were prohibited from living in residential dormitories (Ris, 2022).

During the mid-1800s, an impersonal approach derived from the Germanic model of higher education emerged. The German education system had no focus on the student experience outside of the classroom, and students were expected to find their own housing arrangements (Frederiksen, 1993). In this model, the focus of education was on content, and faculty interests were centered on creating more knowledge through research – not on the holistic education of students (Blimling, 2015). The rise of the impersonal approach led to the residential experience becoming a dormitory experience with the mere purpose of housing and feeding students (Inkelas et al., 2018). Residence halls were built with little to no intention of fostering an academic environment outside of the classroom but rather house as many students as possible in close

quarters. This model of education was short-lived, ending around the early 1900s, and higher education began circling back to the student experience outside of the classroom to contribute to the success of students within the classroom.

Brower and Inkelas (2010) state that while the idea of LLCs can be traced back to social clubs at Oxford and Cambridge, the more structured LLCs we commonly see today are first seen in the late 1920s at Alexander Meiklejohn's Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin. The Experimental College was based in a residence hall where both students and their advisors lived and studied. The Experimental College attempted to build community with students both inside and outside of the classroom while focusing on democracy and social learning (Inkelas et al., 2018). The Experimental College welcomed students with minoritized identities, including Jewish and gay students (Ris, 2022). Meiklejohn developed the Experimental College with tenets of John Dewey's liberal education, where students can take charge of their own educational experience (Rudolph, 1962). Although the Experimental College only lasted five years, the impact of the Experimental College is something we still see with learning communities today. The Experimental College introduced elements of today's LLCs, including active learning strategies, integrating inside and outside classroom learning, and obtaining knowledge from multiple perspectives (Inkelas et al., 2018).

In the 1960s and 1970s, new learning community programs appeared at the University of California, Berkeley and San Jose State College led by Joseph Tussman and Mervyn Cadwallader, respectively (Inkelas et al., 2018). Tussman was a former student of Meiklejohn and was influenced by the Experimental College to create a community focusing on democracy and integration of course content (Inkelas et al., 2018). Cadwallader created a Tutorial Program that also focused on democracy and

faculty collaboration through team teaching (Inkelas et al., 2018). Unfortunately, like the Experimental College in Wisconsin, both of these programs were also short-lived.

Blimling (2015) describes today's educational approach of residence halls as a student learning approach that began in the mid-1980s. Around this time and through the mid-1990s, many published national reports called for national higher education reform and innovative undergraduate education (Inkelas et al., 2018). Higher education institutions were being scrutinized for their low graduation rates and the quality of faculty teaching or its absence altogether (Blimling, 2015). Astin (1999) highlighted residence halls as an opportunity to increase retention, graduation, and college satisfaction rates of first- and second-year students, although some studies do not support this notion for all students at all institutions today (López Turley & Wodtke, 2010).

With the pressure for educational reform to focus on the undergraduate student experience and education, residential life professionals began actively promoting student learning outside the classroom (Blimling, 2015). This urgent request for reform led to the revival and abundance of LLCs that we see today. The combination of the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) identifying learning communities as a high-impact practice in 2007 and President Obama's announcement of the College Completion Agenda in 2009 shines a spotlight on learning communities as a means to improve undergraduate education with a particular emphasis on LLCs within residential spaces on campuses.

Living Learning Communities Today

In 2018, there were living learning community (LLC) programs at over 600 four-year residential colleges and universities in the United States (Inkelas et al., 2018). Although LLCs are deemed high-impact practices that aim to increase retention, graduation, and sense of belonging for all students, their implementation varies

significantly among these 600 programs (Doyle et al., 2019; Kuh, 2008; Reynolds et al., 2019; Spanierman et al., 2013). Inkelas et al. (2018) state that institutions carry out LLCs based on anecdotal information and broader learning community literature, resulting in various structures, outcomes, and quality of living learning communities.

Although there are many variations of LLCs, most LLCs are programs that cluster students together in a residential community and enroll these students in college courses together (Inkelas et al., 2018; Levine Laufgraben, 2005). Typically, LLCs cluster students by a shared identity or theme, such as their major, first-generation status, and social justice themes, among others (Doyle et al., 2019; Inkelas et al., 2007; Jessup-Anger et al., 2020; Spanierman et al., 2013). Living learning communities are a unique set of high-impact practices because they require collaboration between academic faculty and student affairs administrators to be successful. Living learning communities can vary in many ways, including the requirements to participate in the LLC program, the number of courses that students are enrolled in together, how LLCs are categorized at an institution, and how involved the academic faculty and student affairs administrators are within each program. In fact, some institutions even have varying types of LLCs within the same institution (Inkelas et al., 2007; Wawrzynski & Jessup-Anger, 2010).

Some studies have emphasized the importance of intentionally developing first-year experiences, including LLCs, by considering the various identities of students in each community and their individual needs (Jessup-Anger et al., 2020; Reynolds et al., 2019; Wawrzynski & Jessup-Anger, 2010). Wawrzynski and Jessup-Anger (2010) conducted a comprehensive, exploratory mixed methods study of LLCs at a four-year public land-grant university. This university specifically promotes its long history of well-established, academically based LLCs. This longitudinal study sampled 95 students about their expectations regarding academic behaviors, attitudes, and concerns about

the university; their goals for college; and their support systems at the university. Wawrzynski and Jessup-Anger (2010) compared two different types of LLCs, collaborative and combined. Collaborative LLCs were more structured with dedicated funding, faculty, and staff, whereas combined LLCs were smaller in size and received less resources. Students in collaborative LLCs also enrolled in dedicated sections of courses together instead of enrolling in a larger course section with non-LLC students. Wawrzynski and Jessup-Anger (2010) concluded that although students in both types of LLCs enter college with similar expectations for their college experience, students in collaborative LLCs have greater peer academic interactions and a more enriching educational environment than students in combined LLCs. Because of these findings, Wawrzynski and Jessup-Anger (2010) emphasize the importance of structuring and investing in LLCs with dedicated staff and resources if institutions genuinely seek to improve undergraduate experiences and student learning.

Contributing to this notion, Jessup-Anger et al. (2020) conducted a multi-state case study of social justice-themed LLCs located in varying regions in the United States. The purpose of this study was to examine students' experiences in a social justice LLC and explore how these communities promoted students' understanding of social justice. Through this qualitative study, Jessup-Anger et al. (2020) interviewed 30 students in three social justice LLCs at three private Catholic schools. Jessup-Anger et al. (2020) found that students demonstrated a variation in their understanding of and commitment to involvement in social justice initiatives and asserted that involvement alone was insufficient to promote social justice understanding. However, Jessup-Anger et al. (2020) stated that students' social justice understanding deepened when involvement was supplemented with sustained learning opportunities in the form of classes, structured reflection about community service, and sustained discussion about justice. They

encourage institutions to invest time, energy, and resources to ensure that students develop the capacity for social justice understanding rather than providing unstructured environments that can be more detrimental than beneficial.

The vast majority of LLCs are located at four-year postsecondary institutions. While some community colleges have begun to provide on-campus housing options, most literature focuses on LLCs at four-year colleges and universities (Inkelas et al., 2018). Even within four-year institutions, most research has focused on public and private predominantly white universities, however, some studies on the impact of LLCs at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have been recently conducted (Ericksen et al., 2015; Johnson, 2016; Pearce-Brady, 2019). Because the majority of literature has focused on predominantly white institutions, the student populations and campus climates have largely been centered in whiteness. The following section discusses the impact of living learning communities in recent literature; however, it should be provided with the caveat that institutions in these studies have predominately white environments that influence these outcomes.

Impact of Living Learning Communities

Despite the variety of structure in living learning community programs across institutions, many studies show that LLC participation results in positive outcomes, such as improved academic performance (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; Hall & O'Neal, 2016), increased retention and graduation rates (Inkelas et al., 2007; Tinto, 2000), social benefits, and sense of belonging (Garvey et al., 2020; Hall & O'Neal, 2016; Inkelas et al., 2007; Spanierman et al., 2013; Tinto, 2000).

One of the landmark studies for living learning communities is the National Study of Living-Learning Programs, which relied on a decade of mixed methods research to study over 50,000 undergraduate students in over 600 LLCs (Inkelas et al., 2007).

Initially, this longitudinal study's purpose was to understand the various impacts of LLCs on student outcomes. However, it evolved into developing a database for research on LLCs to improve implementation and undergraduate education with LLCs on a national scale. Overall, the National Study supports the effectiveness of LLC programs and identifies various benefits that LLCs provide to the undergraduate experience, including increased academic performance, more positive interactions with peers and faculty, a higher sense of belonging, and others. This national project is commonly cited in LLC literature because of its robust data and research design.

Academic Performance Outcomes. Many scholars endorse LLCs as an effective practice to provide college students with a seamless learning environment conducive to positive academic outcomes (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; Doyle et al., 2019; Hall & O'Neal, 2016; Reynolds et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2015). Most studies that examine academic outcomes of LLCs are quantitative in design and focus on grade point averages, retention rates, and graduation percentages. However, some mixed methods studies examine these variables in addition to student engagement and sense of belonging (Doyle et al., 2019; Hall & O'Neal, 2016). Most literature that focuses on the academic performance outcomes of LLCs supports the notion that students who participate in LLCs earn higher grade point averages, complete a higher number of credit hours per semester, and are more likely to be retained and graduate on time. However, some studies have contradicted some of these findings when comparing certain outcomes for LLC and non-LLC students.

Wilson et al. (2015) examined the impact of an aviation living learning community on student success measured by grade point average and credit hour completion with a quantitative design. By examining data from 625 freshmen and transfer students and comparing their academic outcomes at the study institution, Wilson et al. determined that

those who participated in the aviation LLC earned higher grades and completed more credit hours their first year than those who did not participate in the LLC. Wilson et al. attributed available resources such as tutoring, faculty relationships, and weekly study sessions to the academic success of the aviation LLC students. Although there were significant differences in grade point averages and credit hour completion, Wilson et al. did not find any difference between LLC and non-LLC students concerning retention rates.

Similarly, Vincent et al. (2021) examined the impact of a pre-pharmacy living learning community at the University of New England by measuring grade point average and retention from fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall semesters with a quantitative approach. Students who participated in the pre-pharmacy LLC exhibited higher grade point averages and had higher retention rates than students who did not participate. Vincent et al. also credit additional LLC programming, increased access and support from faculty, and peer connections as reasons for higher academic success markers.

The study conducted by Dagley et al. (2016) is similar to that of Wilson et al. (2015) and Vincent et al. (2021) in that it also examined a single learning community by comparing retention and graduation rates. Dagley et al. analyzed these variables for students who participated in a STEM learning community compared with non-participants at the University of Central Florida. The STEM learning community is a two-year learning community model that incorporates required math coursework and optional residential components. Even though the STEM learning community had an optional residential component, the retention and graduation rates were higher for students participating in this program than those who did not. Additionally, Dagley et al. found that female, African American, and Hispanic students were all retained and graduated at higher rates when participating in the STEM learning community.

Adding a mixed methods approach to examining a single living learning community, Hall and O'Neal (2016) conducted a study with an experimental design to evaluate a pilot living learning community at Indiana University Southeast. Using a combination of survey and interview data, Hall and O'Neal examined how their pilot program would improve student engagement, academic performance, and second-year retention. Among other outcomes, Hall and O'Neal found that students who participated in their pilot LLC program performed significantly better on active reading outcomes, earned higher final course grades, and overall had a positive impact on student learning. Additionally, Hall and O'Neal found that students who participated in their pilot LLC program were retained at a higher rate than students from the same demographic backgrounds who did not participate in the program.

Another mixed methods study explored the impact of a living learning community pilot program on academic outcomes. Doyle et al. (2019) conducted an explanatory sequential mixed methods study to assess how scholarships impact students' academic performance, retention, and sense of belonging. Financial aid is often linked to grade point average (GPA) and financial need, but Doyle et al. emphasize that grade point averages are not always representative of student learning. They hypothesized that if financial aid, such as a scholarship, was tied to LLC participation instead of a particular GPA requirement, student learning may be increased. The study institution developed a scholarship initiative that required recipients to participate in an LLC. Doyle et al. examined the impact of this scholarship program with two phases. The study's first phase was quantitative, using logistic regression models with retention and GPA data from 1,125 first-year students who participated in one of two LLCs. The study's second phase consisted of phenomenological interviews with six students from the first phase who received the LLC scholarship. Although receiving the scholarship was not a strong

predictor of retention, student stories maintained that learning occurred outside the classroom and encouraged students to participate in the LLC.

Purdie II and Rosser (2011) conducted a quantitative study that examined three different programs at the same large public research university in the Midwest. Although all three programs shared a goal of promoting first-year student learning and success, they varied in structure. The first program was the first-year experience (FYE) course; a two-credit course focused on transitioning students successfully to the university. The other two programs were living learning communities, one was an academic themed floor (ATF) that strategically housed students together by discipline in a residence hall. The second living learning community was the freshmen interest group (FIG), which grouped students in their residence hall and enrolled the same group into four classes. Purdie II and Rosser compared these three programs by collecting demographic and student background data, then holding these variables constant, compared participants' grade point averages and retention rates. Purdie II and Rosser found that students who participated in a FIG earned higher grade point averages and were more likely to be retained to their sophomore year. Although the higher grade point average was significant, it was only slightly higher than students who participated in FYE courses and ATFs. However, the difference in retention rate was substantial, resulting in an 18% increase if students participated in a FIG compared with the other two groups. Purdie II and Rosser discussed the structure of FIGs, attributing the higher academic performance measures to faculty-student interactions and number of courses that students enrolled in together.

Another study examining different learning communities and their impact was conducted by Cambridge-Williams et al. (2013) at George Mason University. This quantitative study examined the retention and graduation rates of students who

participated in first-year seminar courses and the first-year LLC attached to the seminar course. Cambridge-Williams et al. compared retention and graduation rate data among three groups:

1. Students who did not enroll in the first-year seminar course
2. Students who enrolled in only the first-year seminar course
3. Students who enrolled in the first-year seminar course and participated in the associated LLC

Cambridge-Williams et al. (2013) found that students who participated in the first-year seminar course were retained at a higher rate (90%) than students who did not enroll in a first-year seminar course (78%). There was no significant difference in retention for the LLC group compared to the first-year seminar-only group. However, 94% of students who took this first-year course and participated in the LLC returned for their second year. The six-year graduation rate for students who took the first-year seminar course and participated in the LLC was 83% compared to 61% for those who just enrolled in the first-year seminar course and 55% for students who did not participate at all.

The majority of these studies were quantitative or quantitative-dominant in design, allowing the researchers to determine significant differences in LLC students and non-LLC students but leaving them unable to identify influential factors of participating in LLCs. While most literature supports the notion that students who participate in LLCs are more academically successful in terms of grade point average, retention rates, and graduation rates, the quantitative nature of these studies leaves the unanswered question of, "why?" The following studies accept these academic performance outcomes as truths and explore what experiences may contribute to these outcomes with a

qualitative or qualitative-dominant design to attempt to answer why students are more academically successful in these environments.

Connections with Peers and Faculty. Many scholars assert that living learning communities foster student interaction with faculty and peers, producing higher social and academic engagement both inside and outside of the classroom (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Inkelas et al., 2006; Kuh, 2008; Levine Laufgraben, 2005). Living learning communities have a strong potential to improve undergraduate education by integrating what students are learning in the classroom to what they are experiencing outside of the classroom. As previously mentioned, many studies assert that LLC participation results in higher academic performance and typically attribute this outcome to relationships formed with peers and faculty in these communities (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; Cambridge-Williams et al., 2013; Dagley et al., 2016; Purdie II & Rosser, 2011; Reynolds et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2015). Recent studies have explored how students engage with others, including their peers and faculty, and how this can impact their transition and success as undergraduate students.

While much research on living learning communities examines student outcomes, little research explores why LLCs are linked to these positive student outcomes. Thus, Arensdorf and Naylor-Tincknell (2016) conducted a qualitative study to explore this phenomenon through focus groups with LLC and non-LLC students. Through their study, results indicated that LLC students reported richer connections to faculty and students in addition to other social and academic opportunities. The themes that emerged from their focus groups included Student Study Skills, Connection to Peers, and Connections to Faculty, which were more prevalent with LLC students than non-LLC students. Although Arensdorf and Naylor-Tincknell note that both groups of students acknowledged the need to alter their study habits to adjust to the rigor of

college coursework, LLC students tackled this obstacle using a team-oriented approach and study groups. Living learning communities fostered social connections among students, providing a sense of accountability and support with their academics. Additionally, students in LLCs reported deeper connections with faculty members in and out of class. They named their relationships with faculty as reasons why they are afforded other opportunities on campus.

Workman (2015) conducted a qualitative study that explored first-year undecided student experiences in a living learning community designed specifically for undecided students at a public high-research Midwestern university. Like Arensdorf and Naylor-Tincknell (2016), this study employed a phenomenological perspective with semi-structured interviews. The themes that emerged from interviewing 12 students were categorized into one of the four S's from Schlossberg's transition theory (situation, support, self, and strategies). Workman examined how students navigated their transition to college through Schlossberg's transition theory and the systems in place to support students through this transition. Results from this study support that making social connections is significant for student success and transition, and students prioritize creating these social support networks. Workman suggests that practitioners focus on helping students learn how to navigate their social systems, and while it does not directly help undecided students declare a major or career, however, not all first-year students are prioritizing this aspect of their college transition when they joined the LLC for undecided students.

Building on the living learning community literature with phenomenological approaches, Jessup-Anger et al. (2019) argue that little research has been conducted to explore students' experiences within a social justice living learning community, especially the lasting impressions of those experiences. Jessup-Anger et al. conducted a

phenomenological qualitative study where they interviewed eight students who participated in a social justice LLC at a private, Catholic university in the Midwest. Jessup-Anger et al. found that students developed a deeper understanding of social justice issues in their communities and established lasting values, including an appreciation for community and an increased capacity for social connections. Students in this LLC were able to engage in deeper discussions with their peers and realized the need for deeper friendships.

Wawrzynski et al. (2009) conducted a qualitative study on students' perceptions of LLCs at a large land-grant university in the Midwest. This study collected data by facilitating 10 focus groups to understand how students perceive their academic LLCs and what aspects of their environments they valued. Students described having meaningful relationships with their faculty and peers throughout this study, contributing to the seamless learning environment and the community's culture. It was evident in this study that students valued the connections they made with their peers and faculty and understood that they held a prominent role in creating the culture they experienced in their academic LLC, including the norms of academic support and learning. Wawrzynski et al. call for collaboration between residential life staff and faculty in order to create this culture of seamless learning with their students.

A qualitative study on factors supporting student retention in living learning communities was conducted by Bauer and Kiger (2017). This study examined students' personal experiences in a nursing living learning community and explored findings associated with promoting student retention. Bauer and Kiger conducted 14 interviews at two different universities with nursing living learning communities, and the themes that emerged were mutual support, resident assistant staff, and self-determination. Students in these communities discussed the convenience of the residential environment when

forming study groups or finding friends with similar career interests. Bauer and Kiger found that when LLC students reflected on their experiences, they attributed their retention to the peer relationships and residential staff to support them, in addition to holding themselves accountable.

Providing a mixed methods perspective to this literature, Reynolds et al. (2019) conducted a convergent parallel study that utilized survey data to explore the challenges of designing and sustaining a first-year experience program at a private university in Rhode Island. Reynolds et al. compared 842 students' perceptions participating in one of four groups: living learning communities, first-year experience courses, both of these experiences, and neither of these two experiences. Through reflections, students in living learning communities expressed having emotional and social connections with their peers. Although educational benefits stemmed from these relationships, such as forming study groups quicker and having accountability amongst peers, students in living learning communities did not recognize this connection. Reynolds et al. conclude that institutions providing first-year programs, including living learning communities, intentionally develop these communities by incorporating peer and faculty relationships to achieve social and academic gains.

It is evident that living learning communities provide students with ample opportunities to connect with others, including their peers and faculty. The qualitative and qualitative-dominant studies allow for students' stories to highlight how these connections and relationships contribute to how students experience their living learning community and their college as a whole. Meaningful relationships that develop as a result of participating in a living learning community contribute to more positive academic performance outcomes, however, these relationships can also contribute to other positive outcomes, such as sense of belonging.

Sense of Belonging. Connections with peers and faculty can also contribute to a greater sense of belonging within the campus community. Students who live on campus report a higher sense of belonging on campus than students who live off-campus (López Turley & Wodtke, 2010). Recent studies have built upon this literature by exploring how living learning communities (LLCs) impact undergraduate students' sense of belonging (Arendsdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; Garvey et al., 2020; Jessup-Anger et al., 2019; Spanierman et al., 2013). The following mixed methods studies explore students' sense of belonging in LLC environments.

Spanierman et al. (2013) conducted a multiphase mixed methods study that examined the relationship between LLCs and undergraduate students' sense of community and belonging to their university and residence halls at a large Midwestern public university. The study's first phase used a quantitative approach by surveying 344 undergraduate students to determine whether living in an LLC was associated with students' sense of belonging with the university and their residence hall. The second phase used another survey that collected both quantitative and qualitative data from 171 LLC students from the first phase. Spanierman et al. found that LLC students reported a greater sense of belonging than non-LLC students in their residence halls. However, there were no differences between these two groups concerning their sense of belonging with the greater college campus. Additionally, Spanierman et al. found that white students reported a higher sense of belonging on campus than Students of Color and suggested that future studies further explore the role that LLCs play in the sense of belonging for Students of Color at predominantly white institutions. Spanierman et al. also utilized quantitative and qualitative survey data for their mixed methods study. To explore how Students of Color experience a sense of belonging in LLCs more deeply,

other types of qualitative data, such as interview data, may provide richer insight into their experiences.

Garvey et al. (2020) conducted a convergent parallel mixed methods study to explore belongingness among first-generation college students living in residence halls. Garvey et al. surveyed 390 first-year first-generation college students living on campus at a large, public university in the Southeastern United States. They found that female students, Christian students, and students with a higher socioeconomic status reported a higher sense of belonging than their male, non-Christian, low-income peers who lived on campus. Garvey et al. encourage student affairs practitioners to embrace living learning communities for first-generation college students and other marginalized student groups as a means of promoting a sense of belonging in their communities.

Conversely, some studies have cautioned those who develop and implement LLCs about the potential for students to experience isolation within an LLC (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; Jessup-Anger et al., 2019; Jessup-Anger & Howell, 2021; Wawrzynski et al., 2009). Wawrzynski et al. (2009) conducted a qualitative study to understand how students perceive their academic LLC environment and assert that students are vital pieces of the LLC culture, as they uphold the community expectations and norms. However, if some students within an LLC do not share the same values or perspectives, an opposite effect can occur: isolation and marginalization. Wawrzynski et al. suggest that practitioners identify students who are not satisfied with their LLC experience in order to highlight practices that contribute to their feelings of isolation.

Arensdorf and Naylor-Tincknell (2016) also support the possibility of isolation for students, warning that students can feel a lack of sense of belonging if cliques form before they have an opportunity to navigate their social connections. Jessup-Anger et al. (2019), who conducted a qualitative study examining the lasting impacts of social justice

LLCs, indicate that students can find isolation instead of a community if they do not fit the norms and beliefs of their social justice LLC. Jessup-Anger and Howell (2021) built upon the previous study and explored one student's isolation within the same social justice LLC and found that while LLCs are a high-impact practice, they are not beneficial for all students. For LLCs to succeed, students should feel socially integrated and included, even if students have different values or opinions.

Sense of belonging is a complex phenomenon that can be influenced by how a student experiences college and can influence if a student chooses to stay and eventually graduate (Strayhorn, 2018). Findings from the previously mentioned studies support that living learning communities can either positively, or sometimes negatively, influence the sense of belonging for college students. Because sense of belonging can ultimately contribute to college student success, it is imperative that living learning communities continue to be studied in order to determine how they contribute to sense of belonging, especially for marginalized student populations who tend to experience a lower sense of belonging and lower retention rates (Spanierman et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2018).

Future Research and Closing the Gap

The pressure postsecondary institutions face to recruit, retain, and graduate students today is unmatched. Unfortunately, the efforts made by higher education practitioners have not produced favorable results for college students with marginalized identities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). The equity gap between white students and Students of Color continues to be a focus for these institutions, however, research is essential in order to identify which initiatives are most promising for closing this gap. Previous literature has identified factors that influence the retention and graduation of Students of Color, and most recently, ways in which institutions foster a

sense of belonging has been acknowledged as one of these factors (Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2018).

Many studies have examined the outcomes produced by living learning communities, thrusting them into a list of highly effective high-impact practices for postsecondary institutions to implement. Although grade point averages, retention rates, and graduation percentages are common measures for student success, living learning communities also boast outcomes such as increased peer and faculty interactions and a greater sense of belonging for students on campus. Brower and Inkelas (2010) suggest that more studies be conducted that examine LLC effectiveness on student learning outcomes, social transition to college, overall satisfaction, and sense of belonging. Spanierman et al. (2013) and Garvey et al. (2020) recommend that future research explores how students with marginalized identities are impacted by living learning communities, especially at predominantly white institutions. Predominately white institutions have dominated the literature on living learning communities, providing rich data on how LLCs impact student success within this type of institution. Although living learning communities may universally be considered a high-impact practice for college students, much of the literature is void of how these programs impact Students of Color specifically within predominantly white institutions.

How Students of Color experience college is a complex phenomenon that requires a variety of methodologies to explore. Many studies have examined how Students of Color experience college through quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies. Altogether, these studies have found both influences and outcomes stemming from developing a sense of belonging. Greater peer and faculty interactions, participation in summer bridge programs, and living on campus are among some of the experiences and initiatives that tend to result in a greater sense of belonging for

Students of Color (Duran et al., 2020; Hausmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2018).

However, holding marginalized identities such as being a Student of Color, identifying as LGBTQIA+, being a first-generation college student, and coming from a lower socioeconomic status tend to result in a lower sense of belonging for college students (Bettencourt, 2021; Strayhorn, 2018).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the literature review reveals positive impacts of developing a sense of belonging for college students, as well as many positive outcomes for living learning communities as a high-impact practice. However, the literature is void of studies that examine how Students of Color in living learning communities experience a sense of belonging. Researchers have suggested that future studies explore how living learning communities may impact Students of Color and their sense of belonging, specifically at predominantly white institutions (Spanierman et al., 2013).

This study takes a phenomenological approach to address this gap in the literature. Chapter IV will present a more in-depth discussion of the methodology of this study, including data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter V will present the findings from the study, and Chapter VI will present a discussion and conclusion to this study.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

Students of Color often experience a lower sense of belonging on college campuses, contributing to lower retention and graduation rates (Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2018; Tachine et al., 2017). Living learning communities are residential experiences that are deemed as high-impact practices that aim to increase retention and sense of belonging for all students. Some scholars have suggested that living learning communities could be a successful way of promoting a sense of belonging and increasing retention of Students of Color (Pichon, 2016; Spanierman et al., 2013). Despite their suggestions for future research, limited literature addresses the impact of living learning communities on Students of Color who participate in them. This study seeks to close that gap by analyzing how Students of Color describe their experiences and perceptions of sense of belonging in living learning communities. This type of research may help enable institutions to enact strategies that increase their overall retention and graduation, moving one step closer to closing the equity gap for Students of Color.

This chapter presents the methodology that I employed to explore how Students of Color participating in living learning communities describe their experiences and how they perceive their sense of belonging. This phenomenological study focused on Students of Color in living learning communities at a large, predominately white research university. This chapter will restate the study's purpose and research questions, discuss the rationale and phenomenological research design, and describe data collection and analysis process. Finally, strategies to establish trustworthiness and ethical considerations and limitations will be addressed.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how Students of Color participating in living learning communities make meaning of their experiences and perceptions of their sense of belonging at a large, public research university. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do Students of Color describe their living learning community experiences and sense of belonging?
2. How do Students of Color make meaning of their living learning community experience?
3. What perceptions do Students of Color have regarding the impact of living learning communities on their sense of belonging?

Each research question was carefully crafted with “every word deliberately chosen and ordered in such a way that the primary words appear immediately, capture my attention, and guide and direct me in the phenomenological process of seeing, reflecting, and knowing” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59). These research questions guided the remainder of the study, from data collection to the development of an essence of the phenomenon of how Students of Color in living learning communities describe their lived experiences and perceptions of a sense of belonging.

Rationale and Research Design

I selected a qualitative approach for the study because it aimed to gain insight into people’s perspectives, experiences, and perceptions. Saldaña and Omasta (2018) state that studies aiming to explore how human beings experience life should utilize a qualitative approach to “reveal deep meanings and interpretations” (p. 146). Qualitative research centers the importance of the human experience and the need to develop an in-depth understanding of that experience from multiple perspectives. While quantitative

inquiry can shed light on human experience, it cannot typically prioritize the individual perspectives and stories from participants in the same way as qualitative inquiry.

This research study employed a constructivist worldview, acknowledging that “each person understands the world differently because people possess a range of different experiences and perspectives” (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 142). The constructivist worldview aspires to understand and make meaning of phenomena “formed through participants and their subjective views” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 36). A constructivist worldview involves illustrating various participants’ perspectives and recognizing researcher subjectivity since knowledge cannot exist without bias (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study also employed hermeneutic phenomenology, which embraces the constructivist worldview as a form of phenomenology research that rejects the idea of bracketing out researcher positionality, as the researcher is woven into the process of understanding participants’ perspectives (Kafle, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). In accordance with this framework, the nature of this study was interpretive, relying on participants’ stories and perspectives as subjective truths as well as myself as the researcher to interpret how participants make meaning of their experiences. This study retained the constructivist worldview throughout its methodology, including data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness.

Phenomenology Rationale

Within qualitative research, there are many forms of inquiry. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize that qualitative research involves researchers focusing on the meaning their participants hold about a specific issue instead of the meaning that researchers bring to the research or writers from the literature. With the intent to gain insight into the experiences of Students of Color, this qualitative approach adopted

hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, where the goal was to describe a sense of belonging from the perspective of Students of Color in living learning communities. This study exercised a phenomenological approach to understand the “human experience and for deriving knowledge from a state of pure consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 101). Creswell and Poth (2018) state that phenomenological research can be used to develop practices or policies resulting from forming a more in-depth understanding of particular phenomena. Phenomenological researchers intend to “determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Through this approach, I provided insight into the perceptions of sense of belonging and lived experiences of Students of Color as they participated in living learning communities. The purpose of phenomenological research methods aligns seamlessly with the purpose of this study, as I depicted participant experiences “in compelling enough detail and in sufficient depth that those who read the study can connect to that experience, learn how it is constituted, and deepen their understanding of the issues it reflects” (Seidman, 2019, p. 57). The following section discusses the steps taken to conduct this study with a phenomenological approach in detail.

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach

Moustakas (1994) is a well-cited author regarding phenomenological methods and college student experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fauria & Zellner, 2015; Museus & Park, 2015; Pisarik et al., 2017; Swank & Jahn, 2018). Moustakas asserts that phenomena are “the building blocks of human science and the basis for all knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). The phenomenological approach regards perception as the “primary source of knowledge” where the researcher asks participants to reconstruct and reflect on their experience with a phenomenon through interviews (Moustakas, 1994, p.

52). In this study, I asked participants to reconstruct and reflect on their experiences with living learning communities through two interviews, one which focused on reconstruction and the second which focused on reflection. The goal of these two interviews was “to come as close as possible to understanding the true ‘is’ of our participants’ experience from their subjective point of view” (Seidman, 2019, p. 17). Utilizing the phenomenological approach, the study sought to make meaning of the lived experiences of Students of Color who participate in living learning communities from their perceptions and feelings of sense of belonging. Specifically, this study adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, and in accordance with this, my biases and experiences are not bracketed out, but rather are “embedded and essential to the interpretive process” (Laverty, 2003, p. 28). Additionally, since a hermeneutic approach to phenomenology does not involve step-by-step data analysis procedures, but rather “multiple stages of interpretation that allow patterns to emerge” (Laverty, 2003, p. 30), both participants and I contributed to understanding how Students of Color in living learning communities experience a sense of belonging.

Positionality

To begin the research process, I first acknowledged my own identities, experiences, and relationships to make my assumptions in this study more explicit with regard to every step of the research process. As stated previously, my role in phenomenological research is intimately woven into every aspect of the research design. It is impossible to completely bracket out the experiences and biases that a researcher brings to a study, especially when they are closely involved with the research.

As a Latina with a first-generation college education, I have personally experienced the challenges presented in an environment, higher education, which was systemically crafted and developed to support white men. I attended a midsized four-

year, predominantly white institution in the rural Midwest. The identities I have and experiences I had as an undergraduate student most certainly impacted how I relate to the data and stories told by participants. During data collection and analysis, I made note of instances where I participated in co-construction, when participants' stories cause me to resonate with my own personal experiences.

My professional work experience has also not only influenced the decision to explore this phenomenon, but it also shaped how I interpreted the lived experiences of Students of Color. Prior to conducting this study, I was the Assistant Director for Residential Education at a predominately white research university. During my tenure within the Residence Life department, I not only oversaw the living learning community program, but I also developed a new framework to facilitate the program in partnership with academic and administrative faculty. Additionally, my role was instrumental in the development of new living learning communities including several identity-based and academic themed ones. As a scholar-practitioner formerly involved with living learning communities at a predominately white research university, I possess "funds of knowledge" which guide my work in supporting Students of Color and how I interpret phenomena (Bensimon, 2007). All practitioners possess funds of knowledge that impact how they serve students based on their own personal and professional experiences which then influences our implicit theories about student success (Bensimon, 2007). My funds of knowledge stem from my experience working closely with faculty and students to develop new living learning communities and assessing and improving the framework which guides this program in addition to the formal education and training I have as a scholar-practitioner.

While I no longer worked in this capacity at the time the study was conducted, the funds of knowledge I possess guided the study's design, including the development

of research questions and interview protocols. For example, knowing that each living learning community required students to be enrolled in at least one common class, I intentionally asked participants about their experiences in these required classes. Additionally, my experience influenced how the data was analyzed, as I am familiar with the intentionality and framework of the living learning community program at the site institution.

I understand that my experiences with living learning communities and my belief in their impact on student success influenced my interpretations, but I also believe that through reflexivity and reflective writing, and drawing from the literature, I was able to discern which portions of my findings stemmed from my previous knowledge of the living learning community program and which portions stem directly from participants, with an effort to center their stories and experiences in this study rather than my own.

Study Site

The study was conducted at a large, predominately white, public four-year university located in the western United States. The university sponsored over a dozen living learning communities (LLCs) under three categories: academic, identity, and cocurricular. The participants recruited for the study participated in either an academic LLC or an identity LLC. The university states that high-impact practices such as LLCs promote higher grade point averages (GPAs), higher retention rates, and higher graduation percentages. Additionally, the university states that LLCs promote a higher sense of belonging, especially at research-intensive institutions.

Within these LLCs, students network and engage with faculty and peers both inside and outside the classroom. Students must take at least one shared course with others in the same LLC and live on campus in the residence hall that hosts their specific LLC. The university hosts LLCs in three different residence halls. There were four

identity LLCs developed for the following groups: Black students, Latinx students, LGBTQIA+ students, and transfer students. The identity LLCs were developed with the goal to connect and support students who were interested in exploring the culture and community for each of these communities. At the time of this study, there was an academic LLC available for every academic college or school within the site university for students to participate in with the exception of the college overseeing liberal arts majors. Cocurricular LLCs are for students who are accepted into a university program, such as athletics, rather than grouped together by academic major or shared identity.

In the Fall 2021 semester, this institution enrolled approximately 17,000 degree-seeking undergraduate students. The race and ethnicity percentages of the student population were approximately 52% White, 24% Hispanic/Latino, 8% Asian, 4% Black or African American, less than 1% American Indian or Alaska Native, less than 1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 9% two or more races (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Roughly 3,000 students lived on campus in one of 10 residence halls and nearly 45% identified as Students of Color. Out of the total on-campus population, about 250 students participated in an LLC and of those participants, approximately 44% identify as Students of Color. The proportion of Students of Color participating in LLCs closely aligns with the proportion of first-year Students of Color living on campus (45%) and overall proportion of Students of Color attending the university (45%) (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

While the percentage of Students of Color living on campus and participating in LLCs was similar to the overall undergraduate student body, the proportions of gender, local status, and Pell Grant eligibility among students living on campus and students participating in LLCs were different. For instance, the overall undergraduate student

population was 53% female and 47% male, compared to the gender breakdown of Students of Color participating in LLCs (73% female and 26% male). Additionally, 40% of all undergraduate students were local, meaning they are from the county in which the university is located, but only 15% of students living on campus and 8% of students participating in LLCs fell in this category. Lastly, approximately 26% of all undergraduate students at this university were eligible for the federal Pell Grant, but only 16% of students living on campus and 19% of students participating in LLCs were eligible for this grant.

Participants

Participants for this study were Students of Color who were currently participating in living learning communities at the study institution. A Student of Color refers to any college student who identifies as Hispanic or Latinx, Asian, Black or African American, Indigenous, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or multiracial. Student of Color was used instead of “non-white” to include students who identified as multiracial with one of those races being white. According to Seidman, we should select participants who are “currently engaged in those experiences that are relevant to the study” (2019, p. 20). Participants were full-time students living on campus, as this is a requirement to participate in any living learning communities at the study institution. Eligibility requirements related to standardized test scores and other course placement methods are not consistent across all living learning communities, so the population of potential participants reflected a range of academic ability.

Sampling Method

I recruited participants via purposeful sampling because I sought to understand specific experiences with those holding specific identities. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that criterion sampling is an intentional form of purposeful sampling to recruit

participants who would best inform the study by selecting those who have experienced the phenomenon being studied. Purposeful sampling involved selecting participants because they were most likely to provide insight into their experience and sense of belonging while participating in living learning communities as Students of Color. Purposeful sampling allowed me as the researcher to ensure that all participants are not from only a small number of the living learning communities offered at the institution. Working with the residence life department at the study institution, I retrieved a list of all living learning community participants who also self-identified as Students of Color. The list provided by the residence life department included student names, contact information, and demographic information including their race/ethnicity, gender, academic major, and which living learning community they were participating in. I sent recruitment emails to this list of students regarding the opportunity to participate in the study (see Appendix A). Snowball sampling occurred in addition to the initial purposeful sampling. Here, I asked current participants to refer other potential participants who may contribute to the study's purpose (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018; Seidman, 2019).

The initial recruitment email included an offer for an initial meeting to discuss all aspects of the study, including the study's purpose, the two-interview format, recording procedures, and confidentiality procedures. I kept a record of all potential participants and noted key characteristics related to the study, such as which living learning community they were participating in and what race or ethnicity they identified as (Seidman, 2019).

Participant Profiles

A total of nine participants completed both interviews for this study (see Table 1). Participants represented membership in six of the 12 total living learning communities that were sampled. Participants represented a variety of race/ethnicity, including

Hispanic/Latinx (four), Asian (two), Black/African American (two), and multiracial (Asian and Pacific Islander, one). While the gender breakdown is not neatly proportionate to the overall gender makeup of living learning community (LLC) students, female students made up 73% of all LLC Students of Color. Therefore, it was expected that there would be more female participants in this study than other genders. Additionally, only three of the participants identified as first-generation college (first-gen) students.

Table 1

Participant Overview

Name	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Major	LLC	First-Gen
Arthur	Hispanic	Male	Engineering	Honors College	No
Dionne	Asian, Pacific Islander	Female	Biology	Honors College	No
Lilyanne	Asian	Female	Engineering	Engineering College	No
Marla	Black	Female	Nutrition	Black identity	No
Nathan	Hispanic	Non-binary	Computer science	Honors College	Yes
Randy	Black	Male	Psychology	LGBTQIA+ identity	Yes
Shannon	Latinx	Female	Education	Latinx identity	No
Suzanne	Latinx	Female	Psychology	Latinx identity	Yes
Violet	Asian	Female	Engineering	Women in STEM	No

Below are brief participant profiles for each of the nine participants. I assigned pseudonyms to participants if they did not self-select a pseudonym to keep interviews confidential. Additionally, I altered any personally identifiable information to protect the confidentiality of the participants, their roommates, and other persons named in their interviews.

Arthur was a Hispanic male in-state student from an urban city located approximately seven hours away from the study institution. Both of his parents had college degrees and he had siblings who have attended or were currently attending the same institution. Arthur's parents were born in another country and moved to the United States before he was born. Arthur majored in engineering and was a member of the Honors College LLC. Arthur aspired to go into software or videogame development after graduating with his bachelor's degree.

Dionne was an Asian Pacific Islander female in-state student from an urban city located approximately seven hours away from the study institution. She did not specifically mention that her parents earned bachelor's degrees. Dionne mentioned wanting to be a role model for her younger siblings who also aspire to attend college. She also discussed frequently visiting family abroad in the Pacific before the health pandemic. She majored in biology and was a member of the Honors College LLC. Dionne aspired to attend medical school after graduating with her bachelor's degree.

Lilyanne was an Asian female student from the Midwest region of the United States. She was adopted and raised by two white parents, but did not mention if her parents attended and graduated from college. However, Lilyanne did mention having siblings who have attended or were currently attending other universities in the United States. She majored in engineering and was a member of the Engineering College LLC. Lilyanne aspired to go into structural engineering after graduating with her bachelor's degree.

Marla was a Black female in-state student from a rural town located approximately five hours away from the study institution. She mentioned having a sibling who also attended the same institution. Marla shared that she was familiar with the feeling of being the only Black student in her classes while in high school. She was

athletic in high school but no longer participated in sports in college and spent more time reading and writing as hobbies as a college student. She majored in nutrition and was a member of the Black identity LLC. Marla aspired to go to dental school after graduating with her bachelor's degree.

Nathan was a Hispanic non-binary in-state student from an urban city located approximately seven hours away from the study institution. Nathan stated that their parents held college degrees, but from a college outside the United States, so they considered themselves a first-generation college student. They mentioned having siblings who attended or were currently attending the same institution. Nathan received national academic scholarships and was attending the study institution because of their familiarity with the campus and in-state tuition cost. They majored in computer science and they were a member of the Honors College LLC. Nathan was interested in attending either graduate school to conduct engineering research or working at a major technology company after graduating with their bachelor's degree.

Randy was a Black male in-state student from an urban city located approximately seven hours away. He grew up in a single parent household and identified as a first-generation college student. He mentioned having other siblings, but none attended or were currently attending college. Randy was interested in attending the study institution ever since he was young because of the mascot. He majored in psychology and was a member of the LGBTQIA+ identity LLC. Randy aspired to work in the psychology field and was passionate about male mental health issues.

Shannon was a Latinx female in-state student. While she was an in-state student, she is originally from a Latin American country and recently moved to an urban city located approximately seven hours away from the study institution. She shared that her parents have college degrees, and she chose to go to college to avoid having a low-

income job. She also shared that her parents were recently divorced, and both parents remained in her life. She was an education major and a member of the Latinx identity LLC. Shannon aspired to work for a federal agency or become a counselor after graduating with her bachelor's degree.

Suzanne was a Latinx female out-of-state student from an urban city located approximately three hours away from the study institution. She identified as a first-generation college student since neither parent graduated from college. Suzanne's father immigrated to the United States when he was very young, and both of her parents come from large families. She shared that she had younger siblings who were also interested in attending college. Suzanne was a psychology major and was a member of the Latinx identity LLC. Suzanne aspired to be a therapist because of her passion for mental health.

Violet was an Asian female out-of-state student from an urban city located approximately two hours away from the study institution. Although Violet was an out-of-state student, she was able to drive home frequently since her home state was located in the Western United States like the study institution. She mentioned that one parent held a college degree. She majored in engineering and was a member of the Women in STEM LLC. Violet aspired to work in robotics and physics after graduating with her bachelor's degree.

Related Procedures

Prior to recruiting participants, I applied for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and was granted exempt status. After receiving IRB approval, I began recruiting for participants via the previously mentioned sampling methods. Once students expressed interest in participating, I communicated with students during an informational meeting to discuss the purpose of the study and data collection

procedures. If during the initial informational meeting, it was determined that a student would be an appropriate participant in the study, I scheduled times and dates for their two interviews based on the participants' preferences and schedules (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018; Seidman, 2019). At the time of scheduling, I informed the participant of the length of time for each interview and general topics that will be covered.

I did not predetermine a set number of participants; however, Dukes (1984) and Creswell and Poth (2018) state that most phenomenological studies interview approximately 10 participants. In this study, I determined the size of the sample by looking at sufficiency and saturation. Sufficiency involves looking at the range of potential participants (Students of Color in living learning communities) and determining if the sample size and characteristics reflect that range. This increases the possibility that those outside the sample connect with the sample's experiences (Seidman, 2019). I also continuously recruited and interviewed participants for the study until a level of saturation was met. Saturation is where I began to hear the same information repeatedly without learning anything new from the participants (Laverty, 2003; Malterud et al., 2016; Seidman, 2019). Once I scheduled interviews, I sent the informed consent form to participants with the request of completing the form before their first interview (see Appendix B).

Instrumentation and Data Collection

The phenomenological approach consists of conducting interviews to collect qualitative data from participants to develop an in-depth understanding and essence of their lived experiences from their point of view (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2019). Interviews are forms of storytelling, allowing participants to make meaning of their experiences and centers those experiences as the foci of the study. Thus, the primary data collection source was from conducting semi-structured interviews

which utilized mostly open-ended questions to guide each interview. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that phenomenological studies typically consist of multiple in-depth interviews with each participant. I adapted a two-interview format from the three-interview format of Seidman (2019), which is designed to deeply explore each participant's experience and how they make meaning of that experience. I employed a two-interview format instead of three interviews in order to lower the attrition rate of participants throughout the study. Seidman (2019) proposed a three-interview format to adequately obtain the life history, detailed lived experience, and reflection of meaning. The current study adapted Seidman's (2019) three areas into a two-interview format, as seen in other phenomenological studies (Howard, 2017; Mala, 2017).

Interviews were a means of exploring and understanding each participant's lived experiences and perception of sense of belonging as a Student of Color in a living learning community. The role of interviews in this study was for both participants and I to engage in data collection together. Interviews are typically viewed as interactions between the researcher and participants, and as such, my role as the researcher in this process cannot be overlooked (Smith et al., 2009). Each interview consisted of primarily open-ended questions to allow the data and experiences to emerge as naturally as possible. The interview protocol for the first interview was the most developed initially, and the second interview protocol was not entirely created until after the initial interview stage was completed. This was done purposefully to take what was learned from the first interview regarding student experiences to further build upon during the second interview (Seidman, 2019). While both interview protocols guided each interview, I adjusted and built upon each interview's participant responses as well as had opportunities to ask follow-up questions throughout both interviews. This allowed for

enough flexibility for the participants to share their stories, perceptions, and feelings related to their experiences and sense of belonging.

Because the first six weeks of a college student's experience is crucial to their transition and development of a sense of belonging on campus, I did not schedule interviews until the month of November, after this six-week period concluded (Levitz & Noel, 1989). Each interview was approximately 15-45 minutes in length, and the two interviews were spaced roughly one month apart. This one-month interval enabled participants to reflect and recall their previous interviews more effectively while allowing me as the researcher enough time to analyze the data to develop intentional questions for the second interview. Scheduling interviews one month apart also encouraged retention of participants for the study opposed to scheduling them further apart and possibly overlapping between the fall and springs semesters. Each interview served a purpose and the second interview built upon the content and structure of the first interview. The second interview also allowed me to follow up with participants if areas in the initial interview needed further clarification. The following sections describe the purpose and focus of each interview and how they built upon each other to allow the participant to make meaning of their experience in a living learning community.

Interview I: Focused Life History and Details of the Lived Experience

The purpose of Interview I was to “put participants’ experience into the context of their life history by asking them to tell us as much as possible about themselves in light of the topic up to the present time” (Seidman, 2019, p. 21). The initial interview also built upon the rapport that was initiated during the first meeting. This interview consisted of many questions asking participants to reconstruct and narrate a range of fundamental events and previous experiences that provide a context for exploring their participation in the living learning communities as Students of Color at the study institution (Seidman,

2019). During this interview, we reviewed their life history up to the time they became a full-time college student living on campus and participating in a living learning community. This interview also focused on the “concrete details of the participants’ present lived experience” in a living learning community (Seidman, 2019, p. 22). Many questions in this interview involved action and observation from the participant’s perspective, including what they see, feel, and hear as they experience living learning communities. Many questions in this interview protocol asked for specific examples and details related to the participants’ experiences.

When asked what their experiences in living learning communities were like, participants were asked to “reconstruct their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and actions, most of which they take for granted during their experience of the day” (Seidman, 2019, p. 22). Interview I also asked participants to describe a typical day as a Student of Color living on campus and participating in a living learning community “from the moment they woke up to the time they fell asleep” (Seidman, 2019, p. 22). Seidman (2019) proposed a three-interview format, and this first interview combined Seidman’s first two interviews’ structure by including questions that focus on both the life history and detailed lived experiences of participants.

The first interview protocol asked participants questions related to their choices to attend college, attend the specific institution, and participate in a living learning community (see Appendix C). These questions also had follow-up questions related to previous experiences and relationships that can influence their behavior, referencing back to Strayhorn’s (2018) concept of sense of belonging that states this phenomenon is a fundamental motive sufficient to drive behavior. Additionally, questions in the first interview addressed how participants currently feel connected at the institution, what types of students and activities they are finding themselves connecting to, and what their

relationships were like with their roommates and suitemates. These questions addressed Strayhorn's (2018) model of college student sense of belonging by allowing students to share groups they have joined and activities they are participating in, as well as how they perceive their connections with peers as they adjust to college.

Interview II: Reflection on Meaning

The purpose of Interview II was reflection. Here, I asked participants to reflect on the meaning of the experiences and perceptions they explored from Interview I (Seidman, 2019). I focused on reflection with the participant, beginning with their overall experience and focusing on specific experiences they discussed in the previous interviews. Interview II began with questions surrounding how they defined "belonging" and "authenticity," to gauge how they understood their own experiences in those contexts. I developed Interview II questions directly from what the participant discussed in Interview I, resulting in an initially less structured interview protocol than the previous interview (see Appendix D). While the second interview varied based on the previous interviews, I asked all participants to reframe their perspective of everyday occurrences and reflect on what those occurrences mean to them in terms of their sense of belonging (Seidman, 2019).

The second interview took into consideration Strayhorn's (2018) definition of sense of belonging: "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group ... or others on campus" (pp. 28-29). Additionally, Strayhorn (2018) asserts that a "*true* sense of belonging is not about 'fitting in,' but rather about acceptance, authenticity, and finding community as one's true self, just as you are" (Strayhorn, 2018, pp. 38-39). The first set of questions during the second interview addressed the participants' own definitions of authenticity

and belonging as well as examples of how these have shown up during their time on campus that semester. Additionally, I asked participants about their experiences, if any, with feeling appreciated, valued, and confident. Feeling confident references Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs. Strayhorn's (2018) model provides context to the position of sense of belonging in Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs and states that for students to achieve higher-order needs such as confidence and knowledge, they must first develop a sense of belonging. Lastly, the second interview posed questions about participants' perceptions and meanings of being a member of an LLC, key experiences in their LLC, and the LLC's overall impact on their experience this semester.

Management of Data

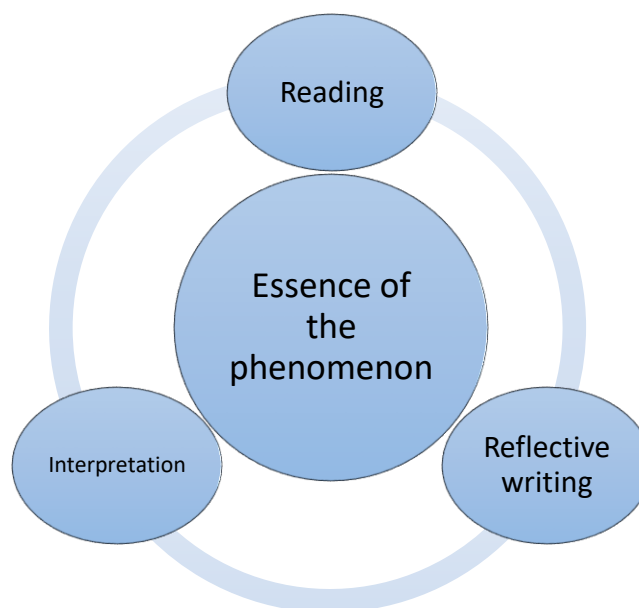
I delivered informed consent forms to participants via DocuSign. DocuSign is a software that is password-protected and securely collects signatures from participants. Once I collected signed informed consent forms, I conducted and audio-recorded interviews. If the interviews took place in person, I audio-recorded interviews through the Otter.ai application on a smartphone. If the interviews took place via Zoom, I audio-recorded interviews through the Zoom software. I then uploaded all audio recordings to Otter.ai for the initial creation of each complete transcription. I saved all files in the following format: "YYYY_MM_DD_PP" where "YYYY_MM_DD" was the date of the interview and "PP" were the participant's first and last initials. Once I created full transcriptions, I removed or replaced all identifying information of the participant and others mentioned in the interviews with pseudonyms in the transcripts before data analysis. I saved copies of all informed consent forms, interview protocols and notes, audio recordings, and full transcriptions, as well as condensed and coded transcriptions, onto a hard drive stored in a private office that was only accessible to me.

Data Analysis

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach does not include bracketing as a form of setting aside researcher bias and perceptions, but rather embeds them into the research study. Heidegger and Gadamer assert that it is impossible to separate researcher experiences and bias and that these actually play a vital role in interpretation of the data (Lavery, 2003; Leget, 2020; Smith et al., 2009). By acknowledging my positionality and bias related to this study, these assumptions become explicit and known throughout the research process. Lavery (2003) suggests that researchers should practice reflective journaling throughout the data analysis process to identify assumptions and interpretations. In this study, I engaged in memoing throughout the duration of data analysis, and it served as my form of consistent journaling. By taking note of my own impressions and feelings throughout this study, I was able to embrace and acknowledge my own assumptions rather than “attempting to stifle them in the name of objectivity or immersion” allowing me to “engage more extensively with the raw data” (Tuffold & Newman, 2010, p. 85).

Hermeneutic Circle

Qualitative data analysis generally involves organizing the data, reducing the data into themes through coding, and developing findings from those themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hermeneutic phenomenology takes this qualitative process and engages the researcher in reading, reflective writing, and interpretation. This process is not linear, but rather moving forward and backward between these three stages of the hermeneutic circle (see Figure 1).

Figure 1*Hermeneutic Circle*

Once interviews were completed, I produced interview transcriptions. I used Otter.ai software to upload each interview's audio recording and draft individual interview transcriptions. I then reviewed each transcription by reading while listening to the audio recording and correcting any transcription software errors to ensure that each transcription was a verbatim recording of what was said by each participant and me. While listening and reading each transcript, I also wrote notes, or memos, to document my thoughts and ideas that emerged, again acknowledging my own perspectives through reflective journaling (Laverty, 2003). Creswell and Poth (2018) state that memoing helps track your ideas as you analyze your data, which can support the credibility of the qualitative data analysis process.

Once the transcriptions were reviewed initially, I condensed the transcriptions, which involved reducing interviewer questions to leave only what is needed to convey what was asked (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Additionally, redundancies, tangential

comments, and word fillers were removed. As I read through the transcripts, I noted anything of interest and my thoughts around why I found it interesting through continued memoing. The processes of reading and reflective writing are interchangeable, allowing for flexibility as I moved through each transcription. Once I read and re-read transcripts, I then referenced my notes made from the transcripts to begin identifying codes and emergent themes. Because no codes were previously established before the data analysis, I was practicing open coding rather than focused coding. This allowed me to continue to frame the data analysis process with the participants at the center of understanding this phenomenon. Once codes from each individual transcript were identified, I then clustered them together to form themes.

During the interpretation of data, the existing literature and Strayhorn's (2018) model of college student sense of belonging informed me of common themes related to similar phenomena. However, the codes were clustered together into themes that emerged directly from the individual interview transcripts. Each participants' interviews had their own set of emergent themes, and while the discovery of themes from the first interview impacted how I interpret the next interview and so forth, emergent themes for each participant's interviews were closely tied to their transcriptions (Smith et al., 2009). These emergent themes are similar to the individual textural descriptions in Moustakas' (1994) proposed method of phenomenological data analysis. These themes reflected not only the participants' own words, but also how I as the researcher interpreted those words.

Once I established emergent themes from each participants' experience, I then searched for similarities. I then combined emergent themes which represent "parallel or similar understandings" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 95). This process allowed me as the researcher to look for patterns among the participants' experiences as well as stark

differences. Here, the essence of the sense of belonging for Students of Color participating in living learning communities took shape. The essence of the phenomenon considered the emergent themes of all participants and weaves them together. In my findings, I share the common themes I interpreted from the interviews, as well as significant statements directly from transcriptions to provide validation for my findings.

As previously mentioned, some of the participants' stories and experiences shared during this study describe core elements in Strayhorn's (2018) model of college students' sense of belonging, providing context for feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of Students of Color. The emergent themes from this study reflect aspects of this model as it relates to how Students of Color in living learning communities experience sense of belonging at this institution.

Trustworthiness

Within qualitative research, it is essential to use multiple strategies to promote trustworthiness within the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend that when a researcher is studying their own workplace, they employ multiple strategies of validation to "ensure that the account is accurate and insightful" (p. 154). Phenomenological research aims to understand how humans experience a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018; Seidman, 2019). As such, the stories and experiences shared by participants must be treated as their truths. However, how can I be sure that the participants are telling me their truth? If it is their truth, is it the truth for others? What if I interviewed participants earlier or later in the academic year? What if I picked different participants? Although I cannot say with 100% certainty that all of these questions are entirely addressed in this study, the concerns are minimized by specific practices, including the sampling of participants, the development of the interview protocols, and the schedule of the interviews.

The study's trustworthiness refers to the importance of doing as much as possible to minimize the interviewer's effect on how the participants reconstruct their experience; however, interviewers will always be a "part of the interviewing picture" (Seidman, 2019, p. 27). As previously mentioned, it is not possible to completely bracket out the impact and influence of the researcher in qualitative research, as their thoughts and ideas are critical to the interpretation of the data collected. Additionally, each participant's meaning and reflection would be "a function of the participant's interaction with the interviewer" (Seidman, 2019, p. 28). It is important to acknowledge my role within the research and the experiences that I brought to the study, not to suppress my perceptions, but to highlight where they appear in this study. In the following sections, procedures and practices are explained that addressed the validity and reliability of the study and my positionality in the research.

Each interview had a specific purpose in the storytelling, reflecting, and meaning-making of each participant. Seidman (2019) expresses:

The goal of the process is to understand how our participants understand and make meaning of their experience. If the interview structure works to allow them to make sense to themselves as well as to the interviewer, then it has gone a long way toward validity (p. 29)

In addition to each interview having its own purpose in the data collection process, the two-interview structure in its entirety encouraged interviewing participants over one month "to account for idiosyncratic days and to check for the internal consistency of what they say" (p. 29). The second interview provided the opportunity for the participants to reflect on their first interview, for me as the researcher to clarify on any aspects of their stories, and to address any inconsistencies.

To further address the study's validity and collaborate with participants further, participants were able to review and confirm or alter the interview transcripts to ensure that the data collected reflected their perceptions and descriptions of their lived experiences for each of their interviews (Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2019). During data analysis, I compared the themes from each interview to the complete transcription to determine that the themes expressed were compatible with the content to support validity. I also collected data through document analysis and observation on the university's living learning community program to contribute to participant stories and the triangulation process. Obtaining data from multiple sources can "shed light on a theme or perspective" and provide validity to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 260).

Ethical Considerations

Although those working in the residence life department at the university served as "gatekeepers," it was important that their role in the study was limited to just that (Seidman, 2019). It would be unethical to have residence life staff incentivize or otherwise encourage participation in the study because of their role and influence in living learning communities and the homes in which their students reside. I shared results and findings with the residence life department to improve lived experiences of Students of Color in their residence halls as a means of reciprocity for participants who gave their time and effort to the study. However, the delivery of findings to the residence life department did not serve as the study's primary goal.

During the initial contact meeting, I described the purpose of the study and aspects of the informed consent form with each potential participant. I also informed the participants of the audio recording and procedures for data management during this initial meeting and through their informed consent forms. I provided informed consent forms (see Appendix B) to participants before the first interview. Participants were free to

withdraw from the study at any time, which was communicated by the informed consent forms. I also reminded participants of the voluntary nature of the study at the beginning of each interview.

I removed all identifying information from the interview transcripts before data analysis to maintain confidentiality. Additionally, participants were able to review and confirm or alter the interview transcripts to ensure that the data collected reflected their perceptions and descriptions of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Limitations

Qualitative research provides many benefits, including elevating the participants' voices and providing in-depth descriptions of their experiences. However, qualitative research also posed some challenges for this study, including its large time commitment, lack of generalizability, and aspects of the participant sample.

Qualitative methodology typically requires an extensive amount of time compared to quantitative methodology. Depending on the study, researchers may spend extensive time familiarizing themselves with the study site, developing rapport with the participants, and analyzing and interpreting the collected data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this phenomenological study, I interviewed each participant twice as the sole researcher, requiring a considerable amount of time in data collection. The extensive time required for data collection for two interviews per participant limited the ability as the sole researcher to collect more rich data through additional methods, such as photo elicitation or focus groups. In addition to conducting all of the participant interviews, I was also the only researcher coding and developing themes from each transcript and writing lengthy descriptions for this phenomenon. Qualitative data analysis involves truly engaging with

the data by reading, reflecting, writing, and interpreting meaning in what is shared by participants (Kafle, 2011; Laverty, 2003).

The amount of time the study asked participants to commit also presented a limitation. I asked participants to take part in two interviews that lasted approximately 15-45 minutes each and were scheduled roughly one month apart. Because of the two-interview format, the possibility for participants to withdraw from the study was heightened when compared to a study that only asks participants to participate in a single interview. However, scheduling two interviews one month apart reduces the possibility of withdrawals when compared to scheduling interviews further apart, such as two or three months, or scheduling three interviews. Additionally, I scheduled interviews after October. As previously mentioned, the first six weeks of a college student's experience is crucial to their transition and development of a sense of belonging on campus (Levitz & Noel, 1989). Therefore, scheduling interviews before this six-week period concluded may not be enough time for students to begin speaking to their experiences participating in living learning communities and developing a sense of belonging. However, scheduling interviews later into the fall semester can conflict with scheduled breaks in November and December that can increase participant withdrawal. Initial interviews took place in November with second interviews scheduled for after fall break, which fell on the last full week of November. Additionally, second interviews took place in the days leading up to the university's finals week, which can further increase participant withdrawal. For this study, three participants withdrew from the study between their first and second scheduled interviews.

Due to the nature of the qualitative inquiry, the findings and themes I identified in this study are not generalizable. With a small number of participants at only one institution, the experiences expressed by Students of Color in living learning

communities were within a specific context that is limited in its ability to make assumptions for Students of Color at other institutions. Additionally, the purpose of a phenomenological study is not to generalize the findings to a greater population outside of the one at the study site, but to “present the experience of the people they interview in compelling enough detail and in sufficient depth that those who read the study can connect to that experience, learn how it is constituted, and deepen their understanding of the issues it reflects” (Seidman, 2019, p. 57).

The nature of the participant sample also hosts a number of limitations, as they must be Students of Color participating in living learning communities at this university. While all participants met this requirement, it also means they were full-time students living in one of the residence halls on campus. Living on campus is a costly expense when attending college and there is no requirement for first-year students to do so at the university. Because the cost of living in one of the on-campus residence halls is substantial, many local students may choose to live at home, among other reasons. Students living on campus are generally coming from further distances, impacting their sense of belonging as they navigate not only a new campus, but new friendships and a new city (Buote et al., 2007). The participant sample in this study did not include any local students, who comprise a large portion of the student body at the university (40%).

In addition to living on campus being costly, the living learning communities at the university are located in two of the most expensive residence halls, which can impact if a student is able to participate in this experience or not. While 26% of all undergraduate students at the study institution qualify for the federal Pell Grant, only 19% of students participating in LLCs fall into this category. Therefore, the sample of participants in this study may be lacking in representation of low-income students, a group of underrepresented students who face tremendous barriers while attending

college, and even more so when they are Students of Color (Bettencourt, 2021; Strayhorn, 2018).

Lastly, all living learning communities (LLCs) at the university are hosted in residence halls which also house other students who are not participating in LLCs. Typically, students who were not participating in LLCs lived on separate wings or floors, but there are some instances of non-LLC students living among LLC students. Because of this arrangement, it was difficult to determine if experiences were unique to participating in an LLC versus living on campus in general. However, the structure of LLCs at the university including a required class and attendance at specific events does highlight some unique experiences apart from living on campus as a non-LLC student.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed all details of the hermeneutic phenomenological research design, participants, site, data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, and limitations for the study. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how Students of Color in living learning communities experience a sense of belonging at a large, predominantly white research university. The study employed a two-interview model adapted from the three-interview format proposed by Seidman (2019) and recruited participants via purposeful and snowball sampling. This study's data analysis procedures reflected the hermeneutic circle, which allowed for creativity and reflection as I interpreted the data (Laverty, 2003). Chapter V presents the findings from the study, and Chapter VI presents a discussion and conclusion to this study.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how Students of Color in living learning communities (LLCs) experience a sense of belonging at a large, public research university. Using Strayhorn's (2018) college students' sense of belonging as a theoretical framework, this study explored how Students of Color described their experience and sense of belonging while participating in their LLC during their first semester. To do so, this study employed hermeneutic phenomenological methodology through a series of two interviews with each participant where data was collected about their life history, their day-to-day experiences, and reflection on those experiences. The findings illuminated aspects of how Students of Color describe their LLC experience and critical components that contribute to their sense of belonging.

This chapter presents the findings from this study. First, this chapter briefly describes the study's participants. This chapter then introduces four emergent themes from participants' stories and experiences as they relate to their living learning community and sense of belonging: shared identities & similar values, shared experiences & collective struggles, impactful connections & meaningful relationships, and a home away from home. Chapter VI will provide a discussion and conclusion of these findings through the theoretical framework of Strayhorn's (2018) model of college students' sense of belonging.

Overview of Themes

The two-interview format was developed to address the following research questions:

1. How do Students of Color describe their living learning community experiences and sense of belonging?

2. How do Students of Color make meaning of their living learning community experience?
3. What perceptions do Students of Color have regarding the impact of living learning communities on their sense of belonging?

During the initial interview, participants were asked to discuss their life history up to the point of arriving on campus as a college student as well as their day-to-day activities thus far during the fall semester. During the second interview, participants were asked to describe their sense of belonging and key experiences from their LLC participation.

During the data analysis process, four themes emerged that directly connect back to the study's research questions. When participants were describing their experiences within their living learning communities (LLCs) and their perceived sense of belonging, the following four themes emerged:

1. Shared Identities & Similar Values
2. Shared Experiences & Collective Struggles
3. Impactful Connections & Meaningful Relationships
4. Home Away from Home

All four themes connect back to Strayhorn's (2018) model of sense of belonging, existing literature, and the structure of living learning communities at the study institution. Participants shared their expectations and discoveries surrounding sharing identities and common values with their LLC peers. Additionally, the LLC provided shared experiences and fostered collective struggles among each community. Based upon these first two themes, participants described impactful connections and developing meaningful relationships with others, contributing to their sense of belonging on campus. Additionally, the home away from home theme addresses the need for students to feel comfortable and safe in a physical space, as well as connections to their families and

friends from before their time in college in order to feel a sense of belonging in college. The following sections depict each theme in detail along with significant quotes from each of the participants. While some participants had similar opinions and experiences, there were also instances of some participants with differing feelings and perceptions of their LLC experiences, which are also depicted as subthemes when applicable.

Theme One: Shared Identities & Similar Values

The first theme in these findings was one of the most profound and salient, where all participants described expecting and having shared identities and similar values with other students in their LLC. When participants were asked why they decided to join an LLC, many of them responded with anticipation of living with other students who share similar interests or values. Their pre-college expectations of sharing similarities with peers influenced their decision to join a community. Once arriving to campus and experiencing their LLC, most participants highlighted having the same academic major or interests, coming from similar cultural backgrounds, or more generally, being a new student in college as shared identities with their peers. However, a few participants discussed ways in which they noticed they did not share identities with other LLC peers and the disconnect between their perceptions prior to arriving to campus and the reality once their semester began, which contributed to feelings of isolation.

Pre-College. Before arriving to campus in the fall, participants applied for their housing preferences and in their application, they indicated whether or not they were interested in participating in a living learning community. During their interviews, I asked participants what influenced their decision to select “Yes” to an LLC, and almost all participants described an expectation of being around others who were similar to them, whether it be having the same academic major, same race or ethnicity, or sharing similar

values. For participants in academic living learning communities, they shared the expectation of living with others who shared similar academic interests as a reason for applying to their LLCs. For example, Lilyanne described her initial perception of the Engineering College LLC by saying, "At the beginning, I thought it would be a nice place, the LLC, to have everyone on my floor be engineers and we would have similar classes together and have similar experiences and interests." Similarly, Arthur discussed being with other honors students who are like-minded as an appealing reason to join the Honors College LLC. He stated,

It [the Honors College LLC] would be among other honors students, so presumably other people that also care about their academics a little bit more than other people. And the idea of the LLC is kind of neat, you have like-minded people grouped together.

Arthur had also applied to multiple LLCs and shared why he preferred the Honors College LLC over the Latinx identity LLC:

If I hadn't gotten into the Honors one, I would have preferred the Engineering one, but then they messaged me that it was that was full and then I put the Latinx LLC, when in reality, if I'd gotten into that one only, I probably wouldn't have taken it. I would have just rather lived not in an LLC. The grouping is nice, but just based on being Latinx wasn't that important to me. Like the Honors LLC, it might be a group of people who care about their academics a little bit more. Latinos, you just people who are all Latinx, right? But that's a very wide group of people, you have people from Chile all the way to Mexico. But that's the only commonality, right? Just maybe they all speak Spanish and not even that. Whereas, the Honors LLC, it's a little more focused, I guess academics matter a

little bit more to me. Seems kind of the similar reason why I chose maybe the Engineering LLC over like the Latinx LLC if I hadn't gotten to the Honors one.”

Despite Arthur identifying as Hispanic, he was not seeking connections with peers revolving around his racial identity, but rather with those who shared similar values of prioritizing academics. Arthur did not necessarily attribute pre-college experiences to this reasoning but reflected on this decision as merely a preference for those he wanted to surround himself with in his residence hall arrangements.

Similar to participants in academic LLCs, participants in identity LLCs also indicated that one of the reasons for joining their LLC was an anticipation of having shared racial/ethnic identities with their peers. For example, Marla shared that her pre-college experiences influenced her decision. She shares that she chose to participate in the Black identity LLC because she was used to being the only Black person in school:

I've always been the only Black kid in class or in school and always been the only Black family in the town ... I just really wanted to be with other people that are Black. Because I've always been around other people who weren't.

Marla's main reason for joining the Black identity LLC was to have Black roommates and be around peers who identified as Black, so having the opportunity to be a part of this community despite applying for housing late was something Marla was extremely grateful for. Marla shared the following:

Just knowing I had the chance to apply for it [the Black identity LLC] and have all Black roommates, then I did, and I actually got in it ... just knowing it's a possibility and then actually getting to have it and experience it.

Marla emphasized that being around other Black students in her LLC was an overall key experience for her, especially when compared to her pre-college experiences of being the only Black student in class in her rural hometown.

Shannon's decision to participate in the Latinx identity LLC slightly differed from the other participants' decisions in that she was more focused on living with others who would not be racist, sharing her values of anti-racism and the opportunity to learn about the variety of Latinx cultures other than her own. Shannon described her decision as a "safe choice" because she "didn't want to get paired up with somebody who doesn't like People of Color." Shannon described her pre-college experience of moving to the United States from a Latin American country, and while she moved to an urban city, she did not feel the same amount of appreciation for the variety of Latinx culture as she had before. Shannon also emphasized the ability to learn about differences among Latinx cultures as a reason for choosing to participate in the Latinx identity LLC by sharing the following:

The Latin community, it's just so many countries, it's not just one so I just like learning about all that. And I thought that by accepting this one [the Latinx identity LLC], I would meet other people that are like me, but not exactly like me and just talking about our cultures because I love talking about my culture and expressing my culture towards people.

Shannon did seek to live with others who were also Latinx, but she also acknowledged that not all Latinx students would be the same; they would have different cultures and values that she was interested in learning about. Her expectation was that others in the Latinx identity LLC would enjoy talking about their culture like she did. Shannon's decision apply for the Latinx identity LLC was also influenced by the need to avoid peers who were racist, under the assumption that students who identify as Latinx like herself would share the similar value of not being racist.

Academic Interests. Once arriving to campus, participants in academic LLCs discussed the ease of connecting with others based on having the same major or similar academic interests and motivation. During her second interview, when asked to reflect

on her friendships thus far, Lilyanne stated that if she was not in the Engineering College LLC, she “probably would know less engineers” and indicated that the majority of her friends were engineering majors. Lilyanne described her experiences in the LLC revolving around being an engineering major and reflected on how impactful living with others interested in engineering was on her experience this semester.

Similarly, Arthur stated that having a common identity assisted with meeting others by sharing: “For Honors, we are all Honors students and it’s easy to connect initially and get to know people.” Arthur attributed having shared academic interests to the ease in which he found himself forming connections with his peers.

Although Suzanne was participating in an identity living learning community, she found others with similar majors on her floor, and also found this shared academic major identity valuable to her experience. She said, “There's already three or four other students that are in the psychology field or even social work field that we all kind of connect in that way.” While this was not an initial reason for Suzanne joining the Latinx identity LLC, she found that having peers who had similar academic majors living on her floor contributed to her sense of belonging.

Race and Ethnicity. Similar to participants in academic LLCs, participants in identity LLCs discussed sharing the same race/ethnicity as their roommates and peers when describing their experiences in their LLCs. When I asked Marla to share a key experience she had so far in the Black identity LLC, she shared the following experience with her suitemates:

I remember the first night, we were all getting ready for bed, and we all put our bonnets on over our hair, and I just remember being happy because any time I was at a sleepover, I was always the only one putting on a bonnet, and I remember friends teasing me and saying it looks like what cooks wear. But when

I'm with them, we all wear it, so it's not something weird, it's just normal. I remember going to sleep happy that night because we all got ready for bed and we're all wearing our bonnets.

Later, Marla also shared that finding others who are also Black contributed to her sense of belonging by stating, "I guess just when I feel like I'm not the only Black person around then I do feel like I belong."

Suzanne also described her LLC experience by mentioning how having a shared racial/ethnic identity played a role in how she connects to others by stating the following:

You find other people [Latinx students] that are like you and because you don't really see a ton around campus ... it's cool to be in the same floor, and near them and have the same [identity studies] class as them. And then we come together for study groups, and we just get together.

During Suzanne's second interview, she highlighted her shared identity with others as a contributor to her sense of belonging by sharing,

I'm on the floor with a whole bunch of other Latinas like me, and I have the [identity studies] class and there we were recently doing presentations on social justice movements and they're talking about how it is to be Latina and just in school and in life, so it's cool to be able to connect to them and know that other people go through the same thing.

Later, Suzanne also discussed further the reality of participating in an LLC with others who share her Latinx identity:

I love my culture, I'm glad to be a Latina girl. It's very cool to be a part of a community, such a small community on campus, and to see my roommates or my neighbors be Latinos. And it's cool to just see them around and to be a part of this such small community on campus and try to have it grow slowly.

Here, Suzanne described the importance of living with those who shared her Latinx identity, but also that she was able to see them around campus. She valued having a close-knit community with her peers and found it reassuring to see them throughout campus as well, not just in her residence hall.

Feelings of Isolation. While others discussed positive experiences regarding having shared identities and similar values with their peers, Violet stated that her original perception of the LLC was not the reality because “they [Residential Life] introduced the living learning community as a space where you're supposed to be able to connect with people that are within your same major” which was not what she was actually experiencing this semester. Violet discovered that she was one of only three engineering majors in the entire Women in STEM LLC. She shared, “Since I'm in [the Women in STEM LLC], there are actually two other engineers in the entire wing. One of them wasn't even originally an engineer.”

Similar to Violet, Nathan also mentioned not connecting as well to others on their floor because of being the only computer science (CS) major in the Honors College LLC. He shared,

I know a lot of the people here [in the Honors College LLC] are pre-med majors. It's a little hard to relate to them because for them, they are looking forward to medical school. Whereas CS, it's really easy to relate to them because it's my same major. They have a lot of the same experiences I have.

Later, when Nathan was asked to describe any challenges or barriers they had this semester, they mentioned not having the same major as others in the Honors College LLC again by stating,

There's [*sic*] no CS majors in my LLC. And then there's very few engineers, so it's difficult to relate to people based off my major. There are very few people that

share my STEM classes. So, if I need help, I can't really ask anyone in my LLC.

So, it's a little hard to relate to people academically.

While Nathan highlighted ways in which they did not connect with others by being the only Computer Science major, they did find connections through the shared identity of being an honors student in the Honors College LLC.

While Suzanne also described finding others on her floor with the same academic major even though she was in an identity LLC, the opposite was not as prevalent for Lilyanne and Nathan in academic LLCs. Both Lilyanne and Nathan recognized they were one of few or the only student in their LLC who identified with their race or ethnicity. For instance, Lilyanne noticed that all of the female Students of Color in the Engineering LLC were placed together in a suite opposed to spread out to other female suites on the floor. She shared, "All of us in my suite are POC [People of Color]. And I feel like they [housing staff] did that on purpose. So, you don't feel alone, I guess." However, Lilyanne identifies as Asian, and while her other suitemates are People of Color, they did not identify as Asian. Lilyanne went on to describe instances of how her roommates connected on having similar traditions that she was personally not familiar with. Additionally, Nathan noted that they did not share their ethnicity with many others in the Honors College LLC: "I think there's one other Hispanic person here. But they don't necessarily, I think only one of their parents was Hispanic, so they don't necessarily identify with that." It is important to note that both Lilyanne and Nathan joined academic LLCs with the anticipation of sharing the same academic identities (Engineering student and Honors student respectively). However, once they arrived on campus, they noticed other social identities, their race and ethnicity, were different from others in their LLCs. Nathan also addressed that while everyone in their LLC are Honors students, they noticed they were the only computer science major.

For Violet, Nathan, and Lilyanne, their perception was being one of few students in their LLC with a certain identity: an engineering major, a CS major and Hispanic student, and an Asian student, respectively. These perceptions serve as their truths and lived experiences, whether or not it was the reality of the representation in their LLCs.

It was apparent through both sets of interviews, participants were interested in joining living learning communities because as first-year students, they were interested in finding others with shared identities such as major or race/ethnicity, and/or similar values, such as prioritizing academics or being anti-racist. When discussing students' perceptions of what they believed an LLC was, their responses generally contained some form of "shared identity" and then later discussed how these perceptions played out in the reality of what they actually were experiencing. While some participants found connections in shared identities and similar values, having a homogenous environment can expose where participants differed with the majority of their LLC, such as when Violet and Nathan discovered they were one of few engineering majors on their LLC wings, or when Lilyanne noticed that she was the only Asian female in her LLC.

Theme Two: Shared Experiences & Collective Struggles

The second theme in these findings was closely related to the first theme, where all participants described having shared experiences as well as going through the same struggles with other students in their LLC. While some participants shared social activities such as game nights, movie nights, and athletic events, other participants emphasized shared academic experiences such as study groups for common classes and collaborating on assignments and group projects. Having shared experiences are not necessarily unique to LLCs, as there are many opportunities for students living in the residence halls to have shared experiences with their roommates and neighbors. However, some of these shared experiences included below are unique to LLC students.

Social Experiences. When asked about their cocurricular activities during the first interview, most participants discussed joining clubs and attending campus events with other students in their LLC. For instance, Shannon stated that she was “going to Latin Dance Club with my roommate,” and Dionne shared that she tries to “attend all of the sporting events” and reminisced on football and basketball games she attended with friends from her LLC. Shannon’s experience of attending Latin Dance Club with her roommate may seem unrelated to her LLC experience, however, having a shared identity with her roommate, as they are both Latinx students, can contribute to similar interests rooted in their cultural heritage, such as Latinx Dance Club. Dionne’s experiences with attending sporting events again are not unique to her Honors College LLC experience, however, she indicated that she attended these events with others in her LLC, who are the same students that she lives with and attends class with. It is important to make this distinction that LLC students are choosing to continue to have shared social experiences with their LLC peers outside of the required classes and other LLC-sponsored events.

Some participants did discuss LLC-sponsored events as shared experiences with their peers. Violet mentioned when her Women in STEM LLC hosted an off-campus retreat, she felt connected to a community and stated, “My friends and I...we had laid out our sleeping bags, and we were stargazing, and we were talking about a lot of different things. And in that moment, I definitely felt I found a good community to be around.” Suzanne touched on how having shared experiences with fellow Latinx identity LLC students at cultural events was impactful to her LLC experience:

Seeing when they [study institution] had the Hispanic Heritage Month, and all the activities they had for that, that was super cool. To have stuff that I was familiar with and comfortable with. And seeing other people go to those events and be

like, “Hey we are from the same culture,” and it's cool to see people go to those events that are like me, and for the school to even have those events.

Other shared social experiences are not necessarily events that have happened in the participants' LLCs, but rather informal conversations with their LLC peers. Arthur stated how frequently his common area was used in comparison to other floors in the residence hall and an experience he shared with floormates:

There's a common area between both wings ... And we use ours constantly. If we have too many people, we will bring chairs from the study room into there because we don't have enough people. One time we, all of us are responsible, we stole a couch from the other wing, because they never use their area, and we use ours. So, we had more seating, but I mentioned we got caught and they made us put it back.

As previously stated, Arthur's shared experience with his Honors College LLC peers could be replicated in other residence halls that do not host LLCs, however, having other shared experiences with those LLC peers contribute to the social atmosphere that he experienced in his common area.

Similarly, Randy mentioned casually spending time with his LGBTQIA+ identity LLC roommates and having thoughts about feeling like he belonged and shared, “I'll have moments like that where I'm talking my roommates are we're just watching *The Bachelorette* or something. Just talking, chilling, having a good time...I think I'm like, wow this feels nice with these people. They're nice.” Nathan described a specific shared experience they shared with others in the Honors College LLC. Nathan stated one of the key experiences they had was “when we all played hide and seek throughout the entire [residence hall] building as a group. I think that was interesting because, we just sort of decided on it.” Violet shared that her group of friends in her LLC typically enjoy informal

game nights with board games like Clue and Mahjong. Many of the shared social experiences that participants described were informal, without being planned in advance. However, some of these social experiences eventually become habits, such as Suzanne and Randy's weekly TV show viewing parties, Violet's board game nights, or Nathan and Arthur's movie nights.

Similar to Dionne, who continued to socialize with her LLC peers by attending sporting events, Arthur, Randy, Nathan, and Violet choose to continue to share experiences outside of the LLC-required and sponsored experiences with their peers. While these shared experiences alone are not unique to LLCs at this study institution, they still contribute to how the study's participants described their LLC experience and sense of belonging.

Academic Experiences. In addition to social activities and events, all participants described their living learning community (LLC) through shared academic experiences, such as required common classes and study groups and collaborative projects. When asked to describe what the LLC experience is, Arthur shared:

It's a place where you can connect with other people... And also, to stay connected because we all have to take a class together, and we all have the same events and assignments. We all have the same worries and same concerns with assignments in the classes we have. We all share some of the same struggles and that fosters a sense of community.

Arthur emphasized that his Honors College LLC experience not only allowed him to connect quickly with others, but that the shared academic experiences and "same struggles" allowed him to maintain those connections throughout the semester.

Marla stated that when she hangs out with her suitemates, they discuss their required common class and its assignments and discussions, as well as the collective struggle:

We all take this [identity studies] class, and we talk a lot about that class. We talk about assignments and then sometimes ... it becomes like a class discussion, Like, 'Oh do you remember what that person said?' ... we'll talk about class, like if we liked an assignment or we didn't. Or if we are struggling with one, we will help each other out with it.

Likewise, Lilyanne shared a time that her and her roommates were working on a difficult class assignment together through their required common class. Lilyanne shared that although the assignment was difficult, having roommates to experience it together with made it easier:

My roommates make it really easy to go through those struggles because we were building our Rube Goldberg machine, and all of us were doing it at the same time and helping each other out. We were talking and blasting music. It was really fun.

Arthur found value in attending required lectures with his suitemates, and shared a time he felt a sense of community through these experiences:

We are all in [the Honors College LLC class] because we are in the [Honors College] LLC, we all have to be in [the Honors College LLC class]. We have to go attend some meeting about study abroad opportunities ... And we all ended up walking together because we all came from the same dorm, we all went to the same place. I know when I have my [Honors College LLC] class, I'll see my classmates leaving and we'll probably end up walking together and probably end

up coming back together. There's a greater sense of community ... because we have classes and events together because of the Honors College.

Arthur appreciated living on the same floor as his classmates because their behavior of attending class and additional lectures influenced him to also attend. He noted that leaving and coming back together enforced a sense of community.

Suzanne mentioned meeting others on her floor through their required common class and hosting study groups:

With the [identity studies] class, we have study sessions, and basically the whole floor is there because we all mostly have that class. So, it's cool to see the people we have in class and be able to actually talk to them or see them in the elevator and saying hi or something or even around campus. It's very welcoming.

Shannon, who also shares the required [identity studies] class with Suzanne, Randy, and Marla, shared her perspective of discussions that take place in her LLC class with her and her peers:

I've sat there and listened to their [classmates] opinions. And I'm shocked because I'm like, 'This is a really good opinion.' I'm like, 'Wow, and I live with that person. This person lives literally three doors down from me, and I didn't know how passionate they could be about this and that,' and it's definitely impacted a lot ... because I feel like I can see myself in the students and their opinions and I'm like, 'Wow, I'm their age. This seems like something I should definitely take into consideration.' This class isn't just about the teacher teaching you ... it's not just the teacher giving you all this information, but the students are too with their opinions. And I'm like, 'Whoa, this is good.'"

Shannon highlighted how her perspectives changed about her peers based off of the discussions that took place in the identity studies class, and how it influenced her to think differently about her experiences as a Latinx student.

While most participants discussed their shared academic experiences in positive ways, Randy described his academic experiences in a negative way. Randy did not enjoy his required LGBTQIA+ identity LLC class, and he emphasized that he was not alone in that sentiment. Randy shared how many of his classmates in addition to himself did not enjoy the required identity studies class, but he did enjoy the professor who taught the class. He shared, “Everyone hates it. Like literally you'll hear us throughout the Zoom call, like recorded. I hope she doesn't hear that. But we're not talking about her. We're talking about the class.”

Other participants discussed academic experiences outside of their required class. Nathan mentioned the atmosphere of their Honors College LLC by sharing:

Often, you'll see people doing their homework and so, if you just sit around doing your homework, you see other people doing their homework, you feel motivated to do your own work ... It's not common that people skip classes.

Like Arthur, Nathan described how other peers' behavior to study and go to class influenced his own behavior to do so in the Honors College LLC.

Dionne, who is also in the Honors College LLC, discussed the study lounges on her floor and doing homework as well: “I like the study rooms, hanging out in there ... people just coming in and joining you and then we start studying or talking about something.” Violet mentioned the academic environment that her LLC provided was beneficial for her academic success despite not sharing the same major as others:

Just seeing my suitemates always studying and being productive definitely inspires me to do the same. But I guess it's a very passive form of how that helps me be a better student just because it's if I see them, then I'll feel that way.

In this study, all participants discussed various social and academic experiences they share with their roommates and other LLC peers. When describing what their LLC experience is, participants continued to emphasize the required class component of their LLC as well as socializing with their peers outside of the classroom setting through formal and informal social events and study groups. As previously mentioned, some of these experiences are not unique to LLCs at the study institution, however, attending required classes and LLC-sponsored events with roommates and peers are unique to the LLC experience and directly contributed to participants' sense of belonging.

Theme Three: Impactful Connections & Meaningful Relationships

During their interviews, all participants discussed the relationships that have formed among roommates, residential life and housing staff, and faculty and teaching assistants. Many participants shared stories of the bonds and relationships they have formed with their roommates and suitemates, including citing these relationships as being the most different for them if they were not in an LLC. Additionally, some participants described both positive and negative experiences with residential life and housing staff and identified some of those interactions as contributory to their sense of belonging. Lastly, some participants shared relationships with their faculty and teaching assistants, especially those who were passionate about similar topics or provided these participants with further connections outside of the classroom.

Roommates. All participants had at least one roommate or suitemate, and these relationships were a major part of each participant's LLC experience and sense of belonging. Lilyanne stated that "the main people I hang out with are my roommates" and

when describing her daily routine, indicated that her roommates were a large part of her schedule. She shared, "I go to class with all my roommates on Mondays at 12. And then we all come home. Then we go get lunch. Then we basically do homework from there, but we keep all our doors open so it's really you can just come in and talk to one another. Then we get dinner together. And we talk a lot." During her second interview, Lilyanne described her relationships with her roommates as one of the most important aspects of her Engineering College LLC experience. Lilyanne stated, "I made a lot of friends in the LLC. And especially my roommates, like we're planning to live together. We have plans till junior year together. So, I feel like I made friends that I'm going to know for a while here."

Marla also emphasized the importance of her relationship with her roommates when asked to describe her Black identity LLC experience. Marla shared that at the beginning of the semester she quickly made friends with her roommate: "We just kind of just got to know each other. And kind of already bonded. With just being Black, I guess. I was like, 'Oh my gosh, I finally had a Black best friend.'" Like Lilyanne, Marla also indicated that she spends a lot of time with her roommates and highlighted her relationships with them as one of the most impactful parts of being in the Black identity LLC.

While Violet's reason for joining the Women in STEM LLC was more about networking and professional development, she was grateful for the suitemate relationships that the LLC provided. She shared: "The one thing that I'm thankful for the LLC is being grouped in with a good group of suitemates. So, one of my suitemates I'm very close with and I'm glad we met through the LLC." And later, when asked what would be different if she were not in the Women in STEM LLC, Violet described her suitemate relationships again, "I think the way it would have the most impact on my semester

would definitely just be my roommate situation just because I'd be rooming with different people, and I do like my suitemates a lot."

Arthur discussed his ability to be authentic around his suitemates. Arthur shared, "I feel like I can be myself around them. I don't need to change anything about myself to fit in with them." Later, Arthur described a time when he felt appreciated and valued, and shared a story about introducing his suitemates to a cultural tradition:

I had this idea, and I wasn't sure everyone would be, would like it. But I had this idea for the piñata and my friends, they actually really liked it. And like I was worried they wouldn't be interested ... It was nice that they liked my idea. They took part of it.

Arthur shared how his suitemates took turns holding the piñata and spinning him when it was his own turn. Having Arthur's culture embraced by his suitemates was one of his key experiences as a member of the Honors College LLC, even if he did not initially join an LLC with his Hispanic culture at the forefront of his mind.

Nathan was also grateful for their relationships with their suitemates, but also others who live on the floor. It seems that Nathan and their suite were strongly connected with other suites in the Honors College LLC. Nathan stated, "I think I'm very lucky to get along really well with the people in the neighboring suites" and shared "we'll often see each other out in the common area. We'll definitely say hi to each other when we come across each other in there or on campus." Nathan shared stories of going off campus with suitemates to parties and restaurants, but when asked to share a time they felt most appreciated, they did not share an event, but rather a process with their suitemates:

My suitemates will seek me out to get everyone's approval whenever we make some decision that involves the suite. So, for example we were filling out the

roommate agreement, you know, we all came together to and gave input on that process.

Shannon's relationship with one of her suitemates was similar to Lilyanne's relationship with her roommates. Shannon shared, "We go to Latin Dance Club together. We have a class together. We go to eat at the Den all the time. We'll go out on the weekends together." Shannon's regular schedule and activities frequently included her suitemates. However, her relationship with her roommate was not as positive. Shannon described her roommate as "difficult to live with" and as a result, she said, "I hate being in my room. I just don't like to be in there when my roommate is in there." As a result, Shannon spends most of her time in her suitemate's room instead of her own, and common spaces in the residence hall like study spaces and social lounges.

During the first interview, Lilyanne discussed a suitemate conflict that had put future plans with her suitemates on hold: "We have had some problems and had to have suite meetings to talk them out ... It's kind of messing up everything ... we all wanted to room together next year." However, at the second interview, Lilyanne shared that the roommate conflicts have been addressed and they still have plans to live together next year.

Residential Life and Housing Staff. Some participants spoke about the relationship they have with their Resident Assistant (RA) as well as other residence hall staff during their interviews. Some participants discussed getting to know their RA and connecting with them through academics or culture. Other participants shared stories of how their RA encouraged them to join other clubs on campus or attend residence hall and university events.

Some participants shared instances of when Resident Assistants helped inform them of upcoming events. Marla stated that her RA would inform her of events

happening on campus and in her residence hall through a group chat, “Sometimes there’s events going on, and [my RA] will post it in our group chat thing.” Marla did not share many experiences with her RA but did describe experiences as her RA being informative and resourceful. Shannon also has the same RA as Marla and described similar experiences. Shannon stated that her RA “is super into sending us stuff about our LLC ... And a lot of LGBT events around campus.”

RAs are also tasked with helping their residents through situations and participants in this study described their RAs as being approachable and understanding to their situations. Suzanne described her RA as “super easy to talk to” and available to talk about issues they were having with their room door. Randy described his RA as someone who he talks to because they are “very honest” and “very understanding.” Randy also shared a specific experience he had with his RA:

I’ll be honest, they are the first non-binary person I have ever met that I actually somewhat care about. Back in high school, I was a whole different person but that’s three years different. Even in Vegas, I was like ... You’re still a guy or a girl. But now I understand it’s more of a respect thing. They have been really cool with me about everything.

Arthur appreciated his RA, not only for being friendly, but for actively having conversations with him and his suitemates. Arthur stated, “I like my RA, and he stops in and says hi. Like he could send us reminders of stuff, but he actually like knocks on our doors and says hi.” Arthur also talked about another RA for a different LLC that he got to know in his residence hall. He stated that this RA introduced him to Film Club and to another person in her LLC that was Hispanic/Latinx like himself. He described his relationships with residential life staff as “on good terms” and “waving hi” from the front desk when he enters the residence hall.

Just as Arthur mentioned, staff at the front desks, while not unique to the LLC experience, played a role in how participants described their experience in their LLC. Lilyanne shared, "I really like the front desk students. I like to say hi to them, because I feel like not a lot of people say hi to them, so I'll say hello to them." Lilyanne also shared a story of getting to know a specific front desk worker because she did not know his name, but he had remembered who she was early on. Shannon also described an instance of making friends with front desk staff. Shannon shared, "I'm really into zodiac signs. My phone case is saying I'm a Taurus, so she's [a front desk worker] like, 'Can you guess my zodiac sign?' And I guessed it ... so I befriended her."

Arthur, Lilyanne, and Shannon all shared positive experiences they had with their front desk staff members, leading to familiarity and comfort when they entered their residence halls. As noted earlier, front desk staff are not unique to LLCs and are present in all residence halls on campus. However, participants in this study shared stories of their interactions and relationships with front desk staff as it relates to their experience in their LLC, since their LLC is located within their residence hall. While some of these residential life staff relationships were positive, others negatively impacted participants' ability to feel comfortable in their residence hall. For example, Randy shared his experience with a front desk worker that was not positive. Randy stated, "She works late at night. And that's the thing, I try to be good, and I'm just like, 'Oh, maybe she's tired. There's something going on.' I try to be as like understanding as possible. It's like, she doesn't like you." Randy indicated that most of his negative experiences with this staff member were about COVID-19 mask policies, since it was mandatory to have a mask on at all times when students enter a residence hall.

Shannon shared a similar negative experience with an RA regarding mask policies. She said,

I had a problem with this RA one time. I was in my social lounge, drinking some water. And he comes in because he was doing rounds. And I guess, because he had literally just come out of the elevator as I was putting my water bottle down, and about to put my mask on. So, I put on my mask. And he's like, "You know, you're supposed to have your mask in here." And I'm like, "Yeah, I know. Sorry." I don't want to argue with him. So, I was like, "Okay, my bad." So, he took a picture of my Wolf Card, which is fine. Whatever.

When Shannon reenacted this scenario, she gave a sense of condescension when voicing the role of the Resident Assistant. Shannon indicated that she was worried about being "kicked out" of her residence hall room. Shannon went on to describe another confrontation with the same Resident Assistant and her roommate about the mask policy and finding comfort in other RAs who reassured her and her roommate that they would not be in trouble or removed from their housing for their situations. This experience was extremely impactful for Shannon, as she later went on to describe that she is not comfortable in her residence hall around some of the staff members.

While Suzanne did not share a specific example like Shannon did, Suzanne also described some residential life staff as "not approachable" because "I feel you'll be judged by them in some way." She did clarify that most of the staff were nice, but there were some staff members who work at the front desk that made her feel this way. Although they both described negative interactions with residence hall staff, Suzanne and Shannon did not convey that their marginalized identities were a factor in their negative interactions.

Nathan described positive experiences with their Resident Assistant, but when discussing their RA's supervisor, Nathan shared an experience where there was a vandalism issue in the residence hall and this staff member addressed their LLC "in a

very accusatory tone” and described the experience as “not great, especially when you know for a fact that your wing hasn’t done anything.” This interaction with a residential life staff member offended Nathan, who was familiar with all of their LLC peers and knew their RA believed the community would not be involved with vandalism of their residence hall. Nathan’s perception of the conversation was that the RA supervisor was accusing the Honors College LLC without gathering facts and speaking with the members about the situation beforehand.

While most participants had positive experiences with residential life and housing staff, some participants shared very specific negative conversations with staff that have left an impact on their LLC experience. Since these staff members live in the same building as these participants, it can have a lasting impact on how comfortable participants feel where they live. On the other hand, having positive relationships with their Resident Assistants and other staff, such as being comfortable talking about roommate conflicts or facility issues, can enhance their LLC experience.

Faculty and Teaching Assistants. Participants also discussed developing meaningful relationships with their faculty members and teaching assistants as it relates to their LLC experience and sense of belonging. Even for the few participants who did not enjoy their required LLC course, they still expressed respect and admiration for the faculty teaching the course. Additionally, some participants shared stories of teaching assistants that provided impactful connections with other helpful resources on campus.

One of the participants, Randy, was very firm in his distaste for the required identity studies course as a part of the LGBTQIA+ identity LLC experience. However, when asked about the faculty member teaching the course, Randy said, “Me and this teacher. We are good. We click. We can talk. I love her.” Later, Randy described his dilemma of not enjoying the course, but appreciating the instructor. Randy shared, “I

hate the class and then I feel bad about it because I want to give her my attention. I do out of respect.” Randy enjoys how passionate the instructor is for the class and hopes to have a future class with her that he enjoys.

Suzanne, who was also in the required identity studies class, spoke of the same faculty member in a similar way. Suzanne admired her passion and the level of knowledge the faculty member had on identity issues and stated, “It’s crazy how in depth she knows about racism and feminism and all these things that we talked about over in class.” Later Suzanne also shared that she appreciated that the faculty member, while knowledgeable about these topics, helps her students understand the issues more during the class. Shannon is also in the same identity studies class, and emphasized how appreciative she was that the faculty member who was teaching topics on gender and race was a Black woman. Shannon said, “It’s not the same as some white person with privileges teaches a class about you know, discrimination and other stuff.” Shannon also discussed learning about her faculty member’s experiences outside of class, highlighting her international trips and learning multiple languages as inspiring for her own goals.

Dionne also talked about her faculty member when talking about her required class for the Honors College LLC. While Dionne mentioned her faculty member during both of her interviews, her relationship with her teaching assistant (TA) was more impactful for her LLC experience. Dionne shared that her TA helped her apply for internships and connected her with the multicultural center on campus. Because of her relationship with her TA, she felt confident during her internship interviews and developed even more friendships through the Indian student club. Dionne also discussed meeting with the dean of the Honors College frequently because of being a member of the Honors College LLC and spoke positively of the conversations. Dionne

said, “You get to go talk to him, he just wanted to see how our day was ... just seemed very personal. He wanted to get to know who we are.” Dionne’s meaningful relationships with faculty and teaching assistants contributed to her ability to feel welcome and make even more connections on campus.

Lilyanne also described her relationship with a teaching assistant in her required Engineering College LLC class. One of her key experiences as a member of the Engineering College LLC was learning more about her teaching assistant’s research and graduate school experience. She stated that she became more comfortable with her TA and asked to see his research paper and learning more about different types of engineering. This exposure led Lilyanne to think about what she should be doing during her undergraduate years, including what clubs to join, undergraduate research labs to work in, and other experiences that can boost her resume and ability to get into graduate school.

Participants in this study shared many stories of their relationships they developed as members of their LLC, both in their residence hall and in the classroom. Throughout these stories, they highlighted the meaningful relationships they have developed with whom they are living and learning. Many expected their relationships to continue beyond this academic year, with participants making plans to live with their roommates again next year or hoping to take another class with a faculty member. Many meaningful relationships also contributed to developing other impactful connections on campus, such as within undergraduate research labs, the multicultural center, and student clubs. Whether positive or negative relationships, it was evident that participants’ relationships with peers, mentors, and staff were a critical part of their LLC experience and sense of belonging.

Theme Four: Home Away from Home

The fourth theme refers to how participants described their LLC experience when asked if they felt safe and comfortable. Participants discussed feeling safe with doors that lock and front desk security around the clock, but they also referenced feeling comfortable with their living space and who they shared that space with. Eight of the nine participants referred to their residence hall as home, with some using the phrase a “home away from home” and based that feeling on the physical space, activities they did in their rooms, and staying connected to their families and friends from home. While this concept is not unique to LLCs, it is of importance to how these Students of Color experienced a sense of belonging within their LLCs.

Arthur and Nathan both shared the feeling of safety as a contributor to a “home away from home” feeling. Both Arthur and Nathan highlighted their sense of security within their residence halls, noting that their doors can lock and there were many points of entry that required they scan their student ID. Arthur shared that him and his suitemates typically keep their suite door open while someone is home like other suites in his LLC. Arthur mentioned that “it’s not bad to walk into someone else’s suite” and reiterated that they “all get along really well.” Nathan also mentioned feeling comfortable because they know their suitemates can walk in, but that they will also knock before entering to respect their private space. Nathan appreciated the option of doors locking to provide a sense of security, even though they hardly lock their door unless no one is home. Arthur discussed stories of bringing parts of his culture into the Honors College LLC, such as piñatas and ofrendas. Replicating these traditions from his home contribute to his sense of “home away from home” in his LLC. In addition, other Honors College peers embracing these traditions with him contributed to his overall sense of belonging.

Some participants stated that they have now started calling their room “home,” for instance, Marla said she started referring to her room as “home” when she spoke with others, “Sometimes, I’m like, ‘Yeah, I’m going to go home,’ and I mean my dorm.” When Marla was asked what makes her room feel like home, she said, “I guess just the things I do in my room. Those are the things I would do in my room at home, like making my bed and doing homework in there. Habits.” Marla’s ability to replicate habits she was used to performing at home with her family contributed to her feeling comfortable and at home in her LLC.

Lilyanne referenced something similar and stated that her room was like her home because of “habits” but also because of the presence of her suitemates. She shared, “I come home, and everyone is there, and I’m able to talk to any of them. It’s just kind of nice.” Lilyanne also shared that although she does not own many things, the stuff in her room also makes it feel like home. She shared, “All the stuff there is mine. I’m kind of a minimalist, so I don’t really have much back home anyways, physical-wise.” For Lilyanne, her room felt more like home because of her relationship with her roommates and less about the items she has in her room, since that was similar to how her room is back home.

On the contrary, Suzanne shared that the items in her room contribute to this “home away from home” feeling. Suzanne said she felt comfortable in her space because of how she decorated the space with items that remind her of home, including pictures of family and friends and gifts she received from them. Suzanne regularly speaking to her parents on the phone and visits home on long weekends. She shared “since it’s [home] not far away, it’s nice to be able to go home some weekends and see my family again.” Like Lilyanne, Suzanne also shared an awareness of her positive roommate relationship contributing to her feeling at home in her LLC. Suzanne stated,

It's cool to have a room to feel comfortable in, and feel comfortable with your roommate, and that's a cool experience to have because other people don't have those experiences. Some people hate their rooms or hate being in there.

Violet also frequently visited her family on weekends. She mentioned that “the fact that I’m just an hour 40 minutes away, I think is comforting.” She shared stories of visiting home in September and October for family birthdays and going home on longer weekends. Violet shared that while she does visit her family frequently, she was always excited to return back to campus to be with her suitemates, with which she had positive relationships.

Alternatively, Shannon was a participant who did not have a positive relationship with her roommate and struggled to feel at home in her room. She shared “I hate being in my room. I just don’t like to be in there when my roommate is in there” and that being in her room made her angry at times. When asked if she felt at home, Shannon shared that she does not in her room, but when she spends time with her friends and other suitemates, she feels a sense of community. Unfortunately, Shannon did not feel comfortable spending time in her room outside of sleeping because of her relationship with her roommate.

The fourth theme of “home away from home” is derived directly from participants’ stories when asked if they felt safe and comfortable in their LLC. While most participants shared positive experiences with their room and referring to it as “home” as well as the positive relationships with those they live with, Shannon and Randy did not have positive roommate relationships, which impacted their ability to feel a “home away from home.” It was also evident that participants found a variety of ways to feel comfortable in their LLC, whether it be with the way they decorated their rooms or who they spent time with outside of their room. Lastly, participants shared aspects of staying connected to their

family and friends from their hometowns, whether it be through the items they brought with them to their LLCs, talking to them regularly on the phone, or frequently visiting on weekends. Staying connected to their previous relationships with family and friends was important for these participants when it came to feeling safe and comfortable in their new homes.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed findings from the study from conducting two interviews with nine total participants. This chapter introduced four emergent themes from participants' stories and experiences as they relate to their living learning community and sense of belonging: shared identities & similar values, shared experiences & collective struggles, impactful connections & meaningful relationships, and a home away from home. Each theme does not exist independently of the others; all four themes intersect and influence each other. Participants highlighted the anticipation and reality of shared identities and similar values as a part of their LLC experience. Additionally, the LLC provided opportunities for shared academic and social experiences and fostered collective struggles among each community through required coursework. Based upon these first two themes, participants described their impactful connections and meaningful relationships with others, contributing to their sense of belonging on campus.

Additionally, the home away from home theme addresses the need for students to feel comfortable and safe, as well as maintaining connections with families and friends from before their time in college in order to feel a sense of belonging in college.

While most participants provided positive stories regarding these themes, there were also some participants who had experiences that highlighted the absence of these themes, such as not sharing the same major as their peers, not enjoying the required LLC class, and having negative roommate relationships. Chapter VI will provide a

discussion and conclusion of these findings through the theoretical framework of Strayhorn's (2018) model of college students' sense of belonging and other connections to existing literature.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While colleges and universities have adopted programs like living learning communities (LLCs) to boost retention rates of college students, Students of Color continue to graduate at much lower rates than white students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Understanding how Students of Color describe their experiences with high-impact practices, such as LLCs, and how they experience a sense of belonging can contribute to a better understanding of how institutions can retain and graduate Students of Color at a higher rate. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the sense of belonging and experiences of Students of Color participating in LLCs at a large, public research university. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do Students of Color describe their living learning community experiences and sense of belonging?
2. How do Students of Color make meaning of their living learning community experience?
3. What perceptions do Students of Color have regarding the impact of living learning communities on their sense of belonging?

To address these research questions, I conducted a phenomenological study with Strayhorn's (2018) model of college student sense of belonging as its theoretical framework. I collected rich, qualitative data by conducting two semi-structured interviews with Students of Color currently participating in an LLC at the study institution during the fall semester of their first year of college. This chapter discusses of the findings from Chapter V and connects them to the theoretical framework and existing literature, shares implications for practice and suggestions for future research.

Discussion of Findings

Through data analysis, four themes emerged: shared identities & similar values, shared experiences & collective struggles, impactful connections & meaningful relationships, and home away from home. All participants shared expectations and instances of having (1) shared identities & similar values and (2) shared academic and social experiences & collective struggles as LLC members. These first two themes allowed participants to easily form (3) impactful connections & meaningful relationships with their LLC peers, residential life staff, and teaching staff. Lastly, when describing their experience, most participants in this study stated that they felt comfortable and described their space as a (4) home away from home. These four themes directly address the study's research questions and connect and expand Strayhorn's (2018) model of college students' sense of belonging and existing literature.

To address the first research question, Students of Color described their LLC experiences through the four emergent themes and highlighted its complexity. Participants in this study described their LLCs as communities where they shared similar identities and values with peers, where they engaged in shared experiences and collective struggles, where they developed meaningful relationships and connections, and as a home away from home. These emergent themes highlight what was most salient for participants as they navigated their first semester in their respective LLCs. In addressing the second question, Students of Color attributed their LLC experience as a means to generating connections and fostering their sense of belonging on campus. Most participants described feeling confident, comfortable, and safe in their LLCs. They also emphasized the importance of their relationships with peers, faculty, staff, and continued relationships with family. In addressing the last research question, Students of Color perceived the LLCs as contributors to their sense of belonging on campus in part

due to the nature of connection both inside and outside the classroom. When asked what their college experiences would be like without the LLC, all participants acknowledged that it would not be the same. Some participants predicted a lack of friendships or differences in relationships by identity, while others addressed not having the LLC class and its impact on their academics and connections to faculty.

The use of Strayhorn's (2018) model of college students' sense of belonging as a theoretical framework for this study allowed myself as the researcher to better understand the phenomenon of sense of belonging from the perspective of Students of Color in LLCs. This framework acknowledges the fluidity of sense of belonging rather than a rigid developmental theory with stages, further emphasizing the complexity of this phenomenon. This study afforded an opportunity to better understand and gain insight into how Students of Color describe their experience in LLCs and their sense of belonging within them.

Findings from this study shed light on the important role of intersectionality within LLC environments as it relates to sense of belonging for Students of Color. Additionally, findings revealed how Students of Color experienced their LLCs, with particular emphasis on Students of Color participating in identity LLCs at the study institution, which is a PWI. This study also contributes to existing, albeit limited, literature that focuses on Students of Color participating in LLCs (Garvey et al., 2020; Spanierman et al., 2013). The following sections highlight the study's connections to Strayhorn's (2018) model of sense of belonging as well as existing literature.

Shared Identities & Similar Values

During this study, participants shared various behaviors they engaged in to meet the need for a sense of belonging. In fact, prior to arriving to campus, most participants disclosed that they chose to participate in an LLC to live with others who were like-

mindful or held a shared identity or similar values, such as the same ethnicity or academic major. This finding connects with the second component of Strayhorn's (2018) model which states that sense of belonging is a fundamental motive sufficient enough to drive behavior, either positive or negative. Choosing to join this program was a behavior these participants employed in order to fulfill a sense of belonging before even physically arriving on campus.

The study also found that context and timing of participating in an LLC was especially relevant to sense of belonging for participants. Feelings of vulnerability are heightened for the participants in this study, as they were incoming first-year students who were not familiar with the campus or surrounding community. This finding relates to the third component of the sense of belonging model (Strayhorn, 2018) which emphasizes that sense of belonging can take heightened importance during certain contexts, times, and among certain populations. Strayhorn states that this third component involves normative congruence, which suggests that "individuals seek environments or settings that are congruent with their own expectations, values, attitudes, and positioning" (p. 35). All participants shared that their decision to join an LLC included the anticipation of living with others who shared an identity or were perceived to be like-minded. Sense of belonging on a PWI takes heightened importance for Students of Color (Strayhorn, 2018), and thus, for participants in identity LLCs, the decision to live with others of the same race or ethnicity was particularly important.

Race and ethnicity played an important role in participants' decision to join an LLC and impacted how they experienced their LLC and a sense of belonging. Marla shared that her reason for joining the Black identity LLC was to live with other Black students because she never had that experience in her rural hometown. After arriving on campus, Marla connected quickly with her suitemates but yearned for even more

connections with Black students, thus inspiring her to join the Black Student Organization on campus. Marla's experiences and sense of belonging in the Black identity LLC aligns with Williams (2020), who found that Black students experience a greater sense of belonging when they are among peers with the same racial background. These findings also align with the fifth component of Strayhorn's (2018) sense of belonging model which states that sense of belonging is influenced by an individual's social identities. Here, various identities can impact how a student perceives a sense of belonging.

While race and ethnicity impact sense of belonging for participants, the saliency of these identities and their pre-college experiences also influenced their decision to join an LLC. For example, Arthur chose to join the Honors College LLC as someone who values academics and surrounding himself with others holding the same value. Being around others who value academics encourages Arthur's commitment to being an Honors College student opposed to being in the Latinx LLC. Different from Arthur, Marla's pre-college experiences of being the only Black person among her peers influenced her decision to join an identity-based LLC instead of one for her academic major. Marla was seeking an environment with other Black students at a PWI, and by doing so, her Black identity was more salient than other social identities. This finding relates to the existing literature that found that certain predictors of pre-college experiences impact salient identities of college students (Hurtado et al., 2015). These findings are important to higher education because they depict a strong example of the varying saliency of racial identity and importance of choice as students select which LLC to join.

Despite participating in an LLC designed to foster a sense of belonging with peers of shared identities, participants shared feelings of isolation associated because

they did not hold other commonly shared identities with their LLC peers, which is similar to other existing literature (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; Jessup-Anger et al., 2019; Jessup-Anger & Howell, 2021; Wawrzynski et al., 2009). However, these studies found that students experienced feelings of isolation in relation to not holding similar values as their LLC peers, not necessarily holding different identities. In this study, participants having feelings of isolation because they did not hold other commonly shared identities in their LLCs highlights the key importance of the intersectionality of identities. For example, Lilyanne shared her heightened awareness of being the only female Asian student in the Engineering College LLC, which is dominated by white male students. The context of her identities in this space influences how she experiences her LLC and perceives her sense of belonging. Lilyanne may have benefited more by being in a Women in STEM LLC, which Rainey et al. (2018) found to be helpful for female Students of Color in STEM fields. However, contrary to findings from Rainey et al. (2018), the student in the study who did participate in the gender-based LLC still experienced feelings of isolation due to the lack of connection to others with the same major. Violet's perception of this LLC was that it would offer her more opportunities to network with other engineering majors but found that the majority of her LLC peers was actually in the College of Science. Strayhorn et al. (2022) share that values can change among academic majors, thus influencing sense of belonging, which can be connected to the feelings of isolation both Lilyanne and Violet experienced in their LLCs. While Lilyanne and Violet held identities shared with their LLC peers, they found themselves feeling excluded based on their other intersecting identities.

This study also found positive experiences associated with intersectionality of identities. Nathan, who just after arriving to college, began to explore their gender identity and came out as non-binary. Nathan's gender identity converges with other

social identities to influence their sense of belonging. Nathan acknowledged that they are one of few Latinx students in the Honors College LLC in addition to being the only computer science major in this community. These multiple dimensions of Nathan's identity simultaneously influence their sense of belonging in their LLC. Strayhorn's (2018) fifth component addresses the concept of intersectionality of identities, stating that "social identities intersect and often simultaneously affect college students' experiences of belonging" (p. 38). Within this fifth component, Strayhorn describes his revelation that sense of belonging is not about assimilating to a culture or fitting in, but rather about "acceptance, authenticity, and finding community as one's true self, just as you are" (p. 39). Through the support and acceptance of their LLC peers, Nathan was able to embrace their authentic self, which contributed to their sense of belonging. Nathan's ability to be authentic also refers back to Strayhorn's (2018) definition of sense of belonging, as Nathan's perceived social support and experience of feeling accepted and valued contributed to their overall sense of belonging. Nathan's sense of belonging is directly connected with their ability to be vulnerable in their LLC and explore who they are authentically.

Shared Experiences & Collective Struggles

The second theme that emerged during this study was the notion of having shared academic and social experiences as well as going through the same struggles as their LLC peers contributing to their sense of belonging. The LLC itself encourages behaviors that foster a sense of belonging for Students of Color, whether behaviors directly involve the LLC or not. Participants described joining clubs and undergraduate research labs, and engaging in behaviors to promote their academic success like studying with their LLC peers and walking to class together. All participants in this study described shared academic experiences with their LLC peers. Arthur shared that he and

his peers were enrolled in the required Honors College LLC class, and thus, had the same assignments and shared the same struggles and worries. These same experiences and struggles foster a sense of comradery and belonging within the LLC. Nathan described that their LLC peers did not commonly skip classes since they motivated each other. Arensdorf and Naylor-Tincknell (2016) and Bauer and Kiger (2017) had similar findings, where students in LLCs discussed forming study groups easily and reported improved academic habits and outcomes. These findings highlight the direct impact that LLCs have not only on sense of belonging for Students of Color, but also habits and behaviors that promote academic success and thus, their retention at a PWI.

Participants also discussed various shared social experiences, such as joining clubs and attending campus social events with their LLC peers. Violet shared her experience of socializing with her Women in STEM LLC peers during an LLC-sponsored retreat event, exemplifying the importance of social interactions on her sense of belonging. Shared social experiences were just as valuable for participants' sense of belonging as the shared academic experiences, supporting Hurtado and Carter (1997), who found that Latinx students who interacted with peers outside of class and joined co-curricular activities experienced a greater sense of belonging than those who did not. Shared social experiences contributing to sense of belonging for Students of Color also aligns with Workman (2015), who found that social connections were important for students in LLCs to develop a sense of belonging. Hausmann et al. (2007) stated that the more opportunities for students to have shared experiences with peers and faculty academically and socially, the greater the sense of belonging for students. Although LLCs have a reputation for focusing on academic success for its participants (Inkelas et al., 2018), findings from this study serve as an important reminder that social

opportunities are just as impactful on the sense of belonging and retention for Students of Color at a PWI.

Impactful Connections & Meaningful Relationships

Participants in this study emphasized the importance of having impactful connections and developing meaningful relationships with their LLC peers, faculty, and residential life staff. This study confirms what previous studies have also found: the importance of these connections and relationships in LLCs and sense of belonging for students (Adams & McBrayer, 2020; Bauer & Kiger, 2017; Duran et al., 2020; Garcia, 2017; Hausmann et al., 2007; Inkelas et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2007; Wawrzynski et al., 2009). Additionally, all participants in this study cited relationships they developed as the most important aspect of their LLC experience and sense of belonging. This finding aligns with the assertion from Johnson et al. (2007) that these relationships are critical for the sense of belonging of first-year students overall. The findings from this study assert that establishing impactful connections and meaningful relationships enabled Students of Color to develop a sense of belonging within their LLCs, which then extended to their sense of belonging on campus overall.

The most commonly reported relationships were that of their roommates and other LLC peers. Roommates, suitemates, and other LLC peers were a large part of participants' experiences and sense of belonging. The participants in this study shared many examples of relationships with their LLC peers. For instance, Suzanne shared that when she returned from fall break, one of her peers knocked on her door to say hello and welcomed her back. This experience made her believe "someone likes me" and that someone cared that she was back on campus. Other stories highlighted ways in which participants felt depended upon and needed in their LLC. Nathan shared that they were a Computer Science major taking advanced computer science courses, however, others

on their floor were engineering majors taking the entry-level computer science class. When their LLC peers struggled in their computer science class, they sought Nathan out to tutor them throughout the semester. Nathan expressed that this made them feel needed and valued by their peers. These relationships contributed to participants' feeling of mattering, which relates to sense of belonging according to Strayhorn's (2018) fourth component. This fourth component says that sense of belonging and mattering are related, ensuring that participants felt valued, needed, and appreciated. This study's findings on the importance of peer relationships supports other existing literature that asserts that these relationships foster a sense of belonging for students in LLCs (Duran et al., 2020; Jessup-Anger et al., 2019). This study contributes to these existing studies by focusing on Students of Color and their peer relationships in LLCs.

Findings from this study also suggested the existence of other positive outcomes as stemming from established relationships, especially when participants discussed their futures. Lilyanne shared that she and her roommates have plans to live together through junior year, suggesting that Lilyanne plans to remain a student at the study institution. Having committed to living together next year with her roommates, this continued relationship and source of support suggests that Lilyanne is less likely to withdraw from college. This closely aligns with Strayhorn's (2018) sixth component which suggests that a sense of belonging promotes positive outcomes and success. These findings assert that when participants establish meaningful connections and relationships, they also establish a relationship with the institution, thus increasing the chances of their retention. This finding supports the need for Students of Color to establish meaningful relationships with peers, staff, and faculty in order to be retained on college campuses.

In this study, there were also instances in which participants shared the impact of conditions changing on their sense of belonging, placing their chances of retention in jeopardy. For example, Randy shared an instance of a situation changing and impacting his need for a sense of belonging related to his relationships with his roommates and other LLC peers. Randy shared a time at the beginning of the semester when he depended on a friendship with his new roommate and did not focus on developing other connections within his LLC. However, when his roommate left, Randy felt alone and had a heightened need to build connections with other students. Randy stated that he started making other friends and found it easiest to make friends with those in shared classes. While Randy was quickly able to develop a friendship with his roommate, the loss of that relationship created an urgency for Randy to make more friends quickly, whereas others on his floor did not feel an urgency to develop new friendships in the middle of the semester. Randy's experience conveys that a sense of belonging must be met as conditions change, which aligns with Strayhorn's (2018) last component of his model that states this specific notion. Just because Randy had felt a sense of belonging at the beginning of the semester, does not mean that it would remain throughout the remainder of the semester, especially since his roommate had left. It is critical to acknowledge the phenomenon of sense of belonging as complex, ever-changing, and fluid, especially for higher education practitioners who work with students year-round.

Additionally, findings from this study highlighted the importance of faculty relationships. Shannon shared her appreciation for having a Black woman teach her LLC class, explaining her appreciation of the faculty's experiences and how it contributes to teaching students about privilege and equity. Learning from and having impactful connections with LLC Faculty of Color can further promote a sense of belonging and retention on college campuses. Meaningful relationships with faculty have been shown

to foster a sense of belonging for students, especially Students of Color (Adams & McBrayer, 2020; Hausmann et al., 2007). Additionally, other existing literature highlights LLCs as contributors to developing meaningful faculty relationships and sense of belonging for students (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; Inkelas et al., 2007; Reynolds et al., 2019; Wawrzynski et al., 2009). Adams and McBrayer (2020) urge institutions to diversify faculty to promote a sense of belonging for Students of Color and increasing their retention. Identity LLCs offer a unique opportunity for a required course to be taught by a Faculty of Color in a classroom of Students of Color looking for impactful connections and a sense of belonging on a PWI campus. This finding supports the need for increased diversity of faculty in higher education classrooms to directly impact the sense of belonging and retention for Students of Color at PWIs.

Lastly, participants highlighted connections and relationships they had with residential life staff, both positive and negative, as impactful to their experience in their LLC. In this study, participants described their Resident Assistants (RAs) and other residential life staff as either positively through the time they spend getting to know the participants or informing them of current events, or negatively through being documented or accused of policy violations. Bauer and Kiger (2017) found that the LLC students they interviewed attributed their retention and sense of belonging to both peers and residential life staff, as some of the participants in this current study did. Developing meaningful relationships with residential life staff can contribute to how comfortable and welcome Students of Color feel in their residence hall, especially since these staff members live among them. Alternatively, negative experiences can provide the opposite result. Experiencing negative interactions or incidents, such as microaggressions, hate speech, or worse, can not only impact students' sense of belonging, but their mental health and safety as well (Mui & Teichholtz, 2022; Tanner, 2021; Walters, 2020).

The participants who shared negative experiences with residence hall staff, however, did not attribute them to their racial, gender, or sexual identities. This was especially true for those who joined an identity LLC to connect with others who share these same identities. This statement is important, as it is supported by Strayhorn's (2018) fifth component, which states that sense of belonging is influenced by the identities of the individual. While negative experiences with residential life staff were not attributed to participants' identities, residential life staff members do impact the sense of belonging and experiences of Students of Color in LLCs in both positive and negative ways. The role of residential life staff and other higher education practitioners is critical and should not be overlooked when considering ways to increase their sense of belonging and retention for Students of Color at a PWI.

Home Away from Home

Lastly, participants in this study continued to refer to their LLC as a "home away from home." Participants described their homes as comfortable and safe, where they could be their authentic selves. Various aspects of their LLC contributed to this feeling of a home, including the physical space and decorations, the positive relationships they had with their peers, and the activities they did in their rooms. Another aspect that contributed to "home away from home" was staying connected to their families. This critically contributed to their feeling of a "home away from home" and is of particular importance for the sense of belonging of Students of Color in LLCs at a PWI. Interestingly, staying connected with families counters previous theories that suggest assimilation and autonomy promote college success and identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Tinto, 1975). Hausmann et al. (2007) found that parental support significantly predicted students' intent to persist through college. This study adds to this finding by adding qualitative data on how family support contributes to the

experiences of Students of Color in college. For Students of Color, keeping ties with their background, traditions, and families are critical for their success on college campuses.

However, it is also important to note the impact of intersectionality of identities on who has the opportunity to participate in LLCs. At the study institution, living learning communities required participants to be full-time students living in a residence hall while taking at least one required class with other students in their LLC. Living on campus is a costly expense when attending college and is not a requirement for first-year students to do so at the study institution. Because the cost of living in one of the on-campus residence halls is substantial, many local students may choose to live at home, among other reasons. Students living on campus are generally coming from further distances, impacting their sense of belonging as they navigate not only a new campus, but new friendships and a new city (Buote et al., 2007). All participants in this study were not from the city in which the university was located. In fact, all participants' hometowns were at least two hours away from the university, which can impact the ability to visit frequently and heightens the need to establish a "home away from home." Additionally, the two residence halls where the LLCs are located are the most expensive halls the university offers and there is currently no advertised need-based or merit-based financial aid specifically for students interested in joining an LLC. This situation creates financial barriers for low-income students and local students who may choose to live at home instead of on campus, taking away the resources and benefits of LLC participation that fosters a sense of belonging and retention for these students.

Implications for Practice and Research

Findings from this study provide many implications for practice to increase sense of belonging for Students of Color at PWIs and acknowledge the intersectionality of their identities. Additionally, this study offers suggestions for future research to expand upon

the knowledge this study created on the sense of belonging for Students of Color in LLCs.

Practical Implications

Findings from this study can aid practitioners in promoting a sense of belonging for Students of Color, especially at PWIs or in academic fields where they are underrepresented. One of the most prominent aspects of the LLC experience that participants in this study spoke to was having shared identities with others and how intersectionality of identities impacted their experiences and sense of belonging. While shared identities are already built into the structure of what LLCs are, it may be beneficial to incorporate more shared identities beyond the LLC's themed shared identity. For instance, an Honors College LLC may already connect students together by the Honors College, however, higher education practitioners can provide more opportunities for students to build connections through intersecting identities such as academic major, ethnicity, or gender. Additionally, it may be to the benefit of LLC students if residence life staff consider intersecting identities when accepting students into LLC spaces to prevent instances of isolation. For example, if an Honors College LLC is comprised of mostly STEM majors, students majoring in the liberal arts may find themselves feeling isolated in an LLC even if they are all Honors students. In this example, if residence life staff examine the academic major distribution of their Honors College LLC students, they may be able to proactively recruit and accept a variety of majors to prevent students from feeling isolated because they are the only liberal arts major among STEM majors. Additionally, practitioners can provide programming that encourages connections across LLCs to create opportunities for LLC students to connect with others via other shared identities.

Second, participants described shared social and academic experiences as a major component of the LLC experience. Similar to shared identities, required classes are part of the nature of living learning communities. However, there are still opportunities for higher education practitioners to incorporate more shared experiences beyond the required class. Currently, LLCs at the university only have a required fall semester class. However, as Strayhorn (2018) emphasizes, higher education practitioners should keep the seventh core element of his model at the forefront of our minds, which states that a sense of belonging must be satisfied as conditions change. No longer having a shared required class in the spring semester may impact the sense of belonging for Students of Color in LLCs. Providing other additional shared experiences during the spring semester may counteract the absence of a shared spring semester course. LLCs can also require a spring semester class; however, some LLCs may struggle with finding another common class that all of their students need to take during the spring semester. There are LLC programs at other institutions with more than one shared course, including the Psychology Living Learning Community at Azusa Pacific University (Azusa Pacific University, n.d.) and the Business Learning Community at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (University of North Carolina at Charlotte, n.d.). Another alternative can be a weekend retreat or leadership development weekend which allows LLC students to share experiences together during the spring semester without the need for another required course.

Participants in this study also frequently shared stories about their relationships with their LLC peers, residential life staff, and faculty. These relationships were critical in how participants experienced their LLC and described their sense of belonging. Most prominent were their roommate and suitemate relationships. Because most participants chose their LLC because they had the opportunity to live with others who are like-

mindful or shared a common identity, practitioners involved in assigning room placements should find ways to increase roommate compatibility, such as asking LLC applicants about their living preferences and habits. Roommate matching is critical to any on-campus living experience, and LLCs are no exception. In fact, the importance of roommate matching may be heightened for LLCs, as students are spending more time together in LLCs through shared experiences.

Additionally, participants in this study shared both positive and negative experiences with residential life staff and its impact on their LLC experience. Resident Assistants who regularly informed their residents of upcoming events and got to know their residents through meaningful conversations were typically described as “approachable” and “easy to talk to.” These staff play a large role in how comfortable participants felt in their residence halls and influenced their engagement with campus events. Additionally, some participants appreciated that their Resident Assistant had the same major they did, finding value in hearing about their experience as a first-year student. For practitioners, it may improve the LLC experience for Students of Color if their Resident Assistants held some of their same identities, such as major or ethnicity, or even be a former LLC participant themselves. Additionally, Resident Assistants for LLCs should receive training on the purpose, goals, and learning outcomes of their communities, especially if they are tasked with planning some of the LLC-sponsored programming.

This study also found that faculty and teaching assistants were instrumental in developing sense of belonging. Some participants cited their faculty holding office hours and listening intently to their in-class discussions as factors that fostered their sense of belonging. Other participants shared stories of their teaching assistants connecting them to other campus experiences, such as undergraduate research and the Multicultural

Center. One participant shared the importance of their faculty member being a Black woman, suggesting that sharing identities with faculty and teaching assistants may promote a greater sense of belonging for Students of Color. Higher education practitioners involved in courses for LLCs should consider the impact of the identities of faculty teaching these courses for Students of Color, and the efforts made to connect with these students both inside and outside of the classroom.

Another key implication for higher education is the notion of LLCs being a “home away from home.” Higher education practitioners should promote the notion of an LLC being a “home away from home” and embrace students’ backgrounds and their families. This can be done by communicating that they do not need assimilate to be successful in college, celebrating their identities, and hosting family weekends or incorporating families into LLC course assignments. One example is having an assignment where LLC students interview a family member to learn their life history.

Living on campus and participating in LLCs can be a financial barrier for many Students of Color. Given the benefits associated with LLCs, especially for Students of Color, higher education practitioners should identify effective ways to reduce these financial barriers to participate in an LLC. Thus, higher education practitioners must encourage LLC participation and an increased sense of belonging through offering financial assistance to offset the cost of housing and programming fees that are typically associated with an LLC program. One institution, Georgia Tech, currently offers financial assistance for LLC participants through a renewable need-based grant of up to \$10,000 per year (Georgia Institute of Technology, n.d.).

Although this study focuses on LLCs as a high-impact practice, there are components of the LLCs that can be incorporated into other existing initiatives and programs to foster sense of belonging among Students of Color. This study specifically

highlighted the importance of relationships and connections with peers, faculty, staff, and a continuation of a relationship with family. For Students of Color, these relationships directly contributed to their sense of belonging on campus. Higher education professionals can implement practices that can nurture these connections and relationships, such as internships, undergraduate research opportunities, family weekends, academic or identity-centered clubs and organizations, and faculty mentorship programs.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study addressed a gap in the literature to explore how Students of Color experience a sense of belonging in living learning communities (LLCs). However, there are many opportunities for future research to continue the conversation of promoting a sense of belonging for Students of Color in higher education settings.

First, LLCs can vary from institution to institution (Doyle et al., 2019; Inkelas et al., 2018; Kuh, 2008; Reynolds et al., 2019; Spanierman et al., 2013). Further studies at other institutions on LLCs would provide further understanding of how Students of Color experience a sense of belonging in different types of institutions. For example, future research can explore Students of Color participating in LLCs at minority-serving institutions, smaller liberal arts colleges, and private universities.

For this current study, it was difficult to determine if some experiences were unique to participating in an LLC versus living on campus in general. The required class experiences and LLC-sponsored events are certainly deemed as unique to LLCs, and participants shared what they felt would be most different for them if they were not in an LLC, to which they responded with different roommates and relationships with others who share their racial identity or academic major. However, the nature of this study did not include a comparison of Students of Color not participating in an LLC but still living

on campus. Future studies should explore this comparison to determine what experiences are unique to participating in LLCs and which can be attributed to living on campus in general.

While this study focused on first-year students only, future research can explore how Students of Color in LLCs experience a sense of belonging as new transfer students or as returning upperclassmen. Some colleges and universities host LLCs that serve transfer students and returning upperclassmen. Additionally, it would be beneficial to explore how sense of belonging for Students of Color in LLCs impacts students long-term. Strayhorn (2018) states that sense of belonging needs to be met as conditions change. As such, future studies should examine instances that may cause conditions to change long-term and impact a sense of belonging for students, such as when students experience instances of discrimination or bias, when students lose a roommate, or during times of heightened stress, such as midterms and finals.

This study focused on Students of Color in LLCs as one major category. Future research should examine various racial/ethnic groups separately or comparatively, such as Indigenous students, Black students, Latinx students, and Asian students. More research can explore Students of Color and intersecting identities, such as first-generation college students and students from low-income backgrounds. While there is existing literature on these student groups, future research can examine these student groups in LLCs over a longer period of time and with a variety of methodology.

The phenomenon of a “home away from home” by continuing to stay connected with families, traditions, and identities were important for participants’ sense of belonging in this study. Future studies should further explore this concept to better understand the importance for Students of Color participating in LLCs and their connections to home.

Additionally, future studies should gain insight into the perspectives of family and friends of Students of Color in LLCs and how this can contribute to their sense of belonging.

Lastly, future research can examine the roles and perceptions of residence life practitioners, faculty and academic advisors who serve Students of Color in LLCs from their perspective. Much of the existing literature focuses on the perspectives of college students; however, gaining insight into the experiences of the professional staff who serve these students can also improve their overall college experience and sense of belonging.

Conclusion

Findings from this study highlight how participants described their experience participating in their LLC, both within their residence hall and in their classroom. Participants also reflected on instances when they felt they could be their authentic selves, when they felt confident, and when they felt a sense of belonging within their LLC. Institutions of higher education will continue to support initiatives and high-impact practices shown to boost retention and graduation for the foreseeable future. Therefore, we as practitioners and researchers must continue to work to understand how various students experience these high-impact practices, most notably, students from marginalized identities. This study adds to the existing literature by gaining insight into how Students of Color participating in LLCs describe their experience and sense of belonging. This study elevated participant voices through two sets of interviews and highlighted four emergent themes including, shared identities, shared experiences, relationships, and a home away from home. This study identified ways in which Students of Color described their experiences in relation to Strayhorn's (2018) model of college students' sense of belonging and existing literature and provided practical implications and suggestions for future research. Although there are many more questions to be

explored, this study contributed to understanding how a high-impact practice, living learning communities, foster a sense of belonging for Students of Color at a predominantly white research university.

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT EMAIL TEMPLATE

Dear [insert potential participant],

My name is Angie Bradley, and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at the University of Nevada, Reno. I am currently conducting research that explores the experiences of college students who participate in Living Learning Communities as it relates to their identities and sense of belonging. As such, I am recruiting participants for two 45–60-minute interviews that can take place via phone, Zoom, or in person. You must be 18 years or older to participate.

The study is approved by the UNR Social Behavioral Institutional Review Board (IRB). I plan to use the findings to inform educational policies and practices to create greater support for students who participate in Living Learning Communities. If you are willing to participate in the study or have any questions about the study, please email me at angelicabradley@unr.edu. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Angie Bradley
Educational Leadership
College of Education
University of Nevada, Reno

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I am conducting a research study to understand the experiences of college students who participate in Living Learning Communities at [study institution]. Participation in this study involves taking part in two (2) interviews that will take approximately 45-60 minutes each. All interviews will take place in the modality of your choice (phone, Zoom, in-person). I will ask you questions about your life history and experiences with participating in a Living Learning Community. You must be 18 years or older to participate in this study.

I understand that answering personal questions may be uneasy. It is my responsibility to respect your privacy and identity throughout this study. If you choose to participate in this study, your identity and all personal information you share will be kept confidential and remain only accessible by me, the sole researcher. To ensure your confidentiality, I will use a pseudonym in place of your real name (i.e., if your name is Rachel, it will be changed to Monica). Additionally, any other information such as names of people, organizations, and any other specific affiliations will be assigned pseudonyms. No personal identifiable information shared in any publications.

Your responses to the interview questions will be audio-recorded and kept confidential. At no time will your name be revealed in the results of this study, including in the dissertation that will be produced or any future publications. You have the right and ability to review the audio recording at any time and have its contents either edited or deleted. The audio recording will be transcribed, and the audio file will be destroyed shortly afterward.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If at any point during the interview you do not feel comfortable participating, you are free to decline to end participation at any time for any reason, or to refuse to answer any individual question without penalty to you. There are no known risks associated with your participation in this study beyond those of everyday life. There are also no direct benefits; however, your participation may contribute to the literature regarding experiences of Living Learning Community students.

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact me via email at angelicabradley@unr.edu. I can answer any questions concerning your rights as a research participant or concerns about the conduct of this study. Additionally, if you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the University of Nevada, Reno Social Behavioral Institutional Review Board (IRB) by calling 775-327-2368 or send a note from the Contact Us page of this website: <http://www.unr.edu/research-integrity>.

Agreement to Participate

I have read the above information, have had the opportunity to have any questions about this study answered, and agreed to participate in this study. My signature indicates that I have read and understood all the aforementioned.

I give consent to be audio-recorded for this study. (Please initial)

_____ Yes _____ No

Participant Print Name

Participant Signature

Date

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW I PROTOCOL

The questions below serve as a guide for the first interview of the two-interview format. The goal of the first interview is to ask participants to tell me as much as possible about themselves up to the present time. During this interview, we reviewed their life history up to the time they became a full-time college student living on campus and participating in a living learning community. Additionally, this interview will focus on the details of the participants' current experiences in their Living Learning Community. During this interview, we discuss current experiences from the participant's perspective, including what they see, feel, and hear as they experience living learning communities.

1. Please introduce yourself with your name and sharing a little about yourself.
2. What is your major and what Living Learning Community are you participating in?
3. What influenced your decision to go to college after high school?
 - a. What influenced your decision to attend [study institution]?
4. What influenced your decision to participate in a Living Learning Community at [study institution]?
 - a. What experiences and relationships influenced your choice?
 - b. What perceptions did you have about what a Living Learning Community was?
 - c. What do you hope to gain from participating in a Living Learning Community?
5. Please describe your cocurricular activities here at the university.
6. What makes you feel connected with others at the university?
 - a. In what ways does your ethnic identity play a role in how you feel connected at the university?
7. How do you see yourself fitting in at the university?
8. Share with me your experiences when you moved into your residence hall and Living Learning Community. What was that first day like (Thursday)?
9. Tell me what it is like to participate in your Living Learning Community.
 - a. Can you share what a typical weeknight looks like in your Living Learning Community?
 - b. Can you share what a typical weekend looks like in your Living Learning Community?
10. Can you share with me any key experiences you have had thus far while participating in your Living Learning Community?
 - a. In what ways does your ethnic identity play a role in how you experience your Living Learning Community?
11. Describe your relationships with your roommate and suitemates. What do your daily interactions look like?
12. Describe the types of students you connect with at the university.
13. How do you feel about your residence hall and your residence hall staff?
14. Describe the events that you attend in your residence hall and on campus.
15. Can you share any challenges or barriers you have experienced thus far while participating in your Living Learning Community?
16. How do you feel when you are in your room/residence hall?
 - a. Are you comfortable?
 - b. Do you feel at home?
 - c. Do you feel welcome?

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW II PROTOCOL

The questions below serve as a guide for the final interview of the two-interview format. The goal of the second interview is reflection. This interview begins with questions surrounding their sense of belonging and builds upon those responses with their living learning community experiences.

Sense of Belonging

1. What does “authenticity” mean to you?
 - a. Has your LLC experience impacted or influenced your ability to feel authentic? If so, how?
 - b. Can you share an example of a time you were your authentic self this semester?
2. What does “belonging” mean to you?
 - a. Tell me what you think it feels like to belong.
 - b. Can you share an example?
3. Have you felt valued or appreciated this semester?
 - a. [If yes] Can you share an example of a time you felt valued or appreciated?
 - b. [If no] Can you tell me more about why you have not felt valued or appreciated?
4. Have you felt confident in yourself this semester?
 - a. [If yes] Can you share an example of a time you felt confident?
 - b. [If no] Can you tell me more about why you have not felt confident?
5. [Clarifying from Interview I] How do you identify ethnically?
 - a. Has your ethnic identity contributed to your sense of belonging?
 - b. If so, how? Can you share an example?

LLC Experiences

6. [Reference their previous perceptions and expectations of their LLC experience from Interview I]. How do your previous perceptions and expectations of the LLC experience relate to the reality of what you have experienced this semester?
 - a. [if not already provided] Can you provide an example?
7. If someone from your hometown asked you to explain the LLC experience, how would you describe it?
8. Has participating in your LLC helped you achieve educational goals?
 - a. If so, how? Can you share an example?
9. Tell me about a conversation in your LLC class(es) that left an impression on you.
 - a. [if not already addressed] Ask about role of faculty in this experience
 - b. [if not already addressed] Ask about role of peers in this experience
10. How do you think your experiences would differ, if at all, if you were not in an LLC?
11. Do you think participating in the LLC has impacted you this semester?
 - a. How do you think the LLC experience has impacted you overall?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in an LLC this semester that you have not shared?