

Book Review: *The Impact of a sense of belonging in college: Implications for student persistence, retention and success* by Bentrin, E. M., and Henning, G. W.

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Introduction

“[D]eveloping and maintaining a sense of belonging is inherent to the academic and cocurricular success of college and university students” ([Bentrin & Henning, 2022](#), p. 273). Within their edited collection, *The Impact of Sense of Belonging in College: Implications for Student Persistence, Retention, and Success*, Bentrin and Henning compile theoretical foundations and practical considerations for those hoping to utilize the promising concept of belonging to positively influence student outcomes.

The book seeks to provide a “compendium of research, applications and approaches to sense of belonging” (p. xvii) that were hitherto scattered across disparate strands of the broader student success literature. Furthermore, the book aims to bring consistent definitions and an overarching theoretical approach to this topic that has gained traction in practical work at higher education institutions. Towards this aim, the first few chapters of the book lay out theoretical foundations and definitions, with most chapters thereafter exploring practical applications of work to enhance students’ sense of belonging. In particular, the book recognizes the close connection between belonging and inclusion, with many chapters exploring how belonging is experienced by specific demographic groups of students, mostly those historically underrepresented within higher education. Whilst the book is centered around the U.S. college experience and aimed primarily at guiding practitioners in U.S. universities, belonging and its links to student success are relevant for international higher education audiences.

This review is structured into two subsequent parts: a section to provide a summary of the contents of the book, followed by critical analyses of whether the book met its stated purposes.

Contents of the Book

Given that the book contains 23 chapters, it is beyond the scope of this review to provide an in-depth synopsis of each chapter individually. Instead, this section of the review will group and summarize relevant chapters together.

In Chapter 1, “Theoretical foundations for sense of belonging in college”, Vaccaro and Newman discuss the applications of their own model of belonging for privileged and minoritized students. This chapter argues that our understanding of belonging must acknowledge existing systematic oppression, rejecting the idea that we can solely rely on student involvement to build belonging. This chapter also draws on work from [Maslow \(1968\)](#) and [Strayhorn \(2019\)](#) to begin setting out definitions for student belonging, which is then built upon by Strayhorn himself in his subsequent chapter entitled “Unraveling the relationship amongst engagement, involvement and sense of belonging” (p. 21). In this chapter, he establishes the differences between these three concepts, arguing that far too often “definition creep” (p. 23) leads us to confusing how we use these terms.

Chapter 3, “Reviewing, theorizing, and looking ahead” by Ellison and Braxton, further explores our understanding of belonging and how it sits precariously between being both a psychological and sociological construct. The chapter also utilizes [Astin's \(1991\)](#) I-E-O model to discuss how belonging

is affected by inputs (I) such as students' demographic characteristics and environmental factors (E) such as campus relationships and climate ([Hoffman et al., 2002](#)), and then has outputs (O) such as improved well-being, retention, and academic achievement ([Boyd et al., 2022](#)).

Part 2 of the book curates 15 chapters that explore sense of belonging across different student identities and contexts; including students with multiple identities, queer and trans-spectrum students, gender divisions, Native American students, Asian American students, Latinx students, Black students, socio-economic divisions, English learner students, first-generation students, first-year students, transfer students, commuter students, student-veterans, and student-employees. Each chapter varies in its structure and focus, but most provide context for the barriers that may be faced by students from the focal characteristic, as well as examples of, and arguments for, efforts to address these barriers.

Part 3 then moves forward into more practical implications and applications. Chapter 19 is split into four sub-chapters, each providing a case study of efforts to enhance students' sense of belonging within U.S. colleges. Each sub-chapter demonstrates how belonging interventions were rooted within theory, evidencing the expertise of those within the student success space to bring together theory and practice. These case studies are followed by chapters exploring how student belonging has been affected by changing social media usage and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The book concludes with two important chapters around impact and next steps. "Measuring belonging in higher education" by Lingat et al. provides a crucial critique of how existing research studies have used a wide variety of techniques to measure students' sense of belonging. Their chapter, establishing a history of belonging scale development provides practical guidance for those hoping to evaluate work on belonging. The "Conclusion," written by editors Bentrin and Henning, draws together all previous chapters of the book and ends with a brief discussion around the limits of belonging and how we must be careful to consider the students who do not want to belong.

Critical Reflections

The main strength of the book is its inclusion of theory and definitions around students' sense of belonging. As recognized in the book's established aims, within higher education practical efforts to enhance belonging are already very prevalent ([Knehta & McCartney, 2021](#); [Soria & Stubblefield, 2015](#)), yet often without proper reflection on the definition of, or theory underpinning, belonging. The three introductory chapters help to bring theoretical foundations and much needed clarity between terms such as engagement, involvement, and belonging. Furthermore, towards the end of the book, Lingat et al.'s chapter aids readers in understanding how to overcome the common obstacles in measuring students' sense of belonging.

Whilst these introductory chapters discussed definitions for student belonging, aptly preparing future chapters to build on these definitions, many subsequent chapters also established their own definitions for sense of belonging. This added unnecessary repetition, and even some inconsistency, which may feel jarring for those reading the book cover-to-cover. However, these additional definitions were commonly found in the chapters exploring a sense of belonging among different student identities and contexts. The decision to include broader definitions of belonging within some of these chapters may have been made so that they are comprehensive for readers who are just interested in that individual chapter. For instance, scholars focusing on the experiences of Asian American students can read Chapter 8 by Kao and gain holistic insights into belonging without need for then also reading all other chapters of the book. Given that much existing literature has

recognized and explored how students from minoritized groups may experience belonging differently (Gopalan et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2007), the wealth of chapters exploring these different student perspectives is appreciated.

Given the other main aim of the book is helping to connect the theory and practice of sense of belonging, the chapters on case studies are especially welcomed. The case study on developing growth mindsets through mentoring by Bayless and Parkinson was refreshingly honest in its reflections about aspects of their intervention that they felt were less successful. However, other chapters within this section included no evaluation of impact, feedback from students or even critical reflections from practitioners. Earlier in the text, the editors recognized the wealth of practice around sense of belonging already taking place within higher education. It is therefore less clear why case studies with evaluative aspects—evidence of impact or lessons learned—were not prioritized for inclusion within the collection.

Conclusion

The Impact of Sense of Belonging in College: Implications for Student Persistence, Retention, and Success by Bentrim and Henning combines theoretical foundations with practical considerations around how to influence a sense of belonging in diverse student populations. The collection's initial chapters establish useful theoretical context and definitions for student belonging which are then built upon by subsequent chapters exploring diverse student contexts and case studies to enhance belonging. Given the importance of sense of belonging to student success, the book provides a comprehensive guide for practitioners.

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