

Exploring the Complexity of First-Year Student Belonging in Higher Education: Familiarity, Interpersonal, and Academic Belonging

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Abstract

Belonging is critical to first-year student success and persistence in higher education. However, differing definitions make it challenging to fully understand why belonging is significant. Foregrounding student voice, this research explored how first-year Australian university students talked about their belonging. Using Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework of student engagement as a lens, 18 students were interviewed weekly throughout the year. Students talked about belonging in three distinct but interrelated ways: familiarity, interpersonal belonging, and academic belonging. While all were important for student wellbeing and engagement, academic belonging, students' sense that university, their discipline, and courses were "right" for them, was critical for perseverance. Unlike interpersonal belonging which tended to build through the year, academic belonging fluctuated for many students. The findings suggest framing belonging merely as about relationships limits understanding of this important construct. Contributing to scholarship by bringing a refreshed perspective to the nuances and complexity of belonging, the research suggests higher education providers need to monitor and foster academic belonging in first-year students.

Keywords: Belonging, student engagement, first-year student experience, retention.

Introduction

The changing socio-political landscapes of neoliberal reforms position universities as the "engine of the 'knowledge economy'" (Beban & Trueman, 2018, p. 99). Higher education is increasingly seen as a "rite of passage" for high-school leavers (Nairn & Higgins, 2007). With the cultural expectations and financial necessity of immediately securing employment following studies (Nairn & Higgins, 2007; Tinker & Elphinstone, 2014), university students face increased pressure to succeed. In the absence of appropriate institutional and interpersonal support, there is a heightened risk students will depart prematurely (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). The median attrition rate of Australian universities is 18.8% with first-year students at particularly high risk of early withdrawal (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2018). Attrition is costly for all (Adams et al., 2010); universities need to improve retention rates for the prosperity and wellbeing of both students and the institution.

Reasons for attrition vary. Tinto (2009), for instance, theorised student attrition is largely influenced by factors relating to commitment, support, and academic preparation. In particular, the importance of belonging for students in higher education has been recognised by many theorists (O'Keefe, 2013; Thomas, 2012). Belonging has long been a topic of scholarly interest. Maslow's (1968) early work on his hierarchy of needs recognised the importance of belonging to a person's wellbeing. As a fundamental component of human motivation, affecting physical and mental health (Vallerand, 1997), belonging has been



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described as a universal human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In higher education, previous research suggests belonging is critical to student retention (O’Keefe, 2013; Tinker & Elphinstone, 2014; Williams et al., 2018). According to Thomas (2012), “feelings of isolation and/or not fitting in” is a key reason students consider leaving (p. 12). Critical to first-year students’ persistence (Nelson et al., 2009; Tinto, 2009), belonging has a positive impact on the student experience and outcomes (Queensland University of Technology, 2002).

Despite these demonstrated links between belonging and student retention, the precise nature of belonging within the higher education context remains contested. Commonplace conceptualisations of belonging centre around interpersonal notions of “attachment” and “relatedness” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Delahunty et al., 2014; Mestan, 2016; Thomas, 2012). Baumeister and Leary, for instance, argue that a sense of belonging requires two things: “First, there is a need for frequent, affectively pleasant interactions with a few other people, and second, these interactions must take place in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern for each other’s welfare” (p. 497).

While belonging is most often discussed in terms of relationships, others take a broader view. This conceptualisation refers not only to peer connections, but to the broader institutional setting, or as Vallerand (1997) puts it, the “feeling that one belongs in a social milieu” (p. 300). Van Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman (2020) argue that students who feel they belong have an “affinity with their institution, feel that they fit in and are part of the community, and feel accepted and recognised for their abilities” (p. 377). They emphasise that without this sense of belonging to the institution and their chosen discipline, students are more likely to leave university prematurely. Ahn and Davis (2019) extend this, arguing belonging at university has four domains: social, academic (university and classroom), personal space (including life satisfaction and personal interests), and surroundings (including accommodation and location). Evidently, conceptualisations of belonging in the context of higher education vary in the emphasis placed upon the degree of interpersonal relationships, ranging from interactions that are more fleeting to those that are enduring and sustained, but also the extent to which broader contextual factors are considered, such as the institution or discipline itself.

This lack of consensus makes it challenging to understand why and how belonging is important. As Ahn and Davis (2020) argue, “if students’ belonging is to be used to promote academic success and retention, more conceptually refined approaches and empirically detailed evidence will be required” (p. 12). Of particular relevance to the current study is how belonging is theoretically linked to student engagement, also long recognised as critical to student success. Again, there are differing views. Some researchers, such as Fredricks et al. (2004) who work within the school sector, view belonging as a component of emotional engagement. However, others argue that engagement is the student’s connection to their learning, rather than their connection to people. Taking this approach, Kahu and Nelson’s (2018) conceptual framework of student engagement proposes that belonging is a critical influence on student engagement. This can help explain why belonging is important for student success and retention as discussed earlier.

Unlike Kuh (2009), who defines student engagement solely as student behaviours, Kahu’s (2013) framework draws on Fredricks et al. (2004) to argue student engagement is not just what students do but also their emotional and cognitive connection to their learning. This view of engagement as multidimensional is supported by others (Nelson et al., 2009; Trowler, 2010). The later iteration of the framework highlights the multifaceted and dynamically interacting impact of both institutional and student factors on student engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). As Coates (2005) argues, student engagement “depends on institutions and staff providing students with the conditions, opportunities and expectations to become involved” in their learning (p. 26). Kahu and Nelson’s (2018) framework illustrates how various factors interact to influence engagement directly as well as via four pathways: self-efficacy, emotions, belonging, and wellbeing. This recognises that, like engagement, belonging is also a joint proposition; and belonging matters not just for student wellbeing but because it impacts on their engagement with their learning.

The current study adds to this literature by offering a deeper understanding of belonging’s nuanced complexity, and how it might relate to student engagement and therefore student success, from the student perspective. Rather than using surveys, which pre-empt responses with preconceived ideas, the current study uses a longitudinal qualitative methodology to explore changes in university students’ understanding and experiences of belonging throughout their first year. Recent studies such as those by Ahn and Davis (2019) and van Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman (2020) have aimed to get a better understanding of how students perceive their sense of belonging at university; this paper builds on that foundation by examining belonging through the lens of student engagement and thus increasing our understanding of why and how belonging matters to first-year students.

The following research questions guided the study:

- 1) *How do first-year students talk about their developing sense of belonging?*
- 2) *What do they describe as the antecedents and consequences of belonging?*

Method

This paper reports on data drawn from a study following 18 students (11 female and 7 male) through their first year at an Australian regional university. The students were all transitioning from high school and studying full time in disciplines such as social sciences, health, and business. Twelve were studying at their local university while living with their families; six were in shared housing or university accommodation having moved to study. The students had hour-long individual interviews just before the semester began and short (15-20 minutes) weekly interviews throughout the year with the third author. Students were encouraged to talk about whatever was important to them, and sometimes asked trigger questions to keep the conversation flowing or to direct their attention to aspects of their experience they may not have considered. Of relevance to this paper, at times they were asked if they felt they fitted in or belonged, and what influenced those feelings. Interviews were recorded and transcribed with identifying details removed and pseudonyms assigned.

This work is situated within a critical realist perspective which combines a realist ontology with an interpretive epistemology, recognising our understanding of the world as subjective, contextual, and socially constructed (Bhaskar, 1998). As such, our analysis is dependent on and influenced by our existing knowledge and experiences as researchers in student engagement. In the first phase of analysis, the entire dataset was coded collaboratively by the first and third authors, leading to a high-level coding schema. The first author then conducted a more fine-grained reflexive analysis on the data initially coded as “belonging”. The process was both deductive and inductive in that this analysis was informed by our earlier work in student engagement while remaining open to the data and the student voices. The findings are therefore both descriptive and interpretive (Braun & Clarke, 2006) – while based on the words of our participants, what is presented is ultimately our interpretations of those words and experiences.

Findings

The analysis showed student understandings of belonging evolved and fluctuated through the year. The first phase was getting familiar with the place, practices, and people of this new environment. Later, two distinct but related types of belonging emerged: interpersonal belonging, the students’ connection with people, and academic belonging, the students’ connection and fit with their discipline and courses. These three types of belonging overlap and influence each other but are discussed separately for clarity. All three operate at different levels: university, discipline, and classroom. The final section of our analysis explores why belonging mattered for students.

Familiarity: “No One’s Really Comfortable”

In the first few weeks, students used phrases such as “the new kid” (Karla) and “kind of lost” (Mia). This was an uncomfortable time, and a key goal was to establish familiarity – with the place, the practices, and the people. This early belonging was foundational – a necessary precursor to the deeper interpersonal and academic belonging that could come later. For example, when Felix was asked in the first week if a social life on campus was important, he replied: “It would be, eventually, but at the moment it’s just kind of getting the feel of the ground and getting involved in everything.”

Getting familiar with the physical campus and the practices of university, including timetables and different types of classes, was critical in the early weeks. As Heidi explains, the students needed to get to a point where university life was just everyday life:

It’s just kind of time like, you know, when you get familiar with your surroundings and you figure stuff out or you kind of, you get the feel of how uni works and you yeah, it just becomes a part of a normal day thing.

The students expected to feel out of place and saw this as a necessary adjustment:

Everyone else knows where they are going except for the first years and then we have our maps out. Checking which tutorials we have to go to and everything. But that’s all part of it. You can’t really avoid that. (Mia)

As Melanie explains, learning these practices is a key goal of the first year: “I think that the first year is just all about like learning the basics and getting to know all the short cuts.”

The need for familiarity of place and practice extended beyond the campus. Some students chose this university because it was local and therefore an easier transition: “It was closest to home and easiest to fit in ... frankly I didn’t want to leave [the area] just yet, I’m very comfortable here” (Isaac). In contrast, Tony moved to attend university and talked about getting to know the area as important for his early belonging: “Just generally walking around the place, getting to know it, it’s sort of hard to explain.” For all the students, even those who hadn’t moved, this was a new phase of life which required them to establish new practices and routines inside and outside of university:

I would hope to have a, kind of, a routine set in. Like, uni and then I keep up with my fitness and I keep up with what I eat ... what I want to do and what I want to keep doing. (Rose)

Familiarity with people – both students and staff – was also a critical component of early belonging. While most wanted to make friends, in the first few weeks recognition was enough: “Just being known around campus, just being able to sort of walk in somewhere to say ‘Hey, how’s it going?’ and start a conversation here and there” (Tony). For some students, participating in university events and activities was important: “... getting involved with as much as you can” (Melanie). Classroom activities such as ice breakers and group work were also valuable for students to connect with each other: “That class particularly I was quite comfortable in. As soon as I got there the icebreaker activity was happening and everyone was talking and meeting new people”. Getting to know staff was important for some students’ early belonging: “I’d love to get to know the teachers quickly” (Sienna). For a few, this was more important than meeting other students: “I think that it’s important to fit in with your like mentors or your like teachers, but with students, I don’t think that that’s really important” (Melanie).

Interpersonal Belonging: “I Need to Know People”

Gradually building through their first year, interpersonal belonging was the students’ deeper connections with people – mostly students, but also staff. The students wanted friendships with “people like me” (Alex and Luke) – people with common interests or goals. Most students wanted friends in the same course, expecting this would mean they had more in common: “I guess I’ll be able to meet people who are into, you know, similar things as me because they’re doing the same course” (Felix). These friendships were critical to their developing sense of belonging at university: “Yeah, I feel I do belong really well. Yes, I just ...there are people like-minded around me so yeah, they’re all at uni for one reason – to get a degree, to have a job” (Peter).

Students varied in what they wanted. Some had existing social networks and were not actively seeking new friendships at university, whereas others, particularly those who had left home, were keen to make new friends. The desired purpose of friendship also varied – some wanted social and others academic; for example, while Peter was keen to meet up with people who are “fun, outgoing, like to go to parties”, Elisabeth was not: “I’m not really looking [for] partying and drinking and things like that. I’m just looking for a few steady friends that I can study with, and I can talk to.”

Students also had different experiences with how easy they found it to make friends and how successful they were. Two students talked about social anxiety. Rose explained how this impacted her sense of belonging in her early weeks:

I’ve been noticing that recently [my social anxiety] flairs up so that really affects my perspective of how I belong and my feelings of belonging... it’s like you still feel judged and you don’t feel like you belong and you’re still worried about people’s perception of you.

As the semester progressed, not all students had their friendship needs met and this inhibited their belonging. Mia commented at the end of the first semester: “I feel like if I had more friends then I’d feel like I fit in more.”

Finally, for some students, relationships with staff were important to their interpersonal belonging: “I think tutors have been a big thing for me. I do feel like especially with my Economic tutor, I feel more we have a friendship and I feel like I belong in that class” (Elisabeth). Equally, feeling staff did not know them had a powerful negative impact. For instance, Mia, at the end of the first trimester, when asked what would give her a better sense of belonging, was clear: “If the [course] tutor knew who I was, considering I come to every single tutorial.”

In general, the students’ sense of interpersonal belonging developed and strengthened over time as they worked or socialised with other students, made friends, and got to know staff. In contrast, academic belonging, discussed next, fluctuated across the semester in different ways for different students.

Academic Belonging: “This is the Right Course for Me”

When students were asked about belonging or fitting in, they often talked about whether university was the right place for them or whether this was the right course and/or future career path. While influenced by people, mostly staff, this academic belonging was noticeably distinct from interpersonal belonging.

A few students expressed an immediate and strong sense of belonging to university. Melanie for example described sitting down in her first lecture: “I just felt like this is the place where I’m meant to be, this is what I’m meant to be doing.” Sienna was equally enthusiastic when asked in week one if she felt she was fitting in: “Yep. Oh my God, I just love it. I feel like this was definitely the place I was supposed to be.” However, this early positivity didn’t always last as students learned more about university and their discipline. For example, despite her early confidence and a strong first semester, Sienna reported increased stress in her second semester and reduced interest in her courses. She started to doubt that psychology was the right course and future career for her and subsequently withdrew from university.

Critical influences on students’ academic belonging as the semester progressed included self-efficacy and success, participation in class, interest in the course, and their developing career identity. When asked what was needed for her to fit in, Alison replied: “As long as I feel that I’m keeping up with the work, and I can communicate with the tutors and lecturers, and I can participate in class activities and stuff, that’s fitting in.” Self-efficacy, a student’s belief that they are capable of the work, was an important influence on academic belonging. Equally, a lack of success reduced self-efficacy and inhibited academic belonging, making students doubt their place at university. At the start of the semester, some students doubted their capability: “I honestly don’t feel like I should be here because I don’t feel smart enough” (Alex). For these students, early success helped build the necessary self-efficacy: “It [a good grade] makes me feel like I’m supposed to be here, because I was sort of in doubt coming straight from high school, if I could cope with it” (Isaac). Perceptions of success, and therefore self-efficacy, depended upon grades, personal goals, and expectations. For example, Rose was keen to get high grades and scoring 50% on a test in week six triggered self-doubt: “Since my slump I’ve been feeling quite negative about it and like oh I can’t do it, why am I doing it, blah, blah, I don’t belong, everyone’s so intelligent and uni makes me feel so dumb.” Rose’s comment about feeling “dumb” illustrates the powerful negative impact a lack of academic belonging can have, as discussed later.

Participation in class was talked about as both an influence on and a consequence of academic belonging: participating helped students feel they belonged and belonging helped them feel comfortable enough to participate. For example, Matthew described answering a question in a lecture for the first time:

I put my hand up and [answered], and it was the feedback from that ... It’s sort of like hey, good job, you belong here. Feeling that you can contribute and knowing that I can contribute it makes you feel like you belong somewhere.

The positive feedback from the lecturer boosted his self-efficacy and fostered his sense of academic belonging.

As well as being influenced by students believing they were good enough to be at university, academic belonging also stemmed from their belief that this was the right discipline for them. Before the year started, half of the students had a clear career goal, and all were excited to be studying something they were interested in. Alex, for example, despite struggling to make friends midway through the first semester, was happy with her course choice: “I feel like I belong in the course. I find it very easy to understand and interesting. So, yeah, I feel like I’m in the right course.” Her interest in the course positively influenced both her self-efficacy and belonging. It was also important for students’ academic belonging that they believed their university learning was taking them in the right direction. Some, such as Alison, had a clear goal and were confident they were in the right course: “People I’ve seen have been dropping out of journalism and now they are in criminology ... I know that I know what I want to do ... So that makes me feel good. I belong in this class.”

However, as the year progressed, those feelings of academic belonging fluctuated for some students. For example, Heidi, despite wanting to be a nurse since she was a child, started to doubt her choice mid-way through the first semester:

I’m kind of a little unsure whether it is the right course I should be doing... I mean, there’s definitely parts of me that enjoy it, and I think that I can definitely do it. I guess it just depends now what area I want to go into.

For Heidi, enjoyment and self-efficacy during the first semester were not enough to establish academic belonging because she was not sure she wanted to be a nurse. However, she visited a career advisor who encouraged her to wait for her first placement before deciding to change majors or withdraw. Following that placement, Heidi’s academic belonging strengthened. She enjoyed it and felt she had a better idea of her possible future career paths.

The perceived singularity of the career path in professional degrees, such as journalism or nursing, appeared to make it easier for students to know (or believe) this was the right course for them and thus feel that sense of academic belonging. In contrast, Elisabeth, was doing a business degree and had yet to choose her major:

I'm sort of just trialling everything, putting everything on trial to see if I would like it or not. So I don't really feel like I belong in any sort of – I have a rough idea of my goals and I've written them down and I've got them in my diary and I always reflect on that, what I like doing, what I want to do. It's just very hard to match a course to my goals.

Staff were a critical influence on academic belonging. Staff grading and feedback signposted student capability, teaching practices encouraged participation, and staff interest triggered student interest: “Their engagement and passion for the subject encourages me to want to go home and study more” (Melanie). Staff could also influence students' development of professional identity. For example, by Week 7 Matthew felt he belonged in his journalism class:

With [tutor], you feel respected as a student and you in turn give them respect, because they've already given it to you. Like in journalism, we are treated more as junior journalists than student journalists. It's odd to describe, but they treat us like we actually have a place there.

Zara's experience of journalism was in stark contrast. Despite starting university with a clear goal of becoming a journalist, she felt the teaching staff made her think “the world of journalism is people with money”, which inhibited her sense of academic belonging: “Is that a world that I wanna be a part of?” Later, Zara changed her major to communications and found a renewed sense of excitement for her study.

Belonging Matters: 'I Just Want to Drop Out'

The final section of this analysis explores why belonging mattered to students. Starting university was accompanied by negative emotions such as anxiety and fear. Students talked about how being alone was uncomfortable: “when you first get here it's pretty daunting because it's like, oh my God, all these eyes are on you because you're alone” (Alison). Early belonging – familiarity with place, practices, and people – was critical for mitigating those negative emotions. Felix highlighted the value of knowing people:

Having people that you're familiar with so if things aren't going well and you're not really fitting in you can go say 'hey how are you?' and just be with them for a little bit so you're not entirely uncomfortable and alone.

Being comfortable then fostered confidence and participation, as Rose explains: “If I belong then I feel more comfortable and I'm more comfortable doing things and more confident in the actions I do.” Early belonging mattered, starting a positive spiral that could lead to deeper interpersonal and academic belonging as the semester progressed.

Throughout the semester, interpersonal and academic belonging fostered student engagement – behaviourally, emotionally, and cognitively. When they felt they belonged, students were more likely to attend their courses, the classes were more enjoyable, and it was easier for them to engage in their learning: “Making friends in class has helped me feel comfortable enough to sit and listen, and learn, and engage in the class” (Felix). As Peter explains, the link between success and academic belonging works both ways: “Knowing I'm succeeding is my belonging. In fact, if I didn't belong in it, obviously I wouldn't be succeeding as well as I am.”

Belonging was also associated with student wellbeing. Interpersonal belonging from friendships provided support, particularly in times of stress: “Because it really sort of helps if you've got that network of friends that you can call upon for support and help and likewise they can call upon you” (Tony). Academic belonging, feeling they were in the right course, also contributed to student wellbeing: “I'm secure in what I'm doing so that like makes me feel good” (Alison). For Mia, this then linked to success: “If you don't feel like you fit in, then you're not going to be happy and if you're not happy you're not going to get good grades.” However, stress could also inhibit belonging: “If I'd gone to student wellbeing a bit earlier, and gone there repeatedly, then I think I would have been able to get that sense of belonging a bit earlier and get a bit more peace of mind” (Tony).

Academic belonging mattered more than interpersonal belonging. Without academic belonging to sustain them, workload and stress had a greater negative impact on students. For instance, Sienna decided not to return for a second year. She was studying psychology but didn't have a clear goal and wasn't sure this was the right degree:

This is why I want to defer uni because I'm sick of the struggle. I'm sick of feeling like I've always got this weight on my shoulders. It's time-consuming, especially when you're doing assignments and exams on stuff that you really don't see yourself doing. What's the point?

Interpersonal belonging was not enough to overcome this, as was evident in Karla's case. Her academic belonging remained low throughout the year because she couldn't see how what she was learning, academic skills, lab classes, and psychology, was related to her planned career in Occupational Therapy: "I don't like the subjects I'm doing. Like I want to be an OT, I want to learn stuff about OT." Despite having made good friends at university, she decided to withdraw at the end of the year: "I'm sad that, like you know, all the friends I've made in the classes. Like they're going to go on and continue their degree."

Whether triggered by low self-efficacy or being unsure of their course choice, a lack of academic belonging leading to stress and thoughts of leaving was common, as the following examples illustrate. Tony struggled with an assessment and commented:

A two-year-old could do it, so I came to the conclusion that I was simply too dumb to do it, so I started questioning whether or not I should be at university and considered dropping out all because I was just too bloody stupid.

Peter's response to failing an exam near the end of the year highlights the strength of the negative emotions this can cause: "I'm over it. I just want to drop out of uni. I hate it. I'm f***ing over it." Zara's doubt about whether journalism was right for her impacted her whole university experience:

It just made me feel really lost and I felt like I didn't have any control over what was happening, it wasn't what I had wanted or expected, kind of just went a little topsy-turvy for a little while there and it got a little bit hard.

This lack of academic belonging makes learning difficult, as Elizabeth found: "It's a lot of stress, I can't really concentrate on my lectures or tutorials because I'm thinking about changing things."

Discussion

Key Findings

Despite its recognised importance in educational settings, what constitutes student belonging remains contested. By foregrounding student voice, the current study sheds light on how first-year students develop and experience a sense of belonging. The findings offer empirical support for an extended conceptual understanding of student belonging which includes familiarity, becoming accustomed to the physical and social landscape of the university, along with the interrelated dimensions of interpersonal and academic belonging. Critically, the findings highlight that conceptualising belonging as being just about relationships fails to account for the significance of academic belonging, the student's sense of fit to their discipline, course, and chosen career path. The findings illustrate complex links between the three dimensions of belonging and aspects of the student experience such as self-efficacy, wellbeing, and student engagement.

Familiarity is a necessary precursor to deeper interpersonal and academic belonging. This early stage of belonging is integral for negotiating the negative emotions, such as fear or anxiety, that often come with a profound shift in life such as starting university. Students need to develop an understanding of the everyday practices of the university, a sense of grounding to the physical environment, and feeling known by those around them. Familiarity helps build comfort as student life becomes the "new norm", increasing students' confidence in their ability to succeed in higher education.

This stage of familiarity supports claims in existing literature, such as Thomas' (2012) finding that "students who did not think about leaving appeared to have a better understanding of the university processes" (p. 12). Thomas (2002) draws on the concept of institutional habitus to demonstrate how the "values and practices of higher education institutions impact student retention" (p. 423). In the present study, institutional habitus offers a lens through which the significance of students' sense of familiarity can be understood. For first-year students, becoming accustomed to the new environment requires an internal shift to embed the social and cultural norms of the university into their everyday interactions. As the place and the people become normalised, the shifting nature of students' habitus enables them to develop the deeper, more nuanced interpersonal and academic belonging.

Interpersonal belonging, centred on finding people with similar interests or goals, was positively linked to wellbeing. Other studies also show belonging is negatively correlated with depression (Stebleton et al., 2014) and that friendships support wellbeing both as a source of fun (Buote et al., 2007) and as support in times of stress (Picton et al., 2017). Importantly, the

current findings suggest socially-based relations are not essential for all students – while some students want friends to socialise with, others want friends to study with. What is not clear is how these different peer groups might impact differently on student engagement. While Mestan (2016) suggests that “having a peer group strengthens [students’] sense of belonging and integration into the university, which is one of the most important factors sustaining course engagement” (p. 989), Ahn and Davis (2020) argue that social belonging, involvement in social groups and clubs, does not necessarily lead to higher levels of academic engagement in courses.

Academic belonging characterised students’ understanding of whether university, and their discipline, was right for them. Critical antecedents of academic belonging included classroom participation, self-efficacy, interest in the content, and belief that the discipline was leading them down the right career path. Each of these antecedents stemmed from the interaction between the student, their preferences and predispositions, and the learning environment, particularly staff and their teaching practice. Academic belonging is distinct from interpersonal belonging – a student can have friends and positive staff relationships but still lack academic belonging. While interpersonal belonging is undoubtedly important, making it less likely a student will withdraw, academic belonging may be more critical, supporting retention directly. As Mestan (2016) found, students who drop out often do so because they feel courses lack purpose and do not provide career direction.

The findings provide empirical support for Kahu and Nelson’s (2018) argument that belonging acts as a pathway – fostering engagement or, in its absence, inhibiting engagement. Throughout the semester, when students felt a sense of interpersonal and/or academic belonging, all dimensions of engagement were enhanced: they were more likely to attend, classes were more enjoyable, and learning was easier. This then enhanced student success creating a positive spiral. The pattern across the year differed between interpersonal and academic belonging. While some students ended their year more connected to people than others, there was a general pattern of interpersonal belonging getting stronger as the year progressed. In contrast, students’ academic belonging, influenced by so many changing variables, did not follow a set pattern of development. For some students their academic belonging strengthened as they got to know more about their chosen discipline. For others, learning about their discipline weakened their academic belonging leading to changing course or leaving university. And for some, while they felt university was the right place for them and they were satisfied with their course choices, lack of a clear goal meant their academic belonging was weaker.

The findings also highlight links between the four pathways in the framework, in particular between all three types of belonging and wellbeing. In the first weeks, familiarity helps mitigate anxiety, while during the year interpersonal and academic belonging act as buffers in times of stress, although in different ways. Interpersonal belonging helps because peers, friends, and staff can be emotional and academic supports. Academic belonging, in contrast, acts as a buffer because the student feels the stress is more manageable and worthwhile if they believe they are in the right place and heading in the right direction. Supporting the work by Ahn and Davis (2020), our findings emphasise that students’ sense of academic belonging to university and to their discipline is fundamental to their success and likely attrition. These preliminary findings need to be followed up with more targeted research.

Fostering Belonging

More consideration needs to be given to fostering all aspects of student belonging. While institutions focus on building familiarity through orientation activities, there is less emphasis on interpersonal and academic belonging, which take time to establish, and which continue to develop and, in the case of academic belonging, potentially weaken. Importantly, the onus of responsibility for fostering belonging does not rest solely upon students (Coates, 2005). Neither is it limited to staff in student support services or those organising clubs and social events. Belonging occurs at the level of the classroom and the discipline as well as the university, so the focus needs to be both inside and outside the classroom.

In particular, students need ongoing opportunities to connect with students and staff with similar disciplinary interests and career goals. For example, building collaborative tasks into the course structure and teaching pedagogy (Tinto, 2009) is a valuable strategy for fostering both interpersonal and academic belonging. Another related strategy is learning communities “developed around shared goals, interests and experiences through what group members do collectively and cumulatively” (Delahunty et al., 2014, p. 53). Forming groups based on shared experiences can satisfy the human desire for interpersonal belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), while at the same time, the disciplinary focus of a learning community offers the opportunity to foster academic belonging and students’ emerging professional identity.

For academic belonging, meaning is important. Academic belonging is fostered when students can personalise their study, such as choosing classes or assignment topics that are meaningful to them (Naylor, 2017). As Whannell and Whannell (2015) explain, when courses have symbolic meaning for students that is aspirational of their future, as opposed to societal or familial

expectations to go to university for instance, the individual is likely to adjust to university life more easily. Meaningfulness is key to student motivation to learn, typically resulting in higher levels of engagement, autonomy, and success (Tinker & Elphinstone, 2014). Sometimes it is a matter of making that meaning explicit to students. Findings in the current study highlight the importance of linking learning to students' future selves – particularly for non-specific degrees such as business. Mentors can be useful here. For example, research with STEM students has found students with mentors had higher levels of self-efficacy and belonging at the end of their first year (Apriceno et al., 2020). While the current study was conducted in a higher education context, these findings are potentially applicable to other adult learning contexts such as professional development training. The sense that the training is relevant to the attendees' current and future professional identities, that they are in the 'right' place, is likely to foster stronger interest and engagement in the learning and therefore more positive outcomes.

Above all else, the findings highlight that many first-year students question their decision to come to university and/or their choice of discipline. And this questioning can happen at different times during the first year. Positive and motivating relationships with academic staff, student mentors, and support staff (O'Keefe, 2013), as well as well-resourced infrastructure (e.g. student associations, counselling centres), are vital. Students need support from academic staff within the discipline and career/course advisors to work through any doubts. They may need to change direction or perhaps to better understand the diverse doorways their current degree may open. This type of support will likely mitigate early departure from university.

Conclusion

This research offers insights into the nuanced complexity of belonging, which opens pathways for further research, particularly on academic belonging. Specifically, scholarship would benefit from inquiries that assess how academic belonging is experienced, negotiated, and fostered for students of disparate backgrounds. The current study was limited to first-year students at a single Australian regional university so other contexts would also be valuable. Academic belonging may be easier to attain for students in professional degrees (Mestan, 2016). There is a need to explore how similar experiences of academic belonging can be nurtured for students in more generalised degrees where career outcomes are not always as clear cut, such as Arts or Business degrees. Finally, given the recent emphasis on online and blended learning, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, further scholarship needs to explore how online students develop these three interrelated aspects of belonging and how institutions can facilitate this process.

Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework shows belonging as a critical link to student engagement and therefore student success and perseverance. This study offers insights into the multidimensional nature of that belonging pathway, and suggests academic belonging has a critical and often undervalued role to play in the student experience.

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