Why Diversity is Not Enough: Perceptions of University Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives Predict Institutional Belonging

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Why Diversity is Not Enough: Perceptions of University Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives Predict Institutional Belonging

by

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Honor’s Thesis

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Advisor: Dr. Kristjen Lundberg
Abstract

Belonging, including feelings of being valued in a larger institutional space, is important to student overall well-being. For students of color attending Primarily White Institutions (PWIs) (and other historically marginalized group members), institutional belonging may be partially dependent on how they perceive diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. This study aims to assess individual differences in how DEI initiatives are experienced by students at PWIs in order to better understand how experiences of DEI initiatives on campuses may differentially impact students of color compared to White students. Belonging for students of color was found to be contingent on their perceptions of DEI initiatives as genuine and successful (or not), while White students’ belonging was found to be less dependent on these perceptions. Protective factors, like peer relationships, were more strongly impactful for predicting belonging for students of color compared to White students. There were racial differences in levels of participation on campus, but it was not associated with belonging.
Why Diversity is Not Enough: Perceptions of University Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives Predict Institutional Belonging

Students’ sense of belonging to a university can be attributed to many factors, including how integrated they feel into the student body, how accepted they feel by others at the university, and their perceived importance, or value, to the university (Ahmet, 2021; Ahn & Davis, 2020; Douglas et al., 2015). Belonging in a university setting is also strongly related to academic achievement, with student’s sense of belonging significantly predicating current academic achievement and well-being (Pittman & Richmond, 2007). Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are often explicitly aimed at fostering belonging. And, while these programs have an impact on all university students, historically marginalized students are the ones towards which many inclusion initiatives are directed. How do they perceive these initiatives? And, what are the potential consequences if these initiatives are viewed negatively?

The current study aims to investigate how students of color and White students perceive and experience DEI initiatives, as White students tend to report greater overall belonging than students of color (Shaheed & Kiang, 2021). Interventions that are aimed at increasing students’ sense of belonging, students of color are able to report more positive outcomes that are associated with student belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2007). When more effort and intention are perceived behind the creation of spaces for students of color, students of color report higher levels of belonging and academic engagement (Kirby et al., 2020). Sense of belonging and other associated outcomes can be improved for students of color, and yet many universities still experience a belonging gap between their White students and historically marginalized students. This indicated that the presence of DEI initiatives on these campuses might not be enough, but that the perceptions of the effort and success of these initiatives are just as important.
Perception of University Efforts

University efforts can be understood as what the institution is doing to try and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, such as creating multicultural spaces, listening and enacting changes put for by marginalized groups, and devoting time and money to DEI trainings. In order to understand institutional belonging, it is first important to understand what initiatives and efforts are perceived as coming from the institutional level. University messaging and early programing that promotes a diverse and inclusive campus experience can prove to be misleading for BIPOC students, as BIPOC students who participated in these early programs can feel as though they are not representative of the overall campus community and be disappointed with this discrepancy (Vaccaro et al., 2019). This dissatisfaction can continue throughout one’s time at the university, as students in one study, regardless of being in their first year or final year, reported communication and access to resources as the largest areas of dissatisfaction (Douglas et al., 2015). These feelings of disappointment towards the university can draw students’ attention to what else in their surroundings is making them feel like they do not belong.

Environments where BIPOC students feel “othered” are created through years of discrimination at the PWI, making them attuned to the centralization of whiteness on campus and the realities of the campus’s heterogeneity (Osbourne et al., 2021). When university messaging about campus climate is unrealized in everyday BIPOC experiences, it allows these feelings to be attributed back towards university efforts. Overall, the ways in which a PWI presents itself has very real ramifications for students, leading to BIPOC students’ increased suspicion that they are not meant to belong in these spaces.

One way the university can present themselves as inclusive is through inclusion signals. Inclusion signals can heavily influence perceptions of institutional measures, as they promote the
inclusion of minority groups. However, they can have several unintended consequences, such as setting unrealistic expectations and making false promises that will go unrealized (Ahmet, 2021). These signals might also cause overrepresented groups to believe they are being excluded, causing additional problems for minority individuals (Dover et al., 2020). White people are quicker to associate multiculturalism with exclusion and were less likely to think of multicultural initiatives as relating to themselves (Plaut et al., 2011). This suggests that DEI initiatives effect everyone, not just marginalized groups, and can have unintended impacts on the population. However, others suggest that being in a culturally engaging environment does not indicate differences in belonging for White and non-White students (Museus et al., 2017). Perceptions of initiatives are important then in understanding if students feel as though they are effective and working according to their intention, as often the implementation of these programs can have varying effects depending on the existing environment and on the identity of the person experiencing them.

**Suspicion of the University**

Perceptions about the effectiveness of programs can then lead to the perception of whether these initiatives are genuine or for show. Diversity is seen by some students of color as being carefully constructed and manipulated from an institutional level, which is not perceived to translate to actual values of diversity (Ahmet, 2021). Interviews with students revealed that Black students felt the university was trying to “check a box” for the institution to be more physically diverse, in which Black students felt isolated and like they were not meant to be in the same space as White students (Ahmet, 2021). A lot of times students of color who grow up in diverse backgrounds experience a culture shock when entering a PWI, forcing them to recognize the role their race plays in their new environment and to engage with peers who are perceived to
be less culturally competent (Osbourne et al., 2021). This experience may differ for White students who might see the presence of diversity as the ability for everyone to experience the space the same.

Students of color may feel suspicious as to why they are even a part of the campus in the first place, as many feel as though their experience is not valued. Stigmas around being Black in a predominantly White school can cause Black students to feel as though others perceive them as being there only for diversity or for other talents, not academics (Melendez, 2008). Signals from personnel in the university such as lacking faith in their academic skills and being underrepresented in the classroom may create an environment in which Black students feel as if their involvement in the university isn’t a representation of the university’s genuine investment in their education and growth. Time at the university is associated with making Black students’ more aware of the racial identity in comparison with White students in a PWI, affecting their comfort in expressing their ethnic identity (Chavous, 2000). Those who find their race to be more central to their identity are the least comfortable participating in multicultural interactions (Shaheed & Kiang, 2021). Race salience can then be a barrier to belonging, as the intention behind multicultural spaces and one of the benefits of diversity on campus is higher rates of multicultural interactions. However, these benefits are not realized if marginalized students feel as though they are not able to genuinely express themselves in these interactions. Living in a space that does not value one’s identity begins to affect how one interacts with others. Being hyper-aware of one’s “otherness” can be a result of a lack of interactions that support their identity as being accepted. Just as individuals’ motives are bring inferred by others (Plant & Devine, 1998), an intuitions motives can also be inferred, BIPOC students might perceived intuitional efforts as being a result of external pressure. Therefore, efforts for BIPOC inclusion
can be viewed as very suspicious considering how time in these spaces makes individuals more aware of their racial identity.

**Institutional Belonging to the University**

In settings where White people are able to control who is in their immediate surroundings and most frequented areas, which is typical of predominantly White institutions (or PWIs), they tend to situate more White people within these spaces (Anicich et al., 2021). This exclusionary behavior can tend to transfer over to a university setting, where BIPOC students feel isolated, unvalued, and as if they are taking up space meant for White individuals (Ahmet, 2021). This is inherent to understanding what a PWI is, as these spaces were built for the belonging of White people, not BIPOC populations. When including them in these spaces, it is important to understand that allowing them in is not enough and is not an act deserving of great recognition (Wall, 2021). Diversity is not in itself reminiscent of inclusion, and this poses a threat to the belonging of BIPOC individuals in a predominantly white university setting.

Institutional belonging can then be partially informed by perceptions and suspicions of the university’s DEI efforts, but other factors also play a role in this measure of well-being. Belonging to the university is not uniform and means very different things for all groups of students. In looking at this measure as variable and context-dependent, one can get a better understanding about why the same university setting evokes different responses from its students. The difference between what university belonging means for first-year and final year university students reveals that availability and communication with support services were more important for first year students, whereas attentiveness within support services was more important for final year students (Douglas et al., 2015). This difference can speak to how belonging evolves on campus, shifting from just needing access to resources to needing the
university to be effective in responding to students. One way students’ needs can be met is through the promotion of university spaces being used for more cultural groups, as Black students have found that participation in cultural spaces gives them more opportunities to interact with each other in more culturally-relevant ways (Payne & Suddler, 2014; Wright et al., 2022). Participation in culturally-relevant events put on by the university or university groups are associated with better perceptions of the campus climate (Glass, 2012). Needs on campus can evolve, but addressing these needs through providing culturally relevant spaces for BIPOC students can provide a better environment for their belonging.

Academic markers and feelings of achievement can provide insights into institutional belonging, too, as many different BIPOC groups tend to think about learning opportunities and belonging differently at a PWI. Black women in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields report more uncertainty about finishing their program and perceive more threat to their ethnic identity in this program than other groups of students (Leath & Chavous, 2018). Black athletes report a similar disposition in the overall campus community, as teachers and peers tend to stereotype them as jocks, making them feel unwelcome in the overall academic community (Melendez, 2008). While some groups might experience a lack of belonging and associated negative outcomes in academic achievement and motivation, the opposite is also true where increased belonging helps to improve these outcomes. Asian American students in one study report academic achievement as being an important part of their institutional belonging, as it is linked to being able to pursue long-term goals due to the opportunities provided by the university, many of which are not available for international students back home (Slaten et al., 2016). Additionally, a group of predominately international students indicated that classroom opportunities for dialogue with people from different backgrounds was associated with higher
perceptions of the overall campus climate (Glass, 2012). Classroom interactions provide valuable insight into how individuals view the university and their belonging within it, given that the quality of these interactions is variable depending on one’s identity and one’s campus environment.

**Participation**

The way the university promotes and provides access to environments where positive peer interactions can take place is one way in which diversity initiatives can be realized. Students who felt like they didn’t fit in a university because of their ethnic background were less likely to join and engage with more ethnic-centered organizations on campus (Chavous, 2000). Being involved on campus, especially with in-group members, is commonly seen as being protective over one’s well-being and sense of belonging. For example, Black football players could be presumed to be taking steps to protect their sense of belonging by belonging to a team and being a part of a very popular campus activity. However, interviews reveal that they felt isolated and rejected because of stereotypes perpetuated by professors and fellow students about Black athletes only being a part of the institution to perform on a team, not for academic merit (Melendez, 2008). Even when students of color create their own spaces within an institution, there are still cultural forces that can cause belonging deficiencies. Black fraternities are excluded from the mainstream population in PWIs, as they typically have differential treatment when it comes to fraternity housing, campus organizing, and student participation in events (Ray, 2013). Due to lack of university resources for these Black organizations, they are forced to exert more effort to host the same types of events, often with more university supervision and regulations (Ray, 2013). They are made to feel othered simply by wanting to belong to institutions the same way White men might be able to more easily. Even in spaces where Black
students have the right to be and are supposed to be protected, there are institutional barriers to their belonging.

Participation in different campus spaces can also be a way to be closer to one’s ethnic group, as there is often a tendency for some extracurricular groups to be more populated by one racial group or another. Ethnic minorities on campus tend to join groups on campus centered around their culture, whereas White students tend to join Greek life, each organization serving as a “ethnic enclave” for students (Sidanius et al., 2004). Joining an ethnic organization was associated with feeling more connected to the overall campus, but further participation in these spaces increases feelings of ethnic victimization (Sidanius et al., 2004). This further reiterates that it is not about the opportunities the university provides for participation in campus groups, but the overall experience of these groups in a campus climate that is unwelcoming. Believing that one is a part of a shared campus experience can be a protective experience, as feeling part of a collective is protective against feelings of a lack of belonging (Museus & Chang, 2021). However, being connected to an in-group is sometimes not enough, as the greater campus climate makes these spaces lose some of their protective qualities.

Peer Perceptions

Peer belonging is just as important, as students who don’t feel welcome by their peers in their living situations or classrooms will not have the buffer of a positive social environment to help foster belonging outside of the university (Yao, 2016). Overall, historically underrepresented groups at PWIs have lower perceptions of peer belonging than more advantaged students (Ribera et al., 2017). International students reported wanting to room with a native student in order to help learn more about the campus culture and better adjust to their surroundings. However, a majority of those interviewed ended up switching to roommates from
the same or similar backgrounds the next year because of reported awkwardness, loneliness, and
general discomfort from being in a space with someone who lacked a cultural connection (Yao,
2016). Many BIPOC students view their hometowns as being more diverse than the population at
the university, which they consider to be an asset many of their White peers’ lack, contributing to
their lack of cultural competence (Vaccaro et al., 2019). Some students believe that the lack of
diversity in friend groups is because of how entrenched racism is in society, institutions, and the
individuals within it (Andreouli et al., 2016). However, intergroup contact is generally associated
with more positive outcomes. Peer perception of the ingroup also aids in feelings of belonging at
the university, as Black students on one campus felt that their community was close-knit,
providing them with a great support network (Payne & Suddler, 2014). Peers that have similar
values and experiences can provide a beneficial cushion to belonging. However, many times this
comes at the expense of bonding over shared belonging issues with the greater university,
making belonging context-bound (Vaccaro et al., 2019).

These barriers drive BIPOC students towards making friends with their ingroup and for
White students to maintain an environment where their comfort and belonging is centered first.
White students in these cases may make BIPOC students feel like they don’t care enough to learn
about their background to make new friends, as many BIPOC students feel this lack of effort is
associated with the burden that is usually placed on them to educate others (Vaccaro et al.,
2019). White participation in Greek life is associated with higher perceptions of ethnic groups
causing tensions on campus, meaning that these White peers are actively associated ethnic
groups with negative connotations (Sidanius et al., 2004). This projection of unwelcomeness
centralizes White experiences and denotes the comfort of ethnic groups on campus, further
causing a divide between White and BIPOC students. This means that peer groups are only as
protective as their ability to decrease feelings of burden and isolation, which may not occur with cross-racial peer contact. When messaging is received about more positive social norms on campus, marginalized groups feel as though they will be treated significantly more respectively and inclusively (Murrar et al., 2020). These messages need to translate into the actual climate of the university, which may be largely dependent on higher institutional actions that trickle down.

However, not all students hold the opinion that university settings create a more adverse experience for themselves. Black students report feeling uncomfortable in the larger campus community, but find solace with peers of the same race (Payne & Suddler, 2014). They posit that “code switching” is essential to feeling like they are more welcome by their White peers, allowing them to fit in with the more mainstream culture. This was not explained in a particularly negative light, as the idea that their identity transcends their race is ultimately protective (Payne & Suddler, 2014). These ideas can have negative consequences, as chronic codeswitching is a result of the constant feeling that one will be judged in a setting in which they are the minority (Wright et al., 2022). Codeswitching increases these students’ sense of belonging, but at the cost of living in fear of judgement and having to hide one’s true self. University settings may therefore believe they are increasing students of color’s belonging, but it is important to understand if this is coming from their need to change themselves to fit in. One should not have to feel like they must be inauthentic around their peers. Instead, a better culture of inclusion needs to be developed to help increase positive feelings of belonging.

**Well-Being**

Many universities might want to achieve a sense of belonging for students, yet it seems to be difficult for many groups of students to attain. Research shows that fostering a sense of belonging on college campuses can improve academic outcomes, decrease loneliness, and
improve overall well-being, especially for historically marginalized groups (Brooms, 2019; Moor et al., 2018; Ribera et al., 2017). When asked to explain their belonging to the university with 10 words, the average student had 1.8 negative words, suggesting that all students had at least some negative belonging experience on campus (Anh & Davis, 2020). One study of college students found that 17% of students’ well-being was comprised of the need to belong to the university (Karaman & Tarim, 2018). This suggests that negative experiences at the university level, something that the average student has at least some experience with, has a direct impact to overall well-being. Diversity initiatives are therefore important for students, as they are supposed to signal belonging in a campus community for all different racial groups. When unrealized, diversity initiatives can actually pose many challenges, such as making discrimination harder to recognize, increase the presumed situations of reverse racism, and contribute to overall feeling of being unwelcome (Dover et al., 2020). When students feel as though they can be welcome, students can be happier and attribute more meaning to the time at the university, all of which promote the need for these programs to be effective (Karaman & Tarim, 2018). The feelings of disappointment around university initiatives and the subsequent threat to belonging for students of color can then further impact one’s general sense of well-being.

Current Study

I am interested in examining why some belonging needs do not seem to be met time and time again, despite research indicating how to foster more inclusive and welcoming environments (Kirby et al., 2020). My research will work to determine the extent to which perceptions of university diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives predict one’s sense of belonging to the university. Well-being is also measured to determine how much a student’s overall well-being may be affected by their sense of belonging to the university.
The present study also aims to understand what institutional belonging means to different racial groups on campus, with a particular emphasis on BIPOC students’ relative experience of belonging on a PWI campus. I hypothesize that students of color will experience significantly lower belonging on campus than White students. Additionally, I expect that experiences of belonging on campus for BIPOC students will be more contingent on their perceptions of DEI initiatives and how successful and genuine they are (or not), whereas White students’ sense of belonging is expected to be less contingent on these perceptions. Protective measures that foster inclusion, such as participation on campus and strong peer relationships, are hypothesized to predict higher levels of belonging for White students, but less so for students of color. This research will provide insights into how universities are either failing or succeeding at creating a positive environment for all students and allow for a better understanding of what areas of institutional belonging need to be addressed.

**Methods**

To test these hypotheses, a convenience sample of undergraduate college students \((N = 219)\) from PWIs was gathered by sending out an announcement through introductory-level psychology classes and an informational email to the general campus community at the author’s home institution, as well as recruiting other college students at similarly structured institutions via Prolific (https://www.prolific.co/). A prescreening survey was administered to the Prolific sample to ensure the full-time, com-campus, students came from a relatively small, predominately White, institution in a similar geographic area.

Participants were presented with a 10-15 minute survey about their sense of belonging at the university, after which they received compensation of $5 or course credit at the home institution, or a range of $0.40-$3.00 for the Prolific sample depending on time taken to complete
the survey. The survey began by asking students two questions: one about a time when the university made them feel as though they belong and another about a time when the university made them feel they do not belong. Subsequently, participants completed the following measures:

**Perceptions of DEI Initiatives**

Participants’ perceptions of DEI initiatives were measured in four main areas: (1) the perceived effort put into these initiatives, such as time, money, other resources (α = .87); (2) the perceived success of DEI initiatives on their campus (e.g., “The university has been successful in recruiting and supporting a diverse student body”; α = .92); (3) the perceived motivation behind DEI initiatives (i.e., initiatives being genuine or a symbolic gesture; α = .79); and (4) the perceived personal benefit that they experienced from the initiatives (e.g., “There are not many programs or policies on campus intended to support students like me,”; α = .83). All of these measures were rated on a Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

**Institutional Belonging**

Institutional belonging was measured using a combination of 12 items from the Belonging to the University Scale (Karaman & Cirak, 2017), the Brief Sense of Community Scale (Peterson et al., 2008), and the Perceived Ethnic Threat Scale (Ethier & Deaux, 1990). Items in this section include “I feel that I have to change myself to fit in at the university,” and “I express myself easily at the university.” These measures were combined to look at three aspects of belonging: how integrated into campus participants felt, their perceived acceptance as part of the campus community, and how important they feel to the university (α = .90). Participants were asked to rate how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).
Participation and Peers

Participation in campus spaces was measured by presenting participants with a list of options of campus organizations, as well as a space to list their own, and asking them to identify how many hours each week they spend in these organizations. Next, participants were shown a series of 5 items relating to how they view their peer relationships on campus based on measures used in Museus et al. (2017) and Ribera et al. (2017) (e.g., “I fit in with other students at my institution”; α = .70). Participants responded on a Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Well-Being

Lastly, participants are presented with an 8-item well-being measure that was adapted from scales created by Diener et al. (2010) and Russell et al. (1980) (e.g., “I am optimistic about my future”; α = .91). All measures, excluding participation, were measures on a Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Demographics

The survey closed with basic demographic information, such as race, gender, year in school, age, socioeconomic status, and sexuality. It is important to note that for data analysis purposes of comparing results between racial groups, the racial category was created by separating monoracial White participants from all other participants. This created a dichotomous variable that allowed us to compare White participants to BIPOC participants. While this strategy comes with limitations (e.g., losing nuanced differences between racial-ethnic minority groups, inadvertently reifying the White/non-White distinction), for our sample this created relatively even comparison groups and made sense in the context of PWIs. Following the study, students were presented with a debriefing indicating the purpose of the study, including a list of
resources available at the home institution or other, more general, resources for the Prolific sample.

Results

Participants ($N = 219$) were primarily female (71.7%), with a smaller male (23.7%) and gender queer population (4.8%). The samples’ racial demographics were 46.95% White, 3.29% Black, 22.07% Asian, 11.74% Latinx, and 15.96% Other, which includes multi-racial individuals. Additionally, the sample ranged from 18 to 25 years old ($M = 20.10$, $SD = 1.35$).

Participants’ sense of institutional belonging was found to be significantly positively associated with all perceptions of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in the expected ways. Belonging was also significantly positively correlated with participants’ sense of well-being and positive peer relationships, but not with participation in campus activities. Descriptive statistics for the main variables of interest can be found in Table 1.

Differences in belonging and perceptions of DEI initiatives by racial-ethnic identity were calculated using independent samples $t$-tests where monoracial White participants were compared to participants of color (BIPOC). BIPOC participants felt as though they belonged significantly less than did White participants. Participants of color also felt as though DEI initiatives benefited them less, were less successful, and less effortful than did White participants. However, all participants were slightly suspicious of the motives behind DEI initiatives, with no significant difference between White and BIPOC participants. BIPOC participants also felt as though they had less positive peer relationships and participated marginally less on campus than White students. Further information regarding mean differences by racial-ethnic identity can be found in Figure 1.
**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics for Main Variables of Interest*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Belonging</th>
<th>Effort</th>
<th>Success</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Personal Benefit</th>
<th>Peer Relationships</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Well-Being</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Belonging</strong></td>
<td>$M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.12$</td>
<td>.57***</td>
<td>.63***</td>
<td>.41***</td>
<td>.70***</td>
<td>.75***</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.48***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effort</strong></td>
<td>$M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.15$</td>
<td>.73***</td>
<td>.39***</td>
<td>.57***</td>
<td>.47***</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Success</strong></td>
<td>$M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.07$</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>.72**</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motivation</strong></td>
<td>$M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.92$</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td>.42***</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Benefit</strong></td>
<td>$M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.25$</td>
<td>.62***</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.19***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peer Relationships</strong></td>
<td>$M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.07$</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td></td>
<td>.36***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participation</strong></td>
<td>$M = 3.92$, $SD = 2.33$</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Well-Being</strong></td>
<td>$M = 5.67$, $SD = 0.87$</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$
Moderation analyses were then run to determine if the relationship between each of the perceptions of DEI initiatives and belonging differed for White and BIPOC participants. This was done by running a regression analysis predicting belonging with motivation, racial-ethnic identity, and their interaction term using an SPSS macro developed by Hayes (2022). Similar models were then run using effort, success, and personal benefit as predictor variables. All predictor variables were mean-centered prior to analysis such that a score of zero represented the sample mean. All tests yielded a similar pattern of results such that the relationship between the predictor variable and belonging was stronger for BIPOC participants than White participants. To illustrate, consistent with the zero-order relationships, we observed main effects of motivation
and racial-ethnic identity. Critically though, these main effects were qualified with a significant interaction term indicating racial differences in the relationship between perceived motivation behind DEI initiatives and belonging. Specifically, this relationship was stronger for BIPOC participants compared to White participants, meaning more positive perceptions of motivations predict a stronger change in belonging compared to that of White participants. More about this specific relationship can be found in Figure 2.

Other factors that were hypothesized to be associated with belonging were also tested using regression analyses. Peer relationships, racial-ethnic identity, and their interaction term were tested as predictors of belonging. The main effects of peer relationships and racial-ethnic identity were significant, as well as their interaction term, indicating racial differences in the relationship between peer relationships and belonging, which can be further explored in Figure 3. Again, this relationship was stronger for BIPOC participants compared to White participants, meaning more positive peer relationships were more strongly related to their sense of belonging. Hours spent participating in campus activities was also tested in the same way. While the main effect of racial-ethnic identity was significant, the main effect of participation hours and the interaction term was not. Further information regarding the moderation analyses can be found in Table 2.
Table 2

Parameter Estimates for Moderation Analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moderator</th>
<th>Main Effect of Moderator</th>
<th>Main Effect of Racial-Ethnic Identity</th>
<th>Interaction</th>
<th>Simple Slope for White Ps</th>
<th>Simple Slope for BIPOC Ps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effort</td>
<td>0.44 (0.05), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>-0.63 (0.12), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>0.36 (0.11), <em>p</em> = .001</td>
<td>0.44 (0.05), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>0.80 (0.12), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>0.56 (0.05), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>-0.70 (0.11), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>0.30 (0.11), <em>p</em> = .01</td>
<td>0.56 (0.05), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>0.85 (0.11), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>0.55 (0.07), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>-0.95 (0.12), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>0.51 (0.13), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>0.55 (0.07), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>1.06 (0.15), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Benefit</td>
<td>0.52 (0.05), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>-0.55 (0.05), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>0.22 (0.09), <em>p</em> = .02</td>
<td>0.52 (0.05), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>0.75 (0.10), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Relationships</td>
<td>0.72 (0.05), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>-0.28 (0.11), <em>p</em> = .01</td>
<td>0.23 (0.10), <em>p</em> = .03</td>
<td>0.72 (0.05), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>0.95 (0.11), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>0.05 (0.03), <em>p</em> = .11</td>
<td>-0.90 (0.14), <em>p</em> &lt; .001</td>
<td>0.07 (0.06), <em>p</em> = .25</td>
<td>0.05 (0.03), <em>p</em> = .11</td>
<td>0.12 (0.07), <em>p</em> = .09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Formatted as follows: $B$ (SE), *p* value. Racial-ethnic identity was coded as 0 = White, 1 = BIPOC.
Figure 2

The Relationship Between Perceived Motivations and Belonging as a Function of Racial-Ethnic Identity

Note. Information regarding the significance and strength of this interaction can be found in Table 2.

Figure 3

The Relationship Between Peer Relationships and Belonging as a Function of Racial-Ethnic Identity

Note. Information regarding the significance and strength of this interaction can be found in Table 2.
Discussion

I found that there is currently a “belonging gap” on predominately White college campuses such that participants of color feel as though they belong significantly less than White participants. Previous research supports the idea that students of color tend to feel as though they belong to the university less than White students (Hausmann et al., 2009; Shaheed & Kiang, 2021). While DEI initiatives are present on campus, there are still differential rates of belonging for participants of color compared to White participants. Belonging was also significantly positively associated with all facets of positive perceptions of DEI initiatives, indicating that positive perceptions of DEI initiatives may help foster belonging. However, as is seen in our data, the mere presence of DEI initiatives is not enough, but also the intentions and perceptions behind them (Ahmet, 2021; Ovink & Murrell, 2022).

There is clear evidence that participants of color in this study felt as though university DEI initiatives were less effortful, less successful, and personally benefited them less than did White participants. This further supports the idea that not only is the mere presence of DEI initiatives not enough to improve belonging, but the perceptions of the initiatives must be that they are genuine and that they have access to adequate resources for the initiatives to have the intended effects. Perceptions of these initiatives matter, as the entire purpose of DEI initiatives is to increase levels of belonging and inclusion on campus. If students don’t believe these initiatives are doing their job or are “performative,” than the intended effects are not present. Specifically for students of color, there is a belief that more effort needs to be put into DEI given its current status (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2021).

Importantly, the study indicated that there is hope to make levels of belonging more comparable across racial groups. As perceptions of university DEI initiatives became more
positive, this was associated with higher levels of belonging for all participants. However, this relationship was stronger for that of BIPOC participants compared to White participants, indicating that the perceptions of DEI initiatives may play a more important role in their sense of belonging than White participants. The main concern here is how to increase positive perceptions of DEI initiatives to close the belonging gap. Evidence indicates that students of color can experience a higher sense of belonging when multicultural spaces are supported on campuses (Kirby et al., 2020). Feeling part of a larger community and having shared experiences with others can serve as a protective factor towards belonging, further highlighting the importance of fostering inclusive spaces on campus (Museus & Chang, 2021). Signs of support that are tangible and backed-up by greater institutional resources is a good way to start increasing how positively students view DEI initiatives, in turn potentially impacting their sense of belonging.

Participation was one factor that was explored as a general indicator of belonging, which was expected to have a stronger impact on White participants compared the BIPOC participants given other institutional barriers to belonging for BIPOC participants (Melendez, 2008, Sidanius et al., 2004). This study operationalized participation as the number of hours one spends doing activities on campus, such a Greek life, athletics, and clubs. Our data indicated that participation and belonging were not associated with one another. Further, it was found that as participation increased, belonging stayed the same such that White participants maintained higher levels of belonging relative to BIPOC participants. The relationship between participation and belonging for BIPOC students was not entirely unexpected, as other work has found that participation in campus activities may exacerbate feelings of non-belonging such that some feel as though their differences compared to the majority are even more prominent (Melendez, 2008). However, White students were expected to feel increased levels of belonging with increased participation,
which did not appear in the data. In grouping this variable, there was evidence that the relationship between belonging and participation was just marginally linear, but further work with this variable is needed to understand why these specific trends appeared.

Peer relationships were also investigated in a similar manner, where the perception was that more positive perceptions of peers would be more impactful for White students as compared to students of color (Sidanius et al. 2004; Wright et al., 2022). We found the opposite, such that more positive peer relationships were actually more impactful for participants of color than White participants. This has important implications for possible interventions to increase belonging, as it suggests that promoting positive space for peer relationships might be able to lessen the gap in belonging between BIPOC students and White students. While peer relationships are not directly related to DEI initiatives, creating a more diverse student body allows for a greater opportunity for intergroup contact, which can be associated with better perceptions of the campus climate overall (Glass, 2012; Payne & Suddler, 2014). In this way, institutions can make efforts regarding positive peer contact that might help optimize the effects of DEI initiatives.

While the current study provides useful empirical data regarding the state of belonging for students of color and White students, there are important limitations to consider when analyzing and applying the results. The sample was predominately female, possibly causing some of the data to be skewed towards their perspective. There is no explicit concern that female, male, and gender queer individuals would differ on their perceptions of DEI initiatives, but it should be noted as an area to improve in further studies. Our sample also had very few Black participants. We suspect that more Black participants may have revealed further racialized gaps in perceptions of DEI initiatives and belonging, but it is difficult to say with certainty given that
their underrepresentation in the current data. Similarly, other important identities (and intersecting identities) that should be considered in reference to DEI initiatives were not considered here, such as gender minorities, religious minorities, and students with disabilities. Other considerations are that this study was correlational only. Other studies have manipulated the perceptions of DEI initiatives by referencing how much money and time are put into common or multicultural spaces, which did impact belonging for students of color (Kirby et al., 2020). This might be one consideration to alleviate this limitation and establish a causal relationship between perceptions of DEI initiatives and belonging. Lastly, the study did not reference any specific DEI initiatives and took a more general approach. However, giving participants the space to elaborate on what came to mind when thinking of DEI initiatives allowed for more about their perceptions to be known. In giving participants the space to reveal their overall perceptions of DEI initiatives, they were not constrained by any set list and experiences.

Overall, the current study found that there is still a belonging gap between White students and students of color. While DEI initiatives are meant to make belonging between these groups more comparable, there is not currently enough evidence to support this within our sample. Thus, perceptions of DEI initiatives become vastly important in understanding how to improve the belonging of students of color. The study found that as positive perceptions of these initiatives increased, so did participants’ sense of belonging. However, these relationships were stronger for students of color than White students, suggesting that addressing these perceptions would have a greater impact on belonging for students of color. These findings have important implications for how institutions treat DEI initiatives. Students are aware of what happens on campus and form their own opinions about the motivations and success of DEI initiatives, which can greatly
impact their belonging. It is important for universities to understand that the perceptions and construal of DEI initiatives are just as important as what they are implementing. With the current findings, higher educational institutions can work towards valuing and implementing more suggestions from students as to what the campus might need, as their belonging is central to the institutional experience.
References


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