

THE ACADEMIC THIRD PLACE:
EXAMINING PHYSICAL SPACE AND FIRST-YEAR STUDENT SENSE OF
BELONGING AT A COMMUTER CAMPUS; IMPLICATIONS FOR
EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

A Thesis

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by

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Graduate and Professional Studies in Education

Abstract
of
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Brief Literature Review

First-year students experience many challenges as it relates to transitioning from high school to college and establishing a strong sense of belonging. Sense of belonging, identified in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), has been tied to persistence and retention, particularly in first-year students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) and commuter students (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011). First-year seminars and learning communities have been identified as effective methods in fostering sense of belonging (Young & Hopp, 2014).

Physical spaces may be able to encourage positive peer, faculty, or staff interactions, which in turn, can foster sense of belonging (Temple, 2008). The sociological theory of the third place (Oldenburg, 1999) postulates that students require a place between home and school, called the third place, to forge bonds with peers. Past research suggests that the academic library can function as the third place on a campus (Montgomery & Miller, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine whether a shared study space affects first-year students' sense of belonging at a commuter campus. The study also aimed to explore how and why first-year students and commuter students used a first-year study space to make recommendations to educational leaders.

Methodology

The study took place at a four-year public institution in Northern California. First-year students were e-mailed a link to an online questionnaire containing items regarding various student demographics (including commuter status), the first-year experience, use of a shared study space, and sense of belonging. The quantitative and qualitative data were aggregated for analysis and common themes were identified and explored within the data.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study provided various findings regarding sense of belonging and overall use of physical space. No direct correlations were found between use of the first-year study space and sense of belonging. However, the participants in the study used the first-year study space for academic study, which aligned with Tinto's theory of academic integration. Additionally, the characteristics of the first-year study space aligned with characteristics of the third place outlined by Oldenburg (1999).

Students were much more likely to use the first-year study space if they were enrolled or had been enrolled in a first-year seminar. Additionally, the most used service in the first-year study space were peer mentor services. One of the

recommendations provided in the study was to offer peer mentor services to those students not enrolled in a first-year seminar to encourage them to use the first-year study space. Additionally, another recommendation was to locate resources in the first-year study space to maximize the utilization of resources by first-year and commuter students alike.

The findings guided implications for educational leaders who can benefit from knowing the benefits of creating a study space for students. Leaders should be able to make decisions about space allocation that are not only cost-effective but also effective in engaging students. Recommendations for future study included further exploring connections between study spaces and sense of belonging for other students in transition, such as transfer students.

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Date

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

The first year of college is one of transition; students who spent years building peer and faculty relationships at their high school must start over at a university. In addition to the normal challenges, the student population is often demographically different. There are more ethnic minorities, women, and more working students than ever enrolled at four-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Additionally, a majority of students commute to their institution, creating a literal and metaphorical separation between home and university (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). In recent literature, ethnic minorities and commuter students have been found to have lower levels of belonging as compared to residential and White American students (Newbold et al., 2011). Literature related to the subject suggests that sense of belonging is linked to persistence and higher graduation rates (Tinto, 1975; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). It is important for leaders in higher education to find innovative ways to encourage and foster sense of belonging in first-year commuter students.

Commuter students are often unable to attend on-campus events that are held throughout the day and they often do not have the chance to pursue co-curricular activities (Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer, 2001). With this comes difficulty when attempting to engage these students. Commuter students report time constraints as a barrier to making

connections with the university. Additionally, commuter students must use their time to study more effectively. Literature also suggests that commuter students are more likely to have outside responsibilities that revolve around family and do not have a conducive study environment at home (Newbold, et al., 2011). Because of this, commuter students value their study time. These students are likely to use the academic library for independent or group study (Regalado & Smale, 2015). Literature suggests that engaging these students remains an area of growth for many institutions (Kuh, et al., 2001; Newbold, et al., 2011; Regalado & Smale, 2015).

The academic library's purpose at college institutions has shifted in recent years with the increasing popularity of online journal articles in favor of physical materials (Gardner & Eng, 2005; Montgomery & Miller, 2011; Banning, Clemons, McKelfresh, & Gibbs, 2010). Millennial college students no longer utilize the library to merely check out physical books. Additionally, the way that students use the academic library at an institution has shifted (Montgomery & Miler, 2011). Most college students now use the library to study, either in groups or individually (Gardner & Eng, 2005). As a result, academic libraries are attempting to connect more with students. Academic libraries are creating more flexible learning spaces for students to accommodate student learning or facilitate peer interaction. Additionally, academic libraries are increasingly collaborating with academic departments and student services to brainstorm innovative ways to encourage first-year students to use library services.

The impact of physical space on a college campus has been understudied in the literature. Physical space is defined as the facilities and material structures of an

institution (Strange & Banning, 2001). Physical space can facilitate or limit student learning, though it has not been examined thoroughly (Temple, 2008). Institutions are trending towards creating more flexible learning spaces to assist the learning process. Flexible learning spaces can be configured to accommodate independent study, group study, and more. Informal learning, which has been tied to belongingness, can be influenced by learning spaces (Temple, 2008). The physical design of an institution can also foster belonging; an inclusive classroom design can be the catalyst for positive peer interaction (Temple, 2008).

The purpose of this study is to determine if a shared study area impacts first-year students' sense of belonging at a commuter campus. This study seeks to examine various student demographic variables, the experience of first-year students, use of a shared study space, and overall sense of belonging. Specifically, the study explores if a shared study space for first-year students can affect sense of belonging at an institution. The study also looked at common ways that first-year students and commuter students used the study space and whether this affected their sense of belonging.

Statement of the Problem

Sense of belonging has been recognized as an essential component of student engagement and retention (Brookman, 1989; Hausmann et al., 2007; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Kune, 2011; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Thus, leaders in higher education are examining new ways to integrate their students into the institution. Specifically, first-year students and commuter students

alike have been identified as groups at risk for attrition and difficulty in developing a sense of belonging (Kune, 2011; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Concurrently, shared areas build community and increase academic outcomes for students. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What aspects of this shared study area, if any, (e.g. peer mentors, interacting with other first-years, having a "go-to" place, etc.) impact sense of belonging for the first-year student?
2. What student demographic variables, if any, (e.g. ethnic identity, first-generation college student status, commuter status, etc.) affect sense of belonging?
3. Does a shared study area build community amongst commuter students? If so, how?

Significance of Study

The integration of first-year students into an institution has been highlighted as a key factor in persistence and graduation (Brookman, 1989; Hausmann et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2008; Kune, 2011; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Pittman & Richmond, 2008).

Though much research centers on first-year students and sense of belonging, the potential impact of demographic variables and a shared study area have not been examined concurrently before. Additionally, this study will also look at commuter students specifically. The majority of students pursuing higher education are commuter students (Newbold, et al., 2011). Further study of this group of students is important.

In the fall 2016 semester, 72.1% of first-time freshmen at River University (pseudonym used for confidentiality purposes) were commuter students (River University, 2016). Commuter students make up a large portion of the population at River University. Thus, examining commuter students at this institution can provide valuable information when attempting to understand belonging. Because commuter students make up a sizable number of many universities' student population, new methods to foster sense of belonging for first-year students entering a new campus environment is important to higher education leaders focused on student success.

Academic libraries are struggling to readjust their role at an institution (Edwards & Walton, 2000; Gardner & Eng, 2005; Montgomery & Miller, 2011). With decreasing rates of book check-out in favor of online article options, academic libraries are looking to offer more physical spaces for students to study. Rather than being a location to gather information through books, academic libraries are becoming a location for students to congregate to study together. The allocation of physical space for group and individual study creates an opportunity for students to congregate and socialize with one another. The use of shared physical spaces aligns with the methods used to foster social and academic integration recommended by Tinto (1998). This new purpose also seems to be in line with the theory of the third place, postulated by Oldenburg (1999).

Definition of Terms

Academic Integration

For the purpose of this study, this term refers to “grade performance and his intellectual development during the college years.” (Tinto, 1975, p. 105). This term was coined by Tinto (1975) and is typically used in regard to first-year students transitioning from high school to college.

Commuter Student

For the purpose of this study, a commuter student is defined as a student who does not live on-campus.

First-year Seminar

A course typically taken in the first year of attending an institution. This course typically focuses on assisting first-year students to integrate into the campus community by fostering academic and social development.

Learning Communities

A set of bundled courses typically taken in a cohort system. Some learning communities can be designated for first-year students.

Learning Spaces

The physical environment where informal or formal learning takes place (Temple, 2008).

Millennials

The generation following Generation X, born between 1982 and 2002. This generation encompasses current traditional college first-year students.

Persistence

Whether a student decides to continue to the next semester or year with the intent of graduating (Tinto, 1975).

Physical Space

For the purpose of this study, this term refers to the institution's material structures and facilities (Strange & Banning, 2001).

Sense of Belonging

For the purpose of this study, this term refers to “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected included and supported by others in the school social environment” (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80).

Social Integration

For the purpose of this study, this term refers to “a person's integration into the social system of the college” (Tinto, 1975, p. 107).

Shared academic study space.

For the purpose of this study, a shared academic study space refers to a designated physical space where students can study with their peers.

Third Place

The place between home and an institution where connections can be built between peers.

Organization of the Remainder of the Thesis

The study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature surrounding the research topic. The discussion of the literature will be organized by various subtopics. First, the theoretical framework surrounding sense of belonging and how sense of belonging is measured in the first year will be discussed. Secondly, first-year students at four-year institutions will be discussed in relation to their transition from high school to college. The review will then discuss how shared learning experiences and shared academic spaces build community between students at a four-year institution. Lastly, the discussion will expand on peer-to-peer support and the role of student leaders in the shared academic space. Chapter 3 will detail the research design and methodology, as well as procedures for data analysis. Chapter 4 will present the findings from the data collected in the student questionnaires. Lastly, Chapter 5 will provide recommendations based on the interpretation of the findings.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

The first-year of college plays a large role in developing sense of belonging at an institution. Theories surrounding sense of belonging as it relates to first-year students and commuter students will be explored to better understand the context of the study. Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Tinto's theory of integration provide the framework for understanding sense of belonging as a construct, specifically in higher education and for first-year students. This chapter provides an overview of past literature regarding first-year students, sense of belonging, physical spaces, and the role of the academic library as a third place.

To best serve their student population, leaders in higher education should understand the demographics and challenges of their students. The review of the literature will provide information regarding the numerous challenges that first-year students and commuter students face at their institutions. To make decisions about the allocation of resources and physical space, leaders should understand the role of physical spaces and learning spaces at an institution. The pedagogy and vision of the institution should influence how physical space and facilities should be designed. The impact of physical spaces, more specifically, learning spaces will be observed throughout the review of the literature. Sense of belonging can be affected by how learning spaces are designed and introduced to students (Temple, 2008).

Theoretical Frameworks

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Motivational theories play an important role in establishing the framework for sense of belonging. Abraham Maslow, a humanistic psychologist, was the first person to identify belonging as an essential human need (Kune, 2011). In his hierarchy of needs, he details the rank and order of basic human needs. It is organized as a pyramid, with physiological needs at the bottom, followed by safety, belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization (see Figure 1). The last tier, self-actualization is the fulfillment of the talents, creativity, and success of the self. The theory states that the needs lower in the hierarchy must be addressed before moving up in the next level (Maslow, 1943).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs has been applied to an educational context in the literature for decades. Typically, institutions have addressed the belongingness need by encouraging a safe learning environment for students. This responsibility has been ensured by individual faculty, departments, and administrators at the university level. However, there has been debate as to what role the individual student plays in embracing belongingness. An institution can offer resources and attempt to foster belongingness. However, because belongingness is a psychological construct, the student must be open to belonging to the institution (O' Keeffe, 2013). Much of belongingness in Maslow's model focuses on positive relationships and attitudes (Maslow, 1943).

Higher education institutions which create a supportive environment allow the student to begin to address self-esteem needs (Brookman, 1989). Using this model

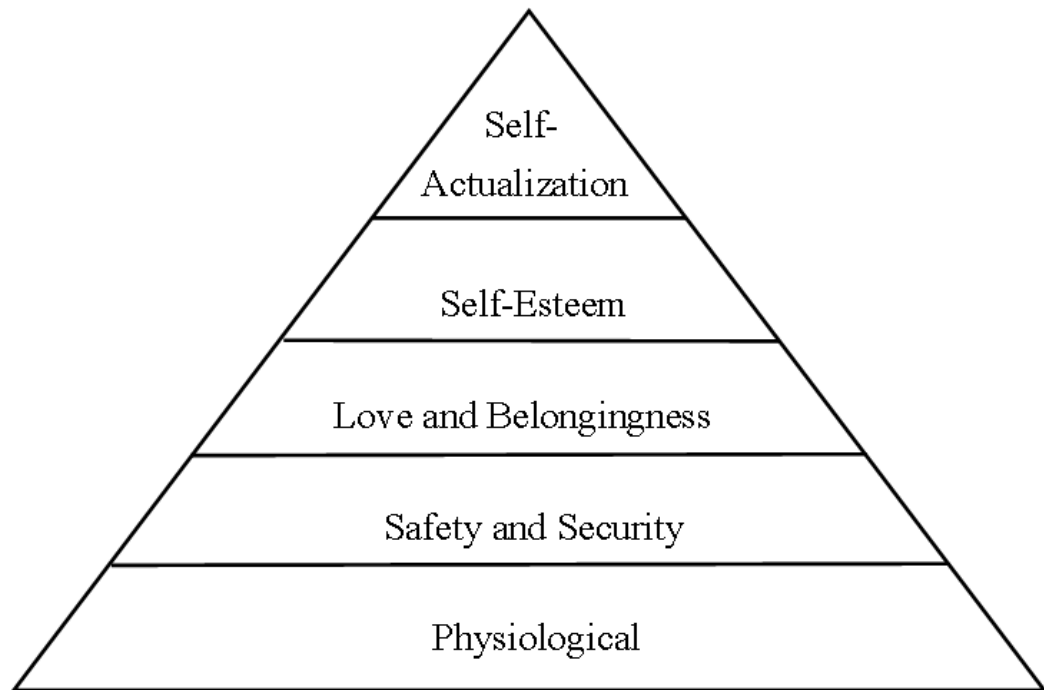
propels forth a cooperative experience between the university and the student to address needs. The needs toward the bottom of the hierarchy, safety and physiological needs, can be fostered by the institution itself. The needs located in the upper two tiers, self-esteem and self-actualization, are internal psychological needs maintained by the student. Belonging, which falls in the middle, is more of a shared responsibility between the student and the institution (Brookman, 1989). Because of the hierarchical organization, belonging is essential in developing self-esteem.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be used as a tool to determine motivation in an organizational setting, as well as on an individual basis. Self-actualization, placed at the apex of the hierarchy of needs, has proven itself the most difficult to define in academic study. Some researchers suggest that the self-actualization category should be divided into two aspects, desire for accomplishment and desire for power and competition (Groves, Kahalas, & Erickson, 1975).

Although Maslow's hierarchy of needs is an older humanistic model in psychology, the model aligns with recent popular focus on holistically addressing student needs. This is especially evident in new initiatives that address the physiological and security needs of students. For instance, some institutions are implementing a food pantry to address food insecurity or emergency shelter to address housing insecurity (Quaye & Harper, 2014). This ultimately stems from Maslow's assertion that a person cannot succeed without addressing their most basic needs first. When faculty, administrators, and staff adopt Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a guiding framework, they

embrace a holistic lens, which views the student as a human being with desires and needs.

Figure 1 *Maslow's hierarchy of needs*



Source: Maslow (1943)

Tinto's Theory of Integration

Tinto's theory of integration presents one of the ways that sense of belonging can be measured (Association for the Study of Higher Education [ASHE], 2007). Tinto's conceptualization of integration is split into two types of integration: Academic integration and social integration. Academic integration includes the endorsement of academic values of the institution and attempts to achieve academic success. Academic integration can be measured by progress to degree and persistence within a selected major. Social integration represents the alignment of the student with their social

environment (ASHE, 2007). Often, social integration is measured through interaction with peers, faculty, and staff members. While there is not as much empirical support for academic integration, social integration has been shown to increase institutional commitment and persistence (ASHE, 2007).

In Tinto's model of persistence, belongingness is framed in two aspects: academic and social integration. Tinto calls for educators to structure the learning environment to encourage academic and social integration, whether they be a faculty member or a student at the institution. Academic integration has an integral role in the first year of college, as students that are unable to meet the academic rigors of the institution tend to drop out. Students are more likely to persist if they have built both social and academic integration (Tinto, 1996).

Academic integration and social integration influence persistence for different reasons. Academic integration is highlighted as a key factor for persistence in first-year students because of the transition to more rigorous college courses from high school (Tinto, 2010). Without being able to navigate the new college system in terms of academics, procedures, and policies, the first-year student can become alienated.

Additionally, social integration is highlighted as a key factor for persistence in first-year students because building social bonds help to influence the motivation to attend college (Tinto, 1999). Students without a strong social integration into their institution struggle to make lasting bonds with other students. They can feel alienated from other students and as they do not belong. Social and academic interaction interact with one another, highlighting the importance of both facets of integration into the

institution (Tinto, 1999). Tinto (1975) states that “social integration occurs primarily through informal peer group associations, semi-formal extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and administrative personnel within the college” (p. 106).

Tinto identifies specific conditions for student success. Tinto (1975) emphasizes that the institutions that are mindful and committed to student success can increase student success. This is typically done through overall mission statements, incentives and rewards for students, and strong leadership. Institutional commitment can increase student success, especially for underserved and low-income students. Individual differences in motivation, academic achievement, and personality can still affect student success (Tinto, 2016).

Integrating academic support and social support with the learning environment leads to the most effective outcomes (Tinto, 2010). For some students, the classroom may be one of the only learning environments where they are able to interact with students. Students that are more involved in learning, especially in peer interactions are more likely to persist.

Sense of Belonging in College Students

The recent literature identifies a misalignment between student goals and institutional goals as being a barrier to retention and graduation. This has been termed sense of belonging. Sense of belonging was first identified by Abraham Maslow as being a basic psychological human need in 1943 (Maslow, 1943). Belongingness for students at a higher education institution is defined as “affiliation and identification with the

university community” (Strayhorn, 2012). Often, sense of belonging is built with positive social relationships with faculty and peers.

Sense of belonging not only refers to the relationship between a student and their peers or faculty. Sense of belonging encompasses overall identification with the campus community (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Belongingness functions a psychological construct that even addresses mental health. Students that do not build a sense of belonging with an institution experience psychological maladjustment and stress. Sense of belonging has a positive relationship with fewer depressive symptoms. Students with higher sense of belonging report higher grades and levels of self-efficacy (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Students that have a high sense of belonging tend to be more involved in campus organizations and report more positive interactions with faculty and staff.

Increasing Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging can be facilitated by creating a welcoming university environment. One study specifically identifies positive student and faculty relationships, psychological and counseling services, and inclusion as factors that can increase sense of belonging. Students that report more interactions with peers and faculty also report greater sense of belonging than those who do not (O’Keeffe, 2013). Additionally, support from faculty, peers, and family have been shown to increase sense of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007).

Sense of belonging can be built by both the student and the institution. With regards to the individual, a student must internally be willing to accept and identify that the university is a welcome environment to feel welcome (O’Keeffe, 2013). Sense of

belonging can also be built by attending athletic events and wearing university apparel. Institutionally, effective student support services are essential to encouraging identification with the university. Various potential interventions targeted to increase sense of belonging in college students have been identified in educational research. One intervention consisted of university administrators communicating with students via e-mail, where the communication emphasized that student feedback would be used to implement change. Additionally, the student would receive mailings and encouraging messages from staff (Hausmann et al., 2007). This made students in the study feel empowered and more likely to connect with their institution. These results supported that this was an effective way of increasing sense of belonging in first-year college students.

Adjustment periods to the university have been closely tied to sense of belonging. Sense of belonging decreases throughout the year for all students. However, successful academic integration is associated with higher levels of sense of belonging throughout the entire academic year (Hausmann et al., 2007). Thus, initiatives that work towards building academic integration also build sense of belonging.

First generation college students find it more difficult to build a connection with their institution than other students. Sense of belonging was found to be related to academic and psychological adjustment (Pittman & Richmond, 2007). For African-American students, more parental support can influence sense of belonging; this relationship was strong (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Additionally, peer support increased sense of belonging over time. For ethnic minority students, a hostile racial campus climate can have a direct impact on the development of sense of belonging. Positive

meaningful experience with peers, faculty, and staff in the first year can help foster sense of belonging. Connecting with other peers outside of academics as well as can help predict sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Sense of Belonging's Relationship to Persistence

Consistently, sense of belonging has been found to be positively related to persistence in higher education (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). The relationship between a student and one other person can significantly impact the decision to persist in college (O'Keeffe, 2013). Some past studies have minimized the role of sense of belonging by combining it with other factors, such as institutional fit. However, in one study, sense of belonging emerged as a predictor of persistence even when controlling for institutional fit (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). Additionally, Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) found that student sense of belonging acted as a mediator to the effect of satisfaction on intention to finish the degree.

First-year College Students

The transition from high school to college is a well-documented one in the literature (Tinto, 1999). The academic expectations increase significantly from high school to college. Some first-year students are on their own, separated from their family, for the first time. The newfound independence can be difficult for a new college student whose time was otherwise structured. Additionally, today's first-year college students are more diverse than ever before. There are more first-generation college students,

ethnic minorities, and working students enrolled than ever before (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

First-year college students face a number of challenges that make their transition to college difficult. These challenges vary from personal, family, relationship, financial, and social concerns (Turner & Thompson, 2012). There is a growing number of first-generation students, ethnic minorities, and women that are entering college for the first time (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). First-year students report academic stress as being the greatest challenge to the adjustment in their first year of college (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). Establishing relationships with other students can help first-year students mitigate the academic challenges in the first year.

Persistence in First-year College Students

The first year of college has been identified as one of the most vulnerable periods for student attrition. Students that drop out in their first year are not likely to return to higher education. Of the students that do not persist, about 75% of them drop out in the first year (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004). To curb attrition, many institutions have created programming that targets the first-year students. This programming has often been referred to as the first-year experience. First-year students that have negative experiences at their institution are at risk of dropping out or not returning for their second year (Tinto, 1975).

Millennial First-year Students

A majority of traditional college students were born between 1982 and 2002. This generation is referred to as Millennials (Wilson, 2004). Millennial students have a

number of traits that differentiate them from past generations. Millennial college students are more diverse than their predecessors. More women and ethnic minorities are enrolled in college. Additionally, more low-income families have students attending college than ever (Debard, 2004).

The millennial generation of college students share some common characteristics. Millennial students are high-achieving, diverse, and ambitious. Some have referred to millennial college students as being both special and sheltered (Debard, 2004). Millennial students have parents that are highly involved in their education and their lives. Millennial students grapple with high expectations and pressure placed on them by parents and other adult figures (Wilson, 2004). Many millennial college students work off-campus and commute between their parents' home and school.

The transition to college from high school for the millennial generation is difficult. Many millennial college students come from highly structured time and involvement in extracurricular activities in high school. When these students arrive at college, they are uncertain of how to manage their own time in an unstructured environment (Wilson, 2004). Past research highlights the generational differences between millennial students and other past generations. Millennial students study less than past generations and crave physical contact. If they are not able to create an academic and social connection with the institution that they are attending, they may not be able to be motivated to attain their degree.

Millennials are not only more fluent in technology, but they are reliant on their technology. Much of the social interaction that takes place between students is through

social media (Wilson, 2004). Despite spending free time on different social media platforms, millennials do crave in-person interactions and contact. Millennial students are team-oriented and desire a community to belong. Because of this, millennial students like to gather with peers to build community (Gardner & Eng, 2005).

Although they are more proficient with technology, millennial first-year students are not studying as often as their baby boomer or generation X predecessors. Millennial students hold the opinion that they do not need to study as often to receive a good grade on an assignment. Some have attributed this to high school grade inflation or a lack of understanding of academic expectations. With advances in technology, millennial students prefer to use online resources as opposed to physical books (Gardner & Eng, 2005).

First-year Sense of Belonging

First-year students must face transitions academically and socially, often with expectations of increased responsibility and independence. Affiliation with an institution has been associated with a better social and academic adjustment. A poor transition to college has been linked to depression and other psychological consequences later in life.

First-year programming focuses on creating bonds among first-year students. Students that connect with peers experience a better adjustment than those not participating in this type of programming (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Peer mentors affect how first-year students view their university. First-year students that have participated in a peer mentoring program report more satisfaction with their institution

than students that do not participate in a peer mentoring program (Sanchez, Bauer, & Paronto, 2006).

First-year Seminars

One institutional practice to increase persistence in first-year students is offering a first-year seminar. First-year seminars are courses that help to facilitate the transition from high school to college. First-year seminars are commonly implemented at different institutions; more than 80% of institutions offer first-year seminars (Young & Hopp, 2014). The most commonly reported objectives of first-year seminar courses are facilitating a connection with the institution, providing an introduction to the campus, and fostering effective academic skills (Young & Hopp, 2014). First-year seminars address topics such as time management, study skills, the geography of the institution, and how to navigate the challenges of being a college student.

First-year seminars are offered in a variety of formats. Some seminars are structured as a continuation of new student orientation and offered over the summer as a supplementary course. This is the most common type of seminar course offered (Young & Hopp, 2014). First-year seminars can also be offered during the academic year, typically during the first semester. First-year seminars are taught by a variety of instructors, ranging from tenure-track faculty to student affairs professionals (Young & Hopp, 2014). The content of first-year seminars varies by institution and can include curriculum specifically focused on building study skills, time management skills navigating university structure, and information literacy. Some first-year seminars can

have more of a focus on how to succeed in courses academically, and also integrate pieces of unique institutional support.

First-year students benefit from taking first-year seminars. Despite institutional differences in first-year seminar course content, course format, and other factors, the benefit of taking a first-year seminar has been well-documented and consistent. Students enrolled in first-year seminar tend to take more classes, have higher grade-point averages, and persist beyond the first year (Hoffman et al., 2002). First-year seminars provide students with academic skills to persist beyond the first year. First-year seminars have been identified to be a high impact practice in higher education. High impact practices are practices identified by the Association of American Colleges and Universities that increase retention and persistence at institutions (Young & Hopp, 2014).

Learning Communities

Learning communities have been identified as another strategy to increase student persistence. Learning communities are comprised of multiple courses, bundled together and offered to the same group of students (Tinto, 1997). Learning communities can be made up of general education courses, major-specific courses, and first-year seminars. Some learning communities can also have a combination of first-year seminars bundled with either major specific courses or general education courses. Some learning communities are themed, particularly to encourage students to connect material across disciplines and courses.

The goal of a learning community is to create a tight-knit community within the larger courses. Because of the structure of learning communities, students spend more

time with each other in class. Students feel more comfortable talking about the material and asking each other questions. This encourages positive peer relationships, which in turn, facilitates learning. Students in learning communities spend more time working on their assignments and studying (Tinto, 1998). Some studies show that students in learning communities tend to perform better academically than students not enrolled in a learning community (Tinto, 1998). Students are able to “construct knowledge together” because they not only share course content but the experience of learning the same content together.

Learning communities encourage both social and academic integration for first-year students. Students enrolled in learning communities are able to interact more comfortably with the students in their cohort. They are more easily able to establish and maintain peer relationships that center on academics. Additionally, learning community students find that “friendships established within the confines of the learning community classroom were often found to transfer to more social aspects of university life” (Hoffman et al., 2002). Additionally, learning communities provide vital peer interaction to commuter students that may not have the opportunity to interact with students outside of class (Tinto, 1998). Not only do students learn the same material together, but they construct their knowledge together. Students then feel more comfortable interacting with each other and asking questions (Bloomquist, 2014). However, if a student does not have access to learning communities, other methods to engage students must be explored.

Engaging the Commuter Student

Commuter students are understudied in educational research (Bloomquist, 2014). Much of the literature does not separate out commuter students and residential students; instead, the research does treat both residential and commuter student as one group. This is detrimental to the commuter student because they are found to be demographically different from residential students (Newbold, et al., 2011). Commuter students are more likely to be older, students of color, and more likely to be first-generation college students. Commuting has been defined in various ways in the research literature. Primarily, students that commute are the students that do not live on campus. Alternative definitions exclude students who live within walking distance from campus. The distinction has also been made between independent commuter students and dependent commuter students, who often live in their parent, guardian, or relative's home (Bloomquist, 2014).

Demographically, commuter students differ from residential students. Commuter students are less likely to participate in school activities. They are also more likely to have outside responsibilities; such as work or taking care of their family. Commuter students were more likely to be non-traditional students and transfer students (Newbold, et al., 2011). Though there is no statistical difference between commuters and residential students in whether they are employed, commuter students are more likely to work more hours. With regards to campus engagement, commuter students are less likely to attend university-sponsored events. In other measures of assimilation into university culture, commuter students were less likely to view their school as being "distinct" or "having a

good reputation.” Similarly, commuter students are less likely to identify with the institution (Newbold, et al., 2011).

Commuting is linked to different psychological and educational effects. Commuter students been found to have lower degree attainment rates, higher levels of stress, and lower scores on emotional health measures. Commuter students have been found to have fewer friends at the institution they attend. Commuter students who drive to school have less contact with faculty members and are less likely to build relationships with their instructors (Kuh, et al., 2001). Additionally, they are less likely to take advantage of co-curricular activities that include community service, study abroad, internships, and more (Kuh, et al., 2001).

Commuter student success strategies differ from residential student success strategies. Commuter students impose their own forms of student success strategies that may be maladaptive (Clark, 2006). Because commuter students encompass many different populations, much of their student success strategies are focused on creating a study environment and maximizing their time. One study by Clark (2006) identified examples of commuter student success strategies as being a quest to find independent study time. Examples of this included forgoing a romantic relationship to focus on their studies and locking themselves in their bathroom to study. Rather than working on building academic success directly, commuter students were more concerned with creating a study environment and removing their perceived barriers to success.

Commuter students experience challenges that relate to making connections on campus, time management, and navigating the university geographically (e.g., finding

classes, finding parking) (Newbold et al, 2011). These challenges are similar to the normal challenges that all students face. However, these difficulties are amplified when the student does not live on campus.

Building Sense of Belonging in the Commuter Student

Students who commute can have trouble feeling as though they belong to an institution. Additionally, they lack the opportunities that residential students have to connect with their institution. Those who have low sense of belonging see their college experience as being a necessary inconvenience to achieve their end goal (Clark, 2006). This results from the lack of opportunities that they have to connect with the university, a task that is difficult when the student is less likely or able to attend campus events and co-curricular activities. One framework that can explain the lack of belongingness in commuter students is Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It may be that commuter students must be concerned with their safety needs and physiological needs and thus unable to address their belongingness needs (Quaye & Harper, 2014).

The literature suggests that universities meet the commuter students where they are by appealing to them in non-traditional formats. For example, some researchers suggest web-pages to help commuter students orient themselves at the university or creating a carpool (Newbold et al., 2011). Even though some studies suggest web-based solutions to sense of belonging in commuter students, some literature suggests otherwise. Students express a want to communicate with peers face-to-face (Krause, 2007). This is an aspect of the college experience that cannot be entirely supplemented with web pages or social media.

Commuter students identify various challenges at their institution: primarily, finding connections with other students. One of the ways that institutions can consider engaging students is making “home-like” environments on campus. Commuter students identify a sense of uncertainty in regard to large gaps between classes. They have the decision to make of whether to go home or go to class (Bloomquist, 2014). To address this, a successful initiative created a lounge space for commuters in between classes (Santovec, 2007). Additionally, commuter students are more likely to use the library for academic purposes. Being that they are more likely to have outside responsibilities that revolve around family, some do not have a conducive study environment. Some institutions have created a commuter-friendly library environment to accommodate such students, creating an academic home away from home. One study suggests converting library spaces to foster connections between commuter students and effective study time (Regalado & Smale, 2015).

Commuter students possess less access and opportunity to form peer relationships and increase their belonging. They often lose their peer relationships from high school, and as a result, tend to prioritize their families over peer relationships at school. Additionally, they may find it more difficult to maintain a relationship formed in the classroom if their schedules do not align. Each semester, the commuter student must establish a new routine, adjusting their work schedule, home life, and academic study time (Clark, 2006). This can also make it more difficult for the student to adjust to the university or feel a part of the university.

Higher education institutions have been developing opportunities for first-year commuter students to build a sense of belonging. Some universities are creating a lounge environment that mimics home. One example is Seattle University's Collegia Program, which provides a space for commuter students that have a kitchen, furniture to rest on, computers, and a fireplace (Clark, 2006). Additionally, there is academic support programming and breakfasts held in the lounge. Other institutions are also offering first-year study spaces with peer mentors and student assistants to run the study space.

Commuter students are at-risk for attrition; concurrently, sense of belonging impacts the decision to depart a university (Bloomquist, 2014). Because of the tie between sense of belonging and graduation, it is important for higher education professionals to understand how to successfully address commuter students. Commuter students inherently are at a disadvantage for engaging with the university in comparison to residential students. Many students identify creating a home away from home as being the most effective way to engage commuter students (Temple, 2008).

Learning Environments and Physical Space

The physical environment of an institution can contribute to the effectiveness of an institution in meeting its outcomes for students. However, little attention has been placed on the physical aspect of the learning spaces themselves. Spaces that act as learning environments can contribute to student belonging and identification with the institution (Temple, 2008). Despite this notion, the literature has little to say about how physical spaces translate when creating a flexible learning environment. For instance,

seating can affect social interaction in both classrooms and lounge areas (Temple, 2008). Additionally, this influences student stress, belongingness, and identification with the campus. For instance, a student that is uncomfortable because a class is too small or cramped can perceive the class more negatively or can create a negative association in their mind.

Recently, there has been a movement towards creating more flexible learning spaces. Students and faculty have a desire for physical space that can accommodate different types of configurations to facilitate the learning process (Temple, 2008). For instance, the learning spaces may be able to be configured for group study, individual study, or class discussion. These design configurations may help facilitate peer interactions, which in turn, facilitate informal learning. There are recent trends that pedagogy should inform the physical design of a learning space (Temple, 2008).

The Changing Function of an Academic Library

Current library science literature has focused on the shifting purpose of academic libraries. Because millennial students are more knowledgeable on how to use technology than past generations, academic libraries are being used differently. In the past, academic libraries were used primarily for checking out and reading physical books copies. Additionally, students would utilize the assistance of reference librarians more (Edwards & Walton, 2000). Currently, the primary function of academic libraries has shifted from providing physical copies of books to a study area. There are now very few libraries that provide solely physical copies or books; most academic libraries now offer both physical books and online resources (Montgomery & Miller, 2011). Rather than focusing on

adding more materials to the library, academic libraries have shifted to focus on the students that use them. Undergraduate students tend to use libraries primarily for independent study, classwork, or to study with a group (Gardner & Eng, 2005).

Additionally, millennial students tend to feel comfortable approaching peers rather than older authority figures (Debard, 2004). Many academic libraries have been adding group study spaces to create more opportunities for collaborative learning (Gardner & Eng, 2005). Recent modifications to the academic libraries include an “emphasis on space and computer-based access, rather than on books and shelves” (Edwards & Walton, 2000, p.90). These spaces can enhance peer interactions and assist students in collaborating with others.

The physical layout of a space affects how an institution can facilitate sense of belonging and shared learning. These design changes are not limited to individual classrooms, but the entire campus. Some research suggested that the role of the library will be as a physical environment to enable community interaction and collaborative learning (Montgomery & Miller, 2011). Additionally, libraries have been offering meeting spaces that encourage social interaction between students.

The Academic Library and First-year Student Success

The academic library can acclimate students in their transition to the campus (Gardner & Eng, 2005). Some studies suggest that new student orientation programs collaborate with the academic library to assist students in their transition to college. Additionally, when libraries collaborate with other student services, they can increase overall support for students in their first year (Soria, Fransen, & Nackerud, 2014). Use of

the academic library could potentially increase the academic integration into the campus by providing familiarizing the students with appropriate peer-reviewed sources, rather than unreliable online sources (Soria, Nackerud, & Peterson, 2015).

According to Soria et al. (2014), first-year students that use academic library at least once during their first year were more likely to persist to the second year; these students were also more likely to have higher grade point average than those that do not use the academic library. This effect was observed even when controlling for grade point average, a strong predictor of persistence. Additionally, this relationship is not exclusive to checking out books, but using online databases as well (Soria et al., 2014). Use of the academic library may be tied to sense of belonging as well (Codispoti & Frey, 2010).

The Academic Library as the “Third Place”

The concept of the “third place” was posited by sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1999). In the theory, there are first places, second places, and third places. The first place is home, where domesticity needs are met; the second place is the workplace where productivity is addressed. Lastly, the third place is an informal gathering place between home and work where people can socialize with one another. Examples of traditionally cited third-places include coffee shops, bookstores, hair salons, and the library (Oldenburg, 1999).

The “third place” is an informal location between home and work where many can gather to build community. The third place consists of many different characteristics that distinguish the third place from other social areas. In terms of design and structure,

third places are not particularly flashy and impressive on the outside. The purpose of the third place as a restorative place is more important than the design (Oldenburg, 1999).

The “third place” acts as a “home away from home” that provides psychological comfort (Oldenburg, 1999). The mood in the third place must be positive and offer assurance to its visitors. Third places are accessible and accommodate its visitors. There is no sense of status in the third place, as all visitors are equal. In the third place, visitors need to be able to arrive and depart whenever they please. Additionally, third places must be inclusive to engage every person. According to Oldenburg (1999), "third places that render the best and fullest service are those to which one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurances that acquaintances will be there" (p. 32).

In the educational context, some researchers have identified the academic library as a third place for college students (Montgomery & Miller, 2011). Commuter students that do not have time to attend other on-campus events can study at the academic library between classes. These students who may spend a majority of their time between the university, home, and work could use the academic library as a third place would be able to facilitate social integration in the institution.

The third place has been applied to higher education research. Oldenburg discusses the third place as a place for students to connect with one another to build a sense of community. Students identify third places as places where students can have unstructured study time, eat and drink, and socialize with other students. Some students identify the location of their third place as being off campus. This has prompted researchers to explore how campuses can develop third places for students to engage in

social and informal discourse (Banning, et al., 2010). In the academic library, students may also be exposed to peers with dissimilar backgrounds. Thus, the academic library may expose students to get to know peers with other types of ethnic, socioeconomic backgrounds (Aabø, Audunson, & Vårheim, A. 2010).

Transformational Leadership in Higher Education

The transformational leadership style has been steadily rising as a popular leadership style (Winston, 2006). Transformational leadership is characterized by the inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence (Bass & Avolio, 1993). Specifically, transformational leaders focus on the relationship between the leader and the follower to foster and lead the charge for change. Transformational leaders are inspiring and charismatic to their followers, as they tend to be vision-orientated and use emotional intelligence when interacting with their followers (Yammarino & Bass, 1990). Transformational leaders are “development-oriented for the purpose of change” (Kirby, Paradise, & King, 1992, p. 303)

Transformational leadership is characterized by the intellectual stimulations of followers, consideration of emotional and motivational components, and striving for change. They seek to grow their followers to inspire them towards a shared vision. Additionally, transformational leaders model good behavior and inspire organizational change.

The literature surrounding higher education suggests that transformational leadership can foster change in higher education (West-Burnham, 2008). One researcher suggested that transformational leaders in education “are able to create and sustain

learning communities” (p. 6). Transformational leadership is an intellectually stimulating, emotional, and inspiring leadership style. Literature shows that higher education leaders preferred transformational leadership behaviors that are associated with individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation (Kirby et al., 1992).

Rationale for the Study

Sense of belonging in first-year college students and in commuter students can impact the decision to persist. As a result, student affairs practitioners and other leaders in higher education should know how to positively influence a student's sense of belonging on campus. Often, belonging is mistaken as identification with the college campus. However, the distinction is that identification with the institution is more focused on identifying as a member of the campus community (Tinto, 1975). Belonging is a psychological construct that centers more on the positive relationships between the student and other members of the campus community (Kune, 2011).

Many solutions to engage commuter students focus on ways to engage them off-campus. Examples of this include creating a website with resources or creating a carpool system (Newbold et al., 2011). However, if these commuter students are often on-campus solely to attend class, they will not be able to take advantage of the resources. The additional solutions must be conscious of the obstacles that students face. A designated study space may serve to provide the commuter student with the conducive study environment that they crave, while also providing them with the opportunity to create positive peer relationships with other students.

Leaders in higher education should know how physical spaces influence the success of first-year students. Additionally, leaders in higher education should explore whether physical spaces can affect how students become academically and socially integrated into the campus. A successful library study space may be another way that library services are utilized that will benefit students. It may increase the number of students that visit the academic library, a number that has been dwindling overall since the introduction and accessibility to the internet (Montgomery & Miller, 2011). Traditionally, the design and educational impact of physical space and facilities have been ignored in higher education. The pedagogy and vision of the institution should influence how physical space and facilities should be designed (Temple, 2008). This may also serve to inform how spaces should be designed, allocated, and operated to best serve students.

Summary

The review of the literature illustrates how instrumental the first year of college is and how building sense of belonging can increase student success. Belongingness, a need identified in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, has been applied to the field of higher education. In the model, the student must satisfy their basic physical needs and safety/security needs before they address belonging. Another framework that addresses first-year students specifically is Tinto's theory of integration, where academic and social integration work together to influence belonging and persistence in a first-year student.

First-year students encounter many difficulties in their first year of college. One of these difficulties includes developing a sense of belonging with their institution. Traditional millennial college students, in particular, experience a difficult transition from a sheltered, structured environment, to an unstructured yet, difficult environment with high academic expectations. The challenges that affect first-year students can be exacerbated if the student is a commuter student. Commuter students typically do not spend as much time on-campus as residential students, making it difficult for them to connect with the campus and their peers. Traditionally, learning communities and first-year seminars are common ways to create social interaction for first-year students. First-year seminars often focus on acclimating students to the university and fostering conversations about campus engagement (Bloomquist, 2014). Similarly, learning communities' cohort students into the same classes, creating a consistent social circle. Higher education professionals are seeking new methods of connecting commuter students to their institution. Creating a space that is a home away from home can help commuter students connect more with their institution.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand whether a shared study space influences sense of belonging for first-year students on a commuter campus. The research methodology adopted a quantitative design with purposeful self-selection sampling. From this, the data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and frequencies to explore trends and themes. The research study sought to answer the research questions:

1. What aspects of this shared study area, if any, (e.g. peer mentors, interacting with other first-years, having a "go-to" place, etc.,) impact sense of belonging for the first-year student?
2. What student demographic variables, if any, (e.g. ethnic identity, first-generation college student status, commuter status, etc.,) affect sense of belonging?
3. Does a shared study area build community amongst commuter students? If so, how?

Setting of the Study

The study was conducted at River University, a large public institution located in Northern California. The institution is located in an urban area of Northern California and serves a majority of undergraduate students (River University, 2016). A majority of freshman students that attend River University identify as female (57.1%). River

University is also a Hispanic-serving institution, with 37.8% Latino students entering the institution in Fall 2016 (River University Office of Institutional Research, 2016). The institution also has a total of 45.8% underrepresented minority students. Also, a majority of students self-identify as commuter students (72.1%). These statistics are comparable to those of the general institution as well (River University Office of Institutional Research, 2016).

Research Design

Population and Sample

The goal of this research study is to explore whether a shared study space affects sense of belonging in first-year students at a commuter campus. Because of this, the target population for this study was first-year students attending a four-year institution. The sample was selected through self-selection sampling, a type of purposeful sampling. During data collection, there were 3,746 first-time freshmen enrolled at River University. Every first-year student was invited to participate in the study through an e-mail sent directly to their campus e-mail. The list of potential participants was obtained through the First Year Experience program at River University. Participants could opt out of the study at any time. There was a total of 249 participants that completed the study.

Demographic Data

All students invited to participate in the study were first-time first-year students at River University. Additionally, all invited participants were all traditional college-age students, aged 18-21. For gender, participants were invited to choose from many

different gender identity options (see Table 1). The participants were also given the option not to disclose their gender identity. 67.1% of participants identified as women and 32.1% of participants identified as men. This is somewhat consistent with the 57.1% of first-time first years that identify as women and the 42.9% of first-time freshmen that identify as a man (River University, 6). There were two participants that chose not to disclose their genders.

Table 1

Participants by Gender

<u>Answer Choice</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Woman	167	67.1
Man	80	32.1
Genderqueer or gender-fluid	0	0
Other: Please indicate	0	0
Prefer not to disclose	2	.8

Note. N=249.

Participants were also invited to disclose their ethnic identity, with the option to not disclose or to write in their own response (see Table 2). Participants could select more than one ethnic identity option. The researcher then recorded those participants as multiracial students. Of the 249 participants, twenty-seven participants identified two or more ethnic identity options; this amounted to 11.6% of participants. This is somewhat consistent with the demographics provided by River University, which indicated that 7.1% of the first-time first-year students entering in 2016 were multiracial students. Two participants chose not to disclose their ethnic identity.

The most represented group in the study were Latino students, 39.4% of participants self-identified as Latino students. This percentage is consistent with the reporting done by River University. For students entering the university in fall 2016, 37.8% of students identified as Latino students (River University, 2016). Following Latino students, White American students were the next largest group to participate in the study. Of the participants, 22.1% of the participants in the study self-reported as White American Students. This is also consistent with the demographics of the fall 2016 cohort of first-time first-year students, which reported that 18.3% of the entering students were White American (River University, 2016).

Asian students represented a third of the group, although 20.1% of the participants identified as Asian or Asian American. This is consistent with the demographics presented by River University. River University reported that 21.5% of the first-time first-year students entering the university identified as Asian. African Americans represented 3.2% of the participants, which is less than the 6.8% of African American students that entered River University in the 2016-2017 school year (River University, 2016). The smallest group represented in the study was the American Indian or Native American group; 0.2% of the participants identify as American Indian or Native American. This is consistent with the 0.2% of first-time first-year students that identified as American Indian.

Underrepresented minority students are defined as the historically underrepresented groups in education. Traditionally, these groups include Latinos, American Indians, and African Americans (Ford, 1998). River University reported that

45.8% of the first-time first-year students were underrepresented minorities. Consistent with the reporting from River University, 43.4% of the participants in the study identified as an underrepresented minority (River University, 2016). Additionally, when considering all minorities accounted for in the study, which comprises of Asians, Latinos, American Indians, and African Americans, 63.5% of the participants were minority students. This is also consistent with the reporting from River University, which indicated that 67.3% of the first-time first-year students starting in fall 2016 were identified as minority students.

Table 2

Participants by Ethnic Identity

<u>Ethnic Identity</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Asian or Asian American	50	20.1
Black or African American	8	3.2
Hispanic or Latino	98	39.4
White, Caucasian, or European American	55	22.1
American Indian/Native American	2	0.8
Multiracial	29	11.6
Prefer not to disclose	5	2.0
Underrepresented Minority	108	43.4
All Minority	158	63.5

Note. N=249.

Design of the Study

To investigate the potential relationship between sense of belonging and usage of the study space, the researcher employed a quantitative method for this survey. A

questionnaire (see Appendix B) was distributed to all first-year students through Class Climate, an online platform for survey and data collection. All students were recruited through an invitation e-mail, with a unique link to the questionnaire to avoid multiple responses per student. No incentives were offered to the participants. All responses to the questionnaire were aggregated for analysis.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to data collection, the Sacramento State Institutional review board provided human subjects approval. Invitation e-mails were sent out on February 6, 2016, to campus e-mails. This study was housed under Class Climate, an online data collection platform used by the institution. To avoid participants taking the questionnaire more than once, each participant was e-mailed an individual link to the questionnaire. Additionally, reminder e-mails were sent to the students every four days to prompt students who did not respond to the questionnaire. Students were able to opt-out of the study and reminders at any time. On average, the study took participants 30 minutes to complete. The study stopped collecting responses and closed on March 1, 2016. All responses were recorded into Class Climate and exported into SPSS for further analysis.

Instrumentation

An electronic survey was distributed to all first-time freshmen. The survey was split into different sections, each focusing on a different aspect of the study. In the questionnaire, there were questions on demographics (1-5), the first-year experience (5-8), and sense of belonging (9-25). The sections on demographics and the first-year experience were developed by the researcher, and are closed-ended categorical questions.

There was one open-ended question regarding the perceived value of the first-year study space. The measure used to assess sense of belonging was the Psychological Sense of School Measurement Scale (PSSM) developed by Goodenow (1993). Although the PSSM scale was initially developed for middle school students, various researchers have adopted the PSSM scale for use in the past for assessing university age students (Sari, 2015). The scale was retested for reliability. The PSSM scale produced a high reliability score ($\alpha = .91$).

Data Analysis Procedures

To analyze the data, descriptive statistics and frequencies were recorded to see how the first-year shared study space was being used and how it could have contributed to the development of sense of belonging. The dependent variable of the study is sense of belonging, and the independent variables are ethnicity, first-generation student status, gender, commute status, commute length, and usage of the space. The social science statistics analysis program SPSS was used to conduct the analysis.

Limitations to the Study

Although the researcher took precautions to make sure the study was objective and collected the most pertinent information, there were various limitations to the study. One of the limitations involves the small number of participants in relation to the invited population of students invited to participate. The sample size of 249 first-year students constitutes about 6.4% of the students invited to participate in the study. Because of the small sample size, the data collected cannot be generalizable to all first-year students or

all commuter students. This study functioned as more of an exploratory study to provide insight as to how educators can build spaces for students to form a sense of belonging. With the data collected, it is difficult to identify a causal link between use of the study space and sense of belonging in first-year or commuter students.

There were also numerous external factors affecting the participants' responses. During the course of the semester that data was collected, the first-year study space experienced frequent changes in operating hours. When asked to list how many times they visit the first-year space, there were some participants that indicated that they did not visit the first-year space because of inconsistent opening and closing hours. Some students indicated that the first-year study space was closed during time that they were able to visit. It is possible that these students may have designated a different area to study as well because of the outside considerations. Overall, the first-year study space receives more visitors in the fall, and this may have affected the responses received in the survey.

Because the participants opted into the study via e-mail, there is the risk of self-selection bias. The survey was distributed through e-mail and the only students that completed the study had to open their e-mail to complete the study. Perhaps the study was not entirely representative of all first-year students at River University. Overall, despite the limitations of the study, valuable information was collected regarding first-year students, commuter students, and physical space.

Summary

This purpose of this study was to explore whether a first-year study space affected sense of belonging in first-year and commuter students. It also sought to take into account their first-year experience and demographics. This study was conducted at a large public institution in Northern California. Participants completed a 25-item questionnaire that focused on their use of the shared study space, whether they participated in first-year seminar, and an assessment of their sense of belonging. Data was collected online through a survey platform and was exported to a social science analysis program. The data was collected over a one-month period. The researcher used this program to generate descriptive statistics of the data to best determine which factors best influence sense of belonging.

Chapter 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the shared study space affected sense of belonging in first-year college students. The researcher created a questionnaire in a quantitative format on Campus Climate. All first-year students received an invitation e-mail requesting optional participation in a survey regarding sense of belonging and their first-year experience. The researcher developed a quantitative questionnaire that was electronically distributed to all first-year students via e-mail. Out of the 3,887 students that were e-mailed to participate, 249 students completed the online questionnaire. The following chapter discusses and analyzes the findings of this study and answers the following research questions:

1. What aspects of this shared study area, if any, (e.g. peer mentors, interacting with other first-years, having a "go-to" place, etc.,) impact sense of belonging for the first-year student?
2. What student demographic variables, if any, (e.g. ethnic identity, first-generation college student status, commuter status, etc.,) affect sense of belonging?
3. Does a shared study area build community amongst commuter students? If so, how?

The following chapter describes and interprets the findings of this study. Because the study is an exploratory study, descriptive statistics will be presented and analyzed in relation to past research. The chapter will present descriptive statistics as they relate to demographics and the first-year experience of the participants. Additionally, this chapter will connect current findings to past findings in the literature as well as present new findings to guide future research.

Findings and Interpretation of Data

The questionnaire focused on four different aspects: (a) demographics, (b) first-year experience, (c) usage of the first-year study space, and (d) sense of belonging. For demographics, the gender, ethnicity, first-generation student status, commuter student status, and commute distance were connected. In the first-year experience section and first-year study space section, students were invited to disclose whether they were taking a first-year seminar, whether they had visited the first-year study space, how often they visit the space, and how they use the first-year experience space. Lastly, the sense of belonging section invited students to disclose the level of agreement that they had with statements regarding their relationship with their peers, faculty, and staff. They additionally had to evaluate statements that pertained to their identification and belongingness as they relate to the institution.

Demographically, the participants were comprised of an ethnically diverse group of students. Most of the participants in the study were women (67.1%). The largest represented ethnic identity in the study was Latino students (37.1%). Just under half of

the participants were first-generation college students (45.8%). A majority of the participants were commuter students (77.1%) from the local area. In terms of commuter data, many students live within driving distance (66.5%) and typically commute from 30 minutes away (18.9%).

Previous research indicates that first-generation college students experience more difficulty when building a strong sense of belonging with the campus. First-generation college students tend to have a more difficult time when building sense of belonging. First generation college students may experience more difficulty when “learning to play the role of the higher education student” (O’Keeffe, p. 611, 2013). Literature suggests learning how to adjust to being a higher education student may be more difficult when the student is the first in their family to attend a higher education institution. First generation college student status is also highly correlated with commuter status (Bloomquist, 2014). Of the participants of this study, 45.8% self-identified as first-generation students. There were 54.2% of participants that disclosed they were not the first in their family to attend college (see Table 3).

Table 3

Participants by First-Generation College Student Status

<u>Item</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
I am the first in my family to college.	114	45.8
I am not the first in my family to attend college.	135	54.2

Note. N=249.

Commuter Student Data

To help contextualize the study, information regarding the student experience as a residential or a commuter student was collected (see Table 4). A majority of students that attend River University are commuter students who live off-campus. In fall 2016, the university reported that 72.1% of first-time first-year students are commuter students, whereas 27.9% of first-time first-year students live on-campus (River University, 2016). Understanding whether participants commute or not can provide additional insight into sense of belonging. Past research has shown that commuter students experience more difficulty than residential students when building a sense of belonging because they have more time constraints.

Past research indicates that students that commute to their institution are less likely to build a strong sense of belonging than residential students. Consistent with the demographics presented by River University, 77.1% of the participants of this study reported that they do not live on-campus and 22.9% of the participants reported that they are residential students. Students that are commuter students are more likely to be first-generation, ethnic minorities, and working students. These are also other demographic variables that have been shown to affect sense of belonging.

Knowing the distance and how long it takes for students to commute to their institution can be useful to understanding how students build sense of belonging. The more the physical distance to the institution, the more the metaphorical distance to the institution. Additional information was collected regarding the overall distance that students at River University tend to commute from (see Table 4). A majority of the

student that participated in the study were commuting from a local distance, which can suggest that the participants live with a relative or caretaker.

Most of the participants reported that they live within driving distance. The most common reported distance that the participants indicated was within ten to twenty-five miles. Also, 26.5% of participants that reported they commute ten to twenty-five miles. Following this distance, the second most reported distance was between five miles to ten miles. In addition, 17.3% of participants reported that they commute within five to ten miles. The third most reported distance was driving distance over twenty-five miles. Henceforth, 12.95% of participants drive to campus from over twenty-five miles, which is a very significant distance. Lastly, 10.8% of participants lived within walking distance.

Table 4

Participants by distance from River University

<u>Answer Choice</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
No commute, live on-campus	57	22.9
Walking distance	27	10.8
Driving distance, less than 5 miles	24	9.6
Driving distance, between 5-10 miles	43	17.3
Driving distance, between 10-25 miles	66	26.5
Driving distance, over 25 miles	32	12.9

Note. N=249.

Information was collected regarding the overall time in minutes from place of residence to the university (see Table 5). Past research indicates that students that commute from a long distance tend to score lower on belonging scales. Literature also suggests that they also tend to feel less supported by faculty and staff (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). This was to take into account the traffic which may not be apparent when merely considering distance to the university. The results were recorded as a one-way trip from place of residence to the university. The majority of the participants indicated that they commuted from 0 to 20 minutes away from River University. The second most reported time that participants indicated was commuting from 20-40 minutes away.

Table 5

Time in Minutes Spent Commuting One-way to the University from Place of Residence

<u>Time</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
0-10 minutes	74	29.7
11-20 minutes	38	15.3
21-30 minutes	47	18.9
31-40 minutes	29	11.6
41-50 minutes	20	8.0
51-60 minutes	20	8.0
61 or more minutes	19	7.6

Note. N=249.

First-year Experience Data

Information regarding the overall first-year experience was collected from the participants. Participants were asked whether they had taken or were enrolled in a first-year seminar at the time of the survey (see Table 6). First-year seminars have been identified as an effective method of engaging first-year students and in helping first-year students develop a strong sense of belonging (Hoffman et.al, 2002; Young & Hopp, 2014). Half of all first-time first-year students at River University enroll in a first-year seminar (River University, 2016). More than half of the participants indicated that they were enrolled in or had taken a first-year seminar. And, 63.1% of participants in the survey have taken or were currently enrolled in a first-year seminar course at River University. In addition, 36.9% of participants did not take or were not enrolled in a first-year seminar course at the time of the data collection.

Table 6

Participants Enrolled in First-year Seminar

<u>Answer Choice</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Yes	157	63.1
No	92	36.9
Total	249	100.0

Note. N=249.

Students that are taking a first-year seminar are more likely to be engaged on their campus, have higher sense of belonging, and persist to their second year (Hoffman, 2002; Young & Hopp, 2014). First-year seminar courses are specifically designed to facilitate

the transition from high school to college. Sense of belonging has been specifically connected in the past to taking a first-year seminar course (Young & Hopp, 2014).

The First-year Study Space

To understand why and how first-year students use the first-year study space, data was gathered regarding how and when students use the first-year study space. First, participants were asked whether they had visited the first-year study space (see Table 7). Of the participants, 56.2% of students have visited the first-year study space whereas 43.8% of students reported that they have not visited the first-year study space.

Table 7

Participants that had Visited the First-year Study Space

<u>Answer Choice</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Yes	140	56.2
No	109	43.8

Note. N=249.

There was little to no relationship between commute status and usage of the space (see Table 8). Also, 61.4% of the residential student participants visited the first-year study space, while 54.7% of commuter student participants visited the study space. Almost 40% of residential student participants had not visited the first-year study space while 45.3% of commuter students had not visited. Although there was a much larger volume of commuter students overall, students that commuted were just as likely to use the first-year study space as the students that lived on-campus.

Table 8

Students that Visited the First-year Study Space by Commuter Status.

<u>Group</u>	<u>Commuter Students</u>		<u>Residential Students</u>	
	<u>Count</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Count</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Students that did visit the first-year study space	105	54.7	35	61.4
Students that did not visit the first-year study space	87	45.3	22	38.6

Note. N=249.

First-year seminar students were more likely to use the first-year study space than students that were not enrolled in or had not taken a first-year seminar course (see Table 9). Of the students that were enrolled in or had taken a first-year seminar, 77.7% of the participants had visited the first-year study space, whereas 22.3% had not visited. Of the students that had not taken a first-year seminar course, 19.6% of the participants had visited the first-year study space, whereas 80.4% of the participants had not visited. These results do not indicate exactly why first-year seminar students were more likely to visit the first-year study space, but the large discrepancy should be noted when considering why.

Table 9

Participants that Visited the First-year Study Space by First-year Seminar.

<u>Group</u>	<u>Students that did visit the first-year study space</u>		<u>Students that did not visit the first-year study Space</u>	
	<u>Count</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Count</u>	<u>Percent</u>
First-year seminar students	122	77.2	18	22.3
Students that were not enrolled or had not taken a first-year seminar	35	19.6	74	80.4

Note. N=249.

Participants were asked to describe how often they used the first-year study space (see Table 10). The participants were able to write in their own response to this question. Overall, most of the participants that visited the first-year study space visited the space once to three times a semester. A majority of these visitors came by occasionally. Some

participants remarked about coming to the first-year study space “when [they had] an upcoming exam.” One of the characteristics in the theory of the third place is the regulars, who are frequent visitors to the third place (Oldenberg, 1999). Similar to the theory postulated in the third place, there were a number of regulars who visited multiple times a week.

Table 10

How often first-year students visit the first-year study space.

<u>Answer</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Once a semester	21	17.1
Twice a semester	46	37.4
Three times a semester	12	9.8
Four times a semester	4	3.3
Once a month	7	5.7
Three to four times a month	9	7.3
Once a week	3	2.4
Twice a week	2	1.6
Three times a week	3	2.4
Four times a week	3	2.4

Students were asked how they used the first-year study space (see Table 11).

Participants could select multiple options from a list: to meet with a peer mentor, to study or complete schoolwork, to pass time between classes, to get questions answered, to attend an event/workshop, or to make new friends. The most commonly selected reason

why participants use the first-year study space is to meet with a peer mentor. About half of the participants selected meeting with a peer mentor as being the reason for using the first-year study space. After this reason, the most popular reason selected was to study or complete schoolwork. Students also used the first-year space to ask for information or have their inquiries addressed. 14.1% of the participants use the space to have their questions answered. The least common reason to visit the first-year study space that was selected was to attend an event or workshop.

Table 11

How participants used the first-year study space.

<u>Answer</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
To meet with a peer mentor	111	44.6
To study or complete schoolwork	62	24.9
To pass time between classes	20	8
To get my questions answered	35	14.1
To attend an event/workshop	21	8.4
To make new friends	9	7.3

When asked what was most valuable about the first-year space, the participants identified a variety of different factors (see Figure 2). Thirty-five percent of participants listed the overall information and advising information as a valuable aspect of the first-year study space. This was the most frequently cited positive aspect of the space by the participants. These students tended to cite meaningful encounters with the peer mentors and professional staff in the first-year study space as being helpful to them. One student

remarked that the first-year space “[has] supportive people and [is] a good resource to help you connect with others.” In the first-year study space, the students found a place where most of their inquiries were able to be addressed in a one-stop shop manner. This value of the in-person connection directly relates to research surrounding millennial students.

Many of the participants were appreciative of atmosphere of the first-year study space. Additionally, 33% of participants believed that the welcoming and helpful environment was a valuable aspect of the study space. Interestingly, 9% of participants believed it was helpful to merely have a designated space for first-year students. This directly connects with the way that they perceive the institution. One of the students stated that “it’s a very personal space and it makes college less intimidating.” These students voiced that they appreciate that a physical space was created and available specifically for first-year students.

The responses regarding the value of the first-year study space mirrored past research on the third place, academic and social integration, and library sciences. 10% of students voiced that the first-year study space had a positive impact on facilitating the transition to college. One of the students remarked that “that it was a space created for us to feel safe and learn about what this campus with the help of our mentors.” Overall, the participants seemed to report that the first-year space had a positive impact on their college experience. In reference to the first-year study space, a student stated that “I find that it will help me in the future and made my life easier in college.”

The first-year study space functioned as a sort of third place for first-year students. The first-year students viewed the space as being a flexible and inclusive space that acted as a home away from home. Most of the participants had visited the first-year study space twice to three times per semester. However, there were some students that were considered “regulars” who visit twice to four times a week. This also aligned with characteristics of the third place (Oldenburg, 1999).

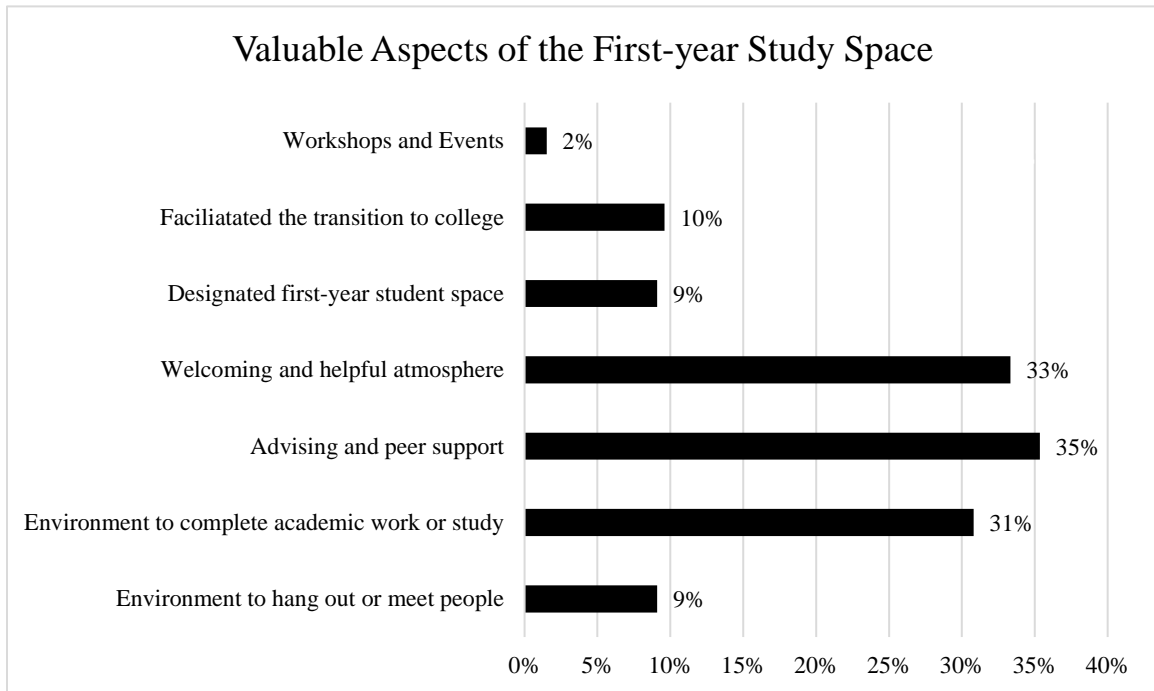
Academic and social integration were addressed in the first-year study space. Some participants reported that they use the first-year study space to establish or maintain connections with others. Fewer students listed that they believed that the first-year study space was helpful to “hang out” or meet new peers. One student remarked “in my first semester, I was there a lot because I didn’t really know anyone. I went there to study and watch Netflix.” Nine percent of participants listed meeting new people and “a place to hang out” as being a valuable aspect of the first-year study space. While fewer participants listed that they meet new friends in the space, many of the participants stated that they visited the first-year study space specifically for group study. This suggests that the students may be using the first-year study space to reinforce new bonds created with their classmates, rather than to establish new bonds.

Consistent with the research surrounding commuter students, the students value having a study space that is quiet and functions as a restorative place to gather thoughts. 31% of participants believed that the first-year study space was a great place to study and “get work done.” The students appreciated the study space was quiet. One student, in particular, declared that “[the first-year study space] is a cool place to study compared to

the traditional library setting.” This also evokes the past research on the academic library as a third place and the importance of the physical layout (Codispoti & Frey, 2010). The first-year study space challenged the student attitude towards traditional academic libraries. Students valued that the first-year study space was versatile, with rooms that could be converted for group study or individual study.

Workshops were the least cited reason as to what was most valuable about the first-year space. Two percent of students identified that workshops were a valuable part of the first-year study space. The participants of the study seemed to prefer individualized informal interaction with others in the first-year study space rather than formalized workshops or tutoring. The participants specifically seemed to value one-on-one encounters with their peers or mentors in the first-year study space. This connection to peers has been echoed consistently in the literature surrounding sense of belonging and academic or social integration.

Figure 2 *Valuable aspects of the first-year study space*



Sense of Belonging Data

Information was collected from the participants regarding their sense of belonging as it related to their identification with River University. The questions were adapted from the Psychological Sense of School Membership scale and focused on the students' sense of belonging to the institution, the faculty and staff, and their peers. Overall, the participants in the study reported with high scores on the items measuring from PSSM scale measuring sense of belonging (see Table 12). The descriptive statistics indicate that the participants have an overall high sense of belonging. The reverse-scored items were the questions with the lowest means documented.

Table 12

Descriptive Statistics on the Psychological Sense of School Measurement Scale

<u>Item</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
I feel a real part of River University	3.56	1.03
People here notice when I'm good at something	3.31	1.08
It is hard for people like me to be accepted here	2.03	1.12
Other students in this school take my opinion seriously	3.48	1.01
Most professors at River University are interested in me	3.34	1.01
Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here	2.35	1.28
There is at least one faculty or staff in this school I can talk to if I have to	3.76	1.32
People at this school are friendly to me	4.14	0.86
Faculty and staff here are not interested in people like me	1.99	1.11
I am treated with as much respect as other students	4.21	0.90
I feel very different from most other students here	2.54	1.18
I can really be myself at this school	3.77	1.04
The faculty and staff here respect me	4.12	0.87
People here know I can do good work	3.80	0.94
I wish I were at a different school	2.19	1.32
I feel proud of belonging to River University	4.03	1.06
Other students here like me the way I am	3.86	0.96

The items were grouped into different categories: overall identification with the institution, relationships with faculty and staff, relationships with peers, and how the institution perceives them. When it came to overall identification with the institution, over 70% of the participants indicated that they felt pride in belonging to River University (see Table 13). Additionally, over 50% of participants indicated that they felt like a real part of River University. On the reverse-scored items, the students scored lower, indicating a high level of disagreement. Eighteen percent (18%) of participants indicated that they wanted to be at a different school and that they felt as if they did not belong.

Table 13

Frequencies on the Psychological Sense of School Measurement Scale-items Relating to Identification with the Institution

<u>Item</u>	<u>Not at all True</u>	<u>Rarely True</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Somewhat True</u>	<u>Completely True</u>
I feel like a real part of River University	4.0%	8.5%	34.8%	32.4%	20.2%
I feel proud of belonging to River University	3.3%	5.7%	18.0%	30.7%	42.2%
Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here	35.0%	23.0%	21.8%	12.8%	7.4%
I wish I were at a different school	45.8%	15.4%	19.6%	12.1%	7.1%

Regarding relationships with faculty and staff, the participants overall have positive connections with faculty and staff (see Table 14). Over 60% of participants have at least one faculty member and staff member to reach out to if they needed to. Over 45% of the participants believe that professors at River University are interested in them as a student. 77.2% of participants believe that the faculty members at River University respect them. Conversely, 10% of participants believe that the faculty members are not interested in them. Many of the participants selected neutral as a response, perhaps because their relationships with faculty and staff are still developing.

Table 14

Frequencies on the Psychological Sense of School Measurement Scale-items Relating to Relationships with Faculty and Staff

<u>Item</u>	<u>Not at all True</u>	<u>Rarely True</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Somewhat True</u>	<u>Completely True</u>
Most professors at River University are interested in me	6.2%	10.4%	37.3%	35.3%	10.8%
There is at least one faculty or staff in this school I can talk to if I have to	9.4%	9.4%	18.0%	22.9%	40.4%
Faculty and staff here are not interested in people like me	46.7%	20.8%	22.5%	7.1%	2.9%
The faculty and staff here respect me	1.2%	1.6%	19.9%	38.2%	9.0%

With regards to peer relationships, the participants indicated that they identify with their peers (see Table 15). There were 93.3% of participants indicated they feel that they are treated with as much respect as other students. Overall, participants feel that their peers perceive them in a positive light. Also, 50.4% of participants feel that their peers take their opinion seriously. In addition, 64.7% of participants feel that their peers appreciate them as they are. A smaller number of students voiced that they feel alienated from their peers. Lastly, 21.2% of participants feel different from other students at River University.

Table 15

Frequencies on the Psychological Sense of School Measurement Scale-items Relating to Peer Relationships

<u>Item</u>	<u>Not at all True</u>	<u>Rarely True</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Somewhat True</u>	<u>Completely True</u>
I am treated with as much respect as other students	1.4%	3.3%	1.9%	39.0%	54.3%
Other students in this school take my opinion seriously	6.0%	5.5%	37.9%	36.2%	14.5%
I feel very different from most other students here	24.5%	23.7%	30.7%	15.4%	5.8%
Other students here like me the way I am	2.5%	2.9%	29.9%	35.7%	29.0%

Lastly, there were some items that related to how the participants believed that the institution perceived them (see Table 16). Overall, participants believe that River

University is an approachable place. 79.4% of participants believe that the individuals at River University are friendly. Some of the participants feel appreciated by students, faculty, and staff at River University. About 62.3% of the participants believed that people at River University know that they can do good work. And, 42.2% believed that others at River University notice their talent or ability. Overall, participants believed that they did not need to conceal themselves while at River University. Also, 61.4% of participants believed that they could truly be themselves at River University.

Table 16

Frequencies on the Psychological Sense of School Measurement Scale-items Relating to how the Institution Perceives Them

<u>Item</u>	<u>Not at all True</u>	<u>Rarely True</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Somewhat True</u>	<u>Completely True</u>
I am treated with as much respect as other students	1.4%	3.3%	1.9%	39.0%	54.3%
People here know I can do good work	2.1%	4.2%	31.4%	36.4%	25.9%
People at this school are friendly to me	0.8%	2.8%	17.0%	40.1%	39.3%
People here notice when I'm good at something	6.6%	12.8%	38.4%	27.7%	14.5%
It is hard for people like me to be accepted here	44.8%	20.7%	23.7%	7.9%	2.9%
I can really be myself at this school	2.8%	7.7%	28.0%	32.5%	28.9%

Summary

Sense of belonging was explored through the examination of a study area designated for first-year students. Concurrently, demographic variables including commuter status were examined in relation to sense of belonging. The researcher reviewed the findings collected from 249 first-year students at River University. The researcher reviewed all of the findings collected through questionnaire distributed by e-mail from first-year students. Correlations were found between sense of belonging using the first-year study space and commuter status. To provide an understanding of the data and address the research questions, descriptive statistics were presented and analyzed for the quantitative results. From the qualitative data, common themes were presented. All findings were compared or connected to past research relating to the third place, academic and social integration, and library sciences.

The first-year study space functioned as a sort of third place for first-year students. The first-year students viewed the space as being a flexible and inclusive space that acted as a home away from home. Most of the participants had visited the first-year study space twice to three times per semester. However, there were some students that were considered “regulars” who visit twice to four times a week. The first-year study space also functioned as a location where academic and social integration occurred. The participants viewed the first-year study space as a place to complete academic work and study (31%). These participants viewed the study space as a conducive environment for completing academic tasks. Some students used the first-year study space as a lounge area or as a place to form new bonds with peers (9%).

Chapter 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The first year of college can be challenging when attempting to create a connection amongst new peers and in a new environment. This sense of connection, or sense of belonging, can impact a student's decision to persist into their second year (Hausmann et al., 2007; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Nicpon et al., 2006; Tinto, 1998). Connecting with an institution can be more difficult especially when a student commutes to the institution they attend. When compared to residential students, commuter students must travel to get between their home and their institution, which literature suggests affects them when building a sense of belonging. Commuter students report more time constraints, more family responsibilities, and less time spent at their institution (Newbold et al., 2011). Past literature suggests that creating spaces that function as a home away from home can be a successful way of connecting commuter students to the campus (Santovec, 2007). Simultaneously, the academic library is shifting away from a mere information hub to a gathering place for students to form bonds with their peers (Aabø et al., 2010; Banning et al., 2010; Codispoti & Frey, 2010; Edwards & Walton, 2000). This gathering place mirrors a sociological theory surrounding the third place, a place between home and school where there are connections (Oldenburg, 1999).

Past literature provided the context for the research study. The review of literature focused on sense of belonging, the academic library, the third place, commuter

students, and first-year students. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and Tinto's (1975) academic and social integration were used as conceptual frameworks to understand sense of belonging. The challenges that first-year and commuter students face were explored when developing sense of belonging. Additionally, the role of physical space at an institution was explored as it relates to learning and building sense of belonging. The theory of the third place, particularly in the academic library, was also examined to provide a list of characteristics of the physical space.

The purpose of this study was to examine whether a physical designated study space would impact the sense of belonging in first-year students and commuter students. To examine this, the researcher created an online quantitative and qualitative survey and distributed it through e-mail. This study addressed the following research questions below:

1. What aspects of this shared study area, if any, (e.g. peer mentors, interacting with other first-years, having a "go-to" place, etc.) impact sense of belonging for the first-year student?
2. What student demographic variables, if any, (e.g. ethnic identity, first-generation college student status, commuter status, etc.) affect sense of belonging?
3. Does a shared study area build community amongst commuter students? If so, how?

This study was conducted at a large four-year public university with the data collected from 249 participants. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher, using

original components and a sense of belonging scale developed by Goodenow (1993). The questionnaire was comprised of closed-ended and open-ended questions, some of which were rated on a Likert-scale. Information was collected regarding various student demographics, commuter status, the first-year experience, use of the first-year study space, and sense of belonging. The questionnaire was distributed through e-mail to first-year students attending River University.

Conclusions

Participants in this study were invited to recollect their first-year experience, their sense of belonging as it relates to the institution that they attend, and their usage of the first-year study space. Out of 3,746 students invited to the study, 249 students participated and completed the questionnaire. While a direct correlation between commuting, use of the first-year study space, and sense of belonging was not established, common themes were explored and descriptive statistics were analyzed to provide interpretations of the data.

The First-year Study Space and Sense of Belonging

The findings of the study align with the conceptual frameworks surrounding sense of belonging. Maslow's hierarchy of needs postulates that basic physiological and safety needs must be satisfied before meeting the need to belong (Maslow, 1943). Tinto's theory of academic and social integration suggests that students must adjust their academic expectations to their institution and have successful peer relationships to fully belong at an institution (Tinto, 1998).

In line with Tinto's (1975) theory of integration, many of the participants used the space for academic study, which can be associated with academic integration. To a lesser extent, they also used the space to create connections to their peers, or socially integrate into the institution. Students did not tend to use the first-year study space to meet new people, but rather, to meet and complete work amongst other students. Some participants indicated that they use the first-year study space to complete academic work with their classmates, suggesting an interaction between academic and social integration.

The First-year Study Space as a "Third Place"

The concept of the third place was postulated by sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1999). In the theory of the third place, the first place is home and the second place is the workplace or college; the third place exists as a place between the first and second where people can create and reinforce social bonds. Within the context of higher education, the third place is traditionally the student union. More recent studies suggest converting library spaces to foster connections between commuter students and effective study time (Regalado & Smale, 2015). In relation to this, students that participated in the study listed many of the characteristics of the third place as being a part of why the first-year study space is valuable. The participants appreciated how flexible the first-year study space was. Specifically, the participants appreciated that the physical space could be converted from an individual study space to a group study space, or a workshop space.

Similar to the theory of the third place, the first-year study space acted as an inclusive leveling ground where there was no hierarchy. Third places act not as flashy locations where formalized activities take place, but as understated locations where

guests can come and go as they please (Oldenburg, 1998). Consistent with the theories surrounding the third place, the first-year study space was accessible and inclusive to students. A frequently cited aspect of the first-year study space was how friendly the staff and other individuals were. The welcoming atmosphere contributed to positive interactions between the students and staff. Additionally, the qualitative data in the study indicated that the first-year study space acted as a restorative space where students were able to relax between classes and come and go as they please. For example, one of the participants aptly stated that the first-year study space was the place to go if he or she “just needed a place to be.”

The first-year students particularly appreciated having a designated “go-to” space where they could gather information, complete academic work, and have meaningful interactions with mentors and peers. Primarily, students felt that the first-year study space was helpful in answering questions and providing information. Not only did participants value that information was in one centralized location, the students especially value interactions with peer mentors that staffed the physical space. The students preferred meaningful informal encounters rather than formalized workshops or appointments. This is consistent with the evolving theory of the third place.

Recommendations

The data gathered from the research study provides a concurrent view of various factors that may contribute to sense of belonging. Leaders in higher education benefit from understanding how physical spaces can influence the success of first-year students

and commuter students. Past research, though scarce, has shown that physical spaces can affect how students become academically and socially integrated into the campus. The findings of this study can also serve to inform how spaces should be designed, allocated, and operated to best serve students.

Transformational leaders can create new physical spaces where the manner that student services are offered can be reoriented to fit student needs. The alteration of the environment around them is characteristic of transformational leadership; for instance, “transformational leaders do not necessarily react to environmental circumstances—they create them” (Avolio and Bass, 1987, p.83). Educational leaders can address the need for sense of belonging by creating physical spaces that act as third places. This can potentially facilitate the creation and reinforcement of peer bonds. Additionally, the physical space can function as an innovative manner of addressing student inquiries and referring students to resources directly. Rather than telling students about resources, educational leaders can recruit representatives from high-impact resources to serve students in the space. This can be a manner of providing direct service to students with a lessened possibility that the student will not be able to find or use the service.

Transformational leaders lead with charisma and attention to the individualized needs of those they serve. Consequently, identifying the needs of the students requires an understanding the particular student population and demographics. For instance, a majority of the students in the study lived within driving distance from River University. Understanding the journey that students make from their home to their campus can be important to understanding how students build their sense of belonging. Educational

leaders that understand students beyond their time on campus embrace a well-rounded transformational leadership approach that embraces Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs.

The role of the physical space can be taken for granted on a campus. However, literature suggests that physical spaces can contribute to sense of belonging and academic outcomes for students. While this relates to individual classrooms, it also applies to all learning spaces. Lounge areas are often created at college institutions. New study areas or lounge areas should be created with the needs of the specific student population in mind. For instance, including a kitchen with a sink near the study area could attract commuter students who bring their lunch to school. Making mindful decisions about how physical spaces are created should be considered if educational leaders are to adopt a holistic lens to serve students.

Understanding why students use physical spaces provides further recommendations for how to draw more students into physical spaces on-campus. For instance, the data for this particular sample of the River University indicated that the students visited the first-year study space did so to acquire information from peer mentors. Additionally, students were much more likely to visit the space if they were enrolled in or had taken a first-year seminar. To make the first-year study space more accessible to students that are not enrolled in a first-year seminar, perhaps educational leaders could offer peer mentor services to entice students that are not in first-year seminars to visit the first-year study space. The data suggests that first-year students value meaningful one-on-one interactions in-person where their inquiries can be addressed. The first-year study space, though a simplistic idea to gather and serve first-

year students, is particularly convenient for millennial students who crave one-on-one contact. Millennial students, although in tune with the advances in technology, value one-on-one meaningful conversations with their peers and faculty or staff.

The concept of creating third places on campuses has been discussed before, particularly as it relates to libraries or student unions. However, third places targeted towards populations that are experiencing potentially difficult transitions have not been addressed before in the literature. Creating a successful study space with functions and attributes that connect with students can affect how students perceive the institution. These study areas should be staffed by student mentors who can address the inquiries of students and provide peer-to-peer connection.

Building sense of belonging in the first year through fostering academic and social integration into the campus may positively impact retention and academic success in college students. Although the study provided an exploratory view of a small sample of the first-year population, the data collected does not provide a causal link between sense of belonging and the first-year study space. Further study with a larger sample size from different institutions may be necessary to clarify the connections between physical spaces and sense of belonging. A well-developed sense of belonging can predict successful academic outcomes. A well-developed sense of belonging can also be a marker for psychological well-being for students. First-year college students are especially vulnerable to transitional psychological difficulties, including exhibiting symptoms of maladjustment. Leaders in higher education benefit from understanding whether a shared study space designated for first-year students is an effective practice on

a commuter campus to build sense of belonging. This is especially important for leaders in higher education attempting to engage the first-year student population with cost-effective and innovative efforts.

This study only focused on a space designed for first-year students and how the first-year study space affects first-year and commuter students. Further research may be focused on transfer students that are experiencing a similar transition to first-year students. Further research may justify a similar type of study space for transfer students that do not know where to be on their new campus. In fact, literature suggests that commuter students are more likely to be transfer students than residential students. Institutions across the United States are awarding more associate's degrees overall. For instance, the California Community College system is awarding more associate's degrees for transfer, also called the degree with a guarantee. These degrees allow for students to be able transfer to seamlessly to a California State University. The institutions welcoming new transfer students may be looking for new ways to engage the student population. The adjustment from a community college campus to a larger institution can still be a challenge for new students navigating the campus.

APPENDICES

Office of Research Affairs, [REDACTED] or
email [REDACTED]

Your participation is entirely voluntary and your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without consequences.

By selecting “I agree” below, you are indicating that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

I agree to participate.

I decline to participate.

APPENDIX B
Survey Instrument

Demographics

1. Gender:

- Woman
- Man
- Genderqueer or gender-fluid
- Other:_____.
- Prefer not to disclose

2. Ethnicity (Please select all the categories that apply below):

- Asian or Asian American
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- White, Caucasian, or European American
- American Indian/Native American
- Other (Please specify): _____
- Prefer not to disclose

3. Are you the first in your family to attend college?

- Yes
- No

4. How far are you located from River University?

- No commute, live on-campus
- Walking distance
- Driving distance, less than 5 miles
- Driving distance, between 5-10 miles
- Driving distance, between 10-25 miles
- Driving distance, over 25 miles

5. If yes, how many minutes (one way) do you spend commuting to the University?

- 0-10 minutes
- 11-20 minutes
- 21-30 minutes
- 31-40 minutes
- 41-50 minutes
- 51-60 minutes
- 61 or more minutes

First Year Experience Questions

1. Have you taken or are you taking a first-year seminar (Ex: XXXXXXXXXX)?
 Yes
 No
2. Have you visited the first-year study space, located in the XXXXXXXXXX?
 Yes
 No
3. If yes, how often do you visit the first-year study space?
 Once a week
 Two to three times a week
 More than four times a week
4. How do you use the first-year study space? (Check all that apply.)
 To meet with my peer mentor or resource mentor
 To study or complete homework
 To pass time between classes
 To get my questions answered
 To attend an event/ workshop
 To make new friends
5. What do you find to be the most valuable aspect, if any, of the first-year study space?

Sense of Belonging Questions

Instructions: Please use the following scale to report your level of agreement/disagreement to each of the following items.

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Not at all</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Somewhat</i>	<i>Completely</i>
<i>True</i>	<i>True</i>		<i>True</i>	<i>True</i>

1. I feel like a real part of [REDACTED].
2. People here notice when I'm good at something.
3. It is hard for people like me to be accepted here.
4. Other students in this school take my opinions seriously.
5. Most professors at [REDACTED] are interested in me.
6. Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here.
7. There is at least one faculty or staff in this school I can talk to if I have to.
8. People at this school are friendly to me.
9. Faculty and staff here are not interested in people like me.
10. I am treated with as much respect as other students.
11. I feel very different from most other students here.
12. I can really be myself at this school.
13. The faculty and staff here respect me.
14. People here know I can do good work.

15. I wish I were at a different school.

16. I feel proud of belonging to [REDACTED].

17. Other students here like me the way I am.

**Note: Adapted from the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale.*

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