

# **Reaching Out, Connecting Within: Community Service Participation and Sense of Belonging Among College Students**

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*This study examined the relationship between students' participation in community service and their sense of belonging on campus. Furthermore, the study explored whether the ways in which students become involved in community service yield different associations with their sense of belonging. Using the Student Experience in the Research University survey administered to students at 12 large, public research universities in 2010, it was discovered that general participation in service and becoming involved in service through student organizations, fraternities or sororities, and university departments are positively associated with students' sense of belonging; finding service opportunities on one's own is negatively associated with sense of belonging.*

## Reaching Out, Connecting Within: Community Service and Sense of Belonging Among College Students

Opportunities for undergraduate students to become engaged in their communities continue to expand on college and university campuses across the United States. The most recent figures from the Campus Compact (2011) demonstrated that college students contributed to more than 382 million hours of service in 2009-2010. The Campus Compact also noted several years of consecutive gains in students' participation in community service, service-learning, and civic engagement, showing a consistent upward trend toward increased activism among college students. According to the *National Survey of Student Engagement* (2011), in 2010, 60% of college seniors reported having completed community service or volunteer work. College students are increasingly becoming interested in reaching out and helping others; for example, Pryor, DeAngelo, Blake, Hurtado, and Tran (2011) found that 69.7% of incoming first-year students indicated that helping others who are in difficulty was essential or very important to them—an 8.3% increase from ten years earlier (Sax, Lindholm, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 2001). College students are twice as likely to volunteer as individuals of the same age who are not enrolled at an institution of higher education (Dote, Cramer, Deitz, & Grimm, Jr., 2006).

Community service has been demonstrated to have positive effects on the personal development of college students by providing opportunities for students to become active, positive contributors to society. Yet, community engagement initiatives, including offering service-learning courses, coordinating community service and volunteerism partnerships, and conducting community-engaged scholarly work, may be challenging for faculty and staff to facilitate due to a lack of personnel and dedicated resources to engage the institution in these important community-based efforts. For example, Campus Compact (2011) reported that 39% of American universities have an annual budget of less than \$20,000 dedicated to community service offices and that many staff members work part-time in community engagement efforts. Efforts that scholars and practitioners can take to establish the benefits of community service may promote greater allocation of resources to foster the continued development of community engagement initiatives on campus.

The research questions guiding this study are as follows: controlling for demographics, engagement, campus climate, and students' involvement on campus, is community service participation positively associated with college students' sense of belonging? Furthermore, do the ways in which

students become involved in community service have different associations with students' sense of belonging? To date, very few studies have examined the potential for community engagement initiatives to impact students' integration and retention positively. The results of most studies suggest an indirect link between service-related learning and retention. Braxton (2000), for example, suggested that active learning activities, such as those sometimes offered in service-learning courses, influence students' social integration, institutional commitment, and departure decisions. Participation in alternative forms of community service, including service-learning, have been identified as an important contributor to students' engagement in and commitment to school (Sax & Astin, 1997). Astin and Sax (1998) found that students participating in community service activities reported a greater satisfaction with their college experience; this satisfaction may support students' ongoing retention and persistence. Yet, while many believe community service participation to be an important high impact practice (Kuh, 2008) that positively benefits students' integration on campus, few studies explicitly address the issue through empirical research. Consequently, this study aims to address the gap in the literature with regard to community service participation's effect on college students' integration.

In this paper, we take a unique approach to scholarship in this field by examining the relationship between students' participation in community service and their sense of belonging at large, public research universities. Additionally, we seek to examine whether the ways in which students become involved in service has any further association with their sense of belonging on campus. Such evidence may help campus administrators, student affairs practitioners, and faculty members to determine specific programmatic areas in which to focus, enhance, and develop community service initiatives to potentially benefit students' integration on campus.

### **Community Service, Sense of Belonging, Integration, and Retention**

As this paper is centrally concerned with examining potential associations between students' community service participation and their integration on campus, it is important to turn to integration and retention theories as conceptual frames to guide analysis. One of the most prominent and paradigmatic theories in student retention, Tinto's (1975) model of student departure, theorizes that students' integration into the academic and social college environment predicts whether they are likely to persist. In this model, students' pre-college characteristics shape their initial commitment to college completion at their institution. Students' initial commitments also affect their social and academic experiences, which can impact their social

and academic integration. Taken in tandem, students' social/academic integration and commitment levels largely determine their likelihood of retention. According to Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007), the concept of sense of belonging is implicit in Tinto's theory and is a central component of student persistence. As such, Tinto's theory is a useful framework for this paper. In our study, we investigate whether community service has the potential to influence students' integration positively in their institutions; namely, whether community service is positively associated with students' sense of belonging.

Tinto (1975) recognized three sets of factors that influence students' retention: individual characteristics, institutional characteristics, and the student's interaction within the college environment. In Tinto's model, students' individual characteristics and their interactions with the academic/social domains of their institutions shape their commitment to their institutions. According to Tinto, "[o]ther things being equal, the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be his [sic] commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion" (p. 96). Community service as an intentional and programmatic activity has the potential to impact both the academic and social domains of a students' college experience. For example, students can take what they learn from their experiences and integrate their new-found knowledge into their academic pursuits. In turn, community service has the potential to help students develop a connection between more theory-driven academic studies and to foster connections to real-life practice. Students rarely participate in community service projects alone; most often, community service activities are conducted with other students (e.g. in service clubs and organizations) and community service activities are almost certainly conducted with community service organization partners—thus, community service activities have the potential to provide students with meaningful social connections.

Opportunities for community service to enhance students' academic work are well documented, most prominently in service-learning rather than general community service participation literature. The academic benefits include increased interaction with faculty (Sax & Astin, 1997), stronger faculty relationships (Astin & Sax, 1998), bolstered motivation (Hedin, 1989), and increased academic performance in both the short-term (Strage, 2001) and the long-term (Strage, 2004). The social benefits include enhanced peer relationships (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Keup, 2005-2006; Osborne, Hammerich, & Hensley, 1998), increased exposure to diversity and multiculturalism (Crossman & Kite, 2007; LeSourd, 1997), improved understanding of social issues (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Smith, 1999), and

increased tolerance for others (Crossman & Kite, 2007; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Therefore, community service as intentional educative practice can help students to integrate into both social and academic domains, further enhancing their retention.

While service-learning as a specific high impact activity holds multiple benefits for students, participating as a volunteer in non-service-learning community service endeavors also yields benefits for undergraduates. Vogelgesang, Ikeda, Gilmartin, and Keup (2002) found that community service participation was significantly and positively related to students' retention, suggesting that volunteerism enhances students' involvement and facilitates both social and academic integration during students' first year of college.

### **Sense of Belonging**

While the aforementioned studies have examined various effects of community service and service-learning participation on students, our present study seeks to examine the relationship between community service participation and students' sense of belonging on campus. Sense of belonging has been characterized in both affective and cognitive terms to describe an individual's affiliation with a group (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). It has often been described as a feeling of connectedness—that one is important to others and that one matters in a community to which he or she is affiliated (Jacoby & Garland, 2004-2005; Strayhorn, 2008). Some have argued that the concept of sense of belonging may be of particular importance to the experiences of students who may be marginalized or feel as though they belong at the periphery of the campus community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Students of color, in particular, can experience a sense of marginality that often results from an unwelcoming environment (Collins, 1986). Additional work suggests that students' from lower social classes also experience a lower sense of belonging on campus than their middle/upper-class peers (Ostrove, 2003). Kuh (2008) noted that historically underserved students tend to participate less often in high-impact educational practices, including first-generation students and African American students in particular. However, when historically marginalized students do participate in these activities, they tend to benefit more than majority students. In other words, there are compensatory effects of engagement in high-impact educational practices.

Research has shown that student perception of the university can play a factor in retention. According to Newman and Courturier (2001), if college students are enrolled in an institution perceived as treating its students as *consumers*, students often react by attending several different institutions in

order to find one that meets their needs. Those students who are marginalized by a campus climate where they are seen as a consumer lack a sense of belonging and thus are at higher risk of attrition. Moreover, in their research on campus climate and retention, Oseguera and Byung Shik (2009) found that peer climate has the potential to impact retention. Essentially, if students perceive a high number of students transferring out of the institution they are enrolled in, they themselves are at an increased risk to transfer out of the institution. If left unchecked, this transfer culture can result in a significant decrease in retention. By developing a sense of belonging with retention risk students, campus administrators, student affairs practitioners, and faculty members may be able to increase retention rates for these marginalized students and reverse any impact of transfer culture.

Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) connected the concept of sense of belonging as an implicit component in models of student persistence. Scholarly research suggests a strong relationship between belonging (i.e., academic and social integration into the college/university) and student retention and graduation (Alford, 1998; Tovar, Simon, & Lee, 2009); the greater the sense of belonging to the institution, the more likely it is that the student will remain in college (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002-2003). Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) found that students' academic integration was associated with an increase in sense of belonging over time, surmising that "how well a student adjusts to the academic environment of college is thus closely tied to their developing sense of belonging with the college" (p. 829). The greater the sense of belonging to the academic and social community for students, the greater the chance that students will persist towards graduation (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hoffman, et al., 2002-2003).

Although much is known about sense of belonging as a conceptual idea, Strayhorn (2008) argued that "comparatively few empirical studies estimate the influence of various factors on students' sense of belonging in college" (p. 307). This study contributes to literature on sense of belonging by examining the extent to which community service participation has an impact on students' sense of belonging. Opportunities to learn about the positive benefits of community engagement initiatives can prove fruitful for institutions seeking to understand connections between engagement and student outcomes, including students' retention.

## **Methods**

### **Instrument and Participants**

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey is

based at the Center for Studies of Higher Education (CSHE) at the University of California-Berkeley. The SERU survey sampling plan is a census scan of the undergraduate experience; all undergraduates enrolled spring 2010 who were also enrolled at the end of the prior term are included in this web-based questionnaire, with the majority of communication occurring by electronic mail. In the SERU survey, each student answers a set of core questions and is randomly assigned one of four modules containing items focused specifically on a research theme. The core questions highlight four thematic research areas: academic engagement, community and civic engagement, global knowledge and skills, and student life and development.

The survey was administered to 287,498 undergraduate students across 12 large, public universities classified by the Carnegie Foundation as having very high research activity. The undergraduate enrollment at the smallest institution in the sample was slightly over 18,000 and the enrollment at the largest institution in the sample was over 38,000. The institutional level response rate for the SERU survey was 34.7% ( $n = 99,810$ ). Twenty percent of the undergraduates were randomly assigned to a community engagement module of the survey ( $n = 19,962$ ) and were used in this analysis. Of the participants who responded to the survey module, 58.5% were female and 41.5% were male. Additionally, 0.5% of respondents were American Indian or Alaskan Native; 3.4% African American; 11.6% Chicano or Latino; 31.1% Asian, Filipino, or Pacific Islander; 45.0% White; 4.9% Unknown/Other; and 3.5% International.

## Measures

For this analysis, we used demographic control variables from the SERU, including students' gender and race, which were dummy-coded (female = 1, male = 0; students of color = 1, all other students = 0). International students were also dummy-coded (international = 1, non-international = 0). Within the dummy-coded race/ethnicity variables, we excluded other/unknown students from the analysis. In the survey, students were also asked to report their social class when growing up and could choose from five categories: low-income/poor, working-class, middle-class, upper-middle/professional class, and wealthy. We dummy-coded the social class variables for analysis (low-income/poor = 1, all others = 0; working-class = 1, all others = 0).

In addition to the variables above, the SERU survey also gathers data related to students' community service participation in college. In the core of the survey, students were asked the question, "How many hours do you spend in a typical week (7 days) on the following activities?" and "performing community service or volunteer activities" was one of the

options. This variable was also dummy-coded (participated in service = 1, did not participate = 0). In our sample, 55.8% of students ( $n = 12,274$ ) participated in community service at least one hour in a typical week.

Additionally, in the randomly-assigned module, students were asked “How did you get involved in community service?” It is important to note that this variable was filtered—only students who first answered “yes” to the question, “During this year, have you done community service either on or off campus?” were selected to answer questions related to the ways in which they became involved in community service. The data suggest that students were most likely to become involved in community service through a student organization on campus (47.8%), followed by finding service opportunities on their own (41.7%), and through a fraternity or sorority (20.5%) (Table 1).

Table 1

*The Ways in Which Students Became Involved in Community Service*

	Yes	
	<i>n</i>	%
Through another student organization on campus	4580	47.8
I found the work on my own	3981	41.7
Through my fraternity or sorority	1950	20.5
Through a religious organization or church	1872	19.7
Through a related class	1689	17.7
Through a university department or program	1460	15.4
Through my internship	932	9.9

Several of the ways in which students became involved in community service include factors that may also contribute to increases in students’ sense of belonging on campus. For example, students who participate in student organizations may have a higher sense of belonging than those who do not. Therefore, students who participate in community service through a student organization may have a higher sense of belonging that is more strongly attributed to their membership in the student organization than to their community service participation. In order to isolate the potential effects of community service participation on students’ sense of belonging, we therefore controlled for additional factors in our study. These included whether students participated in student organizations or Greek life. Students were asked to indicate whether they had been a participant or member,

officer or leader, or neither, in a variety of activities, including Greek fraternities or sororities and 12 types of student organizations (e.g. academic, campus sports clubs, honor societies, political, recreational, religious, service, etc.). These variables were dummy coded (1 = participant or leader, 0 = neither participant nor leader) and combined so that two variables remained: participation in Greek life and participation in student organizations. In our sample, 13.4% ( $n = 2,368$ ) students participated in Greek life and 64.4% ( $n = 10,879$ ) participated in a student organization.

We chose additional control variables related to students' perception of campus climate, their satisfaction, and their classmate/faculty interactions because these factors have been demonstrated in prior literature to affect students' sense of belonging. For example, Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) found that perceptions of hostile campus racial climate negatively affected Latino students' sense of belonging. Additionally, research has demonstrated that increased academic interactions with peers and faculty enhance students' sense of belonging on campus (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002-2003).

The SERU survey contains multiple questions that we wanted to use as control variables and as our focal dependent variable in our analysis; therefore, we conducted a principal component analysis (PCA) on 20 items with oblique rotation (promax). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis ( $KMO = .88$ ). Bartlett's test of sphericity,  $\chi^2(190) = 192,491.210$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicated that correlations between items were sufficiently large for PCA. An initial analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each component in the data; five components had an eigenvalue over Kaiser's criterion of one and explained 67.07% of the variance. Given the large sample size, Kaiser's criteria components, and the convergence of a scree plot that showed inflexions that justify retaining five components, the final analysis retained the following factors: campus climate, academic engagement, satisfaction with instruction and quality of teaching, satisfaction with access and availability of courses, and faculty and classmate interactions. Table 2 shows the factor loadings after rotation in a pattern matrix, with factor loadings over .40 in bold. Each component had a high reliability, with Cronbach's  $\alpha > .80$ . The factor scores were computed using the regression method and saved as standardized scores with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one.

Table 2

*Summary of Exploratory Factor Analysis Results for the SERU Questionnaire ( $n = 17,042$ )*

<i>Item</i>	<i>Campus Climate</i> ( $\alpha = .91$ )	<i>Academic Engagement</i> ( $\alpha = .87$ )	<i>Sense of Belonging</i> ( $\alpha = .85$ )	<i>Classmate Interactions</i> ( $\alpha = .80$ )
Students are respected here regardless of their religious beliefs	<b>.844</b>	-.012	-.020	.013
Students are respected here regardless of their race or ethnicity	<b>.837</b>	.003	.043	-.019
Students are respected here regardless of their sexual orientation	<b>.834</b>	.042	-.055	-.005
Students are respected here regardless of their gender	<b>.810</b>	-.015	.027	.004
Students are respected here regardless of their disabilities	<b>.803</b>	.021	-.040	.010
Students are respected here regardless of their economic or social class	<b>.780</b>	-.027	.073	-.016
Students are respected here regardless of their political beliefs	<b>.769</b>	-.020	-.025	.019
Asked an insightful question in class	-.007	<b>.898</b>	-.019	-.046
Brought up ideas or concepts from different courses during class discussions	-.023	<b>.877</b>	-.015	-.051
<b>Table 2 (continued)</b>				
Contributed to a class discussion	.002	<b>.865</b>	.028	-.084
Interacted with faculty during lecture course sessions	.016	<b>.815</b>	-.012	.005
Had a class in which the professor knew or learned your name	.005	<b>.687</b>	.067	.001

Found a course so interesting you did more work than was required	.004	<b>.652</b>	.008	.067
Talked with the instructor outside of class about issues and concepts derived from a course	-.001	<b>.638</b>	-.045	.199
Knowing what I know now, I would still choose to enroll at this campus	-.012	-.033	<b>.880</b>	-.042
I feel that I belong at this campus	.015	-.024	<b>.879</b>	.029
Overall academic experience	-.045	-.021	<b>.806</b>	.079
Overall social experience	.045	.111	<b>.735</b>	-.054
Worked on class projects or studied as a group with other classmates outside of class	.000	-.021	.010	<b>.913</b>
Helped a classmate better understand the course material when studying together	.007	.055	.005	<b>.887</b>

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*Note.* Campus climate items began with "Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements" and were scaled 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Academic engagement and classmate interaction items began with, "During the academic year, how often have you done each of the following" and were scaled 1 (never) to 6 (very often). The sense of belonging items for social/academic experience began with "How satisfied are you with each of the following aspects of your educational experience in your major" and were scaled 1 (very dissatisfied) to 6 (very satisfied); additionally, the remaining belonging items began, "Please rate your level of agreement with the following statement" and were scaled 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

## Results

We first analyzed the data with an independent samples *t*-test to determine whether there are statistically significant differences observed between students who participated in community service and those who had not participated in community service with respect to their sense of belonging. We also used *t*-tests to examine whether statistically significant differences exist in students' sense of belonging dependent on the ways in which they became involved in community service. The tests suggest that there is a statistically significant difference in sense of belonging between the first two groups, with students who participated in community service

reporting a higher sense of belonging (Table 3). We also found statistically significant differences in the ways in which students became involved in community service, with students who became involved in service through a fraternity/sorority, student organization, and university department reporting a higher sense of belonging than students who indicated not becoming involved through those three areas. Additionally, students who found the community service work on their own reported a lower sense of belonging compared to those who did not. The effect sizes of the differences, as measured by Cohen's *d*, suggests the differences are small between these groups.

Next, we conducted multiple linear regressions predicting a relationship between sense of belonging and service participation while controlling for gender, race, social class status, campus climate, academic engagement, satisfaction, and students' classmate interactions. The overall regression for our first model was statistically significant,  $F(11, 12599) = 295.17, p < .001$ . The model accounts for 20.5% of the variance in sense of belonging (Table 4). The first model suggests that participation in service is positively associated with students' sense of belonging. When holding other factors constant, community service participation is associated with a .09 increase in students' sense of belonging. Additionally, most of the other factors in our model were also found to be associated with students' sense of belonging. Female students reported a higher sense of belonging while students of color, international students, low-income, and working-class students reported lower sense of belonging when other factors were held constant. Our five control predictor variables—campus climate, academic engagement, classmate interactions, participation in student organizations, and participation in Greek life—were also found to be positively associated with students' sense of belonging.

Table 3

*Differences in Sense of Belonging between Students' Participation or Involvement*

	Participated/ Involved	Did not Participate/ Not Involved	95% CI	df	T	d
	M (SD)	M (SD)				
Community Service	.08 (.98)	-.09 (1.01)	(-.20, -.14)	17040	-11.26***	.17
Related Class	.13 (.96)	.09 (.97)	(-.10, .01)	8853	-1.68	.04

Fraternity or Sorority Student Organization	.24 (.93)	.06 (.98)	(-.23, -.13)	8829	-7.15***	.19
University Department	.18 (.93)	.02 (1.00)	(-.20, -.12)	8891	-7.94***	.17
Religious Organization	.20 (.96)	.08 (.98)	(-.18, -.06)	8822	-4.16***	.12
Found on Their Own	.10 (.93)	.10 (.98)	(-.05, .05)	8829	-.04	.00
Internship	.07(.99)	.10 (.97)	(-.04, .09)	8802	.71	-.03
Found on Their Own	-.00 (1.02)	.17 (.93)	(.13, .21)	8874	8.15***	-.17

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Next, to determine whether the ways in which students become involved in community service have different associations with students' sense of belonging, we conducted multiple linear regression on these variables while controlling for gender, race, social class status, and our campus climate, academic engagement, classmate interaction, and participation variables. The overall regression for the model was statistically significant,  $F(18, 6524) = 103.48$ ,  $p < .001$ . The model accounts for 22.3% of the variance in sense of belonging (Table 4). Our second model suggests that finding community service opportunities through a fraternity/sorority, a student organization, or a university department are positively associated with students' sense of belonging on campus. These findings held when controlling for students' participation in student organizations and in fraternities and sororities. Additionally, finding community service work on one's own is negatively

Table 4

*Regression Models Predicting Sense of Belonging*

Predictor	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE	<i>t</i>	B	SE	<i>t</i>
Constant	-.04*	.02	-2.26	.05	.03	1.39
Female	.04*	.02	2.40	.02	.02	1.08
Students of Color	-.19***	.02	-11.24	-.19***	.02	-8.23
International	-.28***	.04	-6.19	-.38***	.07	-5.67
Low-Income	-.09***	.03	-3.18	-.14***	.04	-3.72
Working-Class	-.08***	.02	-3.75	-.11***	.03	-3.90
Participation in Greek Life	.14***	.02	5.83	.12***	.06	2.09
Participation in Student Organizations	.19***	.02	11.24	.15*	.03	5.60
Campus Climate	.32***	.01	39.68	.32***	.01	29.76
Academic Engagement	.13***	.01	15.55	.12***	.01	11.02
Classmate Interactions	.12***	.01	14.16	.12***	.01	10.18
Community Service Participation	.09***	.02	5.09	.05*	.03	2.05
Service through a Related Class				.03	.03	1.09
Service through a Fraternity or Sorority				.02	.06	0.38
Service through a Student Organization				.11***	.02	4.93
Service through a University Department				.07*	.03	2.39
Service through a Religious Organization				.00	.03	0.00
Service through an Internship				-.01	.04	-0.19
Service Found by Students' Own Effort				-.14***	.02	-6.12
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>			20.5%			22.3%

*Significance levels. \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001*

associated with students' sense of belonging on campus. The other ways in which students found community service opportunities—through a class, religious organization, and internship—were not significant in our model. Similar patterns emerged in this model that were present in our first model: students of color, international students, low-income students, and working-class students all reported lower sense of belonging scores when other factors

are held constant. All five control variables—campus climate, academic engagement, interactions with classmates, participation in fraternities and sororities, and participation in student organizations—were discovered to be positively associated with students' sense of belonging.

### **Discussion**

Our study suggests that participation in community service is positively associated with students' sense of belonging on campus when controlling for students' perceptions of campus climate, academic engagement, frequency of classmate interactions, and participation in student organizations. The findings also suggest that students' involvement in community service and volunteerism can positively enhance their integration into the campus community by increasing students' sense of belonging.

Additionally, we discovered that students who found community service opportunities through fraternities/sororities, university departments, and student organizations reported a higher sense of belonging than those who indicated not finding service opportunities through these organizations. One potential reason for this is that students may participate in community service alongside other members of their fraternities, sororities, or student organizations. For example, a group of fraternity members may all engage in an organized community service activity and this collective action potentially fosters a greater sense of belonging in participants by encouraging the development of friendships and institutional affiliation. Consequently, students who found community service on their own reported a lower sense of belonging compared to students who were connected through other organizations. These data suggest that students who connect to community service opportunities through on-campus organizations may be better integrated into campus life than students who seek service opportunities on their own. Yet, we find it disconcerting that nearly 42% of students reported finding community service opportunities on their own as the benefits of finding community service through fraternities/sororities, university departments, and student organizations, as suggested in our study, may outweigh the benefits of finding community service by oneself (Table 1). This appears to be a potentially missed opportunity for students who may find it more beneficial to engage in community service efforts through on-campus organizations.

Evidence of these positive relationships can prove useful for campus administrators and student affairs practitioners as they assist their students in becoming more integrated on campus. Our data suggest that students who find service opportunities through internships or religious organizations may

not reap the same benefits of increased integration on the college campus, suggesting that student affairs practitioners may wish to enhance or promote community service opportunities through student clubs and organizations instead. While community service participation through internships or religious organizations may benefit students in other ways (e.g. networking opportunities, work experience, spiritual development), our results suggest they may not enhance students' sense of belonging on campus as strongly as connecting to service through university departments, fraternities/sororities, or through student organizations, which likely provide further opportunities for students to connect with their peers through service.

Furthermore, academic advisors, career counselors, and other student affairs practitioners who have direct contact with undergraduate students can help promote opportunities for involvement; from this perspective, student affairs professionals can serve as valuable brokers of information about relevant activities and high-impact educational learning opportunities. Student organizations not currently involved in community service projects may find it beneficial to develop service opportunities for their members; for example, academic student clubs (e.g. biology club, physics club) could initiate volunteer programs that include tutoring for local K-12 schools or student club sports teams could volunteer with youth athletic programs in the local community. Additionally, student affairs practitioners can encourage all students—including historically underserved students who, in this study, reported a lower sense of belonging on campus—to participate in high-impact educational practices such as community service. Efforts that practitioners can take to connect students to community service through student organizations, university departments, and fraternities/sororities may yield extended benefits of students' deepened integration into university life (Kuh, 2008).

There are several ways student affairs practitioners can help students not formally associated with student organizations to become involved in community service efforts; for instance, new student programs—such as orientation, first-year experience programs, and first-year seminars—are increasingly offering community service components and experiential educational components as strategies of involving first-year students into campus activities (Stebbleton, Jensen, & Peter, 2010). Residential halls can include community or civic engagement themes in student programming or implement living/learning programs with such themes—such measures can increase communications between students from diverse backgrounds and intergroup dialogues (Guarasci & Cornwell, 1998). Student leaders representing student organizations or fraternities/sororities can also organize community engagement activities and encourage all students to participate in

the groups' efforts. The data in this report suggest that new student programs and residential life departments may indeed benefit from the additional inclusion of community service components, as these measures may serve to enhance first-year students' integration on campus.

Finally, as our survey is specific to the experiences of students at large, public research universities, the results can be used to support increased efforts to engage research universities in community-based scholarship and public engagement. According to Checkoway (2001), many research universities were established with a civic mission to prepare students for active participation in a diverse democracy. Reardon (1997) also noted that land grant institutions have received notable attention and scrutiny for what is "perceived to be their failure to engage in activities that directly respond to the environmental, economic, and social problems facing the nation's declining rural areas and distressed urban neighborhoods" (p. 130). Therefore, examining the role of community service opportunities in research universities can strengthen engagement efforts to benefit students, institutions, and communities alike.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

As a correlational study, the current research does not examine the *effects* of community service participation on students' sense of belonging, but only the *relationship* between these two factors; as such, it is not possible to determine whether students who are better integrated in campus are more likely to participate in community service or vice versa. We therefore recommend that future research undertake the task of untangling some of those relationships. Students self-reported their average weekly participation in community service or volunteerism; such a measure may not capture students' participation with complete accuracy. Furthermore, our community service participation was dummy-coded, potentially masking unique relationships between the number of hours students participate in service each week and their sense of belonging on campus. For example, as students increase the number of hours they spend volunteering in community service hours per week, they may have an increasingly deeper sense of belonging to the institution. Additionally, our sample, while from several geographically diverse higher education institutions located across the nation, may only be generalizable to student populations at large, public research institutions. Consequently, these limitations should be considered when reviewing the results of our study. Students who attend small liberal arts colleges, for example, are likely to have different experiences. Finally, we recommend that scholars engage in qualitative studies to learn more about students'

experiences in community service to elicit deeper understanding of the ways in which their volunteer experiences lead to increased integration on campus.

### **Conclusion**

Our study enhances the scholarship related to the benefits of community service among college students; specifically, we found evidence that participation in community service is positively associated with students' sense of belonging on campus. Additionally, we found that students who become involved in community service through fraternities/sororities, university departments, and student organizations have a higher sense of belonging than students who do not; this suggests that community service opportunities embedded within student-centered organizations can yield powerful impacts on students' sense of belonging—and potentially persistence—in universities.

Finally, we found evidence for a potential missed opportunity: over two-thirds of students involved in community service reported finding service opportunities on their own. This type of service is negatively associated with students' sense of belonging on campus. Encouraging students to become involved in service through fraternities/sororities, student organizations, and university departments—and supporting these groups as they develop community service initiatives—therefore presents an exciting opportunity for campus administrators, faculty members, student affairs practitioners, and student leaders to increase community engagement on campuses.

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