Social Satisfaction and Sense of Belonging: Revisiting Student Persistence

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Abstract

There is increasing concern in the higher education community about the high rates of student attrition, as the United States as one of the highest rates in the industrialized world (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2011). In 2013 Patrick O'Keefe found that "feeling rejected and not being able to develop a sense of belonging within higher education is a key cause of student attrition" (p.612). The present study further investigates the relationship between students' sense of belonging and their social experience satisfaction while attending college. Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey data from a large, public Midwest university is used to explore self-reported sense of belonging and its relationship to students' satisfaction with their overall social experience while at school. The study found social satisfaction to have a strong positive correlation to sense of belonging and was able to identify several factors that had an impact on social satisfaction, including living in residence halls and spending time socializing with friends. It is recommended that researchers continue to explore the role student social life and satisfaction play in sense of belonging. It will be important moving forward surveys are created to specifically address social satisfaction and sense of belonging among students.

Keywords: persistence, sense of belonging, social satisfaction, SERU

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Introduction and Problem Statement

Student persistence is a multi-faceted area of research within higher education. Persistence refers to the sustained enrollment of a student from the first semester through graduation. While much has been discovered about various factors that increase and decrease persistence rates amongst students, including on-campus employment (Astin, 1999), living on-campus (Astin, 1999; Shushok, Scales, Sriram, & Kidd, 2011), and involvement in extracurricular activities (Astin, 1999; Berger & Milem, 1999; Christie & Dunham, 1990) have all been shown to increase persistence, our ability to increase such rates at institutions still has a long way to go. Low student persistence rates can have many negative consequences, including "lost revenue for the higher education institution, the subsequent misappropriation of funds from state and federal governments, the weakening of the labour market and potential exclusion of young, low-skilled workers from employment" (O'Keeffe, 2013, p. 611-612).

As an off-shoot of student persistence research, many researchers have begun to explore how sense of belonging impacts persistence (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; O'Keeffe, 2013). There have been a small number of studies that have provided support to the notion that a student's sense of belonging at their institution is critical for persistence (Hausmann, Schofield, &Woods, 2007; O'Keeffe, 2013). That is, the more a student feels as though they are a part of their campus community the greater their odds of degree completion are. This is an important finding and is deserving of further investigation.

Researchers have looked at sense of belonging though many lenses including race (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997), immigration status

(Stebleton, Huesman, & Kuzhabekova, 2010), and transfer status (Townley, Katz, Wandersman, Schillaci, Timmerman, & Mousseau, 2013). While these studies have greatly contributed to our understanding of sense of belonging and the role it plays with persistence, few studies have examined how the social experiences of students plays into their sense of belonging. Exploring the impact of the collegiate social life is critical to our understanding of sense of belonging because sense of belonging by definition evokes a social connotation. Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) define sense of belonging as "the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community" (p. 804). They go on to describe sense of belonging as "the extent to which group members feel 'stuck to' or part of, particular social groups... sense of belonging as feeling part of a social group" (p. 327). These definitions directly mention social groups (as opposed to academic groups) and communities, which encompass much more than just the academic groups and communities on campuses. Given the essence of what sense of belonging is and how it has been show to impact persistence, it is important that we work to identify social factors that impact sense of belonging both positively and negatively. By doing this, we can better equip collegiate staff, faculty, administrators, and policy makers to better serve their student populations in a holistic manner.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

While some researchers have begun to investigate the role sense of belonging plays on student persistence (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; O'Keeffe, 2013), this study serves two main functions: to explore the relationship between social satisfaction and sense of belonging and to explore what social and demographic factors influence social satisfaction. The context for this investigation is within a large, public

Midwest university drawing on data from the 2015 Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey. More specifically, I am interested in students' self-reported overall social experience satisfaction and its relationship to their sense of belonging. For the purpose of this study, sense of belonging is used as an indicator of persistence as it has been argued that if "... college students' feelings of belonging (i.e., affiliation toward the institution and experience) are positive they are more likely to be successful and persist towards graduation" (Stebleton, Huesman, Jr., & Kuzhabekova, 2010, p. 2). As such, this study was guided by the following research questions:

- What is the relationship between students' self-reported satisfaction with their overall social experience and sense of belonging?

- What social factors are associated with social satisfaction?

Methodology

This study utilizes responses from the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey that was conducted in 2015 at a Midwest research university. As a component of the responses, survey administrators pull data from university records and pair it with individual responses (this type of data includes demographic and academic enrollment). Correlations were conducted to determine relationships amongst various variables and a logistic regression was utilized to test a prediction model of social satisfaction.

Definition of Key Terms

This study explores social satisfaction and its relationship to sense of belonging within the context of higher education. The following definitions will be used to provide a common understanding of the terms used throughout this paper.

SERU: Student Experience in the Research University survey (detailed information provided on page 21).

Persistence: The sustained enrollment of a student from the first semester through graduation.

Sense of Belonging: This study utilizes the definition from Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007): "the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community" (p. 804). This definition is echoed by that of Strayhorn (2012) which emphasizes social support, feeling connected and as though one matters.

Conceptual Framework

In this paper I will explore literature that addresses student persistence, sense of belonging, and social life. I will then review the Student Experience in the Research University survey (SERU), which provides the data utilized in this study. I will then move into the methodology used in the study and the research findings this study yields. I will conclude with a discussion of what these results means and their implications and recommendations for future research.

Review of the Literature

In 1988 prominent higher education persistence researcher Vincent Tinto explained his theorized three stages of student integration to campus life. These stages included separation, transition, and incorporation. At each stage, students were faced with different challenges they have to conquer in order to become members of their higher education community. In the third stage, incorporation, students are challenged with learning the norms of their new college environment. When speaking of the importance of this stage, Tinto (1988) states:

> Because social interactions are the primary vehicle through which such integrative associations arise, individuals have to establish contact with other members of the institution, student and faculty alike. Failure to do so may lead to the absence of integration and to its associated sense of isolation. These in turn may lead to departure from the institution. (p. 446)

To paraphrase, Tinto believes that social interaction is the driving force behind integration to the institution and that such integration is critical to the persistence of students.

This emphasis on on-campus social integration has lead a small number of researchers, including Patrick O'Keeffe, to explore the role sense of belonging plays in student persistence. The idea here is that if students feel as though they are a valued part of their campus community they will be more likely to persist. One could akin sense of belonging to social integration; sense of belonging being the more modern take on social integration. Throughout this literature review, I will explore areas of student persistence,

sense of belonging, and student social life. This review will form the basis for the study that was conducted.

Student Persistence

Vincent Tinto's Interactionalist Model of Student Departure is widely known in the field of higher education, causing some to refer to it as "near-paradigmatic in the study of undergraduate retention" (Berger & Milem, 1999, p. 643). In 2006-2007, Tinto proclaimed that the area of student persistence was among the most studied areas of higher education (p. 1). He also noted that increasing student persistence rates has become even more important to both higher education institutions and governments in light of cuts to the resources once available to schools. He postulates that this increase in importance has created the opportunity for businesses, researchers, and instructors who attempt to help schools increase their student persistence rates to flourish. Given this, one would expect to see large gains made in persistence rates over the decades of research on the topic, but that doesn't seem to be the case. For instance, the National Center for Education Statistics' 2005 Statistical Analysis Report showed only minor changes in student persistence rates from 1994 to 2000. Tinto argues that while much research has been conducted in regards to persistence, there are still many things that we do not yet know.

Examining how persistence research has developed through Tinto's career, it can be noted that early student persistence research was centered on the notion that it was poor students that withdrew from institutions and thus, the institutions were not responsible for student attrition, the students themselves were to blame (Tinto, 2006-2007). That started to change in the 1970's when researchers began exploring the role the

institution played in student withdrawal. Tinto's 1975 book, *Leaving College,* laid out a theory that postulated that the interactions between the student and their academic and social environments were critical to student persistence. This theory emphasized integration to the campus community and the importance of a student's first year in school.

Tinto (2006-2007) credits his 1975 book with refocusing student persistence research onto involvement. This research highlighted the many benefits of on-campus involvement, particularly the value it has on students in their first year. This was then turned into a research focus on students within their first year. While this history of research was very influential, it was limited in that it did not often take into account the experiences of students from minority backgrounds nor did it often consider the influences of different institutional settings.

As mentioned previously, in 1988 Tinto released an essay in which he theorized the ways in which the process of student departure is different at different times in the college career. He proposed three stages, separation, transition, and incorporation, which are accompanied by unique challenges that students must overcome in order to reach degree completion. With each stage students get closer to integrating to their campus community. In the first stage, separation, students need to detach themselves from the norms of the life they are leaving (for most students this is high school and/or family life). During the second stage, transition, students experience a state of limbo where they are not strongly connected to either their former life or their new college life. During this stage, students are learning about the norms of the institution and establishing relationships. The final stage, incorporation, concludes with the student internalizing their

institution's patterns of behavior and thus obtaining membership in the community. In essence, it is by completing the three stages proposed by Tinto that students are able to feel a sense of belonging to their school.

More recently, Stratton and Wetzel (2013) have noted that the United States most commonly utilized the six-year graduation rate as a measure of success. This rate looks at the ratio of students who have graduated within six years of matriculation compared to those who have not graduated. For the past ten years, the national average was below 60% and there is a national trend that students are taking longer to complete their degrees than in past. The six-year graduation rate, and its use as a measure of college success, is flawed for a number of reasons, including that it does not take into account students who are still working toward a degree. This flaw was the focus of research conducted by Stratton and Wetzel (2013) who looked to distinguish the non-graduates of the six-year graduation rate. Their research analyzed data on over 6,000 students who matriculated to four-year institutions at the start of the 1995-1996 academic year.

In their study, they found that 36% of students who had not graduated in the six years following matriculation were still enrolled and working toward degree completion. In the six-year graduation rate statistic that is widely reported as a measure of college success, this 36% would have been counted as failures, although they were still progressing towards completion. Their study also revealed some startling findings regarding who was, and was not, graduating in six years. They found that African American students and students from lower income brackets were far less likely to graduate (20% and 25% less likely, respectively) than their white and higher income peers. They found that those who took the longest to complete their degree program were

likely to be academically disadvantaged upon entering college. While this study considered demographic and academic characteristics of students, it did not take into account the social situations that students face. At best, this study found that students did better when they were enrolled at schools with peers of similar academic ability. This is an area that deserves further consideration and is something that this paper attempts to address. As we will see, researchers have long been theorizing about the importance of peers and collegiate social life but there is plenty of research still to be done.

Within his 1988 essay, Tinto mentions several programs, circumstances, and opportunities that can impact, both positively and negatively, a student's ability to successfully move through his proposed stages. For the purposes of this study, I examine the ways in which the social programs, circumstances, and opportunities he identified interact with social satisfaction. I rely on the social factors identified by Tinto in this study and they include: living situation, family involvement, Greek life (fraternities and sororities) and extracurricular programs. Additionally, this study will include a social behavior factor composite of SERU questions pertaining to student social behavior.

Sense of Belonging

Early persistence researchers believed that student involvement was related to persistence through the students' subjective sense of belonging. Given that many view belonging as an important source of motivation and a human need (Strayhorn, 2012) it makes sense that researchers would attempt to understand the role it plays among college students. However, it appears that in much of the work that followed, sense of belonging is absent. In an attempt to bring about a renewed interest in sense of belonging in persistence research, Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) conducted a longitudinal

experiment to explore whether sense of belonging was correlated with students' intentions to persist during their first year of school. In this experiment, the researchers sent surveys to first-year students at the start of the academic year to examine variables such as sense of belonging, intentions to persist, social and academic integration, peer and parental support, and institutional commitment. The students who responded to the first survey were randomly placed into one of three groups; either the *enhanced sense of belonging group* or one of two control groups. The enhanced sense of belonging group would receive small gifts (like magnets and decals) that bared their school's name and logo and letters from university administrators that told them they were important members of the university community. These items were sent to students in an attempt to increase their sense of belonging. The students in the control groups received the same surveys but did not receive to university gifts or letters. One of the control groups would receive gifts and letters but they were not linked to the university. The other control group would not receive any gifts or letters of any kind, just the surveys.

The study found that at the start of the academic year, white first-year students reported higher peer support than their African American peers. Peer support was negatively correlated to sense of belonging for white students but positively correlated for African American students. Students who initially reported higher levels of parental support also reported higher initial levels of sense of belonging. However, these students would go on to report faster declines in sense of belonging through the first year. They found that sense of belonging and institutional commitment decreases over the course of the first year. Although, this was not true for students who reported higher academic integration as such integration was discovered to be positively correlated to sense of

belonging throughout the year. All in all, sense of belonging was a strong indicator of institutional commitment and intentions to persist. This study provides a strong argument for the need to study sense of belonging as it related to student persistence.

In 2013, Patrick O'Keeffe published a study linking student persistence rates to students' sense of belonging at their institution. He notes "feelings of rejection and 'not fitting in' are closely related to student attrition" (p. 606). Some students are more at risk of withdrawal, including those from minority backgrounds (ethnic, ability, and socioeconomic status), those who are academically challenged, and first generation students (Heisserer & Parette, 2002 & Collier & Morgan, 2008). Further, Lee et al (2009) found that the stress some students face to make friends at school can diminish their ability to integrate into the campus community.

O'Keeffe (2013) goes on to highlight the importance of creating a sense of belonging among students in order to positively impact student well-being and thus, persistence rates. He argues that to begin developing a sense of belonging, a student needs a relationship with only one person at the institution. He goes on to say, citing Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009, p. 435), "that for students to develop a 'sense of belonging', they 'must learn and adopt the norms of the campus culture'" (O'Keeffe, 2013, p. 611). An older theory by Tinto (1993) articulated that in order for students to succeed on campus that they must shed their individual identities and adopt the identity of the campus community. While this particular theory has been critiqued for being oppressive (Tierney, 1999; Hurtado and Carter, 1997), there is a long history within persistence research that highlights the importance of students to develop a sense of belonging to their institutions.

Hurtado and Carter (1997) argued "that understanding students' sense of belonging may be key to understanding how particular forms of social and academic experiences affect … students." (p. 324-325). In an effort to further such understanding, they investigated the impact the backgrounds and collegiate experiences of Latino students had on their sense of belonging to their institution. For the study, Hurtado and Carter reviewed data from multiple sources (the Student Descriptive Questionnaire, two iterations of the National Survey of Hispanic Students, and institutional data). Their analysis found a number of academic activities (such as talking about course content outside of class) to have a positive impact on sense of belonging. They found that membership in fraternities/sororities and religious organizations increased sense of belonging in second year students, and increase that appears to be maintained into the third year. They also found that membership in social, community, religious, organizations, student government, and sports teams had a positive impact on sense of belonging in third year students. Interestingly, they did not see an improvement in sense of belonging in students who indicated membership in ethnic organizations.

It is well documented that after a student transfers to a new institution they face a multitude of challenges including adapting to a new social environment (Townley et al., 2013; Eggleston & Lanaan, 2001). This period of adjustment can lead to transfer students feeling anonymous and disconnected from their institution (Townley et al., 2013; Kodama, 2002). Given the amount of students who do end up transferring to a new institution prior to degree completion, which is roughly a third of all higher education students, Townley et al. (2013) set out to understand the intricacies of sense of belonging among transfer students. Their study included survey responses from 53 biology,

chemistry, engineering, mathematics, and physics majors who had transferred institutions.

Their study found that students had higher grade point averages if they reported both higher levels of sense of belonging and higher participation rates in an aid program for students in the aforementioned majors. Their study also found that sense of belonging was higher at the students' transferred-to institution that their transferred-from institution. Lastly, their student found that for most students, their *actual* sense of belonging was lower than their *ideal* sense of belonging. This was particularly true for females. The researchers did not heavily investigate this result but it does provide future researchers with another area of sense of belonging to explore.

These studies are all aiming to understand the factors which influence sense of belonging and/or the potential outcomes of having (or not having) a sense of belonging on campus. This is the focus of Strayhorn's (2012) model of sense of belonging. In his model, he draws heavily from Maslow's hierarchy of needs (which includes belonging). He proposes that as students face different circumstances and situations in college, their basic needs reveal themselves in the same manner Maslow describes (physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization). Strayhorn postulates that as a student's need to belong becomes a more important motivator (after their physiological and safety needs have been met) students will seek out various outlets to gain belonging, be it student group involvement, friendships, etc. The outlets which students choose to seek out belonging from and whether or not belonging is found there lead to either positive or negative outcomes, such as persistence or depression. Strayhorn states that if a student is able to satisfy their need to belong it will lead to positive outcomes and allow them to

move on to higher needs but if the need to belong is not met it can lead to negative outcomes and prohibit growth.

While researchers have been looking at sense of belonging in college students since the mid-1990's, there is still much to be discovered (Strayhorn, 2012). It has been pointed out by Strayhorn (2012) "that there is a good deal of confusion in the literature about the differences between involvement, engagement, and other increasingly circulated terms such as sense of belonging" (p. 13). Moving forward it will be important to separate these concepts. In doing so, researchers will be better able to identify factors which impacts sense of belonging which practitioners and policymakers will be able to use to better serve students.

Student Social Life

Prominent higher education researcher, Alexander Astin (1993), once proclaimed peers were "the single most potent source of influence" on college students (p. 398). In Scott Thomas' 2000 article exploring student social integration and persistence, he draws attention to Bean's Student Attrition Model (1980, 1982, 1983, 1990), which postulates that having an encouraging friend would increase a student's commitment to their institution. Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975, 1993) also concludes that commitment levels are higher among students who have integrated further into the social aspects of campus life and that students with higher commitment levels are more likely to persist. These important higher education researchers have all shown that student social life is important in students' decisions to persist.

With this in mind, Thomas (2000) explored how student social networks lead to student intentions to persist. He utilizes data collected via surveys completed by first-year

students at a four-year private college at the end of the 1992-1993 academic year. His research suggests that students who have a broad social network at their institution are likely to have higher levels of social satisfaction, among other variables, and are thus more likely to persist. He also found that students who were considered central ("the degree to which a student is connected to other connected students") were more likely to persist (p. 607). He concludes by proposing that student social integration may best be understood by the individual student's social ties.

Foley Nicpon, Huser, Hull Blanks, Sollenberger, Befort, and Robinson Kurpius (2006-2007) explored the social life-persistence relationship by reviewing the persistence decisions of 401 college freshmen as it related to loneliness, social support, and living arrangements by having students complete questionnaires. They found that peer social support was positively correlated to persistence. This was true for both male and female students, with the later having a stronger correlation. Their study also showed that living on campus positively impacted both persistence and grade point average. In their discussion, they stress the importance of helping students find activities and groups to be a part of. They say:

> Feeling connected and having a sense of belonging is a strong deterrent to non-persistence. On most campuses, groups, clubs, and other activities are available for all types of students, regardless of interest or financial status. Getting involved in campus activities of any type also fosters a sense of belonging and commitment (p. 355)

They go on to note that Tinto (1993) has identified commitment as a valuable indicator of persistence.

Several studies have found that by "establishing social support networks" at their institution, ethnic minorities are more likely to feel as though they belong on campus (Gloria & Ho, 2003 p. 94; Griffin, 1991; Kimbrough, Molock, & Walton, 1996). When exploring the holistic experience of Asian American students, Gloria and Ho (2003) found their "social support variable set" to be the "strongest predictor of academic persistence" (p. 100). In their study, they found parents to be the largest variable within social support but did find that friends were significant in making respondents feel supported socially. The notion that friends are important to the academic success of Asian Americans is supported by the research of Steinberg, Dornbusch, and Brown (1992). The social support received by family and friends was not only correlated to academic persistence, but also to an increase in self-esteem in Asian American students.

Other studies have also explored how social integration impacts persistence decisions in students. Braunstein and McGrath (1997) interviewed university administrators who interacted regularly with first-year students. These administrators highlighted the importance of social integration as it pertained to persistence amongst first-year students. However, during the interviews, administrators did not address the impact of loneliness and social support on persistence.

Christie and Dinham (1990) interviewed 25 students over the course of their first year. The students they interviewed indicated that by living on campus and being involved in extracurricular activities their overall college experience was positively impacted. They concluded that these two factors had aided the students in facilitating the development of friendships. It was noted in the study that students who had more

interactions with non-university friends and family appeared to develop fewer on-campus connections.

Fisher and Hartmann (1995) explored took a closer look at the social lives of students. They were interested in the ways students' racial identities impacted the groups students chose to be involved in on campus. Their study found that the groups students chose to be involved in, be them social or interest based, were influenced by race; this was true for 65% of White respondents and 84% of Black respondents. The respondents in their study also noted that the social opportunities available for them were limited by their race. In their study, several Black respondents discussed the importance of having groups which were predominantly Black in order to help Black students at predominately White institutions be in touch with their Black identity. This idea of the self-segregation of minority groups on campus is supported by Gurowitz (1991) who argued that this behavior is caused by the members of the minority groups not feeling as though they are members of their institution.

Schevaletta (1998) explored social adjustment in inner-city commuter students at community colleges, noting that researchers have concluded that a student's ability to integrate socially into the college community was directly related to persistence. Schevaletta uses his research to explore how the two worlds inner-city commuter students live in interact and impact one another; the two worlds being their home where they reside and their college life. Given this demographics' strong connection to their home life, progressing through Tinto's stages of integration, which starts with separation from their home life, presents additional challenges.

Schevaletta calls attention to the competing set of values that can be present in the home and college environments inner-city commuter students function it, even noting that the values that the home community values can be in direct opposition of the values needed to complete a degree program. One such value that is common in inner-city commuter students is that of helping support their family financially. In order to earn this money, students will take on jobs and work additional hours that, even when done in a responsible manner still reduces the amount of time a student has available to adjust to social life at their college.

Schevaletta does highlight some things that positively impact inner-city commuter students' ability to adjust to college life. These include having a social climate that understands and welcomes the unique characteristics of such students, joining students groups, participating in student government, and participating in informal social situations (hallway discussions with peers, cafeteria interactions, etc.). Schevaletta strongly emphasizes the importance of integration into the mainstream social systems he does note that it is still better to have social connections to marginal social systems at the institution than to have no social connections to the institution at all.

Methodology

Participants

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey was administered in March of 2015 to undergraduate students of a Midwest research university. The response rate was roughly 23.89% and 6,071 of those responses are included in this analysis. Only participants who responded to the six primary variables of interest (overall satisfaction with social experience, sense of belonging, ever lived in a residence hall, how far a student lives from campus, hours per week spent partying, and hours per week spent socializing) were included in this study. Females are over represented in this sample; with 3,732 (61.5%) participants being female and 2,338 (38.5%) being male opposed to the institution whose population is 51.4% female, 48% male. Participants were 73.3% white, 10.5% Asian, 3.1% Black, 3.0% Hispanic, 1.2% American Indian, 0.3% Hawaiian, and 0.1% of participants elected not to disclose their ethnicity. Pell Grant recipients made up 26.9% of participants.

Materials

The SERU survey was developed in 2002 at the University of California – Berkeley (Stebleton, Huesman, Jr., & Kuzhabekova, 2010). Since 2004 it has been widely implemented throughout the University of California system and in 2008 the research group behind the survey expanded to include 5 additional public research universities. The survey contains several hundred items aimed at gauging the undergraduate experience through an electronic questionnaire. The survey is divided into six areas including a core area, which all students answer, that explores "time use, evaluation of a student's major, campus climate and satisfaction, and four thematic

research areas: academic engagement, civic engagement, global knowledge and skills, and student life and development" (Stebleton, Huesman, Jr., & Kuzhabekova, 2010, p. 4). Each student is randomly assigned one of the five remaining areas to respond to. Four of the five areas go further in-depth on the thematic research areas and individual institutions are able to create the final area that is meant to explore their specific campus issues and interests.

When addressing sense of belonging, the SERU survey includes two statements, outlined below. For the purposes of this study, I utilized the first statement throughout my research as it was most closely associated with the definition of sense of belonging used throughout this study. Students are instructed to indicate their response on a scale of 1 to 6, 1 meaning strongly disagree and 6 meaning strongly agree.

- I feel that I belong at this campus
- Knowing what I know now, I would still choose to enroll at this campus

To gather information about students' social experience satisfaction, the SERU survey includes just one statement, outlined below. Students are once again instructed to indicate their response on a scale of 1 to 6, this time 1 means strongly dissatisfied and 6 means strongly satisfied.

- Please rate your level of satisfaction with the following aspects of your university education:
    - Overall social experience

Additionally, the survey draws on university student records and admissions data as it pertains to survey respondents. Examples of this type of data utilized throughout this analysis include Pell Grant recipient status, gender, ethnicity, and college of enrollment.

Through the literature, I identified variables of interest whose relationship to social satisfaction was then examined. Data analyzed in this study come from items related to social satisfaction, sense of belonging, demographics (including demographic information pulled from student records), and social behaviors identified in the literature review (living situation, family involvement, Greek life (fraternities and sororities), extracurricular programs, and financial aid).

Procedure

First, items were identified on the SERU that addressed the three primary areas of this study: sense of belonging, social satisfaction, and the various aspects of social life on a collegiate campus. Then a correlation was conducted to see the relationship between sense of belonging and social satisfaction. After this relationship was confirmed to be positive and strong, correlations were conducted between social satisfaction and the various aspects of social life and student demographics. Appendix A provides a description of the variables used in this analysis. As illustrated in this appendix, there were thirty-three identified aspects of social life and demographics included in this correlation, and of the thirty-four, only three were found to have a p-value above 0.200 and one was found to have a p-value below -0.200. These four factors were pulled together to create a model that aimed to predict social satisfaction. A logistic regression was conducted on this model and it was found to be significant, with strong prediction ability, and all four factors significantly contributing to its prediction capabilities.

Findings

The results of this analysis suggest the correlation between satisfaction with overall social experience and sense of belonging is positive and strong ($r = 0.653$, $n = 6,071$, $p = 0.000$).

Of the variables reviewed (see the Appendix for complete list), only five had an r value above/below 0.20/-0.20 when correlated with overall social satisfaction. Four of the five variables are included in this study's model; transfer status was excluded as it was not seen as a social life factor. The four remaining variables are described in further detail below.

Social satisfaction

On the survey, participants could indicate how satisfied they were with their overall social experience by utilizing a scale from one (strongly dissatisfied) to six (strongly satisfied). For the purposes of this study, responses one through three were categorized as "dissatisfied" (coded as zero) and responses four through six were categorized as "satisfied" (coded as one). Upon reviewing responses, 80.6% (4.896) of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with their social experience and 19.4% (1,175) indicated that they were dissatisfied with their social experience.

Living in residence halls

65.3% of participants have lived in residence halls at some point in their college career. The results of this analysis suggests a correlation between satisfaction with overall social experience and living in a residence hall is positive and weak ($r = 0.251$, $n = 6,071$, $p = 0.000$; see Appendix A).

Hours per week socializing

When participants were asked about the number of hours per week they spend socializing with friends, 3.0% of participants indicated that they spend zero hours per week socializing. Of the participants who did report spending time each week socializing, 35.1% indicated that they spend between one and five hours per week, 31.6% indicated that they spend between six and ten hours per week, 16.0% indicated that they spend between eleven and fifteen hours per week, 7.4% indicated that they spend between sixteen and twenty hours per week, 3.3% indicated that they spend between twenty-one and twenty-five hours per week, 1.4% indicated that they spend between twenty-six and thirty hours per week, and 2.2% indicated that they spent more than thirty hours per week socializing. The results of this analysis suggests the correlation between satisfaction with overall social experience and spending time socializing with friends is positive and weak ($r = 0.244$, $n = 6{,}071$, $p = 0.000$; see Appendix A).

Hours per week partying

When participants were asked about the number of hours per week they spend partying, they were given 8 response variables that were in increments of five, ranging from zero hours to more than 30. Almost half (47.4%) of participants indicated that they spend zero hours per week partying. Of the respondents who did report time spent partying per week, 36.2% indicated that they spend between one and five hours per week partying, 10.8% indicated between six and ten hours per week, 3.4% indicated between eleven and fifteen hours, 1.1% indicated between sixteen and twenty hours, 0.6% indicated between twenty-one and twenty-five hours, 0.2% indicated between twenty-six and thirty hours, and 0.2% indicated more than thirty hours per week. The results of this analysis suggests the correlation between satisfaction with overall social experience and

spending time partying is positive and weak ($r = 0.203$, $n = 6,071$, $p = 0.000$; see Appendix A). In other words, this study shows that spending time partying can have a positive, albeit small, effect on social satisfaction.

Living away from campus

When participants were asked how far they lived from campus they had to select one of five response options. These options ranged from living on campus to living 21 or more miles from campus. It is important to note that the response options are not balanced. 53.9% indicated that they lived less than a mile from campus, 20.4% indicated that they lived between one and two miles from campus, 11.1% indicated that they lived between three and ten miles from campus, 8.6% indicated that they lived between eleven and twenty miles from campus, and 6.0% of participants indicated that they lived twenty-one miles or more from campus. The results of this analysis suggests the correlation between satisfaction with overall social experience and distance students live from campus is negative and weak ($r = -0.205$, $n = 6,071$, $p = 0.000$; see Appendix A). In other words, this study provides evidence that living farther away from campus is associated with lower levels of social satisfaction.

Social satisfaction model

A logistic regression analysis as conducted to predict social experience satisfaction using residence distance from campus, hours per week spent socializing, hours per week spent partying, and whether or not participants had ever lived in residence halls as predictors. A test of the full model against a constant only model was statistically significant, indicating that the predictors as a set reliably distinguished between those

who were satisfied and those who were not (*chi square = 377.905, p < 0.001 with df = 4*).

Table 1

Regression Model Predicting Self-Reported Overall Satisfaction with Social Experience (n = 6,071)

Predictor	B	SE	e^B	Sig.
(Constant)	.082	.140	1.086	
Hours spent partying per week	.198	.048	1.218	***
Hours spent socializing per week	.263	.034	1.301	***
Distance from campus	-.074	.030	.929	*
Ever lived in a residence hall	.671	.081	1.956	***

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

Nagelkerke's R^2 of .096 indicated a weak relationship between prediction and grouping. Prediction success overall was 80.6% (0% for dissatisfied and 100% for satisfied). The Wald criterion demonstrated that all four included predictors made a significant contribution to prediction (hours per week partying [B1], hours per week socializing [B2], and ever living in the residence halls [B4] all had a *p*-value of <0.001, distance lived from campus [B3] had a *p*-value of 0.015). Exp(B1) value indicates that when hours spent partying per week are raised by one response option (roughly 5 hours) the odds ratio is 1.218 times as large and therefore participants are 1.218 more times likely to be satisfied with their social experience. Exp(B2) value indicates that when hours spent socializing per week are raised by one response option (roughly 5 hours) the odds ratio is 1.301 times as large and therefore participants are 1.301 more times likely to be satisfied with their social experience. Exp(B4) value indicates that when living in the residence halls as opposed to living off campus, the odds ratio is 1.956 times as large and therefore participants are 1.956 more times likely to be satisfied with their social

experience. Exp(B3) value indicates that for each increased response option a participant lives away from campus the odds ratio is 0.928 times as small and therefore participants are 0.928 less times likely to be satisfied with their social experience. The response options for distance living from campus range from living on campus to living 21 or more miles away and the options were not balanced (ex. Option B was "1 mile to 2 miles" and Option C was "3 miles to 10 miles").

Discussion

Living in residence halls had a positive impact on social satisfaction in this study and other studies have shown the many benefits of living on campus (Astin, 1999; Shushok, Scales, Sriram, & Kidd, 2011). This study furthers the understanding of the importance of living in residence halls. As more research is done on social satisfaction it will become clearer the role that residence halls place in creating social satisfaction, generating a sense of belonging amongst residents, and improving persistence rates. Referring back to Strayhorn's (2012) model of sense of belonging, living in a residence hall may provide students with easier access to positive outlets within which to obtain sense of belonging. It will be important moving forward the students are encouraged to live on campus, that on campus living continues to be an affordable and attractive option to students, and that universities and policy makers alike continue to fund the expansion of on campus housing for schools in need.

The distance a student lives from campus was shown to have a negative impact on social satisfaction. This is likely caused by the allocation of time spent commuting at the expense of time building connections/community on campus. To combat this, institutions can work to lessen the burden placed on commuter students to return to campus in the evenings and on the weekends. One way to do this would be to provide free on campus parking to such students, as often the additional financial burden of parking can be enough to deter a student from coming back. Alternatively, institutions can work to provide social opportunities and spaces for students to take advantage of between classes. This is a time when commuter students are on campus without an apartment/residence hall to return to. This could be accomplished through the creation of welcoming lounge

spaces with small food prep areas to prepare lunches brought from home. Ideally, this space would also attract on campus students and promote friendships between commuters and on campus students.

While this study did not directly look at family support, it is likely that students who live further from campus are more likely to live with family members. As seen with the 2007 study by Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods, parental support is connected to faster declines in sense of belonging during the first year. In an effort to offset this effect, educating both family on the benefits on developing sense of belonging and the role family plays could help mitigate some of the negative effects. While letting parents and students know that the student will greatly benefit from having time to connect to campus, it is important that this relationship is further understand so that better information can be provided.

Time spent partying and socializing per week were both shown in have a positive impact on social satisfaction. This result seems intuitive, as they are both hallmarks social life. Further, it would be expected that the time someone spends partying and socializing each week is an indicator of their social satisfaction for you wouldn't expect someone who spends many hours per week partying and socializing to be extremely dissatisfied with their social experience, rather you would expect them to enjoy their experience.

The findings from this study support the existing body of research on sense of belonging. Given the strong correlation, the relationship between various social life factors and social satisfaction is examined in order to better understand how to positively influence social satisfaction. This will provide student affairs professionals a deeper understanding of how to better serve their students, increase persistence at their

institutions, and provide justification to the programs and opportunities they are providing.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Seeing that spending time each week to socialize and party with friends has a positive impact on social satisfaction and thus sense of belonging, it will be important for student affairs practitioners to find meaningful ways of encouraging student to partake in these behavior. It will be important for future research to closely examine the finer details of socializing and partying so that practitioners can encourage positive behaviors that complement the academic experience rather than detract from it. Institutions can use this greater understanding to improve the on campus entertainment they provide through programming boards and shift policies to allow students to spend time socializing without feeling guilty. There will be a fine balance to achieve this, as the primary purpose of higher education is academic, however, research such as this study show that social life is an important component of persistence, through aiding in social satisfaction.

Moving forward, it will be important for this line of research to create and utilize better measures of social satisfaction. The present study is limited by the questions and wording used on the SERU survey. Having a standardized survey that could address the specific concerns of social satisfaction and sense of belonging would provide researchers with a powerful tool to more accurately investigate the relationships. This can be accomplished only after the further research has been done to identify variables of social satisfaction.

Additionally, given that this is study is utilizing correlations, it is able to provide some information but cannot be taken as cause and effect. More research would need to

be done to determine whether or not there are additional factors influencing the

relationships seen in this study. Further, this model has limits in explaining the degree of

variation. There could be a number of factors contributing this lack of explanatory power,

including the limited variables included in the survey and the exclusion of variables with

r value below/above 0.20/-0.20 when correlated with overall social satisfaction. Future

research might address this by uncovering addition variables to test and utilizing

sophisticated statistical analysis to discover relationships.

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Appendix A

Table 2

Means, standard deviations, and correlations to social satisfaction for variables of

interest

Variables Used in Analysis	*m*	*sd*	*r*
Ever lived in a resident hall?	0.771	0.420	.251
Greek Fraternity or Sorority Member?	0.104	0.305	.145
Residency	0.668	0.471	-.046
How many hours per week studying and other academic activities outside of class	4.380	1.676	.018
How many hours per week participating in student clubs or organizations	1.945	1.102	.160
How many hours per week spending time with family	2.053	1.366	-.115
How many hours per week attending movies, concerts, sports, or other entertainment events	1.992	0.824	.088
How many hours per week performing community service or volunteer activities	1.682	0.869	.053
How many hours per week participating in physical exercise, recreational sports, or physically active hobbies	2.405	1.060	.095
How many hours per week socializing with friends	3.253	1.403	.244
How many hours per week partying	1.822	0.978	.203
How far do you live from campus?	1.751	1.132	-.205
Female	0.631	0.483	.033
Asian	0.114	0.318	-.048
Black	0.026	0.160	-.057
International	0.032	0.176	-.101
Hispanic	0.028	0.1	-.018
Hawaiian	0.003	0.053	-.013
American Indian	0.011	0.105	-.034
President's Emerging Scholars member	0.006	0.080	-.018
Pell Grant Recipient	0.253	0.435	-.131
Honors Student	0.147	0.354	.098
Freshman Seminar Member	0.298	0.457	.119
Transfer Student	0.134	0.340	-.203
Carlson School of Management	0.074	0.261	.058
College of Science and Engineering	0.202	0.402	.001
College of Biological Sciences	0.103	0.304	.059
College of Continuing Education	0.011	0.104	.021
College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences	0.075	0.264	.007
College of Design	0.040	0.196	-.011
College of Education and Human Development	0.093	0.291	.028
ACT and SAT scores	27.901	3.962	.125

Cumulative GPA at start of data collection term as defined locally	3.334	0.476	.147