

We Belong: A Collaborative Reflection on First-Year Student Engagement under COVID-19

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Abstract

Fourteen first-semester, first-year undergraduate students at a small campus of a large public university in the northeastern United States engaged in a reflective and collaborative writing project during a first-year experience (FYE) course. The project challenged them to research strategies to strengthen their sense of belonging as new college students during the extraordinary circumstances of COVID-19. Despite limited interactions on campus, the students were able to identify factors which contributed to their sense of belonging, both to each other and the institution. Their findings are presented here, in their own words, with additional commentary provided by their instructor. This piece serves to celebrate the significance of integrating student voice, at every level, into teaching and learning scholarship.

Keywords

first-year experience; student belonging; reflective writing; collaborative writing; students as partners

Introduction

Eyes staring out from masked faces, a visible shield against the palpable feeling of grief—the loss of “what could have been.” These were the first-year experience (FYE) students whom I (Grodziak, the course instructor) greeted in person and on campus each Tuesday morning in Fall 2020. At the conclusion of each in-person class session I observed the students collect their belongings, sling backpacks over their shoulders, and quietly walk single-file to the back of the long room and out the door. From there, they continued through the main doors of the building, heading straight to their cars for the return trip to their individual homes. As I watched this procession week after week, I wondered: How are these students connecting to the university? Judging by what I was observing, I had difficulty imagining what I could do that would enable them to feel as if they belonged to an institution with which they had so little direct interaction.

Literature Review

Even prior to the pandemic, belonging had become a major emphasis for first-year experience (FYE) courses at many universities. The FYE course is a graduation requirement for most baccalaureate degree programs at Penn State University. The course content offered at the Lehigh Valley campus engages students in community-building among diverse individuals, reflecting on values and goal setting, and provides extended orientation to campus life and college success strategies. In many ways, the evolving design of FYE courses across multiple institutions reflects the evolution of student engagement theory. In its earliest incarnations, seminal scholars such as Tinto and Austin utilized early forms of learning analytics to build theoretical bridges between student behaviors, such as engaging in extracurricular activities, and student success, especially as measured in terms of persistence and graduation rates (Tinto, 2017). Over time, researchers have increasingly recognized the complexity of student engagement as a construct, arriving at more recent cultural theories which posit that students engage on multiple levels (behavioral, cognitive, affective, agentic), in multiple contexts (curricular, cocurricular, extracurricular, other), and by following multiple pathways through the complex interface of the modern university (Groccia, 2018; Hauck et al., 2020; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Lester, 2013; Tai et al., 2020; Zepke & Leach, 2010).

Applied to the context of FYE, this means that standardized activity checklists have given way to a host of guided experiences that allow the first-year student to chart a personalized course through their undergraduate experience (Guarneri & Connolly, 2019). More deeply, it also means that the purpose of FYE courses has evolved from an emphasis on actions to meaning, especially the concept of belonging, i.e., a “sense of being valued, accepted, and needed” (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Lei et al., 2018; O’Keefe, 2013; Stebleton et al., 2014; Zhao et al., 2012). In the context of the first-year seminar, Strayhorn (2012a) defines belonging as having several socio-affective dimensions, i.e., “social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty peers)” (p. 3).

The First-Year Seminar in the Fall Semester of 2020

In the fall of 2020, however, my students barely had a campus to which to belong. Under normal circumstances, one of the primary goals of the first-year seminar course at the campus, a small commuter satellite campus of a large land-grant university, is to provide an opportunity for students to develop diverse relationships and engage in the university community. As part of the normal course deliverables, for example, each student completed a weekly photo journal entry which documented some aspect of their life as a new college student. In past semesters, the journal entries illuminated new friend connections, new experiences explored through campus activities, group projects, and other connections with classmates in their classes and with the campus and university at large. The reverse happened with my masked students. In the fall of 2020, their writing showed scant evidence of engagement with newly acquainted college friends or with the campus beyond the small and large group activities in which the students participated during our class sessions. If they belonged to anything, it seemed likely to be this class and to each other. The course had evolved from being an academic appendage to a personal lifeline.

Even though this course met regularly face-to-face, it took place in the broader context of COVID-19 social distancing and masking mandates. Very few classes were delivered on campus, leaving the hallways hauntingly empty. The normal student gathering areas were vacant. Student affairs pivoted their programming to accommodate an online audience with live campus student events consolidated to one day per week—Wednesday during lunch hour. Many of my students made a trip to campus once per week to attend our Tuesday morning class. The social offerings did not appear to be a sufficient lure for them to make the twenty-to-forty-minute one-way drive back to campus without a fixed reason, such as a class session. Not to mention, there was a considerable degree of anxiety that still surrounded face-to-face interactions, even safely distanced and outdoors.

These students did not have a campus to belong to, but they did have a classroom. To get to the classroom, they did have to pass one other person, the campus receptionist, Jordan, who greeted them every morning. The students described what it was like for them: Walking into our classroom feels like you are walking into a movie theater because of a series of low-hanging projectors near the door. There are seven rows of long tables that are not all filled with students because of social distancing requirements. Masks hug the faces of every inhabitant of the room. In many ways, it is an impersonal and largely empty space, but these students were able to find ways to connect to and through it over the course of the semester.

At the mid-semester, I accepted the opportunity provided by our university's teaching and learning center to conduct a small group instructional diagnostic (SGID). I wanted a deep dive into the student perspective of their experience in the FYE class given the unprecedented circumstances. Using the SGID method for mid-semester evaluation not only provided feedback to guide the remaining weeks of the semester, but it fully engaged students in the process (beyond simply completing a survey). For the most part, the student feedback was typical of such courses. As in previous semester responses, students still struggled to grasp the purpose of the course, as it was situated outside of a specific academic program. What was new, however, was their emphasis on how much they valued face-to-face interaction both with the instructor and, perhaps especially, with each other.

The Students

Who were they? Fifteen first-year, first-semester students enrolled in my FYE course section. Fourteen participated in the collaborative writing project. All the students had graduated from their respective high schools at the end of the previous school year. They were between the ages of 18 and 19 years old and all lived at home, except for one student who lived with other campus athletes. Their average commute to the campus was twenty minutes. They worked outside of their homes an average of twenty hours per week, with several students who worked an excess of thirty hours per week. Unlike the national gender ratios of traditional college students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021), there were more students who identified as male enrolled in the course than students who identified as female. Most students identified as white/western European, and four students identified, respectively, as Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, Middle Eastern, Asian/Asian American. Likewise, most students reported speaking English as their main language at home. For three students, their home language was, respectively, Arabic, Spanish, and Mandarin.

The students' intended academic majors were diverse. Most student aspirations fell equally in the categories of business, education, and pure science, with individual students aspiring to communications, social science, and computer science. Half of the students planned to spend two years at the satellite campus and complete their degree requirements at the larger main campus. Four students accepted the university's admission offer to complete their first year at a satellite campus close to home and transfer to the main campus for the remainder of their degree program. Two students intended to complete their degree program at the satellite campus, and one student, at the time, was considering a transfer to the fully online campus. They were a diverse group with little in common outside of one thing: They were all enrolled in my first-year seminar class section.

The Project

My students' ability to make connections under these extraordinary circumstances seemed to me to be a remarkable achievement, and one that I wanted to understand more deeply. Working with a research faculty member (Cruz) from one of university's centers for teaching and learning, we came up with an idea that we thought might serve several purposes. First, the students were asked to read several articles and watch a TED talk about what academic belonging is, which we then discussed as a group (Namecoach, 2018; Pogosyan, 2017; Romero, 2018; Strayhorn, 2012b). Here comes the clever bit: I asked them to each write a personal reflection which described their sense of belonging as a college student. We took those reflections as evidence and devised a collaborative research study in which the students researched and wrote about their own experiences of belonging in college.

My intention was that the project would provide the students with an opportunity to further connect with each other (both inside and outside of the class); the inquiry-guided process would spark their interest in learning; the collaborative writing process would strengthen their confidence with academic communication; and, finally, the subject matter might enable them to appreciate the value of their first-year experience course. Did the project achieve these goals? I invite the reader to judge for themselves. What follows is a nearly verbatim transcription of the students' final project, with only some light editing for grammar and flow.

The Method

Before you read their responses, it might be helpful to briefly describe their process. We first removed the identifiers from all the papers, a lesson in research ethics. In small groups, the students then read through each other's reflections and identified possible themes, similar to the first stages of emergent coding. Most of the papers were read and coded by three or four groups. As a large group, we worked together to build a code book which included three broad chronological headings—before enrollment, during active classes, and future actions—each of which was divided into activities undertaken by the student directly or by others. Under these headings, the students identified twenty-seven subthemes which they then used to code each of their reflective papers. The coding was done primarily in a Microsoft Office 365 Word document, using highlighted text (with comments). In keeping with best practices in qualitative coding, we conducted the coding process iteratively, refining our categories as needed. In the end, the students added an additional category, entitled Gaps, which identified where they saw opportunities for further research. In the time provided for project completion, the students completed coding and writing for the first two broad chronological headings: before enrollment and during active classes.

The Findings: Student Perspectives

It should be noted that the following section was written entirely by the students, with only light editing on the part of the faculty authors. This is what the students found out about themselves.

Category 1: Belonging Strategies Utilized Before the Start of the Semester (individual)

As the coding table (Table 1) reflects, most of the students visited the campus by either a tour, orientation, or some other kind of event to learn more about the campus and, looking back, these activities helped them feel a sense of belonging here. Some, while looking for what they wanted in a university, found that Penn State had exactly what they wanted; a prestigious, well-known institution, and the close-knit family of the Lehigh Valley campus. The university had a number of events or programs over the summer (including two scholarship programs focused on increasing participation from underrepresented groups), which some of our students participated in or were invited to join. Another way one student felt like they belonged at Penn State was when they announced their acceptance to the university on social media, and, no doubt, received support and congratulations from friends and family. These strategies had largely been in place prior to the onset of the pandemic but continued to resonate with the so-called COVID cohort (Kyle & Thompson, 2020).

Table 1:
Belonging strategies prior to enrollment (individual), with codes (by number) (n=14)

Belonging Strategy	Number of Codes
Visited campus	10
Looked up information	3
Diversity programs	2
Announced acceptance	1

Category 1: Belonging Strategies Utilized Before the Start of the Semester (others)

At Penn State Lehigh Valley, others did what they could to make us feel like we belong at the beginning of the year despite being in the midst of a global pandemic. Orientation leaders and tour guide, who were described as helpful and friendly, were mentioned the most in our belonging essays. If the two roles were to be distinguished individually, it was noted that tour guides appear to have more instances of outreach, with orientation leaders following close behind. Clubs and teams were mentioned next most often while having similar instances as orientation/orientation leaders, and they helped new students feel like they belong by sending out congratulatory messages and emails as well as hosting gatherings and activities. In addition, some students also referenced the “we are one Penn State” phrase being memorable and unifying. Events like New Student Orientation and scholarships were there to help fulfill social needs while staying safe. Moreover, family, friends, and coworkers were supportive in the student’s decision for choosing Penn State as their college of choice. Lastly, the engagement with professors and other faculty members helped students feel more connected.

Table 2:

Belonging strategies prior to enrollment (others), with codes (by number) (n=14)

Belonging Strategy	Number of Codes
Tour guides	5
Orientation/orientation leaders	4
Club/activities	4
Contacted by Admissions	3
Family/friends/coworkers	3
Penn State staff/faculty	3

Category 2: Belonging Strategies Used During the Current Semester (individual)

While the COVID-19 situation makes the idea of college difficult, students have ways of coping with it. Some students made themselves have daily routines so they can stay on track throughout the semester and continue their lives like a normal student. Then some students had to force themselves to participate in school activities and events so they can feel a sense of belonging. The school has offered activities like making teddy bears, tie-dyeing shirts, pumpkin picking, trick or treat from car trunks, and various other activities, [such as] club fair, Honors Society Club, soccer, volleyball, free gym on campus, student government association, to get students involved. Going to school in-person events enables students to socialize safely with other students; so they can feel that they are not alone. Since it has been difficult to socialize in person, face-to-face, students have turned to the digital lifestyle of calling each other via FaceTime and Zoom to socialize. There have been digital events where students from around all places have joined a Zoom call to chat about what is going on in their life and how their semester is going. Lastly, students have joined clubs in the effort to take up a lot of the spare time they have on their hands and put that time into something useful.

Table 3:

Belonging strategies prior to enrollment (individual), with codes (by number) (n=14)

Belonging Strategy	Number of Codes
Socializing	9

Activities	4
Joining clubs	3
Routine	2

Category 2: Belonging Strategies Utilized During the Semester (others)

In the times of online classes and Zoom University, it is a struggle for students like us, especially incoming freshmen, to find a sense of belonging. Other students and staff set up clubs and activities to do their best in creating an inclusive community. The next-best method to feel a sense of belonging mentioned by students is communicating with newly made friends from classes, since there are not many social situations in the time of COVID-19. Professors may be able to give students a sense of belonging by encouraging them to have their cameras on during class; this could be an attempt to make Zoom feel as much like an actual classroom as possible. Many students chose to have their cameras off and avoid interaction with classmates as well as the professor, and this may evoke a feeling of isolation, which does not help with developing a sense of belonging.

Few online classes gave an opportunity to communicate such as in-person or mixed-mode classes, so taking advantage of that time on campus to talk with staff and students is paramount in feeling at home. This FYE class is one of these mixed-mode classes which many essays mentioned as being a positive factor. Even during a normal school year, it can be hard to make connections and gain a sense of belonging as a freshman in college, but it is especially difficult this year. With many students having limited or no classes on campus, becoming immersed in the college environment and experience is a difficult mountain to climb. However, when professors and others on campus made strides to help students feel like they belonged, it became much easier.

Table 4:
Belonging strategies prior to enrollment (others), with codes (by number) (n=14)

Belonging Strategy	Number of Codes
Friends	5
Teachers encourage cameras on	3
Teachers easy to talk to/feel heard	3
Class on campus/this course	2
Weekly journal/essay	1
Club fair	1

Discussion and Implications: Students

COVID-19 became a big issue when we started college in the Fall. We did not realize that the pandemic would have a major impact on our first semester in college. The disease has really made an impact on people's lives. Students are just learning about the beginning of the effects of remote learning. Every student realizes that it is different for everyone. Some things that are different for everyone are online classes. Online classes are difficult for many students in this class; some of these students said "virtual classes" were a large gap in their life right now. Reading all the responses opened up our perspectives on our classmates.

As the academic research on student success suggests, communication, belonging, and community are three things that every one of these students would like to have (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021): having communication with their peers and teachers, feeling like they belong at campus rather than not wanting to even show up to class, feeling the community support and having people around just to say hello to. Students in our class really opened up about this topic and gave this project a try. Sometimes it is hard to open up about yourself and your feelings. COVID-19 has made students feel uncomfortable with going to campus and seeing their friends. It has impacted students and their everyday lives.

We had many different views about how to cultivate a sense of belonging. Some students focused on different aspects of preparedness for class, such as setting alarms or being present in class. There are other students who tried to figure out the best solution for themselves in regard to COVID-19 and attending class. For example, some students would prefer in-person classes to enhance their senses of belonging, whereas others are taking every measure they can to be safe. Some students are waiting for the vaccine but are also potentially losing the opportunity to experience college as a whole for themselves. Additionally, moving forward, students are looking to be connected with a friend group, not unlike they had in this class, that they feel comfortable communicating with.

As time has gone throughout the semester, a large majority of students have been able to identify positive and negative aspects that they feel have impacted their first-year college experiences. These positive and negative aspects are caused by both the student themselves and those around them. The negative impacts that students noticed were mostly caused by COVID, some including Zoom classes and a lack of on-campus events, which caused students to feel separated from the campus. Similar to how COVID has affected the negative impacts on the college experience, it has also affected the positive impacts, but in a different respect. One positive impact on students' college experiences was getting to meet people, both online and on-campus, that were in a similar situation that their classmates were in.

Conclusion: The Instructor

As students worked in their small groups reading, analyzing, opening up to each other, cooperating on a shared outcome, without knowing exactly what that outcome would look like, I experienced a synergy in the classroom that was not present earlier. The students were no longer individuals sitting six feet apart. The distance appeared to evaporate as the decibels from the discussion rose. When we met online, the black squares in the Zoom page were abuzz. The students reported feeling less alone, expressing their relief that others felt the same. They arrived poised and ready at the beginning of class for the next step in the process. Sometimes they were assigned to work with new groupmates. They navigated working with the coding, reviewing another group's work, writing and rewriting, and creating an additional survey to learn the demographics of their own class. There were times when I felt that I was building as we were flying and felt slightly overwhelmed. I was able to dive into uncharted waters to support my students' inquiry because I, in turn, had support through my teaching center research colleague. This uncomfortable uncertainty melted as eyebrows raised and soft smiles formed when I completed copying and pasting their final group work into one document and announced, We have just created our first "sh*tty" draft (Lamott, 1995).

Would I do this type of project again? Absolutely. The students taught me that they want to connect with each other in an authentic and meaningful manner, I just need to provide the opportunity. The pedagogy of transition has been described as one of becoming (Austen et al., 2021), and I believe that they do want to learn and engage—now more than ever—and what better way than through a shared inquiry project about a topic that has meaning in their personal and collective lives? Of course, I will need to fine-tune the process, especially with making the qualitative research methodology more transparent. This project began because I wondered, How are students going to connect? Now, I wonder what my students wonder. Is it possible for them to inquire about their own inquiry, rather than mine? That may be where I begin next time.

We all were navigating a new historical phenomenon, a global pandemic the extent of which had not been experienced for over one hundred years. I encouraged my students to document their experiences in their weekly photo journals, explaining that their words, their voice, mean something and provide historical perspective. I invited the archival librarian to introduce Penn State's COVID-19 archival project and discuss the importance of historical archives. Why do we record our experiences? What value might they hold? We all embarked on this research and writing journey cognizant of and in agreement that their collective voice about college belonging during their strange first semester of college would be prepared for academic publication, a similarly archived document.

I invited all the students to join me in presenting our project and their experience during a concurrent session during Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) Virtual Conference on Diversity, Equity, and Student Success which was held the following spring. One student responded to my invitation, and she encouraged another classmate to join us. They must have felt that their thoughts and experiences would be heard, would be valued, because they both shared openly and authentically to a Zoom breakout room packed with higher education staff members, professors, and administrators who listened to their every word. In this experience of creating and sharing our story, I felt like I belonged with my students. We were doing this together, exposing a little bit more of who we really are and what we value. In the process, we learned together.

At one point, we (the two faculty members involved in the project) asked ourselves if we might be doing our students a disservice in seeking to publish this work. After all, they are first-year students, just starting out on their college careers, and the public dissemination of this work solidifies their present state, one that will continue to evolve throughout their undergraduate experience, indeed, through their lives. The anticipation of possible publication clearly contributed to the appeal of the project for the students. That said, we still wondered if perhaps there might be cause for regret at a later stage in their academic careers. As is perhaps self-evident, we did ultimately decide to submit the work for publication. Given the emphasis on the importance of student voice in the course, we chose to affirm that their written word, at any stage of maturity, has value (Bowen et al., 2011). These students entered college under extraordinary conditions. This collective work serves to capture that singular moment in time. This project served both to connect them to the academy that they have only recently joined, but it also, and perhaps most importantly, contributes their authentic, at times even poignant, voices to our understanding of what it means to feel like you belong to a university community.

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Addendum

Although the faculty authors of this paper are editors of *Transformative Dialogues*, the article review process was handled by another associate editor, who ensured full blinded review and followed all ethical standards that this journal upholds.