



# Black students' Perceptions of their Sense of Belonging in Living and Learning Communities(LLCs) at a Historically White Public Institution in the Midwest, a Phenomenology Study.

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Success is the sum of small efforts-Robert Collier



## Background

The shift in the US post-secondary education system over decades has led to an increase in diverse populations on campuses. There were numerous benefits of diversity, including exposure to different cultures and new perspectives as well as addressing historical legacies of exclusion for minoritized populations. Diversity promotes equitable systems and is a moral imperative for ethical, right, just, fair, and caring systems. Despite its centrality, minoritized students, such as Black students, often experience unprecedented challenges from their cultural differences. This leads to their low retention and success, with less than 60% graduation rates (USAFacts, 2020). See Fig. 1. A low sense of belonging (SoB) was one of the contributing factors, mainly in historically White institutions, and was associated with high stress, anxiety, microaggressions, isolations, and low self-esteem (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; McKenzie et al., 2023; Sue et al., 2022). This affected students' mental well-being. SoB encompassed

- Perceived social support, feelings of connectedness, and mattering by being accepted, respected, and valued by others, and builds trust and care (Strayhorn, 2019). See Fig 2.
- A key component in Maslow's hierarchy of needs
- A key component in most LLC goals -intentionally designed high-impact practices for the integration of academic and social experiences (Inkelas et al., 2018, p. vii).
- Relationships and a supportive community matter. From evidence, Black students with positive sense of belonging in LLCs thrived academically even in historically White institutions (Cintron et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2023).

Figure 1

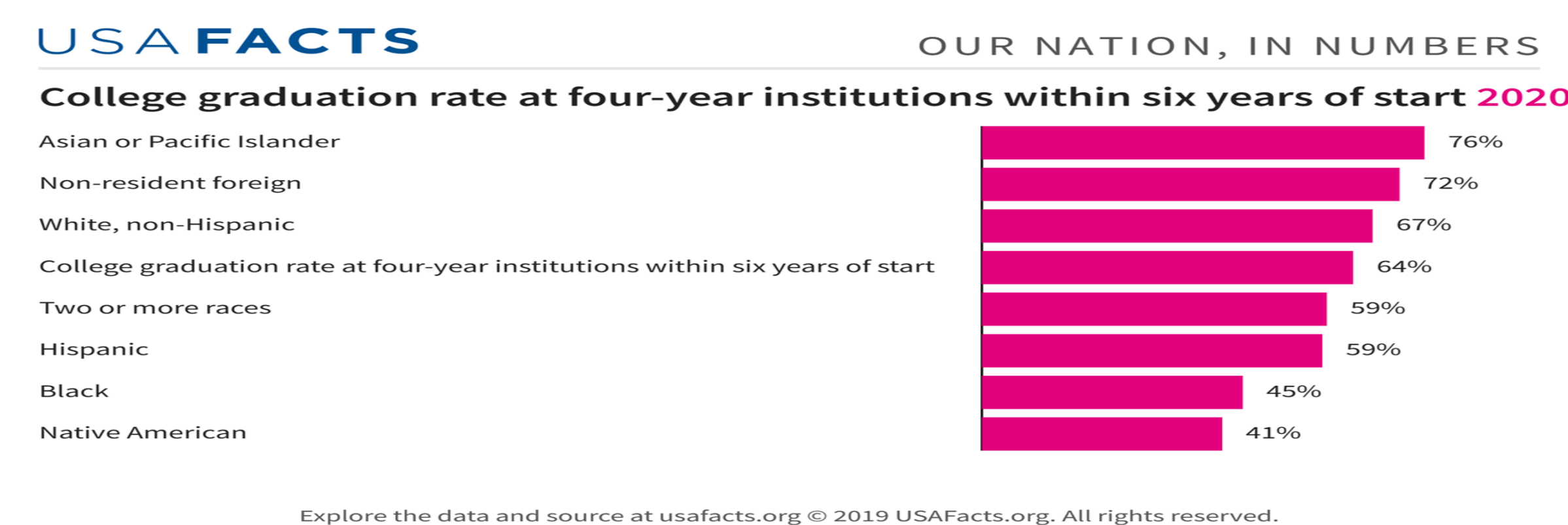
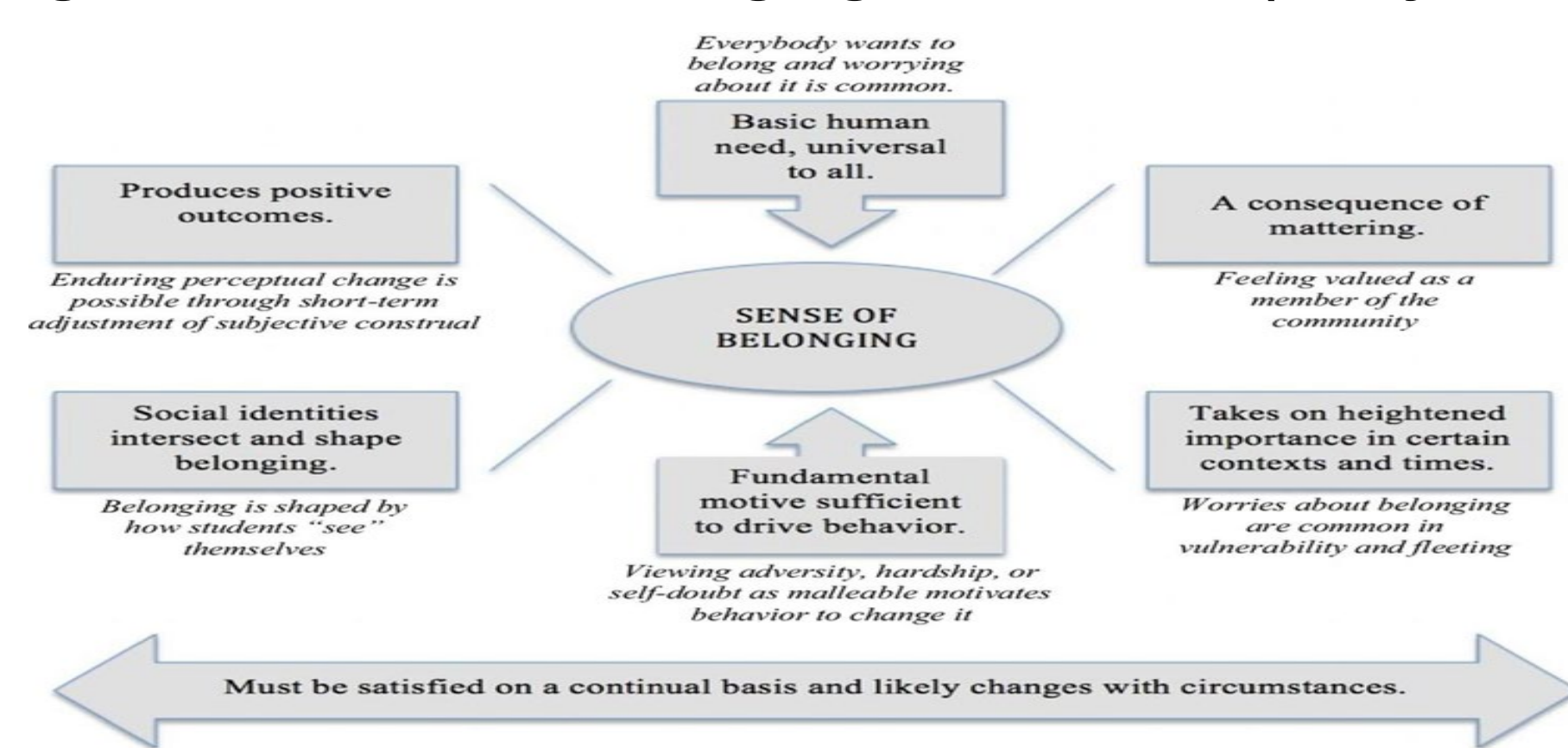


Figure 2 Sense of Belonging Framework (Strayhorn, 2019)



## Why Phenomenology Study

**Grounded in the great works of Edmund Husserl (1970)**

- Let what shows itself be seen from itself (Beck, 2021).
- Participant-centered: Centralized in the science of *essences*, what makes the phenomenon what it is.
- Engages a process known as *epoche*: suspension of the natural attitude on what is known to what is not known through bracketing.
- Rich, thick descriptions embedded in students' voices, personal stories, and language.

**Conceptual Frameworks**

- **Astin's (1993) model of Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O):** Recognition of external and internal characteristics that may shape how students engage.
- **Sense of Belonging Framework (Strayhorn, 2019):** How Black students process their belonging in a racialized environment.
- **The Black Identity Development model (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001):** Exploring racial salience of Black students in their meaning making.

## Data Collection & Analysis

**Data collection**

- 6 participants
- Open-ended questions (Moustakas, 1994).
- Prolonged engagement through two interviews
- Interactive process through probing

**Data analysis**

- Thematic analysis (Beck, 2021)
- Coding to develop themes, use themes for emerging patterns
- Textual (what) and structural (how) description of the experiences

**Study Findings**

Theme	Subthemes
<b>Socioeconomic transition support</b> college social preparatory programs that aid transition	Family support, high school preparations, college choices
<b>Initial Campus social immersion</b> social connection opportunities	campus environment fit, social and academic preparations, residential living convenience
<b>LLC connections and disconnections</b> smaller networking communities	shared values but surface-level friendships connections (trips, academic links, other associations)
<b>Cultural Dynamics</b> social differences, unfamiliar spaces, norms, and expectations	disconnections (event types, incidences, cultural dynamics)
<b>Sense of Belonging</b> Definition and essentials	the only Black person, intersecting identities, gender, sexual orientation, acceptance into a supportive community, respectful learning

**Findings:** Responses have implications for well-being, as per the Wellness Wheel on Fig.3. Excerpts examples-used pseudonyms.

"I stopped going to the events when I realized that I'll be the only Black girl." (Taylor)

"I've seen it on myself [lack of community]. It can do some damage to your self-esteem because you want to compare, I compared myself to other people, and I would say, why everybody else has that group of friends? It seems like they have a sense of belonging and whatnot, but I don't, kind of makes you reflect on yourself and see if it's something wrong with you." (Jane)

Figure 3 Wellness Wheel



"There's people that I knew I could go party with, but I didn't feel comfortable enough like crying in front of, so that's what I think of when I think of surface level." (Samone)

## Recommendations

**Practitioners, administrators, researchers & policy-makers**

- To promote holistic multi-faceted wellness and lifestyle, include social aspects, and engage in inclusive practices.
- Engage qualitative inquiry like phenomenology, to appreciate students' voices, personal stories, and language on wellness matters.
- Consider a more representative student demographics, for a sense of belonging.
- Recognize & intensify LLC value: If done right, its a safe facilitated space for healthy discussions on cultural difference & identity-affirming experiences.
- Consider social change as an outcome, promote learning strategies even for people not receptive to diversity.

In conclusion, a supportive, inclusive environment will motivate students for success socially, academically and emotionally for their overall wellbeing.

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