Students’ sense of belonging has been identified as a potential lever to promote success, engagement, and well-being in college (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NAS], 2017). Yet most studies of college student belonging have used convenience samples from one or a few 4-year institutions. As such, our understanding of how belonging varies across institutions and student identities and how it relates to important outcomes is sparse (Strayhorn, 2012), especially for students at 2-year colleges (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004). Recently, however, a nationally representative survey of college students in the United States included a measure of belonging—allowing, for the first time, a national analysis of college belonging.

Psychologists describe belonging as a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), a “hub” that can facilitate diverse positive outcomes (Walton & Brady, 2017). In college, feeling a sense of belonging may lead students to engage more deeply with their studies, leading to persistence and success. In both experimental (Yeager et al., 2016) and correlational (Strayhorn, 2012) studies, researchers have found that students who feel they belong seek out and use campus resources to a greater extent, furthering their success. In addition, belonging may buffer students from stress, improving mental health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

But these benefits may not be equally shared. A growing literature indicates that students from underrepresented racial-ethnic minority (URM; Black, Hispanic, and Native) and first-generation college (FG) backgrounds report lower belonging as well as greater uncertainty about their belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Further, the more diverse goals, life circumstances, and student characteristics of 2-year (vs. 4-year) students may mean that belonging functions differently in 2-year settings (Deil-Amen, 2011).

Therefore, we used these newly available national data to ask: Do first-year college students feel like they belong at their school, and does this vary by URM status, FG status, and sex? Given considerable differences in student populations and institutional goals, are patterns similar across 2-year and 4-year institutions? Further, in this national sample, does first-year belonging predict subsequent persistence, use of campus services, and mental health?

Methods and Results

We used data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, a nationally representative survey of first-time, first-year, U.S. college students in 2011–2012 (N = 23,750) with a 2-year follow-up. The belonging measure asked...
students, in the spring of their first year, to indicate their agreement with the statement, “I feel that I am a part of [SCHOOL]” (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). A similar question, asked in the follow-up, is used for supplemental analyses of within-students changes in belonging. The Appendix (available on the journal website) provides supplemental methodological information and analyses.

First, we examined mean levels of belonging by key institutional and student characteristics. On average, students “somewhat agreed” they felt a part of their college (M = 4.04 on 5-point scale, SD = 1.10). Nevertheless, belonging varied across key dimensions (see Figure 1). Overall, students at 4-year colleges reported higher belonging than students at 2-year colleges. Both URM and FG students reported lower belonging than their peers (White/Asian/multiracial students and continuing-generation students, respectively)—but only at 4-year colleges. At 2-year colleges, the reverse was true, and women also reported higher belonging than men. There was no interaction between URM and FG status at either 2- or 4-year colleges (see Appendix Table A1 available on the journal website).

Second, we explored associations between belonging and students’ (a) persistence at any postsecondary institution after 2 and 3 years, (b) self-reported use of campus services in Year 3, and (c) self-reported mental health in Year 3. We regressed each outcome on a vector of student- and institutional-level covariates associated with college success in past research (see Table 1 note and Appendix available on the journal website). In the analyses for services use and mental health, we also controlled for the analogous first-year outcome. Given the descriptive findings, we conducted separate regressions for 4-year and 2-year colleges. Of note, the correlational nature of the data precluded causal inferences.

At 4-year colleges, belonging was positively associated with persistence, use of campus services, and mental health (ps < .05; see Table 1). There were no significant interactions between belonging, URM status, and FG status, suggesting that belonging (as measured here) was equally predictive for students from different backgrounds (see Appendix Figure A1 available on the journal website and “Discussion”). However, very low belonging—which was more common among URM and FG students—appears especially pernicious, associated with considerably lower persistence (see Appendix Table A6 available on the journal website). Results are robust to a large number of alternate models and sensitivity checks, including models that include institutional, student, and time fixed effects; institutional selectivity as a covariate or moderator; self-efficacy as a covariate; institutional expenditures as a covariate; and others (see Appendix Tables A7–A12 available on the journal website).

In contrast, at 2-year colleges, belonging was not significantly associated with any of the core outcomes in primary models (see Table 1). That said, in supplemental models, within-student changes in belonging over time (first year to
third year) were positively associated with all core outcomes at both 2-year and 4-year schools (see Appendix Table A10 on the journal website).

**Discussion**

Overall, in a nationally representative survey, most U.S. students said they felt like they belong at college. Furthermore, at 4-year schools, belonging was positively and robustly associated with outcomes colleges care deeply about, including persistence and mental health. Finally, across all schools, within-student increases in belonging were positively associated with improvements in these outcomes.

Yet concerningly and consistent with past research in smaller and more idiosyncratic samples, URM and FG students at 4-year colleges reported lower belonging than their peers. That these differences emerged across a national sample, despite suboptimal measurement of student belonging, underscores the importance of further understanding students’ experiences of belonging on campus and the structural or institutional qualities that lead students, especially URM and FG students, to experience higher or lower levels of belonging.

In addition, student belonging at 2-year colleges is lower than at 4-year colleges and not significantly associated with our core outcomes of interest. Does this mean that belonging does not matter for 2-year students? We think not. Two-year colleges and their students face greater structural challenges than their 4-year peers; it may be that belonging both increases and is more associated with outcomes when structural barriers have been sufficiently addressed. Consistent with this, a recent study of an intensive advising and structural support intervention at a 2-year college found impressive causal effects on academic success, accompanied by increases in belonging (Scrivener et al., 2015). Or, perhaps greater variability in student backgrounds, goals, and experiences means that general institutional belonging is less important to 2-year students than...
belonging in a course, major, or profession. Suggestively, for example, students’ uncertainty about their belonging in a developmental math course was the single best predictor of course persistence (Bryk et al., 2013).

The surprising finding that URM and FG students at 2-year colleges reported higher belonging than their non-URM/FG counterparts warrants attention. Although a greater proportion of 2-year (vs. 4-year) students are URM and/or FG, this does not appear to explain the finding (see Appendix Table A4 available on the journal website). The pattern may be due to differences in other background/demographic factors or to the kinds of institutions students attend. More in-depth studies of belonging at 2-year schools are needed to further elucidate these findings and the processes at play.

Going forward, nationally representative surveys should incorporate greater theory-driven measurements of personal qualities (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). Only a single nationally representative data set measures students’ belonging in college using a single item. More robust measures of student belonging and their uncertainty about their belonging may yield important insights. Further, research should continue to explore how contextual factors—including efforts by the institution overall but also individual instructors and staff members—affect students’ belonging as well as how belonging differs across additional dimensions of student identity. Simultaneously, rigorous field experiments testing interventions to promote belonging should be carried out in varied contexts to understand average and heterogeneous causal effects of belonging on student outcomes (see also NAS, 2017). These efforts will allow practitioners and scholars to better understand—and hopefully enhance—all students’ belonging, success, and well-being in college.

NOTE

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