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April 9, 2020

A Tale of Two Campuses: A Study of Sense of Belonging at a Multi-campus University

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An abstract of
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Sociology

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Abstract

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Developing a sense of belonging to an academic institution is especially challenging for college freshman and transfer students as they adjust to a new educational environment. It can also be challenging for students who change campuses within the same university as they attempt to develop and sustain a strong sense of belonging to their university. This paper explores how campus climate affects sense of belonging for students enrolled at a multi-campus university. Overall, findings suggest that integration into the social domain of the campus leads to a strong sense of belonging to that campus. The findings also suggest that participation in extracurricular activities, relationships with students and faculty members, and racial congruence with the campus community affect a student's integration into the campus's social domain.

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Acknowledgements

This paper would not be possible without the support and guidance of my advisor Dr. Irene Browne. Thank you for providing the framework and the steps for completing this research. I also would like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Hegtvedt and Dr. Owen-Smith, for agreeing to oversee this process. Lastly, I would like to thank the interview participants for their candor and vulnerability.

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INTRODUCTION

Whether as a freshman starting college or as a transfer student from another institution, students struggle to enter new educational environments. New students have to grow familiar with the campus expectations and norms and learn how to get access to available campus resources. They also have to form new connections and social bonds with existing members of the campus community such as other students and faculty members. Students who are transferring from one institution to another experience this “learning phase” twice in their academic career. Even when transferring within the same university, changing campuses may provoke an experience of “culture shock” as transferees re-orient themselves to a new campus.

The experiences of “culture shock” raise the question of whether and how students who change campuses within the same university can develop and sustain a “sense of belonging” to their institution. Does knowing that they will be leaving one campus for another weaken or strengthen a sense of belonging among transferees? Does a sense of belonging differ for transferees compared to students who remain on the same campus all four years? If so, how? In this paper, I investigate these questions by comparing students who reside and study at two different campuses at the same university, asking the question: how does campus climate affect sense of belonging? I use quantitative and qualitative data to look at how these students integrate themselves into each campus and develop a sense of belonging while being on that campus.

Generally, students who do not feel connected to their academic institution are much more likely to leave (Tinto 1975). In addition, students with a stronger sense of belonging try harder in school and are more likely to have higher academic achievement (Abdollahi and Noltemeyer 2018). Therefore, university administrators are particularly

interested in strengthening a sense of belonging among their student bodies. However, if an institution has multiple campuses that are distinct from each other, it may struggle to form a cohesive campus community and students may have fragmented perception of their place on campus. This study will inform administrators on how to make students feel more connected to their campus communities, regardless of the number of undergraduate campuses present within the university.

My study provides a novel approach to the question of campus climate and sense of belonging in two respects: I focus on a university that has two separate campuses with very different educational climates, and I use a mixed-methods design, analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data. My quantitative analyses capture student responses to exit survey data distributed by the two campuses. My qualitative component involves conducting in-depth interviews with 19 current students from two campuses of the same university. To triangulate the information, I also interview administrators from both campuses. The study was conducted on the two undergraduate campuses of Arboretum University: The Aspen campus and the Elm campus. Key findings from the quantitative and qualitative data analysis characterize the campus climate of the two campuses. They also illustrate how factors such as campus size, relationships with other students, extracurricular activities, and racial identity affect sense of belonging.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vincent Tinto's Model of Dropout Behavior (1975) provides the theoretical framework for this study. Tinto initially developed this model to explain how students' relationships with their institution can influence their decision to withdraw from that institution. The model states that students enter college with attributes (such as a

particular gender and race), a family background, and past educational experiences. The sum of these attributes determines a student's commitment to graduate from a college and to graduate from a particular institution. Once a student begins college, they have to find ways to integrate themselves into both the academic domain (performance and intellectual development in the classroom) and the social domain (relationships made with other students, faculty members, and other members of the college community) of their higher-ed institution. For example, international students use "the development of friendship on campus, involvement in student organizations, participation in campus events, seeking employment on campus and off-campus, and volunteering [at campus and off campus events]" to integrate into the social domain of U.S. universities (Jean Francois 2019:1077). Pichon (2016:54) found that among first-year students intending to receive a four-year degree, faculty-student interactions such as "engaging students in meaningful discussion" and "answering questions during and after class" were important for a "quality education."

My study primarily focuses on the middle part of Tinto's Model of Dropout Behavior, which examines students' integration into the academic and social domain of their respective institutions and the results of that integration with respect to sense of belonging. Tinto's model predicts that the more integrated a student is into either the academic or social domain of their university, the greater the student's commitment to the academic institution and to the initial goal of completing college (Tinto 1975). Tinto (1975:98) also argues that "student commitments to college completion and the institution" later on in the school year illustrate a student's "perception of the benefits (e.g. academic attainments, personal satisfactions, friendships) and the costs (e.g. financial time, dissatisfactions, academic failures)" of attending college. For instance, a

study of full-time, first-year, non-transfer students found that “students who reported more peer-group interactions, interactions with faculty, peer support, and parental support” had a stronger sense of belonging (Hausmann et al. 2007:829). In another study, Johnson et al. (2007:532) found that “a smooth social transition to college” predicted a greater sense of belonging for all racial/ethnic groups studied, including African-Americans, Asian Pacific Americans, Hispanic/Latinos, Multiracial/Multi-ethnic, and White/Caucasian. Therefore, “the lower an individual’s commitment to the institution, the more likely [they are] to drop out from the institution” (Tinto 1975:96).

Milem and Berger’s Model of College Student Persistence (1997) expands Tinto’s Model by further detailing the mechanism by which integration in the social domain influences a student’s commitment to completing college at a particular institution. Milem and Berger termed the mechanism as the Behavior-Perception-Behavior cycle. According to the cycle, first-year college students will spend their fall semester investing their time in different activities on their college campuses such as student organizations, sport teams, art communities, etc. As they get more involved in these activities and meet new people, students begin to evaluate how well they fit in the campus community. They also begin to evaluate how well the university community supports them as individual members.

The theory predicts that “these perceptions influence the likelihood that students will invest additional energy” in their chosen activities later in the spring semester (Milem and Berger 1997: 390). In other words, if a student feels like they belong on campus and that the university supports their presence on campus, the student will continue their participation in the following spring semester. Continued involvement in campus activities also influences the level of commitment a student has to their

institution, which relates back to Tinto's Theoretical Model of Dropout Behavior (Milem and Berger 1997). Multiple studies have documented this phenomenon. For instance, current and former members of Latino-Greek letter organizations cited their participation in Greek life motivated them "to become more active in their [campus] communities" (Moreno and Banuelos 2013:118). Shammass (2015:80) found that among Arab American and Muslim American students, those who were more willing to participate in "student clubs, organizations, and activities" were more likely to feel a part of the campus community.

For my study, I am measuring sense of belonging because it is an indicator of how well a student integrates into the social domain of their higher-ed institution. In the university context, sense of belonging is defined as "a feeling or sensation of connectedness [and] 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, peer)" (Strayhorn 2012:3). Much of the literature related to the concept focuses on the role of ethnic identity in fostering a student's feelings of connectedness. For instance, in research focused on the role of Latina/o sororities and fraternities on predominantly White universities, Garcia (2015) found that a sense of belonging is strongly associated with a student's ability to identify with other students who look like them and share similar backgrounds and experiences. Wells and Horn (2015:157) found that for Asian American college students, sense of belonging depended on the students' ability to find their Asian culture "congruent with the campus culture."

A college student's sense of belonging matters because it is strongly associated with a student's academic achievement (Abdollahi and Notemeyer 2018). In other words, students who feel accepted and included by their university communities have

higher academic expectations for themselves and are more motivated in the classroom. In their study, Freeman et al. (2007) found that first-semester freshmen with a strong sense of belonging were more invested in learning and mastering course material. These students were also more confident in their ability to achieve their academic goals. Another study found that full-time, first-year college students with a stronger sense of belonging were more likely to have a stronger commitment to finish an academic program at their institution (Hausmann et al. 2007).

Campus climate influences sense of belonging because it determines the type and frequency of certain interactions in the academic and social domains. Campus climate is “the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards and practices of employees and students of an institution” (Rankin and Reason 2008:264). There are five major factors that influence campus climate: “access/retention, research/scholarship, inter- and intra-group relations, curriculum and pedagogy, and university policies and services” (Rankin and Reason 2008:266). For example, Jean Francois (2019) illustrates that unconscious discrimination from members of the campus community (i.e., faculty, staff, students) and the lack of follow-up to freshman orientations after the first year serves as a hindrance in the development of sense of belonging among international students. In another study, Means and Pyne (2017:912) found that “institutional support structures” such as need-based scholarships, residence halls, and academic support services “enhanced students’ sense of belonging” among low-income, first generation students in their first year of college. For my study, I will primarily focus on inter-and intra-group relations and how they determine the campus climate of the university studied.

I use Tinto’s and Milem and Berger’s theoretical models because they provide a mechanism by which campus climate brings about a sense of belonging. Even though

both models do not explicitly use the term “campus climate,” they include many elements of the conceptual definition, particularly elements related to the inter- and intra-group relations among members of the campus community. To compare sense of belonging among students with different experiences, one has to identify the ways that the climate of either campus promotes integration into either the academic domain or the social domain of the campus. The campus that promotes such integration should have students who have a greater sense of belonging. My study focuses specifically on integration into the social domain, that is, how a campus facilitates and fosters relationships among members of the campus community.

I conducted this study at a private, medium-sized Research I university located in the southeastern United States. To protect the identity of those who study and work at this university, I intentionally replaced the name of the university with the pseudonym “Arboretum University.” I also replaced identifying names and titles with pseudonyms. Arboretum University has two campuses, the Aspen campus and the Elm campus. The Aspen campus is located less than 40 miles from a major metropolitan city while the Elm campus is located within the metro area of that same city.

Arboretum undergraduate students can start their academic career either on the Aspen campus or the Elm campus. Undergraduate students on the Elm campus start and end their academic careers on that campus. While on the Elm campus, they can matriculate in three different undergraduate schools in their third year: the business school, the nursing school, or the liberal arts college. Meanwhile, undergraduate students on the Aspen campus start their academic careers on the Aspen campus but will finish on the Elm campus because the Aspen campus only provides courses for 1st and 2nd year students. In the end, all undergraduate students, regardless of where they

start their undergraduate career, graduate with a bachelor's degree from Arboretum University.

The Elm campus is physically 11 times bigger than the Aspen campus. Furthermore, the Aspen campus has a student body that is about one-sixth of that on the Elm campus and has fewer institutional resources than the Elm campus. For instance, the Elm campus has 47 academic departments in which students can choose their majors and minors. On the other hand, the Aspen campus divides its faculty into three general academic divisions to compensate for the fewer number of faculty members. If Aspen students want to declare their major and/or minor, they have to do so with an academic department on the Elm campus. Furthermore, many divisions that exist on the Elm campus are either smaller or non-existent on the Aspen campus. For these reasons, Aspen students have more opportunities to interact with other students, faculty members, and other members of the campus community. With a smaller student body, they are more likely to feel seen and supported by the academic institution. Therefore, based on the existing literature, the two models, and the difference in the two campuses, I developed the following hypotheses:

H1: Aspen campus students will experience a stronger sense of belonging compared to Elm campus students.

H1a: Aspen campus 2nd year students will experience a stronger sense of belonging compared to Elm campus 2nd year students.

H1b: 4th year Aspen transfer students will experience a stronger sense of belonging compared to Elm campus 4th year students.

METHODS

To answer the research question, I used data from two sources: campus exit surveys and in-depth interviews with students from both campuses.

Campus Exit Surveys

When they matriculate out of an undergraduate school, students complete exit survey questions about their time as students. Aspen campus students complete the surveys during their 2nd year of college before they transfer to the Elm campus. Elm campus students complete the survey during the 4th year of college. Survey responses illustrate patterns in sense of belonging, relationships with members of the campus community, and perceptions of the campus community. Furthermore, exit survey data show how sense of belonging evolves for Aspen students throughout their four years at Arboretum University as they study at two different campuses.

Arboretum University granted me access to exit survey responses from both campuses. For this study, I used the exit survey responses from the Aspen Class of 2017, which includes Aspen 2nd year students who did and did not move on to the Elm campus. Participants are between the ages of 18-25 years old and reside in the United States. I excluded survey responses from international students and transfer students from analysis because their unique experiences may affect their sense of belonging in different ways. I operationalized “sense of belonging” using the following statement from the survey: “I feel that I belong at this campus.” The response categories are “strongly agree,” “agree,” “neither agree or disagree,” “disagree”, and “strongly disagree.” I operationalized “campus climate” using the following questions from the Aspen exit survey:

- “How satisfied are you with the social life on campus (clubs, teams, events)?”

- “How satisfied are you with the student interaction with faculty?”

I also used exit survey data from the Elm Class of 2019, which includes Elm 4th year students who originally started on the Elm campus and those who started on the Aspen campus. Again, participants are between the ages of 18-25 years old and reside in the United States. In addition to excluding international and transfer students, I also excluded business school students and nursing school students from analysis. Business students and nursing students attend classes at different parts of the Elm campus, away from most undergraduate students. These environments may affect sense of belonging in different ways. I operationalized “sense of belonging” using the following statement from the survey instrument: “On a scale of 1 to 7 mark the box that best represents the quality of your relationships with other students at Arboretum.” The response categories are “1”, “2”, “3”, “4”, “5”, “6”, and “7.” A ranking of “7” indicates the strongest sense of belonging while a ranking of “1” indicates the weakest sense of belonging. I operationalized “campus climate” using the following statements from the Elm survey:

- On a scale of 1 (lowest ranking) to 7 (highest ranking) mark the box that best represents the quality of your relationships with faculty members.
- On a scale from 1 (lowest ranking) to 5 (highest ranking), how do you rank your social experience in the Arboretum community?

In-depth Interview

In-depth interviews help better clarify student perceptions of campus climate and sense of belonging. I first interviewed administrators from both the Elm campus and the Aspen campus in order to gain an understanding of the campus climates and concerted

efforts by the administration to promote sense of belonging. Using the data from these interviews, I designed the interview questions for students. Then, I recruited students from both campuses by sharing study information in student Facebook and GroupMe groups. I asked professors from both campuses to share the study with students in their classes. I also shared the details about the study myself with people in my own social network. I asked 2nd year and 4th year students to participate in this study. By the 2nd year, both Aspen and Elm students will have lived in their respective campus communities for at least a year and a half, giving them enough time to experience and understand the campus climate and develop connections. If a potential participant expressed interest in the study, I sent them an online form to complete in order to evaluate if the participant met the inclusion criteria for the study. The inclusion criteria include 2nd year or 4th year Arboretum University students who either started on the Aspen campus or the Elm campus. Exclusion criteria include Arboretum students who are in either the business or nursing school, international students, and transfer students. If the participant met the criteria, the participant and I set a time and place for the interview.

I operationalized “sense of belonging” using the following three questions:

- “How often do you feel not welcomed on the ASPEN OR ELM campus?”
- “Overall, do you feel that you belong on the ASPEN OR ELM campus?”
- “Did you feel that you belong on the Aspen campus?” (for Aspen transfer students only)

I operationalized campus climate through a series of questions (e.g., “Would you describe the majority of your relationships with faculty members to be strong or weak relationships?” and “Would you describe your campus as having a toxic environment?”)

to understand student expectations about campus climate, relationship with members of the campus community, on-campus experiences, and perceptions of campus climate. In essence, the questions aimed to primarily understand how students integrated themselves in the social domain of their respective campuses.

RESULTS

The research question for this paper is how does campus climate affect sense of belonging? I expect Aspen students to have a stronger sense of belonging than Elm students because students will have more interactions with other students, faculty members, and other members of the campus community due to the smaller campus size. These interactions will promote student's integration into the social domain of the campus, which will lead to a stronger sense of belonging. I conducted a secondary data analysis of exit survey data from both the Aspen and Elm campus to view how sense of belonging and perceptions of the campus community change for Aspen students throughout their four years at Arboretum University. I also conducted in-depth interviews with campus administrators and current Aspen and Elm students in order to gain a better picture of how these students interact with the campus climate and how these interactions affect sense of belonging.

In-depth Interviews with Campus Administrators

I interviewed two campus administrators: one administrator from the Aspen campus and one administrator from the Elm campus. These interviews illustrate how each campus establishes their campus climates and fosters a sense of belonging among their student bodies. According to both administrators, while the two campuses

regularly interact with each other, each campus makes decisions about campus life independently from each other. However, it is evident that the mechanism by which both campuses foster a sense of belonging is through programming and campaigns that promote integration into the social domain of their respective campuses.

On the Elm campus, almost all of their efforts to promote sense of belonging target first-year students. In other words, they dedicate many resources into integrating first-year students into the social domain of the campus. For example, Campus Life staff organize intensive freshman orientations and semester-long freshman seminars for first-year Elm students to ensure that students know how to utilize critical campus resources. They train upperclassmen peer mentors such as orientation leaders and resident assistants to help first-year students adjust to a college residential environment. In the end, the Elm administration hopes that each first-year student will develop a connection with at least one other person in the Elm community by the end of their first year of college. Furthermore, the administration expects that these connections will serve as a positive foundation for the next three years of college. Since the administration is heavily invested in the first-year experience, they do not dedicate as much time to integrating any type of transfer student, let alone the incoming third-year Aspen students. They also do not continue integration efforts for Elm students who did not make connections during their first-year of college. In addition, due to the size of the Elm campus, they are unable to maintain what the Elm administrator called a “high touch” environment, where administrators have regular interactions with students and give focused attention to all students at all times.

On the Aspen campus, administrators dedicate much of their resources to integrating all students into the social domain of the campus. With a smaller campus,

their integration efforts are not only likely to reach more students but also continue for the full duration of a student's time at Aspen. This past school year, the Aspen campus established a new thematic first-year orientation program in which first-year students learn to internalize positive campus values such as kindness, a healthy work-life balance, and realistic expectations of success and failures. What is unique about this type of orientation is that the messaging continues after orientation and is evident in different aspects of college life such as academic advising, residential life, and student organizations. The administration makes a concerted effort to collaborate with all campus stakeholders (students, administration, faculty, and staff) to not only help first-year students transition into college but also reinforce integration into the social domain during the full duration of a student's time on the Aspen campus. The Aspen campus can carry out such a campaign because they have a smaller student body and a smaller institution.

Aspen administrators hope that this restructuring of their campus life model changes student's perceptions of the campus climate. According to the Aspen administrator, many Aspen students perceive the Aspen campus to be "toxic" and "competitive" because of the "toxic" conversations that occur among students. For instance, the Aspen administrator stated how many students compare the number of hours they sleep to see who has the lowest number, the idea being that the person who slept the shortest time has studied the most or is the most productive student. Because of these constant conversations, many Aspen students feel "highly anxious" because they sense pressure to compete with their classmates all the time. A toxic and competitive environment negatively affects their college experience, including their sense of

belonging, because it's hard to form strong inter- and intra-group relations with other students if one primarily perceives them to be competitors instead of peers.

Analysis of Exit Survey Data

With special permission from Arboretum university, I received access to 1469 survey responses from Aspen students and Elm students. About 75% of the survey sample is Elm students who completed the Elm exit survey in the 4th year of college. 17% of the sample is Aspen students who took the Aspen exit survey in their 2nd year of college and the Elm exit survey two years later in their 4th year. Lastly, 8% of survey participants are transfers or Aspen students who completed the Aspen exit survey in the 2nd year but never graduated from the Elm campus and transferred out of Arboretum (Table 1).

	<i>n</i>	%
ELM	1097	74.7
ASPEN	254	17.3
TRANSFERS	118	8.0

I decided to focus on survey questions that asked about sense of belonging and inter- and intra-group relations because, according to the interviews with campus administrators, the both campuses foster a sense of belonging among students by cultivating inter- and intra-group relations. I also focused on questions that would allow me to compare similar types of questions between the two survey instruments.

Table 2 shows that when asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement “I feel that I belong on this campus,” the majority of Aspen 2nd year students agreed with the statement (71.2%) compared to Aspen transfer students (66.1%). Two years later, when asked to rank the quality of relationships with other students on the Elm campus, about 76.8% of the same Aspen students answered with “5”, “6”, or “7”, demonstrating a strong sense of belonging even as 4th year students on the Elm campus. A ranking of “7” indicates the strongest sense of belonging while a ranking of “1” indicates the weakest sense of belonging. Only 77.2% of 4th Elm students answered with “5”, “6”, or “7.” The difference in rankings between the 4th year Aspen students and the 4th year Elm students is statistically significant and shows that 4th year Elm students have a stronger sense of belonging than their Aspen counterparts (Table 3).

Table 2. I feel that I belong at this campus.				
	ASPEN	TRANSFER	Chi-Square,df	P-value
	%	%	6.740, 5	0.241
Strongly Disagree	2.8	1.7		
Disagree	4.7	11.0		
Neither Agree or Disagree	12.6	15.3		
Agree	40.9	36.4		
Strongly Agree	30.3	29.7		
No Response	8.7	5.9		
TOTAL	100.0	100.0		N= 372

Table 3. On a scale of 1 to 7 mark the box that best represents the quality of your relationships with other students at Arboretum

	ELM	ASPEN	Chi-Square,df	P-value
	%	%	15.601, 7	*0.029
1- Lowest Ranking	1.7	2.0		
2	2.5	2.8		
3	4.6	2.4		
4	13.4	14.2		
5	22.7	28.3		
6	25.3	27.2		
7- Highest Ranking	29.2	21.3		
MISSING	0.5	2.0		
TOTAL	100.0	100.0		N=1351

***p** < .05

****p** < .01

*****p** < .001

Table 4 shows that 74.8% of 2nd year Aspen students were either “generally satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the social life on the Aspen campus compared to 69.5% of 2nd year Aspen transfers. Higher satisfaction with campus social life is indicative of better integration into the social domain of the campus. However, when asked two years later to rank their social experience in the Arboretum community, only 57% of Aspen students ranked “4” or “5” compared to 63.3% of 4th year Elm students who did (Table 5). A ranking of “5” indicates the highest satisfaction while a ranking of “1” indicates the lowest satisfaction. These findings indicate that the Elm social experience is less likely to integrate Aspen students than Elm students into the social domain of the Elm campus.

Table 4. How satisfied are you with the social life on campus (clubs, teams, events)?				
	ASPEN	TRANSFER	Chi-Square,df	P-value
	%	%	7.461, 5	0.189
Did not Participate	0.4	0.0		
Very Dissatisfied	4.7	7.6		
Generally Dissatisfied	9.1	15.3		
Generally Satisfied	53.5	44.1		
Very Satisfied	21.3	25.4		
No Response	11.0	7.6		
TOTAL	100.0	100.0		N=372

Table 5. On a scale from 1 to 5 , how do you rank your social experience in the Arboretum community?				
	ELM	ASPEN	Chi-Square,df	P-value
	%	%	10.242, 5	0.068
1-Lowest Ranking	4.5	3.1		
2	9.6	11.4		
3	22.0	27.2		
4	36.1	38.2		
5-Highest Ranking	27.2	18.9		
MISSING	0.7	1.2		
TOTAL	100.0	100.0		N=1351

Table 6 shows that almost 90% of 2nd year Aspen transfers were “generally satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their interaction with Aspen campus faculty members compared to 2nd year Aspen students who moved on to the Elm campus (85.1%). This

finding indicates that for the majority of Aspen students who transferred out in 2017, relationships with faculty members was most likely not a reason why they transferred out of Arboretum University. By the end of the 4th year on the Elm campus, about 80% of Aspen students ranked the quality of their relationships with faculty members as “5”, “6”, or “7” compared to 85.3% of 4th year Elm students (Table 7). A ranking of “7” indicates the highest quality while a ranking of “1” indicates the lowest quality. The difference between the 4th year Aspen students and the 4th Elm students is statistically significant and indicates that relationships with Elm faculty are more important to an Elm student’s integration into the social domain of the campus than an Aspen student’s (Table 7).

Table 6. How satisfied are you with the student interaction with faculty?				
	ASPEN	TRANSFERS	Chi-Square,df	P-value
	%	%	2.610, 4	0.625
No Response	11.0	5.9		
Very Dissatisfied	1.2	1.7		
Generally Dissatisfied	2.8	2.5		
Generally Satisfied	39.0	41.5		
Very Satisfied	46.1	48.3		
TOTAL	100.0	100.0		N=372

Table 7. On a scale of 1 to 7 mark the box that best represents the quality of your relationships with faculty members.

	ELM	ASPEN	Chi-Square,df	P-value
	%	%	16.933, 7	*0.018
1-Lowest Ranking	0.5	0.4		
2	0.7	0.8		
3	3.4	3.5		
4	9.7	12.2		
5	23.2	26.0		
6	29.1	29.5		
7-Highest Ranking	33.0	24.8		
MISSING	0.5	2.8		
TOTAL	100.0	100.0		N=1351

***p < .05**

****p < .01**

*****p < .001**

Analysis of Student Interviews

Twenty-one students signed up to participate in the in-depth interviews. Two of those students were not invited to continue further in the study because one was an international student and one was a nursing student. The other nineteen students met the inclusion criteria. 53% of the sample are Elm students and 47% of the sample are Aspen students. All participants are between the ages of 19-22 (Table 8).

Similar to the exit survey data, I used the information from the campus administrators to design the interview questions. I decided to add questions about experiences with on-campus housing, freshman orientation, and freshman seminar because the Elm campus administrator explicitly mentioned those as experiences that

are formative to students integrating into the social domain of the institution and developing a sense of belonging. I also added questions about participant’s perception of the “toxicity” and “competitiveness” of their campus because the Aspen administrator cited these perceptions as a hindrance to social integration and fostering a sense of belonging.

Table 8. Demographic Data of Interview Participants

Campus	Class Year	Name	Age	Gender	Racial Identity	State of Residence
ASPEN	2nd	Charlotte	19	Female	East Asian	California
		William	19	Male	White	Virginia
		Ava	20	Female	South Asian	Texas
		Elijah	20	Male	Hispanic	Florida
	4th	Amelia	21	Female	South Asian	Texas
		Harper	22	Female	White	Connecticut
		Sophia	21	Female	White	Georgia
		Oliver	21	Male	Black	Georgia
		Ben	21	Male	Black	Georgia
ELM	2nd	James	19	Male	Black	Ohio
		Olivia	19	Female	South Asian	Texas
		Robin	19	Non-binary	Bi-racial	Illinois
		Abigail	19	Female	White	Virginia
		Jennifer	20	Female	Hispanic	California
	4th	Mia	21	Female	White	Ohio
		Ryley	21	Prefer not to say	White	New York
		Isabella	21	Female	Black	Texas
		Evelyn	22	Female	White	New Jersey
		Liam	22	Male	East Asian	Utah

sense of belonging

The majority of interview participants reported feeling that they belonged on their respective campuses. When asked why, many participants cited their relationships with other students in their responses. For example, Isabella, a 4th year student on the Elm campus, said “some people don’t like where they go to school and I don’t feel that way about Arboretum. I really do like the Elm campus. I found great opportunities and met really cool people.” 2nd year Elm students had a stronger sense of belonging than the 2nd year Aspen students, which is contrary to hypothesis H1a. In fact, Aspen 2nd year students were the least likely to report that they felt like they belonged on their respective campus. Furthermore, they were the most likely to report that they felt unwelcomed, mainly because they could not relate to many of their peers on the Aspen campus. For instance, 2nd year Aspen student Ava said that she felt unwelcomed because other Aspen students do not understand or agree with her political views. She also felt that her “non-professional” career path deterred her from making connections with other students. The number of 4th year Aspen students who reported having a sense of belonging on the Elm campus is about the same as the number of 4th year Elm students who reported the same feeling. In addition, all of the 4th year Aspen students reported having a sense of belonging to the Aspen campus when they were 2nd year students and to the Elm campus as 4th year students.

In addition to asking about sense of belonging, I also asked many questions about participant’s perception of campus culture, members of the campus community such as students and professors, and the administrative-led programs designed to foster a sense of belonging on their respective campuses.

To many of the Aspen participants (both 2nd & 4th year students), the two most defining aspects of the Aspen campus is its small size and rural location. As Oliver describes it, the Aspen campus is “more like an island where there’s palm trees, but it does storm from time to time.” Some of the things that participants appreciate about Aspen is the campus-wide focus on social justice, the high academic expectations, strong community engagement, emphasis on leadership, and the overall quirkiness and niceness of the student body. However, many participants argue that the small size of the Aspen campus “magnifies and intensifies” both positive and negative experiences with the campus climate. As Ben describes it, “you have this collection of high-achieving students...and that’s part good. But the confluence of just the high achieving students...it creates this sense of always having to be on the go and always having to be a part of two [student] executive boards while also taking 17 credits...because [it’s] the norm at Aspen.”

At Aspen, success often looks like high GPAs, multiple student leadership positions, and impressive resumes. While some say that the administration plays a role in crafting this idea of success, these expectations are primarily student-driven. Since the campus is smaller, it is easier to see and hear what other students are doing. According to Sophia, “everything is so visible so you can see each other...You don’t have a lot of obnoxious people. I think more people feel insecure if that makes sense. Maybe, they see other people and they do the math and they’re like ‘oh I’m not doing well.’” Ava argues that “people have such jealous and toxic relationships to other people’s success...Sometimes, there’s not even a metric for people to judge their own progress other than through prestige and getting a certain position.” An Aspen student’s sense of belonging is in many ways tied to how well students *perceive* their own success in

reference to other students. For example, Charlotte talked about how Aspen encourages their students to become leaders early on in their college careers. However, she argues that some students interpret such messages and think that if they don't have a leadership position, they are not a part of the campus community. The desire to succeed promotes the "toxic" and "competitive" environment that the Aspen administrators are actively fighting against. Elijah and many of his friends describe it as the "Depression Olympics" because everybody is trying to prove how much they are "sacrificing" to prove that they belong in this competitive community.

To make matters worse, Aspen students who feel isolated and unwelcomed on campus often feel trapped because they do not have the means to physically get off campus. On the Elm campus, it is easier for students to move off campus because it is in a major metropolitan area. They can connect with other college students from different schools and spend time in different parts of the city. However, the Aspen campus is over 30 miles away from the same metropolitan area and Aspen students cannot easily travel to the city, especially if they don't own cars. Furthermore, many Aspen students do not feel connected to the local rural community. For example, Harper states that two years ago when she was at Aspen, "[she] didn't really venture outside the campus very much. [She] didn't for many reasons probably...based on the fact that the area is not really student-friendly." Similarly, current Aspen student Ava says that students "can tutor and volunteer and stuff [in the surrounding neighborhood] but that's a very different thing from being genuinely concerned about what goes on there." Since many students do not have the means to leave campus regularly and they do not have connections with the local community, Aspen students often feel stuck on campus and unable to escape the negative environment if they choose.

On the other hand, students had varied responses to their descriptions of the Elm campus climate, which illustrates why Charlotte described the climate as being “diffuse” and home to many “microcultures.” The Elm campus is big enough where “there's enough space for individuals...[to] focus on [their] own things without having other people just throw[ing] their stuff at [you], yet small enough where you can see the same people every day.” Some participants argue that the environment is not toxic or competitive because it's easier not to compare to other students. However, other participants argue that it is very competitive (some 4th Aspen students saying even more competitive than Aspen) because the presence of other elite schools on campus such as the medical school and the business school elevates the definition of student success. One common perception about the Elm campus climate among participants is the lack of community. Fourth year Aspen student Harper elaborates more on this point by arguing “[she doesn't] really have a cohesive definition of what it means to be the Elm community...[she doesn't] really feel like there is one community in a sense.”

For all participants in the study, regardless of where they started at Arboretum, some of the most important features of the campus climate include relationships with other students, relationships with faculty members, and participation in extracurricular activities. When asked to describe their relationships with the majority of other students at Arboretum, nine of them stated that they have strong relationships. All except one 4th year Aspen student said that their relationships with other Aspen students is much stronger than their relationships with Elm students. Furthermore, 4th year Aspen students were the most likely to state that they have strong relationships with other students in general. The overwhelming majority of participants in the sample reported having strong relationships with faculty members.

The majority of interview participants also stated in the interviews that participation in extracurricular activities makes them feel more connected to the Arboretum community. For instance, Elijah talked about how being the President of the Hispanic student union at the Aspen campus connected him to people who “share a similar passion and interest.” Jennifer talked about how participation in Greek Life made her feel like she was a part of things.” Olivia stated that participation in extracurricular activities “really broaden[ed] how many people [she got] to meet and interact with and that’s how [she] found a lot of [her] closer friends.”

Availability of extracurricular activities is an important feature of campus climate on both campuses because from those activities, many participants found clusters or groups of students that served as “micro communities.” These micro communities served as a buffer from some of the negative aspects of the campus climate. For example, these micro communities provided support for students who felt “claustrophobic” in environments where there are specific expectations of how a student should act, as seen on the Aspen campus. These communities also helped students feel more grounded, especially in environments with no strong community like the Elm campus. Furthermore, many of the 2nd year Aspen students who reported that their participation in extracurricular activities did not make them more connected to the Arboretum community also reported to have no sense of belonging with their campus.

Another feature of campus climate that I discussed with students is the first-year orientations and freshman seminars. Since administrators from both the Aspen and Elm campus stated that first-year orientations and semester-long freshman seminars were important programs used by the campuses to promote sense of belonging, I asked the interview participants about their experiences in both programs. Although they liked

and appreciated it, the majority of participants stated that first-year orientation did not help them connect to their respective campus communities. Many participants cited the tiring and overwhelming nature of the orientations as the reason why they didn't get much out of it. A greater majority of participants stated that first-year seminars did not help them connect to their respective campus communities. Many said that the seminar was a waste of time and students in the seminar did not take it seriously enough to have productive conversations. Many also felt that seminar facilitators repeated information heard in other classes and first-year orientations during the seminar.

Jennifer suggests that first-year seminars should focus on resources and opportunities that first-year students should expect to use in their later college years. She feels that Arboretum "does a great job at trying to welcome first-years and integrate them into different programs and a lot of stuff...but that the same effort lacks so much with upperclassmen," which supports the Elm campus administrator's characterization of the campuses' integration efforts. In her opinion, first-year seminars should focus on "financial aid, summer opportunities, scholarships, and fellowships." They should teach students on how to navigate resources like "the office of accessibility and disability, the financial aid office, and the library." Similarly, Oliver suggests that first-year seminars should be more interactive and encourage volunteer trips and visits to important locations on campus.

One important factor of campus climate came up frequently in the interviews was racial relations, particularly for Black-identifying participants. About 63% of the sample identified as a Non-White person. However, the only participants who stated that their racial identity influenced their sense of belonging were all four Black participants and one White participant. This may have been due to the fact that around the time I

conducted many of the interviews, a controversial conservative speaker had come to the Elm campus to give a lecture on affirmative action that many students, particularly students of color, did not approve of. With that being said, these students shared perspectives that were largely based on college experiences that occurred before the controversial lecture.

For James, “difference is not viewed as something positive at Arboretum.” He feels that White students in particular do not regard him as somebody who deserves to be a student on the Elm campus. He discussed how “when [he’s] walking on the sidewalk and a white person’s walking, [he] always ha[s] to move off it or [he] always ha[s] to move around them” to avoid bumping into them. He also discussed how him and many Black students try to attend popular fraternity parties on campus but are asked to wait outside the door while White people, particularly White women, are ushered in. Isabella talked about the moments that she has in her statistics classes when she realizes “[her] whole class is always White and Asian people” and asks herself “why [is she] in [that] room?”

The Aspen campus climate is no different for Black students. Oliver talked about his frustrations with how people view him as “an African-American male” who is “tall and seems to be athletic” and how other students look to him to speak on behalf of *the* Black experience. Even though these participants felt that they did belong on their respective campuses, anti-black racism fuels moments of disconnection and isolation from their respective campus communities. Interestingly, Harper, who identifies as White, states that her racial identity actually helps her feel more connected to the student community, particularly on the Elm campus, because the campus and the

surrounding neighborhoods are predominantly White. It makes her feel more at ease knowing that at least she “fit in” culturally with the campus climate.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study looks at how campus climate affects sense of belonging. I hypothesized that in general, Aspen students will experience a stronger sense of belonging compared to Elm students. The exit survey data show that 4th year Elm students have a stronger sense of belonging than 4th year Aspen students. It also shows that Elm students are more integrated into the social domain of the Elm campus, which suggests the importance of inter- and intra-group relations to cultivating a sense of belonging for students. These findings do not support the hypothesis. However, the quantitative data does support Tinto’s Model and shows that integration into the social domain leads to a stronger sense of belonging. It also supports Durkheim’s theory of social cohesion. Using a Spearman’s correlation, I found a moderate correlation between student’s rankings of their social experience at Arboretum on the Elm survey and student’s ranking of their sense of belonging ($R_s = 0.541$). There is also a moderate correlation between student’s ranking of their faculty relationships on the Elm survey and student’s ranking of their sense of belonging ($R_s = 0.460$). Both correlations are statistically significant.

The interview data shows that 2nd year Elm students have a stronger sense of belonging than their Aspen counterparts. Furthermore, 4th Aspen students and 4th Elm students report about the same level of sense of belonging. These findings also do not support the overall hypothesis. The data also illustrates how the size and location of the Aspen campus exacerbates the high academic and social expectations that shape the

campus climate. It also shows the perceived lack of a cohesive community on the Elm campus. Interview findings on relationships with other students and faculty members and participation in extracurricular activities support the theoretical framework described in the literature review. Particularly, the importance of extracurricular activities to the formation of micro communities supports Milem and Berger's Model of College Student Persistence. Lastly, the qualitative data illustrate how anti-black racism in a campus climate can discourage Black students from developing a strong sense of belonging to their academic institutions. This finding is consistent with past research. For example, Aglin and Wade (2007) found that racial identity negatively correlates with adjustment to college for Black-identifying students.

There are several possible reasons why Elm students overall demonstrate a stronger sense of belonging than Aspen students. For one, the toxic and competitive nature of the Aspen campus climate may play a major role. Though some Elm and Aspen students stated that the Elm campus can be toxic and competitive as well, it is evident from the interviews that the toxicity and competition is more visible on the Aspen campus. It can be hard to form relationships with other students if one always perceives them as competitors. Another reason why Elm students overall demonstrate a stronger sense of belonging may be due to the type of students who attend those campuses. Elm students maybe more likely to relate to each other better because they have the same experiences and interests. In the interview findings, a 2nd year Aspen student mentioned that her weak sense of belonging came from the inability to connect with her peer's career goals and interests. However, if this was the case, one would expect that Elm students would have described the campus as having a more cohesive campus climate.

A possible limitation to the study is the interpretation of the survey questions, particularly among 4th year Aspen students. For example, some students may have interpreted the questions asking about relationships with students and faculty members to mean those *just* from the Elm campus instead of from *both* the Aspen and Elm campuses. If Aspen students considered both of their relationships and experiences from both campuses, their responses to the sense of belonging could be different. For instance, Aspen students could have a stronger sense of belonging because even though they may not be as integrated into the Elm campus, their strong relationships with other Aspen students make them feel that they are part of a community.

Another limitation is the interview sample size. The perspectives and opinions of the sample may not be representative of the entire student population at Arboretum University. Particularly with the 2nd year students, there is one less 2nd year Aspen student than Elm student. An additional 2nd year Aspen participant could sway the overall results for the 2nd year Aspen students. Furthermore, my position as both researcher and Arboretum student also influenced the type of students who participated in the study. It also influenced how comfortable participants were with sharing their personal experiences with me. I had personal relationships with many of the participants, particularly with the Aspen participants. I believe these relationships made many of them feel comfortable with sharing their thoughts on the campus climate and their sense of belonging to their respective campuses.

In essence, it is difficult to maintain a cohesive university identity when a portion of the student population is changing campuses while the remaining portion experiences no change. Based on the findings of the study, this results in a weaker sense of belonging for students who have to transition and adjust to more than one campus

during their undergraduate career. Universities with multiple campuses should ensure that all students of the university have equal access and experience with all campuses on the university. In the case of the university studied, Arboretum should make it easier for all Arboretum students to visit and experience the Aspen campus and the Elm campus. The administrators from both campuses should work more collaboratively, especially for campus life events, so that students from all campuses can have more similar campus experiences. Lastly, administrators of universities with multiple campuses should dedicate more effort and resources to programming for upperclassmen to help them integrate into the campus community. Since these universities can always expect a group of upperclassmen students to transfer to a new campus within the same university every year, these efforts should be continuous and on-going.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. My name is Onyie Eze and I am a fourth-year student at Arboretum. Currently, I am working on my honors thesis project and this study is a part of that project. The purpose of this study is to determine how campus climate and class year affect sense of belonging. I am interested in this topic because as an Arboretum student and Aspen Continuee myself, I am trying to make sense of my own experience of living and attending classes on two different campuses within the same university during my college career. I would also like to provide insight into how to improve the undergraduate experience for all Arboretum students. The interview will take at most one hour. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers so feel free to interrupt and ask for clarification. You may skip any question and may end the interview at any time. Your name and answers to interview questions will remain confidential. Risks to participation is a potential loss of privacy and breach of confidentiality. The primary benefit of completing this interview is helping me, a fellow student. Lastly, as a reminder, participation in the study is required to be eligible for the gift raffle.

- Do you understand all these conditions?
- Do you agree to be interviewed?
- I will be writing notes during this interview. I will also be recording this interview. Do you mind if you are recorded?

Interview Questions

- How do you identify your racial identity?
- How do you identify your gender?
- What is your state of residence?

- Did you intend to start your Arboretum undergraduate career on the ELM OR ASPEN (*depends on subject*) campus?
- What were your expectations for starting your Arboretum undergraduate career at the ELM OR ASPEN (*depends on subject*) campus? Were your expectations met?
- (*for Aspen transfer students only*) What were your expectations for continuing your Arboretum undergraduate career at the Elm campus? Were your expectations met?
- Would you describe the majority of your relationships with other Arboretum undergraduate students (i.e. Aspen students and/or Elm students) to be strong or weak relationships? Why?
- Would you describe the majority of your relationships with faculty members (Arboretum College and/or Aspen College) to be strong or weak relationships? Why?
- How was your on-campus Arboretum residential experience (i.e. living alongside RAs, SAs, and other students, being invited to hall events, etc.) during your freshman and sophomore year of college?
- Do you currently participate in Arboretum-affiliated extracurricular activities? If so, did participation in these activities make you feel more connected to the Arboretum community (i.e. Elm College and/or Aspen College)? Why or why not?
- Did you participate in a freshman/first-year orientation at the beginning of your Arboretum undergraduate career? Did you participate in a freshman seminar? If

so, did participation in either experience make you feel more connected to the Arboretum community (i.e. Elm College and/or Aspen College)?

- Would you describe the ELM OR ASPEN (*depends on subject*) campus as having a “toxic environment?” Why?
- Would you describe the ELM OR ASPEN (*depends on subject*) campus as having a “competitive environment?” Why?
- How often do you feel not welcomed on the ELM OR ASPEN (*depends on subject*) campus? Why?
- Overall, do you feel that you belong on the ELM OR ASPEN (*depends on subject*) campus? Why?
- Did you feel that you belonged on the Aspen campus? (*for Aspen transfer students only*) Why?