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"I'm Thankful Every Day I Did It": An Exploration of Belonging for Commuter Students in Historically White Sororities and Fraternities at Primarily Commuter Public Institutions

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"I'M THANKFUL EVERY DAY I DID IT": AN EXPLORATION OF BELONGING FOR COMMUTER STUDENTS IN HISTORICALLY WHITE SORORITIES AND FRATERNITIES AT PRIMARILY COMMUTER PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

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Membership in historically White sororities and fraternities (HWSF) has been connected with sense of belonging (Cohen et al., 2017; McCreary & Schutts, 2015). The experience of commuter students in sororities and fraternities, however, has been largely overlooked, including an understanding of what belonging consists of as members. This phenomenological study sought to close that gap by exploring how commuter students in HWSF experienced belonging at primarily commuter public institutions through interviews with alumni who lived that experience. Three themes emerged from the data: personal connections, feeling welcomed and accepted, and transformation of the college experience.

Introduction

Developing a sense of belonging is an important aspect for college students because it leads to a number of positive outcomes (e.g. Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019). According to Strayhorn, belonging is influenced by student characteristics and the environments in which they occupy during college, and the need to achieve belonging is enough to motivate a student's behavior. Four-year college and university environments, however, tend to be designed for residential students, which leaves commuter students at the margins of their institutions (Attewell & Lavin, 2012). Interestingly, even when an institution enrolls mostly commuter students (i.e. primarily commuter institutions), their policies and practices still can leave commuters decentered in their college operations (Weiss, 2014). Not attending to commuter students is problematic because, as a group, they have unique needs compared with their residential peers (Burlison, 2015). These challenges in combination with institutional structures that do not support them can negatively influence their belonging (Jacoby, 2000; Pokorny et al., 2017).

Some research has found that joining a student organization helps commuter students develop a sense of belonging (e.g. Holloway-Friesen, 2018), and while prior research has suggested that joining a sorority or fraternity can lead to belonging, commuter students are either not quantitatively disaggregated - *if* they are included at all (e.g. Cohen et al., 2017; McCreary & Schutts, 2015) - or qualitatively centered. Indeed, most of the qualitative research focuses on other identities and experiences, so the reader often is left to infer a participant's commuter status (e.g. Arellano, 2020). Nevertheless, the limited research that specifically includes commuters (Ray & Rosow, 2010; Vetter, 2011) or membership at primarily commuter institutions (Biddix et al., 2018; Biddix et al., 2019) suggests that sorority or fraternity membership is beneficial for commuter students. What contributes to sense of belonging for commuter students in sorority and fraternity life (SFL) at primarily commuter public institutions, however, and how, if at all, belonging in their organizations contributes to their overall feeling of belonging at their institutions is unknown.

The purpose of this study is to begin to

fill this gap by examining a subset of this population – those commuter students who joined HWSFs at primarily commuter public institutions. I chose to utilize HWSF as a designation to recognize the history of racial exclusion in NPC and many NIC fraternities (Torbenson, 2012), as well as recognize that not all sororities and fraternities fall under an umbrella organization. Additionally, I chose to include only alumni who lived this experience in part to allow them to reflect on their entire undergraduate membership experience in terms of their belonging, which is an experience that shifts over time (e.g. Nunn, 2021). Understanding this experience is important for institutions, headquarters, and chapters in order to implement policies and practices that foster belonging for commuter students in SFL.

Literature Review

Commuter Students

Commuter students are defined as any student who does not live in college or university housing (Jacoby, 2000), which comprises over 75% of students who attend public institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Commuter students are more likely to be students of color, older, work more hours, be first-generation students, and transfer students than those who live on campus (Graham et al., 2018). The students encompassed in these statistics have a range of experiences, but scholars have identified some of the common challenges they face, such as a limited time to spend on campus, needing to work, being responsible for family members (Burlison, 2015; Weiss, 2014), adjusting to college (Melendez, 2019), feeling connected to their institutions (Newbold et al., 2011), and developing a sense of belonging (Jacoby, 2000).

Qualitative research involving commuter students suggests that while they may not live on campus and have a limited amount of time to engage in campus life, they are both interested in, and benefit from, involvement

(Clay, 2016; Weiss, 2014). Connecting with other students, especially through student organizations, has been found to contribute to academic achievement (Krause, 2007) and belonging (Holloway-Friesen, 2018) for commuter students. They, however, may choose to wait to get involved until later in their first semester or beyond to ensure they can balance their current responsibilities with their college academics (Clay, 2016).

While Clay (2016) described SFL as an avenue for commuter student involvement, only one of his participants were involved in this way. The inclusion of only one sorority member is reflective of the limited body of research that explicitly includes commuter students or primarily commuter institutions. Heida (1986) first posited the benefits of membership in SFL for commuter students at primarily commuter institutions, describing its benefits as promoting involvement and connecting students with the institution. She also described its challenges, most notably the perceptions of not being "real fraternities and sororities" (p. 49) due to the strong connection between HWSF membership and living in houses. More recent research has found a connection between historically White sorority membership and persistence for women at primarily commuter institutions (Biddix et al., 2018; Biddix et al., 2019), but it is unclear how many, if any all, of those members were commuters. Vetter (2011), who did examine commuter status by distance from campus, found that membership was significantly correlated with social connectedness for members who lived within one mile from campus, but not for those who lived more than a mile away. Another study by Yearwood and Jones (2012), who measured student engagement for Black students, found that those who participated in a SFL were significantly more engaged than those who were not.

While Yearwood and Jones (2012) did not specify whether or not their participants were members of culturally-based sororities and fraternities (CBSFs), commuter

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students' greater likelihood of being Students of Color (Graham et al., 2018) and the scarcity of affiliated housing for CBSFs (Ray & Rosow, 2010), suggests that the qualitative research on CBSFs could be informative for this study. Indeed, while not explicitly researched, some of the data in studies on CBSF membership suggests that participants were commuter students. For example, in a study that examined the role housing played on fraternity men's interactions with women, Ray and Rosow (2010) found that all of the members from the historically Black organizations in their study lived off-campus which afforded them greater privacy and supported more positive masculinities than those HWSF members who lived in houses on campus. Similarly, in Arellano (2020), Delgado-Guerrero et al. (2014), and Garcia's (2019) studies on Latino/a students in sororities and fraternities presented data which suggested that they had participants who lived off-campus and developed a sense of belonging due to their membership.

Sense of Belonging

Belonging is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by a number of factors (Bowman et al., 2019); occurs at different levels (i.e. individual, group; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017) and in different spaces on campus (Nunn, 2021; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019); and changes over time (Bowman et al, 2019; Nunn, 2021). Even so, institutions ought to have an interest in helping their students feel like they belong because it is associated with a number of beneficial outcomes including a positive transition to college (Nunn, 2021), persistence (van Herpen et al., 2020), self-actualization (Strayhorn 2012, 2019), and academic self-efficacy (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021). Scholars have emphasized the important role of institutional structures, including policies and practices, to help their students belonging; shifting much of the onus of developing belonging from the individual- to the organization-level (Giacalone & Perrelli, in press; Jaco-

by, 2000; Nunn; Strayhorn; Pokorny et al., 2017).

Clay (2016) and Weiss' (2014) studies involving commuter students from primarily commuter institutions found contrasting influences of institutional structures. While Clay's (2016) participants found the variety of co-curricular options their institution provided to aid their involvement, Weiss (2014) found that the institution that was the site of her study was not structured to support commuter students, even though they comprised the majority of the students. Even so, they, along with Holloway-Friesen (2018) found that commuter students felt like they had to make an extra effort in to engage in the co-curricular activities, which Holloway-Friesen specifically connected to their belonging. Further, Pokorny et al. (2017) argued that institutions need to help commuter students meet one another in order to aid in their belonging, which is consistent with other research that suggests that students connecting with peers who share identities and experiences contributes to belonging (Arellano, 2020; Nunn, 2021; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017).

Reflecting the complexity of belonging, generally, belonging as it relates to sorority and fraternity membership is complex as well. Most of the research that has explored membership's influence on belonging at the institutional-level has come from scholarship on CBSFs (Arellano, 2020; Garcia, 2019; Delgado-Guererro et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019). In addition to feeling like they belong to the institution, sorority and fraternity members also experience belonging at the chapter- (Cohen et al., 2017; Long, 2011; McCreary & Schutts, 2015) and sorority and fraternity community-levels (DeSantis, 2005; Garcia) as well. Further, belonging varies by sexual identity (Long, 2011), type of sorority or fraternity (Garcia, 2019), or an organization's social status within a sorority and fraternity community (DeSantis, 2005).

While most SFL studies involve current

students, two recent notable studies either included entirely (Garcia & Duran, 2021) or mostly (Duran & Garcia, 2021) Queer Alumni/ae/x of Color in CBSFs. The inclusion of participants who had already graduated was a strength of these studies because the it allowed for the participants to reflect on their whole undergraduate membership experience. Even though these studies were not on belonging, the extent to which Queer students are able to be themselves authentically in the spaces they occupy during college is connected with belonging (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017).

Conceptual Framework

As a concept, belonging has been defined in different ways. For example, Goodenow (1993) and Strayhorn (2012, 2019) focused on acceptance, respect, and inclusion; Baumeister and Leary (1995) emphasized "lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 427); while Bean (1985) aligned belonging with institutional fit. Due to the various conceptualizations of belonging and to acknowledge the participants' understanding of their own lived experiences, I did not approach the study with an *a priori* definition.

Methodology

Due the limited research on commuter students in SFL at primarily commuter institutions, and none of it on belonging, a qualitative method was appropriate for this study (Creswell, 2014). The study was guided by a constructionist framework which assumes "all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is…constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Crotty gives an example of how a tree will be understood differently by a hiker, an arborist, and a logger based on

their social locations in the world and their respective relationships with the tree. Extending that idea, constructionism suggests that both the experiences students have, such as commuting, and the type of institution students attend, such as primarily commuter institutions, would influence the way they make meaning of their collegiate experience. Broido and Manning (2002) echoed this application of constructionism and cited its importance in student affairs research and practice as it "expands [the] ability to work effectively toward the *missions and purposes* of higher education." (p. 444, emphasis added). Indeed, constructionism has been used in other studies involving specific institutional types (Guardia & Evans, 2008; Kortegast & Hamrick, 2009; Yancey Gulley, 2017). Further, Weinburg (2008) described "the recognition that things could be otherwise and that we might make them so" (p. 35) as a main purpose of constructionism, which is important in a study about commuter students in HWSFs due to the common assumption that membership requires living on campus (Giacalone & Waltemeyer, forthcoming).

Specifically, this study employed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009). As in phenomenology more broadly, participants' lived experiences served as the primary data source (van Manen, 2014). IPA, however, assumes an objective reality is unattainable. Rather, participants share an interpretation of their experience, which the researcher, in turn, interprets themself. The choice to use this version of phenomenology is appropriate within the framework of this study because both IPA and constructionism draw from Heidegger's interpretivist ontology (Crotty, 1998; Smith et al.). The research questions for this study were (1) what comprised the experience of belonging for HWSF alumni from primarily commuter public institutions who commuted throughout their college careers; and (2) how, if at all, did their membership contribute to their sense of belonging on campus?

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Participants and Setting

A number of inclusion criteria were used for the participants, including characteristics of the institutions they attended, which is reflective of constructionism's emphasis on the meaning-making between the person and their environment (Brodio & Manning, 2002; Crotty, 1998) and phenomenology's roots in studying specific "everyday experience[s]" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 32). In order to eligible, participants: (1) had to be an alumnus/a/x of a HWSF; (2) never lived on campus; (3) graduated within the last five years; and (4) attended a primarily non-residential public four-year institution as defined by the Carnegie Classification System. To meet this definition, an institution must have fewer than 25% of their students housed in college or university-owned, -controlled, or -affiliated facilities and/or have fewer than 50% of their students enrolled full-time (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018). I used the term *primarily commuter* in place of primarily non-residential throughout the study to center the experience of commuter students. As a conservative measure, any institution with recognized sorority or fraternity housing owned or operated by an entity other than the host institution was excluded in order to ensure accuracy in residential population data. Inaccuracies in these data could result in a residential threshold population that exceeds the primarily commuter definition. After cross-referencing the list of primarily commuter institutions within the Carnegie dataset with institutional websites and outreach to staff, these parameters yielded 90 eligible institutions.

Participants were recruited through outreach to SFL advisors, social media postings, and snowball sampling. Only alumni were included so participants could reflect on their entire college experience, and I would be alleviated of any legal or ethical obligations as an SFL advisor to report illicit behavior. Eight participants from four geographically diverse institutions met the requirements and agreed to participate.

The majority of participants were straight, White, and women (see Table 1). Their one-way commute times were 15 to 120 minutes, using a variety of methods including getting rides from parents, driving themselves, and taking public transportation. All participants held leadership positions in their chapters, their sorority and fraternity communities, or both. While all the institutions which the participants attended had residential options, the Common Data Sets available for the years the participants attended their institutions indicate that 83% to 99% of undergraduates commuted. Only one participant (Jake) came from an institution that had dedicated hallways for their sororities and fraternities, but he never lived in one, nor did he ever live elsewhere on campus.

Procedure

Consistent with phenomenological research, I wrote and reflected on an *epoché* in my research journal prior to, and throughout, the study. An *epoché* is a description of all prior knowledge and assumptions associated with a phenomenon (van Manen, 2014). In it, I included my positionality as a fraternity member and advocate, SFL advisor, and professional who worked with commuter students at a primarily commuter institution for over seven years. I found that sharing my experience as a professional who works at a primarily commuter institution created an openness with the participants and a shared understanding that sorority and fraternity membership at these types of institutions differs from the residential sorority and fraternity experience.

Data were collected through multiple sources. First, intake questionnaires asked basic questions about the participants' experience in their organizations during their college career. Then, participants took part in semi-structured interviews in-person and over Zoom. The interviews explored their experiences in-depth and lasted an average of 50 minutes. Finally, follow-up phone calls were used with all but one of the par-

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Institution	Organization	Gender	Race/Ethnicity[a]
Dustin	Northeast State College (NSC)	Fraternity	Man	White
Hope	NSC	Sorority	Woman	White
Jake	Southern State University (SSU)	Fraternity	Man	White
KW	West Coast University (WCU)	Sorority	Woman	Black/African-American
Lys	WCU	Sorority	Woman	Hispanic
Molly	East Coast University (ECU)	Sorority	Woman	White
Nicole	NSC	Sorority	Woman	Italian-Cape Verdean
Victoria	NSC	Sorority	Woman	White

[a] *Race and ethnicity descriptions were retained as identified by participants.*

ticipants to share initial findings and seek clarification about unclear portions of the experience, both unique to the individual participant and common across all participants.

Analysis

The data were analyzed using the six steps of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). The first three steps are to read transcripts multiple times; note concepts, language usage, and nascent ideas in the interviews; and identify emergent themes, for which I used open and descriptive coding. After this step I reviewed the transcripts, notations, and codes, then wrote a short narrative for each participant about how their responses informed the research questions. This step not only helped solidify the emerging themes, but also allowed for an idiographic analysis of each participant, which is essential in IPA (Smith et al.).

As recommended by Smith and his colleagues (2009), I completed the first three steps for all participants before moving on to steps four through six. Steps four and five are to make connections across themes and participants, which I accomplished using axial and thematic coding. Finally, step six is to identify the transcripts in which the themes occurred. A theme should be present in at least half of the transcripts in order to be included. The themes presented below appeared in all transcripts, which suggests they are representative of the underlying structure of the experience, which is a goal in phenomenological research (van Manen, 2014).

Trustworthiness

I employed a number of trustworthiness measures based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommendations. Credibility was established through member-checking and reviewing initial themes with an expert peer. Using a purposeful sample, including details about the participants, and supporting findings with quotes established transferability. I tested and adjusted the initial interview protocol based on interviews with two participants not included in the study and asked the same questions to each participant to ensure dependability. An audit trail of all research notes, raw data, and coding fames ensured confirmability. Finally, I engaged in reflexivity (Etherington, 2004) by keeping a research journal throughout the study

Limitations

A number of limitations were present in this study. First, while the findings were consistent, the study included a relatively small number of participants, most of whom were members of historically White

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sororities. Great care should be taken with trying to apply these findings broadly, especially with CBSFs. Second, since only alumni were included, the experience of those members who either left their organization or institution prior to graduation could be very different. Third, all participants held leadership positions at the chapter-level, community-level, or both. This is a particularly notable limitation because holding leadership positions has been found to positively influence sense of belonging (Dowiak, 2016; Holloway-Friesen, 2018; Manley Lima, 2014). Finally, the policies, structures, and student demographics at the institutions that the participants attended were not explored deeply in the study but may have had an influence on their experiences.

Findings

The three main findings from this study centered on (1) personal connections, (2) feeling welcomed and accepted as a member, and (3) a transformation of the college experience. Each are described in detail below.

Personal Connections

The participants described personal connections as one part of belonging. With the exception of Dustin, who met members from the fraternity he joined at his college's fall activities fair, all of the participants joined their organizations because they either knew someone already affiliated with a HWSF, or they knew someone who was also going to a chapter's recruitment event. For three of the participants – Hope, Jake, and Victoria – the people that initially connected them to a HWSF were other students they knew from high school. Others, (Molly and KW) were more inclined to join after they found out that commuter students were members already. KW was unsure if commuter students even could join sororities and fraternities at WCU.

Once members, those personal connec-

tions manifested as a group of friends in their chapters and influence their belonging. Hope described the importance of the friends in her chapter:

> [Having] a smaller network of people that you could truly count on was really important to me…because you can't expect to get along with 35 [or] 40 people at once. But if you have those three or four that are in your immediate (sorority) family that are there to support you, then you can make it through the rest.

While this is logical for larger chapters, even Dustin, who was a member of a smaller chapter, differentiated between the friends he had in his chapter from the chapter members at large. These connections were so important that some participants went out of their way to help other members who were having a hard time making those connections in the chapter. Yet for some of the participants, not living on campus limited the opportunities to interact with members. Nicole for example, said that she "struggled with [other members] hanging out in their dorms and not being invited because [she] didn't live with them." She felt that had she lived on campus, she would have had an easier time interacting with more of her sisters.

Having chapters comprised of multiple groups of friends lends itself to multiple sub-groups within the larger chapter, which the participants generally referred to as "cliques." The sub-groups were not inherently bad, but they became problematic for participants' sense of belonging in two instances: (1) when a participant's closest friends were parts of various sub-groups, or (2) when there was in-fighting between the groups. Molly, for example, felt she had friends in multiple "cliques" within the chapter, which had a negative effect on her belonging:

> I feel there's definitely times where I felt I didn't belong. But I feel like that is in the cliques that come within a chapter. So I feel I was somebody who

was friends at times with different people who were in their cliques but then it was like, "Oh, well I'm not invited because I'm not a part of this friend group in the chapter, but we're friends but I'm not friends with these people."

Jake also had friends in multiple groups. At one point, the disagreements between the groups within the chapter got so bad that he questioned his membership:

> Our chapter went through a really rough period, with cliques in a sense. It was just like toxic - brothers hanging out with each other, but not all being included…It got to the point that the cliques would almost fight with each other. They would kind of create strategies about how to get on the executive board and all that kind of stuff… I was like, "If everyone's fighting with each other, why am I in this chapter?"

Personal connections were important beyond the chapter as well. The connections participants made with other sorority and fraternity members through formal programs and informal interactions helped them feel like they belonged to part of the larger sorority and fraternity community. Hope, for example, met members from other organizations as her sorority's president during a retreat for sorority and fraternity community leaders. She found that in "every fraternity, every sorority, there were people that I made connections with, people that I was friends with, [and] people that I worked with." Jake discussed how his membership helped him make friends in his classes because he would sit with members of other sororities and fraternities, even if he did not know them, because their memberships provided an "instant weird connection" they would not have had otherwise.

Feeling Welcomed and Accepted as a Member

Participants felt that it was important to be welcomed and accepted for who they were in their chapters, which, like with personal connections, began in the recruitment process. Participants felt welcomed by the members in the organization, particularly by those they already knew. Further, the participants felt like the members of the chapters had a genuine interest in them as individuals. Lys for example, discussed the long-lasting impact of being welcomed:

> The minute I went to one of their events I was literally walking up and a girl literally greets me from so far away. I don't know how she knew I was going to the event. But she came up to me and she was like, "Hey, are you coming to the sorority event?" And I was like, "Yeah," and that made me feel welcome…And my guard literally from that moment kind of dropped and I always felt that I didn't have to be guarded or jaded or anything.

Indeed, the participants' sense of belonging hinged on their ability to feel like they could be their "authentic" (Nicole) or "true" (Dustin) selves as members of the larger chapter. The need for authenticity in terms of social identities was present for most of the participants with racially or sexually minoritized identities. For example, both Lys and KW, who are Women of Color from the same chapter both described how their chapter differed from what they described as the "blonde hair, blue-eyed" stereotype. KW even discussed how, as a Black woman, she found the diversity of the sorority welcoming: "one thing that really attracted me was how diverse all those girls were. They were different shapes, different sizes, and different backgrounds. So, that's what really attracted me to [sorority], was the diversity of that sorority."

Authenticity, however, also included the extent to which other members understood the experience they had a commuters. For the most part, chapter members were understanding. but when they were not, it affected participants' belonging within the chapter. Nicole, for example, helped her family take care of her brother who has a disability, which was one of the reasons why she commuted. This was an added responsibility for

her on top of classes, working, and the sorority, and she felt like that piece of her life was not always recognized:

> It would kind of hurt my feelings a lot when, if we would do a safe circle, or if we would do something, and I'd be like, "Well, you girls know that I have a brother who's disabled [*sic*], and he's sick and no one checks in on me."… Not to say that people didn't reach out to me, but the amount that I gave was so much more than the amount that I received. And that was kind of heartbreaking.

Transformation of the College Experience

Through their sororities and fraternities, the participants developed a sense of belonging at their institutions as well. Their experience prior to joining was one of mostly isolation; they did not know many, if any, other students, spent as little time on campus as necessary, and the time they did spend was mostly alone in a campus facility or their cars. Even for KW and Lys, who joined their sorority shortly after becoming orientation leaders, described a similar experience at WCU prior to their involvement with orientation. At SSU the experience was so prevalent that Jake indicated those students were colloquially called "P.C.P. (parking lot, class, parking lot) students." Hope provided a more detailed description of her own experience:

> I really didn't do much of anything…I had breaks in between my classes, and I would spend those breaks taking naps in my car. I didn't really go into the dining hall or anything like that because for one, I didn't know anyone, and two, I just didn't really have the desire to. I really just spent my time going to classes, go to my car, go to classes, and then go home and then go to work.

Joining a sorority or fraternity increased the number of people the participants knew on campus, made them feel like they had places to go, and, ultimately, transformed their college experience. For most of the participants, their sorority or fraternity either motivated them to come to campus or stay on campus longer. Lys described this change for her:

> [Joining my sorority] made me want to be on campus…It wasn't a pain to go to campus as it used to be. When I first went to WCU, I was like, "Gross, I have to go to campus for class," and I would just go to class and then go home. Then, when I was in the sorority, I stayed on campus a lot more to the point where my parents thought I was like dead.

Hope expressed a similar sentiment when reflecting on the experience in her sorority. She said if she had not joined:

> I probably would have been just like I was in high school, just kind of kept to myself, did my work, just quiet. But it completely changed my whole experience…I was opened up to new relationships, opened up to new experiences…I'm thankful every day that I did it.

Nicole, Molly, Victoria, and Jake attributed their college persistence to the sense of belonging they developed either directly or indirectly as members. The connection between developing a sense of belonging through her sorority and persistence was particularly strong for Nicole. She had to wait until her second semester to join her sorority due to college policies, however, she had a hard time making friends her first semester and almost left NSC because of that difficulty:

> The opportunities that I tried to make friends all failed. I'm not saying that joining the sorority was a last resort thing…but it was kind of like if I don't get into this and if I don't make friends in this then I need to leave.

Unlike Nicole, Molly had made friends her first semester in her classes, but struggled academically in her general education courses. Her academic struggle on top of the wear of commuting discouraged her from staying at ECU:

I don't think if my friends joined the sorority, that I would find much value in staying at school or kind of much purpose, in that it was annoying to go back and forth by train and by car and it took a lot out. I wasn't doing well (academically)...I really think because I found a sense of belonging and I found the group of friends that that's the reason that I finished school.

Discussion

This study sought to examine the experience of commuter students' sense of belonging in HWSFs through interviews with alumni. The first research question sought to explore the elements that comprised the experience of belonging. To begin, as others have found in research on HWSF members, belonging was indeed associated with membership (Cohen et al., 2017; McCreary & Schutts, 2015), and, as others have found, the participants benefitted from developing a sense of belonging as commuter students (Clay, 2016; Holloway-Friesen, 2018; Krause, 2007). For these participants, belonging was influenced by their personal connections and feeling welcomed and accepted. These findings related to connections and feeling accepted as part of belonging within their chapters are in line with Cohen et al. and McCreary and Schutt's work, which supports transferability of their findings to commuter students.

One surprising finding was how little being a commuter student specifically mattered for the participants' belonging within their chapters. Using constructionism's tenet of an environment's influence on meaning-making and its invitation to critique the understanding of an experience (Crotty, 1998; Weinberg, 2008), this finding potentially could be that commuting is so common at primarily commuter institutions that it was normalized as part of the experience. Indeed, the participants described commuting and the challenges that came with it as being part of their overall identity as a col-lege student. In that sense, their ability to be "authentic" (Nicole) or "true" (Dustin) selves was important. This is evident with Nicole, whose decision to commute was influenced by her need to help out her family - which is common for commuter students (Burlison, 2015) - and her belonging was diminished when she felt other members did not support her. Interestingly, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) also found the concept of authenticity as a contributor to belonging for minoritized students. Minoritization recognizes that one is not inherently a minority, but rather is minoritized by the environment in which one finds themself (Harper, 2013). Through a broad applicability of this concept, commuter students, too, could be minoritized since four-year higher education institutions are typically designed for residential students (Attewell & Lavin, 2012), which, again, can even be the case at primarily commuter institutions (Weiss, 2014).

Another element of belonging was having personal connections. Again, having personal connections began prior to joining, since the participants knowing somebody their organization or in another HWSF strongly influenced most of the participants' decision to join. This also may be true for residential students who join HWSFs as well, but it is telling that most of the participants did not go through a formal process organized by their institution or a governing council. Weiss (2014) found in her study that commuter students can hold the perception that anything outside of class occurring on campus is only for residential students. While Molly and KW did not directly state that perception, they were unsure as to whether or not commuter students could join sororities until they met other commuter student members. Further, highly formalized recruitment processes could create barriers that limit commuter student involvement, especially if all of the activities occur after students have left for the day (Kirk & Lewis, 2015).

A third piece of belonging was hav-

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ing friends and the internal dynamics of a chapter as a function of belonging. Again, this finding echoes the research that positive peer interactions are important for belonging (Bowman et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2017; McCreary & Schutts, 2015; Pokorny et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2012, 2019). It also extends Jabs' (2018) findings of the importance of a small group of friends to belonging for HWSF members, because it was consistent for all participants, not just members of historically White sororities like in her study. As alumni, the participants were able to reflect on their entire collegiate experience. Indeed, Jake, Molly, and Nicole's descriptions of their experiences indicate that belonging was a shifting experience within their chapter, which adds to the growing literature that belonging is not a static experience that is either achieved or not but rather one that ebbs and flows over time (Bowman et al., 2019; Nunn, 2021).

The second research question explored how, if at all, their membership influenced their belonging on campus. The participants described how they all felt like they belonged to their sorority and fraternity communities in addition to their chapters. They discussed belonging to the community as an extension of belonging in their chapters yet separate from their institution as a whole, which reflects Nunn's (2021) finding that belonging socially and to the institution as a whole are separate but interconnected experiences. This additional layer of belonging is important for commuter students because it is another way for them to make connections with their peers. Many of the connections to other HWSFs members, however, came from formal programs, which the participants attended as leaders of their chapters and communities. It could be that commuter student members who did not hold leadership positions would not feel such a strong sense of belonging to the sorority and fraternity communities if they do not have access to these programs.

The strongest influence of commuting on belonging was the feeling of belonging

at the institution as a whole. Feeling connected to one's institution is atypical for commuter students (Newbold et al., 2011; Weiss, 2014), therefore, it is not surprising that joining a HWSF was transformative for the participants. Again, they knew few, if any, other students at their institutions, most had a hard time making friends in class, and they did not have a residential component to help them meet their peers. As a result, most of the participants spent time between classes alone in their cars or in common areas on campus. The time spent in these spaces, however, is not inherently bad. Weiss (2014) found that commuter students use the time in their cars to nap, study, charge their phones, and eat, but a lack of connection can hinder belonging. After joining their organizations, the participants knew more people and felt like they had places to go on campus, which are important for belonging (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019). As a result, going to campus was no longer a "chore" as Lys described, and as Hope stated, she is "thankful every day" that she joined her sorority.

Recommendations for Research

Since the participants in this study had all graduated as active members, future research ought to explore the experiences of commuter students who either left their organizations or did not graduate from their institutions. Next, while commuter students may have been included in studies involved CBSFs, their identities and experiences *as commuters* warrants exploration, as this study's focus on HWSFs is insufficient. Further, while participants were selected from primarily commuter institutions, the influence of those environments were not explored. Therefore, future studies could examine the influence of institutional policies on the experience of commuter students in sororities and fraternities. Similarly, other studies could explore sense of belonging for commuter students in sororities and fraternities at primarily

residential institutions, specifically those with recognized housing. Finally, quantitative research could illuminate to what extent commuters feel a sense of belonging compared to residential members, non-members, and commuter students in other student organizations

Recommendations for Practice

The main implication for practice from this research is that commuter students can and do benefit from joining HWSFs at primarily commuter public institutions. Practitioners should target messaging toward commuter students that promotes membership as an option for them and advertise where commuter students spend their free time. Next, the importance of peer relationships outside of formal recruitment processes as a contributor to belonging and subsequently joining, suggests that institutions should allow and encourage semester-long recruitment. Indeed, Clay's (2016) findings from a study of involved commuter students (one of whom was a sorority member), suggests that commuter students may wait to join student organizations until they have settled into their routine of classes and have figured out how to balance all their responsibilities. Further, staff working with sororities and fraternities should promote other involvement opportunities on campus, especially on-campus jobs, so that current members will have more opportunities to connect with other unaffiliated commuter students.

It is also important to remember that a commuter student's relationships in their HWSF might be the only strong peer connections they have on campus, especially if they are uninterested or unable to hold leadership positions due to their commitments outside of college and their organization. Therefore, staff can also work with chapters and their advisors to ensure chapter leaders are working to build relationships among all members. Not only will this help members find a group of friends within their chapter, it might help dissolve some boundaries between chapter "cliques." It would also be beneficial to help members develop communication and conflict resolution skills to ensure that group in-fighting gets resolved and does not negatively influence their belonging. Finally, the participants reported feeling a sense of belonging within the sorority and fraternity community in part due to programs they attended as leaders. Practitioners should find ways to expand programming to include more members who do not hold leadership positions such as programming for new members and emerging leaders from all chapters. While not within the scope of the study, these recommendations may be especially important for chapters with a large portion of their membership that lives either on-campus or in affiliated housing, which might create a strong residential-commuter divide.

Conclusion

Membership in HWSFs is so closely tied to the residential experience in our collective consciousness that we forget that those students who do not live on campus may be interested in joining. Not only are some commuter students interested in joining but the findings from this study suggest it can be a key experience that helps to connect them with other students and makes them feel like they belong at their college or university. As scholars and practitioners, we need to be attuned to the commuter student experience in these organizations to understand it more thoroughly and to help support those students who join.

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