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UNDERSTANDING FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON SENSE OF
BELONGING AND A STUDENT SUCCESS PROGRAM: A PROGRAM EVALUATION

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

By

Angela Bartee

November 2021

UNDERSTANDING FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON SENSE OF
BELONGING AND A STUDENT SUCCESS PROGRAM: A PROGRAM EVALUATION

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Evangelist Florine E. Jackson. Since kindergarten, you have motivated me to pursue education with my whole heart, to love the opportunity to learn, and to allow education to create better opportunities for me than you were able to enjoy. Your steadfast commitment to learning inspired me to begin this journey and to complete it. Thank you for praying for me through the end. I love you.

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Abstract

The purpose of this mixed-methods program evaluation was to assess how first-generation students related their participation in the Success Program at LU with their sense of belonging. I used the CIPP model to conduct the mixed-methods program evaluation. The evaluation questions were: (1) To what degree do first-generation students who participate in the Success Program report a sense of belonging? and (2) What components of the Success Program do first-generation students find meaningful, based on student perspectives? The General Belongingness Scale (GBS) was used to collect quantitative data by measuring the levels of sense of belonging reported by program participants. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with nine participants who possessed varying levels of belongingness, based on their GBS scores. The quantitative component of the evaluation found that student respondents possessed positive levels of sense of belonging to the program. The qualitative identified which components of the program were meaningful to students. The two emerging themes included: (a) The meaningful components of the program were activities that enabled students to interact with others, and (b) students found activities were meaningful because they were provided in an encouraging environment.

UNDERSTANDING FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON SENSE OF
BELONGING AND A STUDENT SUCCESS PROGRAM: A PROGRAM EVALUATION

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Yale *belongs* to all of you, and you all deserve the right
to enjoy the good of this place.”

Peter Salovey, 23rd president of Yale University (Stanley-Becker, 2015, para. 19)

In 2015, minority students at Yale University marched in protest to reveal a number of on-campus incidents that had caused pain and distress (Stanley-Becker, 2015). Yale President Peter Salovey invited a group of 40 students to share their experiences with him in the president’s office. During the meeting, students cried and detailed a variety of negative, racially motivated events they had encountered on the campus. The students also communicated their discomfort with certain Yale traditions, such as using the term “master” to address faculty in their living learning communities. At the end of the 4-hour meeting, Salovey, a psychologist, frankly and caringly told the students, “We have failed you...I think we have to be a better university. I think we have to do a better job” (Stanley-Becker, 2015, para. 2-3). After the meeting, Salovey emailed a letter to the entire campus summarizing his commitment to serving these and all students who have felt excluded among campus traditions and practices. “Remember that Yale *belongs* to all of you, and you all deserve the right to enjoy the good of this place” (Stanley-Becker, 2015, para. 19).

These words are the foundation of this dissertation. While the 4 years on a college campus are often considered the best years of a student’s life, I suggest the benefits and good of the campus come after they graduate. Achieving a college education, especially for first-

generation college students (FGS) who are more likely to be ethnic minorities, dramatically elevates their family's social and economic capital. Baum et al. (2013) found that graduates with a 4-year degree earn more, are less likely to be unemployed, lead healthier lifestyles, spend more time nurturing their children, are more likely to have health insurance and pensions, and have increased chances of moving up the socioeconomic ladder. These outcomes for college graduates can be particularly transformative for FGS. However, FGS are not fully achieving the benefits of a college education, because they are not graduating at the same rates as continuing-generation students—students who have at least one parent who has a bachelor's degree.

Over the last 50 years, FGS became a growing part of the college student population (Rizvi, 2018). FGS are students whose parents have not completed a 4-year bachelor's degree (Center for First-generation Student Success [CFSS], n.d.). Approximately 56% of undergraduate students in 2015-16 were first-generation (RTI International, 2019). However, studies show that FGS graduate at a lower rate than their continuing-generation peers. According to the CFSS, only 44% of FGS graduated within six years in 2009, while 60% of their continuing generation peers graduated (RTI International, 2019). Ishitani (2006) found that being an FGS reduced the odds of graduating in 4 years by 51%. X. Chen (2005) found that 43% of FGS withdrew from postsecondary institutions while only 20% of students with college-educated parents did so. Without graduating, I suggest that FGS, as a national population, are not enjoying the good of college campuses.

National priorities in education have called for improving equity in education, which includes increasing college completion rates for FGS (Donohue, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The U.S. Department of Education's (2014) Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2014-2018 outlined national priorities for education that included improving access,

affordability, and degree completion for low-income and FGS. Additionally, many states, like Tennessee, are requiring greater accountability for proving successful outcomes in order to receive state funding (Maio, 2012). Performance-based funding often distributes a state's higher education budget to institutions based on measures such as course completion, credit attainment, and degree completion (Miao, 2012). Given that FGS are comprising larger portions of the college-going population, and considering the graduation rates among these students, it is important for many reasons to investigate means to improve their college completion rates (Davis, 2010). Davis (2010) found that raising the graduation rates of FGS at one institution, caused a significant change on the university's overall graduation rate. If we, as college administrators, choose to recruit vulnerable students such as FGS and ask them to incur the debt that is likely required to complete their degrees, then we have an obligation to recognize the challenges they face and to provide effective support programs that will assist them in completing their studies and graduating (Tinto, 2017).

As President Salovey stated to Yale's minority students (Stanley-Becker, 2015), we must do better. We must do a better job as universities to develop a sense of belonging for our FGS, who are also likely to include a large percentage of ethnic minority students (Davis, 2010). Possessing sense of belonging has been shown to positively affect the persistence and retention of FGS (Strayhorn, 2019). They too deserve to enjoy the good of our campuses.

Researchers have designed institutional program models to aid student success for FGS (Bordelon et al., 2019; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). However, we need to ensure university support programs are accomplishing the goals they have been designed to achieve. One manner of assessing whether a program is serving FGS effectively is by conducting program evaluations. Mertens and Wilson (2012) define program evaluations as an applied inquiry process for

collecting and synthesizing evidence that culminates in conclusions about the state of affairs, value, merit, worth, significance and quality of a program (p. 5). In this dissertation I conduct a program evaluation of a first-generation student support program at one university to help them understand how students relate their participation in the program with their sense of belonging.

Large University (LU) is a 4-year, urban, research university in the mid-Atlantic that is the college of choice for many FGS. Approximately one third of the fall 2020 freshman class of LU students self-identified as FGS. In 2015, LU created a comprehensive FGS intervention program called the Success Program, one of whose goals is to create a sense of belonging among FGS as one of many strategies to aid their persistence to graduation. The Success Program produces and oversees academic and social engagement activities, which have been shown to develop sense of belonging (Davis, 2010; Opidee, 2015; Tinto, 2017). Students who feel a sense of belonging on campus are more likely to persist to graduation (Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto & Cullen, 1973). Success Program activities include summer academic courses, personal skill development workshops, social events, tutoring, peer mentoring, FGS faculty engagement opportunities, and an FGS student organization. Some program activities have been operating for 5 years, but the program has not yet graduated its first 6-year graduation class. Nonetheless, it is an opportune time to conduct a formative evaluation to assess whether the Success Program, through its multiple components, is facilitating the desired outcome of achieving a short-term goal of creating sense of belonging for its participants.

Background

The traditional college student population of 18–22-year-olds is in decline (Glanz, 2014; Sawchuk, 2006), and more universities seek nontraditional students for their financial survival (Rizvi, 2018) and to increase equity and access in higher education (U. S. Department of

Education, 2014). Nontraditional students include working parents, military veterans, adult learners, online students, and FGS (Bruininks et al., 2010; B. Lee & Davies, 2014). Research shows that achieving a college degree can transform the lives of first-generation college students and provide lifelong benefits (Asoni & Sanandaji, 2016; Baum et al., 2013). Baum et al. (2013) found that college graduates are more likely than others to be employed, are more active citizens in their communities, lead healthier lifestyles which reduces healthcare costs, are more likely to collect higher lifetime earnings, are more likely to receive health insurance and pensions from employers, and are more likely to move up the socioeconomic ladder. However, if students begin but do not complete their degrees, they will not enjoy these transformative outcomes. FGS face unique challenges that threaten their likelihood to graduate than their continuing-education peers (X. Chen, 2005; Davis, 2010; Tinto & Cullen, 1973). Common traits among FGS include less rigorous academic preparation in high school, lack of family knowledge on navigating college, heightened concern regarding college costs and loans, more time working off-campus, less student involvement, and suffering with impostor phenomenon (Cunningham, 2019; Davis, 2010; Jehangir, 2010). Because of these factors, FGS drop out at higher rates than their peers (X. Chen, 2005; Davis, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pascarella et al., 2004; Tinto & Cullen, 1973).

According to Tinto and Cullen (1973) who conducted a seminal study investigating the reasons for college attrition, students who drop out usually lack a sense of belonging within the academic or social environment of a college community. Tinto's (1975) resulting Student Departure Theory has been a foundational component of resulting FGS literature and retention models (Bordelon et al., 2019; Solanki et al., 2019; Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging has been studied extensively in the fields of psychology and college student research. Psychologists Baumeister and Leary (1995) explain sense of belonging as a fundamental human motivation. They posit that human beings are pervasively motivated by a need to belong through a strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments. Hagerty et al. (1992) define sense of belonging as “The experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of the system or environment” (p. 173).

College student research also provides extensive literature on sense of belonging, but the field does not share a universal definition. Hoffman et al. (2002) defines sense of belonging as a subjective sense of affiliation and identification with the university community. O’Keeffe (2013) asserts developing a sense of belonging can be achieved by creating a caring environment on campus, and that having a positive relationship with at least one key person, whether a faculty member or program staff member, can create the sense of belonging or connectedness a student needs to persist. Bowman et al. (2019) considers sense of belonging a factor that includes external engagement with the campus community that is also influenced by students’ individual emotional needs. Others consider belongingness to be a multidimensional construct that bridges belonging with peers or other individuals and a perception of belonging in the larger context or organization (Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Strayhorn, 2019).

For this dissertation, I used psychologists Baumeister and Leary (1995) explanation of sense of belonging as a fundamental human motivation. Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) definition of sense of belonging relates to the psychological need of belongingness, without the context of an organization affiliation that is often found in college student research. These

scholars show evidence to support that individuals spend a great deal of time pursuing belongingness, and strongly resist breaking social bonds. According to the authors, belongingness produces positive emotion, and individuals who have a sense of belonging engage more extensive and favorable patterns of information processing for people with whom they share social bonds. Alternatively, Baumeister and Leary (1995) found that deficits in belongingness led to a variety of ill effects such as psychological and physical health problems, and behavioral pathologies. The authors use this information to theorize that sense of belonging is not merely a want but is a human need.

Achieved Sense of Belonging

Baumeister and Leary (1995) posited that sense of belonging can be achieved through actions and engagement with others. Achieved sense of belonging can be established by meeting two criteria:

1. Engaging in frequent and affectively pleasant or positive interactions with the same individuals.
2. Having such interactions occur in a framework of long-term, stable caring and concern.

Sense of belonging can also be achieved or satisfied through tacit associations with groups, as well as by one's perception of, or relationships with, objects, ideologies, animals, nature and spiritual, which transcends interpersonal relationships (Hagerty et al., 1992).

Using Baumeister and Leary's (1995) formula for achieving sense of belonging provides a lens for evaluating if the Success Program is achieving sense of belonging through academic engagement--interactions with faculty within the classroom (Tinto, 1975), or through social engagement--interactions with peers, staff, and student organizations (Tinto, 1975). While

Tinto's (1975, 2017) research suggests engaging students in academic and social engagement activities, Baumeister and Leary's (1995) framework provides details on what components should be included within social and academic engagement activities that will help achieve belongingness for students.

Influence of Achieved Sense of Belonging on FGS. Scholars agree that developing a sense of belonging for FGS is critical to their academic success, whether it is achieved through academic or social engagement programs (Bowman et al., 2019; Davis, 2010; Dumford et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2002; O'Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1975). Having a sense of belonging is critical for FGS who tend to doubt their academic qualification and self-efficacy more than their continuing-generation peers (Buzzeto-Hollywood et al., 2019). Komarraju et al. (2010) found academic engagement with faculty results in a deeper understanding of course content, a stronger sense of belonging, and increased persistence rates. Effective academic engagement builds bonds with instructors and peers and increases learning (Bordelon et al., 2019; Komarraju et al., 2010). Likewise, social engagement is critical to developing sense of belonging for FGS (Hoffman et al., 2002; O'Keeffe, 2013). Developing a social sense of belonging by creating a caring environment between students and others on campus motivates students to perform to the best of their abilities, and prevents student attrition (Pearson, 2012).

According to Tinto and Cullen (1973), who conducted a seminal study investigating the reasons for college attrition, students who drop out of college lack a sense of belonging within the academic or social environment of a college community. The authors suggested that the level of engagement within the distinct academic and social systems of college reflects students' judgment of "fit" within the campus setting and represents perceptions on the part of the student of having shared values and support in the collegiate environment. Tinto and Cullen's original

study (1973) and Tinto's continued research (1993, 2017) recommend creating programs that provide academic engagement and social engagement for students that will assist them in developing a sense of belonging and will ultimately help students persist to graduation.

Academic engagement activities describe interactions with teaching faculty and peers within the classroom or related to coursework (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). Social engagement activities include interactions with peers, staff, faculty, and student organizations through formal and informal activities outside of the classroom (Tinto & Cullen, 1973).

Tinto's research has been a foundational component of FGS literature on intervention strategies that encourage student success (Bordelon et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2002; Solanki et al., 2019; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Tinto created models (Tinto, 1993; Tinto & Pusser, 2006) for institutional action and conditions needed to retain students. Contemporary studies confirm that students who possess a sense of belonging on campus are more likely to persist to graduation (Hoffman et al., 2002; O'keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2019). This program evaluation measures achieved sense of belonging by participants in the Success Program and which components of the program students found meaningful.

FGS Retention Program Models and Program Evaluation. Universities that desire to retain FGS are implementing a variety of social and academic engagement programs to develop sense of belonging. Researchers have recommended several models of programs that create a sense of belonging and encourage retention among FGS. These program models consist of summer bridge programs, academic advising strategies, academic success skills workshops, living learning communities, or semester-long courses (Bordelon et al., 2019; Davis, 2010; Hicks et al., 2019; Jehangir, 2010). However, formative program evaluations of FGS success programs are needed in order to ensure they are achieving the goals they are designed to address (Mertens

& Wilson, 2012; Spaulding, 2008). Spaulding (2008) asserted that student progress is often tracked and measured but the educational practice is rarely monitored in ways that actually improve educators' and program practices. Spaulding recommended that schools regularly evaluate educational practices to "determine their worth and to make recommendations for programmatic refinement and success" (p. 171). Universities that implement programs without periodic evaluations of these programs risk attracting FGS to college to watch them drop out with thousands of dollars in debt (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir, 2010). FGS who incur high levels of debt without earning a college degree are further disadvantaged (Jehangir, 2010). This dissertation sought to learn more in its formative program evaluation on a student support program at a 4-year, public, research university to inform stakeholders on whether the program is achieving one of its desired goals of creating a sense of belonging among FGS.

Program Description

The Success Program began operating in 2015 at LU to support the success of FGS. The program organizes and connects students with academic and social engagement activities for FGS across the campus.

Context

LU is a large, public university that has approximately 20,000 undergraduate students and 8,000 graduate and professional students. The LU student body is diverse. About 50% of LU students identify themselves as students of color or multiple races. A large majority of the students (80%) come from within the state, and 4.5% are international students. Approximately 7% of its undergraduate students are transfer students, 60% are female, and 40% are male. One-third of LU's students are eligible to receive federal Pell Grants, which identifies them as low-

income students. Each year, the institution has approximately 3,000–4,000 FGS undergraduates on campus.

Located in the heart of a busy, urban environment, the university also markets to adult students, working adults, and to those who need to complete unfinished degrees. Part-time students make up of 20% of the student body. LU has a residence hall capacity to house approximately 5,000 students. Many students live off-campus or commute from home. LU's mission statement states that it celebrates the diversity of its student body and is committed to advancing knowledge and success, while addressing disparities wherever they exist. This mission objective embodies the university's commitment to supporting the success of FGS who typically graduate at lower rates than their peers.

Description of the Program

The Success Program is managed by the Strategic Enrollment Management Division at LU. Program activities are available to all FGS on campus, and participation is voluntary. The program advertises its activities through emails to students and posters are distributed around the campus welcoming all FGS. Students may opt in to receive the monthly e-newsletter about program activities by sharing their email addresses with program staff. These opt-in students are considered the program participants with whom program staff can regularly and directly communicate. The current program participant list contains 1,019 students. The list contains the students' email addresses, but demographic information is not collected about the students. Goals of the Success Program are to:

- Educate students of campus resources
- Facilitate student use of campus resources
- Develop sense of belonging and community

- Support retention of FGS
- Aid on-time graduation of FGS

Program activities begin the summer prior to freshman year and are available through senior year. The program staff includes a Director, Administrator, a graduate assistant and two undergraduate student assistants. The program staff also liaisons with staff members across the campus who serve FGS in various academic programs such as business, engineering, and medicine. The Success Program staff shares other programs' activities with Success program participants. The Success Program staff also serve other departments under the division of Strategic Enrollment as needed. The program oversees a first-generation student organization, and a peer mentoring program. Program staff, peer mentors and student organization leaders help organize monthly social and academic engagement activities for students. Activities are advertised on bulletin boards across campus, through the participant e-mail list, and through the all-student campus listserv. The program has an office that students can visit to receive information and guidance. Student participants receive t-shirts and other branded merchandise throughout the year. Seniors receive a program pin when graduating. To achieve its goal of supporting student success for FGS, the Success Program provides a comprehensive mix of academic and social engagement.

Academic Engagement. Academic engagement includes initiatives that include faculty and are tied to courses or curricula (Bowman et al., 2019; Hoffman, 2002; Solanki et al., 2019). Many academic engagement programs are led by academic departments, such as STEM departments that want to ensure the success of FGS or other at-risk students pursuing science majors (Hicks et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2012).

Success Program activities that are considered academic engagement are:

- Summer Scholars Program—a fee-based, five-week summer program that gives high-achieving FGS a head start at getting acquainted with college resources at LU and college-level academic work. Students take classes, earn credits, make new friends, and get assigned to peer mentors.
- Peer mentorship course—a class taught by the Success Program administrator who trains upper-class students on leadership and best practices for mentorship.
- TRIO Bridge program—a program for approximately 200 FGS who applied and were admitting into the TRIO program. The Bridge program prepares students for college-level courses, enables them to build friendships and introduces them to college resources.

Social Engagement. Social engagement activities are designed to create a supportive, caring community by helping students make friendships with each other, staff, and faculty (O’Keeffe, 2013; Pearson, 2012). Many Success Program activities are considered social engagement because they are voluntary extracurricular activities that are administered outside of the classroom. Although some activities teach skills designed to aid classroom success, such as tutoring sessions, they are not required or tied to a course or faculty member. In order to evaluate the influence program activities have had on developing sense of belonging, the Program’s social engagement activities have been divided into four categories based on their most primary purposes:

Peer Support and Community. The program offers a variety of opportunities for students to learn about the supportive community available to FGS at LU, to interact with one another, make friends, and become part of the FGS community.

- Orientation—a unique component of the overall new student orientation that introduces information specifically addressing needs of FGS
- The Success Program student organization—a student-led initiative in which FGS student leaders organize activities to create community. FGS student organization leaders work closely with program staff.
- ALIGN conference—a national conference sponsored by the Alliance for Low-Income & First-Generation Narrative that serves FGS from dozens of colleges through student empowerment and community building workshops.
- Peer mentors—a group of junior and senior FGS who are paired with younger FGS to provide regular support and friendship
- Social outings to theater productions, concerts, and other gatherings.
- Branded items that show belongingness to the FGS community such as program posters, t-shirts, and graduation pins.

Personal Skill Development. Various skills workshops are organized by program staff, student organization leaders and other departments across campus to teach important skills that lead to student success.

- First Tuesdays—evening workshops to introduce study skills, tutoring, and other campus resources such as the Counseling Center, Campus Learning Center for Tutoring, Library and Research Services, and Campus Recreation Center.
- Money Mondays—a monthly seminar that teaches money management strategies that are helpful during college and after graduation.

- The Success Program conference—an on-campus conference where program participants research and present topics related to FGS. Students, faculty, and community college students are invited to attend.
- Career panels that include guest speakers of alumni and non-alumni career professionals who share knowledge about successfully entering graduate school or desired professions.

Informational Resources. Several communication instruments exist to share information with FGS at LU. These include:

- The Success Program website—a branded website that introduces program activities and other important information to encourage the success of FGS on campus. The website connects students to information related to Accessibility Services, Advising, Career Services, free Drop-in Tutoring, Financial Aid, Libraries and the Writing Center); also includes news stories about the accomplishments of FGS on campus. The website is designed to be a valuable 24-hour resource for students and their families.
- Bi-monthly e-newsletter—communicates helpful information about activities in the Success Program and across the campus, including important deadlines for common university procedures such as adding and dropping classes.

Figure 1 presents a logic model of the Success Program’s activities.

Figure 1

Organization of the Success Program Based on the CIPP Model

Stakeholders

The primary stakeholders for whom this program evaluation would benefit are the program managers and university leaders. As the university invests resources into making this program available to students, leaders at a state university want to know that their efforts are effective in helping this vulnerable population succeed. Secondary stakeholders could include the other program leaders who could perhaps adapt success strategies used in this program for other nontraditional students such as veterans, parenting students and others. Finally, state legislators and corporations should be interested in this evaluation to recognize the effect state budget allotments and corporate gifts are having on aiding college completion.

Overview of the Evaluation Approach

Program evaluation is an important and useful strategy for assessing the effectiveness of educational programs (Gall et al., 2007). Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007) define evaluation as the systematic investigation into an entity's value. Specifically, program evaluation is the process of collecting, reporting, and applying descriptive information about an object's value (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007, p. 312). I approached this evaluation through the pragmatic paradigm. Mertens and Wilson (2012) explain pragmatic evaluators are concerned with research that can be useful to stakeholders and program leaders for program refinement and decision-making. The pragmatic paradigm aligns its evaluation methods with Use Branch evaluation models, which illustrate how these theoretical perspectives are used in practice with specific emphasis on generating information that facilitates use of evaluation findings in practice (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Stufflebeam's (2000) Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) model is useful for the pragmatic paradigm and Use Branch evaluations and provided an appropriate structure for the purpose and scope of this dissertation.

Program Evaluation Model

The CIPP model structures evaluations in order to guide and improve programs or enterprises (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). The model is specifically designed to help strengthen enterprises, issue accountability reports, help disseminate effective practices, increase understanding of involved phenomena, and help decision makers, stakeholders, and consumers become aware of entities that are worthy or unworthy of further use (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). Stufflebeam, the author of the CIPP model, is a Use Branch evaluation theorist and the model's findings serve the purposes of pragmatic evaluators who endeavor to provide evaluation findings that will be useful to program staff (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). The model's

epistemological orientation is objectivist, which carries the assumption that moral good is objective, not based on an evaluator's feelings or personal emotions (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007).

The CIPP model enables the evaluator to investigate an entity through four core concepts: its context, inputs, processes, and products, which make up its acronym (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). Context evaluations relate to the needs, problems, assets, goals, and environmental conditions surrounding the program (Stufflebeam, 2000). Input evaluations investigate the resource allotment invested into the program, such as its budget, personal levels, procedural plans, and cost-effectiveness (Stufflebeam, 2000). Process evaluations explore how the program is being implemented and involve the evaluator monitoring and documenting execution of program plans and providing feedback on the quality and timeliness of program services (Stufflebeam, 2000). Finally, product evaluations assess the intended and unintended outcomes of the program (Stufflebeam, 2000).

Purpose of the Evaluation

The primary purpose of this evaluation was to learn how FGS related their participation in the Success Program at LU with their sense of belonging. Furthermore, the evaluation allowed students to convey in their own words which program components were meaningful to them, based on student perspectives.

Developing a sense of belonging is an intended short-term outcome of the Success Program. The quantitative component of this mixed-methods evaluation measured the levels of sense of belonging reported by program participants. Belongingness levels were measured by an objective instrument, the General Belongingness Scale (Malone et al., 2012). The qualitative component of the evaluation followed with a subset of the quantitative survey participants in

order to provide greater understanding into how student participants have experienced the phenomenon of belongingness through program activities. The qualitative component of the study administered in-depth interviews to nine students who gave feedback on which components or factors were meaningful in creating a sense of belonging. Understanding how students' experience belongingness will aid program administrators in recognizing what components of the program are aiding their efforts to achieve desired goals and how to continue integrating those components in future activities.

The evaluation is designed to be formative, conducted while the program is being implemented, not at its conclusion (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Formative product evaluations are conducted during implementation and provide data and feedback on whether program goals are being addressed and achieved (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). The evaluation findings are intended to help provide useful data and feedback to help improve program implementation to further meet the needs of its primary stakeholders—FGS. For these reasons, the CIPP model adequately served this evaluation purpose.

Focus of the Evaluation

This mixed-methods evaluation addressed two components of the CIPP model—the process and product components. As the quantitative component of the evaluation measured one the program's outcomes, it addressed the product component of the CIPP model. The qualitative component of the evaluation explored which components of the Success Program students found meaningful. The data from the qualitative interviews addressed the process component of the CIPP model.

The evaluation questions for this dissertation align with Mertens & Wilson's (2012) guidelines for evaluating program effectiveness. Program effectiveness can be ascertained by:

- assessing skills development, knowledge gain, and/or attitude changes by program participants
- documenting the level of success in accomplishing objectives
- gathering success stories

Results from this study will inform future management of the program on how program activities are affecting participants' sense of belonging based on student perspectives. It will also aid decision-making about how activities can be enhanced to develop sense of belonging for future FGS.

Evaluation Questions

I used the following questions to guide the evaluation:

1. To what degree do first-generation students who participate in the Success Program at Large University report a sense of belonging?
2. What components of the Success program do participants find meaningful, based on their perspectives?

Definitions of Terms

Academic engagement refers to programs that include faculty or academic programs that are designed to promote students' academic success in the classroom (Bowman et al., 2019).

Continuing-generation college students are students who have at least one parent who has completed a 4-year college degree (Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

First-generation college students, or FGS, are students whose parents or guardians do not possess a bachelor's degree (Davis, 2010).

Sense of belonging is the strong, innate human motivation to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Social engagement includes activities that promote congruency with the social environment through building relationships with others (Tinto & Cullen, 1973).

Student Engagement includes the amount of physical and psychological energy students devote to the academic experience, which includes studying, spending time on campus, participating actively in student organizations, and interacting frequently with faculty members and other students (Astin, 1984).

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Since the passage of Higher Education Act of 1965 (1965), first-generation students (FGS) have been identified and studied by academic researchers. In 1965, the Higher Education Act made postsecondary education available to low- and middle-income families (Umbricht, 2016), and the research following its passage showed differing levels of retention and graduation among students. This chapter reviewed the literature related to FGS, the factors that contribute to their lower graduation rates and sense of belonging, and program models designed to create belongingness. Furthermore, research on sense of belonging and how it affects retention were explored.

Defining FGS

A common assumption is that FGS are the first in their families to go to college. However, according to the literature, there are nuances among the definitions of FGS that can make identifying the population unclear (Ward et al., 2012). Some scholars defined FGS as students whose parents had no college or post-secondary experiences (Billson & Terry, 1982; Choy, 2001; Froggé & Woods, 2018; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004; Ward et al., 2012). Other scholars recognized FGS as students whose parents may have had some college but did not achieve a credential or degree (Aspelmeier et al., 2012; Cragg, 2009; Davis, 2010; Palmer et al., 2011; Ward et al., 2012). In an effort to include the needs of immigrant students, some scholars have defined FGS as students whose parents did not complete a 4-year college degree in the United States (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Shields, 2018). Another common definition of FGS

describes students whose parents have not earned a 4-year bachelor's degree at all (Davis, 2010; Vega et al., 2019).

In 2015, a national group of admissions officers standardized the FGS definition by adding a descriptor field on the Common Application that would enable universities to identify FGS in the application process. The Common App is a universal admissions application form used by approximately 900 universities to simplify the admissions process while increasing access, equity, and integrity (Common App, 2020). The Common App (2019) defined FGS as students whose parent(s)/legal guardian(s) have not completed a bachelor's degree. The Center for First-Generation Student Success (CFSS) (n.d) also uses the Common App's definition of FGS as students whose parents did not complete a bachelor's degree. The CFSS is a joint initiative between the Suder Foundation and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, the professional association for student affairs professionals in higher education. LU uses the Common App for its admission process and uses the Common App's FGS definition. Therefore, for the purpose of this evaluation, I used LU's definition of FGS as students whose parents have not earned a bachelor's degree.

History of FGS Literature

Studies on FGS have existed for at least 50 years (Terenzini et al., 1996; Tinto & Cullen, 1973). Research on FGS began as an extension of studying college dropouts following the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965. The Higher Education Act expanded access to college education to non-traditional students by creating financial resources for scholarships and grants to support low- and middle-income students (Umbricht, 2016). Following implementation of the Higher Education Act, U.S. government agencies and education policy organizations

conducted quantitative studies to study the impact of the new legislation on increasing student access and success (Astin, 1972; Tinto & Cullen, 1973).

Tinto and Cullen's (1973) seminal study, sponsored by the U. S. Office of Planning, Budgeting, and Evaluation, focused on drop-out factors in higher education and examined the impact of institution type and factors that threatened college completion. After academic ability, the second most significant variable found to affect a student's persistence in college was their parent's education level (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). In Tinto and Cullen's study, 85.2% of the students enrolled at a 4-year institution and whose father had completed a 4-year college persisted to graduation while only 60% of students whose fathers had only completed some college remained in school. Though Tinto and Cullen (1973) did not coin the term *first-generation student*, their findings were among the earliest that recognized the different levels of success among students relative to the education levels of their parents.

The growing diversification of college student populations has influenced the evolution of FGS literature. Scholars found the earliest FGS studies treated students as a homogenous group and did not consider the needs of culturally diverse students. Tinto's (1993) Theory of Individual Student Departure recommended separating students from their home communities in order to fully integrate into the academic and social environments of the campus and to help them avoid dropping out. Contemporary scholars have found this theoretical suggestion to be ineffective for ethnic minorities, such as Spanish-speaking or Native American FGS (Beard, 2018; Cunningham, 2019; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Youngbull & Minthorn, 2018). While Davis (2010) recognized that FGS need help from universities to resist pressure exerted by family members and friends to return home without a 4-year degree, scholars have criticized

Tinto's original theory for not considering cultural diversity and cultural influences on students' decisions to leave college (Kuh & Love, 2000; Tierney, 1999).

Tierney (1999) argued that Tinto's recommendation to isolate FGS families from students would be particularly damaging to students of color and could lead to cultural suicide. Cultural suicide refers to students neglecting their own culture and imitating another culture, which can have detrimental effects on students whose cultural connections provide a positive sense of identity and belongingness (Tierney, 1999). Family influence in some cultures, such as the Latinx culture, is pivotal in facilitating a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and identity for FGS. Instead, Tierney proposed cultural integration—including students' family and cultural identities as part of the campus dynamic—and that students should maintain their cultural and relational bonds with their families while at college (Cunningham, 2019; Kiyama et al., 2018; Youngbull & Minthorn, 2018). Sàenz et al. (2007) found that creating programs giving Latinx FGS opportunities to stay engaged with and include their families and culture into their college experiences increased sense of belonging, retention, and academic success. For example, the Hispanic Mother Dance at Arizona State University helped students feel validated and recognized on campus, and it nurtured a reputation of institutional support toward FGS and their families (Sàenz et al., 2007). Similarly, Cunningham (2019) found that the identities and self-efficacy of Latina women were positively influenced by their families and Latin culture. Furthermore, the studies found maintaining the connection between the home culture and the campus community contributed to students' feeling a sense of belonging on campus and their persistence (Cunningham, 2019; Sàenz et al., 2007). Encouraging Latinx students to separate from their communities, as recommended by Tinto and Cullen (1973), would cause emotional injury, and threaten their persistence at college (Cunningham, 2019).

Greater awareness and attention to cultural traits of diverse FGS student populations have led to more qualitative studies that investigated the intersection of sense of belonging with factors that interact with the unique qualities and values associated with FGS cultural groups (Cunningham, 2019; Hicks et al., 2019; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Meeuwisse et al., 2010). Guillory and Wolverton (2008) found that Native American students' connections with their families empowered them to overcome challenges on campus such as unwelcoming environments and a lack of academic preparation. Contemporary qualitative studies explored the lived experiences of FGS subcultures and allowed practitioners to more deeply understand how cultural experiences intersected with components of social and academic engagement that could influence sense of belonging for FGS (Cunningham, 2019; Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Rondini, 2018; Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008b; Strayhorn et al., 2016; Yeung, 2018; Youngbull & Minthorn, 2018).

Common FGS Attributes

Although FGS are not a monolithic group (Strayhorn, 2008b), the literature has repeatedly revealed common traits among FGS that threaten their sense of belonging at college. The literature can be divided into those that focus on student characteristics before college and those that focus on experiences after enrolling in college (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Pre-College FGS Attributes. Before college, FGS tend to have lower high school GPAs and are not as academically prepared as their peers (X. Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle et al., 2006; Froggé & Woods, 2018; Terenzini et al., 1996). They tend to come from single family homes, from lower socio-economic status families (Engle et al., 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996), and are more likely to include ethnic minorities (Engle et al., 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). FGS generally have lower college aspirations and have less support from family

(Davis, 2010; Engle et al., 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). They also spend less time socializing with peers and talking with teachers in high school (Terenzini et al., 1996).

FGS Commonalities During College. After enrolling in college, FGS tend to have experiences that diminish academic engagement which threaten students' sense of belonging (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). FGS declare majors later and complete fewer academic credits in the first year (X. Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle et al., 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). They are more likely to withdraw from classes they attempt, and have lower grade point averages (Anastal et al., 2018; X. Chen & Carroll, 2005; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). FGS speak in class less frequently than continuing-generation peers (Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Terenzini et al., 1996) and volunteer for classroom presentations less frequently (Davis, 2010). FGS tend to have familial obligations that conflict with academic and social engagement (Lightweis, 2014), study fewer hours outside of class (Terenzini et al., 1996), and are less likely to participate in study groups (Lightweis, 2014; Terenzini et al., 1996).

FGS also tend to struggle with social engagement. They are more likely to have difficulty developing relationships with faculty and peers (Lightweis, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Terenzini et al., 1996) and joining academic clubs or student organizations (Froggé & Woods, 2018; Lightweis, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Terenzini et al. (1996) reported that FGS are less likely to perceive that faculty members are concerned about students' progress and are more likely to report receiving encouragement from friends to continue enrollment. Additionally, FGS lack study and time management skills (Davis, 2010; Engle et al., 2006), and they are more likely to report having personally experienced discrimination (Terenzini et al., 1996). Due to financial needs, FGS worry about their financial security (Davis, 2010) and work more hours off-campus (Mehta et al., 2011; Terenzini et al., 1996). Living and working off-campus can prevent

students from engaging with campus activities and developing meaningful social connections, which can negatively affect belongingness and academic achievement (Davis, 2010; Engle et al., 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

FGS and Impostor Phenomenon. Emotionally, FGS are more likely to report feelings of isolation, and are known to suffer from *impostor phenomenon* (Davis, 2010; Engle et al., 2006). Impostor phenomenon is the crippling feeling of self-doubt, intellectual inadequacy, and anticipated failure that haunts people who attribute their successes to luck or help from others rather than their own abilities (Nelson, 2011). Impostor phenomenon occurs when students are afraid that the faculty and other students will discover that they do not know as much as they think they should know in order to be in college (Davis, 2010). FGS regard other students as the *real* students who should be answering the instructor's questions; thus, they are less likely to volunteer to answer questions or participate in class discussions (Hayes, 1997; Terenzini et al., 1996). While everyone has occasional bouts of insecurity, students who struggle with impostor phenomenon suffer from profound doubts about their abilities, no matter what they have accomplished or how highly other people think of them (Nelson, 2011). Many studies report that without intervention, FGS report lower senses of belonging than their peers (Bradbury & Mathur, 2009; Davis, 2010; Green & Wright, 2017; Jehangir, 2010; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Strayhorn, 2019).

FGS and Social Capital. Overall, FGS lack the socio-cultural capital that continuing-generation students possess to aid navigation through college (Davis, 2010). Carter (2005) explains that social capital takes the form of information-sharing networks as well as social norms, values, and expected behaviors. Cultural capital is the system of beliefs, tastes, and preferences derived from one's parents (or guardians) that ultimately define one's social class

status (McDonough, 1997). Lin (2001) continues that social capital is based on relationships that facilitate access to resources. First generation students, whose parents did not complete a bachelor's degree, lack the social and cultural capital to thrive in college settings and are forced to acquire it from others while on campus (Davis, 2010; Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). Kinzie and Kuh's (2004) Power of One concept asserts that any individual among the university community can serve an influential role in encouraging and supporting the belongingness of students. The authors encourage relationship-building between student affairs and academic departments, including faculty, staff, administrators and advisors, in order to share the responsibility of promoting belongingness and increasing student persistence (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004).

Sense of Belonging

A proliferation of studies on sense of belonging has emerged; however, the concept of belongingness has many definitions (Bowman et al., 2019; Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Stebleton et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2019). Literature related to a *sense of belonging* was first explored in the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry. Bowlby's (1980) attachment theory posited the need for adults to form and maintain relationships with others as an effort to recapture the connection between the individual as an infant and its mother. Evidence exists that people in every society form social bonds easily and belong to small primary groups that involve face-to-face, personal interactions (Mann, 1980). More generally, happiness in life and subjective well-being are strongly correlated with having close personal relationships (Argyle, 1987). Adversely, the absence of close social bonds is strongly linked to unhappiness, depression, loneliness, and other woes (Argyle, 1987; Leary, 1990).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation. The authors asserted that humans desire to form social attachments and resist

breaking them. They further found that deficits of belongingness led to a variety of ill effects, both psychological and physical (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Hagerty et al. (1992) articulate sense of belonging as a construct beyond a perception of “fitting in” and define it as “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that person feels themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment” (p. 177).

Research on sense of belonging is prevalent in college student research. Tinto and Cullen (1973) described sense of belonging as separate roles within the academic and social environments. In the academic environment, Tinto and Cullen (1973) described belongingness in a college's academic environment as a sense of congruency between the intellectual development of the individual and the prevailing intellectual climate of the institution. Belongingness within the social environment of campus, according to the authors, is developed through interaction between the individual with a given set of characteristics (e.g., family background, values, attitudes, and interests) and other persons, implying a notion of congruency between the individual and the social environment. Tinto and Cullen (1973) argued that students could experience varying degrees of friendship, communication, and support with faculty and peers by integration through informal peer group associations, semi-formal extracurricular activities, and/or informal contact with faculty and administrative personnel. McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined sense of belonging as a general feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together. Strayhorn (2008b) explained that sense of belonging in college was a feeling of connectedness and that one was important to others on campus. Strayhorn (2019) later refined his definition as "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about and important to others on campus such as

faculty, staff, and peers" (p. 4). Strayhorn (2019) agrees with Baumeister and Leary (1995) that sense of belonging includes cognitive and affective components, and suggests the feeling of connectedness will lead to an affective or behavioral response.

Sense of Belonging and College Persistence

Although different definitions of sense of belonging exist within the literature, scholars agree on the outcomes of having sense of belonging and how it affects FGS persistence at college. The literature shows that FGS who have a sense of belonging on campus are more likely to persist to graduation than students who have a low sense of belonging (Bordelon et al., 2019; Bowman et al., 2019; Dumford et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2002; O’Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2019). McGonagle et al. (2014) found that students in their STRONG-CT program for science students experienced higher sense of belonging, achieved better grades, and progressed to major and graduate in STEM fields. Strayhorn (2019) found that students with stronger senses of belonging were more likely to participate in academic activities that promote college success. Thus, increasing sense of belonging is critical to facilitate student success and college completion (Bowman et al., 2019; O’Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2019).

Achieved Sense of Belonging

According to Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) Belongingness Theory, belongingness can be achieved through two main concepts:

1. People need frequent personal contacts or interactions with other people, and ideally these interactions would be affectively positive or pleasant.
2. People need to perceive that an interpersonal bond or relationship exists that is marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future (not just positive interactions with momentary strangers).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) agree with Hagerty et al. (1992) that sense of belonging can also be achieved or satisfied through tacit associations with groups, as well as by one's perception of, or relationships with, objects, ideologies, animals, nature and spiritual, which transcends interpersonal relationships.

College student literature further demonstrates that varying levels of engagement within the social and academic environments of a university can increase or decrease sense of belonging for FGS (Bordelon et al., 2019; Bowman et al., 2019; Braskamp et al., 2015; Hoffman et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2019; Strayhorn et al., 2016). Tinto and Cullen (1973) suggested that belongingness could be achieved through integration through informal peer group associations, semi-formal extracurricular activities, and/or contact with faculty and administrative personnel, resulting in varying degrees of social communication, friendship support, faculty support, and collective affiliation. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) found that students who participated in learning communities developed higher senses of belonging than their peers. Strayhorn (2008b) found that *time spent studying* increased Latinx students' senses of belonging. Strayhorn (2008a) also found cross-racial interactions increased sense of belonging for African American males and their White male peers at a predominately White institution. Scholars agree that sense of belonging can fluctuate or be affected by different people, experiences, and objects, but measuring programmatic effects on creating sense of belonging has involved multiple approaches.

Measuring Achieved Sense of Belonging

Measuring achieved sense of belonging varies according to scholars' definitions and approaches to the construct; therefore, there is no universal measurement of achieved sense of belonging (Malone et al., 2012). Within the field of college student research, some studies have

operationalized a general sense of belonging as a single measure of students' *perception* of connectedness with others (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Stebleton et al., 2014). Scholars have developed various scales attempting to measure this one-dimensional, innate perception of sense of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Hurtado and Carter (1997) used a three-item scale that measured students' perceived cohesion to a group, including such items as: *I see myself as a part of the campus community. I feel that I am a member of the campus community. I feel a sense of belonging to the campus community.* Similarly, Hausmann et al. (2007) developed a one-dimensional scale for measuring the innate sense of belonging, including general questions such as: *I feel a sense of belonging to (name of institution). I am happy to be at (name of institution). I see myself as part of the (name of institution) community.* These scales measure a general sense of belonging to a larger community and appear too broad to address the purposes of this program evaluation.

College student research has expanded sense of belonging into a multidimensional measure (Bowman et al., 2019; Braskamp et al., 2015; Dumford et al., 2019; Hoffman et al. 2002; Strayhorn, 2008a, 2019). Employing a multidimensional approach enables researchers to assess specific interactions and how they affect sense of belonging. Unfortunately, these scales are flawed in that they measure multiple constructs, not just sense of belonging. For example, Hoffman et al. (2002) created a Sense of Belonging scale to evaluate whether a year-long freshman seminar helped develop sense of belonging among class participants. The authors developed a 26-item scale that included items consistent with belongingness theory, as well as items such as: *No one in my classes knows anything personal about me. I have met with classmates outside of class to study for an exam. I feel comfortable socializing with a faculty member outside of class.* The findings from these items could measure other constructs that may

not relate to sense of belonging. For example, a student may not have “met with classmates outside of class” because they live off campus or their work schedule conflicts with their peers’ available time. Additionally, cultural factors on how to interact with authority figures could explain why a student does not interact with a faculty member outside of class and would not necessarily be explained by students’ sense of belongingness. The multi-dimensional scales are flawed in that they tend to measure too many constructs at once (Malone, 2016). Malone (2016) suggested empirical evidence supports that sense of belonging is defined by one dimension.

Malone et al. (2012) found attempts to measure sense of belonging within the psychology discipline were also flawed. Hagerty and Patusky’s (1995) attempt to measure sense of belonging included items that led to multiple constructs including valued involvement, fit, and antecedents to belonging (Malone et al., 2012). Malone et al. (2012) also found that R. Lee and Robbins’ (1995) attempt to develop an assessment of sense of belonging led to two separate measures: the Social Connectedness and Social Assurance Scales and did not adequately measure sense of belonging. The Need to Belong Scale (Leary et al., 2013) assessed the motivation to be accepted by others and to avoid being shunned, which can be an indicator of sense of belongingness but not an assessment of achieved sense of belonging (Malone et al., 2012). Malone et al. (2012) further criticized efforts to measure sense of belonging in that more than 80% of the items in each scale were negatively worded (e.g., *No one in my classes knows anything about me.*). Malone et al. (2012) argued that scales that are primarily worded with negative items indirectly measure a sense of belonging by assessing a lack of *not* belonging.

In 2012, Malone et al. created the General Belongingness Scale (GBS) instrument to assess a sense of achieved belonging across multiple levels of specificity, ranging from close friends and family to others in one's environment. This 12-item scale was developed using a

balance of negatively and positively worded items to better account for individual differences in how respondents interpret items (Malone et al., 2012). The reliability and validity statistics were high for the instrument. Thus, I chose to use Malone et al.'s (2012) GBS to measure sense of belonging in Success Program participants for this evaluation.

College Retention Program Models that Develop Belongingness

Researchers have developed and evaluated many intervention programs that develop sense of belonging among FGS (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Stuber, 2011). These programs can be divided among academic engagement and social engagement program activities.

Academic Engagement Program Models

Academic engagement programs create opportunities for FGS through curricular engagement with faculty and students within the classroom (Hoffman et al., 2002). Academic engagement addresses both the cognitive and social-psychological aspects of the learning process (Solanki et al., 2019). Bordelon et al. (2019) explained that academic engagement practices, such as first-year seminars/experiences, and intensive writing courses, build bonds with instructors and peers and create a sense of belonging. Similarly, Komarraju et al. (2010), found that academic engagement results in a deeper understanding of course content, a stronger sense of belonging, and increased persistence rates. Furthermore, students who have opportunities to interact with instructors they perceive as being approachable, respectful, and available both in the classroom and outside of the classroom seem to have a higher level of belongingness and confidence (Bordelon et al., 2019; Komarraju et al., 2010).

Academic engagement programs can include freshman seminars or College 101 courses, pedagogy for at-risk students, and engagement with faculty to support better grades and success in the classroom (Davis, 2010; Hoffman et al., 2002; Jehangir, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Summer bridge programs introduce new freshmen to the college environment and help prepare them for college-level coursework before students enroll in college classes (Opidee, 2015).

Another academic engagement model that has been found to significantly increase FGS academic success is learning communities (Jehangir, 2010; McGonagle et al., 2014; Solanki et al., 2019). Curricular learning communities include linked courses or clusters in which a cohort of students are simultaneously enrolled in two or more courses, sharing some degree of explicit integration by way of curriculum, learning outcomes, shared assignments, and interrelated coursework (Hoffman et al., 2002; Jehangir, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996). Learning communities can be designed to cater to the needs of specific student populations such as honors students, students with similar academic interests, students of color, or students with disabilities (Davis, 2010; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir, 2010). Some learning communities are created by grouping FGS into shared courses, such as freshman seminars or professional development courses (Buzzeto-Hollywood, 2019; Glaessgen et al., 2018; Hoffman et al., 2002). Solanki et al. (2019) found that students who enrolled in a learning community called EASE had higher STEM course grades, an increase in their cumulative first-year GPAs, and gains in non-academic outcomes, such as their senses of belonging and academic integration.

Social Engagement Program Models

Social engagement programs create opportunities for students to build friendships with other students, staff, faculty, and others, but are not linked to classroom or academic coursework (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). The literature indicates that social engagement activities that help FGS achieve a sense of belonging include peer support groups, social events, informational events, or resources, advising, and activities that transfer social capital to FGS (Davis, 2010; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Opidee, 2015; Petty, 2014). To provide some structure

to the many social engagement activities recommended by the literature, I will describe program models that relate to the activity categories of the Success Program in this evaluation:

information, peer support and community, personal skill development, and financial resources.

Informational Resources. Informational resources refer to printed and online knowledge sources that provide FGS with information that support successful adjustment and navigation of the college environment. The primary disadvantage FGS face is the lack of guidance from their parents regarding how to successfully navigate through college. Informational resources provide helpful content that aid students from the first year through graduation. A lack of awareness of the services available and how to access them hinders FGS from accessing support that can help them achieve academic and social engagement that builds sense of belonging (Winograd & Rust, 2014). Opidee (2015) recommended that programs provide information to enable FGS to overcome the knowledge gaps they possess and learn about the skills and resources that will help them succeed in college. Opidee (2015) recommended having a landing web page for FGS and their families with blogs and videos from upper-class FGS introducing college with helpful tips.

Peer Support and Community. Programs that create a sense of community among FGS, other students, and faculty help students build relationships that are critically important in developing sense of belonging. Traditional summer orientation programs that include college transition components aimed at FGS can enhance essential socialization skills, help students make new friendships, facilitate introductions to faculty, and teach students how to meet faculty expectations in the classroom (Davis, 2010; Hicks, 2003; Lightweis, 2014). Davis (2010) suggested that FGS orientation content should provide distinct information that addresses issues that cause the most anxiety for FGS.

Program activities that help students overcome impostor phenomenon and recognize their feelings are shared by others can be meaningful to FGS. Panel discussions with faculty, staff, peers, and alumni who were FGS can help students recognize the phenomenon as a common feeling and identify ways to deal with it (Davis, 2010). Additional activities to help FGS overcome impostor phenomenon can include peer support groups in which upper-class FGS are available to younger students, and having FGS faculty explain how they experienced and dealt with it. Additionally, social activities, such as field trips, cultural festivals, study groups, sporting events and community projects, create opportunities for FGS to gather and facilitate friendships and belongingness (Davis, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Mentorship programs have direct, positive effects on achieving students' sense of belonging, according to the literature (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Eller et al., 2014; Lightweis, 2014). In Crisp and Cruz's (2009) study, mentors provided guidance to students on research, careers, academics, and personal skills such as being a good listener. The mentor relationships involved student-to-student, student-to-faculty, and student-to-staff member. Eller et al. (2014) found that specific behaviors of effective mentors included: (a) open communication and accessibility, (b) goals and challenges, (c) passion and inspiration, (d) caring personal relationship, (e) mutual respect and trust, (f) exchange of knowledge, (g) independence and collaboration, and (h) role modeling. Students who participate in mentoring programs report a greater sense of belonging and student and academic engagement than students without mentors (Hurd et al., 2018; Moschetti et al., 2018; Smith, 2007).

Advisors are also important members of the caring community needed by FGS in that they are responsible for monitoring students' success. Research findings recommend specialized advising for FGS (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Page et al., 2019). College advisors should be

provided professional development opportunities to learn more about the specific needs of FGS and the cultural subgroups within the FGS population (Davis, 2010; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Vega et al., 2019). Davis (2010) found that requiring multiple mandatory meetings with campus advisors was a best first line of defense against homesickness affecting academic performance, and thus began a habit for student-advisor engagement that continued beyond the first semester.

Contemporary scholars have found program activities that create opportunities for FGS to continue and celebrate their cultural heritage can positively contribute to greater sense of belonging on campus (Cunningham, 2019; Kiyama et al., 2018; Youngbull & Minthorn, 2018). Coggins et al. (1997) found that maintaining traditional Native values and identity were factors that help Native American students have higher grades, lower dropout rates, and higher self-esteem.

Personal Skill Development. Opidee (2015) recommended that programs provide information that will enable FGS to overcome the knowledge gaps they possess and to gain the social and cultural capital FGS lack that will help them succeed in college and beyond. Thering (2012) found that FGS attended college because they wanted to advance their social status by obtaining a bachelor's degree, and that FGS were more interested in classes or majors that could prepare them for a future job. Therefore, activities that help develop personal and professional skills that aid students' professional advancement are useful in helping students persist and achieve success (Lightweis, 2014). Buzzeto-Hollywood (2019) found that workshops on time management and study skills, as well as faculty introductions to college expectations and motivational talks on self-assurance, helped build self-efficacy and belongingness among FGS. Activities that merged academic tutoring with opportunities to make friendships also positively influenced sense of belonging (Lightweis, 2014).

Summary

In this literature review, I explained the history of FGS literature as well as how the literature shows that the social and academic engagement of FGS help them develop sense of belonging. I presented common challenges that FGS face while pursuing bachelor's degrees and the various support program models that can develop sense of belonging. In the next chapter, I introduce the methodology for this evaluation.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

This chapter presents the methodology used to conduct a program evaluation of a student support program for first-generation students (FGS) at a large, public, research university. The Success Program was started in 2015 with several goals to enhance the success and graduation of FGS at Large University (LU). One of the goals of the program was to create sense of belonging among its participants, as belongingness facilitates college student persistence (Davis, 2010; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 2017). The purpose of this program evaluation was to assess how students related their sense of belonging with participation in the Success Program. This formative, mixed-methods evaluation used quantitative and qualitative data to provide useful information for enhanced management and execution of the program.

Evaluation Questions

I used the following evaluation questions to guide the program evaluation:

1. To what degree do FGS who participate in the Success Program report a sense of belonging?
2. What components of the Success Program do student participants find meaningful, based on their perspectives?

This chapter explains the methodology, the theoretical framework, and data collection procedures used for this evaluation.

Program Evaluation Approach

Program evaluation is a systematic process of critically examining a program by collecting and analyzing information about the program's activities, characteristics, and

outcomes (Gall et al., 2007; Mertens & Wilson, 2012). The presentation of a judgement conclusion on the worth and merit of a program is what sets program evaluation apart from traditional research methodologies (Fournier, 2005). Findings from program evaluations are used to assess the effectiveness and impact of programs, to inform decision-making on investment of resources, and to make continuous improvements that will achieve greater success (H. T. Chen & Chen, 2005; Mertens & Wilson, 2012; Simpson & Waye, 2016). As universities implement programs intended to improve access, support, and college completion rates for FGS, it is imperative that program managers administer regular program evaluations in order to ensure program activities achieve intended outcomes and to continually improve successes (Huang, 2011).

I approached this program evaluation through the pragmatic paradigm. Pragmatic researchers are concerned with investigating real solutions to problems (Creswell, 2014; Mertens & Wilson, 2012). The purpose of my evaluation was to gauge whether the processes or activities implemented by the Success Program at LU are helping to achieve a sense of belonging among FGS who participate in the program. The pragmatic paradigm aligns its methods with the Use branch of evaluation that focuses on generating data that are found to be useful by stakeholders (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). This program evaluation was designed with input from stakeholders. The Success Program administrator provided explanations of program goals, activities, and personnel.

As a formative program evaluation, the evaluation was conducted during the delivery of the program with the intention of improving continued operation of the program (Fournier, 2005). At the commencement of this evaluation, the Success Program was entering its fifth year of operation. It has not been operational long enough to assess progress toward the long-term

goal of improving the 6-year FGS graduation rate; however, it is an opportune time to conduct a formative evaluation to measure its influence on achieving a short-term outcome of creating sense of belonging for participants.

Description of the Program Evaluation

I used Stufflebeam's (2000) Context, Input, Process and Product (CIPP) model to organize the structure of the evaluation. The CIPP model divides evaluations into four areas: context, input, process, and product evaluations. According to Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007), a context evaluation helps evaluate goal setting, and input evaluations relate to the staffing, budget and other strategies needed to achieve program objectives. Process evaluation guides implementation, and product evaluation helps with outcome measurement (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). Using the CIPP model, I evaluated the product and the process components of the Success Program. The quantitative component of the evaluation focused on measuring the short-term outcome (the product) of sense of belonging as reported by program participants. The qualitative portion of the evaluation solicited greater detail on which activities and components of the program (processes) were meaningful to students, according to student perceptions.

This evaluation followed an explanatory, sequential mixed methods design, which uses both quantitative and qualitative methods in the same study (Fraenkel et al., 2015; Mertens & Wilson, 2012). A mixed methods approach has two strengths: to clarify and explain relationships found to exist between variables and to allow us to explore relationships between variables in an area of interest (Fraenkel et al., 2015). A mixed methods program evaluation is appropriate when the evaluator uses the pragmatic paradigm as the philosophical framework for the study (Mertens & Wilson, 2012).

I used the explanatory, sequential mixed-methods design, where the evaluator starts with the quantitative component and concludes with the qualitative component of the evaluation (Creswell, 2014). After collecting the quantitative data, I wanted to gain a deeper understanding by interviewing students about their personal, lived experiences. The detailed feedback would be critical to understanding how to explain my findings and inform future program management.

Role of the Evaluator

I served as an external evaluator for this program evaluation. Mertens and Wilson (2012) explain external evaluators can be more objective during an evaluation because they have no personal responsibility within the program. I was able to gain knowledge about program services through conversations with program administrators and staff. As an external evaluator, I was less susceptible to the internal politics of the program and division, nor had a personal stake in the success or failure of the program. While I planned to observe program activities for the evaluation during the fall semester of 2020 and spring 2021, the pandemic conditions caused the cessation of all in-person student activities from spring 2020 through spring 2021. All of my knowledge about student participation and student perspectives on sense of belonging was gained through self-selected reporting by students.

My personal assumption is that programs such as the Success Program at LU can be helpful in supporting the retention and graduation rates of FGS. However, I am also aware that FGS have succeeded in college without having a program such as the Success Program on their campuses. As a strategic planner, my ultimate interest was attempting to measure whether program activities were assisting in achieving the goals established by the program, and to learn how to make recommendation that would prove useful to program administrators to increase their successes. I was careful to not impose my own assumptions and to allow the quantitative

analysis of belongingness scores document student perspectives and to permit students to communicate their experiences in their own words during follow-up interviews to describe factors that were meaningful in influencing their belongingness at LU.

Participants

After conversations with the program administrator, the sample for this evaluation included current student participants of sophomore status or higher. It was determined that student participants who had experienced at least one full year of program activities could provide useful feedback for this evaluation. Students were recruited during the spring of 2021. The Success Program is a student affairs program that is managed by the Student Enrollment Management and Student Success division of LU. The university has approximately 3,000–4,000 undergraduate FGS, but all FGS do not participate in the program. Participation is voluntary, and attendance sheets are not required at program activities. Program participants are given the opportunity to opt-in to receiving the monthly program e-newsletter to stay abreast of program activities. This “opt-in” e-newsletter list was considered the participant list and was used to contact students to participate in this evaluation. One thousand nineteen student participants are on the “opt-in” list. Students provided their email addresses to receive the program e-newsletter list, but no other data or demographic information was collected with the email addresses. Therefore, all students on the opt-in list, including freshmen who were ineligible participants for this evaluation, received the invitation to participate in the surveys. The freshman responses were excluded in this study.

Survey Participants

For this evaluation, I used convenience sampling for this evaluation. Convenience sampling is choosing settings, groups, and/or individuals that are conveniently available and

willing to participate in the study (Collins et al., 2007). The survey was distributed during the spring of 2021. Most classes at LU were still provided online while on-campus student activities remained closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As most students were at home continuing their studies online, FGS in the Success Program could only receive information about this program evaluation and participate in the surveys if they had adequate technology and internet services to do so.

The entire population of students who opted in to receive the Success Program e-newsletter (1,019 students) were invited to participate in the survey by email. Of the 1,019 program participants, 159 students completed the survey. Participants for the evaluation must have been sophomores or higher; therefore 60 freshman respondents were excluded. As a result, 99 respondents met the criteria for inclusion in the evaluation. Because the opt-in email list did not include other demographic data, I was unable to exclude freshmen from the survey invitation list. Therefore, it was difficult to calculate a valid survey response rate with an invalid list of survey recipients. The closest response rate I could calculate would have been 9.7% with the incomplete recipient list that included freshmen. The division of survey participants by school year is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Survey Participants by School Year

Year	<i>f</i>	%
Sophomore	45	45.5
Junior	28	28.3
Senior	26	26.3
Total	99	100.0

Adjustment to the Study. The execution of this program evaluation was highly affected by a viral pandemic of Covid-19 that was spreading throughout the United States. In spring of 2020, the highly contagious nature of the Covid-19 virus caused LU, along with most institutions across the country, to close the campus and send all students home to complete their studies through online classes. By fall 2020 and spring 2021, LU was still delivering most of its classes virtually, and all in-person student activities were cancelled due to the pandemic. Some students were able to live on campus while taking online classes, but most students were completing their studies online from their primary residences. All extracurricular student programs and services were closed to in-person contact during the execution of this evaluation. All Success Program activities during the fall of 2020 were being held virtually for students via webinars, zoom online meetings or through social media platforms. The absence of normal student activity likely decreased participation in the surveys for this evaluation which were distributed during the spring of 2021. I was unable to attend program events during the fall of 2020 to personally recruit participants for the evaluation. Therefore, evaluation participants were limited to students who had the necessary computer technology and/or internet service in their homes to participate in an extra-curricular activity. FGS are more likely to come from low-income populations (Davis, 2010) and response to virtual invitations to participate in this study may have been hampered due to Covid-19 restrictions and technology limitations.

Typically, the survey response rate of 9.7% may be considered low for quantitative evaluation. However, formative program evaluations are not designed to be generalizable and are conducted during the development or delivery of a program with the intention of providing useful feedback to improve the evaluand—the Success program (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). As the evaluator, I decided that the survey data would still provide useful information to program

leaders on ways to improve the Success Program at LU, and the survey data was used to continue the evaluation as designed.

Interview Participants

For the qualitative component of the evaluation, I used convenience sampling. Convenience sampling enabled me to secure participants that were most available and willing to be interviewed (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). I also used a nested sampling process in which participants for one component of the evaluation represent a subset of the participants from the other component of the evaluation (Collins et al., 2007). There was no exact formula for determining the appropriate number of participants for qualitative research (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Morse (2000) recommended using at least six participants for studies that use a phenomenological approach. Johnson and Christensen (2010) suggested phenomenological questions explored the meaning and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon by an individual or many individuals. The second evaluation question sought to understand the phenomenon of being a first-generation student who had participated in the Success Program, and which program activities were meaningful to them, based on their lived experiences. For this purpose, nine students were selected to participate in the qualitative interviews.

To gain diverse perspectives on students' experiences and sense of belongingness, students were selected from the moderate and high levels of belongingness based on their scores from the survey.

Table 2*Demographics for Interview Participants*

Student	Year	Transfer	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	No. of Activities	TRIO	GBS Score
Abby	Senior ^a	No	20	Other	4	Yes	3.08
Isabela	Sophomore	No	20	Latina	3	No	4.17
Kayla	Sophomore	No	19	Black/African American	6	Yes	4.42
Daniela	Senior	Yes	23+	Latina	4	No	4.67
Gina	Sophomore	No	19	Latina	9	No	4.92
Shea	Senior	Yes	20	Latina	6	No	5.25
Eve	Junior	No	21	Black/African American	7	No	6.08
Aaila	Sophomore	No	18	Asian/Pacific Islander	9	No	6.33
Ally	Junior	No	21	White	11	Yes	6.92

Note. TRIO is the name of a federally-funded program that supports disadvantaged students; GBS = General Belongingness Scale.

^a Senior through advanced dual-enrollment credits but second year at Large University

All nine participants who responded to the invitations to be interviewed identified as female.

Participants for the interviews must have granted permission to be interviewed on the survey, and they had to have participated in at least two program activities. In pre-evaluation conversations with the program administrator, it was decided that students who had attended at least two activities could provide in-depth feedback on program activities. One of the program activities listed in the survey was “read the program e-newsletter.” For this evaluation, it was

determined that while reading the e-newsletter is an important activity, participants who were desired for this evaluation should have at least physically attended a program activity in order to be able to provide the useful feedback desired.

Of the 99 valid participants who completed the survey, 56 granted permission to be interviewed. To select the nine participants, I divided the 56 interview volunteers into three categories of belongingness--*low, moderate, and high*--based on their GBS scores. I began to email three students in each category from the top, middle and lowest levels of each category, until I secured nine students who agreed to participate. After three unanswered attempts to reach a student, I proceeded to the next student in that belongingness category based on scores. Only one valid participant scored in the low category of belongingness, and that student did not respond to my email requests. Therefore, the interview participants possess moderate and high levels of belongingness.

Adjustment to the Study. Social distancing guidelines due to the pandemic strongly prohibited personal contact with students during the evaluation. All outreach to participate in interviews was conducted via email, and the interviews were conducted by video using Zoom online video technology instead of through face-to-face interviews. The outreach to students to participate in interviews became difficult due to the inability to meet students personally or to attend group activities to recruit participants. Therefore, I was limited to convenience sampling and self-selection for interview participants. As a result, the participants did not represent all categories of belongingness.

I planned to interview three students in each level of belongingness—low, moderate, and high, based on their GBS scores from the survey. There were only three students from the survey respondents whose GBS scores placed them in the low level of belongingness. However, only

one of those students had attended at least two program activities. One student did not check any box for activities attended. A second student only listed one activity—receiving the e-newsletter, as the activity attended. After multiple attempts to reach the student who had attended at least two program activities, I received no response. Therefore, I was unsuccessful in interviewing students from the low level of belongingness. As a result, the interview sample of nine students was adjusted to include five students who reported moderate levels of belongingness and four students with high levels of belongingness.

Demographics of Interview Participants. The nine students interviewed for this evaluation were diverse in several categories—age, race/ethnicity, class year, and number of activities. Table 2 lists the nine interview participants and their demographic traits. There were four (44%) sophomores, two (22%) juniors, and three (33%) seniors. One student was 18 years old, two were 19, three were 20, two were 21, and one student was 23+ years of age. Four (44%) students identified themselves as Latina, two (22%) students were Black/African American, one (11%) Asian or Pacific-Islander, one (11%) student White, and one (11%) student selected Other as their descriptor for race. The ethnic diversity of the interview participants is higher than the university's overall diversity, which falls in line with research that shows FGS are more likely to be students of color (Davis, 2010). A total of 78% of the interview participants considered themselves students of color, while the university reports about 50% of LU students identify as students of color.

Two students considered themselves transfer students. The oldest student, who was 23+ years of age, transferred to the university after completing two years at a community college. The second transfer student transferred to LU from another 4-year institution after her freshman year. One student self-identified as a senior but entered college with 24 dual enrollment credits

and could graduate in the fall of 2021. This student (starred in Table 2) would be considered a sophomore by number of years at a university and had only completed 1 year in the Success Program, but is a graduating senior based on the number of academic credits achieved. Although this student is not considered a transfer student, the number of credits she brought to the university creates a unique crossroad of her age and professional development needs as an FGS.

All interview respondents were female, which is a limitation of the evaluation. The university has a 40% male student population. Multiple and direct email attempts were made to invite male and non-binary gendered students to participate in interviews, but none responded. This limitation to having interview responses from one gender will be considered in recommendations for Chapter 5. Nonetheless, following the rationale of value for qualitative research, I found that being able to document the lived experiences of these nine program participants, although they may not be representative of the entire FGS population at LU, still offered valuable insight into how students perceive and experience the program.

Data Sources

In order to answer the evaluation questions, quantitative data were collected through surveys, and qualitative data was collected through individual, in-depth interviews.

Measure 1: Survey

Surveys were used to answer evaluation question one: *To what degree do FGS who participate in the Success Program report a sense of belonging?* I used Malone et al.'s (2012) GBS (Appendix A) to assess the participants' *sense of belonging*. The GBS was developed to measure achieved sense of belonging, and it measures belongingness across multiple levels of specificity (Malone et al., 2012). Malone granted me permission to use the scale and provided instructions on how to adapt the survey in order to protect validity and reliability.

GBS. The GBS was used to measure sense of belonging by students who have participated in the Success Program at LU. The GBS is a 12-item scale that is validated to measure achieved sense of belonging among college students (Malone et al., 2012). Malone et al. (2012) revealed that participants can report a sense of belonging based on two factors: feeling accepted or not being excluded. Rejection/Exclusion factors refer to negatively worded items, and Acceptance/Inclusion items refer to positively worded items. The scale presents an equal number of six negatively and six positively worded items. This dual-balanced approach to including both negatively and positively worded items was designed to better account for individual differences in how respondents may interpret an item (Malone et al., 2012).

There is sufficient evidence for the validity of the GBS. Malone et al. (2012) found that internal consistency of the scale, measured using Cronbach's Alpha, was high ($\alpha = .94$, $N = 81$), with average inter-item correlation = $.57$ ($M = 66.3$, $SD = 13.5$). There was strong evidence of convergent and predictive validity, and evidence of discriminant validity was obtained as expected (Malone et al., 2012). Malone et al. found similar validity scores in a second study using the GBS. Reliability was high: Coefficient $\alpha = .95$, $N = 435$, and average inter-item correlation = $.62$ ($M = 69$, $SD = 14.1$) (Malone et al., 2012). Convergent and discriminant validity were demonstrated, and evidence of predictive validity was obtained (Malone et al., 2012).

In this evaluation, the GBS had a minimum average score of 1 and a maximum average score of 7. Scoring of the items consisted of a Likert-type rating choice format. Participants self-reported their perceptions of belongingness from low (*strongly disagree*) to high (*strongly agree*). Negatively worded items were reverse-scored, and higher scores reflected higher levels of belonging.

The specificity of relationship targets was changed relate to the Success Program and the university environment. I followed Malone’s (personal communication, August 19, 2020) guidance regarding how to limit text changes to the targeted relationships and to keep the specificity from specific to the broad targets for participants. Maintaining the order of the survey design and limiting wording alterations helped protect validity and reliability. The relationship targets were: relationships with other Success Program students, Success Program staff members, Success Program activities, the campus community, family and friends, and the university overall. The relationship targets were repeated in both the Acceptance and Exclusion sections. The adapted GBS questions that were used to evaluate sense of belonging with the Success Program are listed in Table 3 and can also be found in Appendix B.

Table 3

The General Belongingness Scale (GBS) for Success Program participants

Item	Description
<i>Acceptance/Inclusion</i>	
1	When I am with other students in the Success Program, I feel included.
2	I have close bonds with family and friends.
5	I feel accepted by Success Program staff members.
8	I have a sense of belonging at Success Program activities.
10	I have a place at the table with students on campus.
11	I feel connected to LU.
<i>Rejection/Exclusion (reverse scored)</i>	
3	I feel like an outsider at Success Program activities.
4	I feel as if students in the Success Program do not care about me.
6	Because I do not belong, I feel distant at LU.
7	I feel isolated from students on campus.
9	When I am with staff members in the Success Program, I feel like a stranger.
12	Friends and family do not involve me in their plans.

Measure 2: Interviews

In-depth interviews were designed to answer evaluation question two: *What components of the Success program do FGS find meaningful, according to student perspectives?* Creswell

(2014) describes interviews as face-to-face, one-on-one, in-person interviews that generally use open-ended questions to elicit views and opinions from the participants. I began the interviews by asking easy background information and then moved toward more in-depth questions related to the evaluation questions. The interview included unstructured and open-ended questions that were few in number. The interviews allowed participants to share historical knowledge and information through their perspectives as students. The interview questions explored experiences and sense of belonging that align with the same relationship targets included in the GBS survey—program students, program staff, program activities, other students on campus, family and friends, and the university in general.

Data Collection

The use of a mixed-methods design requires data collection from a number of sources. For this program evaluation, data were collected using a survey and interviews. This section will describe the data collection process for both components of the evaluation.

Surveys

Quantitative data were collected by following Gall et al.'s (2007) steps for conducting surveys: define the research objectives, select the sample, design the questionnaire, pilot-test the questionnaire, pre-contact the sample, write a cover letter for the survey, follow up with non-respondents, and analyze questionnaire data.

The survey was developed using Qualtrics, an internet-based survey tool. I was required to use an online survey due to social distancing restrictions at the time; however, online surveys also fit the needs of the sample population—undergraduate college students. Undergraduate college students prefer online surveys because they are convenient and easy to use (Park et al., 2019). Online surveys are less expensive, more environmental-friendly, and faster to distribute

and collect data than mailed surveys (Fisher & Herrick, 2013). The online survey also enabled student participation in the program evaluation while meeting the social distancing requirements during Spring 2021.

I pilot-tested the survey first with the program administrator to ensure questions were relevant to the program's activities. The program administrator provided feedback to improve the survey by clarifying language students would understand and removing activities that were only provided through the TRIO program but advertised by the Success Program. All of the program administrator's feedback was included in the survey.

Next, I pilot-tested the survey with three Success Program participants to ensure test questions were understandable and relevant. The program administrator provided names of students who would be reliable to complete the pilot-test. The selected students were invited to provide feedback for improving the questions if needed. All students were able to complete the survey with ease and had no feedback for refining the survey.

Prior to sending the survey to all program participants, the Success Program administrator introduced my study in the February 2021 e-newsletter (Appendix C) and explained that I would be contacting them directly within two weeks to invite their participation in the survey. I emailed the students two weeks thereafter with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, the value of student participation, ensured confidentiality, and welcomed questions (Gall et al., 2007). The email cover letter (Appendix D) was distributed all 1,019 Success Program students on the e-newsletter list and included a link to begin the survey if students consented to participate according to the conditions outlined in the cover letter.

In addition to following Gall et al.'s procedures for traditional surveys, I followed Jue's (2016) recommendations for increasing participant responses from online surveys. Jue (2016)

suggests online participants will provide the highest responses within the first three days after receiving the survey and recommends sending a reminder email no later than seven days after the first survey distribution email. Therefore, four days after sending the cover letter with the survey, I sent the first reminder email to program participants. Four days later, I sent the second and final email reminder only to nonparticipants, asking them to complete the survey. The survey was closed for responses 30 days after the e-newsletter introduction.

At the beginning of the survey, participants were asked basic demographic information, and the General Belongingness Scale questions followed. The surveys were anonymous, and no personal identifiable information was collected. At the end of the survey, participants were able to provide their contact information and to check a box to grant permission to participate in follow-up to acquire more detail about their program experiences. Upon submission, the survey data was immediately saved in Qualtrics for analysis.

Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with nine students, a subset of participants in the quantitative surveys. Park et al. (2019) indicate that undergraduate college students show a higher willingness to participate in online research if incentives are offered and if the design and format are easy. I offered \$20 gift certificates to the university bookstore to motivate students to participate in the interviews.

At the commencement of each interview, I emailed the consent form to students, and explained its contents. After students read the consent forms, they typed their names indicating consent and emailed the forms back to me. After receiving students' emailed consent, I followed Creswell's (2014) guidelines for conducting qualitative interviews. I used an interview protocol to guide each interview in a consistent manner. I started with an ice-breaker question and moved

into four or five interview questions that addressed the focus of the qualitative exploration. I probed the participants with follow-up questions to solicit greater detail to explain their answers when needed. I left spaces between the questions to jot down notes about student responses and ended the interviews by thanking students for spending time with me. After completing the interviews, gift certificates were emailed to each student.

The interviews were recorded and recorded using the closed-captioning application of zoom technology. The interview transcripts were downloaded for each student. An outside transcriber was hired to clean up each transcription document, removing unnecessary time stamps and flawed wording captured by the technology. I provided the final edits for the interviews by listening to each interview videotape and matching the transcript words to ensure transcripts accurately reflected student responses.

Data Analysis

This section describes how the data were analyzed in order to understand the levels of sense of belonging reported by student participants in a Success program for FGS at a large, public university. The analysis of the qualitative data provides deeper understanding into what components of the Success Program students found meaningful.

Survey

The survey data were designed to answer the first evaluation question: *To what degree do FGS who participate in the Success Program report a sense of belonging?* The GBS was used to measure students' achieved sense of belonging with the Success Program. I used IBM's

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software to calculate the GBS Scores and analyze the data with descriptive statistics of frequency, mean, median, and mode.

Interviews

The interview data were designed to answer the second evaluation question: *What components of the Success Program do FGS find meaningful?* The interview data were transcribed and coded to identify emerging themes from participant responses. In this evaluation, I allowed the themes to emerge rather than utilize predetermined codes based on literature or previous studies. I followed Creswell's (2014) steps for analyzing qualitative data.

1. Organize and prepare the data for analysis
2. Read or look at all the data to gauge a general understanding of the content.
3. Start coding, which is the process of dividing the data by bracketing chunks and writing a word that represents a category in the margins.
4. Use the coding process to describe the setting or people and the emerging themes.
5. Use the coding and emerging themes to create a narrative that describes the findings of the analysis.
6. Make an interpretation of the findings to capture the essence and resulting meaning from the findings and themes. (pp. 197-200)

Table 4 provides an overview of the evaluation questions, data sources, and data analysis for the study.

Table 4*Evaluation Questions, Data Sources, and Data Analysis*

Evaluation Question	Data Sources	Data Analysis
1. To what degree do FGS who participate in the Success Program report a <i>sense of belonging</i> ?	Survey	Descriptive statistics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of belonging to other FGS who are Success Program participants? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey item 1 and 4 & interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of belonging to Success Program staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey item 5 and 9 & interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of belonging at Success Program activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey item 8 and 3 & interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of belonging with family and friends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey item 2 and 12 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptive statistics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of belonging to students on campus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey item 7 and 10 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of belonging at LU 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey item 6 and 11 & interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis
2. What components of the program do the FGS find meaningful?	Interviews	Thematic analysis

Note. FGS - first-generation students, LU = Large University.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

This section will outline the assumptions and delimitations that undergirded this evaluation. Additionally, the limitations that were encountered during the process will be presented.

Assumptions

Assumptions are beliefs that guide the way a researcher approaches an investigation (Fraenkel et al., 2015). Fraenkel et al. (2015) explain that assumptions are related to the views researchers hold concerning the nature of reality, the relationship of the researcher to that which he or she is studying, the role of values in a study, and the process of research itself. The philosophical assumptions of qualitative researchers listed by Fraenkel et al. (2015) align with my own:

1. The individuals involved in the research situation construct reality; thus, realities exist in the form of multiple constructions.
2. Research investigations produce alternative visions of what the world is like.
3. It is impossible for the researcher to stand apart from the individuals he or she is studying.
4. Values are an integral part of the research process.
5. Facts and values are inextricably intertwined.
6. The initial ambiguity that occurs in a study is desirable.
7. The purpose of education research is an understanding of what things mean to others.

(p. 427)

Delimitations

Delimitations are the characteristics of a study that result from the conscious exclusionary and inclusionary decisions made during the development of the study plan (Simon & Goes, 2013). As a program evaluation, this study was specifically designed to evaluate the influence the Success Program has had on the first-generation student participants at LU. The scope of the study was limited to participants in this program at a single institution and only to students who

had participated in the program. I did not study belongingness for FGS who were not participants in the Success Program.

Limitations

Limitations are matters or occurrences that arise in a study that are beyond a researcher's control (Simon & Goes, 2013). A major limitation underlying this study was the physical restriction of not being able to personally engage with Success Program participants in their natural. Due to the social distancing guidelines related to the pandemic, my evaluation was limited to participants who had access to technology and internet services. Moreover, another limitation is the sampling method. Students self-selected or volunteered to participate in the surveys or in the interviews. Scholars have found that research volunteers share traits that make them likely to be a biased sample of the population (Gall et al., 2007). Some traits include that volunteer researchers tend to be better educated about the topic, have higher social-class status, and are more social than non-volunteers (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1975). Therefore, the self-selection sampling process may yield data that reflects bias. The quantitative findings related to the measurement of survey participants' sense of belongingness are not generalizable to the greater FGS population at LU and should be cautiously interpreted. An additional limitation is that validity may also be an issue in the study. The post-test evaluation design measured sense of belonging as an outcome of student participation in the Success Program; however, multiple factors can help achieve sense of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2008a). Therefore, participation in the Success Program may not be the sole explanation for students' reported sense of belonging.

Ethical Considerations

As the primary evaluator in this study, I followed the Program Evaluation Standards established by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (Yarbrough et al., 2011). I minimized bias by developing a goal-free evaluation design that did not assume or anticipate the outcome the program was having on participants. Furthermore, I protected the identity of participants and the institution to encourage honest feedback. Finally, I treated all stakeholders with respect and professionalism and honored the established protocols for working with program staff and participants and for implementing the evaluation methodology. To assist with ensuring ethical treatments of evaluation participants, I submitted my research proposal to the William & Mary Institutional Review Board (IRB) to gain approval for working with human subjects.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this mixed-methods program evaluation was to assess how first-generation students (FGS) related their participation in the Success Program at Large University (LU) with their sense of belonging. The Success Program has a short-term goal of creating sense of belonging among its participants, as a critical factor toward a long-term goal of increasing retention and graduation rates of FGS at the institution. The program has not been operational long enough to measure the resulting graduation rates of the FGS participants; therefore, this formative evaluation was designed to address achievement of a short-term goal—developing sense of belonging. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected for the program evaluation. The full methodology was described in Chapter 3, outlining how the General Belonging Scale (GBS) was distributed and scored, and how the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded to answer the evaluation questions.

This chapter will present the data on the levels of achieved sense of belonging reported by students who participated in the quantitative component of the evaluation and the findings that emerged from student interviews, which provided greater explanation into what factors influenced students' sense of belonging, based on student perspective. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected to answer the evaluation questions. The findings will be presented in the order of the evaluation questions.

Evaluation Question 1: To what degree do FGS who participate in the Success program report a sense of belonging?

The quantitative data revealed that Success Program participants who completed the survey possessed positive levels of belongingness. Belongingness scores were measured by the GBS (Malone et al., 2012). The GBS is a 12-item instrument that mixed positive-worded and negative-worded items to measure sense of belonging. Negative-worded items were scored in reverse. The GBS created a possible mean score between 1.0 and 7.0. Scores were divided into three categories of belongingness: *low*, *moderate*, and *high*. The ranges for each category of belongingness can be found in Table 5.

Table 5

Range of Belongingness Levels

Level of Belongingness	Range of Belongingness Score
Low	0–2.99
Moderate	3.0–4.99
High	5.0–7.0

Students' belongingness scores ranged from 1.92 to 6.92. The mean GBS score for participants was 5.11 ($SD = 1.028$). The median score was 5.17. The mean and median scores fell within the high level of belongingness (see Table 5). A total of 97% of survey respondents reported moderate and high levels of belongingness, and 68% of participants reported a belongingness score that fell within one standard deviation above or below the mean, between 4.08 and 6.14. The number of participant scores in each belongingness category are shown in Table 6.

Table 6*Participants' Levels of Belongingness*

Level of Belongingness	<i>N</i>	%
Low	3	3.0
Moderate	36	36.4
High	60	60.6
Total	99	100

Belongingness by School Year

Belongingness scores were collected for sophomores, juniors, and seniors as they have had the opportunity to participate in the Success program for at least one full year prior to the evaluation. The mean belongingness scores for each class of students indicated high levels of belongingness. The sophomore class mean was 5.19 ($SD = 1.04$). The junior class reported the highest level of belongingness, with a mean score of 5.28 ($SD = .94$). The senior students reported a mean belongingness score of 5.21 ($SD = 1.29$; see Table 7). All of the class mean scores reflect high levels of belongingness for Success Program participants.

Table 7*Mean Belongingness Scores by Class Year*

Year	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Level of Belongingness
Sophomore	45	5.1901	1.04	High
Junior	28	5.2778	0.94	High
Senior	26	5.1795	1.29	High

Summary of Quantitative Findings

According to the GBS scores, Success program participants who completed the surveys reported positive senses of belonging. The data showed 97% of survey participants possessed

moderate or high levels of belongingness. It would be easy to conclude that participation in the Success Program developed high senses of belonging for participants based on this data. However, this data may not report a true influence of the program on sense of belonging for participants.

Challenges were encountered during execution of the program evaluation. First, the national pandemic in 2020-2021 caused LU to close most in-person activities and all student activities. At the time of this evaluation in Spring 2021, most students remained at home during the semester the evaluation was conducted and were only reachable via email. The evaluation participants were limited to students who had adequate capacity, technology, and internet service in order to participate from home. Therefore, the data from these participants may reflect sample bias and may not reflect the greater Success Program student population. Students self-selected to participate in the evaluation. Second, due to lack of data on program participants, it was difficult to report a response rate because the email participant list did not include demographic information about the students. The evaluation was designed to only include students of sophomore standing or higher, but without demographic information on program participants, I invited the entire list of participants provided by the program. Sixty-six freshmen also completed the surveys, but their data were not included in the evaluation as they have not had a chance to participate in the program for a full year. As a result, the quantitative data that showed program participants average a high level of belongingness may not offer a complete reflection of participant experience. A more robust amount of data was collected during the qualitative component of the evaluation.

Evaluation Question 2: What components of the Success Program do participants find meaningful in creating a sense of belonging, based on student perspectives?

In-depth interviews with nine students provided the data to answer this evaluation question. The interview protocol in Appendix E was designed to elicit greater detail about students' perspectives on their belongingness and how they feel it has been influenced by components of the Success Program. The interview questions elicited student feedback on specific areas that mirrored the GBS scale, including thoughts about students, staff, and what components of the program were meaningful to them. The qualitative data elicited information that can be categorized in two ways. First, students reported specific program activities they found to be meaningful to them. Second, a thematic analysis found two emergent themes from student feedback that describe how and why students found program activities meaningful in influencing their sense of belonging.

Meaningful Program Activities

Students who were interviewed reported a combination of social and academic engagement activities were meaningful in affecting sense of belonging. The Success Program components were divided into four descriptive categories: Academic Engagement, Peer Support and Community, Personal Skill Development, and Informational Resources. The last three categories are considered social engagement as they occur outside of the classroom. The program components interview participants listed as being meaningful were Academic Engagement, Peer Support and Community, and Personal Skill Development. No student reported the Informational Resources category of activities as being meaningful. The activity categories are labelled according to the primary purpose of the activity. For example, opportunities for peer support may exist within an Academic Engagement activity; however, the primary purpose of the activity still

qualifies it as an Academic Engagement activity if its main purpose includes curricular learning in the classroom with a faculty member.

Academic Engagement

Six out of the nine students interviewed indicated Academic Engagement activities were meaningful to them. Academic Engagement activities include coursework taught by faculty in a classroom. Among the academic engagement opportunities, four students listed the Summer Scholars program as a meaningful activity to them. The Summer Scholars program is a 5-week summer academic session where students take classes that provide college credit to further their advancement toward graduation. Additionally, the Program offers a semester-long mentorship course, which was listed by three students. The mentorship class is a voluntary, service-learning class where students who have been selected as Success Program peer mentors learn important leadership and conversation skills that will help facilitate positive interactions with their mentees. Finally, two students mentioned the Summer Bridge program hosted by the TRIO program as being meaningful. The TRIO program falls under the Success Program's umbrella of opportunities for FGS, but is a distinct program supported by a federal grant for approximately 200 students. Students in the TRIO program must qualify in one or more category: being first-generation, low-income or a student with a disability. Two students who noted high benefit from the summer programming were involved in the TRIO and the Success programs as FGS. Table 8 summarizes the programs listed as being meaningful.

Students were asked to list which program components were meaningful to them in affecting their sense of belonging. Students were not limited in their responses. Although six students mentioned academic engagement programs as meaningful, there are more than nine mentions of academic engagement programs listed in Table 8. Some students were involved in

multiple academic engagement programs and mentioned more than one program as being meaningful to them. For example, one student listed the Summer Scholars program where she had a positive experience with a peer mentor, and then volunteered to become a peer mentor and attended the peer mentoring class. The academic engagement activities students listed as meaningful are presented in Table 8.

Table 8

Meaningful Academic Engagement Activities

Activity	No. of Students
Summer Scholars	4
Mentorship Class	3
Summer Bridge by TRIO	2

Note. TRIO = federally funded program for disadvantaged students.

Personal Skill Development

Five out of nine students indicated that Personal Skill Development activities were meaningful. Personal Skill Development activities teach specific skills to help FGS successfully navigate college and prepare them to pursue their professional goals after graduation. The personal skill development opportunity that was mentioned the most was the opportunity to interact with career and alumni professionals who shared their career paths, including entering graduate school. Three of the five students who listed personal skill development activities valued the opportunity to connect with career professionals. Some of the career professionals were alumni who were first-generations students themselves. Two of the students who mentioned Networking with Career and Alumni Professionals were seniors. The third senior of

the interview participants listed the Graduate School Panel as being meaningful. This category was the only one that all three seniors mentioned as being meaningful and may reflect their priorities as they prepare to graduate. All of the Personal Skill Development activities mentioned as meaningful by students are listed in Table 9.

Table 9

Meaningful Personal Skill Development Activities

Activity	No. of Students
Networking with Career & Alumni Professionals	3
Money Club	2
Study Sessions with the Tutoring Center	2
Graduate School Panel	1
On-campus Student Conference	1

Peer Support and Community

Five of the nine students communicated that Peer Support and Community activities were meaningful to them. Peer Support and Community activities are activities whose primary purpose was to create opportunities for students to make friends and develop relationships with other students, program staff and faculty. Peer Support and Community Activities under the Success Program can be organized by different individuals, including program staff, peer mentors, or student leaders of the first-generation student organization, which is overseen by the Success Program. Interview participants listed the activities in Table 10 as being meaningful to them.

Table 10

Meaningful Peer Support and Community Activities

Activity	No. of Students
Socials/Mixers	5
Mentorship program	3
Game Night	1
Arts and Crafts event	1

Informational Resources

No student reported activities or resources listed under the Informational Resources category as being meaningful to them. Informational Resources include vehicles provided by the Success Program in print, websites, email, and social media to provide important content that FGS and their families can use to learn valuable information to aid student success. The only Informational Resource that interview participants mentioned was the program’s monthly e-newsletter. Each month, the program administrator emails a Success Program newsletter that contains information about upcoming Success Program events, scholarships that are relevant to FGS, activities across campus that may benefit Success Program students, and sometimes includes positive messages to motivate students. If students are interested in more information about anything listed in the e-newsletter, they are invited to contact the program administrator for more information. While no student listed the e-newsletter itself as one of their meaningful program components, five students mentioned the e-newsletter to show their connection to and a means for communicating with the program administrator. One student who could not remember the program administrator's name mentioned she was nice and always answered her questions if

she emailed about something. Although the e-newsletter was not mentioned as a meaningful activity, more than half of the interview participants mentioned it as a vehicle the program uses to regularly interact with student participants. Table 11 summarizes all the program categories mentioned by students as being meaningful.

Table 11

Program Activity Categories Students Found Meaningful

Category	No. of Participants*	%	Engagement Type
Academic Engagement	6	67%	Academic
Peer Support & Community	5	56%	Social
Personal Skill Development	5	56%	Social
Informational Resources	0	0%	Social

**Note.* $N = 9$ but students were asked open-ended questions and often listed multiple kinds of activities that were most meaningful to them.

Emergent Themes

The interview data also presented themes that emerged from participant feedback. As a student affairs program, the students began participating with the Success Program in different ways. Some started before freshman year during the Summer Scholars program. One student started participating during her junior year after being selected as a peer mentor. A transfer student began participating in the program during her junior year through a student organization social. Another student was attracted to the program by attending a career panel for healthcare professionals. Students experienced the Success program uniquely, but the qualitative data

showed they reported similar themes that articulated *why* students found certain program components meaningful to them. Regardless of which program components were meaningful to students, participants communicated two emergent themes:

1. Social and academic engagement activities that enabled FGS to interact with others were meaningful to participants.
2. Participants felt a sense of belonging because members of the Success Program interacted with them in an encouraging environment.

Table 12

Emergent Themes

Evaluation Question	Emergent Themes	No. Students Mentioned
EQ2: Which components of the Success Program do students find meaningful in influencing their sense of belonging?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students valued opportunities to interact with others, including students, program staff, peer mentors, alumni and career professionals, and non-program individuals. 	9
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students found the program environment encouraging which positively influenced their sense of belonging. 	9

Interactions With Others. All nine students articulated the program components that were meaningful were those that allowed them the opportunities to interact with other individuals. Multiple students explained that at a large university, they can feel lost sometimes, so attending activities with a smaller group made connecting with people a lot easier. Students named different individuals who were important to them or provided critical relationships for them. These individuals included other FGS, program staff, peer mentors, student organization leaders, career/alumni professionals, and faculty. Two students also mentioned individuals who

were not part of the Success Program, but students felt their relationships with these individuals positively influenced their feeling a sense of belonging. Non-program-related individuals included faculty in students' majors, academic advisors, and TRIO advisors. The largest groups of individuals who were reported as being meaningful for students to interact with were students and program staff.

Students. Seven of the nine students reported that the Success Program influenced their sense of belongingness because it provided opportunities to interact with other students in the program. Some students reported that one of the greatest values of attending an academic engagement program, such as Summer Scholars before freshman year, is that they were able to make pivotal friendships with other students that have lasted throughout college. Aaila found long-lasting friendships through her mentorship group, which was assigned to her during the Summer Scholars session. Aila explained, “My high school experience wasn’t that great. I had fear and just wasn’t able to be very confident in myself.” During the Summer Scholars program, Aila was assigned a peer mentor with 6-8 other students in the program. She says, “The most special relationships that I’ve come to have are definitely my friends who I’ve met through Summer Scholars. It’s been one and a half years we’ve been together, and they really supported me, and I supported them.”

Other participants said participation in program activities allowed them to make friendships through the personal skill development activities such as tutoring sessions. Daniela, a 23+-year-old senior who transferred to LU from a community college said tutoring sessions were meaningful because she was able to interact with other students who she found in other areas across campus. About meeting other students, Daniela said,

It was like, “Oh, you’re in my math class also, awesome! Let’s go ahead and go over this stuff because I’m confused.” We would work together there. The people they would have as tutors would just come over and talk to us, and you were able to get as much help as you needed.

Being able to interact with others during tutoring sessions made the experience more enjoyable for Daniela and led her to continuing to visit the Tutoring Center, which she said became her “best friend, especially for Calculus.”

Other students listed socials and mixers as helpful activities for how they interacted with other students. Isabela, a sophomore, described the activities meaningful to her included “small get-togethers, like meet and greets, where you just talk to people.” One student did not recall the name of a social, but just remembered going to an event where she got to meet people and “they had food.” A junior who found the Success Program during her sophomore year enjoyed interacting with students at program activities, saying, “I liked it because I had a very hard time freshman year socializing and getting out there because I knew nobody.” Students reported attending various kinds of program activities but found the opportunity to interact with others as meaningful.

Some students found that interacting specifically with other FGS made them feel less alone. Sharing a common trait with other program participants made some students feel like they belonged somewhere. When Eve, a junior, attended personal skill development workshops, such as managing finances, she felt being with other FGS made her feel comfortable. She explained, “I was just like wow, it’s really a group of people that came from, not the same background, but a similar background, that made me feel better about talking about finances and talking about other stuff like that.” Kayla, a sophomore African American student explained a similar

sentiment, “It’s kind of like having those people around you that you know are going through similar situations was comforting you know. It’s like coming into college not alone, I guess.”

Abby, a student from a small, rural town, is a senior who has only been in college for two years because she brought a large number of dual-enrollment credits from high school. Abby explained that participating in the program with people with a shared, first-generation identity made her feel belongingness in the following way.

I feel like you already know you have one thing in common, and it feels like when I was going back [to program activities], everybody is looking for a community or looking for people... Yeah, community would be the best word.

Students who registered for the program’s peer mentorship class learned skills to be effective mentors to other FGS. Sometimes, they also discovered for the first time that they were FGS, and learned the common experiences they shared. Eve was enlightened to realize other FGS shared similar experiences with her.

Some people in the meeting were just stating like, “I was the first child ever to go to college so my parents really didn’t help me as much as they could have with the application process. I had to figure everything out by myself.” And I’m looking like, “Wow, me too! I thought it was just me!” It was like, the whole college process was rough because I had to figure it out by myself, and when other people started talking about their stories and stuff, I was like, “okay, we have a lot in common, you know.”

Another student explained interacting with other FGS in the program made her feel comfortable on campus. “We have similar backgrounds, and it just makes me feel more comfortable talking about touchy subjects, because not everyone would be able to relate, but I know this specific group can.”

In addition to meeting other FGS, two respondents explained how participating in the peer mentorship class taught them valuable skills and knowledge. Ally, a junior leader who participated in TRIO, was a peer mentor, and helped with Summer Scholars. Ally shared specific challenges for FGS and how she has been helped through the peer mentorship class.

The biggest thing is impostor syndrome. A lot of times I feel I'm alone in some of my feelings of struggling, and I can figure out just by talking with other students in the class that it's all of us. And it usually makes me feel better that we can connect about that. Aaila articulated that interacting with others in the mentorship class created a safe space for developing other personal skills such as social skills and leadership skills.

I am someone who has a bit of a struggle with like interacting with people very much. I'm extroverted but also very nervous in social situations. So that course kind of taught me how to interact with other people better and kind of learn to understand them. Our lessons were like on basic material that should be self-explanatory, like body language or just asking open-ended questions, but learning to interact with the other first-generation students also gave me a chance to like see everyone's in the same situation, but we all have different perspectives of it. And that really taught me a lot about interacting with different people, how to become more competent in my own abilities, and kind of overcome some of my own fears.

Students felt a sense of belonging and grew in their interpersonal skills by interacting with other FGS at program activities.

Staff. Seven out of nine students reported engaging with staff members was meaningful to them and helped influence their sense of belonging in the program. Students recognized the Program staff members as being the primary representatives and administrators of the Program.

All students did not report personally knowing staff members but felt their communication through the program e-newsletter and their responsiveness to students' questions via email showed they cared about and wanted to help students. Most participants referred to the program administrator, Susan Ezekiel, Ph.D. (also called Dr. E or Susan) when referring to program staff members. Aaila considered Dr. E to be the most influential and supportive person in her personal development and success as a student.

I think out of all the staff at Large University, I think Dr. Ezekiel might be one of the staff members that I connected with the most. I think she's just been one of the most encouraging presences. She's really helped me find different ways to get involved within the program and in the community.

Kayla, a sophomore, also found that Dr. E was an important actor in influencing her sense of belonging. Eve said, "Dr. E. is the only staff I've really been around, but she's really nice, and welcoming. She has this like agenda, and you know, for some reason, everybody fits in her agenda. She brings something out of each person."

Eve, a junior who credits Miss E. for inviting her to become a peer mentor explained how Miss E. was meaningful in making her feel a sense of belonging.

The only staff member that I have actually worked with in this program is Miss E., and I have a mentor that was recommended by Miss E., so between them two, they always made me feel like I just belonged. There were times when they had more confidence in me than I had in myself. It's always easy to get in contact with them if I ever needed anything.

According to students, Dr. E was a key staff member who served as a role model, a connector to resources and other programs, and supported and validated students' needs.

Ally, a senior nursing student who was part of TRIO and the Success Program, showed how staff members in both programs can sometimes intersect and were critical with educating her on how to persevere at the college during a critical time.

My sophomore year, I didn't get into the nursing school. I was waitlisted for a whole eight months, and I was like, "Wow. I couldn't even get into the nursing program. What's my point in being here?" If it wasn't for the [Success Program] staff and the people in TRIO, I probably would have dropped out of college, but they talked me into staying and told me to try again. I tried again the next year, and then I got in!

Another student shared why she enjoyed visiting the TRIO office to interact with staff, "The staff are my biggest cheerleaders."

All students had not experienced personal interactions with staff members. Daniela did not interact as much with staff members but still found them helpful. She said, "I know that I might not have been close to staff members, but they seemed very open to everyone, so I did like that."

Peer Mentors, Tutors, Faculty. In addition to other students and program staff, students listed various individuals who helped them feel a sense of belonging at LU. Aaila, a student who had a difficult time in high school, reported that her peer mentor was influential in helping her feel a sense of belonging.

I had a peer mentor assigned to me in Summer Scholars, and she stayed with me throughout my entire first year. She was a very supportive, very friendly, welcoming type of person, so she tried to help me and all the students that were within her mentorship group. She supported us, helped us get to know each other and get to know her, and even in classes, she would do late night study sessions to help us pass. So like, just the support

of knowing that there is someone there who is consistently encouraging us, sending us messages of like whenever we had a big event coming up, like, “Hey best of luck on midterms! You can do it! Almost at the end of the semester! Good luck! You got this!” So knowing that there was someone there supporting us, it really helped us make it through like the tough classes.

Another student found support from other peer mentors in the peer mentorship class.

We would support each other during class weekly, and also, we had a group chat outside of class where we would share positive things. Like one time, someone just said, like, “I’m having a bad day. Can someone just send something to cheer me up?” And for ten minutes, people just sent random adorable, cute cat and dog pictures or just, you know, pictures of themselves and jokes. That was just so supportive and encouraging. That really makes me feel welcome, like I’m dealing with situations, but so are other people and we’re all here to support each other.

Some students reported faculty as being meaningful to their sense of belonging. During the Summer Scholars, program staff invited professors who were FGS to go white water rafting with students. One student mentioned that experience as making her feel belonging to a greater community of a first-generation status. “I didn’t know how many professors at the University were first-generation students, and obviously that’s really motivational to see them here and reaching out to us.”

Within the Success Program, Dr. E is the primary faculty member/administrator who leads the Summer Scholars program and teaches the peer mentorship class. Three students listed faculty outside of the Success program who positively influenced their sense of belonging. Abby, the second-year senior, according to the number of dual enrollment and college credits she has

taken, attributes relationships with faculty in her political science major for her sense of belonging. She admits her closest relationships are not within the Success Program. “I guess the closest relationships I’ve definitely made are with my professors. Specifically, I’ve had to take classes with one professor [for my major] four times.”

Career Professionals and Alumni. The Success Program welcomes guests who are career professionals and FGS alumni to speak to and encourage program participants. The program also connects students with activities for FGS in academic departments across the campus. At a large university, this role as a connector to various programs and majors has proven instrumental in exposing students to opportunities beyond the Success Program’s capacity and resources. It can prove difficult when trying to evaluate the program's efforts, however, which department is responsible for events students listed as meaningful. Four students reported interacting with alumni and career professionals was meaningful in helping them feel a sense of belonging. Three students, a junior and two seniors reported that opportunities that provided professional development and networking opportunities were meaningful to them. These older students valued opportunities to meet career professionals who could advise them on how to pursue and succeed in their post-graduation aspirations. The students valued expanding their professional network as they do not have families who have the kind of connections that can assist their professional pursuits.

Daniela, a senior, Latina student, completed her first two years at a community college and is planning to pursue medical school. Daniela’s meaningful events included activities where medical professionals—alumni and non-alumni—were introduced to students and talked about their careers and how they prepared for medical school. Although they were guest speakers,

Daniela considered the alumni and medical professionals as part of the supportive Success Program community that affected her sense of belonging.

For me, it was the way that they opened their doors to students that I feel like didn't have easy opportunities like that. Because, considering that my parents didn't go to college and I don't know other people that could get me [to medical school], it was just very important to me how I was able to be in a position that I can speak to someone who knows about it. There's some students that are fortunate they have parents that are doctors, and they can have an easier way to talk to someone or shadow or something like that, but I didn't. I need to do what I need to go through to be able to get to that position. It was a bit nerve-wracking, but as you talked with the staff and doctors, they were just so open with us.

Another senior student who transferred from a 4-year institution valued meeting professionals who could help her succeed in the health sciences field, where she was already working during our 7:30 a.m. interview appointment. Eve said,

I was reading emails about the different programs right before I transferred here and read about a student who had graduated from the [Success] program. I was looking forward to the people I could meet and the connections I could make.

Meaningful Relationships Outside the Program. When asked about relationships that were meaningful to their sense of belonging, four students noted individuals outside of the Success Program. Although this dissertation is evaluating the Success Program, learning about the actors or agents participants find meaningful in influencing their sense of belonging is valuable information for program administrators.

The TRIO program serves students who are first-generation, low-income or have a disability. TRIO provides advisors and organized events to serve approximately 200 students at the time of this evaluation. Two students mentioned participating in both the TRIO and Success Program as influencing their sense of belonging. One student said, “The TRIO program, we kind of interact with our class mostly, and I just feel we were like a really tight-knit family, so I think it’s just easier to communicate and get along with everyone.” One student mentioned that participating in both programs helped reduce fear about attending events because you begin to see the same faces and will probably know at least one person when participating at events.

The two transfer students listed academic advisors as meaningful to them. Daniela, who transferred from a community college, listed her academic advisor as a critical relationship. As an off-campus commuter student, she explained that she often cannot attend Success Program activities because they occur in the evening, and she only comes onto campus during the day when she is not working. She reported that her advisor is the meaningful person who makes her feel belongingness to the campus.

I really appreciate my current advisor. I have gone through so many different advisors from community college to right now. I feel like she was able to listen to me because, once I transferred over to the science major, I was at a point where I was really struggling in my grades. I was very lost. I didn’t know what to do, and she was like, “Okay, let’s sit down. Let’s research everything that you need and make sure that you’re completing the prerequisites that you need for optometry school. And it wasn’t just school, it was more of like “How are you doing? What can I do to get you on a good level? We have services here, like at the Wellness Center. I can help you with things like that. Honestly, she has

been just a tremendous help in the way that I've been able to build myself academically and being a student on campus.

All students communicated they felt a sense of belonging because they related the Success Program to a supportive community of various individuals who cared about their success. That supportive community included other FGS, Success Program staff, FGS faculty guests, student leaders, peer mentors, tutors, and alumni/career professionals who have served as guest speakers. Additionally, some students reported their meaningful interactions with others extended outside of the program to faculty, academic advisors, and TRIO advisors. This diverse group of individuals comprises a caring community that surrounds FGS who participate in the Success Program.

Encouraging Environment. The second theme that emerged from the qualitative data described the kind of environment that facilitated a sense of belonging for students: an encouraging environment where the various Program partners communicated care for the students. The emerging theme of having an encouraging environment explains the kind of atmosphere that helped students feel a sense of belonging. All nine students communicated that individuals who were meaningful to them were encouraging, friendly, caring, welcoming, positive and helpful. They listened to students' needs and verbally expressed their desire to help them succeed. You could see glimpses of it some of the students' comments already shared. Daniela found the medical professionals who talked about their careers and how to get into medical school were approachable and showed they wanted to help the students. Aila had a friendly, welcoming, peer mentor whose constant encouragement and support helped her make it through the tough classes. Another student explained the encouraging, welcoming environment was critical in helping shy students open up and participate in the mentorship class.

I think we've come to the point where we can just have like serious conversations, fun conversations, personal conversations, and I can open up to people more and be honest about myself. So I think the environment has really helped me to build more meaningful relationships with people rather than just the kind of superficial like conversations about like, "How's the weather?" and just really build meaningful relationships with people.

Another student explained her peer mentor's open and welcoming approach helped her feel comfortable reaching out for help during her first year because "as a nervous first year, I just had so many things to ask and no idea who to ask them to."

This second and final emerging theme described the environment that promoted and nurtured the sense of belonging felt by FGS in the Program regardless of the unique and varied programs they attended. Students repeatedly said they felt a sense of belonging because the individuals with whom they interacted through the Success Program were welcoming, encouraging, friendly, and open to hearing their needs and interests.

Additional Observations by the Evaluator: Program Challenges to Belongingness

During the interviews, I learned about challenges students were experiencing that conflicted with creating a sense of belonging. As a program evaluation is designed to provide useful information to help administrators improve the program, I share this information as it can improve the Process component of the Success Program.

Variability In How Students Learned About the Success Program. First, during our conversation to build rapport with students prior to asking the interview questions related to sense of belonging, I asked students how they learned about the program. FGS at LU learn about the Success Program in various ways and at different times during their experience at the university, as indicated in Table 13. The most common ways students learned about the program

were through the TRIO Summer Bridge program, Summer Scholars, and the campus student organization fair. One of the students received information about the Summer Scholars program through email prior to freshman year, but decided to attend the program after hearing validation from an LU staff member who was a personal friend of a parent. The transfer students learned about the program in different ways. The transfer student who came from another 4-year institution learned about the program through an email newsletter she received prior to transferring to the university for her junior year. The transfer student from the community college learned about the program by attending a student organization fair after transferring into LU. A different student learned of the Success Program through a personal email during the spring of her freshman year inviting her to be a peer mentor for the following year. The varied ways students learned about the program are shown in Table 13.

Table 13

How Students Learned About the Success Program

Means of Awareness	Year Learned of Program	No. of Students
TRIO Summer Bridge	Pre-freshman year	3
Summer Scholars	Pre-freshman year	2
Student Organization Fair	1st year freshman & 1st year transfer/sophomore	2
E-newsletter	Prior to transferring in junior year	1
Personal Email Invitation to Mentoring Program	Sophomore year	1

Note. TRIO = federally funded program for disadvantaged students.

The Summer experience programs are instrumental in encouraging students to participate in the Success Program, but participation in these programs is available by invitation only and limited to a few hundred students collectively. A university with 3,000–4,000 FGS has many other students who can benefit from participating in the Success Program.

Challenges For Commuter Students and Upperclassmen. A commuter student explained the challenges of balancing work, living off campus and attending Success Program events. Daniela, also a transfer student from the community college explained she cannot attend many program events because they are primarily offered in the evening. Daniela wants to work in the medical field and also works in a doctor's office, which is important to her. Thus, she is very selective to choose events that she can fit in her schedule and are really important to her needs at the time. Daniela explained,

As a commuter student, it's difficult having a class at 8 in the morning, one at 12, one at 3 p.m., and you know I'm hungry, I'm tired, I'm a bit confused on like "Should I go home? Should I stay here?" Unfortunately, a lot of the [program] meetings are later in the day. I know a couple are like at 7 at night or even 10 at night sometimes, and I can't really stay that long. Or they were doing something during class time, but I would like keep up with emails and kind of see when's the next one I can go to.

Another commuter and transfer student had a challenge with maintaining her sense of belonging with individuals on campus because of the large campus. As she advances into her major-specific courses in a health field, her major department is located in a more distant location from the Success Program office. She also works in the university hospital which is giving her important experience for graduate school. Shea described her current challenge at the large university,

When I used to be walking to classes, it was a lot easier to see people I knew at the library. Now that I don't eat at the Commons and I don't eat on campus, it's kind of harder to see people. Once in a blue moon I'll see someone off-campus, like shopping or whatever, but other than that, [I don't connect with others] anymore. It's kind of hard, but I do appreciate the zoom meetings.

Commuter students have unique challenges with maintaining their sense of belonging with program participants through in-person, on campus events.

A Challenge to Belongingness: Cognitive Dissonance Between Family and College.

One student communicated that sense of belonging has not been fully met through her participation in the program. Abby is from a small, rural town and did not share her race. She came into college with many dual-enrollment credits and attended the TRIO Summer Bridge program. She said she fits all three criteria for participating in TRIO—being first-generation, from a low-income background, and having a disability. Abby's sense of not fitting in or belonging seems to originate from a disconnect between her home community and family relationships and the campus community. Abby shared,

I don't think the sense of *not* belonging will ever go away honestly. I do think the Success Program has helped to the extent it can, but it just goes deep, like the feeling, because for me, I am the first in my family to go to college. It's like here, you can say that, and a lot of people can resonate with that, but I guess when I go back home, you actually see that. It never goes away.

Abby continued by explaining her challenges on-campus and at home.

I guess one big thing is, sometimes I do feel like I stick out like a sore thumb [on campus] because of where I'm from. So far, I haven't met anyone who is at LU who comes from

where I come from. Like the closest is Johnsonville, but I'm from the Capetown area, which is much farther. So that's one big way, and so definitely there is like at times a cultural clash, and sometimes it just does feel a little bit alienating.

Abby's experiences communicate the challenges FGS feel straddling the home and college cultures. Her feedback is helpful for programs who want to know how to reach students who have additional and specific needs. She scored the lowest belongingness score in the moderate category.

The nine interviewed students scored moderate and high levels of belongingness but reflect diverse experiences within the FGS population at LU. While the general quantitative data suggests students have positive levels of belongingness, the feedback from the interviews provide rich, detailed information that will help the program administrators learn specific advantages and challenges students face related to belongingness.

Adjustment. The qualitative data found useful information from participants on how they relate their sense of belonging to the Success Program. However, students whose GBS scores reflected low levels of belongingness are not included in this data. The original plan of the evaluation methodology included interviewing three students from each level of belongingness: low, moderate, and high. However, only 3% of survey participants recorded low senses of belonging, and none of them either fit the valid participant criteria of having attended at least two program activities, and/or did not agree to be interviewed. Additionally, the qualitative data only reflect the feedback of female students. No male program participants agreed to be interviewed. While this qualitative data is very useful, it only reflects the perspectives of the nine female students with positive senses of belonging.

Summary of Findings

This mixed methods program evaluation used quantitative and qualitative data to understand how FGS related their sense of belonging with their participation in the Success Program at LU. The quantitative data showed that 97% of students who participated in the survey reported having a moderate or high level of sense of belonging. The mean belongingness score for the survey respondents fell within the high level of belongingness. The mean belongingness score for each class reflected a high level of belongingness. Due to the low response rate of the students and limited access to students due to the pandemic, the evaluation findings may be subject to sample bias.

The qualitative data found that students listed a combination of academic engagement activities and social engagement activities as being meaningful to them. Students considered program components categorized as Academic Engagement, Peer Support and Community, and Personal Skill Development as meaningful to them. No students indicated that Informational Resources were meaningful, although they recognized the monthly e-newsletter as an example that shows the program administrator's commitment and support. The resulting emergent themes showed sense of belonging was influenced by the opportunity to interact with others through program activities and by presenting program activities within an encouraging environment. According to various student needs, participants enjoyed interacting with other FGS, staff, peer mentors and career and alumni guest speakers. Some students also reported valuing critical relationships with faculty, TRIO advisors, and academic advisors who were outside of the program. Students reported they felt like they belonged because the diverse members of the caring community they met through program activities were welcoming, friendly, and positive. Although all students scored moderate and high levels of belongingness, the qualitative data

provided additional information that reflected challenges they faced to belongingness in spite of their participation in the Success Program. A diverse group of nine students were interviewed, but all interview participants were female, and none of them possessed a low sense of belonging. To Future recommendations will be made in Chapter 5 based on the evaluation findings and limitations.

CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this program evaluation was to evaluate how first-generation student (FGS) participants in the Success Program at Large University (LU) related their sense of belonging with participation in the program. FGS who possess sense of belonging are more likely to persist to graduation than students who do not have sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1975, 2017). A long-term goal of the Success Program is to increase retention and graduation rates for FGS at LU. My focus in this evaluation was to use the CIPP model to evaluate the process and product components of the Success Program. The goals of the evaluation questions were to determine to what degree do FGS who participate in the Success Program at LU report a sense of belonging and which program components participants found most meaningful in influencing their sense of belonging.

The Success Program was initiated by the LU's Division of Strategic Enrollment Management in 2015 in order to increase the retention and graduation rates of FGS. LU is an urban, public research university, whose undergraduate student population (22,000) includes about 3,000–4,000 FGS each year. Nationally, FGS suffer lower graduation rates than their continuing-generation peers (Davis, 2010). The university's mission is committed to increasing equity and access to education, while decreasing the achievement gaps between disadvantaged or underrepresented students and their peers.

The Success Program has a physical office in the center of campus where students can visit to interact with staff or pick up helpful information. The program is managed by two full-

time professionals who also share other responsibilities within the division in Strategic Enrollment Management, and two part-time staff members. This section will discuss the findings from the evaluation of the process and product components of the Success Program.

Based on the survey respondents, the quantitative data found that FGS who participated in the Success Program at LU possessed high levels of senses of belonging. The mean and median belongingness scores for the survey respondents fell within the high level of belongingness. The mean scores for participants in each class—sophomores, juniors, and seniors—also fell within the high level of belongingness.

Additionally, the qualitative data showed that students felt a sense of belonging from participating in social engagement and academic engagement components of the Success Program. Moreover, the qualitative data were coded and categorized into themes using Creswell's (2014) method for analyzing qualitative data. The emerging themes described *why* students felt belongingness through certain program components. Students reported that program components that were highly meaningful to them enabled them to interact with others and provided an encouraging environment. This chapter will discuss the evaluation findings and will then present recommendations for policy and practice. I will then identify the limitation to this evaluation and suggest recommendations for future research.

Discussion of Findings

The methodology for the evaluation included an explanatory, sequential, mixed-methods design. The methodology began with collecting quantitative data, using Malone et al.'s (2012) General Belongingness Scale (GBS) to measure program participants' sense of belonging. A small sample of students who completed the survey were interviewed to gather the qualitative data in order to gain a deeper understanding of their answers to the survey and their experiences

related to the program and sense of belonging. The evaluation was conducted during the spring of 2021, when LU was closed to most in-person classes and all in-person extracurricular activities were prohibited. Most students were attending online classes from their primary residences. All communication and interaction with participants for this evaluation was conducted via email and virtually.

Participants' Sense of Belonging - Product Evaluation

One of the short-term goals of the Success Program is to create sense of belonging among its first-generation student participants. The first evaluation question sought to measure the degree to which Success Program participants report having a sense of belonging based on the GBS scores. Measuring participants' levels of belongingness evaluated the Product component of the CIPP model (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). The quantitative data found most survey respondents (97%) reported positive levels of sense of belonging. The average level of belongingness fell within the high level of belongingness. The average GBS score for each class of sophomores, juniors, and seniors, also fell within the high level of belongingness. This finding aligns with the extensive literature that engaging students in social and/or academic engagement facilitates positive senses of belonging (Solanki et al., 2019; Swanbro Becker et al., 2017; Tinto, 1975; Tinto & Cullen, 1973; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). Valid participants who completed the survey had to have attended at least two program activities outlined in Figure 2. Success program activities like socials, the mentorship program, group tutoring sessions, and Summer Scholars are types of social and academic engagement opportunities that students reported as meaningful in influencing their sense of belonging.

Caution should be applied when interpreting these data. While the data report high levels of belongingness for Success Program participants, the data likely reflects sample bias. During

the spring of 2021, when this evaluation was conducted, the university was closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and most students lived at home, continuing their studies online. All of the program's in-person activities were closed and students could only receive communication from the program staff via email or social media. The social distancing restrictions during this time likely caused sampling error, as students who did not have adequate technology or internet service at home could not participate in the evaluation. It is likely that students' self-selection to participate in this evaluation skewed the quantitative data. It is possible that students who had high senses of belonging with the Success Program and staff were more motivated to read email communication from the program during this virtually distant time period. Furthermore, students who have had largely positive experiences with the program and have high senses of belonging may have responded to the opportunity to provide feedback to university leaders on the worth and merit of an FGS success program. The purpose of the evaluation was outlined in the informational announcement (Appendix C) and in my response to that announcement (Appendix D). Students who were highly engaged in the program may have been drawn to provide positive feedback about their experiences. Additionally, only 99 valid participants from the 1,019 students on the program's e-newsletter completed the survey. Therefore, these data should not be interpreted as representative of all program participants.

Using Baumeister and Leary's (1995) criteria for achieving sense of belonging, The Success Program appears to be providing activities that develop belongingness. Baumeister and Leary posit sense of belonging can be achieved by persons engaging in frequent and affectively pleasant or positive interactions with the same individuals, and having such interactions occur in a framework of long-term, stable caring and concern. Students reported they received the regular, monthly communication from the Success program administrator who provides information

about helpful events, scholarship information, special opportunities for FGS, and encouraging messages. Students who responded with questions about information from the e-newsletter communicated the program staff was helpful and responsive. Students who did not have a personal relationship with staff members still felt a sense of belonging with the program as the newsletter reflected the staff's commitment to their success. Additionally, students who attended events communicated they enjoyed the experience because people they met were friendly and cared about helping students.

In addition to receiving regular and positive interaction through the program e-newsletter and other program participants, evaluation participants are aware of the Success Program's purpose to support FGS at LU. Some students have enjoyed visiting the physical office, while others who have never visited the office, engage with others at program events around campus, such as the Tutoring Center, in the peer mentorship class, and other spaces. Having a program called the Success Program that serves the needs of FGS at LU shows the university's long-term commitment to the success of FGS. The program's branded merchandise, website, office, and staff communicate to students that they exist to help them as FGS. Thus, according to Baumeister and Leary's (1995) criteria for achieving sense of belonging, the Success Program is operating social and academic engagement activities in an environment that achieves sense of belonging.

Meaningful Program Components - Process Evaluation

The Process component of the evaluation was designed to focus on the process of delivering program activities planned by the program staff in Figure 2. Student participation in program activities was voluntary. Pre-registration in activities nor attendance logs were collected. The program advertised its activities to all FGS through multiple vehicles, including

the daily campus email bulletin (two notices per event), social media announcements, flyers posted around campus, and direct communication to students who have opted into receiving the program's monthly e-newsletter. The monthly e-newsletter list included 1,019 FGS. The email list was considered our program participant list for the evaluation. Students do not officially join the Success Program; all FGS are able to attend any program activities.

Data for evaluating the Process component of the program was collected through interviews with nine participants in the program. The nine students possessed moderate and high levels of belongingness and had completed the survey. Students reported the program components that were meaningful in making them feel a sense of belonging included both academic engagement and social engagement activities (Tinto, 1975).

Academic Engagement. Academic engagement activities include engagement within the classroom with a faculty members and peers as part of a course or academic curricula. The Success Program provides two academic engagement components—the Summer Scholars Program and the peer mentoring class. Two students also named the TRIO Summer Bridge program as serving a meaningful role in making them feel belongingness. Although the TRIO program technically falls under the supervision of the Success Program and its services to FGS, the TRIO program has a separate purpose and application process that limits participation in its program to TRIO members. Students reported the academic engagement components taught students academic content and personal development skills, increased their knowledge of useful campus resources, and helped them build relationships with peers and faculty (Bordelon et al., 2019). Moreover, students explained the academic engagement components enabled them to make integral relationships with other students and faculty who have provided ongoing support for them. Those key relationships included peer mentors, faculty, guest FGS faculty, and new

friendships with other students (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). Through engaging with other FGS students found they were not alone with the challenges they faced in college and learned their struggles were shared with their FGS peers. This new knowledge often helped students overcome impostor syndrome and gain confidence and self-efficacy by talking with peers, mentors and staff who encouraged and informed their successes. Similarly, Komarraju et al. (2010) found that learning communities such as these provide opportunities for students to interact with faculty they perceive as being approachable, respectful, and available inside and outside of the classroom and help students develop higher levels of academic confidence and motivation. In summation, students found the academic engagement components of the Success Program were helpful vehicles for sharing social and cultural capital through stories, anecdotes, and other helpful information about attending college (Davis, 2010).

Social Engagement. Students reported the social engagement components of the Success Program were equally important to creating a sense of belonging for them. Students listed activities in the categories of Peer Support and Community, and Personal Skill Development as the types of activities they found meaningful. Activities in the peer support and community category included social activities that created opportunities for friendship-making. The activities students listed as meaningful were socials where they could just meet and talk with other students. Some students found connecting with other FGS through program activities helped them discover commonalities that created a comfortable sense of community on a large university campus. Attending large universities often causes students to feel greater isolation and disorientation from large classes and campus blueprint (Dumford et al., 2019). Creating stable sources of social support for FGS is critical, especially during the transition to college (Dumford et al., 2019). Friendships between peers helps students integrate within the social system of a

college (Tinto, 1975). When students feel like they fit in with other students and are socially engaged within the institution are more likely to have sense of belonging and persist to graduation (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1975).

Success program tutoring sessions created learning communities that helped students become comfortable with seeking help and taught them valuable study skills to aid their academic success. Additionally, the tutoring sessions introduced FGS to the ease of academic help-seeking with their peers, a skill students continued using individually and in the absence of their peers when needed. At tutoring sessions FGS developed friendships with other students they had met in other parts of campus, which extended their friendships. Davis (2010) recommended FGS needed study groups and study skills sessions. At small colleges, study skills are sometimes taught by faculty in first-year courses; however, faculty at large universities are less likely to teach study skills because they disagree about whether they can or should be taught (Davis, 2010). Therefore, programs like the Success Program at large universities are instrumental in filling the need of helping to prepare FGS for academic success by collaborating with the Tutoring Center to offer tutoring and study skills sessions for FGS.

Additionally, students identified alumni and career panels where professionals shared the social capital related to getting into graduate school or entering their desired professions as being meaningful to them. Significant research shows the value FGS have with interacting with other students and faculty (Davis, 2010; Hoffman, 2002; O'keeffe, 2013). I was surprised that multiple students mentioned the importance of connecting with career professionals and alumni during career panels. This finding relates to Smith's (2007) results that students benefit from relationships that provide or receive important academic knowledge and helpful resources, which the author defined as social capital. Students appreciated the opportunity to learn about career

advancement information from experienced professionals, recognizing their own parents could not advise them in this manner (Villalpando & Solorzano, 2005). The Success Program's career panels provide opportunities for students to gain valuable knowledge that will aid success through and beyond graduation. Although Baumeister and Leary's (1995) second condition for achieving sense of belonging suggests interactions must occur within the context of long-term, stable relationships, and not one-time interactions, the qualitative data in this evaluation showed that one-time interactions with alumni and career professionals were meaningful to students. It is possible that one-time interactions that are connected to a long-term, caring program can also influence students' sense of belonging.

Challenges to Belongingness: Process Components. Although most of the evaluation participants scored moderate and high levels of belongingness, students identified challenges for creating a sense of belonging for all FGS at LU. Through the interviews, I learned that students learn about the Success Program through different means. With a population of 3,000–4,000 FGS at LU, it is unclear if all FGS at LU are receiving information about the Success Program, which could increase belongingness, persistence, and graduation rates for the greater population. Additionally, commuter students identified challenges with being able to attend program events as many social engagement activities occur during the evening hours, catering to the needs of on-campus students. Finally, one student did not fully feel a sense of belonging as she struggles with her identity between family and home community and the campus community. Davis (2010) outlined the dissonance FGS can feel by not fully fitting in with their families and home communities nor with the campus community.

Interaction With Others: Emerging Theme

I used Creswell's (2014) methods for coding qualitative data and identified two emergent themes. The first theme showed students found certain Success Program components meaningful because they created opportunities for FGS to interact with others. The FGS participants communicated they appreciate the opportunity to interact with, talk to, and engage with various individuals they met through Success Program activities. Students valued relationships and interactions with other FGS, peer mentors, program staff, program faculty, tutors, career professionals, and FGS alumni. Students who did not have strong relationships with members of the Success Program staff reported individuals outside of the program who were meaningful to them in creating a sense of belonging. These individuals included advisors, non-program major-related faculty, and TRIO advisors.

According to students, these individuals represent individuals who shared social capital on how to thrive in college and post-graduation. Students described the roles these members played in their lives as Stanton-Salazar's (2011) institutional agents in her social capital framework. Institutional agents are persons who maintain supportive relationships with lower status individuals and occupy relatively high positions in an organization and are well positioned to provide social and institutional support through personal and positional resources (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Stanton-Salazar's (2011) social capital framework identified various roles institutional agents play and how they can empower low-status students, in this case FGS, toward academic success. In the social capital framework, institutional agents can play the following roles: provide personal and positional resources, advising students on appropriate decision-making related to advancing in education, networking coach, and more. Students in this study described alumni professionals as integrative agents who coordinated students' social integration

into high-status networks, and where students can engage individuals who are at the top of their field. Based on student descriptions of key relationships, some individuals played multiple roles. The program administrator served as an institutional agent who played the roles of cultural guide, program developer, advisor, networking coach, recruiter, bridging agent and coordinator (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Scholars have recommended students can develop a sense of belonging if they have a bonding relationship with just one person within the university (O'Keeffe, 2013; Tinto, 2017). Kinzie and Kuh (2004) study presented the practices of high-performing institutions that excel in engaging students for the purpose of increasing student success. The authors claimed high-performing institutions use a mix of staff members, faculty, administrators, and students to collaborate, set direction and create and maintain student success efforts (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). The Power of One concept conveys that anyone in the campus community can play a pivotal role that energizes, inspires, welcomes, or encourages students (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). In this evaluation, students identified such individuals, some of whom were part of the Success Program, but others were found in other parts of the campus. Some students were greatly affected by friendships they made with other students during Summer Scholars before their freshman year and with peer mentors. Another student valued the interactions she had with program staff during times of crisis. Students who had no connection with program staff named guest speakers who were alumni or career professionals who were meaningful to them because they taught students skills for entering their careers.

At a large university, it is likely unrealistic to expect all FGS to connect with and be dependent upon the four Success program staff members to receive their personal sense of connectedness. The nine students interviewed in this study have shown that not all of them

received their sense of belonging from the program-related agents. Rendon's (1994) validation theory stems from the recognition that the college student population is diverse. Rendon (1994) supports the need for a combination of individuals—faculty, administrators, staff, and advisors—to participate in the process of validating students because all students cannot be expected to learn or to get involved in institutional life in the same way. Rendon's (1994) validation theory posits campus members can participate in transforming students into powerful learners by taking the initiative to validate students, academically and interpersonally, empowering students to believe they can be successful. Such validation, according to Rendon (1994) can occur inside and outside of class. Students in this evaluation demonstrated they had experienced validating experiences within the Success Program and outside of the program. The Success Program's efforts to not only plan activities for FGS but also to connect FGS with helpful activities across the campus and serve as a central connector for FGS support services are reinforced by Rendon's validation theory and Stanton-Salazar's social capital framework. Creating and facilitating greater opportunities for FGS to find individuals with whom they will feel a sense of belonging based on their personal needs is a worthy initiative.

Encouraging Environment

The final theme from the qualitative data showed students felt belongingness because the individuals they connected with through Success Program activities talked with them in a caring and encouraging manner. This finding aligns with Rendon's (1994) validation theory. Students felt encouraged by conversation and guidance that was positive and motivating, which was provided in a context of genuinely wanting to help the students succeed. This final theme also aligns with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) first principle that interactions that facilitate belongingness should be positive and affectively pleasant. Students credited the welcoming,

open, positive, and kind interactions they had with individuals in the program helping them persist during difficult classes, making them feel better on hard days, convincing them to try again after failure, and just knowing that someone is out there who supports them and believes in them. These validating experiences helped students feel a sense of belonging.

Understanding how students describe and value an encouraging atmosphere in program activities informs us on the behavior that is meaningful to students in feeling belongingness during program activities. While this evaluation sought to learn about which program components were meaningful, the qualitative data showed that students are diverse and may prefer different activities at various stages of their development and according to their personalities. However, all students valued the encouraging, supportive atmosphere that showed university representatives cared about their success. Several studies that outline how faculty can support student success for FGS include pedagogical strategies such as using high-impact practices (Bordelon et al., 2019; Ribera et al., 2017; Zumbrunn et al., 2019) or designing necessary first-year seminar content for freshmen persistence (Hoffman et al., 2002). This finding seems to show that students value *how* individuals interact with them more than what the activity is or who those individuals are, reinforcing Kinzie and Kuh's (2004) Power of One concept and Rendon's (1994) validation theory. Understanding that FGS feel a greater sense of belonging with various individuals who talk with them in an encouraging manner helps create the building blocks for any programmatic component.

Implications for Policy and Practice

As LU endeavors to continue supporting the success of FGS at LU, the findings in this program evaluation provide rich data to inform administrators on how students are perceiving program activities related to their sense of belonging. The findings and related recommendations

are outlined in Table 14.

Table 14

Evaluation Findings and Recommendations for Practice

Finding	Related Recommendation	Supporting Literature
F1. Student participants in the Success Program who responded to the survey reported moderate and high levels of sense of belonging.	R1. Intentionally plan a mix of social engagement and academic engagement opportunities for FGS.	Bordelon et al, 2019; Davis, 2010; Dumford et al., 2019; Jehangir, 2010; Tinto, 2017
F2. Interview participants reported the Program activities that were meaningful fell within the categories of Peer Support and Community, Personal Skill Development, and Academic Engagement. No participants reported Informational Resources as meaningful.	R2. Intentionally plan activities that enable students to create and feel peer support, to grow in personal skills, and provide students with engagement opportunities in the classroom.	Davis, 2010; Hoffman et al., 2002; Solanki et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2019
F3. Students reported the activities that were meaningful enabled them to interact with others.	R3. Plan opportunities for program participants to engage with others but especially with career professionals, and FGS alumni.	Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Dumford et al., 2019; Kinzie & Kuh, 2004; Strayhorn, 2019; Swanbro Becker et al., 2017
F4. Students reported activities that were meaningful because they were provided in an encouraging environment.	R4. Train new staff, student leaders, peer mentors, and guest speakers to interact with FGS as institutional agents and using validation theory.	Davis, 2010; Kinzie & Kuh, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2011

Recommendations for Practice

In this section I explain in greater detail my recommendations for continuing and improving the Success Program's achievement of sense of belonging for its participants. Additionally, my recommendations will suggest ways to scale up the program's successes and positively affect more FGS at LU.

Intentionally Plan Social and Academic Engagement Activities For FGS. The findings from this study show that students related their participation in social engagement *and* academic engagement activities to their positive sense of belonging. Students who participate in academic engagement programs experience an increase in sense of belonging (Dumford et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2002; Tinto, 2017). Shared academic learning in the classroom enabled students to forge new and long-lasting relationships with each other, peer mentors, faculty, and program staff. Academic engagement with faculty results in stronger sense of belonging, a deeper understanding of course content and increased persistence (Bordelon et al., 2019). Success Program participants listed academic engagement activities such as Summer Scholars, the peer mentoring class, and the TRIO Summer Bridge Program as being meaningful to them.

Additionally, social engagement activities should be planned to support friend-making between students and build meaningful relationships with program staff and guests. Students' sense of belonging can be supported by being socially engaged on campus (Davis, 2010; Hoffman et al., 2002; Jehangir, 2010; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Tinto, 2017). Participants reported social engagement activities such as tutoring sessions, socials, pizza nights, and alumni/career panels as being meaningful to them. The Success Program should continue to offer a combination of academic and social engagement activities for its participants to provide a rich array of activities that serve students' individual needs and interests.

Provide Activities That Facilitate Peer Support and Community, Personal Skill Development, and Academic Engagement. The qualitative data found that interview participants reported activities that fell within categories of Peer Support and Community, Personal Skill Development, and Academic Engagement were meaningful to them. No students listed activities or resources that fell within the Informational Resources category as being meaningful to them. The program components that were meaningful to students provided students opportunities to personally interact with others, which is of specific value to FGS. Peer Support and Community activities provided opportunities for students to develop relationships with other students, staff, and faculty. Davis (2010) found that activities such as study groups and social events allow FGS to gather and establish friendships and facilitate belongingness. Additionally, Success Program students reported that tutoring sessions and financial management workshops were meaningful Personal Skill Development activities because they enabled students to connect with other FGS while learning valuable skills related to college success. The diversity among college students on a large campus necessitates that the university provide multiple engagement activities to meet students' needs at different developmental stages.

Plan Opportunities For Program Participants to Engage With Others, Including Guest Speakers. Program staff should make assertive efforts to establish relationships between social and academic departments to share and deepen the opportunities for campus colleagues to join the mission of supporting the success of FGS (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). It would be a great investment of time for the Success Program managers to expand the breadth of guest speakers who can engage with students by establishing connections with the Career Services Department and with the Alumni Relations departments. Kinzie and Kuh (2004) recommend student affairs

professionals initiate partnerships with faculty members and others across campus to understand the diverse needs of undergraduate students and to share in the ways we can serve them.

Train New Staff, Student Leaders, Peer Mentors, Faculty, and Guest Speakers To Interact With FGS In A Caring, Encouraging, And Validating Manner. Students related their sense of belonging to the encouraging environment provided during Success Program activities by staff, student leaders, peer mentors, and guest speakers. Positive and affirming words shared by the individual students met through program activities helped students feel supported by a caring community invested in their success. Rendon's (1994) validation theory can be a framework used to teach faculty and other across campus how to create validating experiences for students in their unique roles across the campus.

Since students also mentioned non-Program individuals such as academic advisors and non-program faculty as being meaningful to their sense of belonging, I suggest Success Program staff could investigate the possibility of participating in new faculty orientations or training for faculty development programs to presenting effective strategies for engaging FGS (Bordelon et al., 2019), Rendon's (1994) validation theory, and Stanton-Salazar's (2011) roles related to institutional agents. Bordelon et al. (2019) found that faculty who work together to improve course design for students in one course positively influence teaching in their other courses. I suggest teaching faculty to engage effectively with FGS in a caring, encouraging manner could positively affect their engagement with and persistence of non-FGS.

Recommendations for Policy

If we accept that the Success Program is achieving sense of belonging for its participants, we must also accept that the program is not yet serving all of the FGS at LU. I used data from my

Additional Observations to suggest recommendations for policy change within the program to increase reach among its FGS population.

Intensify Efforts To Reach FGS and Welcome Their Participation In The Success Program. Although the Summer Scholars and TRIO summer bridge programs have been instrumental in introducing the program to FGS, these programs can only accept limited numbers of students. Every first-generation student should be able to participate in the Success Program and enjoy the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging within this unique community, if desired. Program administrators should work with stakeholders across the campus to standardize and customize students' awareness of program activities and services (Huang, 2011; Simpson & Wayne, 2016). Zhao and Kuh (2004) found that ineffective advertising strategies limited students' awareness of learning communities that positively affected students' academic success. Similarly, the Success Program is currently not reaching half of the FGS population at LU. There is significant opportunity to scale up program activities and increase belongingness for more students.

The program should standardize and customize the ways students learn about the Success Program (Huang, 2011; Simpson & Wayne, 2016). All FGS should receive information about the Success Program after being admitted to the university and after submitting their enrollment deposit. Increased use of social media and online advertising could possibly enhance awareness of program activities (Simpson & Wayne, 2016). Additionally, the program managers should assertively work to deepen relationships across the campus to invite faculty, staff, and administrators to promote engagement in the Success Program to students in their departmental environments (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Offer Program Events At Multiple Times Of Day. Program events should be offered twice a day to accommodate working, commuter students. Each semester, the program should survey students based on their schedules to determine what times are best for event programming. Additionally, the program should explore alternative ways to provide support to FGS at flexible, non-traditional times. To accommodate commuter students and students who work, Zoom meetings and virtual events should continue to offer flexible opportunities for these students to get and remain connected to the program. Additionally, vendors are creating applications, such as the EVAN360 app, that works with universities to make advising, career service support and other social and academic support available to FGS when they need it. Simpson and Waye (2016) recommend regularly gathering feedback from students through focus groups and other surveying means to continually design program component that serve the needs of FGS.

Assist Students With Navigating The Dichotomous Worlds of Their Home Culture and Campus Culture. Davis (2010) suggests FGS parents are as uninformed as their students relating to how to help their students succeed in college. Davis (2010) recommends universities find ways to send information to FGS parents after students are admitted and committed to enroll at the university in order to teach them what their students can expect upon entering college and how parents can help them. Increasing programming that helps FGS manage between their home and campus communities may be helpful.

Increase Full-Time Staff Who Are Dedicated to The Success Program. In order to accommodate the need to reach more FGS and increase program participation outlined through the Process component of this evaluation, I cannot ignore the needs to reconsider factors that relate to the Inputs component of the CIPP model. Currently, two full-time staff members work

for the Success Program; however, these staff members also share responsibilities in other areas of the Strategic Enrollment Management division. If the university seriously wants to serve all of its FGS, which is currently three times larger than its current email list, the university must invest in full-time staff who can fully commit to the Success Program. Having staff dedicated to the program will provide the necessary time to personally engage with greater numbers of students, collect the data necessary for continual progress updates and program enhancements, and develop the cross-campus relationships (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004) that will multiply the validating experiences FGS need to feel sense of belonging at LU. Additionally, full-time staff members can explore the creative opportunities for maximizing staff time to effectively serve thousands of FGS, such as exploring FGS Apps and creating and facilitating virtual programming while in-person events are still being implemented. Finally, additional full-time staff can investigate the opportunities to scatter staff scheduling to accommodate the needs of commuter FGS within the program and across the campus, such as career services and tutoring.

Increase Financial Resources for FGS Operations and Student Success. In order to accommodate additional costs for serving many more students, I recommend the full-time program staff establish strong relationships with the university advancement division to partner in securing private gifts that can support operations for the Success Program and create scholarships for FGS. The program staff can educate fundraisers on the benefits of serving FGS and how the Success Program changes students' lives so fundraisers can include the program in fundraising campaigns and priorities. Donors and foundations who are committed to increasing equity and access in higher education can be great partners in increasing the resources the program can use to maximize its influence on FGS (Learning Philanthropy, 2022). The Suder Foundation invests in public universities who want to partner in their First Scholars program to

support the graduation rates of FGS. Grants from the Suder Foundation include operational and scholarships for students (Learning Philanthropy, 2022). The Success Program staff could assist advancement professionals with identifying, cultivating, soliciting, and stewarding relationships with such donors, foundations, and corporations.

Additional Recommendation: Collect More Data

To better monitor the achievement of program goals in future evaluations, I recommend Success Program administrators collect more data on the students who participate in their program. Mertens and Wilson (2012) state data is critical to conducting effective program evaluations. Collecting appropriate data can help answer questions about whom the program is serving, what the content of services are and include feedback about the quantity and quality of services rendered. Moreover, data can help compare the experiences and outcomes of program participants with those of similar populations who do not participate. Additionally, collecting more detailed data on student attendance will enable program administrators to identify most popular programs based on real data from student attendance and not solely rely upon student memory for program evaluation purposes. Finally, a program's progress can be monitored by continually collecting and reviewing data on changes and new conditions that could affect program strategy.

On a larger scale, I suggest the federal government's Department of Education also begin to collect regular retention and graduation data on FGS from universities across the country. FGS studies often use years-old data on FGS retention and graduation rates. The National Center for Education Statistics' 2017 Stats in Brief (Redford & Hoyer, 2017) on FGS and continuing-generation students was prepared using data from 2002, more than a decade ago. If serving FGS is truly a national priority, as indicated in the White House's 2014 strategic plan, it is critical to

collect current national data on FGS retention and graduation to learn if we are achieving our goals to improve college completion for FGS.

Limitations

This evaluation incurred challenges as it was implemented during spring of 2020, when the university remained closed due to social distancing requirements. Student participation in the evaluation was limited to students who had the requisite technology and internet service to participate in the virtual activities. FGS are more likely to be minority students or from lower socio-economic status (Davis, 2010) The quantitative data may be skewed due to sampling error. Students with high sense of belonging may have self-selected into the survey population, with a desire to assist in informing the institution about positive experiences they have had in the Success Program. Additionally, the qualitative data was disproportionately female and did not include students who scored low sense of belonging. Additional limitations occurred from the lack of demographic data collected on program participants. We were unable to reach sophomores or higher, causing difficult in calculating a valid response rate.

Moreover, the one-group post-test evaluation design of this study may also limit our interpretation of the sense of belonging scores. A Nonequivalent Control Group Design may be a better design for a future evaluation. In the Nonequivalent Control Group Design, the experimental Group A and the control Group B are selected without random assignment (Creswell, 2014). Both groups take a pretest and posttest, but only the experimental group receives the treatment. This methodology, in addition to collecting more data on participants and students who do not participate in the program, might be more effective in observing effects of the program on sense of belonging.

Recommendations for Future Research

I recommend additional areas of research explore ways to engage and evaluate the experiences and needs of Success Program participants with low senses of belonging and FGS at LU who do not participate in the program. Since no data were collected from interview participants whose sense of belonging fell within the low category, it would be beneficial to the program's overall success to understand the needs of all FGS.

I also suggest future evaluations investigate the needs of male FGS and which program components are meaningful to them. All of the qualitative data was provided by female students. Particular attention should be given to investigate the experiences of African American male FGS at LU. African American male college students suffer the highest attrition rates of any college sub-group (McClure, 2006; Robertson & Chaney, 2017; Strayhorn, 2008c). Furthermore, African American males are matriculating in smaller numbers and graduating less than African American female students (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Like FGS, African American males face unique challenges that diminish student involvement in activities that create sense of belonging on campus (Strayhorn, 2008c). At the time of this evaluation, this student sub-group may have been experiencing heightened distress due to social isolation during the pandemic and following the May 2020 killing of a Black man, George Floyd, by a White police officer in Minnesota (History, 2021). The event ignited protests for social and racial justice across the country, including near the LU campus. It is crucial to explore the experiences and sense of belonging of African American males and their participation in the Success Program at LU. The Success program includes some components supported by literature to benefit African American males, such as mentoring, pre-college programs, study skills and tutoring sessions, and financial aid workshops (Robertson & Chaney, 2017; Strayhorn, 2008c), but I was unable to ascertain their

experiences and sense of belonging at LU during this evaluation. Future research could further study the needs of male FGS and if their participation, or lack of participation, in the Success Program is influenced by the program's all-female staff.

Summary

This dissertation began with the assertion by President Salovey that our campuses *belong* to all of our students, and they all deserve to enjoy the good of our campuses. I suggest students will not benefit from the good of attending college unless they graduate. As FGS still struggle with lower graduation rates than their peers, universities that recruit these students have a responsibility to implement adequate support services and programs to help them succeed and graduate. The Success Program is charged with aiding the retention and graduation of FGS at LU. To accomplish that outcome, one of the program's goals is to create sense of belonging among its participants. This formative program evaluation explored how program participants related their sense of belonging with participation in the Success Program. The evaluation data found that the Success Program is meeting the criteria of planning the kinds of social and academic engagement components that develop sense of belonging for students. Additionally, participants reported they receive regular communication from program staff that includes information on program activities and facilitate helpful communication with program representatives. Moreover, students reported their engagement with a combination of institutional agents who have created validating experiences in an encouraging manner has been meaningful in making students feel a sense of belonging. The quantitative data from the survey respondents demonstrated high levels of belongingness, and students identified specific social and academic engagement program components they found meaningful in influencing their sense of belonging.

According to this mixed methods evaluation, I find the Success Program at LU is accomplishing its goal of creating sense of belonging among the FGS who participated in this evaluation. To fully understand the program's affect on all FGS at LU, more data and evaluation is needed. Nonetheless, the program is delivering components supported by the literature to be best practices in developing sense of belonging and in supporting student success for FGS.

This evaluation has shown that validating experiences within a support program's activities or in other parts of campus can create sense of belonging and the transformative experiences that our university admissions brochures promote. Those validating, encouraging experiences have the power to aid FGS in persisting to graduation and enjoying the professional careers and higher socio-economic experiences their college degrees will afford them. Universities that desire to recruit FGS should fully commit to establishing a similar support program such as the Success Program at LU. This evaluation's findings and recommendations will aid in strengthening this vital program as it truly does the work of increasing access, equity, and achievement in education.

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Appendix A

General Belongingness Scale (GBS)

Directions: Please rate the degree to which you *agree or disagree* with each of the following statements on a scale of 1 to 7 (strongly disagree to strongly agree, respectively).

1. When I am with other people, I feel included.
2. I have close bonds with family and friends.
3. I feel like an outsider.
4. I feel as if people do not care about me.
5. I feel accepted by others.
6. Because I do not belong, I feel distant during the holiday season.
7. I feel isolated from the rest of the world.
8. I have a sense of belonging.
9. When I am with other people, I feel like a stranger.
10. I have a place at the table with others.
11. I feel connected with others.
12. Friends and family do not involve me in their plans

Scoring: Higher scores indicate greater levels of belonging.

7 = Strongly agree

6 = Agree

5 = Somewhat Agree

4 = Don't Agree or Disagree

3 = Somewhat Disagree

2 = Disagree

1 = Strongly Disagree

Malone, G. P., Pillow, D. R., & Osman, A. (2012). The General Belongingness Scale (GBS): Assessing achieved belongingness. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 52(3), 311-316. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.10.027>

Appendix B

General Belongingness Scale for Success Program Participants

Demographic Information:

Year at CCU _____

Age _____

Race/Ethnicity _____

Major _____

Please rate your experience with the Proud First program: none, very limited, some experience, quite a lot, extensive.

Survey

Directions: Please rate the degree to which you *disagree or agree* with each of the following statements on a scale of 1 to 7 (strongly disagree to strongly agree, respectively).

1. When I am with other students in the Proud First program, I feel included.
2. I have close bonds with family and friends.
3. I feel like an outsider at Proud First activities.
4. I feel as if students in the Proud First program do not care about me.
5. I feel accepted by Proud First staff members.
6. Because I do not belong, I feel distant at CCU.
7. I feel isolated from students on campus.
8. I have a sense of belonging at Proud First activities.
9. When I am with staff members in the Proud First program, I feel like a stranger.
10. I have a place at the table with students on campus.
11. I feel connected to CCU.
12. Friends and family do not involve me in their plans.

Scoring: Higher scores indicate greater levels of belonging. Negative-worded items are scored in reverse.

7 = Strongly agree

6 = Agree

5 = Somewhat Agree

4 = Don't Agree or Disagree

3 = Somewhat Disagree

2 = Disagree

1 = Strongly Disagree

Adapted from Malone, G. P., Pillow, D. R., & Osman, A. (2012). The General Belongingness Scale (GBS): Assessing achieved belongingness. *Personality and Individual Differences, 52*(3), 311-316. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.10.027>

Appendix C

Dissertation Announcement

Students needed!

A William & Mary doctoral student, Angela Bartee, is conducting research on the impact of support services for first-generation college students, and she would like to survey members of our Success Program for her dissertation. Angela will be reaching out to you via email, looking for volunteers to complete a short, 5-minute survey about students' experiences in the Success program. Your responses will be anonymous and will be instrumental in helping Angela learn how colleges can support the success of first-generation college students. Look out for Angela's email in your inbox within the next week. She will greatly appreciate your participation in completing the survey. For more information, contact Angela Bartee at adbartee@email.wm.edu.

Appendix D

Survey Invitation Letter

Hello, and thank you Dr. E. for mentioning my dissertation survey in the Success Program newsletter.

I am Angela Bartee, a doctoral student at William & Mary, conducting research about programs that support first-generation students. We would like to invite you, a member of the LU Success Program email list, to participate in this short survey.

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact participation in a first-generation student program has on students. My study can help university leaders learn how to invest in activities that support first-generation student success.

This survey should only take about 5 minutes. Your responses will be anonymous, and you may decline to answer any questions you choose.

Following the survey, nine students will be interviewed for 25-30 minutes via zoom, so I may gain a deeper understanding of your responses and experiences as a first-generation student. If you are willing to be interviewed at a later time, please check the appropriate box within the survey. I would sincerely appreciate your willingness to be interviewed.

Thank you again for participating in this study. Your feedback will be invaluable to program managers at LU and other universities. Should you have any questions about the study, please reach out to me at ###-###-#### or at email address. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Angela Bartee
Doctoral Student in Educational Policy, Planning, & Leadership
William & Mary

BY CLICKING ON THE LINK BELOW, I UNDERSTAND THE TERMS ABOVE AND AGREE TO PARTICIPATE.

Follow this link to the Survey:

[\\${1://SurveyLink?d=Take the Survey}](#)

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:

[\\${1://SurveyURL}](#)

Follow the link to opt out of future emails:

[\\${1://OptOutLink?d=Click here to unsubscribe}](#)

Appendix E

Interview Protocol for Success Program Participants

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to describe the ways in which participation in the Proud First program helped or did not help develop a sense of belonging among its participants. It will also help us identify which activities organized by the Proud First program were most and less instrumental in helping students feel a sense of belonging to the program.

Warm up questions:

1. How did you first learn about the Proud First program?
2. How did you decide to participate in the program?

Interview Questions:

3. Which Proud First activities did you participate in?
4. Do you feel a sense of belonging in the Proud First Program?

If YES

YES (a) Why do you feel like you belong in the Proud First program?

Did you participate in any activities that made you feel like you belong in the program?

If YES

YES (a) Which activities did you participate in?

YES (b) What was your experience with students at the activity?

YES (c) What was your experience with staff at the activity?

YES (d) What made you feel like you fit in among the Proud First program?

If NO

NO (a) Why don't you feel like you belong in the Proud First program?

If NO

NO (a) What activities did you participate in?

NO (b) What was your experience with students at the activity?

NO (c) What was your experience with staff at the activity?

NO (d) What made you feel like you don't belong in the Proud First program?

5. How do you feel when you are with other students in the Proud First program?

6. How do you feel when you are with staff members in the program?
7. How do you feel on the rest of the CCU campus? Do you feel connected in other ways on campus?
8. At any point, have you thought about leaving CCU?

If YES

If NO

If YES (a), why did you thinking of leaving CCU?

If NO (a), why have you not considered leaving CCU?

If YES (b), what made you stay at CCU?

Are any relationships you have made through the Proud First program

Thank you for participating in this evaluation. As a reminder, your responses will remain anonymous and confidential.

VITA

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