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**THE EFFECTS THAT SPACES AND PLACES OF CAMPUS HAVE ON
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS**

by

Ashley Davis

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Educational Services and Leadership
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Arts in Higher Education
at
Rowan University
March 28, 2023

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Dedications

I dedicate this work to the participants and all future Higher Education students here at Rowan University.

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I would like to thank my friends and support network at Rowan University for the support these past two years. Their never-ending encouragement kept me grounded as I wrote my thesis, and I am forever grateful to them.

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Abstract

Ashley Davis

THE EFFECTS THAT SPACES AND PLACES OF CAMPUS HAVE ON
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

2022-2023

Stephanie Lezotte, Ph.D.

Master of Arts in Higher Education

Student sense of belonging on campus is changing post COVID-19 pandemic, and this is because the way students utilize spaces on campus has evolved. Facilities on campus can impact the way students feel they belong based on how the spaces are set up and where students go in between classes (Samura, 2018). This study investigated the relationship between providing accessible, specific physical spaces and the participants' perception of student belonging. Undergraduate students enrolled full time at Rowan University were interviewed to collect data, and a qualitative research approach was used to analyze the data. Results conclude that there is a relationship between student sense of belonging and community based on the physical spaces students utilize on campus.

Table of Contents

Abstract	v
Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Research Problem	1
Significance of the Research Problem	1
Purpose of the Study	2
Assumptions and Limitations	2
Operational Definitions.....	3
Research Question	4
Overview of the Study	4
Chapter II: Literature Review	5
Higher Education	5
Student Involvement	7
Student Life Centers	8
Sense of Community.....	12
Summary of the Literature	16
Chapter III: Methodology	18
Context of Study	18
Research Questions.....	19
Population and Sample of Study.....	20
Data Collection Instrument	20
Procedure of Gathering Data	21
Data Analysis	22

Table of Contents (Continued)

Chapter IV: Findings.....25

 Profile of the Population/Sample24

 Findings.....25

 Sense of Belonging25

 Physical Spaces on Campus27

 COVID-19 and Mattering28

Chapter V: Summary, Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations30

 Summary of the Study30

 Discussion of the Findings3

 Research Question 131

 Research Question 232

 Conclusion32

 Recommendations for Practice and Further Practice.....33

 Recommendations for Research33

 Recommendations for Rowan University.....33

References.....34

Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval38

Appendix B: Interview Questions39

Chapter I

Introduction

Higher education institutions focus on student life and the college experience when recruiting students for enrollment. Student life at higher education institutions center their goals around building a sense of community and belonging for students. Sense of community and belonging is what ties the academic and social experience students have at college together (Bowers et al., 2020). For students to experience this positive relationship, students must dedicate themselves to academic achievements through time and energy. When students do participate in clubs, organizations, sports, academic extracurricular activities, their academic performance is more likely to be positive and successful (Astin, 1984). Involvement also has an impact on student collaboration, common purpose, and citizenship on campus (Dugan & Komives 2007).

Statement of the Research Problem

The purpose of this study is to add to the research done on Student Life Centers by completing a qualitative study that examines the relationship between providing accessible, specific physical spaces and the participants' perception of student belonging. By doing so, professionals will understand how multiple realities of different types of physical spaces affect students and how naturally occurring student development impacts the feeling of belonging in students (McMillan, 1996).

Significance of the Research Problem

Higher education institutions are constantly evolving, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Universities need to understand the importance of creating a sense of community and belonging on campus for undergraduate students as institutions

transition back to fully operational. This research study reflects on how enrolled undergraduate students at Rowan University feel about the current Student Life Center and its impact. Rowan University will be able use this study's findings to cater Student Life Centers toward the aspects that create a sense of community and belonging because of the specific qualitative research. This will promote inclusivity and collaboration within students moving forward.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to add to the literature by providing research within Rowan University's Chamberlain Student Center in Glassboro, New Jersey. This study examined how undergraduates' sense of belonging has evolved from before the COVID-19 pandemic and if the transition from virtual learning and virtual extracurricular activities to fully back in-person learning and extracurricular activities was impacted by the physical spaces provided when students came back to campus. Students in this study were asked specifically if the set-up of spaces in The Chamberlain Student Center either positivity or negatively affected them compared to other buildings and outdoor spaces on campus.

Assumptions and Limitations

This research focused on the sense of community and belonging provided by the Student Life Center at Rowan University. While this research will aim to create a basic and general understanding of this concept, it cannot be generalized for all higher education institutions in the United States. This research also consisted of a convenience sample of Rowan University students who may have biases and other judgements about the Student Life Center that may result in the questions asked being answered as not

entirely true. This study should also note that there may be research bias in result to my own involvement within Rowan University's Chamberlain Student Center, but I have attempted to reduce any such bias using a systematic and rigorous research design.

Operational Definitions

1. The College Student Center/Union: A physical, stand-alone building on college campuses that provide several operational services for students, staff, and faculty. These services include, but are not limited to, meeting spaces, food courts, dining spaces, laundry rooms, print centers, mail centers, and information desks. On campus, these buildings can be referred to as several different names such as student center, student union, and campus center.
2. Sense of Belonging: Barrett (2011) referred to sense of belonging as a construct of three variables: sense of belonging, college social activities, and social support network.
3. Sense of Community: McMillan (1996) states that belonging is a vital part of a sense of community that is centered around acceptance, emotional safety/trust, and boundaries.
4. Mattering: Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) define mattering as "a motive: the feeling that others depend on us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego extension" (p. 165).
5. Physical Spaces on Campus: For this study, physical spaces will be classified as the components of a space. This includes layout, arrangement of furniture, artwork, location, and facilities offered.

Research Question

The research question for this study follows:

- 1.) Is there an observed perception between the physical space of a college student center and students' sense of community on campus?
- 2.) How has the student experience evolved since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to the current experience in the student center?

Overview of the Study

Chapter II of this study provides a literature review that examines current and recent research done to understand the importance of the study. In the literature review, higher education, student involvement, Student Life Centers, and sense of community are all researched extensively to understand the importance of each topic.

Chapter III of this study provides details regarding the methodology and procedure that was used for the research. There are descriptions of the population sample, data collection, and data analysis.

Chapter IV provides the results of the study. This chapter examines the patterns and themes found for each research question asked in the study and summarizes the findings.

Chapter V concludes the major knowledge and information from the study. This chapter also discusses and provides suggestions for higher education professionals to take for future practices.

Chapter II

Literature Review

This study aims to understand the effects that physical spaces, room set ups, and resources offered in Student Life Centers have on undergraduate students and their sense of belonging on campus. First, knowing about higher education and general history will help reveal what groups of student's universities are focusing on, and how that is tied into current students and their identities. Then, knowing the history of student engagement and involvement is important so that there is a general base level of understanding how much students participate in academics and extracurricular activities. Next, I will transition to review Student Life Centers on campuses and what they were originally intended to provide for students and what they have transformed to now. I will also include research suggesting how the physical spaces in the student centers are important, and sometimes certain room layouts and set ups can affect students socializing. This will lead into the student belonging section, and about how important this is for students so that they feel purpose during their undergraduate years. Finally, this literature review will include a conceptual framework, and provide information about future research in the discussion portion of the study.

Higher Education

In higher education, institutions have evolved over time to advance and develop their purpose and mission. In the Colonial College period, from 1636 to 1770, higher education was focused on student experiences and their religious commitments rather than educational purposes (Ward, 2003). Institutions only began shifting from this group thinking type of learning to a more individualized, specialized student experience in the

Denominational College period, from 1770–1860, to promote external knowledge and reasoning into the classroom (Ward, 2003). The Research Era, in 1860 - 1945, created college to be an all-encompassing experience: research in scientific labs, research grants, creations of academic and student life departments, and more specialization opportunities changed the student involvement on campus (Ward, 2003). Only wealthy, White men were able to access higher education opportunities to this point, and it was still very oppressive for White women, Black students, and all other marginalized groups. The only way women could be allowed on campus is if they were in professional roles such as faculty and staff (Ward, 2003). During the Mass Education Era from 1945–1975, institutions were focusing on diversifying the programs offered, faculty representation, and student population (Ward, 2003). The current era, The Contemporary Era from 1975 to the present, brings to light the issues that were overlooked in higher education (Ward, 2003). Now is the time where institutions are seeing adjustments and transformations being made to better students' experiences, as well as faculty and staff members (Ward, 2003).

As institutions develop throughout time, student affairs and student life experiences become more centered on students. At most higher education institutions in America, student affairs professionals can be summarized as those who, “bring to the academy a particular expertise on students, their development, and the impact of their learning environments ... They are closely aligned with the academic mission and serve as invaluable links between students and the institution” (Ludeman & Strange, 2009, p. 8). Elkins (2015) explains that in the early 2000s, student affairs professionals were “to possess knowledge, skills, and competencies in assessment as a foundational piece of

their educational training and professional development” (p. 41). This changed the way curricula in graduate programs were being shared so that future professionals in higher education were entering the field with knowledge and experience in guiding students throughout their own personal journeys (Elkins, 2015). This also initiated professional development organizations and conferences, such as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) to give the working professionals a chance to learn from each other annually (Elkins, 2015).

In recent student life at higher education institutions, overall progress and development have been occurring, but it has taken many years to do so (Elkins, 2015). A study conducted by Elkins (2015) found that change also happens in higher education when universities lose funding for non-essential staff that work in student success and student life. The area does not get the attention it needs which then impacts the experiences students have outside of class, which ultimately impacts students’ academic success (Elkins, 2015). Universities then must rebuild, and it becomes a never-ending cycle of building student life back (Elkins, 2015).

Student Involvement

In higher education, student life is one of the areas professionals focus on to enhance the student experience. The goals of institutions are to engage, develop, and provide a welcoming environment for students throughout their journey in college (Ludeman, 2009). Ludeman et al. (2009) also explain that there is an increasing need for student life to provide out-of-classroom experiences so that students can join in community building and become involved on campus. Astin’s (1984) Theory of

Involvement explains that to do this, students must dedicate themselves to academic achievements through time and energy. When students do participate in clubs, organizations, sports, academic extracurricular activities, their academic performance is more likely to be positive and successful (Astin, 1984). Students who are living on campus, participate in extracurricular activities, hold a part time on-campus job, attend a four-year university, identify with college enrollment or environment, and interact with faculty and staff are more likely to continue to have success in their college career (Astin, 1984). Involvement also has an impact on student collaboration, common purpose, and citizenship on campus (Dugan & Komives, 2007). This theory can be seen in practice by using Bowers' et al. (2020) research to understand the time and commitment students devote to their experience and becoming successful.

Another look into student involvement at higher education institutions is through the work of Tinto (1997) and his work on integration of the classroom experience and the student life experience. His findings suggest that when students are encouraged to participate in learning in a different setting within their academic social support group, the participation is at a level of achievement that institutions strive for in balancing intellectual and community engagement (Tinto, 1997).

Student Life Centers

At higher education campuses in the United States, universities try to provide what Rullman and Kieboom (2012) refer to as third place in society. The first place for most individuals refer to as their own or a place they feel comfortable is their homes, the second place is their work, and the third place is neither work nor home (Rullman & Kieboom, 2012). For the third place on campus, this would be the Student Life Centers

that tie together work and school (Rullman & Kieboom, 2012). Third places are free to enter, food is commonly available, they are easily accessible, there are regular users, and the environment is welcoming and comfortable (Rullman & Kieboom, 2012).

Student centers at higher education institutions provide the culture Astin (1984) and Tinto (1997) expect for students' success and development. This consists of providing development through employment and volunteerism, respecting and representing diverse identities of all students, and providing spaces where individuals can foster relationships and feelings of community on campus. The Association of College Unions International (ACUI) (2018) reported that Student Life Centers must all meet the same standards in providing resources to students in order to meet an equal level of success and development opportunities at institutions throughout the United States. The standards are allowing student professional development through employment and involvement, inclusivity, equity, respect, affirmation, promoting student leadership and social responsibility, and “providing physical spaces for formal and informal community interactions that build meaningful relationships” (ACUI, 2023. n.p.).

To comply with the standards ACUI has established, McLane and Kozinets, (2019) explore how spatiality and experiences create an attachment between spaces and students. Frequent student visitors who attend events, or even just utilize the space in Student Life Centers, do feel a sense of belonging when surrounded by students similar to them. If Student Life Centers create safe spaces for marginalized groups of students, then a greater sense of belonging can be achieved. Mulrooney and Kelly (2021) also provide insights from students in their study that provides feedback to the intentionality of student centers, and other new buildings, on campus. Student Life Centers, as well as new

academic buildings, need to provide spaces for students to host events, but also an area for studying on campus. Samura (2018) says this can be done by having engaging areas within the buildings. Longer dining tables, round studying tables, natural lighting, and artwork for students to look at creates inclusive spaces where students can meet and feel comfortable (Samura, 2018). Matthews et al. (2011) talk about the physical spaces on campus that promote active social learning and spaces where students can collaborate while doing classwork. Students said they felt that they had more of an opportunity to make friends and socialize while doing homework which created a sense of belonging based on the spaces provided (Matthews et al., 2011).

A recent study done by Rullman and Kieboom in 2012 brought together several higher education associations including the Association of College Unions International, Association of College and University Housing Officers-International, Association of College and University Libraries, National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association, and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education who were joined by the Society for College and University Planning, the Committee on Architecture for Education of the American Institute of Architects, and the International Interior Design Association. Together, these groups of professionals did research to explore the main influences that physical spaces and places in Student Life Centers can have on students (Rullman & Kieboom, 2012). The study concluded on five main findings: the first is that “Higher education leaders too often work within—rather than across—the boundaries that define our professional disciplines, campus management structures, and association missions” (Rullman & Kieboom, 2012, p. 185). The second main point is that “facilities are too often designed without the flexibility and adaptability needed to ensure user relevance

over time (Rullman & Kieboom, 2012, p. 185). The third is “measures of success and effectiveness are too often quantitative (e.g., user counts, square footage) and too narrowly defined (e.g., retention percentages rather than learning outcomes)” (Rullman & Kieboom, 2012, p. 185). The fourth is “the sociology of community is less valued and more difficult to describe than academic goals, many of which drive design and financial decision making” (Rullman & Kieboom, 2012, p. 185). And the fifth main finding is that “Higher education and its industry partners lack an agreed-upon definition of community that is understood across disciplines, professions, and associations and that is easily and democratically used without specialized training or bounded knowledge” (Rullman & Kieboom, 2012, p. 185). For this study, highlighting these results, specifically the lack of flexibility and evolution of Student Life Centers and the measurement of success, is important to note because of the physical disadvantages it creates. Student centers are not able to continuously provide a space that keeps up with the changing needs of students, and it creates a lack of usage of the spaces in the student centers on campus (Rullman & Kieboom, 2012).

Student Life Centers also provide a physical environment for individuals to perform many different tasks: studying, working, socializing, social activities, lounging, and events (Smyth, 2016). Since there is such a wide variety of support, multiple groups of people, including faculty, staff, students, parents, alumni, and other guests, have the opportunity to use the facility offered in the student centers (Smyth, 2016). Having such a large space for these groups allows for the student centers to be community centers on campus- a place where everyone can come together to meet up (Smyth, 2016). Brown and Taylor (2012) also emphasize the importance of providing spaces for students to

come together. When students are provided spaces to host events, it not only teaches them a new level of organization and responsibility, but it also provides them the opportunity on how to be leaders (Brown & Taylor, 2012). These events also allow for students to learn how to network with each other and learn how to be comfortable with people who are interested in similar topics or hobbies (Brown & Taylor, 2012). Student Life Centers are a space on campus where students of multicultural groups will meet for their events (McDowell & Higbee, 2014). This provides students with a space they feel they are safe going to in between classes and also gives them the space they need to feel like they belong (McDowell & Higbee, 2014).

Sense of Community

Sense of community on campus is a prominent aspect of Student Life Centers on campus. Students need a place to feel welcome on campus, and student centers provide the physical spaces needed for the opportunity for community building (Ludeman et al., 2009). Sense of community and belonging is what ties the academic and social experience students have at college together (Bowers, et. al., 2020). McMillan (1996) states that belonging is a vital part of a sense of community that is centered around acceptance, emotional safety/trust, and boundaries. Another desire students on campus have is feeling like they matter. Barrett (2011) referred to sense of belonging as a construct of three variables: sense of belonging, college social activities, and social support network. Higher education professionals in student life are the builders of these variables at Student Life Centers on campus. These experiences students have are based on the programs Student Life Centers focus around sense of belonging, social activities, and support networks for students to interact (Barrett, 2014).

As with a sense of belonging, mattering is also important for students. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) define mattering as “a motive: the feeling that others depend on us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego extension” (p. 165). This concept of mattering affects individuals’ behavior, which can be tied back to Astin’s Involvement theory. According to Schlossberg et al. (1989) “mattering refers to the beliefs people have, whether right or wrong, that they matter to someone else, that they are the object of someone else’s attention, and that others care about them and appreciate them” (p. 21.) These factors of community make students have dynamic, constant, and constantly changing relationships within these communities (Komives et al., 2009). When spaces are intentional with their set up, events, and artwork, students can feel comfortable in their community and that they have a place where their presence matters on campus (Samura, 2018). Schlossberg et al. (1989) also found that students who are given the opportunity and resources outside of the classroom to build their own individual personality during social events and programs feel as though they have a stronger sense of belonging and matter. They found that basic things, such as providing students with their own mailbox in the Student Life Center, makes them feel as though they have a spot on campus outside of the classroom (Schlossberg et al., 1989). This ties into the concept of sense of belonging because these facilitates offer students something that belongs to them and that they are responsible for. Johnson (2019) found that students do think that having a sense of community on campus is extremely important and that Student Life Centers on campus provide an experience that most students are satisfied with.

Barrett (2014) acknowledges the gaps in knowledge surrounding a sense of community through Student Life Centers. There is not enough support to help guide higher education professionals in providing these experiences for students to get the most out of their experiences (Barrett, 2014). Other gaps in knowledge surrounding the sense of community and belonging on campus for students is centered around the disconnect between universities in the United States and the expectations of what student life offers (Barrett, 2014). While the basic level of facilities and programming need to be met, there is little awareness of what students are looking for (Barrett, 2014). Scheibler (2021) completed a study and found that “students don’t necessarily know what the College Experience is, they just know they want it” (p. 112). There are so many different pathways students can choose from when deciding what their experience will look like: what major to pick, what minor to pick, which extracurricular activities should they join, and which residential housing assignment they will choose. Understanding what makes students choose what experience they have will provide evidence of what events are creating a feeling of togetherness and inclusion.

Student backgrounds and their own relationships with sense of belonging in different cultures also impacts the role student life has (Lecy, 2021). First generation students and low-income students have different perspectives on what sense of belonging and community is when they first enter college (Lecy, 2021). For some students who come from marginalized backgrounds, such as Indigenous Americans, community and gathering plays an essential part into their own belonging and community at a university (Oxendine & Taub, 2021). Providing them a space where they can come together makes them feel connected to each other outside of the classroom (Oxendine & Taub, 2021).

Garcia et al. (2019) found that international students are more likely to feel a sense of community on campus when they interact with faculty and staff members at the university. Another group of students that have a new sense of belonging and community are students who have learned online due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Brodie & Osowska, 2021). Having to learn online affected students' interactions, so their sense of belonging has shifted to be more comfortable with online interactions (Brodie & Osowska, 2021). The pandemic shifted learning online immediately, and this forced students to be at the mercy of their socio-economic status, Wi-Fi or network coverage, and digital competency (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021). Many groups of students were marginalized during this period because of access to learning, and if a student did not meet these standards put in place by the university to learn online, they were affected negatively because professors would oftentimes change their course to make the assignments less challenging and cover less material (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021). Professors also minimized the amount of group work done during online learning (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021). This means that with institutions transitioning back to completely in-person student life activities, students will need to learn a new sense of belonging and community because of how displaced they have been during the pandemic.

Something that also impacts the students is the way specific institution functions. Higher education institutions all have different types of management, leadership, funding, budgets, and regulations based on what kind of institution they are (Birnbaum, 1998). All these different types of administrative decisions and policies can affect what is offered to

students on their college campus, which will impact how they are involved on campus (Birnbaum, 1998).

A very similar study that connects to this research on the effects of spaces on campus was completed in 2019 by Erik Johnson that explored the impact of physical space in the College Union and students' sense of community on campus (Johnson, 2019). Johnson's study concludes that Student Life Centers at Rowan University in New Jersey do impact the students' sense of belonging (Johnson, 2019). Johnson used a quantitative methodology to obtain his results; this study will be an adapted replica qualitative study based on Johnson's research.

Summary of the Literature

For the duration of student life in higher education in America, the foundation of the main campus has always included a Student Life Center or sometimes a main space for students to come together to meet outside of the classroom (Ward, 2003). Higher education professionals continue to encourage students to utilize the space provided in the Student Life Centers to foster a feeling of belonging on campus (Smyth, 2016). This can be done if spaces are provided on campus; such spaces would increase student engagement because of student's feeling that they belong there (Astin, 1984). Since student centers on campus provide a third space on campus for students by having accessible food courts and lounging areas for work and socialization (Rullman & Kieboom, 2012) and complying with the standards to provide a space for programming and student interaction (ACUI, 2023. n.p), the student center on campuses allows for students to develop a sense of belonging and community.

Research has been done for over 100 years about how physical spaces on campus and the student union impact sense of community and belonging, but Barrett (2014) acknowledges that there is a gap in research about how the facilities impact students' community. There is especially a gap in knowledge about this relationship now after the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining these relationships post-pandemic and post-online learning at a public undergraduate university in New Jersey, this study aims to reveal data that provides an understanding into how current spaces and resources provided impact the sense of community for undergraduate students.

Chapter III

Methodology

Context of Study

Understanding the foundational theories and framework that are referenced when trying to make sense of community and belonging on campus for students is extremely important to ensure the student experience offered at universities is providing the same quality at institutions across the United States (ACUI, 2023. n.p). To be able to provide a sense of community and belonging for students in Student Life Centers, completing research is the only way to recognize and interpret what works well and the areas that need improvement (Komives, 2009).

McMillan (2016) writes that “qualitative research stresses multiple realities that are rooted in participants’ views and perceptions. A focus on understanding and meaning is based on social interactions, verbal narratives, and observations, rather than numbers” (p. 11). This type of research truly focuses the experiences and stories of students who have utilized Student Life Centers and what their experiences have been. Qualitative research is centered around an interpretative, constructivist, and transformative worldview. These worldviews focus on cultural, political, and participant experiences (McMillan, 2016). This is especially important post COVID-19 institutions closures and online learning as students transition back into in person events, classes, and socialization.

To investigate this issue, a qualitative research study was completed at Rowan University in Glassboro New Jersey. Rowan University has an undergraduate enrollment

of 15,963 students and 90 bachelor's degree programs (Rowan University, *Fast Facts 2023-2023*. n.d).

The research is on the Chamberlain Student Center, located in the heart of Glassboro's campus on Route 322. The Chamberlain Student Center has eight premier event locations for student organizations and departments to utilize free of charge for events (Rowan University, *Welcome to the Chamberlain Student Center*. n.d). Students or departments hosting events are able to customize room set ups and event activities (Rowan University, *Welcome to the Chamberlain Student Center*. n.d). There are open spaces students do not need to reserve and can utilize for 14 hours of the day when the building is open. There are several lounge areas in the building and a food court that provides seating for people to dine in. On average, around 6,000 to 10,000 people come into the student center daily during the academic year (D.Hartman, personal communication, 6 December 2022).

Research Questions

Although prior research (Johnson, 2019) shed light on the impact the student center has had on Rowan students, this impact has not yet been re-examined post-COVID-19. This research aims to close that gap in knowledge by asking the following research questions:

1. Is there an observed perception between the physical space of a college student center and students' sense of community on campus?
2. How has the student experience evolved since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to the current experience?

Population and Sample of Study

The population of this study was full-time undergraduate students at Rowan University during the 2022-2023 academic school year. The reason I focus exclusively on undergraduate students is because Rowan University has a larger undergraduate population than all other levels of study ((Rowan University, *Fast Facts 2023-2023*. n.d). Students over the age of 18 who self-identified as having visited the student center during this time were eligible to participate in the study. I did not have access to the records of these students, so I had to take their word that each participant was a full-time student who was 18 years or older. The individuals in this study were selected through a randomized convenience sample by responding to my recruitment email sent in Rowan University's daily mail Rowan Announcer. When I was not getting responses from recruitment email, I focused on student workers in the Chamberlain Student Center changing the sampling to an authoritative sample. Authoritative sampling is when researchers target certain participants and select them based from knowledge or association (Saldaña, 2013). I asked students who work in the Chamberlain Student Center to participate in the study if they were interested. This allowed for my overall participation in the study to increase.

Data Collection Instrument

For this study, qualitative research was conducted using an ethnographic approach. An ethnographic approach is “a description and interpretation of a cultural or social group system. Ethnographers spend extensive time in the setting being studied and use observations, interviews, and other analyses to understand the nature of the culture.” (McMillan, 2016, p. 14). To fully understand student culture, interviews were the best

way to get that base information to then understand what the sense of community is within each student.

The interview protocol I utilized was asking a series of 13 questions I created, but also engaging the participants if their responses could be developed further. I would ask “How so?” and “Can you give an example?” to get participants to explain their experiences further. These questions were approved by Rowan University’s Institutional Review Board and can be found in Appendix B. The interview protocol utilized a semi-structured format so that I could ask deeper questions that would develop participants’ answers further.

Procedure of Gathering Data

After receiving approval from the Instructional Review Board (IRB) at Rowan University, which can be found in Appendix A, an initial notice was sent out through a Rowan Daily Announcer to recruit volunteers to participate in the interviews. The Rowan Announcer was sent with a brief description of the study and noting that participation was entirely voluntary. Rowan Announcers are sent from the Rowan University server, so all information sent and collected via e-mail is protected by the university. This announcer went out four times in the volunteer opportunities portion of the Rowan Announcer and was sent out to all undergraduate students at Rowan University totaling to 15,963 student emails (Rowan University, *Fast Facts 2023-2023*. n.d).

The Rowan Announcer had a Google Form where students submitted their emails and gave consent to be contacted for a potential interview. When volunteers responded as interested, I sent another follow up email directly to the participant to confirm a time and date for the interview.

Once an interview was scheduled, the participant would come into interview and sign two consent form, one that was the general consent to participate, and the second for recording audio of the interview for review and transcription purposes. When both consent forms were signed, the interviews began and were recorded and transcribed via WebEx for all interviews. In-person interviews were audio recorded and WebEx interviews were audio recorded but not video recorded. The interviews took place in person or via WebEx, and all lasted no longer than 60 minutes. All data was collected between January and February of the Spring 2023 semester.

Participants' real names were not recorded or labeled when saving the recordings. Instead, I asked the participant to provide the name they would like to be referenced as when discussing my results. Study information was stored on a laptop and a Google Drive protected by Rowan University but did not contain names or any other personal information that would make the student participant known. After this study is fully completed, all the data collected will be destroyed. During the interviews, participants' responses were outlined and summarized, and to ensure credibility, member checking took place. At the end of each interview, the conclusions were sent to and reviewed by the participant to ensure the take-aways that are accurate and reasonable (McMillan, 2016). This helps ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the data (McMillan, 2016).

Data Analysis

This study followed a thematic analysis to categorize the common phases and experiences (McMillan, 2016). Thematic analyses are important when conducting interviews because it allows the researcher to form people's views, opinions, knowledge, experiences, or values from a set of qualitative data (Caulfield, 2022). An inductive,

latent approach was followed so that after all the interviews were conducted, common themes were found within the data using key words or similar experiences (Caulfield, 2022). This allowed for the coding process to be completed using phrases and words that were all similar to find the themes across the interviews (Caulfield, 2022). Once all the common themes were found, the information was sent to the participants to ensure that they are represented accurately in the findings and to ensure trustworthiness as a part of the final step in member checking (McMillan, 2016).

When coding information from interviews, the process of vivo coding was completed. Vivo coding is when interviews are singling out specific words or phrases to prioritize and honor the participants voice (Saldaña, 2013). When all the data had been coded, there were three major themes that were discovered which included a) what students define sense of belonging on campus as, b) student usage of physical spaces on campus, and c) if the COVID-19 pandemic affected this.

Chapter IV

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the relationship between student's perception of sense of belonging on campus and places on campus. It also examined their perception of whether the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their own personal belonging. Utilizing an ethnographic qualitative study approach to investigate the current undergraduate sense of belonging at Rowan University adds to the current research about sense of belonging on college campuses, if physical places on campus matter, and if the COVID-19 has an impact on these concepts. This chapter will review the profile of the population, an analysis of the data from the interview questions, and the findings from the interviews.

Profile of the Population/Sample

Seven students who volunteered for the study were interviewed. All the participants were between the ages of 18 – 25 years old, so this study has more of a traditional college student focus. Most of the participants lived on campus, and about half of the participants frequently used the student center at Rowan University. There were a few outliers: three participants who worked in the student center who that use the student center daily for more than one reason, and one student who never used the student center at all. Commuter students do not use the student center as frequently as students that live on campus in residential halls.

Findings

The following sections describe the interview findings around the major sections of literature described earlier in this study: sense of belonging, physical spaces on campus, and COVID-19 and mattering.

Sense of Belonging

Higher education oftentimes emphasizes the student experience and student involvement outside of the classroom. When students participate in clubs, sports, and other extracurricular activities, they oftentimes feel a sense of belonging. Moss, a full-time undergraduate student, describes their sense of belonging as not feeling judged or discriminated against in any of the spaces they are in. They spend a lot of time in the student center and attend events frequently enough to notice the way spaces are set up and where students are the most engaged. Moss specifically said the Chamberlain Student Center provides them the sense of belonging and most other spaces on campus do not. They state:

I don't feel discriminated against or judged when I am in a public space at the Chamberlain Student Center... I feel like I am judged on other places on campus, but that's not so much Rowan University's fault and I know I am not the only person who feel this way.

Another student who had a similar experience is Jeff. Jeff described a sense of belonging on campus as having a reason to be somewhere, interacting with people and things, and feeling positive about the environment you are in and giving back to the environment you are in. Jeff spends a lot of time in the Chamberlain Student Center and attends events very frequently. Jeff states:

A sense of belonging is to me means that you have a reason to be somewhere on campus. You are interacting with things or that you were making some type of contribution to a campus ecosystem or environment. This could come in a form of different roles. I don't think it's you have to be doing anything, sometimes just existing and interacting with other people is good enough. I think the sense of belonging is also that you're interacting in some way with the environment on campus, but also that you are feeling like you are in a place where you belong on the, the environment is also interacting with you in some form. I do think that Rowan gives me that sense of belonging, specifically in the Student Center and Discovery Hall.

It's important to note that not all students felt like Rowan gave them the sense of belonging that Moss and Jeff described. Alex describes a sense of belonging as having a wide range of friends on campus and regularly spending quality time with them, being able to go to on and off campus events with them, and generally having a positive attitude and experience while being a student. Alex explains they do not feel a sense of belonging at Rowan University and do not spend a lot of time in the Chamberlain Student Center or in other buildings on campus. When they do, they are usually at the Chamberlain Student Center for meeting up with a friend between classes, or for a general club meeting. When they described their time attending events, Alex stated:

I didn't really feel like I wanted to be there. I just wanted to get it over with and leave. I only go to these things because I have to fill requirements for my honors program, so I wasn't really invested in what the event was doing. I wouldn't have gone if it wasn't a requirement.

Overall, six out of seven students who spoke about their sense of belonging felt that Rowan University provided that to them. Five out of seven students gave specific example of how they would like to see improvements even though they say Rowan University provides a positive experience and is doing all they can. Some suggestions from participants were to focus more on the student experience in all years instead of just first year by offering a course like Rowan 101 but for every year a student is in college. Rowan 101 is a required introductory course all incoming first year students must take. The course goes over materials such as student resources, how to be a college student, and other wellbeing initiatives to promote Rowan University to students. Other students suggested upgrading spaces to create more lounges in buildings for students to just relax in, such as commuter lounges.

Physical Spaces on Campus

When discussing physical spaces on campus, I investigated the components of the space. Specifically, I asked participants if they could remember how a space was set up, and if they thought that effected the feeling they had there or not. Sam is an extremely involved student and frequently attends events on campus. Usually, the events Sam attends are in the student center on campus. Sam stated: "I felt like I had space there and it wasn't too crowded. I think just very casual in a positive environment. Everyone who comes in like they feel very friendly, which is good an environment."

Another student who said they had a similar experience was Patrick. Patrick described a sense of belonging as being in a comfortable space that is not an academic building on campus. Patrick explicitly stated that these spaces were not academic

buildings or places that hold class. Patrick said that the student center on campus is a place where they feel comfortable and like they can take up space. Patrick says:

I think it was, it was pretty, like, professionally set up. I would say the one thing is that I think the ballroom is a little deep, so I feel like sometimes if you're sitting in the back, it feels really far away. The people who set it up did a really great job and they also had lunch too, so I know whenever there's food, they're always really organized when they provide us catering for events. They had lunch in these nice boxes, so it was quite easy, and it didn't disturb the flow of the event. I think it was well organized awesome.

Another student who had feedback about the way spaces impacted their sense of belonging was Alex. Alex does not spend a lot of time of campus because they are a commuter student, and rarely goes anywhere besides class. They mentioned they do not usually notice the way spaces on campus are set up and have never taken that into consideration when thinking about the impact room layouts can have on sense of belonging.

Overall, most students stated that they pay attention to the way events are set up, and that they have an impact on the way the event flows. Six out of seven student said that the way events are set up impact the space and sense of belonging they have while using the space.

COVID-19 and Mattering

When asking if the COVID-19 pandemic effected student sense of mattering and belonging, all students said the pandemic did not affect their sense of belonging. Students said they felt that their own personal development impacted the sense of belonging they

had individually, and that this was not something Rowan University contributed to when switching to fully online classes and back to all in-person during and after the pandemic. Having an on-campus job and living on campus has heavily influenced Snow's sense of belonging, and they do not believe that the pandemic has influenced their sense of belonging. Snow believes that Rowan University provides a strong sense of belonging on campus, but this is an independent feeling each student must find on their own. Snow states:

Well, since I was in high school for the pandemic, I think it did but only because of the switch between high school and college. I kept myself a little bit more isolated and just to myself. I think it did kind of change but personally and not because of the pandemic.

Moss gave a similar response to Snow. Moss talked about their personal identity when referring to sense of belonging but reflected that is a personal feeling. Moss says:

I would say before the pandemic that feeling like I belonged came from my identity. I feel like I belong now belong here and not before the pandemic because I was hiding who I really was, not presenting the way I wanted to present, versus now I can be myself and openly present in a way that makes me happy.

It is important to highlight this finding in the study, and that all the participants said yes, their belonging has changed since the COVID-19 pandemic, but only because of self-development and not because of the switch to only virtual and no longer physically in person or in buildings on campus.

Chapter V

Summary, Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

The final chapter of this thesis will discuss the research questions that influenced the interview process and how they relate to the findings of this study. The study will be summarized and discuss future recommendations for how higher education institutions, as well as Rowan University, can work toward helping student feel like they belong and matter to the college community they are in.

Summary of the Study

This study aimed to investigate the sense of belonging students have at Rowan University based on the physical spaces and facilities they use. This purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions students had of their own sense of belonging and their sense of belonging at Rowan University. It also examined the physical spaces and facilities on campus provided to students, and if students perceived this impacting their sense of belonging and mattering. Utilizing a ethnographic qualitative study approach, I was able to interview seven undergraduate students who attend Rowan University that provided me the insight I needed to conduct the study. I was able to determine that student sense of belonging is impacted by the physical spaces on campus and setups of these places; however, student sense of belonging was not impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic for these seven students.

I was able to recruit students through sending a recruitment email on the Rowan Announcer to over 15,000 undergraduate students. Seven students replied that they were interested, and they were contacted to set up an interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed through WebEx. I summarized my conclusions from the interview and

sent out the summary to the participants so I could ensure accuracy in my findings through member checking. I was able to use these summaries and direct quotes to help me analyze my data. This contributed to the perspectives of student perceptions of real-life experiences that assisted me with creating themes and coding in my data.

Discussion of the Findings

Research Question 1

- 1.) Is there an observed perception between the physical space of a college student center and students' sense of community on campus?

Students in higher education need to feel like they have a sense of community and belonging for overall wellbeing. Student Life Centers are the heart of college campuses, and an essential place for students to go that is not their home, dorm, classroom, or work. Student Life Centers provide a welcoming environment for students to utilize when building community that influences their sense of belonging (Ludeman et al., 2009). When students have this sense of belonging, the in and out of classroom experience becomes more positive (Bowers, et. al., 2020).

Overall, the perception between physical space and sense of community at Rowan University is related. One student out of seven who participated in this study stated that they do not feel like they belong on campus, and they do not use the facilities offered to them. Six out the seven students stated that they do use the facilities, specifically the Chamberlain Student Center, and they do feel like they have a positive sense of belonging at Rowan University. Because of the small number of participants, these findings cannot be generalized for Rowan University or higher education.

Research Question 2

2.) How has the student experience evolved since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to the current experience in the student center?

When understanding the student experience, I investigated if students attended events or used spaces to do schoolwork outside of the classroom that are on Rowan University's campus. This focus can be supported by Astin's Theory of Involvement (1984) and if the participation in extracurricular activities impacts the student experience post COVID-19 pandemic (Astin, 1984). Student involvement also has a great impact on collaboration, student drive, and community on campus (Dugan & Komives, 2007).

Students who were involved and attended events in the Chamberlain Student Center at Rowan University said they had a positive student experience, but that the COVID-19 pandemic would not have impacted this. There is no suggestion that the student experience has evolved or changed directly as a result to the COVID-19 pandemic for these seven students. Students suggested that having a positive experience was individual, and that Rowan University provides plenty of opportunities to students, but it is up to the person to be engaged or not.

Conclusion

Based on literature that was reviewed in chapter two, student sense of belonging is impacted by physical places on campus. Students in this study who were more engaged in campus activities were more likely to notice how spaces and events are prepared and arranged. Students use several facilities, such as the Chamberlain Student Center, to spend time at outside of their dorm or home to feel like they are a part of the community

and have a space where they are comfortable. The COVID-19 pandemic did not change the student experience or involvement for these seven students.

Recommendations for Practice and Further Research

There are several recommendations made based off the findings of this research and previous literature proposed about sense of belonging and student involvement.

Recommendations for Research

Future research on student sense of belonging should focus more on the inclusivity of the space or the events student are attending. In other research that has been published, students with physical and intellectual disabilities also struggle with a sense of belonging on campus. Understanding how nontraditional students also gain a sense of belonging on college campuses is important as well. If these two identifiers were taken into consideration, there would be a better understanding of the perceptions students have about their own sense of belonging and community on campus.

Recommendations for Rowan University

Rowan University should focus more on student experiences outside of the classroom and make more of an effort to prioritize Student Life and Academic Affairs. University also needs to set a standard for serving students who are live on campus, off campus in Glassboro, or commute from ten miles or further. Several students mentioned that commuter students must put more effort into making a community and feeling like they belong at Rowan University because events only happen late at night or during class periods.

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Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval



DHHS Federal Wide Assurance Identifier: FWA00007111
Rowan IORG/IRB: Glassboro/CMSRU
IRB Chair Person: Dr. Ane Johnson
IRB Director: Eric Gregory
Effective Date: December 8, 2022

Notice of Approval - Initial

Study ID: PRO-2022-284
Title: THE EFFECTS THAT SPACES AND PLACES OF CAMPUS HAVE ON UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS
Principal Investigator: Stephanie Lezotte
Study Coordinator: Ashley Davis
Co-Investigator(s): Ashley Davis
Sponsor: Internal

Submission Type: Initial
Submission Status: Approved

Approval Date: December 8, 2022
Expiration Date: December 7, 2023
Approval Cycle: 12 months
Continuation Review Required: Yes
Closure Required: Yes

Review Type: Expedited
Expedited Category: 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

ALL APPROVED INVESTIGATOR(S) MUST COMPLY WITH THE FOLLOWING:

1. Conduct the research in accordance with the protocol, applicable laws and regulations, and the principles of research ethics as set forth in the Belmont Report.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. What pseudonym would you like me to replace your name with when discussing my results?
2. Did you go to high school or college during the 2020-2021 academic year?
3. Did you have a switch to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. Do you use the student center on campus?
5. Have you ever attended an event in your campus's student center?
6. Can you explain the event to me?
7. Could you describe to me what the event space looks like in terms of set up?
8. Can you describe how the event made you feel?
9. Describe what it means to belong on a college campus.
10. Does Rowan give you the sense of belonging you just described? Specifically in the student center?
11. Do you think your sense of belonging is different now versus before the COVID-19 pandemic?
12. What can be done to make the experience better for you on campus?
13. Is there anything I have missed in this interview that you would like to add?