Project (Assessment) Title

Exploring the sense of belonging of enrolled students at SLCC.

College Strategic Goal

Increase student completion

Assessment Overview

Our assessment seeks to explore the sense of belonging of enrolled students at SLCC. We will interview several currently enrolled students and seek to discover their levels of belonging. Specifically, we would like to discover if there have been any interactions during their times as students that have either increased or decreased their sense of belonging.

In performing this assessment, we chose to define a sense of belonging as "the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group, when an individual can be their authentic self". Having a sense of belonging has been shown to have an impact on a student's academic persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007), therefore we chose to explore if SLCC students experience a sense of community while they are currently enrolled at their respective campus. In attaining a better understanding of their levels of belonging, we will focus on the student interactions with faculty, staff, and the different campus resources and services. The data collected will provide us with a deeper insight as to how we can foster a strong sense of belonging for all SLCC students.

Methodology (Plan/Method)

1. Participants were given a survey constructed of essay and Likert based questions before the start of the focus group.
2. Participants engaged in a focus group session openly discussing their sense of belonging at SLCC.

Timeline

- March 2022 - Focus group questions were developed
- April 2022 - Focus group conducted, and questionnaires distributed
- May – June 2022- Data was assessed and findings were reported

Results/Findings

Recruitment for participants of this study started on April 6th2022. Response for participants were very low despite best efforts at recruitment through group advisors and other stake holders. A total of 10 persons agreed to participate in the focus group with 9 in attendance. Initial goal number of participants were two groups of 20 persons each. Given the low response rates, trends observed in this report should be interpreted very conservatively.

After analyzing the surveys, we found that 89% of the respondents agreed positively that they felt a sense of belonging at SLCC. 78% of the respondents agreed positively that they found the faculty and staff to be welcoming at SLCC. 100% of the participants reported positively that they were comfortable reaching out to faculty and staff for assistance when needed. However, only 33% reported positively that they found the social environment made it easy to establish connections with their peers.
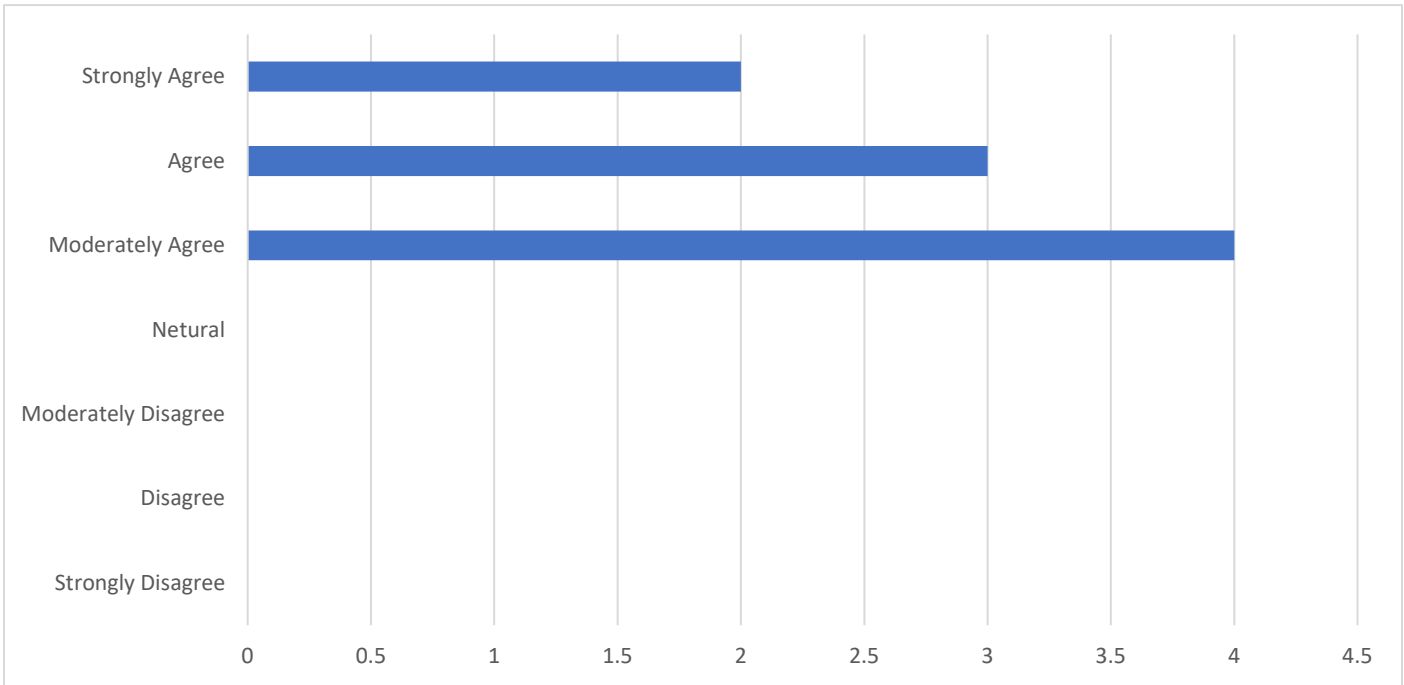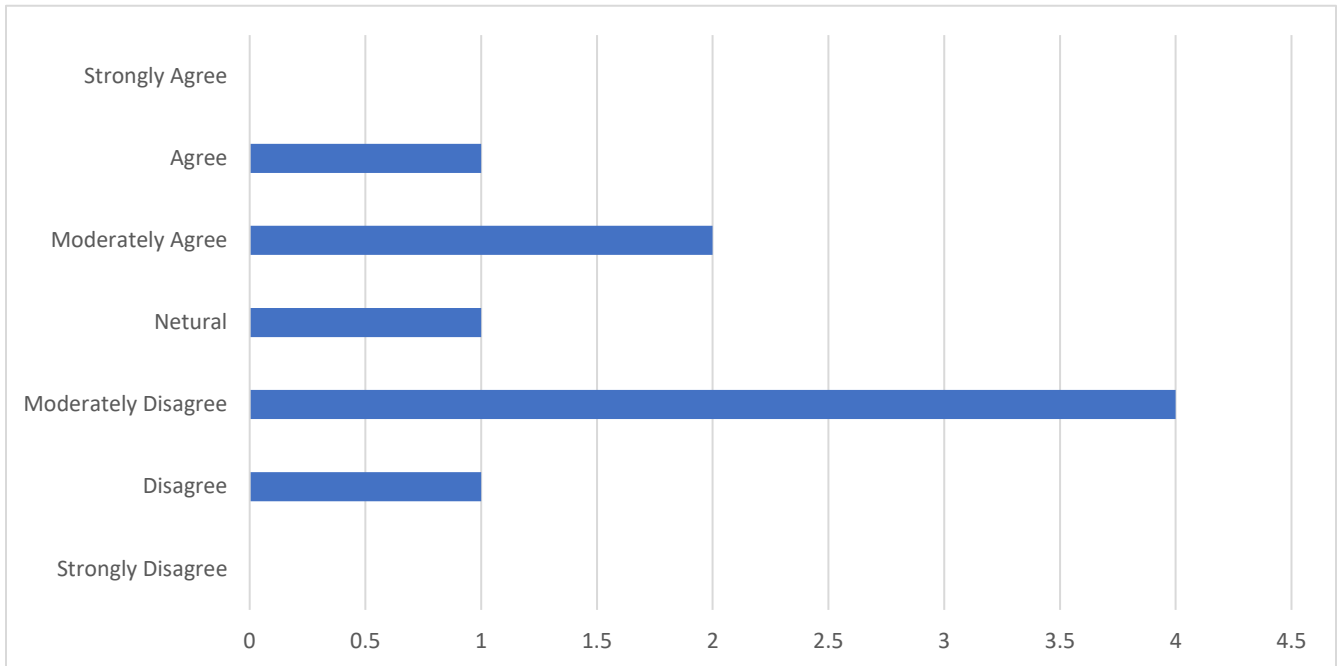
Q1 – I feel a sense of belonging at SLCC
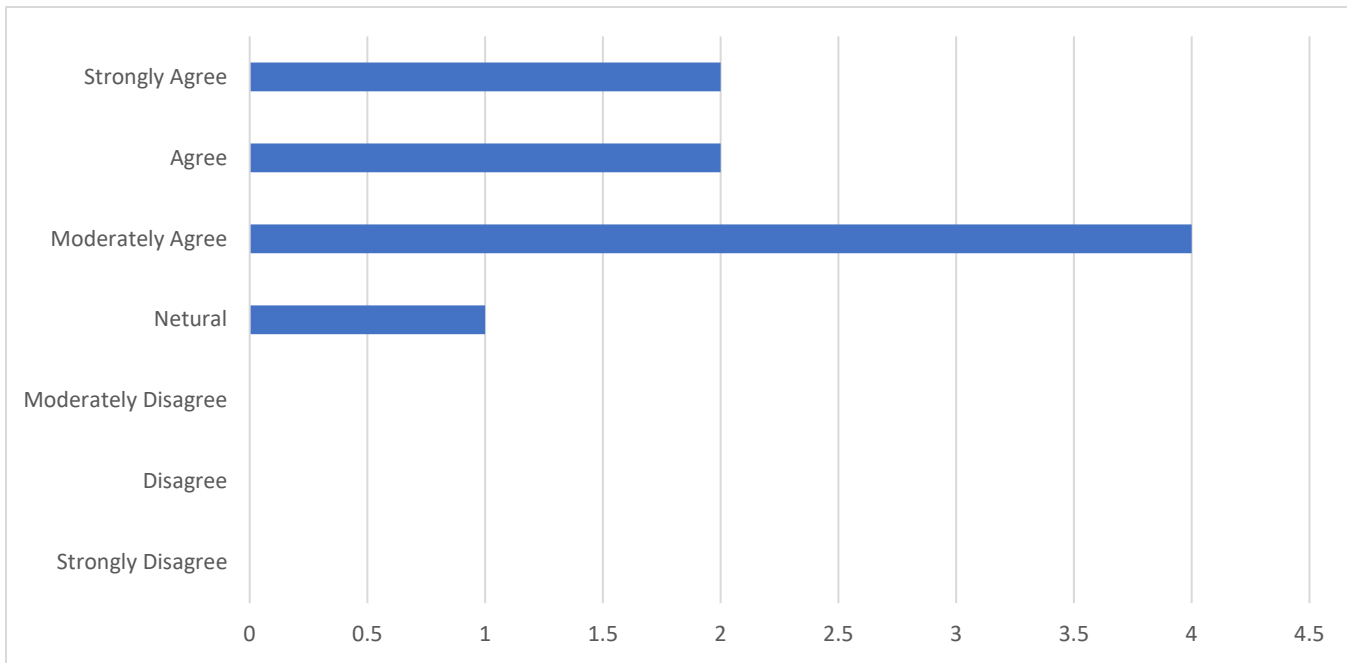
Q2 – I have found the faculty and staff I've encountered at SLCC to be welcoming
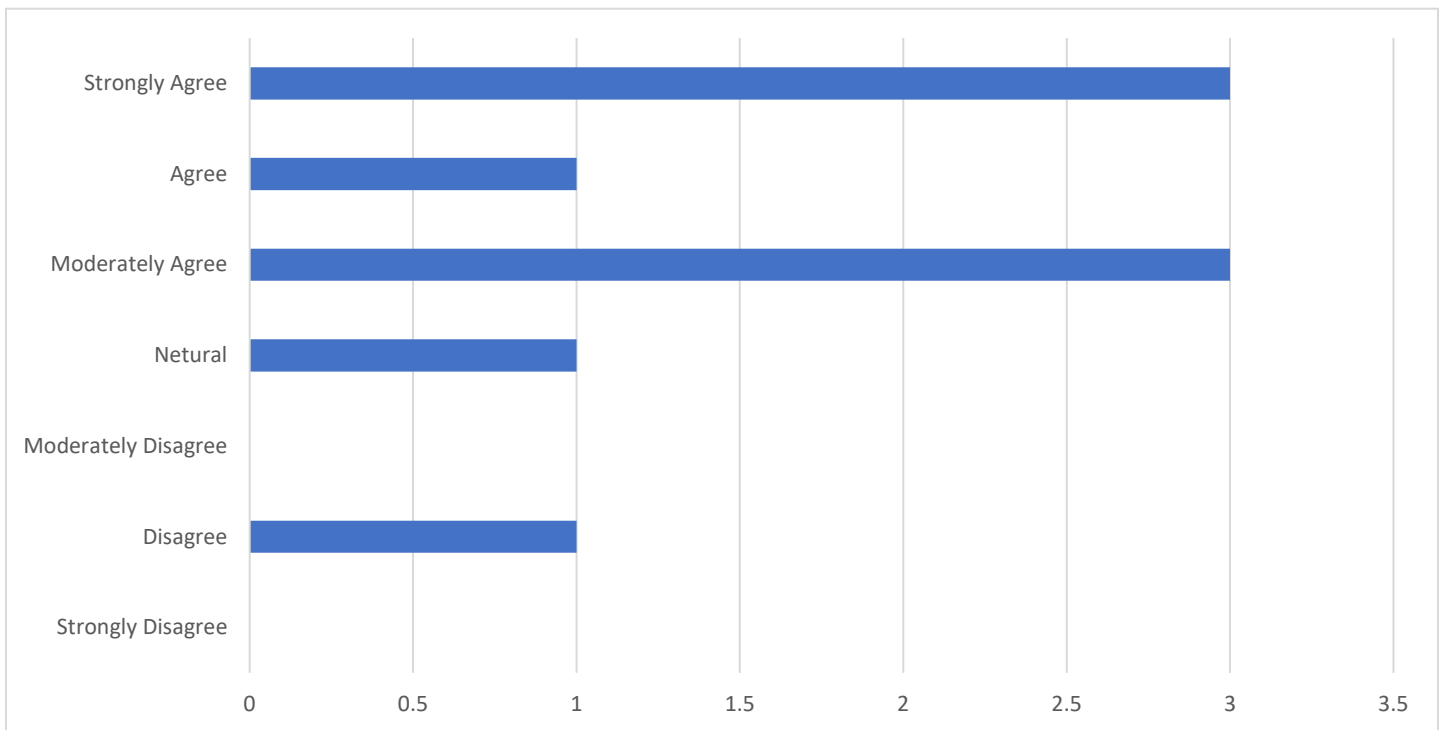
Q3 - I feel comfortable in reaching out to faculty or staff at SLCC for assistance when needed

Q4 – The social environment at SLCC made it easy for me to establish connections with my peers

Noted below are the combination of themes and quotes from the focus group:

1. What does the phrase "having a sense of belonging" mean to you?
   a. **PARTICIPANT RESPONSE**
      i. We have similarities between us but then also like embrace our differences…t's a place where I don't feel like an outsider.
      ii. I feel a sense of belonging is when you can be celebrated and be your unique self, bring all of yourself, like your culture, your experiences, what you came to school for that needs to be celebrated and have a person be welcomed into the community.
   b. **THEME OF RESPONSES**

   Throughout the dialogue, the participants vocalized common trends of being part of a community when describing what they felt a sense of belonging meant to them. They spoke of finding a group of people that they could relate to daily, while exploring their differences amongst each other. Feeling as though they mattered was also a common theme that was described.

2. If you ever felt as though you did not belong at SLCC, what barriers did you encounter that caused that feeling
   a. **PARTICIPANT RESPONSE**
      i. …I wanted to get more involved, to seek out a community and have a sense of belonging, like I mattered in the community. But one of the barriers that I found was the student government which is named SLCSSA. When I wanted to join them, they made it seem like I wasn't belonged or needed. They said that they already had the manpower that they had and that they already were full and that they didn't need anyone to come to that.
      ii. I feel like in the classroom setting the barrier is me not being able to talk to my classroom peers or feeling a little bit uncomfortable because I'm too into my own headspace thinking, well, is this person wanting to talk to me or do they not want to talk to me? Are they shy? Or is it because I'm black. Like, just kind of thinking all these things and it kind of makes the semester a little bit, I don't know, boring because I don't have these connections in the classroom
      iii. I feel like my teachers feel like they are only teaching American students. Even their language is American. Most of the time I turn to my neighbor who is sitting way over on the other side and ask them, "what does that mean"?... So, when you're teaching remember you might have some international students, some black students, African Americans, Latinos, like make your language as broad as possible.
   b. **THEME OF RESPONSES**

   In describing situations where they experienced barriers to feeling a real sense of belonging, experiences were mostly negative for students that identified as out of state. The out of state students described feeling like outsiders and observing the in-state students mostly staying in their groups especially those who came from the same high school. One participant stated "there was no like sense of belonging here because my beliefs and my heritage were so unique. It was hard to find anything that resembled that…. Additional negative experiences that were mentioned came from instances where they felt they were ignored in classes by their professors. Some additional experiences shared were instances where they felt as though unless you were either top of the class or failing, they would be ignored by some professors. Universally participants mentioned that it took them a full semester to one year of being at SLCC to get familiar with the different avenues to get involved.

Alternatively, the participants were asked to share any positive experiences in feeling a sense of belonging at SLCC. Those that had positive experiences in the classroom linked it back to the active engagement levels of the professor. Others would mention when they found different departments such as ODMA and OSS, their feelings became more positive, and they didn't feel like outsiders. Also positively highlighted were changes made to the orientation experience which were highly praised.

3. Are there any additional services or resources that could be provided to increase your sense of belonging?
   a. **PARTICIPANT RESPONSE**
      i. I think with being virtual, that also increases a barrier to technology for minoritized people that don't have that access. As for me, I don't really like virtual things I like in person where I can try and make that connection. That's how I learned how to navigate the system of higher education and those connections in those offices. Virtually you're there for a minute and then gone forever
      ii. We may have that representative come to one campus for one day a week or say we're from transfer and we're going to be here this one day and then they are gone. It's more so making sure those actual positions and locations are more known. If we are going to call SCC and Jordan a main campus, we should really have those resources available more regularly. It could come from more staffing and people knowing what to do and how to process that
   b. **THEME OF RESPONSES**

   Concerns were expressed about staffing levels at the other main campus sites (SCC and Jordan) in comparison to the Taylorsville campus. Several participants voiced their displeasure of having to go to the "main campus" (Taylorsville) for services that were not readily available at their campus (SCC and Jordan). Participants questioned adequacy of staffing levels when describing wait times of 1 week to get appointment times for services at the Taylorsville campus.

4. Is there anything that wasn't covered today that you believe could improve your sense of belonging at your campus?
   a. **PARTICIPANT RESPONSE**
      i. …having more representation. That would be a start. Because I know like and this has been a conversation for a long time, like the hiring process. It's just some in some cases, it can seem a little bit biased. I feel like with the like with the different departments, I really like how now with the different departments when they're hiring for certain positions, they allow it to be open for people to come in and like listen and watch the presentation and you know, be able to give feedback, but it only goes so far because at the end of the day they make the decision. So that is a start, but representation looks different for everyone. So, what might be representation for me and it's like I need this, they're like what we need is this. So, I feel like I don't know how, but I guess it would start with the hiring process depending on who they hire.
      ii. … making sure we have those same resources as the ones already mentioned today. Making sure they are available at more than just one central campus. You might have that representative come down to like one campus for one day of the week. Let's say oh, we're from transfer, and we're going to be here this one day, and then we're gone. It's more so making those actual positions and locations more known. If we're going to call South City or Jordan a main campus, they should have those resources available more regularly. This could come from increased staffing, and it could come from people knowing what to do and how to process tasks. You have a lot of students who live by the Jordan campus. If I must go to Taylorsville, I have to figure out how to take Trax and a bus all the way back down to Jordan, but by the time I make it, I'm already late. It's gotten better, like I know we've seen more events and programming getting spread out more.

b. **THEME OF RESPONSES**

The common themes expressed regarding improving their sense of belonging were generalized around improving services so more of their time would be focused on finding community than navigating what they described as administrative roadblocks. Comments were mentioned about improving minority representation of college faculty and staff but also noted was an appreciation currently being taken to do so. Having mirrored services and staff expertise available at South City and Jordan campus that were available at Taylorsville was strongly mentioned. This was expressed as a need for students who did not have readily available transport to go between the campuses. The delivery of specific services via zoom was a concern for some participants as well. Students provided scenarios where they had to have a virtual medical visit but based on their situation that option would not have been possible. The increase in virtual options were viewed as problem for some participants but not all as a sense of belonging barrier. Some participants mentioned being in-person allowed them to make better connections with the staff. Additionally, concern was expressed for those students that did not have devices to allow access for the virtual options offered by the college. The final theme discussed by the participants was increased and continued training for faculty regarding interacting with persons from different background and cultures.

Action Plan (Use of Results/Improvements/Call to Action)

After analyzing the feedback gained from the focus group, the completed the recommendations for improvements have been noted below.

- Participants noted positively their experiences at orientation and at the start of the semester but were disappointed at the levels of programing as the semester progressed.
  - o The number of social and community building programs should be increased and hosted during peak times of student traffic on campus. This would provide more opportunities for the students to interact with each other.
- All participants were not aware of the different avenues to get involved at SLCC until in some instances after 1 year of enrollment. Some mentioned not noticing the current methods or marketing being done to promote the different ways to get involved.
  - o Efforts should be increased at the start of and throughout the school year at sharing the multitude of avenues for student engagement. Involving faculty in promoting engagement opportunities at key points throughout the year may prove beneficial as a great deal of emphasis was made on information received from faculty.
- Participants mentioned having a greater need for establishing connections with their professors. They mentioned feeling ignored in their classes unless they were either failing or ranked highly in their class.
  - o Professors should receive ongoing coaching regarding classroom management and observation techniques to recognize these students and develop methods to engage the complete classroom not just the outliers.
  - o Best practices should be shared between academic units and those highlighted student affairs units (ODMA, OSS etc.) concerning developing a strong sense of belonging in the classroom.
- Efforts at increasing minority recruitment of staff and faculty should be continued.
  - o Participants expressed a high degree of value in attending an institution where they could share cultural similarities with staff and faculty.
- A similar distribution and delivery of services was requested to be seen across all campus sites
  - o Delivery of front-line services should be reviewed for feasibility of virtual delivery. Where some services were praised and described as having a need for improved delivery, others were noted as being

ineffective. Staffing levels in Student Affairs units should also be reviewed. Participants mentioned having to wait in some instances up to a week before getting an appointment time with some departments.

Other Notes

Conducting a sense of belonging study utilizing a larger cross section of students might help us to better understand their needs for community and feelings of belonging while pursuing their academic interests.

References

Hausmann, L. R. M., Schofield, J. W., & Woods, R. L. (2007). Sense of belonging as a predictor of intentions to persist among African American and white first-year college students. *Research in Higher Education, 48(7),* 803-839. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-007-9052-9