Understanding sense of belonging of students of color attending a liberal arts college

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Understanding Sense of Belonging of Students of Color Attending a Liberal Arts College

by

Jessica V. Wenger

A Dissertation

Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York

In Partial Fulfillment of

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School of Education

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College access programs have been created to provide students of color opportunities to attend college. The Posse Foundation selects promising urban high school students to attend highly selective colleges and universities across the country. College success is dependent on a variety of factors, two of which are successful social and academic integration into the campus community (Tinto, 1993). Related to integration, sense of belonging is the feeling that an individual belongs in their environment (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Despite the homogenous racial makeup of highly selective schools, students of color choose to enroll and become members of selective college and university communities. Being in the minority has the potential to stifle students’ feelings of sense of belonging (Anderman & T. M. Freeman, 2004; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019). Posse Scholars attend schools where they are the overwhelming racial minority (Posse Foundation, n.d.). Understanding Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging is important because their experiences could differ from their peers and impact college student outcomes, such as retention. By applying a qualitative research method approach, I aimed to understand Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging in their cohort or posse and in their campus community as a whole. In addition, I made comparisons between Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars.

Through using Tinto’s (1993) framework on college departure, Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars reported that, in the academic system, poor academic performance hindered sense of belonging. In addition, staff interactions fostered participant sense of belonging, but faculty interactions hindered sense of belonging for both groups of participants. In the social system, both extracurricular activities and peer group interactions fostered and hindered sense of belonging for each participant group.

After analyzing the collected data, I observed Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars felt a sense of belonging to their institution when they engaged with individuals on campus who looked like them or
who had shared interests and similar backgrounds to them. Interactions with campus community members were formal and informal and occurred with both peers and administrators. Posse Scholars engaged with individuals who looked like them and shared similar interests and backgrounds most frequently through the Posse Foundation. It was evident Posse Scholars exhibited sense of belonging to their institution through their participation in the Posse Foundation.

In addition, Posse Scholars exhibited sense of belonging beyond their Posse cohort in the academic and social systems of Tinto’s (1993) model of college student departure. In the extracurricular (i.e., formal) component of the social system, Posse Scholars exclusively shared that engaging in leadership pursuits and participating in campus employment fostered sense of belonging in the College A community beyond their Posse cohort. Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging to College A beyond their cohort when they held positions of leadership and authority. Findings were consistent with existing literature about college employment and leadership as they related to sense of belonging (Ribera et al., 2017; Maestas et al., 2007; Museus & Chang, 2021; Nuñez & Sansone, 2016).
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

She believed she could, so she did.

—R. S. Grey, Scoring Wilder

Writing this dissertation would not have been possible without the unconditional support and encouragement from my incredible dissertation committee, friends, and family members. I am profoundly grateful for each of you.

To my supportive dissertation committee. It was a true joy and privilege to be supported by a group of brilliant, successful, strong, and influential women like yourselves. My success would not have been possible without your continuous encouragement, guidance, and mentorship. I am endlessly appreciative of everything you did to ensure I reached this milestone.

To my friends—thank you! Your thoughtful messages and gestures of support and motivation kept me going. Whether you knew it or not, your acts of kindness, large and small, lifted me up and sustained me during the hardest moments. Even if you did not quite know what writing a dissertation meant, having your support simply because you knew this project was enormously important to me was more than enough. I am so lucky to have friends like you in my life.

To my amazing parents, thank you for always reminding me I belonged in every educational setting I stepped foot in. Thank you for showing me that some of the most profound educational experiences can take place through reading and traveling.

To my mother, a first-generation college student, you are emblematic of what a strong, confident, smart woman looks like. Your own academic and professional journeys and successes continuously inspire me to work hard and be the best I can be every single day. Thanks for urging me to take risks and be brave in all facets of my own life.

To my father, whose own career in higher education excites and inspires me to continue to work in an institution that is intellectually stimulating, rewarding, and filled with limitless possibilities. Your love of learning is infectious. Your unwavering support of my early educational journey (middle and high
school years) are some of the fondest memories of my academic career—thank you for being by my side.

To my brother, you have learned and experienced more in your life than I could ever imagine. You have certainly received a powerful education. I continue to admire your brilliant and creative mind. Thanks for helping me believe in second chances. Although I have not won an Emmy like you, I hope earning this terminal degree makes you proud.

To my husband, thank you for your endless support and love. Your unparalleled kindness, patience, selflessness, and generosity you showed me while I traversed through this project was simply amazing. I am fortunate to have a partner like you who supports me wholeheartedly in everything I do. I shared this 1,000 mile journey with you and am so grateful to have you by my side every step of the way. Your support was a selfless act of love. Thank you.
DEDICATION

To my brilliant, funny, and kind late cousin, Paul S. Wenger (7.2.1982—8.8.2019), my dissertation is dedicated to you. I am sorry my study contains only a few numbers and no formulas. Yes, there are two graphs, but they are extremely simplistic; your smart, amazing daughters could make them in 5 minutes. You were the first member of the Wenger family to earn a doctoral degree and it is truly an honor to follow in your (size 14!) footsteps. I found your dissertation and admittedly, the only part I understood was your own dedication page. You will always be the smarter Dr. Wenger. I completely accept this.

Although you were the most gifted mathematician, I will always remember you as my cool, funny, older cousin. I have always had to look up to you because you were so tall, but more importantly, I have looked up to you for all that you accomplished academically, professionally, and personally in your short life. You continue to deeply inspire me.

Although you are not here, I felt your presence and support throughout this journey, and for that, I am incredibly grateful. Thanks for coming along for the ride and inspiring me on the hardest days. I hope this dissertation makes you proud.

You are loved and missed immeasurably. Finally, please know, as prescribed by you, long hikes and races are always followed by Fitness Burgers. Should I now indulge in a PhD Pizza?
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In an effort to increase underrepresented student populations on college campuses, various college access programs have been created to provide students of color opportunities to attend college with the goal of graduating with a postsecondary degree. Although there are several distinct college access programs that select, prepare, and support underrepresented students in college—such as QuestBridge (formally Quest Scholars Program; QuestBridge, 2021), and Higher Education Opportunity Program (New York State Education Department, 2021)—the Posse Foundation (Posse Foundation, 2021a) is a unique program that boasts a 90% retention rate of its diverse scholars.

The Posse Foundation selects promising urban high school students, who may typically be overlooked in traditional admissions processes, to attend highly selective colleges and universities across the country (Posse Foundation, 2021c). Scholars attend partner institutions in cohorts of 10–12 peers (i.e., posses) and receive social, academic, career, and other supports and resources provided by college administrators and foundation representatives while in school to ensure they are successful and graduate.

Because Posse Scholars are selected from urban cities, many students are from diverse backgrounds. The majority of Posse Scholars who have completed the program were members of underrepresented racial minority groups (Posse Foundation, n.d.). Using 2019 data, the breakdown of Posse Scholar alumni by race was: (a) 34.2% Black, (b) 31.4% Latinx, (c) 11.3% Asian, (d) 8.9% White, (e) 8.6% other, and (f) 5.6% unknown (Posse Foundation, n.d.). In comparison, the Posse Foundation reported, as of 2015, U.S. selective college enrollment by race was: (a) 64.3% White, (b) 7.0% Black, (c) 12.3% Latinx, (d) 11.6% Asian, and (e) 4.9% other (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2015). The Posse Foundation has been diversifying the student bodies at selective institutions in the United States. At selective institutions, Posse Scholars are in the racial minority. With their posse cohort and additional resources, mentorship, and guidance, Posse Scholars navigate campus
environments and communities where they are not the racial majority. The purpose of this study was to understand Posse Scholars’ feelings of sense of belonging while attending a selective Posse partner institution, an education setting that did not reflect their own racial identity.

College success is dependent on a variety of factors, two of which are successful social and academic integration into the campus community (Tinto, 1993). Morrow and Ackermann (2012) showed the importance of each type of integration as they impacted student outcomes like persistence; however, “support for social integration as a predictor of persistence is more robust than for academic integration” (Kuh et al., 2007, p. 14). Social integration includes students’ ability to effectively assimilate with members of the campus environment (e.g., peers, classmates, faculty, staff) so they feel part of the community (Tinto, 1993).

By feeling part of the community, a student experiences a sense of belonging. Sense of belonging is the feeling that an individual belongs in their environment (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Typically, it is easier to feel as though an individual belongs when other people in their environment and community share similar characteristics and traits (Tatum, 1999). Traits could include gender, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status (SES). Because Posse Scholars are overwhelmingly students from diverse backgrounds attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs), they are inherently different from the majority of their peers. F. Britt and Turner (2002) found Black students attending PWIs struggled to form a sense of belonging on campus. Interestingly, Posse Scholars have elected to attend schools where there is little diversity or students who reflect their own racial identity. Posse Scholars could be attending their school for several reasons, including opportunities for social mobility, advancement, preparation for graduate school, and networking (Posse Foundation, n.d.). A detailed discussion of college choice for students of color appears in Chapter 2.

Relatedly, the Posse Foundation asked Posse Scholar alumni if they would have applied to their undergraduate college without the Posse Foundation, and 69.4% of respondents said no (Posse
Foundation, n.d.). Posse Scholar alumni responses showed the Posse Foundation was a driving force in their college selection and enrollment. If it were not for the Posse Foundation, they would not have selected the institution they attended.

This study aimed to understand if, and to what extent, Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging to their campus community. Furthermore, it aimed to understand if feelings of sense of belonging extended beyond the scholars in their own Posse cohort. Understanding sense of belonging is important because it impacts several student outcomes like retention (Hausmann et al., 2007; O’Keefe, 2013). Furthermore, it is important because colleges and universities should be a welcoming environment for students of all cultures, races, and ethnicities and create environments where they feel they belong and can be successful.

The Posse Foundation has garnered national acclaim and support from leaders in education, policy, politics, and other institutions and industries. It has gained the support from Facebook’s Chief Operating Officer, Sheryl Sandberg; Senator Elizabeth Warren; the late Congressman, John Lewis; and General Colin Powell (Posse Foundation, 2015a, 2015b, 2018; H. Stevens, 2017). In 2010, former President Barack Obama donated a portion of his Nobel Peace Prize award money to the Posse Foundation, making it one of only 10 organizations to receive this honor (Posse Foundation, 2010).

For a foundation that has received widespread recognition and support, it is puzzling that there has been no research on sense of belonging of Posse Scholars on the college and university campuses they attend. This study is an important addition to sense of belonging literature and can provide college and university administrators at PWIs with insights that will allow them to enhance their campus communities to support all students’ sense of belonging, especially students from diverse backgrounds.

**The Posse Foundation**

The Posse Foundation was founded in 1989 by Deborah Bial, the organization’s president (Sander, 2013). The Posse Foundation’s success comes from its innovative model where a group of
“small, diverse . . . talented students—a Posse—carefully selected and trained, can serve as a catalyst for increased individual and community development” (Posse Foundation, 2021a, para. 1). The program awards complete 4-year undergraduate tuition and room and board scholarships to selected student scholars.

The Posse Foundation is committed to cultivating and creating leaders prepared and eager to make a difference in their communities on campus, at home, and beyond (Posse Foundation, 2021a). Although it is not considered an access program per se, the foundation is described by its founder as “a youth leadership development and college diversity program that connects student leaders to the best colleges and universities in the country” (Bial & Rodriguez, 2007, p. 22). Others have described the foundation as a “talent scout” (Selingo, 2020, p. 137) for colleges wishing to increase the diversity of their student bodies. The Posse Foundation sends underrepresented, urban high school students to selective colleges. The opportunity to attend selective colleges has the potential to change the trajectory of Posse Scholars’ lives (Posse Foundation, 2021a).

As of 2021, there were 63 Posse partner schools that participated in the program, with each institution enrolling a cohort of 10–12 Posse Scholars each year (Posse Foundation, 2021b). In conjunction with resources and mentors from the Posse Foundation, each partner school provides additional resources for Posse Scholars so they can be successful in school and graduate.

The Posse Foundation recruits students from 10 major U.S. cities, including: Atlanta; the San Francisco Bay Area; Boston; Chicago; Washington, D.C.; Houston; Los Angeles; Miami; New Orleans; and New York City (Posse Foundation, 2021b). Because Posse Scholars are selected from urban areas, the cohorts typically consist of students from diverse backgrounds. As of 2021, about 57% of Posse Scholars were first-generation college students (Posse Foundation, 2021g). However, the program is “not a program for at-risk youth or one for minority students, but a leadership scholarship” (Sander, 2013, para. 15). In 2012, nearly 15,000 students across the country were nominated and 660 were selected.
into cohorts. Of the scholars selected in 2013, 40% were Black, 32% were Latinx, 13% were Asian, and 7% were White (Sander, 2013).

Posse Scholar cohorts are selected from affiliated cities and attend prestigious partner colleges and universities across the country, engaging in mutually beneficial relationships (Posse Foundation, 2021c). The relationship between Posse Scholars and partner campuses at which they enroll is seen as transactional, with each group benefitting from participation. Institutions receive bright leaders committed to enhancing the campus communities and, in return, Posse Scholars receive an excellent education and appropriate support to persist to graduation. Since the inaugural group of Posse Scholars graduated in 1994, over 9,966 Scholars have been selected to transform their lives and communities on over 50 partner campuses as of 2021 (Posse Foundation, 2021g).

The Posse Foundation (2021a) is committed to achieving three distinct goals:

1. To expand the pool from which top colleges and universities can recruit outstanding young leaders from diverse backgrounds;
2. To help these institutions build more interactive campus environments so that they can be more welcoming for people of all backgrounds;
3. To ensure that Posse Scholars persist in their academic studies and graduate so they can take on leadership positions in the workforce. (para. 2)

Posse Foundation goals center on access, inclusivity, and belonging. Importantly, the foundation recognizes the importance for prestigious colleges to admit and support students of color. In doing so, Posse Scholars are expected to be agents of change to make their home campuses more inclusive for diverse students. The foundation has suggested that, by admitting Posse Scholars, colleges and universities have an opportunity to create environments where community can be formed and be welcoming for all students (Posse Foundation, 2021c). Posse Scholars are expected to be part of this process.
The Posse Foundation (2021a) prides itself in preparing Posse Scholars for college, supporting them while on campus, and positioning them for professional career success. Students selected as Posse Scholars complete the four components of the foundation’s program, including: (a) the Dynamic Assessment Process (DAP), (b) precollegiate training, (c) a campus program, and (d) a career program. Each program provides Posse Scholars with resources, mentorship, and support.

Selection Process

The Posse Foundation identifies promising student leaders who have the potential to succeed in college by using a different set of qualities as predictors of college success than criteria typically used in the admissions process (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2007). Most important to the Posse Foundation are students’ abilities in the areas of leadership, motivation, teamwork, and communication. Former President Obama applauded the foundation’s unconventional yet effective and selective criteria by saying, “This shows the validity of using less-recognized skills as indicators of lively educational success” (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2007, para. 14). Many underrepresented students are disadvantaged by the traditional admissions process criteria most—especially highly selective—colleges and universities use.

The Posse Foundation’s process has recognized flaws in the traditional system and has created its own process. First, potential Scholars are nominated by their high school counselors. Next, the foundation staff utilize a Dynamic Assessment Process (DAP) to select finalists (Posse Foundation, 2021a). This process “is a unique evaluation method that identifies young leaders with great potential” (Posse Foundation, 2021a, para 4). Each fall semester, Posse staff employ the DAP to evaluate nominated students who have the potential to succeed but may be overlooked by the traditional admissions standards and metrics utilized at selective colleges and universities. DAP applies nontraditional means to evaluate students’ potential allowing them to showcase their leadership abilities, teamwork skills, and determination to succeed. Once this procedure is complete, student
finalists participate in a multi-part process that includes individual and group interviews with other peers. Finally, Posse staff and partner institution administrators select a group of 10 students—a cohort—to matriculate at each partner campus.

As previously mentioned, ordinary admissions criteria oftentimes put promising students at a disadvantage. Students who possess many redeeming qualities are overlooked through traditional college admissions processes. Students must be nominated by an administrator or instructor at their high school or affiliated community-based organization for the Posse Foundation (Posse Foundation, 2021f). In this way, instructors and administrators select students whom they deem have qualities necessary to succeed in college. Posse Scholar nominees are required to have demonstrated uncharacteristically strong leadership in their family or school community. Finally, students must exhibit academic potential to succeed in college. The Posse Foundation is more concerned with students’ “non-cognitive attributes like grit or moxie” (Sander, 2013, para. 7). Although traditional admissions committees may consider grit or moxie to some degree, they are of high importance to the Posse Foundation in selecting promising Posse Scholars.

Every Posse Scholar is required to complete precollegiate training (Posse Foundation, 2022b). Students meet weekly with Posse Foundation staff trainers and their Posse Scholar peers for 8 months before they step foot on campus. Interactions with staff and peers are in the form of workshops covering topics including “team building and group support, cross-cultural communication, leadership and becoming an active agent of change on campus, and academic excellence” (Posse Foundation, 2021a, para. 5).

On-Campus Support

Once Posse Scholars matriculate, Posse Foundation staff members visit campuses 4 times a year to connect with Posse Scholars, campus liaisons, and mentors (Posse Foundation, 2021d). Posse mentors meet weekly in a team setting and one-on-one setting with each student biweekly for the first
2 years of college. In addition to the personalized attention Posse Scholars receive, the Posse Foundation community engages with the larger campus community in an annual weekend retreat called the PossePlus Retreat (Posse Foundation, 2021h). PossePlus Retreats are attended by students, faculty, and university staff and provide an opportunity for the campuses to come together to discuss important issues selected by the scholars and the foundation.

Although Posse Scholars receive adequate academic support, they also receive professional development and career-related assistance through the career program (Posse Foundation, 2021e). The career program provides internship opportunities, career development workshops, and graduate school and fellowship assistance. Once Posse Scholars graduate, they are invited to participate in the robust alumni network, providing alumni access to career resources and an opportunity to connect and network with former students.

Posse Foundation President Bial has had lofty goals for the future of the organization. Bial’s goals for 2020 were to increase the number of partner colleges and universities to 100 and to expand the number of cities from which scholars were recruited (Sander, 2013). Only the latter goal was achieved. In addition to increasing numbers, the organization has launched three new Posse programs: (a) civic engagement; (b) science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; and (c) veterans (Sander, 2013). The three new programs illustrate the foundation’s commitment to educating students in critical academic and professional areas of need and supporting a rapidly growing nontraditional student population.

The Posse Foundation’s model of cohort building allows students to attend school with 10–12 students in their group who are from the same home city (Sander, 2013). The familiarity of students around them who are having similar experiences assists students in persisting. The cohort, in effect, becomes a built-in network and support group for Posse Scholars. One of Posse’s most notable alums, Dr. Shirley Collado, was a member of the first Posse cohort who went on to receive her doctorate in
clinical psychology at Duke University. Dr. Collado (2013) stated, “There’s no way I would have gone to Vanderbilt, and no way I would have stayed at Vanderbilt, had it not been for the power of a cohort” (as cited in Sander, 2013, para 10). Dr. Collado was the first Posse alumni to assume a college presidency from 2017 through 2021 at Ithaca College (Whitford, 2021).

**Posse Partner Schools**

The Posse Foundation (2022a) listed 63 partner schools as of 2022 (see Figure 1).
### Figure 1

**Posse Foundation Partner Schools**

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<th>Texas A&amp;M University</th>
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<td>Babson College</td>
<td>Illinois Wesleyan University</td>
<td>The College of Wooster</td>
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<td>Lewis &amp; Clark College</td>
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<td>California Institute of the Arts</td>
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<td>University of Michigan-Ann Arbor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carleton College</td>
<td>Middlebury College</td>
<td>University of North Carolina School of the Arts</td>
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<td>Case Western Reserve University</td>
<td>Mount Holyoke College</td>
<td>University of Notre Dame</td>
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<td>Centre College</td>
<td>Northwestern University</td>
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<td>Hamilton College</td>
<td>Syracuse University</td>
<td>William &amp; Mary</td>
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*Note. Adapted from *College & University Partners*, by the Posse Foundation, 2022a (https://www.possefoundation.org/supporting-scholars/college-university-partners). In the public domain.

The overwhelming majority of Posse Foundation partner schools as of 2022—55 of the 63—were private institutions. Labaree (2017) noted several striking advantages of private schools, stating they “produce more research, gain more academic citations, [and] attract better faculty and students” (p. 109). In fact, in the 2022 Shanghai top U.S. universities ranking, 12 of the top 25 universities were private schools (Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2022). In addition, 5 of the top 50...
internationally ranked institutions on the 2022 Shanghai list were Posse Foundation partner schools
(Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2022). Labaree (2017) labeled private universities as the “zone
of advantage” (p. 138) and public universities were relegated to the label of “zone of access” (p. 138).
Thus, private colleges already enjoy a leg up that allows them to assist students in reaching their
educational goals.

The 2022 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data on all Posse Foundation
partner schools revealed the schools were not racially or ethnically diverse in nature (see Table 1). The
average percentage of Black students at a Posse Foundation partner school—including both private and
public partner institutions—was 6%, with a range of 2% to 33%. The average percentage of Latinx
students at a Posse Foundation partner school was 10.5%, with a range of 5% to 25%. Finally, the
average percentage of White students at a Posse Foundation partner school was 55.8%, with a range of
32% to 82%. These demographic numbers reveal Posse Foundation partner schools were not diverse
and students of color were overwhelmingly in the minority.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Posse partner college/university</th>
<th>Black (%)</th>
<th>Latinx (%)</th>
<th>White (%)</th>
<th>Acceptance rate (%)</th>
<th>Institution type</th>
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<td>Acceptance rate (%)</td>
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*Note. Adapted from College Navigator, by the National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, n.d.-a (https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/). In the public domain.*

In addition to the striking racial makeup of Posse Foundation partner schools, many of the schools were selective in nature. A selective institution is one that accepts less than half of its applicants (CollegeBoard, n.d.-b). The average acceptance rate of a Posse partner school was 40%, with a range of 7% to 88%. In addition, 42 Posse partner schools were selective in nature. Seven of the schools admitted 40%–49% of applicants, 13 admitted 30%–39% of applicants, seven admitted 20%–29% of applicants, 10 admitted 10%–19% of applicants, and five schools admitted 1%–9% of applicants (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Selective campuses typically attract more affluent, White students (Espinosa et al., 2019). For several decades, Black students have continued to be outnumbered on selective college and university campuses (The Posse Foundation, n.d.). Enrollment increases among Black, Latinx, and low-income students from 2018–2020 has occurred on less selective college campuses (Selingo, 2020). At the same time, “The most selective colleges enroll more students from the top 1 percent of the income distribution than from the entire bottom half” (Selingo, 2020, p. 11). Clearly, there are inequities and
disparities related to college access and enrollment. Access to selective schools is important because Posse Scholars are given the opportunity to improve the trajectory of their lives by receiving a high-quality education by attending selective institutions. In turn, the colleges that enroll Posse Scholars can diversify their institutions and gain student leaders who can enhance their campus communities.

The Posse Foundation purposefully and intentionally partners with premier colleges and universities across the country for their Posse Scholars (Posse Foundation, 2022a). Many of the nation’s top universities and colleges—mostly private—made the commitment to be Posse Foundation scholar schools as of 2021 (Posse Foundation, 2021b). Posse Foundation partner schools who identify as premier include Cornell University; Middlebury College; and the University of California, Berkeley. As of 2021, 19 Posse partner institutions were ranked in the top 50 universities by U.S. News and World Report (2021a). Furthermore, 22 Posse partner institutions were ranked among the top 50 liberal arts institutions as of 2021 (U.S. News and World Report, 2021b). Selective institutions set high academic standards. Research has shown that “higher expectations result in higher performance” (Tinto, 2012, p. 12). Yet again, although institutions in the top 50 are prestigious and selective, they typically attract affluent, White students (Selingo, 2020).

As previously discussed, Posse Scholars are typically more diverse compared to students who traditionally enroll at partner institutions. That is, Posse Scholars are immersed in an educational experience where their peers and classmates, and even professors and administrators, do not look like them. Strayhorn (2008a) stated it was more difficult for students of color to feel a sense of belonging at PWIs. Understanding Posse Scholars’ experiences related to sense of belonging at their institution is important and necessary. All students, regardless of their racial identity, deserve to attend a school where they belong and have positive experiences navigating their campus environments. As selective schools become more diverse, it is important for administrators to support students of color so they can find success.
Problem Statement

Although U.S. colleges and universities continue to expand the racial and ethnic diversity of their student bodies, many schools—especially prestigious ones—remain overwhelmingly White (Espinosa et al., 2019). Despite the homogenous racial makeup of highly selective schools, students of color choose to enroll and become members of these college and university communities. Programs like the Posse Foundation provide students of color the opportunity to attend a variety of selective colleges, including 63 Posse Foundation partner institutions distinguished as PWIs (see Figure 1).

Posse Scholars receive excellent educational experiences; however, they are tasked with navigating a campus community and environment where they often do not look like their peers and classmates. Posse Scholars attend schools where they are the overwhelming racial minority (Posse Foundation, n.d.). Being in the minority has the potential to stifle students’ feelings of sense of belonging (Anderman & T. M. Freeman, 2004; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2019). Students could feel unwelcomed or not a part of their community. If a student cannot establish feelings of sense of belonging, their engagement, academic achievement, performance, and persistence in college can be disrupted or hindered (Strayhorn, 2019).

Sense of belonging is a profound student experience tied to student outcomes like retention and persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). It is imperative to understand how students of color experience sense of belonging while attending highly selective PWIs. This study focused on one specific leadership program, the Posse Foundation, and its Posse Scholars. By applying a qualitative research methods approach, I aimed to understand scholars’ sense of belonging in their cohort or posse, and in their campus community as a whole.

Prior to this study, there was no sense of belonging literature available related to the Posse Foundation. In addition, no research had focused on Posse Scholars’ feelings of sense of belonging at their schools. For a program that had been in existence for over 30 years at the time of this study, it was
important to understand the experiences of program participants and the ways in which the Posse Scholars program affects students’ sense of belonging at highly selective PWIs. Data and results from this study will benefit college student affairs professionals as they grapple with creating campus environments inclusive for all students, especially students of color attending selective schools.

**Purpose of Study**

Understanding the sense of belonging of students in the Posse Scholars program as they attend their Posse partner schools is important. As previously discussed, Posse Scholars are typically from underrepresented backgrounds. Consequently, Posse partner Institutions’ racial makeup does not often reflect the diversity of Posse Scholars. Thus, Posse Scholars attend schools where they do not look like the majority of their peers. It is important to understand how scholars successfully integrate socially and academically into their college communities, if they do at all. Moreover, I wanted to understand if Posse Scholars could socially and academically integrate with individuals on campus outside of the Posse program. My goal was to understand how these experiences influenced Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging at their college or university.

One reason why Posse Scholars are in the minority of the racial makeup at their colleges is because most Posse partner institutions are selective and private in nature (Posse Foundation, 2021b). Student bodies at selective institutions tend to be comprised predominantly of White and Asian American students (Mullen, 2010), which results in Posse Scholars often becoming members of a learning community in which they are the minority. Understanding Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging is important because their experiences could differ from their peers and impact college student outcomes such as retention.

**Research Questions**

Employing qualitative research methods, this study focused on answering two research questions. Research Question 1 was: In what ways do Posse Scholars exhibit sense of belonging to their
institution as compared to non-Posse scholars? This question addressed if Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging at their college or university as a whole, if they felt it at all. In answering this question, I sought to understand if Posse Scholars were connected to and integrated in their college of choice.

Research Question 2 was: In what ways do Posse Scholars exhibit sense of belonging beyond their Posse cohort? This question was an extension of the first initial question about general sense of belonging sentiments. This question aimed to uncover how Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging to other campus communities, environments, individuals, and spaces in their institution beyond the Posse cohort in which they were intensely enmeshed. It was important to understand if Posse Scholars experienced a sense of belonging beyond their Posse cohort peer group.

I sought to answer the research questions by engaging in a qualitative, case study research methods approach. Using structured and semistructured interviews, I interviewed Posse Scholars at one specific institution to understand their feelings of sense of belonging at their school. In addition to student interviews, I interviewed an administrator at my chosen site institution to understand more about the program. Both institutions (i.e., the Posse Foundation and the site institution), in addition to interviews with students and administrators, were data sources for the project. I looked for recurring themes and ideas and analyzed data to draw major conclusions and suggestions for higher education leaders.

Definitions of Terms

There are several terms used throughout the following chapters important to define at the outset. They are broken up into general terms and Posse Foundation specific terms.

General Terms

- *First-generation college students* are students who are the first individuals in their immediate family to attend college (Checkoway, 2018).
• A historically Black college or university (HBCU) is an institution with the primary mission of educating Black students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

• Latinx refers to an individual being “of, or relating to, or marked by Latin American heritage—used as a gender-neutral alternative to Latino or Latina” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a).

• A liberal arts college is a bachelor’s degree-granting college offering a broad education including the humanities, social sciences, mathematics, life sciences, and the arts. Typically, a liberal arts college is a small, selective institution (CollegeBoard, n.d.-c).

• A predominantly White institution (PWI) is an institution where the majority (i.e., more than 50%) of the student body is comprised of White students (Bourke, 2016).

• A selective college or university is any postsecondary school that admits less than 50% of its applicants (CollegeBoard, n.d.-b). Schools are somewhat selective if they admit 50%–75% of applicants, very selected if they admit 25%–50% of applicants, and most selective if they admit less than 35% of applicants.

• Strayhorn (2019) defined sense of belonging as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff and peers” (p. 4).

• A student of color is any student who identifies as non-White, including Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Native American, or Asian American (Morrison, 2010).

• An underrepresented minority student is any student who identifies as African American/Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, Native American, or two or more races (CalTech, 2020).
Posse Foundation Terms

- A Posse cohort is comprised of 10–12 Posse Scholars; the Posse cohort moves through the college experience together while receiving support and guidance from the Posse Foundation and the Posse partner institution (Sander, 2013).

- A Posse mentor is a faculty member or administrator at a Posse partner institution that provides mentoring to Posse Scholars and Posse cohorts (Posse Foundation, n.d.).

- A Posse partner institution is a college or university that “provide(s) Posse Scholars with full-time tuition scholarships, weekly faculty mentoring and other supports” (Posse Foundation, 2021b, para. 1).

- A Posse Scholar is a student who is part of the Posse Foundation attending a Posse partner institution (Posse Foundation, 2021a).

Summary

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the research topic, including the specific research questions being posed, and the topic’s potential significance and importance of being studied. This study sought to uncover if, and to what extent, students of color at a PWI feel a sense of belonging. Specifically, this study focused on the sense of belonging experiences of Posse Scholars enrolled at selective colleges. The data collected and results from this project could assist college leaders at PWIs in creating campus communities and environments that foster sense of belonging for all students, especially students of color.

Chapter 2 includes a comprehensive literature review of sense of belonging research. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological procedures that were applied to conducting the research project itself. Chapter 4 presents data and research findings. Finally, Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings and recommendations for future research, including recommendations for practitioners in the field of student affairs.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The first goal of the Posse Foundation is “to expand the pool from which top colleges and universities can recruit outstanding young leaders from diverse backgrounds” (Posse Foundation, 2021c, para. 2). The foundation is committed to partnering with highly selective and academically rigorous schools across the United States and sending its scholars to prestigious institutions. Typically, highly selective campuses are less diverse (Dong, 2019). Because of the lack of diversity, elite institutions can oftentimes be comprised predominantly of White and Asian American students (Mullen, 2010). Furthermore, Mullen (2010) acknowledged the lack of diversity, saying, “Student bodies at elite institutions show that they are heavily skewed toward the upper classes” (p. 5). Specifically, as of 2010, related to socioeconomic class standing, top and upper middleclass students made up 91% of the student composition of Tier 1 institutions, and lower middle-class students and bottom-class students made up the remaining 9% (Mullen, 2010). Clearly, there is an imbalance in student racial representation at elite colleges and universities that may be due to disparities in socioeconomic class standing.

The imbalance in student racial representation is also evident at Posse partner schools. Posse partner schools are largely comprised of a majority White student population. The 2022 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) reveals on average, Posse partner school student populations are 55.8% White but only 6% African American/Black and 10.5% Hispanic/Latinx. The relative range of the White student population at partner schools is 32% to 82%. The range of Black and Latinx student makeup at Posse partner schools is 2%–33% and 5%–25%, respectively. Conversely, in 2018, the racial makeup of Posse Scholars at partner schools was 8.5% White, 36.3% African American/Black, and 35.9% Hispanic/Latinx (Posse Foundation, 2018). Understanding Posse partner school identities is important to move forward in analyzing how and why Posse Scholars can find success in their college campuses.
Due to the staggeringly disproportionate racial student body makeup at Posse partner schools, it is important to understand the experience of minority students attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Extensive research has been conducted with the purpose of understanding the experiences of minority students at PWIs. For example, D’Augelli and Hershberger (1993) found Black students attending PWIs, compared to their White peers, judged their institution more negatively, experienced greater instances of harassment and discrimination, began school with less resources, and endured more substantial change in their lives to attend college.

Indeed, the experience of a student attending a college incongruent to their ethnic and racial identity can be a challenging issue to navigate. Students can struggle with finding their place, a sense of community, and belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). It is important to understand the experiences of students of color attending PWIs because success is partially dependent on their ability to become socially integrated in the campus community. Establishing sense of belonging early in their college career is important for students to be successful throughout their time in college (Strayhorn, 2019).

This chapter begins with a discussion of college student choice, including how and why students select the colleges they do. Specifically, it is important to first understand why students of color elect to attend PWIs when they are not in the racial majority. Next, a brief review of the experiences of students of color at PWIs is presented. Then, a discussion of the hostile campus community students of color frequently experience at PWIs is explored. A brief overview of additional college access programs and a review of the literature is presented. The following section discusses existing Posse Program research and literature. Next, an in-depth discussion of sense of belonging is presented, including a definition, model, and its significance. A brief overview of Tinto’s (1993) model of college student departure and alternative models that account for students of color are reviewed. Tinto’s model of student motivation and persistence is presented, focusing on sense of belonging. Next, sense of belonging as it relates to students of color and sense of belonging, specifically as it applies to students of color attending liberal
arts colleges, is discussed. Sense of belonging and its significance as it relates to the Posse Program is included. Finally, a brief summary about what is known about students of color at PWIs and sense of belonging is reviewed. An overview of what remains unknown about this topic is presented. The chapter concludes with the research questions this project intended to answer, with results that will assist in filling in gaps in the relevant literature. This chapter will prepare the reader for Chapter 3 (i.e., research design and methodology).

**College Student Choice**

Understanding college student choices requires cursory knowledge of several sociological concepts and theories, including (a) habitus and fit and (b) social and cultural capital. Each of these concepts contributes to behaviors and choices a student makes in selecting an institution of higher education. In addition, it is important to identify and acknowledge the specific unique circumstances, identities, and experiences students of color have that influence their college choice decisions. Each of these elements is discussed in this section.

**Habitus and Fit**

Bourdieu (1986) identified the element of *habitus* “as a set of dispositions based on an individual’s social context that subconsciously guide the decisions that individuals make” (as cited in Bergerson, 2009, p. 58). Habitus relates to a student’s own dispositions and characteristics, including race, ethnicity, social class, and parents’ education level (Bergerson, 2009). Tinto (1993) labeled race, ethnicity, social class, and parents’ education level as a student’s preentry attributes and posited these factors shape students’ educational goals and commitments. Bergerson (2009) agreed that race, ethnicity, social class, and parents’ education level inform and influence a student’s college aspirations, values, goals, and ultimate institutional choice.

Habitus directly relates to how someone perceives their fit in various settings. Mullen (2010) described habitus as helping to “explain the smooth connection between social origins and academic
destinations” (p. 208). Habitus is a precursor for many institutional choice decisions made by students. In general, habitus has been shown to affect a student’s belief in which type of college or university environment they would fit (Bergerson, 2009). More importantly, McDonough (1997) showed students looking at schools selected colleges where they believed they belonged. Specifically, McDonough (1997) stated students select schools in which they “deem ‘right’ or ‘appropriate’ or schools where [they] will feel comfortable” (p. 2). McDonough demonstrated a student would feel comfortable in environments where they felt as though they belonged.

Fit is also incredibly important. K. Freeman (1997) stated when students find schools and educational environments incongruent with their own values, their sense of worth diminishes. Furthermore, students looking at schools select colleges where they believe they belong (McDonough, 1997). Chavous (2000) found Black students’ perceived ethnic fit and congruence between themselves and their educational environment was important to their ability to become involved in their school community while attending a PWI.

Black students are not the only students who must carefully negotiate fit. Yosso et al. (2009) suggested Latinx students who navigate the college experience at a PWI complete three stages while on campus: “rejection, community building, and critical navigation between multiple worlds” (p. 674). Latinx students do not have the luxury of entering a campus environment with the same ease as White students do because ecological fit between the school and the student are not guaranteed to match (Yosso et al., 2009). Many Latinx students create their own community of students who look like them and identify with their cultures. In a sense, they create counterspaces to obtain a sense of belonging and honor their unique cultural traditions. Counterspaces afford Latinx students the opportunity to sharpen their “skills of critical navigation through multiple worlds” (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 678). In effect, Latinx students are successful in creating community and belonging, but only with people they feel
comfortable with and not with the general campus community that is uninviting and hostile toward them.

Fit extends beyond campus community and can be applied to smaller campus environments. Black students who identify closely with their ethnicity are more involved in multicultural organizations in college (Museus, 2008). Chavous (2000) suggested higher race central students, those who had stronger beliefs on race, may seek refuge in “African American organizations as sources of social support in reaction to perceiving ethnic incompatibility” (p. 95). Students who do not feel as though their perceived ethnic fit is compatible with their college environment have more difficulty integrating socially in the school (Chavous, 2000).

Similarly, Museus (2008) found ethnic student organizations at PWIs afford Black and Asian American students’ feelings of familiarity among peers and provide them a venue to express themselves and be validated in their group. Ethnic student organizations become environments that foster a sense of belonging in a campus community less familiar to students. Tatum (1999) emphasized the importance of students engaging with identity-affirming experiences to learn more about their own cultural group. Identity-affirming experiences become more important when the environment students are placed in does not affirm their identity and fit is compromised.

Fit is significant because it can impact important student success outcomes. Mayhew et al. (2016) noted students’ fit with an institution is positively related to persistence and retention. Consequently, Black students who attend a historically Black college or university (HBCU) experience better student success outcomes compared to Black students enrolled at a PWI (Allen, 1992). Allen (1992) found Black students at HBCUs performed better academically, exhibited greater social involvement, and had loftier postgraduation career goals. Allen (1992) shared that “on predominantly White campuses, Black students emphasize feelings of alienation, sense of hostility, racial
discrimination, and lack of integration” (p. 39). In short, Black students lack sense of belonging, perhaps due to a mismatch in institutional fit.

Many elite institutions attract higher socioeconomic status (SES) students, many of whom are White, inadvertently shutting out low-SES students, many of whom are students of color (Selingo, 2020). As such, Black and Latinx students remain largely underrepresented at selective public colleges and universities in the United States (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2018). One potential and partial explanation for the inherent underrepresentation of low-SES students at elite or selective institutions is they apply to these types of schools at a lower rate (Selingo, 2020). For example, Black students make up 6% of first-year students at elite colleges but the most selective schools in the country enroll more students in the top 1% income distribution percentile than from the whole bottom half (Selingo, 2020).

Additionally, even if low-SES students choose to apply to selective institutions and gain admission, cost of attendance may preclude them from enrolling at a selective institution, which could further exacerbate the racial enrollment gap. One possible reason for the lower rate of poorer students of color applying to and attending elite institutions could be that low-SES students do not feel they will be successful in the elite school environment given the elements of habitus. Low-SES students have not been socialized to believe they belong or fit in prestigious academic arenas (Bloom, 2007).

Mullen (2010) suggested students of color self-exclude from attending elite institutions because they do not think they are worthy to be there and believe the school is not for people like themselves. Students with this mentality are concerned with their place in specific environments and are self-aware when their background is incongruent. Mullen (2010) shared this “deeply ingrained sense of one’s place served to guide these students toward the destinations they regarded as appropriate for persons with their background” (p. 208). Thus, habitus can restrict and impede a student from reaching outside of their comfort zone in selecting a school.
Although many students—especially minority students—are hesitant to enroll in schools that do not reflect their own racial identity, some students do make a concerted effort to increase their own social mobility (Mullen, 2010). Thus, as Bergerson (2009) stated, “It is possible, for individuals to make decisions that move them out of their habitus” (p. 60). Consequently, many Posse Scholars make decisions to move themselves out of their habitus. Posse Scholars take a chance with their education by attending schools where they are most likely part of the racial minority. However, this chance does not come without risks. Bloom (2007) found low-income students of color wrestle with the high stakes of taking a risk attending a school that could potentially benefit their social mobility. Risks may include poor academic performance leading to departure, isolation, and feelings of alienation.

Attending college provides students with the opportunity to change the trajectory of their lives through increasing social mobility and enhancing social and cultural capital (McNamee & Miller, 2014). Although many students attend college to secure or maintain their social status and position in society, other students seek to break out of their prescribed class and achieve a degree that will mobilize them for a better future. Students of color could potentially attend elite, selective PWIs to achieve upward social mobility (Mullen, 2010). For students of color attending PWIs, although they may not fit in their current college environment, their goal is to fit and belong in a higher subsequent social, professional, and personal bracket upon graduating.

The motivation to be in a higher bracket is defined as upward mobility, which refers to the opportunity for an individual to ascend from their current social rank to a higher one (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-c). One way a student can achieve upward mobility is through using a specific mechanism like education. Mullen (2010) suggested, “Degrees from elite institutions signal their holders’ social superiority” (p. 212). Thus, although a student of color may not feel a sense of belonging in their school environment, they may be able to feel a sense of belonging to a broader community they become more qualified to enter upon graduating and move up in societal social ranks.
Although the goal of moving up in societal social ranks is noble, students of color attending PWIs, especially elite institutions, may feel as though they do not fit in. Fit is important because students’ fit with an institution is positively related to persistence and retention (Mayhew et al., 2016). Tinto (1993) acknowledged mismatches of fit, defining it as an incongruence a student can have with their chosen institution. Tinto cited mismatches between students’ skills, abilities, motivations, interests, and peer interactions at their institutions. Most notably, Tinto suggested incongruences with the social aspect of a college can be detrimental to student success and potentially influence a student to depart from school. Tinto (1993) noted there is “a perceived mismatch between social values, preferences, and/or behavioral styles of the person and those which characterize other members of the institution, expressed individually or collectively” (p. 53). Furthermore, Tinto (1993) admitted:

Some degree of incongruence will be experienced by most students is not itself surprising. Few college settings are so homogeneous that virtually no disagreement occurs on campus as to the appropriate character of intellectual and social behavior. But when that perception leads the person to perceive him/herself as being substantially at odds with the dominant culture of the institution and/or with significant groups of faculty and student peers, then withdrawal may follow. (p. 53)

Similar to issues related to fit, Alon and Tienda (2005) identified the mismatch hypothesis as an instance when minority students are accepted and enroll at highly selective or selective institutions, but they enter underprepared and experience worse college student outcomes as compared to better qualified, White students. The controversial issue is students of color admitted to highly selective institutions under affirmative action are not academically prepared and graduate at lower rates than their peers. Alon and Tienda (2005) tested the mismatch hypothesis, finding it did not hold up in their study and that “minority students thrive at selective postsecondary institutions despite their disadvantaged starting lines” (p. 309). Furthermore, Alon and Tienda (2005) supported affirmative action practices because they believed these practices would open more doors for minority students rather than set them up for failure.
Cultural and Social Capital

Students of color encompass a variety of races, ethnicities, SESs, and cultural backgrounds. Wells (2008) stated some students of color, namely Latinx students, enter college with less social and cultural capital than their White peers. Many Latinx students are underrepresented and are part of minority student populations on selective, elite, and private college campuses. One potential reason students of color might choose to attend a PWI is to cultivate more social capital, which can assist in positioning themselves for upward social mobility upon graduating.

Capital, as described by Bourdieu (1986), “is what makes the games of society . . . something other than simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle” (p. 241). Cultural capital is described as the “culturally based resources that can act as a form of capital” (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 5). Cultural capital can be attained through a family’s social origins and through formal schooling and education. Mullen (2010) asserted, “Understanding the higher educational game and how to play it is a vital form of cultural capital” (p. 206). In addition to cultural capital, social capital is another type of capital. Bourdieu (1986) identified social capital as a network of resources cultivated by members of a group that hold value and meaning in the community. Both social and cultural capital are important components that influence a student’s college selection decision and what they ultimately bring with them to their chosen school.

Possessing large quantities of both types of capital gives a student a leg up in the higher education system. Labaree (2017) asserted, “The more advantages you bring to the system—cultural capital, connections, family wealth—the higher the probability you will succeed in it” (p. 166). Bergerson (2009) noted students who have lower social and cultural capital gravitate toward and attend schools that also have lower levels of capital. Attendance at schools with lower levels of capital makes it difficult for students to accumulate more of both types of capital because they typically attend schools congruent with their existing capital standings. Attending a school in alignment with a student’s existing
capital standing can be detrimental for a student of color who wishes to gain more capital if they cannot access a school that possesses more desirable levels of capital.

Cultural and social capital is transactional and can most easily be passed down from parent to child (Coleman, 1988; McDonough & Antonio, 1996; Rivera, 2015). Thus, children of privileged and high-SES parents inherently hold and possess more social and cultural capital. Conversely, parents with lower levels of social and cultural capital bestow lower levels of both types of capital to their children. Instead, students of color gain more cultural capital from their high school teachers than their own parents (McDonough & Antonio, 1996). In addition, Havlik et al. (2017) found first-generation students attending a PWI, many who were students of color, were cognizant of the advantage their multigenerational classmates had in maximizing their college experience because they had college-educated parents who could assist them in navigating the college environment. Lack of college-experienced parental assistance caused first-generation students to not feel similar to others on their college campus; feeling like an other decreases sense of belonging.

Typically, students who have lower levels of social and cultural capital enroll in schools that also possess lower levels of capital (McDonough, 1998). Dumais and Ward (2010) noted, “Cultural capital plays an important role in the reproduction of the social class structure” (p. 247). Dumais and Ward (2010) found cultural capital facilitate first-generation and continuing-generation students’ entrance and access to college; however, it has little impact on students’ ability to persist and achieve good grades. Thus, once in college, Dumais and Ward (2010) found cultural capital has little impact on student success.

**Students of Color and College Choice**

Students of color engage in the college search process in a unique way. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) created a model describing the college search process that includes predisposition, search, and choice. Predisposition relates to students’ unique expectations and educational aspirations (Bergerson,
Other factors that pertain to the predisposition stage pertinent to students of color include SES, achievement levels, school resources, and parental expectations. Students of colors’ predisposition orientation is different than that of their White peers. Students of color must contend with a myriad of social and cultural inequities in their residential, educational, and community settings (Bergerson, 2009). Acknowledging predisposition orientation differences and social and cultural inequities is important in working to understand students of colors’ college selecting and attending experiences.

Students choose to attend college for a variety of reasons, including gaining social mobility, experiencing opportunities to learn and grow, receiving exposure to different viewpoints and perspectives, networking, and preparing for the workforce or graduate study (Baum et al., 2013; Mullen, 2010; Rivera, 2015). White, affluent students often view college as an opportunity to gain new perspectives and network (Mullen, 2010). Interestingly, ethnic minority first-generation prospective students cite career aspirations as a motivator for choosing to attend college (Dennis et al., 2005). That is, students of color saw college as an opportunity to gain skills to enter the workforce, and motivation to gain skills influenced college outcomes and commitment. The different factors that motivate affluent, White students to attend college, compared to ethnic minority first-generation students, is important to recognize because students of color navigate their college experience with different expectations and intentions than their White peers.

In addition to different college-going expectations, students of color also tend to have different motivations when it comes to attending college. In comparing college-going motivations between students attending a prestigious Ivy League institution—many of whom were upper class and White—and a neighboring, less selective state school—many of whom were middle or lower-class and ethnically diverse—Mullen (2010) found students’ reasons for attending were starkly different. Students attending the Ivy League school enrolled to gain a transformative college experience, but students attending the nearby state institution went to earn a degree that would allow them to be employable upon
graduation. It is clear students approach college in different ways and for different reasons, and differing motivations may influence their college experiences, which could include sense of belonging.

A specific population of college students important to understand in terms of college expectations and motivations are first-generation college students. Although not all students of color are first-generation college students, many are, including Black and Latinx students (Balemian & Feng, 2013). First-generation, college-bound students contend with cultural barriers when engaging in their search and selection process. When given the opportunity, first-generation students bring to college a unique set of experiences, perspectives, and cultural wealth distinctive from their White classmates (Checkoway, 2018). Interestingly, Checkoway (2018) identified first-generation college students as students who operate more on an individual basis than in a group. Checkoway (2018) saw the first-generation student population as students who “will not interact collectively until someone brings them together” (p. 73). This observation is especially important to consider when understanding sense of belonging because Checkoway (2018) suggested it is difficult for first-generation students to gain membership into a group; thus, sense of belonging would be harder for them to establish.

Contrary to the research of Checkoway (2018), Guiffrida (2006) found students of color may have a higher tendency to adhere and appreciate collectivist values and find success on college campuses that support these tenets. Museus et al. (2018) also found students who aligned with collectivist cultural beliefs experienced strengthened sense of belonging in their college environment. Museus et al.’s findings make sense because one cultural aspect for students of color, particularly in the Latinx community, is family. Latinx students are accustomed to growing up in tight-knit families where they have firm roles in the family unit (Santiago, 2007). Seeking colleges that support a tight-knit community aligns with Latinx cultural values. It could be expected that Latinx students would seek out sense of belonging in their campus communities.
Before arriving on a college campus, many students research institutions to find the school that fits them best. This process consists of both the search and choice stages (Hossler et al., 2015). When engaging in both stages, students turn to resources in their homes (e.g., parents, guardians) and school communities (e.g., teachers, school counselors) to gather information that will assist them in making decisions about college (Bergerson, 2009). Once more, there are inequities because students of color face information challenges and shortages in their communities. Both the quality and quantity of information made available to students of color differs from White students (Tsioi-A-Fatt Bryant, 2015). For example, students of color often attend poorly resourced schools and do not have access to the same types of high-quality courses (e.g., advanced placement courses) or instructors (Darling-Hammond, 2001). In addition, many students of color have parents who did not attend college and cannot provide valuable information about the search process (Perna, 2000).

In gathering information, first-generation students are more likely to turn to school administrators and teachers with questions about the college search process rather than their own family members (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018). First-generation students do not have the luxury of relying on support and guidance from members of their family because they lack college-going experience. First-generation college students must trust the information they receive from their high school teachers and school counselors whether or not these individuals provide them with accurate and valuable tools and resources.

Another area where information dissemination is lacking for students of color is conversations surrounding cost and financial aid (Bergerson, 2009). Because many students of color come from low-income homes, college cost and affordability are substantial factors in making decisions about college enrollment. Unfortunately, information on how to afford and apply for financial aid is not made easily accessible to students of color, despite many of these students being eligible for large sums of aid money (Hossler et al., 2015). Financial aid information is especially important for students considering—
or overlooking—expensive private institutions, like liberal arts colleges, because many students do not believe they could afford to attend them altogether. In actuality, many students of color could and do qualify for large sums of financial aid awards and scholarships, which surprisingly make costly institutions more feasible options.

One other important factor on search and choice for students of color is geographic location (Bergersen, 2009). Students of color typically look to attend institutions close to home so they can continue to be engaged with their family unit while attending college (Deruy, 2016). Students also wish to remain closely connected to their familiar communities. Many liberal arts colleges are located in bucolic rural areas away from urban cities and towns (M. L. Stevens, 2007). It could be more difficult for a student of color to feel they belong on a campus that is different from where they came. In addition to seeking family connection, many low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color hold a job while in college and must select a school that allows them to continue to work at their place of employment (Kurlaender, 2006). Thus, both family and work tie many students of color to schools closer to home.

It is important to understand the unique challenges students of color face when grappling with college applications and enrollment decisions. Their experiences, predispositions, resources, communities, and families all influence their college decision-making process (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler et al., 2015). For many students of color, numerous factors contribute to their choice to forgo enrolling in PWIs or liberal arts colleges. For students who do decide to enroll in PWIs or liberal arts colleges, they may often feel like the minority or the other because many of their peers do not look like them or have similar backgrounds (Havlik et al., 2017). Thus, it is important to understand their experiences, especially with respect to sense of belonging.
Students of Color at PWIs

Institutions that are more racially homogenous like PWIs may have individual students—including students of color—who experience the environment and sense of belonging in more profound ways (Museus et al., 2018). These experiences may be challenging due to the differences some students feel when attending a school different from their own racial identity. These challenges can translate to poorer student outcomes for certain student populations.

For example, Black students attending PWIs persist at lower rates, demonstrate lower academic achievement, and are less likely to pursue postbaccalaureate degrees (Allen, 1985; McClain & Perry, 2017). Troublingly, Black students attending PWIs are also more likely to experience instances of discrimination and feel as if their institution is “designed to honour white history, white knowledge, and white cultural practices at the expense of the African American experience” (Torres, 2009, p. 883). Many factors contribute to Black students’ lower levels of psychosocial adjustment at PWIs, including “psychological strain of bearing a minority culture in a place where white culture dominates” (Torres, 2009, p. 884). In addition, Black students are often the targets of racism, microaggressions, and other negative racially charged interactions between peers, faculty, and staff (McClain & Perry, 2017).

Black students attending PWIs must also contend with imbalances in social class that increasingly marginalizes them to the outskirts of the campus community (Torres, 2009). A class–race interaction creates “a sense of cultural alienation” (Torres, 2009, p. 888) for Black students. If a student feels culturally alienated from their campus community, they are unable to feel a sense of belonging. Alienation is the opposite of sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). When a student feels alienated, they will seek help from students who share similar experiences for support and validation (Tatum, 1999). Students of color forge community in environments where they feel excluded or where they are the other.
White students seldom experience alienation at PWIs because they identify and align more closely to the dominant culture the PWI environment provides (Museus et al., 2018). However, students of color attending PWIs often experience feelings of alienation connected to loneliness and other unpleasant feelings. One student at a PWI called this phenomenon “an invisible segregation boundary” (Havlik et al., 2017, p. 128). A boundary drawn by race prevents students from connecting with others on campus, which leads them to experience feelings of isolation and loneliness, exacerbating feelings of otherness (Havlik et al., 2017). Because segregation is defined as “the separation or isolation of a race, class, or ethnic group . . . by barriers to social intercourse . . . or by other discriminatory means” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b, Section 2a), a student experiencing segregation cannot establish sense of belonging because they are actively or perceived to be separated or isolated from a group. Students who feel isolated or segregated cannot feel sense of belonging.

For some students, feelings of isolation can transcend all spaces of the campus environment. Bourke (2010) identified several specific cultural spaces that Black students at a PWI navigate with little success, including: (a) athletic expectations, (b) campus traditions, (c) devaluing experiences, (d) Black students as educators, and (e) privilege. Students found these spaces unwelcoming and challenging. As a result, few students sought out campus groups and activities with members outside of the Black community. Most concerning, Black students were subjected to a culture of devaluing experiences. For example, White students reduced Black students’ membership to their university based on affirmative action. This devaluing experience suggests to the minoritized student that they belong only due to a certain condition, not on their own merit, which is troubling. Reducing Black students’ belonging to their institution solely based on affirmative action is belittling and insulting.

It is important for schools to foster spaces where students can belong and thrive. In understanding how culturally engaged campus environments impact sense of belonging for White students and students of color, Museus et al. (2018) found the elements of cultural familiarity,
collectivist cultural orientations, and holistic support were most critical in laying the groundwork for both White students and students of color to experience optimal sense of belonging in college.

Importantly, Museus et al. (2018) noted, “Culture is more salient for minoritized populations who often must navigate dominant cultures that are incongruent with their precollege cultures and cultural identities” (p. 479). Museus et al. (2018) highlighted the importance of cultivating a welcoming and inclusive campus culture and the impact it can have on sense of belonging formation, which is something all students can benefit from, and especially students of color.

Like cultural spaces, impressions students have of their campus environment are important in informing their attitudes and beliefs. Initial impressions are more impactful for college students because they can shape the course of their college experience and influence important outcomes like persistence (Douglas, 1998). Douglas (1998) found the perceptions of first-year Black students at a PWI centered on how race was amplified on campus. Specifically, students felt a heightened level of consciousness about being Black and, for most students, racial consciousness contributed to negative experiences for students. Elevated consciousness of their racial identity on a campus that lacked students with the same racial identity could impact feelings of belonging.

Interestingly, although students can be constantly reminded of who they are and how that identity does not align with the dominant campus culture, some students also report numerous instances of voluntary racial/ethnic separation on their campus (Douglas, 1998). One student reasoned, “Everyone really does feel more comfortable around their own environment” (Douglas, 1998, p. 424). The idea of feeling more comfortable relates to belonging to a community and demonstrates that students gravitate toward individuals they identify with in an effort to feel a sense of belonging.

A positive, welcoming campus culture is important to facilitate the success of all students, especially students of color. Museus (2011) constructed the campus cultural framework for minority student success as a mechanism for administrators at colleges and universities to use to foster success
of students of color. This model includes campus cultures, campus cultural agents, connections to campus cultures, and the outcome of ethnic minority student success. The model illustrates various aspects of how a campus’s culture impacts cultural agents, how a student of color feels connected to the cultures of their institution, and how individual students find success at their institutions.

Connecting to campus cultures requires a student to successfully integrate socially and academically. To integrate, sense of belonging on some level must be achieved.

Museus (2011) found one important mechanism PWIs employed that generated ethnic minority student success was creating a culture of strong networking values. Networks were both formal and informal, allowing students to form connections in different communities on campus. Many students referred to this type of community building as creating a family network. By creating ties and connections early on, in some instances at first-year orientation, students felt as though they belonged before they even immersed themselves in the campus culture at the start of the semester. Establishing connections and sense of belonging early is important for students to feel connected and valued on campus.

Although many campuses employ effective first-year orientation programs, it is also important to create such programs for transfer students and midyear start students (i.e., students who start their studies in the spring term). Creating effective programs could allow students to feel a sense of belonging as they enter a campus community in which many of their peers have already established connections and ties to each other and other members of the institution.

**Hostile Campus Community**

As previously discussed, sense of belonging is often difficult for students of color to achieve while attending PWIs. Many students of color experience instances of racism, microaggressions, and other hostile interactions that cause them to feel alienated and unwelcome (Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). Solórzano et al. (2000) defined *microaggressions*, a form of racism, as “subtle insults
(verbal, nonverbal and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (p. 60). Solórzano et al. examined racial microaggressions experienced by Black students at PWIs and found Black students experienced microaggressions inside and outside the classroom, and they were perpetrated by peers, faculty members, and administrators. As a result, racial microaggressions led Black students to experience feelings of self-doubt, frustration, and isolation. Feelings of self-doubt, frustration, and isolation combined caused Black students to have a negative perception of the racial climate on their college campuses.

In studying the impact of racial microaggression on Latinx students attending PWIs, Yosso et al. (2009) found this student population “experience[d] an accumulation of racial microaggressions as a rejection of their presence at the university” (p. 667). Additionally, Yosso et al. found Latinx students experienced being the brunt of many insensitive, racially charged jokes. Interactions with racially charged jokes ultimately frustrated students, decreased their feelings of sense of belonging with the institution, and inhibited their ability to participate in their campus community. These experiences of Latinx students demonstrates how detrimental a verbal interaction can have on a student because it can affect their sense of belonging.

College racial climate perceptions by students of color are important because they shape and contribute to how students feel toward, and interact with, their environment. Johnson et al. (2007) found Black students who harbored positive campus climate sentiments contributed to students’ sense of belonging. However, Black students were least likely to report favorable campus racial climate perceptions. If Black students do not have positive feelings about the racial climate on campus, they could be at risk for not adequately developing sense of belonging.

Although many instances of microaggressions, putdowns, and insults are negative in nature, Robertson and Chaney (2017) found some Black students at PWIs did not characterize them as such. Students, unfazed by these seemingly negative interactions, deftly navigated the encounters due to
previous exposure in other educational and social settings and the possession of cultural capital. One student acknowledged the presence of racism on his campus, saying navigating the situation successfully “demonstrates grit in a setting that is less than welcoming” (Robertson & Chaney, 2017, p. 269). Although students in Robertson and Chaney’s study allowed microaggressions to roll off their backs, they still may experience residual psychological and emotional effects from these interactions.

The most egregious form of microaggression, microinvalidations, can be extremely damaging to students of color (Sue & Constantine, 2007). Microinvalidations are most harmful because they have the ability to “exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of people of color” (Sue & Constantine, 2007, p. 138). Excluding and nullifying an individual’s own reality and identity is a way of alienating them from the community and environment. As previously established, alienation is the opposite of sense of belonging. Students of color at PWIs, who experience microinvalidations by their White peers, could suffer from lower levels of sense of belonging.

Although many students of color struggle with sense of belonging at PWIs, even high-achieving Black students must navigate their environment carefully. Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) found Black students enrolled in an honors program had to combat stereotypes attributed to Black students inside and outside of class. Moreover, honors students felt an obligation to carry themselves in ways that were non-Black to provide the campus with positive perceptions of Black students. In attempting to conform and gain acceptance and sense of belonging in the community, Black students were losing a sense of themselves. Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) noted this powerful negotiation: “To be incongruent with stereotypes about Blacks means that, at some level, these students give up a part of what it means to be Black” (p. 516). The lengths students will go to achieve sense of belonging can cause them to dismiss and shed important parts of themselves to feel accepted.

Finally, Black honors students in Fries-Britt and Griffin’s (2007) study felt as though they needed to validate and prove their mettle for being members of the honors program so peers and instructors
did not assume they were there due to affirmative action. Thus, Black students were constantly required to demonstrate they belonged and deserved to be a member of the honors program. Fries-Britt and Griffin discussed how students of color are required to negotiate and constantly vie for membership and sense of belonging in multiple communities in their broader institution.

Fries-Britt and Turner (2001) found Black students at PWIs combated general stereotypes simply because they were the minority on campus and in the classroom. The stereotypes endured by Black students “threatened to erode their academic confidence and performance” (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001, p. 427). Moreover, unlike White students, Black students felt they needed prove their academic achievement to their classmates to gain acceptance and respect. Thus, Black students needed to exert more effort to show others they belonged. The extra effort was independent of whether or not they themselves actually felt as though they belonged in the classroom and at their school.

A final finding in the study conducted by Fries-Britt and Turner (2001) was that Black students were cognizant of the fact they looked different from their White peers and often contended with stereotypes related to their appearance (e.g., classmates assuming they were athletes). Stereotypical assumptions reminded Black students they did not belong, or if they did belong, it was because they were playing a sport for the college. This type of membership is transactional in nature; Black students are welcome at the school to provide a service or play a sport. Fries-Britt and Turner (2001) illustrated how stereotypes shared and vocalized by White students to Black students at PWIs prohibit Black students from feeling a sense of belonging at their institution.

In addition to students of color contending with combating stereotypes, they must also wrestle with stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is a psychological phenomenon that a stereotype has on an individual that affects their thinking (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). For example, a Black student who is told they are poor at math simply because they are female and Black might begin to believe this stereotype, even if it is untrue, and perform poorly on math assessments in the future. A student
experiencing stereotype threat uses mental energy to “protect [them]self emotionally and intellectually from the introduction of the stereotype” (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001, p. 425). Internalization of the stereotype can have harmful consequences on individuals.

Because stereotype threat is situational in nature, experiences of stereotype threat could be more damaging to students of color attending a PWI because they already have a higher likelihood of feeling isolated and believing they do not belong (Baker, 2013). The environment created at a PWI can be already unwelcoming and difficult for students of color to navigate; therefore, instances of stereotype threat could persist at greater levels. Students of color must manage stereotype threat to be successful in both social and academic spaces at PWIs.

**Other Access Programs**

Like the Posse Foundation program, there are several other distinct college access programs that select, prepare, and support underrepresented students before and while they are attending college. These programs include: QuestBridge, Talent Search, Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP), Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), and TRIO Upward Bound (Bernhardt, 2013; New York State Education Department, 2021; QuestBridge, 2021; The State University of New York, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2020a, 2022a). Each program supports students so they are positioned to achieve success in preparing for and obtaining a college degree.

Access programs provide students the opportunity to adequately prepare for postsecondary education and obtain a college degree (K. A. King, 2009; McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Like the Posse Program, access programs play an integral role in providing access to students who would otherwise fail to achieve their educational goals due to a variety of burdens and barriers. The selected programs that are discussed include TRIO, Upward Bound, and AVID. Each program provides students with tools and resources to be college ready.
TRIO

Through public funding mechanisms, TRIO programs provide students with opportunities to achieve the goal of attending and graduating from college (Balz & Esten, 1998). TRIO includes eight federally funded programs that support students with getting to and through college. These programs include: (a) Educational Opportunity Centers, (b) Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement, (c) Student Support Services, (d) Talent Search, (e) Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs Staff, (f) Upward Bound, (g) Upward Bound Math–Science, and (h) Veterans Upward Bound (U.S. Department of Education, 2020a). Each program assists in increasing vulnerable students’ preparation for and access to colleges and universities across the country.

TRIO programs were a product of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (1965) with aims of providing and expanding resources for institutions of higher education and increasing access for students who have financial need. TRIO-eligible students are students who are the first to attend college in their families (i.e., first-generation students) and students who experience “social and cultural barriers to higher education” (Balz & Esten, 1998, p. 334). TRIO programs offer extensive resources inside and outside of school to help first-generation students succeed in graduating from high school and enrolling in college.

TRIO programs focus on providing early intervention for students who might not be prepared or equipped with the knowledge, education, and financial resources necessary to attend college (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Many programs funded under TRIO incorporate community-based support networks and engage family members in the students’ college preparatory journey (Bergerson, 2009). Thus, TRIO programs create community for both students and family members, an important component of sense of belonging.

Participating public and private colleges and universities receive grants from the U.S. Department of Education to support TRIO programs and initiatives on campus (McElroy & Armesto,
TRIO programs focus on providing resources and equipping high school students with college readiness skills, information, mentoring, scholarships, and additional academic support so they may make a seamless transition to postsecondary schooling. Each individual TRIO program is small in nature so educators and administrators can provide personalized support for its students. One successful TRIO program is Upward Bound, which is discussed in the following section.

Upward Bound

Upward Bound is a federally funded TRIO program with the goal of preparing at-risk high school students for college admission (U.S. Department of Education, 2020b). It was the first federally funded program to emerge in the 1960s out of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Bergerson, 2009). Upward Bound provides eligible students with resources and programming while attending high school that will position them to find success in applying to and attending institutions of higher education. The program targets low-income, first-generation, college-bound students and provides additional college-preparatory instruction in high school (K. A. King, 2009). A cornerstone of Upward Bound is summer programming and mentorship on college campuses, in addition to weekend college preparatory activities during the academic school year. In the summer especially, students can experience all facets of college, so they feel more prepared when they enroll in the future.

To an extent, the summer program provided by Upward Bound is like a traditional summer bridge program (Saliwanchik-Brown, 2005). Summer bridge programs are typically intervention programs that provide academically at-risk, lower-achieving, college-bound students with additional academic and social support on campus before they begin their 1st semester in the fall. Summer bridge programs are meant to “strengthen the academic foundation” (Bir & Myrick, 2015, p. 23) students build as they prepare to enter college. Many summer bridge programs are successful in preparing students for their academic year and reducing dropout rates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Bir and Myrick (2015) found Black students who participated in a summer bridge program achieved higher college grade point
averages in their 1st year and were more likely to be retained from their 2nd to their 3rd year as compared to peers of similar background who did not participate in the summer bridge program. In addition to the academic advantage participants receive, they can create sense of belonging in their cohort as they navigate the new campus and residential environments, before the rest of the student body arrives on campus.

In advancing the goal of increasing the college-going rate for low-income, first-generation students, Upward Bound provides participants with college search programming and resources, including admissions process assistance, standardized testing preparation, academic counseling, tutoring, and college visits (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Upward Bound provides multiyear programming to its students that supplements the traditional academic curriculum and course load. Students are given the opportunity to grow and connect with Upward Bound staff and create community.

Because students participate in Upward Bound for several years, there is an opportunity for them to integrate into an additional community and foster sense of belonging separate from their traditional high school experience. Saliwanchik-Brown (2005) found students who were part of a New England Upward Bound program reported a strong sense of belonging to the program due to the positive relationships created with peers and Upward Bound administrators. Saliwanchik-Brown demonstrated how students themselves can create sense of belonging among their own cohort or group without interventions or assistance from others.

Importantly, sense of community in Upward Bound is most strongly created in the summer college residential experiences (Saliwanchik-Brown, 2005). As previously discussed, one important component of Upward Bound is the summer college experience where Upward Bound students live and study on a college campus during the summer to gain exposure to living away from home and navigating the college world. In the study conducted by Saliwanchik-Brown (2005), students who attended the 6-week residential program felt a strong sense of belonging to their peers because they had similar life
and personal experiences in which they could relate. In addition, positive relationships with Upward Bound administrators also increased participants’ sense of belonging. Positive relationships with peers and administrators increased students’ feelings of comfort and safety, which are key elements to belonging. Saliwanchik-Brown’s study demonstrated that, in addition to students creating sense of belonging with one another, effective access program administrators also play an important role in creating a sense of community for students.

Strikingly, when students were asked about their feelings of sense of belonging in the various communities they belonged to (i.e., residential, high school, and Upward Bound), most students reported strongest feelings of sense of belonging with Upward Bound compared to the other two communities with which they were affiliated (Saliwanchik-Brown, 2005). Saliwanchik-Brown demonstrated the impact access programs have on sense of belonging for students. Students in the Upward Bound program felt more sense of belonging in their program than the greater high school environment. Understanding sense of belonging for students in other types of programs like Posse deserves attention.

**AVID**

The AVID program runs on private, nongovernment funding and provides low-income, diverse high school students with academic potential additional training, tutoring, and mentoring to prepare them for college (K. A. King, 2009). The first AVID program began in California in 1981 and was the product of a high school teacher who collaborated with an institution in the University of California system (Bergeerson, 2009). Since then, AVID has served thousands of students and high schools across the country and the globe.

The AVID program targets middle-of-the-road students who are ineligible for federal or merit-based college access programs but still demonstrate promise in achieving postsecondary schooling (Bergeerson, 2009). AVID students receive mentorship and support from college students who facilitate
trainings and programs in collaboration with high school instructors and administrators. The program supplements students’ traditional high school curriculum and coursework with intensive academic instruction and training, requiring participating students to enroll in both AVID and regular courses. Like Upward Bound and TRIO programs, AVID’s goal is to provide precollege preparation to underachieving, low-income, minority students so they are prepared to successfully complete high school and enroll in postsecondary education (Bernhardt, 2013). AVID achieves this goal through a comprehensive academic curriculum and supplemental skills and resources programs.

AVID provides students with academic support, in addition to creating and fostering community, so students can achieve their greatest potential (Bernhardt, 2013). Participating schools paired up with AVID coordinators and instructors played an integral role in the students’ academic development because academic preparation has been shown to be a leading factor in college readiness and success. AVID students are encouraged to become thoroughly immersed in their school’s programs, extracurricular activities, and engaged in meaningful ways with their classmates. The most successful AVID programs create and maintain a strong sense of community that extends from the high school to the students’ own family units. Creating community that reaches beyond the academic environment strengthens students’ support networks. Finally, AVID programs emphasize, value, and celebrate students’ unique cultural backgrounds (Bergerson, 2009). Validation of students’ unique cultural backgrounds and experiences may contribute to stronger sense of belonging.

One type of community most individuals are a member of is the family unit. Watt et al. (2008) found a dominant factor that contributed to student persistence in the AVID program in high school was because they likened being a member of the program to being part of another family. Like sense of belonging, AVID students reported feelings of “personal acceptance and security” (Watt et al., 2008, p. 24) among their AVID community, especially with AVID teachers. In one open-ended survey question, close to 20% of respondents mentioned the family like and supportive atmosphere as being a dominant
reason why they continued with the program. Families are specific, close-knit communities where sense of belonging is important. For a student to attribute the AVID program as one that creates a family environment is emblematic of sense of belonging to some degree.

In addition to creating a family like atmosphere, AVID programs’ community feel has also contributed to positive student outcome measures. Llamas et al. (2014) surveyed two central California high school AVID student cohorts—71% of whom were Hispanic—and found students attributed the positive, supportive, and safe AVID environment to be indicative of their success in school. In addition, students in this study shared the social connections they made, ones they compared to that of creating a family, also helped them to persist in school. Furthermore, AVID students reported feeling more connected to their school due to their participation in the program. This connection or sense of belonging is important because it influences adolescent students’ motivation and academic achievement for students of various ethnic backgrounds (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).

Similar to Upward Bound, AVID fosters community and creates a space where students feel accepted, supported, and a sense of belonging. Creating additional familial supports are important for first-generation and low-income students because they prepare academically, socially, and intellectually for college while also navigating the college search gauntlet (Bernhardt, 2013). Unfortunately, there is limited research that has focused on sense of belonging for both AVID and Upward Bound. Furthermore, there is no existing literature or research that discusses sense of belonging for the Posse Program. More research is necessary in understanding the experience of students from diverse backgrounds attending PWIs.

**POSSE Program Research**

As previously documented, existing literature on the Posse Program is limited and does not include any studies pertaining to sense of belonging. For a program that has been in existence for over 30 years at the time of the study and touts such exemplary outcomes as a 90% participant graduation
rate, it is intriguing for there to be a noticeable lack of empirical studies, evidence, and research by the academic community in evaluating the program (Posse Foundation, 2021g). Of existing published research, the focus has been on social and academic integration and self-perception of academic success of Posse Scholars at their institutions. Because sense of belonging relates to these areas tangentially, a brief review of the literature is warranted.

Jones and Were (2008) compared the academic and social integration perceptions and actions of engineering students at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania. Jones and Were compared three groups of engineering students: (a) Posse Scholars, (b) non-Posse minority students, and (c) a random sample of engineering students. Jones and Were (2008) found Posse students “state a high commitment to engineering, and an ability to navigate the academic integration process” (p. 7). In addition, Jones and Were found the minority engineering students who were not scholars held similar academic ambitions but were less successful in navigating the academic integration process. The difference in scholars and students who shared similar characteristics as Posse students, but were not participants in the program, was intriguing.

Jones and Were (2008) acknowledged distinct differences between Posse Scholar engineers and non-Posse scholars. Jones and Were attributed the academic integration success of Posse students to the Posse Program’s unique recruitment process, precollege training, leadership preparation, and supplemental academic mentoring scholars receive in the first 2 years of school. Non-Posse students were less likely to take full advantage of campus resources more overtly made available to Posse Scholars. It is possible non-Posse students did not experience precollege training or learn about resources available on campus. Jones and Were suggested it is the Posse Program’s recruiting and mentoring process that leads to students’ ability to effectively become academically integrated into the Lafayette College engineering program. All critical components take place both before and during the 1st year of school.
Epstein et al. (2014) studied resilience and self-perception of science Posse Scholars—who were science majors like Posse Scholars but were not in the program—and students from well-resourced families from all class years attending Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. Epstein et al. found Posse Scholars’ own views of personal and academic success contributed to their ability to be retained and persist. Traditional, well-resourced students defined their success through an academic lens and attributed it to academic performance. Epstein et al. (2014) defined a well-resourced student as one who had at least one parent who earned an undergraduate degree and an adjusted gross family income of $80,000 or more. Other students in this category framed their success in relation to peers whom they found as competition and motivation. Well-resourced students were proud of their academic accomplishments and found peers to motivate them to succeed.

Alternatively, underrepresented students, but not Posse Scholars, framed success in more of a nontraditional manner, focusing more on their journeys and progress made in studying and learning science than on their grades earned (Epstein et al., 2014). Many underrepresented students emphasized the characteristics of perseverance and resilience as successes in remaining in their science focused major, especially given the obstacles they had to overcome. Different from well-resourced students, underrepresented students found pride in what they had overcome to get to their position, as opposed to what they were achieving currently.

The final group of students in Epstein et al.’s (2014) study, Posse Scholars, varied in whether they felt as though they had found success studying in the sciences. Most scholars from all class years did not confidently feel as though they were successful science students and were still working on becoming better. For these scholars, “success is defined as an upward trajectory or learning to be successful in the sciences” (Epstein et al., 2014, p. 11). Like other underrepresented students, Posse Scholars put a high emphasis on progress and celebrated their journeys, citing these components as motivational factors to continue in the sciences. In addition, like the underrepresented student group,
Posse Scholars acknowledged their academic growth, keeping in mind their own unique family background and prior academic preparation. It is clear that a Posse Scholar’s journey to college is atypical when compared to a traditional or well-resourced student’s journey. Epstein et al. suggested Posse Scholars measure success through the steady progress they make in the academic journeys but well-resourced students measure success through academic performance. Posse Scholars frame their success based on continuous improvement and acknowledge family and prior academic background in helping them build resiliency.

There is much room for additional Posse empirical work to emerge. Continued development of this body of work, especially in the focused area of sense of belonging, will assist in understanding the program and providing science-backed research that supports its highly celebrated outcomes and success. Solidifying more research that focuses on the Posse Foundation’s successful model and students that achieve highly will benefit both the foundation, collegiate stakeholders, and the public at large.

**Sense of Belonging**

Belonging is an important component for all individuals in the multiple spheres and communities they occupy. Individuals can feel a connectedness or belonging to others and groups. Yuval-Davis (2006) stated, “In a concrete or abstract way; belonging can be an act of self-identification or identification by others, in a stable contested or transient way . . . belonging is always a dynamic process” (p. 199). Belonging is transactional in nature and engages an individual with their environment and the other actors in it.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) defined the belongingness hypothesis, sharing:

Human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships. . . . Furthermore, a great deal of human behavior, emotion, and thought is caused by this fundamental interpersonal motive. (p. 497)
Similarly, Maslow (1954) included belongingness in the hierarchy of needs in the middle of the pyramid. Indeed, belonging is an essential and instinctual human desire that influences individual behavior and motivation.

To belong, an individual must have a fully constructed identity. Identities are individualized but can be shaped inadvertently or purposefully by historical contexts (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Identities contribute to an individual’s positions in society and the spaces they occupy. Historically, people of color have endured racism, stereotypes, and other challenges by members of society that has the potential to disrupt and impair their sense of belonging in communities.

One specific community in which sense of belonging is particularly important for individuals is the educational community (Osterman, 2000). By feeling part of the community at their school or college, a student experiences sense of belonging. McMillan and Chavis (1986) identified sense of belonging as “the feeling, belief and expectation that one fits in the group and has a place there, a feeling of acceptance by the group” (p. 10). In addition, McMillan and Chavis proposed that sense of belonging consists of four distinct elements: (a) membership, (b) influence, (c) integration and fulfillment of needs, and (d) shared emotional connection. Each element contributes to a students’ own sense of belonging.

More specifically related to collegiate communities is school belonging or “connectedness to one’s school or perceived school membership . . . includ[ing] individuals’ perception of fitting in and belonging with others at the same institution” (Pittman & Richmond, 2008, p. 344). It is important for students to gain membership and connection to their institution so they build sense of belonging, which positively influences student outcomes.

**Sense of Belonging and Social and Academic Integration**

It is difficult to discuss sense of belonging without acknowledging its connection and relationship to academic and social integration. Academic and social integration are two integral components of
Tinto’s (1993) college student departure framework and can be closely related to sense of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Academic integration is related to institutional commitment. Braxton et al., (2014) note, “the greater the student’s level of academic integration, the great the level of subsequent commitment to the goal of college graduation” (p.74). A brief discussion of Tinto’s (1993) framework is necessary to further establish the importance of sense of belonging for all students, but especially students of color attending PWIs.

Tinto (1993) based the model of student departure on sociologist Durkheim’s theory of suicide (McCubbin, 2003). Durkheim’s theory posits that individuals who have sufficient social support networks and successfully integrate into society are less likely to die by suicide (McCubbin, 2003). In Tinto’s (1993) model, the act of dying by suicide is replaced with the decision a student makes to leave their institution and drop out of college. Like Durkheim’s theory, Tinto reasons students drop out because they fail to successfully make meaningful connections with others and integrate fully into the campus community (McCubbin, 2003). However, there are many reasons a student may not find success in fitting into their school.

Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure is longitudinal in nature and comprises of multiple components and characteristics that contribute to a student’s decision to stay or depart from their institution. Initial characteristics are broken down by preentry attributes, including: (a) family background, (b) skills and abilities, and (c) prior schooling. Next, Tinto outlines goal commitments, including: (a) intentions, (b) goal and institutional commitments, and (c) external commitments. Family background includes social status, values, and expectations (McCubbin, 2003). Once a student enters the university, institutional experiences in the academic system exist, including academic performance (i.e., formal experiences) and faculty/staff interactions (i.e., informal experiences). Components of the academic system influence students’ levels of academic integration. In addition, institutional experiences also include the social system with extracurricular activities (i.e., formal experiences) and
peer group interactions (i.e., informal experiences), which impact students’ social integration and influence their decision to persist. Ultimately, Tinto (1993) believed it is the successful—or unsuccessful—level of integration (e.g., academic and social), in addition to reshaping of goals/commitments, that contribute to and influence a student’s decision to depart or persist.

Integration is “the extent to which the individual shares the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides by the formal and informal structural requirements for membership in that community or in subgroups of it” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2016, p. 560). Specifically, “rewarding encounters with the formal and informal academic and social systems of the institution presumably lead to greater student integration in these systems and thus to persistence” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2016, p. 560). Once integration increases, students’ commitments are strengthened and lead to greater persistence.

Additionally, Bean and Eaton (2001) suggested integration includes an important psychological component. The psychological response a student has when interacting with their college environment is “a sense of academic and social integration” (Bean & Eaton, 2001, p. 77), which influences attitudes like institutional fit. Consequently, institutional fit affects attitudes, behaviors, and intentions like choosing to persist. Thus, integration in the context of institutional fit closely relates to sense of belonging and influences important student success outcome measures like persistence.

In considering Tinto’s (1993) model, McCubbin (2003) stated a student’s “view of their own higher education experience is obviously all-important in their decision to drop out” (p. 2). One important facet of a student’s view of their college experience is their perception of fit and belongingness. If a student views themselves as not belonging or does not harbor feelings of sense of belonging, this sentiment could shape their departure or persistence behaviors and intentions. Student perceptions related to fit and their college experiences influence their feelings of sense of belonging which has the potential to shape student attitudes and college outcomes.
Although Tinto’s (1993) model remains paramount in the literature, it does not exist without criticism. Specifically, Gumport (2007) contested the model does not consider marginalized students who wrestle with the task of integrating into college environments dominated by cultures, values, and beliefs separate from their own. Marginalized student populations include minority students and nontraditional students (e.g., adult learners, commuters). Rendón et al. (2000) believed the model is not representative of marginalized students because of the way integration is defined as a student harboring the same normative attitudes as the rest of the campus community. Underrepresented and minority students, in many instances, are at odds with their community for a variety of reasons. Thus, underrepresented and minority students do not necessarily share nor wish to share dominant campus views and ultimately elect to loosely integrate themselves with the community.

**Tinto’s Model Revised**

In response to scholars’ criticisms, Tinto (1993) defended his model, stating, “Conformity is not always associated with integration” and “the concept of ‘membership’ is more useful than ‘integration’ because it implies greater diversity of participation” (p. 106). Regardless, many scholars have revised Tinto’s model to account for the limitations the original model presents. Scholars (e.g., McCubbin, 2003; Rendón, 1994; Tierney, 1999) have taken issue with Tinto’s model, arguing it is not inclusive of nontraditional students. Because the number of nontraditional students continue to increase on college campuses, it is vital retention models reflect their unique circumstances and attributes.

Importantly, several scholars have proposed alternative models and approaches for students of color, a key student population Tinto’s model inadequately considers (Rendón, 1994; Tierney, 1999). Guiffrida (2006) presented a new model and approach with the goal of “enhancing its cultural sensitivity” (p. 453). Rendón (1994), Tierney (1999), and Guiffrida (2006) created models that better accommodate unique student populations, like students of color, commuter students, and transfers.
These students begin college with barriers that prevent them from optimally integrating into their new college or university environment.

For example, Rendón (1994) acknowledged flaws in Tinto’s model of student departure when considering students of color. In Tinto’s (1993) model, full integration in college can only be achieved when the student separates themself from their original home community to fully immerse themself in the college environment. Full immersion is problematic for students of color due to the phenomena of biculturalism and socialization that students of color experience, as identified by Rendón (1994). Nora and Cabrera (1996) also found minority students’ attachment to parental figures and others back home facilitated smooth transitions to college. In addition, parental support aided in positively influencing students’ successful integration, academic performance, and commitment to persist. Students of color rely on support from family back home to be successful and dismissing these important support networks is unproductive for their success in college.

Although all students must “navigate, negotiate, and traverse many and multiple spaces and context during their college career” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 43), students of color typically must do this with more care and attention paid to differing cultural environments. To maintain ties to their communities at home and attempt to integrate to a new campus community, students of color must balance both worlds and the demands posed by each at school and home simultaneously. This balancing act hinders what Tinto (1993) identified as full integration in the collegiate environment. Berger et al. (2012) noted, “Successful retention of underrepresented students may require that campuses move away from the assumption that successful retention requires integration as a one-way street” (p. 29). That is, disengaging from integration back home might not be in the best interests of students of color.

Finally, Rendón (1994) took issue with Tinto’s (1993) model because it places most of the onus of the departure decision on the student rather than on the institution. Rendón argued it is in part the university’s inability to serve and support students of color that this student population commonly
leaves school. The institution must also take responsibility and be held accountable. According to Rendón, the college or university surely plays a role in the student’s ultimate decision; thus, they must also receive more accountability and acknowledgement in the student departure model.

Another scholar who took issue with Tinto’s (1993) model is Tierney (1999), who created a theoretical model that centers on cultural integrity, capital, and habitus. Tierney saw Tinto’s model as one that would require a minority student to die by cultural suicide if they elected to disengage from their original culture to assimilate with the culture and norms of their university. Instead, Tierney (1999) suggested students of color attending a PWI be encouraged by their institution “to affirm, rather than reject, who they are” (p. 89). Tierney (1999) rationalized that if colleges and universities affirmed the identities of students from diverse backgrounds, they would feel more welcome and motivated to persist. Tierney might suggest it is the university’s responsibility to create an environment where students feel a sense of belonging.

As previously discussed, research by Museus et al. (2018) on culturally engaged campus environments supported Tierney’s (1999) recommendation for universities to create campus environments that are supportive and affirming of students’ unique cultures. Schools successful in creating culturally engaged campuses enjoyed elevated sense of belonging felt by both White students and students of color (Museus et al., 2018). Museus et al. demonstrated the positive outcomes campuses can achieve when administrators work to form and create a culture beneficial for all students.

**Tinto’s Model of Student Motivation and Persistence**

Related to the college student departure model, Tinto (1993) created another model that specifically incorporated sense of belonging. Tinto (2017) suggested students’ decision to persist is widely due to their individual level of motivation. Furthermore, Tinto suggested a student’s motivation is malleable and influenced by both positive and negative student experiences. To illustrate this theory, Tinto created a model of student motivation and persistence that depicts specific student college
experiences, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perception of curriculum as factors that impact motivation, which ultimately influence persistence behaviors.

Sense of belonging is an important student experience that influences student motivation. Tinto (2017) attributed a student’s ability to achieve sense of belonging as one form of commitment that helps solidify a student’s membership to a group, such as communities in a college, both large and small. Establishing commitment and a connection to the campus community is more indicative of positive persistence behaviors. Commitment is an important first step in solidifying goal motivation.

Although the engagement piece is important, students’ perceptions of the interactions and engagements they participate in with others on campus is most crucial to students (Strayhorn, 2012). Tinto (2017) stated, “It is not engagement per se that drives sense of belonging, as it is students’ perceptions of their belonging that derives from their engagements” (p. 261). That is where and why the concept is called sense of belonging. A student’s perceptions and feelings toward something are powerful and can motivate and influence behavior whether or not the sensing aligns with reality.

Tinto (2017) saw sense of belonging as something that is influenced by a “complex array of forces” (p. 261), including a student’s own perception of self, perceptions held by others, and compilation of previous experiences. One important environmental factor students of color contend with is campus climate, which can oftentimes be negative and hostile when attending PWIs. The campus environment itself can be a powerful and complex force that impacts a student’s ability to feel positive sense of belonging while attending school in a homogeneous campus community.

**Sense of Belonging Definition**

Although many different definitions of sense of belonging exist, the definition used for this study is the one provided by Strayhorn (2019):

Sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)
Sense of belonging is multifaceted and dynamic. Strayhorn (2019) identified seven core elements that are integral to sense of belonging, including:

1. Sense of belonging is a basic human need;
2. Sense of belonging is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior;
3. Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance:
   (a) in certain contexts,
   (b) at certain times, and
   (c) among certain populations;
4. Sense of belonging is related to, and seemingly a consequence of, maturing;
5. Social identities intersect and affect college students’ sense of belong;
6. Sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes;
7. Sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change. (pp. 29–40)

The seven elements solidify sense of belonging as an important developmental process that all individuals strive to achieve in order to live meaningful lives in the communities in which they engage and interact.

**Strayhorn’s Model**

Strayhorn’s (2019) model (see Figure 2) is based on Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs. As such, all humans require the fulfillment of specific physiological and psychological needs to function. These needs begin at the most basic level (e.g., food) and progress to the increasingly complex (e.g., self-actualization). In Maslow’s pyramid, love and belongingness are situated in the middle tier, and needs are met through a cycle proposed by Maslow. To achieve fulfillment in progressively more sophisticated need areas, the most basic needs must be met first.
Similarly, Strayhorn (2019) suggested college students possess a need to belong when navigating and negotiating the various spaces they occupy while attending school. Spaces are fluid and include both off-campus and on-campus environments. Upon achieving basic needs, students may pursue sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2019) stated, “The emergence of that need in various college contexts drives students’ behaviors and perceptions” (p. 41). Students who achieve sense of belonging typically find more success in college.

Akin to Maslow’s (1954) model, love and belongingness falls in the middle of the pyramid. Strayhorn (2019) was adamant about how influential student sense of belonging is to their college experience, characterizing this as “a determinant of students’ behaviors” (p. 42). Students who achieve
sense of belonging enjoy great rewards, including “achievement, growth, persistence, and happiness” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 42). Students who are not successful in feeling sense of belonging at their school can feel like a failure and experience other negative student outcomes. Indeed, sense of belonging is important for students to strive for so they may have the most rewarding and fulfilling college experience.

One element the model does not address is academic match. That is, the model does not account for the instance of a student attending an institution that does not have their desired major. Presumably, if a student attends a school that does not offer the degree program in which they are interested, their motivation and interest in integrating in the campus community may be negatively impacted.

**Sense of Belonging Significance**

As previously established, sense of belonging is important for all humans, including college students. Sense of belonging has been shown to positively impact a variety of student success outcome measures, including retention and persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007). Furthermore, students’ involvement in social and academic spheres of campus life influences sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2008b). Specifically, students’ ability to interact in meaningful ways with individuals on campus (e.g., students, faculty, administrators, and staff) affirms they are part of the campus community (Strayhorn, 2019). It is important for students to feel seen, heard, and needed by others while traversing through the college experience. Sense of belonging is integral to this process.

Although it is important for students to feel a strong sense of belonging in multiple environments across campus, a single classroom instructor can influence sense of belonging in profound ways in the academic setting. T. M. Freeman et al. (2007) found first-year students who believed their professors encouraged classroom participation positively influenced their sense of belonging. In addition, students who believed their instructors to be enthusiastic, friendly, and helpful also
contributed to their sense of belonging. Most importantly, students’ sense of belonging perceptions established in one class positively influenced sense of belonging across their entire university experience. The findings from the research by T. M. Freeman et al. illustrate how integral a singular academic experience facilitated by a faculty member can be in fostering sense of belonging for students.

Students who feel as though they do not belong can experience alienation, which Strayhorn (2019) referred to as sense of belonging’s “chilly cousin” (p. 29). Strayhorn (2019) suggested, “The absence of belonging is marginalization, isolation, or alienation from others” (p. 29). Failure for a student to feel a sense of belonging while in college can have devastating consequences, including academic underachievement, poor well-being, poor psychological adjustment, dissatisfaction with college, and college departure (Gummadam et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2019). Because of the potential negative outcomes students may experience, it is important for colleges to focus on mechanisms and measures that promote sense of belonging for all students and especially those who are most vulnerable, like students of color at PWIs.

Fostering sense of belonging early in a student’s college career can have lasting positive effects. Murphy and Zirkel (2015) found that, for students of color, their perceived sense of belonging in the first few weeks of college predicted their academic achievement in the 2nd semester. Murphy and Zirkel’s finding indicates establishing sense of belonging early in a student of color’s academic career impacts their academic performance later in their 1st year of college. In addition, students who do not feel as though they belong early on are more likely to depart from their institution (Hausmann et al., 2007; O’Keefe, 2013). In summary, it is crucially important for all students and students of color to establish sense of belonging early in their college careers so they are positioned for future success.

One positive student outcome that sense of belonging can influence is retention. Scholarly literature has emerged in the field including linkages between sense of belonging and retention (Hausmann et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2019). Sense of belonging plays an important role in retaining
students who are at risk of dropping out (O’Keefe, 2013). It has been well documented that, as of 2019, students of color continue to graduate at lower rates than their White counterparts; thus, they are considered a very high, at-risk of dropping out population of students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). Thus, sense of belonging is critical for all students, especially students from specific populations.

Peer and faculty support, two elements characterized as contributing to sense of belonging, also contribute to student’s intention to persist and influences actual retention behavior (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). Among the most imminent research on sense of belonging has been a study conducted by Hausmann et al. (2007). Hausmann et al. found social experiences and supports established in the 1st semester of school influenced students’ initial sense of belonging sentiments. Moreover, sense of belonging has been found to decline in the 1st year of school. Finally, sense of belonging was positively associated with a student’s commitment to their school and intention to return. Hausmann et al. demonstrated the importance for university administrators and faculty alike to foster sense of belonging in the critical 1st year of a students’ college career.

In addition to positive outcome measures like retention, sense of belonging has been shown to increase the psychological and emotional experiences of college students. Pittman and Richmond (2008) found student sense of belonging increased students’ perception of social acceptance and perceived academic ability while lowering levels of internalizing behavioral challenges. For students who are unable to establish a strong sense of belonging, the sting of rejection influences their decision to depart from their institution (O’Keefe, 2013). Thus, sense of belonging is integral in an adolescent’s collegiate experience and personal development. More importantly, sense of belonging has significant consequences related to student well-being.
**Sense of Belonging and Students of Color**

Although sense of belonging is important for all students, “it takes on heightened importance in contexts where individuals are inclined to feel isolated, alienated, lonely or invisible” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 19). More importantly, sense of belonging is magnified when individuals are engaged in environments or experiences where they feel unsupported or feel like the other (Anderman & T. M. Freeman, 2004). For example, Hurtado and Carter (1997) found students in their study “perceive themselves as marginal to the mainstream life of a campus” (p. 324). For example, students of color attending PWIs can struggle with sense of belonging because they are part of the minority, not the majority of the racial makeup for their campus community. Unsurprisingly, Havlik et al. (2017) found feelings of otherness are exacerbated for first-generation college students of color attending PWIs; these students must grapple with intersectionality (i.e., assuming two identities) that are poorly viewed by their White classmates and instructors.

Sense of belonging is especially important for Black students in their 1st transitional year in college. Strayhorn et al. (2015) found Black male students who were confident in their transition to school reported higher levels of sense of belonging once enrolled at their institution than students who were less confident with their transition. Strayhorn et al. suggested a relationship between confidence building and sense of belonging. Both factors appear necessary for Black students to find success in their 1st year on campus. Johnson et al. (2007) also found smooth social transitions influenced levels of sense of belonging for students of color and White students. Both Johnson et al. (2007) and Strayhorn et al. (2015) showed how seamless transitions position students for success.

In addition to research focusing on Black students, researchers (e.g., Johnson et al., 2007; Museus et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2008b) have studied sense of belonging among Latinx students, another important student of color population. Strayhorn (2008b) found sense of belonging was more important to Latinx students at PWIs than for their White counterparts. Strayhorn’s (2008b) finding supports
Strayhorn’s (2019) third core element of sense of belonging: “Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance (a) in certain contexts (b) at certain times, and (c) among certain populations” (p. 34). More importantly, Strayhorn’s (2008b) work highlights how significant sense of belonging is for certain students, especially for Latinx students.

Sense of belonging is an integral component to the success of underrepresented students on college campuses. In one study conducted by Newman et al. (2015), Black male community college students “perceived racial–gender stereotypes held by faculty members, faculty validation, and faculty student engagement are significant predictors of respondents’ perceptions of belonging with faculty members” (p. 564). Newman et al. illuminated how impactful faculty–student engagement can be for a student. Newman et al. (2015) asserted, “Faculty members’ actions in both formal and informal settings has a tremendous impact on how Black men perceive their educational setting” (p. 574). Faculty–student interactions are especially important for Black students at PWIs because they oftentimes feel isolated due to the lack of representation of Black faculty members (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). Furthermore, faculty interactions with Black male students influence their feelings of sense of belonging. Faculty members must be culturally sensitive to students and acutely aware of how their actions and engagement affects learners.

Allen (1992) suggested the lack of a critical mass of Black students, faculty, and administrators influences Black students’ inability to form a sense of connection and community on campus. Allen believed institutions should recruit more Black students at PWIs so students can form supportive and meaningful social networks. Social groups assist students in building community and sense of belonging. Critical mass also influences Black student participation in campus programs and events. Any opportunity for students to be more socially integrated into the campus environment is positive because it can influence outcomes like persistence (Nora et al., 1996). University leaders should strive to recruit and retain faculty and staff members who are diverse and represent all students they serve.
Finally, García and Garza (2016) suggested both academic and administrative personnel interactions positively affect Latinx male community college students’ sense of belonging. Specifically, García and Garza found when Latinx male students form an academic relationship with faculty members and administrative personnel, their sense of belonging is strengthened, which has a positive impact on persistence. García and Garza concluded it is important for both faculty members and administrators to forge relationships with Latinx students to increase their sense of belonging, which can lead to positive gains in retention.

Related to faculty support, Baker (2013) found that, for Black female students and Latinx students on selective college campuses, having a faculty member that matched their own race positively influenced students’ academic performance. Baker’s finding demonstrates the importance and significance for both faculty members and administrators to forge relationships with students of color to increase their sense of belonging, which can lead to positive gains in retention and academic achievement. Although Baker (2013) did not focus on sense of belonging, she indicated:

A supportive college environment increases sense of connection to the college environment, which increases academic success. Faculty of color present on college campuses may provide the knowledge and support that can make an impact on students of color and having courses with faculty of color be an indication to the students that African Americans and Latinos are a valued part of the college environment (on other words, an indication that they “belong”). (p. 646)

It is imperative students make connections with individuals both inside and outside the classroom, especially in environments where there is a lack of diversity. Ideally, some of the most effective connections students can make are with individuals of color or those who look like them and have experiences like their own. Faculty of color can provide students a sense of connection and belonging. A faculty–student connection has the potential to influence academic outcomes for students of color.

In addition to positive interactions with faculty members and administrative personnel, students can also influence sense of belonging for other students. Strayhorn (2008a) found Black male students attending PWIs benefited from engaging with diverse peers (i.e., students of different racial
backgrounds than themselves). Interestingly, this outcome also extended to White students at PWIs. Strayhorn’s findings demonstrate both Black and White students benefit from interacting in meaningful ways at PWIs because both groups of students experience sense of belonging gains.

**Sense of Belonging and Students of Color at Liberal Arts Colleges**

Due in part to their traditionally small size—among other factors—liberal arts colleges typically lack racial diversity; these private, elite, selective institutions more often attract affluent, White students (Dong, 2019). As such, students of color who attend liberal arts colleges can struggle with finding their place and sense of belonging. Dunlap et al. (2009) highlighted the need for Black students to connect to their environment to create opportunities to both give and receive in the liberal arts college community. The transactional give and take relationship Black students establish in their community echoes Strayhorn’s (2019) sentiment that sense of belonging is both relational and reciprocal in nature. Importantly, Strayhorn (2019) stated, “Under optimal conditions, members feel that the group is important to them and that they are important to the group” (p. 4), which is a concept especially important for Black students attending liberal arts colleges.

Although liberal arts institutions are typically small and intimate in student population size, offering more opportunities to create community, they have paradoxically been found to be more challenging environments for students of color (M. L. Stevens, 2007). Strayhorn and Devita (2009) found Black men attending liberal arts schools experienced less instances of cooperation with their peers and classmates. Strayhorn and DeVita cited cultural incongruity as a potential reason for this finding. The consequences of Black men at liberal arts institutions being less likely to engage in cooperative interactions with peers is troubling because cooperation is considered an institutional good practice that contributes to student success outcomes. Cooperation is an important skill for students to develop and practice in any group, organization, or community in which they are members.
Liberal arts colleges’ size can often magnify lack of student body diversity. Sinanan (2012) found many Black males attending one liberal arts institution could count and identify each student of color on their campus. Lack of diversity heightened Black students’ feelings of not belonging in their social environment and caused them to harbor “feelings of social and personal isolation” (Sinanan, 2012, p. 4). Feelings of isolation transcended students’ entire college experience from in the classroom to inside the residential halls. To combat feelings of isolation, Black students sought out other Black students for support and acceptance. This behavior validates Tatum’s (1999) work that Black students seek out other Black students in educational settings to bond and support each other’s shared racial experience.

**Sense of Belonging and the Posse Program**

The second goal of the Posse Foundation (2018) is “to help these institutions build more interactive campus environments so that they can be more welcoming for people of all-backgrounds” (para. 2). Interestingly, through this goal, the foundation suggests it is the responsibility of institutional leadership to create community, as opposed to the students’ responsibility, which is the stance Tinto (1993) held. The foundation acknowledges racial disparities on their selected Posse partner institution campuses. The intent of the program is not for students to study and attend school with their cohort in a vacuum; rather, Posse Scholars are encouraged and required to build community outside of their own group through informal and formal avenues. Scholars are expected to engage and integrate themselves into their college’s community fabric.

Sense of belonging is important for students to successfully integrate into the social and academic spaces of their institutional communities. There is no empirical literature that addresses Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging at their partner institutions. Because partner schools are predominantly White, selective, prestigious institutions, most scholars do not match the racial profile of the traditional student on their campus (Posse Foundation, 2021b). Strayhorn (2008a) showed establishing sense of
belonging for students of color attending PWIs is difficult. Understanding Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging at their campus sites is important research to pursue.

**Summary**

Students of color attending PWIs navigate their campus community and experience sense of belonging in different ways than their White counterparts (Strayhorn, 2019). It is well documented that students of color must overcome more obstacles and challenges in their quest of feeling a sense of belonging while attending PWIs. Sense of belonging is strengthened through positive relationships and interactions with peers, academic personnel, and administrative personnel (Newman et al., 2015; Strayhorn, 2019; Wood & Harris, 2015). Sense of belonging influences important student success outcome measures like retention, academic motivation, and achievement (T. M. Freeman et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2019). Finally, students of color experience higher levels of sense of belonging while attending HBCUs than their peers attending PWIs (Allen, 1992; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Prior to this study, there was no empirical research on the sense of belonging of students participating in the Posse Foundation program on participating Posse partner institution campuses. In addition, it is unclear as to how and to what extent Posse Scholars feel a sense of belonging with members of the campus community with and beyond their Posse cohort.

The purpose of this study was to explore Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging at a Posse partner institution to understand if they felt sense of belonging at all and if so, did it extend beyond the Posse cohort model. This study makes a unique and significant contribution to higher education sense of belonging research. It will increase the understanding of Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging attending their Posse partner institutions. Findings from the study will help inform administrators of the experiences of diverse students attending PWIs. It was the intention that, by conducting this study, I would be able to propose solutions to ensure scholars were successfully integrated at their institutions.
and felt levels of sense of belonging with their institution that contributed to positive student success outcomes like retention.

**Research Questions**

The first research question was: In what ways do Posse Scholars exhibit sense of belonging to their institution as compared to non-Posse scholars? This question established whether Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging to the school at which they were enrolled. I also hoped to understand how, where, and in which campus spaces and environments and with whom, did Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging, if at all. Scholars may not have felt any levels of sense of belonging at their institutions. If this was the case, I wanted to know how and why they did not feel integrated or that they belonged in their campus communities.

The second research question was: In what ways do Posse Scholars exhibit sense of belonging beyond their Posse cohort? By asking this question, I attempted to understand if students who were underrepresented (i.e., students of color) attending a college that is predominantly White felt a sense of belonging to their institution beyond their Posse cohort. Allen (1985) identified three challenges Black students must overcome when attending predominantly White campuses: (a) academic, (b) cultural adjustment and social isolation, and (c) racism challenges. The challenge that most directly links to sense of belonging is social isolation; students who experience low levels of sense of belonging are more socially isolated than students who have positive social experiences.

Posse Scholars come into their Posse partner institution in a cohort of 10–12 students (Posse Foundation, 2021a). Posse Scholars spend a great deal of time together as a cohort socially and academically through structured and unstructured experiences held by the foundation and the institution they attend. This question focused on how scholars’ social interactions with members outside of their cohort impacted their levels of sense of belonging.
Chapter 3 provides an overview of the research methods used in conducting the study. First, the chapter includes a discussion of the conceptual framework, which is sense of belonging. The chapter explains in detail the institution and participant selection process, identifies the methodological research approach, and explains the study design. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of key threats. This chapter provides the reader a comprehensive overview of how the data were collected and presented for Chapter 4.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The purpose of this study was to understand sense of belonging of students of color attending a predominantly White institution (PWI). Specifically, I wanted to understand the feelings of sense of belonging of students participating in the Posse Foundation program as they navigated their college experience while attending their Posse partner liberal arts institution. To draw more meaningful conclusions about this group of students, I also interviewed non-Posse scholars attending the same institution as the Posse Scholars to make comparisons between the two groups.

The research methodology I employed assisted in answering the two research questions:

- Research Question 1: In what ways do Posse Scholars exhibit sense of belonging to their institution as compared to non-Posse scholars?
- Research Question 2: In what ways do Posse Scholars exhibit sense of belonging beyond their Posse cohort?

The research questions are important because more students of color, especially Latinx students, are attending a variety of different types of institutions of higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). As such, it is inevitable that students of color will elect to attend PWIs. Understanding the sense of belonging of students of color at PWIs—especially liberal arts colleges, which is the focus of the study—is critical. Selingo (2020) asserted, “When it comes to the diversity of elite college campuses, students of color and first-generation students receive the most attention these days” (p. 216). As colleges begin to welcome more students of color to their campus communities, institutional leadership must keep the well-being and experiences of students of color in the forefront of their minds as they strive to create campuses that are welcoming and inclusive for all students.

Newfound interest and attention placed on students of color is well-warranted because the Common App released data for the Fall 2021 admissions cycle that revealed selective, private institutions had experienced a 20% increase in applications from first-generation students and a 24%
increase in applications submitted by underrepresented students (Schwartz, 2021). Increases in application submissions could be explained by the fact many institutions became test optional due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Testing has been linked to favoring wealthier students and giving poorer students a disadvantage with respect to this traditionally mandatory application component (Bauer-Wolf, 2021; Mattern et al., 2016). As applications from underrepresented students increase, more students may also be admitted, which causes increased enrollment of students of color on selective college campuses. Student affairs and academic affairs professionals must understand the experiences of students of color and underrepresented students so they can support their success.

Secondly, the research questions are of interest to higher education scholars and practitioners. Abelson (1995) defined interestingness, an important component of sociological research, as a study that “must have the potential, through empirical analysis, to change what people believe about an important issue” (p. 13). This study meets the interestingness criteria because the research questions posed had not been considered by researchers before. Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging has not been studied previously by researchers, and the data and findings uniquely add to the greater body of sense of belonging literature. Furthermore, the experiences of students of color at PWIs is an important issue and should be explored more fully.

**Conceptual Framework**

The key construct I used in this study was sense of belonging. I used Strayhorn’s (2012) sense of belonging framework and definition because it most closely related to my questions. A full discussion of this framework can be found in Chapter 2. Strayhorn (2019) defined sense of belonging, stating:

Sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

Furthermore, Strayhorn (2019) outlined six core elements of sense of belonging (see Chapter 2). The two elements I used to form interview instrument questions and guide data analysis were:
1. “Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance (a) in certain contexts, (b) at certain times, and (c) among certain populations” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 34).

2. “Social identities intersect and affect college students’ sense of belonging” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 36).

The two core elements listed were related to my study’s research questions because I was interested in understanding in which spaces (e.g., in their cohort versus College A as a whole) Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging. With Core Element 3, Strayhorn (2019) suggested context and time are important driving factors that influence the extent to which sense of belonging becomes important for a student. One purpose of this study was to uncover in which environments sense of belonging was most salient for Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars and to what extent they felt a sense of belonging. Strayhorn’s Core Element 5 was also important because Posse Scholars, like other students, assume multiple identities while attending college. Understanding how they negotiated multiple identities was important to me.

Students can achieve sense of belonging in various social spaces on campus including the micro (e.g., the classroom) and the macro (e.g., the campus at large; Strayhorn, 2019). Posse Scholars can become a part of different communities inside and outside of their Posse cohort. I conducted the study at a liberal arts college in the northeast United States that placed great emphasis on creating community in the various social spaces on campus (i.e., both inside and outside the classroom).

The focus of the study was understanding students’ feelings of sense of belonging. I obtained information on student sense of belonging by conducting one-on-one interviews using online web conferencing software (i.e., Zoom). I recorded and transcribed sessions for accuracy and completeness. Pertinent information gathered from interviews were analyzed, synthesized, and are presented in Chapter 4.
Institution and Participant Selection

This section discusses the educational setting where my study took place and how I selected participants. In this section, I identify this study as a case study and introduce College A. In addition, I describe participants I selected and explain my sampling process. Finally, I provide a statement about how I cared for human participants.

Case Study

The research plan and procedure closely resembled that of a case study. Case studies are most appropriate when considering a single unit of analysis (Abbott, 2014). Specifically, I examined feelings of sense of belonging of students who identified and held membership in a specific organization, the Posse Foundation. Students in the organization were called Posse Scholars and were members of a Posse cohort at their college. Posse Scholars navigate their college environment and experience in their Posse cohort on their college campus. Additionally, I also examined feelings of sense of belonging of non-Posse scholars. By employing a case study approach, I could better “show how mechanisms or aspects of social reality interrelate in a particular case” (Abbott, 2014, p. 213). Data are presented in narrative form, which is a common way to organize information obtained from a case study (Abbott, 2014).

Furthermore, to address the first research question, I engaged in a comparative case study approach. That is, I compared the experiences of two different groups of individuals—Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars—in one bounded system (i.e., College A). The two participant groups that were the subject of this research project were Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholar students of color. Posse Scholars were students attending College A through the Posse Foundation. An overview of the Posse Foundation, its scholars, and the selection process can be reviewed in Chapter 1. Non-Posse scholars were participants who shared several similar characteristics to Posse Scholars but were not part of the Posse Program at College A. The characteristics of Posse Scholars were they were students of color
whose home residence was in an urban setting. Posse Scholars were aware they were participants in the Posse program selected by the Posse Foundation.

The purpose of this research project was to understand Posse Scholars’ feelings of sense of belonging while attending a liberal arts institution. I believed it would be more compelling to engage in a comparative analysis by including Posse Scholars’ experiences to individuals who were like them in some ways but were not part of the program. Hence, I introduced the non-Posse scholar group of participants.

Although the two participant groups were different, the educational setting was the same for each group. In case study research, there are two levels of sampling, and the first is selecting the case (Merriam, 1998). In this research project, the case was the institution, College A. In selecting a research location (i.e., institution) for this study, there were several criteria I wanted to meet so my research questions could be fully answered. The selection criteria were important because there was no research that examined sense of belonging of students in the Posse Program at liberal arts institutions. The first requirement of the institution was it needed to have an active Posse Program on its campus with a Posse cohort for each class year (i.e., first-year, sophomore, junior, and senior years). Furthermore, the institution needed to be selective in nature (i.e., admits fewer than 50% of its applicants). Next, the college needed to be characterized as a liberal arts institution that was also a PWI. As with most liberal arts colleges, the location site needed to enroll less than 3,000 undergraduate students. After carefully reviewing the list of Posse Partner Institutions, I selected College A—which is a pseudonym—to be the site institution for the study.

**College A**

I collected all data from one specific site location, College A. I selected College A based on familiarity and convenience. I knew this institution had a robust Posse Scholars program of more than 10 years at the time of the study. I also believed the leadership at this institution would be supportive of
the research study as indicated by a review of the institution’s mission, values, strategic plan, and written sentiments of senior administrators on campus.

College A was a small liberal arts institution located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States and was accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. It was a private liberal arts college with an undergraduate student enrollment of 2,096 in the fall of 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). As of 2022, about 67% of its students were White, 9% were Latinx, and 4% were Black. In addition, 10% of students were nonresident alien, 6% were Asian, 3% were two or more races, and 1% of students’ race/ethnicity were unknown. No Native Hawaiian or American/Alaskan Indian students were reported to attend College A.

College A enrolled nearly 2,100 undergraduate students at the time of the study. About 55% of students were men and 45% were women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). About 99% of students at College A attended college full time, and 1% were part-time students. The demographic characteristics of College A were consistent with many liberal arts schools in the northeast United States, specifically being overwhelmingly residential and small in student population size. Typically, more women attend college in the United States, including liberal arts colleges. A possible explanation as to why there were more male students on College A’s campus was that although the school was a liberal arts school, it also uniquely had engineering programs, and more men typically major in science, technology, engineering, and math fields of study (Cimpian et al., 2020).

College A was considered very selective because it admitted 43% of its applicants (CollegeBoard, n.d.-a). College A had a yield rate of 21% (i.e., 21% of admitted students enrolled in the college). The midrange of SAT scores were: 600–800 for reading and writing, 620–740 for math, and 1220–1420 total. About 80% of applicants scored between 600–800 in the reading and writing section, but 84% of applicants scored between 600–800 in the math section. The midrange ACT score of an applicant to College A was 27–32, and 58% of applicants scored between a 30–36 on the exam. From 2007 to the
writing of this study, College A had been test optional for nearly 15 years, but roughly 74% of applicants still submitted standardized test results. Finally, 63% of applicants were in the 10th percentile of their high school class and 86% were in the top quarter. ACT and SAT statistics illustrate the selective nature of College A. It was important to share this information because I was interested in the sense of belonging of students of color attending a selective institution.

With respect to the racial makeup at College A, information published by the National Center for Education Statistics as of the summer of 2022, 67% of students were White, 4% were Black, 9% were Latinx, 6% were Asian, 1% identified as race/ethnicity unknown, and there were no Native American students reported at College A (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). About 99% of students were under the age of 24. About 32% of attendees were from the state in which College A was located, but 61% were from out of state, including international students. About 91% of students who began studying at College A in the fall of 2020 returned to the college in the fall of 2021. Students graduated from College A at a rate of 85% within 150% of “normal time” (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). The 85% retention rate is reflective of students who began studying at College A in the fall of 2015. The six-year graduation rate for students by race/ethnicity was: (a) 93% Black, (b) 78% Latinx, and (c) 87% White. Interestingly, Black students graduated at a higher rate than their White and Latinx counterparts, which was inconsistent with national trends (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The Posse Foundation reports Scholars across all campuses graduate at a rate of 90% (Posse Foundation, 2021g).

It was important to provide a snapshot of College A because it provided context for the study. The previously described demographic information clarified who the students were attending College A. The information provided supported the notion that College A was a selective PWI. Furthermore, the portrait of College A was one that depicted a homogenous student population, or one that was not racially or ethnically diverse. It was important to understand the experiences of students of color at
College A. Namely, this study aimed to understand the feelings of sense of belonging of Posse Scholars attending College A.

The initial outreach I conducted at College A was positive and leadership was receptive to the project at the outset. I conducted a preliminary meeting with the vice president for student affairs and dean of students about my study in the middle of September in 2021. I provided this individual with a comprehensive overview of the study, including pertinent documents: (a) Institutional Review Board (IRB) paperwork, (b) letter of cooperation for the study (see Appendix A), (c) participant solicitation email (see Appendix B), (d) informed consent form from my host institution (see Appendix C) and (e) the informed consent form for College A (see Appendix D). The vice president for student affairs and dean of students signed appropriate documents and I submitted them to IRB for approval. Per the Human Subjects Review Committee at College A, the project was qualified for exemption, provided the vice president of student affairs and dean of students was willing to act as a liaison/investigator on the study, in addition to serving as the coprincipal investigator. Appendix E outlines this agreement and the terms of the exemption.

Participants

The second level of sampling in case study methodology is choosing individuals to interview in the case (Merriam, 1998). I interviewed both Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars attending College A. I interviewed eight Posse Scholars. Posse Scholar participants were admitted to the institution through different means than the typical criteria; they had been selected by the Posse Foundation and the admissions officials at College A based on their leadership qualities and potential for success. Many participants were from disadvantaged and underrepresented backgrounds and all were students of color (e.g., Black students, Latinx students). All Posse Scholars were from urban communities. The city that partnered with College A was located in New England, which meant all Posse Scholars attending College A were from the same city. Participants were of traditional college-going age, which was 18–22
years old. I collected additional participant demographic and descriptive data using a participant intake questionnaire (see Appendix F).

In addition to interviewing Posse Scholars, I interviewed eight non-Posse scholars who were also students of color, excluding Academic Opportunity Program (AOP) and Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) students, who also attended College A. Like the Posse Scholars, the non-Posse scholar participants were students of color and hailed from metropolitan cities, just as Posse Scholars did. The non-Posse scholar participants were traditional college-age students, 18–22 years of age. I ensured there was at least one participant who identified as a man, one who identified as a woman, and at least one student who was first generation. I wanted to include these criteria to provide variety and variation of human participant perspectives.

Data were collected by conducting structured and semistructured open-ended interviews with participants. Students received an invitation to interview (see Appendix G). During the interviews, I followed the student interview protocol (see Appendix H), and participants had the opportunity to share their college experiences as it related to sense of belonging. Participants were permitted to skip questions they did not feel comfortable discussing. I protected participant anonymity when reporting the data and communicated this clearly through two informed consent documents participants were required to sign prior to their interview (see Appendices C and D). I debriefed participants at the end of each interview (see Appendix I) and followed up with a transcript and recording of the session so they could verify the accuracy of the information they provided and clarify anything necessary (see Appendix J). More information on care for human participants and research design are discussed in the following sections.

**Sampling**

The vice president for student affairs and dean of students connected me to a Posse coordinator at College A who provided the contact information for Posse Scholars. In selecting Posse Scholars, the
sampling frame I worked from was approximately 40 students attending College A. The chosen sample frame was approximately 2% of the college’s overall student population (i.e., roughly 2,100 students). The sample frame size was derived from the fact College A had four Posse cohorts, one for each class year. I only considered interviewing Posse Scholars who were enrolled in the 2021–2022 academic year, excluding scholars who graduated in the spring of 2021 and beyond. Graduated students had already completed their college experience, and I anticipated it would be difficult to locate these individuals for interviewing.

I was able to gain a list of non-Posse scholars who met the established criteria by also working with the College A Posse coordinator. Eligible students were all students who identified as BIPOC. During the initial recruitment process, non-Posse scholar participants also received the participant solicitation email (see Appendix B), and the participant intake questionnaire (see Appendix F).

In selecting participants for each group (i.e., Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars), I engaged in purposeful sampling, a sampling type commonly used in qualitative and case study research. Purposeful sampling is defined as “select[ing] people or sites who can best help us understand our phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 206). Because I was investigating feelings of sense of belonging of students participating in the Posse Scholar’s program and students of color who were not part of the program, I intentionally selected these groups of students as potential participants. Furthermore, I was specifically interested in understanding Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging; therefore, I reached out to Posse Scholars who completed the participant intake questionnaire (see Appendix F) who identified as individuals of color.

As with any type of sampling technique, purposeful sampling has benefits and drawbacks. Because participants shared several unique characteristics (i.e., they were all students of color), one advantage to purposeful sampling was that I was able to make sounder generalizations from
observations and data. Making sound generalizations was important because the main purpose of the study was to understand feelings of sense of belonging of these unique groups of college students.

As with any study, certain biases have the potential to inadvertently enter the research. Selection bias is a type of bias that can compromise the integrity of a study because it eliminates randomization, which is important when selecting a sample (G. King et al., 1994). Purposeful sampling inherently created a biased sample, or a sample where all students at College A were not equally likely to be selected to interview for the project. However, G. King et al. (1994) stated it is quite uncommon for qualitative researchers to employ a randomness approach to sampling. Furthermore, G. King et al. (1994) confirmed random selection is unnecessary for “small-n research” (p. 18). Because I only planned to interview a group of 16 participants with very specific attributes, random selection for the research study was not possible. However, purposeful sampling was required to best answer the research questions.

I reviewed participant intake questionnaires and selected participants who met the predetermined criteria. When random selection is abandoned, certain biases may become evident. For example, one disadvantage to purposeful sampling is it allows for the potential introduction of selection bias. G. King et al. (1994) defined selection bias as:

> When we, knowing what we want to see as the outcome of the research (the confirmation of a favorite hypothesis), subtly or not so subtly select observations on the basis of combinations of the independent and dependent variables that support the desired conclusion. (p. 128)

The specific type of purposeful sampling I used was homogenous sampling. In homogenous sampling, I explicitly selected a site (i.e., College A) and individuals (i.e., Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars) who shared unique and defining characteristics (Creswell, 2012). As previously outlined, I selected a research site based on important criteria that best aligned with the research questions I was looking to answer. As such, I selected Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars who identified as students of color because
this racial ethnic identifier was a central component of my research questions. I needed to be mindful of bias and aware of the direction of the bias at play (G. King et al., 1994).

**Care for Human Participants**

There are several ethical concerns that must be addressed when engaging in research that involves human participants. The first concern is gaining participants’ trust. It was important for me to earn participants’ trust to ensure interviews were productive, and participants felt comfortable enough to provide honest and accurate information. Furthermore, gaining trust is especially important when working with vulnerable populations, which include individuals of color (Creswell, 2012).

I worked to gain participants’ trust through several means. I was transparent about my role as an interviewer and researcher. I made my intentions clear and explained the interview purpose and the overall purpose of the study. Because I was an alumna of College A, I shared this information with students so they felt more comfortable in answering my questions. I also disclosed my own racial and ethnic identity (i.e., Latinx) as a means of being fully transparent. Disclosing my alumna status and racial and ethnic identity assisted in establishing a rapport with participants. More information about this decision is discussed in my statement of positionality.

Additionally, I gained consent in multiple ways. Prior to each individual interview, all participants were required to complete two informed consent forms (see Appendices C and D). Participants also provided consent at the start of their recorded interview session by clicking continue after reading the statement: This meeting is being recorded. By continuing to be in the meeting you are consenting to be recorded (Zoom, n.d.). Each meeting was passcode protected so only the participant and interviewer could enter the meeting space. Using a passcode ensured the interviewer and participant were the only two individuals who had access to the meeting. I created a unique meeting for each interview as opposed to reusing a meeting room for multiple interviews. I made my research intentions clear by following an interview protocol (see Appendix H) with each participant. After each interview, I sent each
participant a copy of the interview transcript and recorded session and invited them to edit or clarify any information they shared with me during the initial interview session (see Appendix J). Participant video recordings and transcripts are stored on my laptop and will be destroyed after 3 years, per IRB guidelines.

With any interview process, confidentiality is of the utmost importance. I ensured participants’ identifying information remained anonymous and provided pseudonyms for each interviewee when composing the final report. Every participant was assigned an alias. Prior to the interview, students were encouraged to change their Zoom name if they wanted to because this name was displayed during the meeting.

Care for human participants is paramount in qualitative research. I was committed to gaining participants’ trust, providing informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and being transparent about my role and the purpose of the study. By abiding by these ethical guidelines and standards, I conducted interviews that were respectful to participants and the research process.

**Methodological Approach**

I studied the lived experiences of a group of students who had some similar characteristics related to their racial and ethnic identity, place of origin (i.e., home city), educational background, and preparation for college. Participants’ lived experiences were data points I included in the final analysis. After transcribing the interviews, I worked on capturing and describing the essence of the experiences of Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars as they related to sense of belonging while attending College A. The participants I interviewed were placed in an environment different from their home environments. In addition, they were part of a community of individuals who were racially and ethnically different than themselves. The relevant experiences I focused on when interviewing participants was sense of belonging.
Taking a qualitative approach, I attempted to illuminate “the different facets of a gem” (D. W. Britt, 1997, p. 144). Understanding sense of belonging of students of color could only be uncovered through engaging in conversations with participants to understand their experiences. Researchers engaging in a qualitative data collection approach “take the meaning of the material as something for them to discover, rather than as an unproblematic given” (Becker, 2017, p. 40). Using a qualitative approach, I listened to participants’ words and drew meaning from what they had to say.

The imperative qualitative framework this research project best aligned with was social constructivism. Creswell (2003) explained the framework centers on the idea that “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live. . . .They develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (p. 8). The goal of the researcher immersed in this type of inquiry is “to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Creswell, 2003, p. 8). Interactions are principally important in social constructivism. Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars shared their lived experiences with me as they related to their feelings of sense of belonging. Sense of belonging is a social, interactive experience and can be studied through guided conversations and interviews. I employed a literary style of writing and included many narratives so participants’ experiences could be brought to light.

**Research Design**

The first step in formulating a research design is to identify potential participants. At the time of the study, College A had four Posse cohorts, one in each class year. The institution has graduated dozens of cohorts since it partnered with the Posse Foundation beginning in the fall of 2006. I obtained a list of all eligible Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars who were enrolled at the institution, at the time of the study, from a designated contact.

Upon receiving the list of all Posse Scholars attending College A, I asked the vice president of student affairs and dean of students to send out a participant solicitation email (see Appendix B) inviting
Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars to take part in the study. The solicitation email included an IRB approved monetary incentive (i.e., a $20 Amazon e-gift card) to increase participation rates. Interested participants were asked to read, sign, and submit two informed consent forms: (a) College A’s Form (see Appendix D) and (b) University at Albany’s Form (see Appendix C). College A is the study campus while the University at Albany is my home campus. Although the email was from my designated contact at College A, the message included my contact information.

Once the informed consent forms were obtained, I followed up with each potential participant inviting them to complete a participant intake questionnaire (see Appendix F). I included a link to a Google Form that contained the questionnaire. The participant intake questionnaire included demographic questions and questions related to students’ college experience (e.g., academic and extracurricular activities). In total, 16 potential participants completed the questionnaire including eight Posse Scholars and eight non-Posse scholars. One factor that may have motivated students to complete the questionnaire was the advertised monetary incentive provided for individuals who fully participated in the study. I reviewed each completed form to ensure individuals were eligible to participate in the study. Then, I selected students, using the criteria outlined above, and invited them via email to participate in an interview (see Appendix G). After receiving replies from participants, I scheduled and confirmed participant interviews and sent participant confirmation emails (see Appendix K).

**Interviews**

I was the sole individual who conducted 45–60-minute interviews over Zoom between November 2021 and March 2022 using my Zoom account supported by my university. The timeframe for conducting interviews was extremely long as I had difficulty recruiting participants. I completed only three interviews in November and the other 14 occurred in February and March. I confirmed participants’ scheduled interviews with an email (see Appendix K) that included the Zoom link, meeting passcode, and meeting number. The online web conferencing platform, Zoom, was most suitable for
conducting interviews for several reasons. First, this platform was secure and allowed me to provide each participant with a unique password and meeting number to enter the interview session. As the host, I admitted participants from a virtual waiting room into the Zoom meeting space. Including a waiting room ensured the interview session was secure and no one else could participate other than the correct individuals.

Second, Zoom was practical because I was able to record each session and upload the recordings to the cloud. I obtained appropriate participant consent to record the interviews using Zoom’s features. Recording the interview allowed me to review each session later during other steps of the compilation and collection of the data process. Zoom also automatically transcribed interviews, which was beneficial; however, I edited and verified each transcription. Another feature of Zoom that was helpful was the save chat feature.

Finally, interviews were conducted over Zoom to ensure the safety and health of participants and myself during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Although participants were on campus, it was advised by IRB offices at my host institution and College A to interview virtually. To best mirror a traditional face-to-face interview, I required participants to turn their cameras on during the Zoom interview.

Primary Instrument

I asked all student participants a series of questions broken down into three parts. Part A was an introduction to gather basic information and verify responses from the participant intake questionnaire. Each question in Part B was separated into two subquestions, as they related individually to College A as a whole and the Posse Foundation. Posse Scholars answered both subquestions in Part B (i.e., 1a and 1b) but non-Posse scholars only answered subquestions in Part A (e.g., 1a, 2a). Part C did not contain subquestions; rather, questions in this part sought to gather a deeper understanding of students’ sense of belonging. Both Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars answered each question in Part C.
In Part B, Questions 1 and 2 were derived from Hurtado and Carter (1997), but Questions 3, 4, and 5 came from Johnson et al. (2007). These questions addressed both Research Questions 1 and 2 because they asked students if they felt a sense of belonging to their institution and the specific program with which they were affiliated, which was the Posse Foundation.

All questions in Part C were derived from two of Strayhorn’s (2019) core elements of sense of belonging. The two elements considered were Core Elements 3 and 5:

3. “Sense of belonging takes on heightened importance (a) in certain contexts, (b) at certain times, and (c) among certain populations” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 34).
5. “Social identities intersect and affect college students’ sense of belonging” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 36).

With Core Elements 3 and 5, Strayhorn (2019) posited sense of belonging was dependent on contexts, individuals, times, and social identities. The questions I asked in Part C helped uncover when, where, and with whom, including parts of their own selves, Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars felt a sense of belonging while attending College A.

Additional Data Sources

Case study research often requires collection and evaluation of several sources of data (Creswell, 2012). Although the Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholar interviews were the main sources of data for the project, I also collected data from two other important institutional sources, College A and the Posse Foundation. Data from College A and the Posse Foundation included reviewing and analyzing published documents, policies, and content found on websites of both the Posse Foundation and College A and conducting an interview with an administrator at College A who was affiliated with the campus’ Posse Program.

The first source of data was the Posse Foundation. Specifically, I wanted to interview one member from the Posse staff office from the city associated with College A’s Posse program because Posse Scholars attending College A were exclusively from this city. Appendix L outlines the list
of prepared interview questions for the Posse Foundation administrator. With help of a contact at College A, I identified several potential Posse Foundation administrators who were appropriate to contact to obtain additional information about the Posse Foundation and its Posse Scholars.

The purpose of interviewing an employee of the Posse Foundation who worked with College A was to learn more about the goals, mission, and vision of the foundation, in addition to understanding more about Posse Scholars and how they integrate into their campus communities. Although the foundation outlined three goals on their website, I wanted to understand more deeply the goals and purpose of the program from a Posse Foundation administrator’s perspective.

In addition to better understanding goals, I was also interested in how the foundation measured student success. The third goal of the foundation pertains to student completion; however, there are other student outcome measures and success metrics (e.g., time to degree completion, student engagement, academic performance) that are important in higher education. Consequently, I wanted to understand how the Posse Foundation more broadly measured student success.

Through interviewing a Posse Foundation administrator, I sought to better understand Posse Foundation policies. One specific policy was understanding what happened to a Posse Scholar if they stopped out. That is, if a scholar takes a semester or full academic year off, I was interested in knowing how their absence affected their membership in their Posse cohort. I was interested in whether they became members of the cohort below them or if they rejoined their original group of Posse peers. In addition, I wanted to understand the foundation’s housing policy for Posse Scholars; specifically, I was interested in whether upper-class scholars were permitted to live off campus or whether they remained on campus if they were part of the program. The policies in which I was interested may have seemed procedural in nature, but they had the potential to influence Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging, so they were important to discuss in detail.
Finally, little demographic information about Posse Scholars was available on the foundation’s website, so I sought to obtain more data pertaining to scholars by interviewing a Posse Foundation administrator. I wanted to focus on understanding more about the Posse Scholars who attended College A. Ultimately, I was unable to interview a Posse administrator because no one was willing to participate in the study due to policies outlined by the foundation.

I included information gathered by interviewing an administrator employed by College A closely engaged with Posse Scholars at College A. Appendix M outlines the series of interview questions for the College A Posse administrator. The institution had a Posse coordinator who acted as a liaison between the Posse Foundation and the college and provided support for Posse Scholars. I was able to interview this Posse coordinator who worked with all Posse cohorts at College A.

Interviewing an administrator at College A involved with the Posse Foundation was an important component of the research project because it provided me a better understanding of how the program worked at the site institution, in addition to understanding the unique needs, observations, and challenges Posse Scholars experienced at College A. Interviewing the College A Posse coordinator provided the micro or fine-grained information important in understanding and contextualizing information gathered from Posse Scholar student interviews.

Data Collection

Data from all three sources previously discussed (i.e., Posse Scholar participants, non-Posse scholars, and College A Posse Foundation coordinator) were collected by conducting one-on-one interviews. I asked semistructured, open-ended questions so I could obtain authentic and “unconstrained” (Creswell, 2012, p. 218) experiences from participants. When appropriate or necessary, I asked probing questions to gain more information from interviewees. I solicited participation via email (see Appendix B for student participants; see Appendix N for the Posse Foundation administrator
participants; see Appendix O for the College A administrator participant; see Appendix P for the administrator participants).

I employed the same interview protocol for each participant, dependent on their role. Each interview began with a brief welcome and overview of the study, including a reading of the protocol statement (see Appendix H for student participants; see Appendix L for the Posse Foundation administrator participants; see Appendix M for the College A administrator participant). Student participants introduced themselves and verified the information they previously submitted on the student intake questionnaire (see Appendix F). All participants were asked the same set of questions previously outlined according to their participant type (i.e., student or administrator).

For this project, I was the only person who conducted participant interviews. In addition, with respective to the data collection and analysis phases, I solely coded, evaluated and analyzed the data. After compiling the data, I identified and coded themes from interview transcripts. Next, I evaluated the descriptive data. Finally, I analyzed data to arrive at meaningful conclusions, which allowed me to weave narratives and themes together in accordance to answering each of the research questions.

Data Analysis

Analyzing data requires many steps. I edited the Zoom automated transcriptions after reading and watching the recording to verify all information was accurately captured. I followed Creswell’s (2012) six steps for analyzing qualitative data, including:

1. organize existing data to be analyzed,
2. evaluate and code data,
3. create a clearer picture of data by parsing out detailed descriptions and themes (i.e., attempt to identify phenomenon),
4. communicate major findings by providing compelling narratives,
5. find meaning in data as they relate to theoretical framework and research questions,
validate data with participants.

Qualitative data analysis is inductive, iterative, and interpretive in nature (Creswell, 2012). Analyzing data required me to make sound inferences of the information I collected. Furthermore, my data analysis process was oftentimes cyclical and repetitive. Finally, I was required to use my best judgement when interpreting the data and findings. Because data analysis relied on using judgment, the analysis process became somewhat subjective depending on my own approach, discipline, and treatment of the data.

I organized the data in a meaningful, systematic way. As a qualitative researcher, I analyzed the data in a way that corresponded and helped answer the research questions (Creswell, 2012). One way I analyzed the data was through providing descriptions. Creswell (2012) stated, “Developing detail is important, and the researcher analyzes data from all sources” (p. 247). For example, I describe College A in more detail in Chapter 4. College A was treated as a data source, and as such, I gathered additional information about the institution from the college website, important documents (e.g., strategic plan, student handbook), my interview with the Posse coordinator, and other resources. By fully describing College A, I could better answer the question: “What is this place like?” (Creswell, 2012, p. 247). Understanding what College A was like was hugely important because I was interested in understanding feelings of sense of belonging of students attending this liberal arts college. Fully understanding the environment is important in answering the research questions.

Like College A, the Posse Foundation itself also served as a data source. I introduced the foundation in Chapter 1 but provide a deeper analysis of the foundation in Chapter 4. Posse information came from the foundation’s website and published reports, information that contributed to creating a comprehensive picture of the foundation. It was important to completely understand the Posse Foundation because it was responsible for cultivating and recruiting students who attended College A.
In addition to describing College A and the Posse Foundation, I provided descriptive details for each of the participants. I ensured confidentiality was maintained and used pseudonyms when presenting important participant demographic information in the figures in Chapter 4. Tables found in Chapter 4 include important information for each participant, such as their ethnicity/race and gender. Demographic information helped paint a picture of the participants in the study.

Another way I analyzed data was by coding them. Coding data required me to review each interview and transcript and parse out important ideas from interviews. Then, I identified specific, pertinent text segments and gave these important pieces of information a code or phrase (Creswell, 2012). Codes helped encapsulate many facets of the topic. Some codes required additional attention and subcoding. One type of code that was relevant to this study, suggested by Creswell (2012), was setting and context, which are discussed in Chapter 4.

The next way I analyzed data was through extracting themes. I identified and formalized themes from information I gathered during the data collection phase (Creswell, 2012). Themes came to light once I reexamined codes I created at the outset. Themes are “similar codes aggregated together to form a major idea in the database” (Creswell, 2012, p. 248). There are a number of different themes that can be found in data sets: ordinary, unexpected, hard-to-classify, and major and minor themes (Creswell, 2012).

I presented themes through narrative discussion, a typical qualitative data representation technique (Creswell, 2012). Narrative discussion requires researchers to summarize their findings from data they analyzed. I summarized my findings by providing specific quotes and excerpts from interviews that best supported relevant codes, themes, and descriptions I determined after analyzing data. I focused the narrative discussion on specific themes and interconnected themes (Creswell, 2012).
Triangulation and Trustworthiness

There were several strategies I used to increase internal validity (Merriam, 1998). One step was through triangulation, which relates to the incorporation of “multiple investigators, multiple sources of data, or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings” (Merriam, 1998, p. 204). I focused on examining multiple sources of data and multiple methods.

The primary method of data collection was through conducting semistructured, open-ended interviews with participants, including students and administrators. In addition to interviews, I examined documents and materials found on each organization’s website to confirm the information shared during participant interviews was accurate and consistent.

Related to triangulation, I engaged in member checking. Member checking involves sharing the collected data with individuals who originally supplied them (Merriam, 1998). For this study, I invited participants to listen to their recorded interview and read the complete transcript and chat messages from the session. Participants were asked to clarify or amend information they shared during the interview. Engaging in this process better ensured the data were accurate.

Finally, Merriam (1998) suggested researchers clearly state and clarify their personal “assumptions and worldview” (p. 205) at the start of engaging in a research project. Stating personal assumptions and worldviews was important because researcher bias could impact data analysis and collection. Although biases always exist, it is important to acknowledge them because they could potentially impact how the researcher engages in their research projects. To satisfy Merriam’s suggestion, I provide a statement of positionality in the next section.

Statement of Positionality

My interest in and inspiration for the study stemmed from my own personal racial identity and undergraduate collegiate experience. I identify as Latinx, and attended and worked at a diverse research one public university at the time of the study. In my capacity as a student and administrator, I interacted
with a diverse student body, including many students who possessed similar characteristics and identities to those of the student participants I interviewed.

In addition, I made it clear to all participants that I attended College A as an undergraduate student, although not as a member of the Posse Program. The purpose of this study was to understand sense of belonging of students of color attending a liberal arts college through the lens of a specific access program. This research had not yet been conducted, and it seemed appropriate that it was carried out by a researcher of color.

For the findings of this study to be credible and trustworthy, I made an explicit effort to acknowledge I had to eliminate my own assumptions and beliefs, to the best of my ability, and fully commit to exclusively evaluating and analyzing the experiences, feelings, and sentiments of participants I interviewed. I did not approach this project with the preconceived notion that students of color (i.e., Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars) had feelings of sense of belonging in a specific direction (i.e., positive or negative) while attending College A. I was interested in understanding each participant’s own experiences and illuminating their stories into a compelling analysis and narrative.

My identity and relationship to College A may have inadvertently influenced the lens at which I conducted my study’s data collection process and evaluated the findings and results. First, while collecting data, I was able to establish trust with participants by explicitly sharing my connection to College A and my identity. This was important so that participants felt comfortable sharing sensitive information and experiences during the interview process. With respect to findings, several experiences participants shared with me were congruent with some of the experiences my BIPOC peers and I had while also attending College A. I experienced similar things to participants because like many participants, I too identify as Latinx. Because of my positionality, I was able to acknowledge this with participants.
Key Threats

With any research project, key threats must be identified and considered. Possible threats include: (a) reliability, (b) validity, (c) researcher bias, (d) generalizability, and (e) care for human participants. The first threat that must be assessed is reliability. Reliability is defined as “applying the same procedure in the same way will always produce the same measure” (G. King et al., 1994, p. 25). If applying the same procedure produces the same measure, replication is a possibility, and “replication of research findings is crucial” (Abelson, 1995, p. 11). This study must be replicable by other researchers. In addition, I needed to ensure participants provided data and information that were reliable and accurate. Issues related to reliability included participant dishonesty, participant distrust, and researcher bias.

Participant dishonesty and distrust refers to participants who provide false accounts or dishonest information during their interviews. I worked to gain participant trust, so they felt comfortable sharing their authentic and honest accounts and lived experiences. I invited participants to verify their responses by giving them the opportunity to review transcripts of their accounts to ensure I transcribed their responses accurately and authentically (i.e., member checking). Member checking helped ensure the information participants shared was accurate and reliable. Another way I gained participant trust was by concealing their identities; I used pseudonyms when discussing participants and their interview responses in the study’s findings.

Another factor related to reliability that must be considered is researcher bias. I both attended as a student and worked as an employee at College A and needed to be mindful of any bias my previous roles may have brought to the study. D. W. Britt (1997) lamented, “All reality is subjective” (p. 16), and my experiences with College A were rooted in my own reality. Furthermore, D. W. Britt (1997) cautioned that “where you sit determines what you see” (p. 34). As a researcher who had a unique relationship with the site institution and a strong understanding of the Posse Program, I needed to attempt to put my own biases and preconceived notions aside and approach the data collection process as impartially
as possible. Approaching the data collection impartially was important to maintain the integrity of and respect for the data collection process.

Issues related to validity must also be considered. Validity relates to “measuring what we think we are measuring” (G. King et al., 1994, p. 25). One challenge related to validity is context. It was important the information participants shared was taken in context and a clear picture of their experience was situated in a transparent context. The transparent context was important to understand pertinent participant background information and ensure it was made known so participants’ accounts could be better understood and appreciated. Establishing context was important for sound conclusions to be drawn from information participants shared in their interviews. Because this project was partially a comparative case study project, multiple cases were introduced and analyzed. Having more cases potentially increases both external validity and generalizability (Merriam, 1998).

Like researcher bias, sampling bias is another validity concern, and discussed in the sampling section. As previously discussed, the sampling frame for participants in this study was small. Specifically, the Posse Scholar student sampling frame was approximately 40 individuals. Although 40 individuals seems like a small sample, D. W. Britt (1997) stated, “Many interesting phenomena cannot—or perhaps should not—be studied with large samples” (p. 7). I arrived at 16 total student participants—eight Posse Scholars and eight non-Posse scholars—which provided enough data and information to make informed conclusions.

Generalizability is another key threat that requires attention. Generalizability or generality refers to “the breadth of applicability of the conclusions” (Abelson, 1995, p. 12). One question that must be considered is, “Does what we have learned in one context help us make sense out of what is occurring in another?” (D. W. Britt, 1997, p. 156). One answer to D. W. Britt’s question is that references and predictions could be made, but research must be conducted to reach a definitive conclusion. It was important to appreciate the findings of this study only in the context of the study because applying
sweeping generalizations would be inappropriate and unwarranted. Data and conclusions gained from this study could only reasonably be generalized to the type of selected student participants attending similar type Posse partner institutions. The Posse Foundation partners with several institution types; however, the research I conducted could only be loosely generalized to small, liberal arts colleges that reflect the nature of College A. Posse Scholars’ experiences can only be generalized, if at all, to other scholars or students who fit the scholars’ profile of attending similar institutions.

Finally, care for human participants must be considered. Sense of belonging conversations were at times sensitive in nature for students. It was important I respected students’ feelings and experiences. Although individual conversations were not anonymous, I ensured students the findings reported in the final document would not include their identifiable information. Maintaining participant anonymity throughout all stages of the project was critical. Furthermore, I provided a clear interview protocol (see Appendices H, L, and M) for all participants so they knew what to expect before, during, and after the interview session. The interview protocol included language specifying participants were able to stop at any point in time during the interview they deemed necessary, and that they would debrief at the close of the interview session. I also provided participants with a post-interview email (see Appendix I) after completing their interview session.

Summary

This chapter restated the two research questions and how they were addressed through the qualitative research design. The chapter explained in detail the way I selected participants and the institution. In addition, this section provided details on my methodological approach and research design. Triangulation, trustworthiness, statement of positionality, and key threats were also presented. The research design reflected that of a case study and the case (i.e., College A) was identified and described in detail. Key threats were also discussed. The next chapter, Chapter 4, includes results and
data obtained from the study. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion, suggestions for future research, and policy recommendations for practitioners.
CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This study focused on understanding the sense of belonging of students of color attending a liberal arts college. Although research on this topic has been conducted before, no research existed related to students participating in the Posse Foundation, a national leadership scholarship program for students of color. I compared experiences and sentiments of Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars as they related to sense of belonging. The purpose of this research study was to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways do Posse Scholars exhibit sense of belonging to their institution as compared to non-Posse scholars?
2. In what ways do Posse Scholars exhibit sense of belonging beyond their Posse cohort?

Treatment of Data

I conducted 16 student interviews (i.e., eight with Posse Scholars and eight with non-Posse scholars) and one administrator interview using the Zoom video conferencing platform between November 2021 and March 2022. All interviews were recorded, and the transcriptions were saved to my computer. To mirror the look and feel of a face-to-face interview, participants were asked to keep their cameras on during the interview.

I listened and watched each recorded interview and made edits to the computer-generated transcript, as appropriate. I also removed any identifiable participant information from each transcript, and each participant was assigned an alias. I sent each participant the recorded interview video file and a copy of the transcript. All electronic communication with participants that occurred before and after the interview session used my university authorized email address.

Participants were invited to review the interview materials and provide me with any edits they deemed necessary. I provided each participant 1 week to complete this task, if desired. If the participant did not respond to my email in 1 week of their interview, I assumed the participant was satisfied with
the interview’s content and the participant did not have any edits to share with me; this assumption was outlined explicitly in the follow-up email I sent to participants that included the recorded materials. Only one participant provided edits to the interview; the edit pertained to clarifying the participant’s hometown, which was misspelled on the transcript.

All communications on the study between myself and participants occurred via my university assigned email address. Per Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol, all participant information (i.e., interview recordings, transcripts, questionnaires) will be stored for 3 years before destroying the materials. I communicated information about the storage process clearly over email with participants.

**Data Coding**

This section describes the different levels of coding I used to analyze data. Because qualitative data analysis is iterative in nature, I engaged in both first- and second-cycle coding. Full descriptions and examples of types of codes at each level are explained in the following subsections.

**First-Cycle Coding**

In total, I created 101 codes—25 main (i.e., parent) codes and 76 sub (i.e., children) codes, based on the entire data set in the first cycle of coding. In first-cycle coding, I engaged in several coding practices and iterations. First, I coded each transcript using attribute coding, also known as descriptive coding. Descriptive coding requires the researcher to provide preliminary descriptive information for each data set (i.e., transcript; Saldaña, 2013). Descriptive coding “provides essential participant information . . . and contexts for analysis and interpretation” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 70). The specific attribute codes I created for each participant transcript included: (a) participant alias, (b) class year, (c) grade point average, (d) gender, (e) ethnicity, (f) first-generation status (i.e., yes or no), (g) major, (h) minor (if applicable), and (i) Posse Scholar status (i.e., yes or no).

All transcripts were then loaded into the data analysis software NVivo 12 for analysis. Transcripts were uploaded into two separate participant folders: Posse and non-Posse. Each transcript
was classified based on previously determined attribute codes. I read and coded each transcript twice in NVivo 12. I created some codes in NVivo 12 prior to reading each transcript (e.g., “Choose College A again?”), because I knew the codes would be important pieces of data to capture, based on my participation in each interview, because the codes were directly related to questions asked in the interview. I also created codes while reading transcripts as different patterns emerged (i.e., code switching). In the initial round of coding, I engaged in several different types of coding techniques described in the following paragraphs.

Structural coding was one coding technique I used. Structural coding directly related to the research questions at hand and was effective and appropriate for transcription analysis (Saldaña, 2013). The two research questions for this project centered on sense of belonging. Thus, I created two parent codes: (a) Yes—sense of belonging and (b) No—sense of belonging. Each parent code included the subcodes of people (e.g., administration), places (e.g., classroom), organizations (e.g., Posse), and individuals (e.g., Posse Scholars), where they felt or did not feel a sense of belonging.

Another type of coding I used was descriptive coding. Descriptive coding summarizes a passage from a transcript into a short phrase or single word (Saldaña, 2013). One example of descriptive code I identified was identity. Identity included passages from transcripts where students discussed their identity and how it contributed to their engagement with others and their surroundings at College A.

An additional coding technique I used was in vivo coding. In vivo coding uses a direct quote or phrase from the participant (Saldaña, 2013). One in vivo code in this study was being Black . . . is hard. In vivo coding was important because it allowed me to “honor the participant’s voice” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91). Honoring a participant’s voice is especially necessary when engaging with marginalized and vulnerable populations of participants. Participants in this study were students of color and fell under this category.
Emotion coding was another type of coding I found in the data. Emotion coding relates to emotions or experiences reported by participants (Saldaña, 2013). Emotion coding was appropriate for this study because it “explore(s) intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 105). One emotion code uncovered in the subcodes was feeling safe (i.e., I feel safe or I do not feel safe). In this code, I documented participants’ accounts of feeling or not feeling safe on the campus of College A.

Another coding type I employed was values coding. Values coding represents “a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing [their] perspectives or world-view” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 110). An example of a values code in the data set was leader–leadership, which indicated a participant’s focus on being a leader in the College A community. A subcode for this code was create change—make a difference, which emphasized why participants wanted to embody a leadership role at College A representing one of their core values.

I also engaged in evaluation coding. Evaluation coding is appropriate for case studies and focuses on evaluating a program to make improvements for the future (Saldaña, 2013). An evaluation code in the data set was recruit and enroll more students of color. This code was a subcode of action steps College A should take to increase sense of belonging for students of color. The action steps code suggests there were not many students of color, and the college should engage in recruitment efforts to increase this population of students on campus.

Finally, I used process coding. Process coding is also known as action coding and often encompasses “simple observable activity” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 96). Process coding can also speak to important dynamics at play, depending on the research study. One example of a process code in this study was holding the door, which related to observations by participants about who held the door for whom at College A. Many participants indicated the dynamics of door holding may be related to race.
As previously discussed, coding is iterative in nature and requires multiple rounds of analysis and additional coding (Creswell, 2012; Saldaña, 2013). Importantly, it is crucial to engage in multiple rounds of coding to increase the trustworthiness and accuracy of observations (Saldaña, 2013). Saldaña (2013) reasoned, “Code mapping . . . documents how a list of codes gets categorized, recategorized, and conceptualized through the analytical journey” (p. 198). As such, I engaged in two iterations of code mapping. The first iteration included carefully reviewing the list of all initial codes and subcodes. A thorough review of codes and subcodes allowed me to parse out any patterns, similarities, and other interesting observations among codes.

Once all initial codes were determined, I engaged in the second iteration of code mapping by developing second-level codes and categories from primary codes, where appropriate. Developing second-level codes is called subcoding (Saldaña, 2013). Although several subcodes were identified during the first cycle of coding, more emerged after the initial coding was completed. For example, with the code microaggression, I created the following subcodes: (a) hair, (b) identity, (c) language–speech–accent, (d) mistaken name, (e) racial slurs, and (f) other. Subcodes under microaggression represented the types of microaggressions participants reported experiencing. From here, I continued to recode data and began looking for emergent themes.

Second-Cycle Coding

After completing first-cycle coding, I progressed to second-cycle coding. Second-cycle coding allows for more sophisticated and refined organization and analysis of the data (Saldaña, 2013). With this stage of coding, the aim is to “develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual and/or theoretical organization” (p. 207) from codes created in the first cycle. In this stage, I recoded the data, deriving six parent codes. Next, I reviewed all subcodes of each parent code to decipher major categories and themes.
I used components of Tinto’s (1993) theory of college departure, discussed in detail in Chapter 2, when theming the data (Saldaña, 2013). Theming the data provides an opportunity for “categories to emerge from the data” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 177). Specifically, I considered factors that fostered and hindered sense of belonging using components of the institutional experiences section of Tinto’s (1993) theory of college departure. I identified and used Tinto’s components of institutional experience for data analysis and sense of belonging based on experiences and interactions participants encountered in the institutional setting. Tinto’s components contained both academic and social systems.

The academic system includes both academic performance (i.e., formal experiences) and faculty/staff interactions (i.e., informal experiences). The social system includes extracurricular activities (i.e., formal experiences) and peer group interactions (i.e., informal experiences). Factors that fostered and hindered sense of belonging encompassed all four components of the academic and social systems. A discussion of these findings is found in subsequent sections of this chapter.

**College A Documents**

College A was a private, liberal arts college with an undergraduate student enrollment of 2,096 as of Fall 2021 (National Council for Educational Statistics, 2022). About 67% of its students were White, 9% were Latinx, and 4% were Black. In addition, 10% of students were nonresident alien, 6% were Asian, 3% were two or more races, and 1% of students’ race/ethnicity were unknown. No Native Hawaiian or American/Alaskan Indian students reported attending College A. Additional demographic, academic, and admissions information on College A was discussed in Chapter 2.

I reviewed several documents and sources to provide additional context and understanding of College A related to community building, diversity and inclusion, and sense of belonging. Documents included the college’s strategic plan and student handbook. In addition to the strategic plan and student handbook, I also reviewed pieces of information, including pertinent campus websites and emails sent to campus community members from the college’s senior leadership.
Diversity and inclusion were important pillars of the campus community at College A, as evidenced in the college’s 2020–2025 strategic plan. The first goal of the institution’s plan pertained to enhancing and engaging community members’ diverse perspectives and experiences (College A, 2020a). Specifically, one pillar of the plan’s first goal centered on welcoming, creating, and nurturing a culture of respect of all community members.

The strategic plan also indicated the college was committed to strengthening sense of belonging of all community members, stating: “Develop among all members of the [College A] community a sense of belonging” (College A, 2020a, p. 13). In addition to sense of belonging, the college was focused on recruitment and retention of faculty, staff, and students from diverse backgrounds. Recruitment and retention of individuals from diverse backgrounds was in alignment with Goal 3 of the Posse Foundation (2021a): “To help these institutions build more interactive campus environments so that they can be more welcoming for people from all backgrounds” (para. 2).

In addition to having explicit belonging statements in the strategic plan, College A’s commitment to diversity and inclusion was evidenced by new initiatives championed by the college’s president, himself, a person of color. The president communicated the new initiatives via emails to the campus community. On June 15, 2020, College A’s senior leader sent an email to faculty, staff, and students announcing the creation of the Presidential Initiative on Race, Power, and Privilege (College A, 2020b). One focus area of the initiative was increasing support for individuals of color. The creation of the Presidential Initiative on Race, Power, and Privilege initiative demonstrated leadership at College A emphasized and valued diversity and inclusion and that the school was committed to supporting students of color. Posse Scholars were overwhelmingly students of color, so the Presidential Initiative on Race, Power, and Privilege would support students of color at College A.

Following the summer of 2020, the president announced via email on September 9, 2020, the formation of the Diversity Leadership Team (College A, 2020c). The collaborative and diverse team,
comprised of four faculty and staff members, was responsible for carrying out the work of a traditional chief diversity officer. One member of the team was tasked with supporting “the success and well-being of students of color . . . by helping to create an environment where all students understand their identity and those of others” (College A, 2020c, para. 8). Creating culturally inclusive environments has the potential to increase student sense of belonging.

Another member of the Diversity Leadership Team was responsible for “fostering a community of diversity and inclusion” (College A, 2020c, para. 8). Fostering a community of diversity and inclusion also contributes to students’ sense of belonging. Community building is an important component of feeling as though an individual belongs in their environment. The addition of the Diversity Leadership Team demonstrated College A was working to create a campus community where all students were included and felt welcomed. Work of the Diversity Leadership Team is important for students of color at any institution, but especially one that was predominantly White, like College A.

It is clear diversity and inclusion were campus-wide and community-wide concerns and priorities at College A. Additionally, students were made aware of expectations related to diversity and inclusion as outlined in the 2021–2022 student handbook. Per this guide, all students were to adhere to the statement that there was no tolerance for bias incidence, discrimination, harassment, and retaliation. Being subjected to negative experiences like bias incidents, discrimination, and harassment detract from students’ ability to feel a sense of belonging (College A, 2021a). The college took each instance of mistreatment seriously and outlined a comprehensive disciplinary action plan for students who violated rules and regulations.

Additionally, I reviewed other College A media, including a video uploaded to Facebook from College A’s 2021 convocation address by the president. Notably, he stated the 2021–2022 academic year would be one where the college forged to achieve diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals (College A, 2021b). Most importantly, he declared the current academic year as the year the college
added a fourth letter to the DEI abbreviation: B. The president explained this additional letter stood for belonging and would be part of all DEI initiatives. The president’s announcement indicated College A was committed to creating a campus community that was centered on belonging.

Although I was able to find and review an array of College A documents and materials, I unfortunately could not locate any documents related to the Posse Foundation at College A. I inquired with several individuals on campus, including the research liaison and the College A Posse administrator. The only documents related to the Posse Foundation were available through the foundation itself, and they are outlined in the next section.

**Posse Foundation Documents**

This section details the different documents I found pertaining to the Posse Foundation. The two Posse Foundation documents discussed include the annual report and the alumni report. The annual report and alumni report included aggregated data and were an important part of the data analysis because they provided detailed information, data, facts, and figures related to past and present Posse Scholars.

**Annual Report**

The Posse Foundation publishes several important documents available for review on the foundation’s webpage. Two notable documents on the webpage included the annual report from 2019 and the alumni report that did not have a date attached but was most likely from 2019, given dates of endnotes and sources.

The first document, the annual report from 2019, outlined the state of the foundation and provided important information related to foundation facts and figures, student outcomes, foundation partnerships (i.e., collegiate and professional), new initiatives, scholar spotlights, foundation supporters, statements of activities and finances, advisory board information, and foundation staff contact lists. The
annual report was not content heavy; rather, it provided snapshots, lists, and basic facts and figures related to the foundation’s activities and accomplishments from the previous year.

The introduction of the annual report was written by the foundation’s president and chief executive officer and the chair of the national board of directors. The president and chair shared two important statements in their opening remarks. First, they described the ultimate roles of Posse Scholars, saying, “As college students, Posse Scholars are exceptionally engaged, helping to build community and taking full advantage of the unique opportunities a great education affords” (Posse Foundation, 2019, p. 2). This statement included community, something Posse Scholars were expected to build. In turn, it was important to understand how Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging in their own college communities, places they were tasked with building and enriching.

The leaders’ introductory letter in the 2019 annual report also stated the foundation’s ultimate goal: “In partnership with the top colleges and universities, [the goal] is to build a leadership network that reflects the great diversity of the country” (Posse Foundation, 2019, p. 2). The ultimate goal emphasized the importance of diversity, one of the Posse Foundation’s most enduring characteristics. Thus, the foundation has boasted being a leadership program for diverse students to become leaders on top college campuses.

The most notable information the annual report (Posse Foundation, 2019) provided was its “Posse By The Numbers” (p. 2) feature. The statistics demonstrated the growth of the program across the country. For example, this section reported over 9,900 students had become Posse Scholars to date. Scholars had been awarded over 1.5 billion dollars in scholarships related to leadership. In addition, in the year 2019, undergraduate partners with Posse had provided scholars more than 155 million dollars in leadership scholarships. Finally, scholars had been awarded over 500 national fellowships since 2001 (Posse Foundation, 2019).
Alumni Report

The next document I reviewed was the alumni report, which provided data from a national survey the foundation conducted with alumni (Posse Foundation, n.d.). Although the publishing date was not apparent, given the references and citations in the document, I believed this document was also from 2019. The alumni report was broken out into several sections, including alumni census, alumni profile, undergraduate experience, alumni in the workplace, Posse’s impact, and a conclusion (Posse Foundation, n.d.). The alumni report was important in better understanding who Posse Scholars were.

The data from the alumni report included all Posse alumni as of the time the survey was administered. Important data from the alumni report were published in the alumni census and profile sections. Posse alumni by race was broken down as follows: 34.2% Black, 31.4% Latinx, 11.3% Asian, 8.9% White, 8.6% other, and 5.6% unknown (Posse Foundation, n.d.). Black and Latinx alumni made up 65.3% of all Posse alumni. Thus, it made sense to focus my study on sense of belonging of the two dominant ethnic groups who were part of the Posse Foundation program.

Posse alumni family background characteristics were also included in the report. Posse alumni identified their economic class while growing up (i.e., through high school) as: 34.2% lower class, 36.5% lower-middle class, 24% middle class, 5.1% upper-middle class, and 0.2% upper class. Nearly 73% of Posse alumni reported growing up in lower or lower-middle class backgrounds (Posse Foundation, n.d.). Comparatively, 72% of students who attended the most competitive colleges were from the top quartile socioeconomic backgrounds (The Posse Foundation, n.d.). On the other hand, 21% of students who attended less and noncompetitive institutions were from the bottom, lower class socioeconomic status (SES) quartile (Posse Foundation, n.d.).

Another section in the alumni report included information related to Posse alumni high school experiences. When asked about the resource level of their high schools, Posse alumni reported the following: 23% were under-resourced, 37.1% were moderately resourced, 29.1% were well resourced,
and 10.8% were extremely well resourced (Posse Foundation, n.d.). More than half (i.e., 60.1%) of all alumni reported their schools were under-resourced or moderately resourced. The Posse alumni survey results may be related to the fact Posse Scholars mainly attended urban high schools in major cities. Typically, city schools are under-resourced and underfunded (Tsoi-A-Fatt Bryant, 2015).

When asked where peers and friends attended college, nearly 67% of Posse alumni shared they attended more highly ranked colleges and universities than their high school friends (Posse Foundation, n.d.). This statistic is intuitive because the Posse Foundation partners only with 4-year colleges, many of which are highly exclusive and selective. Relatedly, when asked if alumni scholars would have applied to their undergraduate school if it were not for Posse, 69.4% of respondents said no and 30.6% of respondents said yes. Responses to the question about undergraduate school applications suggested the Posse Foundation highly influenced Posse alumni’s college decision process. The follow-up question (i.e., Would you have applied to any 4-year college without Posse?) yielded the following results: 95.9% yes and 4.1% no (Posse Foundation, n.d.); this statistic demonstrated Posse alumni were students who were strongly invested and motivated to attend college.

A final related question was asked discussing whether a Posse participant would, if they could do it over, attend college in a Posse or by themselves. The overwhelming majority of Posse alumni respondents (i.e., 93.5%) said they would go to school with a Posse and only 6.5% of Posse alumni respondents said they would attend school by themselves (Posse Foundation, n.d.). Responses to the question about attendance with or without a Posse suggests the importance the Posse cohort model has on Posse Scholars. It was unclear why Posse alumni would want to attend school again with a Posse, but knowing they simply would do this again demonstrated the impact the cohort model had on them.

Another section in the Posse alumni report that related to this study was on persistence and retention. The alumni report noted Posse Scholars graduated at a rate of 90% (Posse Foundation, n.d.). It is unclear how the foundation arrived at this statistic, but it may have been aggregated by year. The
report acknowledged obstacles and challenges Posse Scholars faced, including challenging academics, new social expectations, and transitioning to a new stage of life. All challenges added stress and anxiety to scholars while in college. Nearly one third of all Posse alumni said they considered leaving their college at some point.

For students who considered dropping out, 59.7% of Posse alumni said their family was very important in keeping them in college (Posse Foundation, n.d.). About 46% of respondents said their Posse was important in keeping them in school. In addition, 45.9% of Posse alumni said their Posse mentor was very important in keeping them enrolled. Finally, 27.7% of Posse alumni shared Posse staff were very important in keeping them in school. Each of the mentioned groups or individuals formed community for Posse Scholars. It was evident, through their responses, that all individuals in Posse influenced scholars’ decision to stay in college.

The alumni report drilled down further in asking Posse alumni about what level of importance Posse was to them while attending school. About 87.2% of Posse alumni shared Posse was very important to their social support (Posse Foundation, n.d.). Posse also supported Posse alumni in other important ways, including emotional support and academic support. That is, 80.5% of Posse alumni reported Posse was important to their emotional support and 61.5% of Posse alumni stated Posse was important to their academic support.

Tinto (1993) suggested academic and social integration are important for students because they relate to their decisions whether or not to persist. Data gathered from the alumni report suggest the Posse Foundation impacts social and academic supports for its Posse Scholars. Supports could potentially relate to social and academic integration in a positive way. That is, the ways in which the Posse Foundation provided academic and social supports may have influenced Posse Scholars’ ability to persist to graduation.
Finally, the alumni report shared Posse alumni’s satisfaction with their college experience. Overall, Posse alumni were generally satisfied with their experience at their institutions (Posse Foundation, n.d.). Specifically, 37.7% of Posse alumni were very satisfied, 46.2% were satisfied, 12.8% were ambivalent, 2.7% were dissatisfied, and 0.6% were very dissatisfied. Unfortunately, no additional information was provided about specifically what Posse alumni were satisfied or dissatisfied with while attending college, and such information would have been helpful. I wanted to understand if sense of belonging impacted Posse alumni respondents’ levels of college satisfaction.

The Posse Foundation has researched alumni’s perceptions and beliefs of how the program impacted their own upward mobility. According to the most recent (i.e., 2019) alumni report, for Posse alumni who finished their college careers more than 10 years prior, over 80% were enjoying a higher economic class than when they were growing up as children (Posse Foundation, n.d.). Before Posse, alumni identified their class as 37.9% lower class, 37.7% lower-middle class, 21.6% middle class, 2.8% upper-middle class, and 0% upper class. Since graduating as Posse Scholars, alumni identified their SES rank as 1.4% lower class, 10.2% lower-middle class, 51.8% middle class, 31.4% upper-middle class, and 5.2% upper class. Although only 24% of Posse alumni reported being in the middle and upper-middle classes growing up, 10 years after graduating from college, 88.32% of Posse alumni believed they had achieved status in middle and upper-middle classes. Conversely, 75.6% of Posse alumni believed they were in the lower and low-middle classes growing up while 10 years after graduating, only 11.6% of alumni scholars still believed they were part of lower classes.

Data from the alumni report demonstrated the vast majority of Posse alumni had experienced upward mobility. Although there are many reasons and factors that influence upward mobility, one important factor is education. What is more difficult to decipher is whether upward mobility is due to the student obtaining a college credential or whether it is the degree itself, held from a selective institution, that facilitates upward mobility. Mullen (2010) posited, “An elite degree also serves as a kind
of consecration, permanently marking its holders as worthy and entitled” (p. 211). Therefore, the degree from the school (e.g., University of California at Berkeley or Cornell University) might have had more impact on a Posse student’s success in rising in the ranks than the fact they were able to obtain a college diploma.

Posse alumni appeared to be active and engaged citizens in society (Posse Foundation, n.d.). They have secured career positions that allowed them to contribute productively to the workforce and economy. Many alumni have opted or aspired to attain a graduate degree. Commitment to their education and career aspirations should make them even more productive members of the workforce. Posse alumni’s commitment to civic engagement illustrates their awareness and dedication to their broader communities. Active involvement in the political landscape is another way in which alumni contribute to and benefit society. Posse alumni behaviors and outcomes were consistent with the literature. Mayhew et al. (2016) found that “college substantially promoted civic and community involvement” (p. 567). It was evident Posse alumni were successful, involved, and active citizens through a variety of their behaviors and activities they had engaged in since graduating from their Posse partner schools.

Both documents were written, created, and published by the foundation. As such, it was important to consider the source when I evaluated its content. I expected all information was accurate and true; however, I also anticipated the foundation was focusing on positive news and outcomes to share with its wide audiences. Audiences of the annual report and alumni report included the general public, partner institution administrators, alumni, donors, and supporters.

**Participant Data**

This study included participation of several groups of individuals, including an administrator and students. All participants were affiliated with College A through their enrollment as students or their employment as an administrator. A detailed summary of the interview with the College A administrator
associated with the Posse Program is provided. The two student groups (i.e., Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars) are described using figures.

Administrators

Initially, I intended to interview two administrators for the study: a Posse Foundation administrator who worked with College A’s Posse Program and a College A administrator who supported the Posse Program and its students on campus. However, due to circumstances out of my control, only one administrator could be interviewed.

The Posse Foundation employee who worked with the Posse Program at College A declined interviewing with me. Unfortunately, the potential participant shared in an email communication in the fall of 2021 that all Posse Foundation employees were prohibited from conducting interviews with outside members of the community, which included researchers; thus, I was not permitted to interview a Posse Foundation administrator.

Although I was unable to interview a Posse Foundation administrator, I did have the opportunity to interview a Posse Scholar coordinator at College A. This administrator was a man, who identified as Black, who I assigned the pseudonym of Isaiah. He had been supporting Posse Scholars at College A for 18 months at the time of the interview. Isaiah was a first-generation college graduate himself. Isaiah was one of three Posse Scholar coordinators at College A. The college moved to a team approach for supporting Posse Scholars after the departure of their chief diversity officer several years prior to the interview. Isaiah believed the team approach had benefited scholars and said students had been receptive to the model. From an administrator perspective, Isaiah believed the three-person team model supporting Posse Scholars was more successful because they were able to catch more problems and coordinate resolutions.

I completed an hour-long interview with Isaiah in the fall of 2021. The interview questions were broken up into four sections: (a) general, (b) student success outcomes and measures, (c) policy, and (d)
sense of belonging. I asked Isaiah to answer all questions from the perspective of being an administrator at College A who supported Posse Scholars.

Isaiah was the direct support for all Posse Scholar cohorts at College A. More specifically, he was responsible for arranging and executing all Posse programmatic events and meetings on campus. In addition to providing mentorship support, Isaiah also ensured Posse Scholars had monetary funds and resources to be academically successful. For example, in his role, Isaiah could purchase required course textbooks for Posse Scholars in need.

Isaiah defined student success as students growing academically and personally during their collegiate careers. Isaiah shared the graduation rate of Posse Scholars at College A was roughly 80%. This graduation rate was 10% different from the 90% reported by the Posse Foundation. At the time of the study, the only Posse cohort on campus comprised of 10 scholars was the Class of 2024. All other cohorts had less than 10 individuals (i.e., eight or nine) due to attrition; however, the Posse Foundation sends Posse Scholar cohorts of 10 students to each partner institution. Isaiah identified scholar persistence as an issue.

In addition to increasing graduation rates of scholars, Isaiah defined student success through other metrics. First, student success, to him, was seeing students come in with one set of perspectives and thoughts and leave with a totally different mindset and outlook. He defined academic success separately as observing students meeting or exceeding their academic goals. Isaiah noted College A attracted high-performing students, and they could be caught up on a specific aspirational grade point average that may have been harder to achieve than they expected.

Isaiah believed College A would define success as students making or exceeding the 2.0 grade point average requirement to earn a college degree. He also believed success, defined by the college, would include personal growth. Isaiah did not believe College A had many, if any at all, tangible
benchmarks or assessments of student success achievement outside the classroom. In addition, Isaiah shared the college was introducing a residential curriculum.

Isaiah did not elaborate as to what College A’s new residential curriculum would be and no information was available on the college’s website. Despite the lack of information available for College A’s residential curriculum, many residential institutions have created such curriculums for students on campus. The goal of a residential curriculum is for colleges “to create living–learning environments that fully engage students in meeting desired learning outcomes” (Kerr & Tweedy, 2006, p. 9). Common learning objectives for residential curriculums include citizenship, leadership, wellness, and others. The focus for residential curriculums is providing educational and personal development types of programming, as opposed to simple social events. Although the old model of a residential program was focused on attendance numbers and satisfaction, this new model focuses on student learning outcomes. Success of the residential curriculum is measured through student learning outcomes.

Isaiah would have liked to see College A consider measuring student success by involvement. Isaiah shared the Posse Scholars who were most involved were those who thrived best at College A. Isaiah identified some forms of involvement as student leaders in clubs and organizations and student athletes. Specifically, Isaiah said, “They have built their own network of friends and supporters. . . . They don’t need to lean on Posse the way that other students do.” Students who are more involved in school are typically more socially integrated, leading to better persistence and success outcomes.

Because I was unable to have a conversation with a Posse Foundation administrator, I asked Isaiah to consider how the foundation may have defined student success. In addition to promoting a high graduation rate, Isaiah said the foundation would have most likely emphasized the successes of each scholar on their individual journey. Isaiah emphasized the foundation hoped scholars went on to special and meaningful careers. Isaiah’s assumption was in alignment with the foundation’s third goal, “to ensure that Posse Scholars persist in their academic studies and graduate so they can take on
leadership positions in the workforce” (Posse Foundation, 2021a, para. 2). The alumni report showed scholars went on to participate in civic engagement opportunities in their communities (Posse Foundation, n.d.).

I also asked several policy questions related to Posse Scholar stop outs and housing. First, Isaiah shared that if a Posse Scholar took a leave of absence from the college, they would return to the campus and reengage with their original Posse cohort from when they started; they would not join a different Posse cohort on campus. For example, Isaiah shared there was a 5th-year Posse Scholar senior who was not affiliated with any Posse cohort because her class graduated last year. However, this student still connected with her Posse mentor on campus. Related to on-campus living requirements, Isaiah affirmed College A was primarily a residential campus, and students were expected to live on campus. Students, including Posse Scholars, were permitted to apply for off-campus releases in their senior year. Isaiah believed around 80 seniors from the entire College A senior class lived off campus. All Posse Scholar participants lived on campus.

The final section of questions I asked was related to sense of belonging. Specifically, I asked in what ways College A supported Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars in forming sense of belonging. Isaiah shared that a member of his three-person team supporting Posse Scholars created a new network for all Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) students but was targeted at students who were not in Posse, such as students in the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) or the Academic Opportunity Program (AOP). The network’s aim was for students to build a support system among one another because there was nothing formally in place for students who were not in Posse, HEOP, or AOP. Isaiah said if a BIPOC student was not part of HEOP, AOP, or Posse, they were left on their own to figure out navigating College A. Posse Scholars were permitted to join the network.

Additionally, Isaiah said that, for Posse Scholars, he believed his office was one that fostered sense of belonging. Isaiah shared he provided informal support and mentorship to all Posse Scholars.
During the interview, two Posse Scholars dropped by Isaiah’s office door to say goodbye before the holiday break. Isaiah said these interactions were a normal occurrence and he had an open-door policy for his students. Isaiah identified the Office of Intercultural Affairs (OIA) as the general support system for non-Posse scholars at College A. For Posse Scholars, Isaiah identified the three-person Posse Scholars support team as the group on campus that most effectively supported scholars and promoted sense of belonging.

In addition to supporting Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging, Isaiah shared a deep concern for sense of belonging of men of color at College A. As such, he created a men’s group for students that mirrored a group he founded at his own undergraduate institution. In addition, Isaiah started a first-generation mentorship program for students at College A. Isaiah originally founded this program with Posse Scholars in mind; however, it had since expanded to support all first-generation students, many of whom identified as BIPOC. He said creating the first-generation mentorship program resulted from conversations he had with Posse Scholars while assuming a previous role at College A. Scholars told Isaiah they did not feel supported by or connected to resources available at College A or with the college in general.

In creating sense of belonging for Posse Scholars, Isaiah shared there was a push for scholars and the College A community to look at the program as one large group, as opposed to four separate Posse cohorts. Isaiah shared that although Posse Scholars were connected to their individual cohorts, they were less connected to other cohorts. As such, creating a sense of belonging among all scholars was a goal.

Finally, Isaiah believed Posse Scholars did not feel a strong sense of belonging while attending College A. He assessed that scholars felt connected to those with whom they could identify and connect in smaller communities, but not with the college as a whole. Isaiah said this phenomenon was alienating for students, regardless of whether or not they were successful in the classroom or socially. Isaiah
estimated Posse Scholars felt slightly more sense of belonging at College A as compared to non-Posse scholars, but only minimally. He believed this difference in belonging was due to the supports Posse Scholars received and the cohort model. Isaiah shared the most successful Posse Scholars were ones who were involved and well-integrated in the college community.

To increase sense of belonging for both Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars, Isaiah believed diversifying faculty would be beneficial. Isaiah shared BIPOC students at College A extremely dislike “choosing a class that is on any racial topic and the class is led by a non-BIPOC person. They want someone who has done the scholarly work who also happens to identify in that same realm.” Isaiah believed improving faculty diversity would quickly enhance sense of belonging for BIPOC students. However, the college was making strides on this front. One of College A’s four chief diversity officers was a faculty member who also held the title of academic chief diversity officer (College A, 2020c). The faculty member was aware of the lack of diversity of faculty and was working with others to improve it.

When identifying effective programs and resources the college had to promote sense of belonging, Isaiah believed his Bridges Program, which was in its 3rd year of operation at the time of the interview, was most successful. The Bridges Program paired incoming first-generation college students with college staff who acted as mentors. Mentees and mentors met throughout each term, both formally and informally (College A, 2022a). He said he regularly needed to turn away 60 to 70 mentors for BIPOC students. The program had approximately 50 active mentees with some students having two to three mentors at the time of our interview. He would have liked to see even more first-generation students participate. Isaiah shared Bridges students had slightly academically outperformed first-generation students who were not in the program, as evidenced by their grade point averages. Isaiah believed the sense of belonging fostered in the Bridges Program contributed to the academic success of participating students.
Isaiah believed Posse Scholars felt most connected and felt as though they belonged when interacting with his team in his office, in club meetings, and the Unity Room, which are places Isaiah identified on campus as safe spaces. Isaiah emphasized the importance for Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars to become involved in an organization because these communities support belonging for students. Specific student organizations where Isaiah believed students of color felt most sense of belonging were multicultural clubs, which included the African Student Association and Pride, to name a few. Isaiah also mentioned Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging at Posse and U Network meetings.

One final, yet important piece of information Isaiah shared in the interview was that “Posse Scholars are a lot more resilient than people give them credit for being at College A.” Isaiah reminded me College A was a predominantly White institution (PWI) and could be daunting for students of color, especially when these students attended racially diverse high schools. Most importantly, Isaiah shared he believed Posse Scholars viewed attending College A as something to get through versus something to experience.

Overall, the information gathered from the interview with Isaiah provided important insights to the perceived experiences of Posse Scholars. Isaiah illuminated how College A could be a difficult environment for scholars to navigate. Improvements had been made to mentorship and advisement practices to support scholars better. It appeared there were specific places and spaces on campus where scholars felt a sense of belonging; however, as a whole, belonging was difficult to achieve at times.

Isaiah believed Posse Scholars were successful and felt a sense of belonging at College A when they were better integrated socially into the community. He observed scholars were most successful when they integrated into smaller communities on campus, like those formed in multicultural organizations. Isaiah emphasized scholars’ need for support. Isaiah and his three-person OIA team provided scholars support both formally and informally on campus. Many important interactions took place in the Unity Room, a space where his office was located and where BIPOC students spent time.
The Unity Room was a safe space on campus for all BIPOC students and was often frequented by Posse scholars.

**Posse Scholars**

I interviewed eight Posse Scholars. Descriptive statistics on this group of participants can be found in Table 2. Of these students, five were women and three were men. The class breakdown of Posse Scholar participants was as follows: five sophomores, two juniors, and one senior. Four of the scholars were first-generation students. The average reported grade point average of Posse Scholar study participants was a 3.35 on 4.0 scale. Finally, the racial and ethnic breakdown of Posse Scholars was seven Black or African American students and one Hispanic or Latinx student.

**Table 2**

**Posse Scholar Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>First-Gen</th>
<th>Class year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adrian</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Damien</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farah</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gemma</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haven</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Senior</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Non-Posse Scholars**

I interviewed a total of eight non-Posse scholars. Descriptive statistics related to this group of study participants is found in Table 3. Three participants identified as women, three identified as men, one identified as nonbinary, and one preferred not to answer. The non-Posse scholars came from a variety of class years including two first-year students, two sophomores, two juniors, and two seniors. The racial and ethnic breakdown of non-Posse scholars included four Black or African American
students, two Asian or Pacific Islander students, one Latinx student, and one multiracial or biracial student. One of the eight participants in the group was a first-generation college student. Finally, the average grade point average of the non-Posse scholar participants was 3.22 on a 4.0 scale, and seven of the eight participants reported their grade point average.

### Table 3

*Non-Posse Scholars Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>First-Gen</th>
<th>Class Year</th>
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<td>First-year</td>
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<td>Corey</td>
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<td>Devin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>No</td>
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</table>

### Data Analysis

This section provides a detailed report of data captured for each research question. I begin by addressing Research Question 1, including data collected from the participant intake questionnaire and interview data. A figure is provided to conceptualize major findings. Next, I move on to Research Question 2 and provide a discussion of the findings related to this question. Analysis of each question includes narrative accounts and quotes from participants.

**Research Question 1**

The first research question was: In what ways do Posse Scholars exhibit sense of belonging to their institution as compared to non-Posse scholars?
Participant Questionnaire Data

Prior to the interview, each participant completed a participant intake questionnaire that provided me with preliminary academic, demographic, and baseline sense of belonging information. Figures 3 and 4 provide the data for two Likert-scale agreeability questions from the questionnaire. Students were asked the statements listed as the titles on the figures. The Likert-scale responses included: (1) strongly disagree, (2) somewhat disagree, (3) neither disagree nor agree, (4) somewhat agree, and (5) strongly agree. In the following figures, Posse respondent data are indicated in the dark gray shaded bars and the non-Posse scholars’ data are indicated in the light gray shaded bars on the graph. Participant data from each group are represented side by side on the bar graphs to provide comparisons. These data begin to help answer Research Question 1. Although the data did not indicate ways each participant group exhibited sense of belonging, they did indicate there were slight differences between groups, which was important. Figure 3 demonstrates participant responses to the statement: “I feel like I belong at College A.”
Figure 3

“I Feel Like I Belong at College A” Participant Responses

![Bar chart showing participant responses regarding feeling like they belong at College A.](chart1)

Figure 4

“I Have Considered Leaving College A” Participant Responses

![Bar chart showing participant responses regarding considering leaving College A.](chart2)
Figure 3 illustrates half of Posse Scholars somewhat or strongly agreed they felt they belonged at College A. One quarter of scholars somewhat disagreed with the statement about belonging and one quarter of scholars reported a neutral stance (i.e., neither agree nor disagree) with belonging at College A. No scholar strongly disagreed that they belonged. Conversely, half of non-Posse scholars strongly or somewhat disagreed they felt they belonged at College A. Additionally, no non-Posse scholar strongly agreed they belonged. Although the sample size was small, the data did show Posse Scholars felt slightly more sense of belonging to their school than non-Posse scholars. Figure 4 indicated more than half (i.e., five) of Posse Scholars agreed (i.e., somewhat or strongly) they had considered leaving the institution. One quarter of Posse participants strongly disagreed they had considered leaving College A. Half of non-Posse participants agreed (i.e., somewhat or strongly) they had considered leaving their school. Three out of the eight non-Posse respondents disagreed (i.e., strongly and somewhat) they had considered leaving College A. Data show leaving school was something many participants had considered, regardless of with which group they identified. About 50% of non-Posse scholars considered leaving and over 60% of Posse Scholars considered leaving College A.

**Interview Data**

Tables 2 and 3 outline participant information for Posse Scholars (n = 8) and non-Posse scholars (n = 8), respectively. Figure 5 illustrates how I coded all participant responses using Tinto’s (1993) institutional experiences components from the model of college departure in two categories. I broke down Tinto’s (1993) institutional experiences into subcategories: (a) fosters sense of belonging and (b) hinders sense of belonging.

Tinto’s (1993) institutional experiences included two systems: academic and social. In each system are formal and informal experiences, as depicted in Figure 5. The academic system includes academic performance (i.e., formal experiences) and faculty/staff interactions (i.e., informal experiences). Faculty/staff (i.e., informal) interactions was broken up into two sections: staff was placed
under fosters sense of belonging and faculty was placed under hinders sense of belonging. The social system comprises of extracurricular activities (i.e., formal experiences) and peer group interactions (i.e., informal experiences). I color coded items in Figure 5 to indicate which participants (i.e., Posse Scholars, non-Posse scholars, or both) identified with which experiences. A detailed analysis of participant groups’ experiences is provided in the following sections.

Figure 5

*Tinto’s (1993) Institutional System and Participant Sense of Belonging at College A*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense of belonging</th>
<th>Academic system</th>
<th>Social system</th>
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<td>Academic</td>
<td>Faculty/staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>performance (formal)</td>
<td>interactions (informal)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Academic</td>
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<td>Intercultural</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Administrators</td>
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<td>Academic major</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
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<td>withdrawal</td>
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</table>

*Note. Purple = Posse Scholars, Red = Non-Posse scholars, Blue = Both*

**Academic System**

All participants reported academic performance (i.e., formal experiences) hindered their sense of belonging in different and similar ways. Both groups of participants struggled with academic major uncertainty, which made it difficult for them to find their place in College A. Francis, a non-Posse participant, shared he was somewhat dissatisfied with his major, which caused him to consider leaving college. He did not feel as though he had direction with his major and did not receive support from
faculty. Part of Strayhorn’s (2019) definition of sense of belonging includes receiving support. Without support, students have more difficulty feeling sense of belonging.

Amber, a non-Posse participant, wanted to study criminal justice, but the major was not offered at College A, so she deferred to majoring in economics instead. She also had difficulty adjusting with her major after failing her first economics exam. Although she had figured out how to be a successful student as a junior, Amber shared she had doubts about the major and what her career path would look like upon graduation, saying:

Everyone knew what they were doing. Everyone had an idea of what they wanted to do with their lives, and I did not. I was like this is horrible and I wanted to leave. . . . Sometimes I’m like, this [majoring in econ] is really what I want to do like. I just haven’t found like that spark. I still like as a junior don’t really know what I want to do. People say with econ like you could do anything with econ. And I’m like, what can I do?

Amber’s initial uncertainty was related to academic ability, but then transitioned to postgraduation opportunities. Her uncertainty was intensified by the fact she felt her peers and classmates had a grasp on academic abilities and postgraduation opportunities, but she continued to grapple with them. Thus, Amber felt less belonging academically. In addition, Carlos, a Posse Scholar, shared he had declared and undeclared his major twice. At the time of the interview, he was exploring majors again and was trying to figure out his academic plan. Carlos began in an engineering major but had a challenging experience with a professor. Although he did not indicate this experience led him to change his major, the way he discussed the experience demonstrated it impacted his interest to continue with the engineering major.

Poor academic performance contributed to participants engaging in course or term withdrawals. Withdrawals impacted sense of belonging for both groups of participants. Two non-Posse scholars took leaves of absence for an entire year during the pandemic, which disrupted their ability to form community and reconnect with their previous friend groups. Francis, a non-Posse participant, shared, “I didn’t really have anybody coming back because they were all part of other groups, or other things, or they were busy doing other things. So, it’s like, I was kind of stuck here.” Being disconnected from
campus for an entire academic year hindered his sense of belonging socially, and it was difficult for him to pick up socially where he left off.

Farah, a Posse Scholar, struggled with the decision to withdraw from a course in her 1st term at College A. The decision was challenging to her because she had always done well in high school. Struggling academically in college contributed to her feeling a lack of sense of belonging because she was unable to perform at the level of her peers. Struggling academically also caused her to strongly consider leaving College A in the fall of her 1st year on campus. Farah turned to her Posse mentor for support and guidance during this difficult time.

Many participants experienced difficulty adjusting to academics, which caused them to underperform; thus, their academic performance suffered. Hector, a non-Posse participant, was academically dismissed after his 1st year due to poor grades. Consequently, he was the only participant who did not report his grade point average. His dismissal created self-doubt and he asked himself, “Maybe it’s not the right place for me?” He lamented, “There’s a lot of pressure to be a certain way . . . a lot of like, doubt almost, about myself kind of crept in.” Hector was still working on integrating academically with the college.

With respect to faculty/staff interactions (i.e., informal experiences), it was clear that overall, staff interactions fostered participants’ sense of belonging, but faculty interactions hindered it. In general, both groups of participants reported interactions with administrators positively contributed to their sense of belonging. Participants felt most comfortable engaging with members of the college administration who looked like them in the dean’s office, the OIA, and the office of admissions. Carlos, a Posse Scholar, shared that, for him to feel like he belonged outside of Posse, “there has to be something in common, or a common experience.” Both Brittany, a Posse Scholar, and Brianna, a non-Posse participant, named a BIPOC staff member in the admissions office as someone who fostered sense of belonging for them before they even arrived on campus. They engaged with this individual on visit days.
and overnight programs. Participants sought out leaders on campus who they felt they could approach and with whom they could connect.

Posse Scholars exclusively shared how the OIA staff were individuals who fostered sense of belonging and shared a connection with them. The connection with OIA staff supported what Isaiah shared in his interview when he said he considered OIA as the general support system for non-Posse scholars. Carlos determined he only felt a sense of belonging in the OIA because the office and staff contributed widely to diversity and inclusion efforts on campus. Brittany shared she was very close to OIA staff and could approach them about anything. She said the OIA staff individuals affirmed she made a “great choice” coming to College A. Along with Posse mentors, the three-person OIA staff were also closely involved with supporting scholars, so Posse Scholars knew and interacted with them often. For Posse Scholars, Isaiah believed the three-person Posse Scholars support team—which was made up of the OIA staff—most effectively supported scholars and promoted sense of belonging.

It is also important to include that OIA staff offices were located in the Unity Room where many BIPOC students, especially scholars, congregated formally and informally. Haven admitted, “When I’m in the Unity Room, I definitely feel like I belong at [College A].” Damien estimated the place on campus where he did not have to code switch was in the Unity Room. Brittany attributed the Unity Room on campus as “a very safe and natural place for [BIPOC students] to be.”

Finally, under the staff category, Posse Scholars reported Posse mentors and administrators fostered sense of belonging. Farah identified she felt a strong sense of belonging to her Posse mentor who supported her through several academic and social challenges in her 1st year on campus. She noted, “I think she definitely values me a lot, which I appreciate, because sometimes I don’t feel valued on this campus.” Part of Strayhorn’s (2019) definition of sense of belonging included feeling valued by individuals in the campus community.
Erica likened a College A Posse coordinator to being a father figure for her, saying, “He’s like an on-campus dad for me. . . . He makes it so that I belong.” Erica also shared this individual often created community by bringing in food for scholars to share in the OIA. Farrah said this same person supported her by helping her pay for academic supplies, including books, when needed. The experiences Erica shared are examples of students feeling cared about and supported, which are parts of Strayhorn’s (2019) sense of belonging definition.

Although staff interactions fostered sense of belonging, faculty interactions generally hindered sense of belonging for both groups of participants. No staff were noted in participant discussion about experiences that hindered their sense of belonging. Office hours was one area where faculty interactions hindered sense of belonging. Several participants experienced microaggressions perpetrated by their professors during office hours. For example, Cade, a non-Posse participant, was told by a professor that he “was wasting too much of her time during office hours because [he was] Asian.” Cade shared the experience “was pretty shocking.” Cade recounted the faculty member had then said something to the effect, “There are other people—like demographics—who needed it more.” However, no other students were waiting outside her office. Adrian, a Posse Scholar, had such a poor interaction with a faculty member in office hours that he ended up dropping the course for which he was seeking support. He said he did not like the way the professor was talking to him. In this instance, Adrian did not feel respected, which is an important component of sense of belonging.

Social System

Both extracurricular activities (i.e., formal experiences) and peer group interactions (i.e., informal experiences) fostered and hindered participants’ sense of belonging. In the extracurricular activities (i.e., formal) component, both groups of respondents found participation in recreational sports supported and enhanced sense of belonging at College A. Adrian, a Posse Scholar, shared:

Like playing basketball, it’s a chill thing that is effortless in terms of like, interacting and communicating with the people that are there. None of it’s about like, worrying about if you
belong because you’re Black. It’s mostly just you belong, because you all have that common interest of basketball. It makes it easier for everything. It’s easier to interact with them because of that. It kind of breaks the wall. I think that’s like, a big thing. Realizing that it’s so easy to break the wall, when you have that first interest, especially . . . like, playing basketball is something that also makes me feel like I belong. That’s part of my identity. I guess I like that part.

In this quote, Adrian touched upon the part of Strayhorn’s (2019) sense of belonging definition related to connectedness and being accepted. Adrian was able to connect with his peers because of their shared interest in playing a sport. He suggested playing basketball with his White peers created belonging and belonging based on race is inconsequential.

Hector, a non-Posse participant, shared playing pick-up basketball was very welcoming. He explained that, oftentimes after playing, the group would continue comradery by getting food after a game because that was the nature of the community. Several of Hector’s friendships were built through playing basketball with peers on campus that may not have been formed if it were not through shared interest in the sport. Devin, a non-Posse participant, also felt close and connected to girls on their cheerleading team. Finally, Brianna, a non-Posse participant and the only varsity student–athlete participant, said she belonged in her track team. She also shared she was closest to other Black teammates, but there were very few of them.

Both groups of participants shared participation in multicultural organizations and clubs fostered sense of belonging. Brianna, a non-Posse participant shared by participating in the Black Student Association (BSU) and the African Student Association, she had been able to be herself and she did not have to “put on a face for other people.” Eva, a non-Posse participant, believed her involvement in the National Society of Black Engineers made her feel like she belonged at College A. The National Society of Black Engineers combined her academic major and her racial background, two parts important to her as a community member at school. Eva also said she felt a sense belonging in her engineering major. Gian, a non-Posse participant who identified as Asian, found membership and belonging in Hip Hop Club and Shakti, the college’s South Asian association on campus.
Several participants from both groups were involved in BSU. Erica, a Posse Scholar, explained how strongly she felt a sense of belonging when participating in BSU meetings:

Every Wednesday at 5 p.m., it’s definitely BSU. That’s where it’s just like, “I belong here, this is like, my safe space.” Um, when we have [BSU] meetings where we’re talking about issues that like, pertain to our lives, like I know I’m not the only one that feels a certain way in the room. I know I can look to my left, and I can look to my right, I can look in front of me, I can look behind me, and I can see those people are sharing the same feelings I’m feeling. Like, they understand exactly what I’m thinking and it’s like . . . I don’t know, you kind of feel at peace just knowing that there’s people who are feeling the same you’re feeling.

In her quote, Erica was speaking to many aspects of Strayhorn’s (2019) definition of sense of belonging, especially perceived social support and feeling cared about. She felt a sense of belonging because she knew the other members of BSU shared similar experiences to her. A feeling of sense of belonging provided her comfort and relief. Only non-Posse participants shared engaging with theme houses fostered sense of belonging. Although no participants lived in a theme house, many engaged in that community and felt it was a place they belonged. All participants mentioned the same theme house, which focused on multiculturalism. The description of this theme house from College A’s (2022b) website was: “[Theme house] strives to raise awareness of the diverse cultures and ethnic groups that make up the campus community. Also known as a multicultural center . . . coming together in a family atmosphere, residents learn about each other’s cultures and backgrounds” (para. 6). Theme house members welcomed nonresidents into the house for cultural, educational, and social events. Hector excitedly shared his connection to this particular theme house, saying:

[The theme house residents] see me and all my friends. . . . It’s like, alright, this is valid. We’re like, here. Like, because of our shared like [people of color]-ness, and that’s like . . . it’s a little bit like, more nuanced than that. I think partially because like you know, [College A] is a PWI. So, it’s different when you can find a place that you know a lot of people who aren’t just like you know, like regular White people are going to be. And like, they’re going to be doing things that not only regular White people do or whatever else it is. Like, that there’s a certain kind of like, burning like, solidarity and, like all these things that go into it. And so, like a place like [theme house name], just because of like, just because of like, the skin I was born with, I don’t feel like I’m alone there. Every time I’ve gone there, that’s never been disproven to me. You know, I always feel safe there.
Francis and Brianna both mentioned they frequented the same theme house often because it was a place where many Black students lived and congregated. Both Francis and Brianna identified as Black, so it made sense they sought out places on campus where they could engage with people who looked like them and who they felt belongingness toward. Brianna specifically stated, “I feel really comfortable around the Black students but like, I live with mainly White people. My roommates, they’re all White. My floor is mainly White.” Brianna acknowledged there were a few Black students on her floor, but the majority of the residents were White. She liked to go to this particular theme house because that was where many Black students lived.

One extracurricular activity where all participants did not feel they belonged was in the Greek organization system. Francis, a non-Posse participant, emphatically declared, “No sense of belonging with 100% different fraternities, no! That’s just a no!” Although College A had multicultural Greek organizations, Francis noted he did not feel sense of belonging in those groups either because they did not share the same interests and he did not feel like he could connect with them. Gian, a non-Posse participant, was frustrated he did not feel sense of belonging within the party scene and Greek life culture at College A because he recognized it was “a big part of college life.” Gian did not think he could easily be admitted into a fraternity social event based on his race and ethnicity and when he was, he felt uncomfortable. Gian stated:

So yeah, it’s like a challenge on its own. Especially when like, everybody else you know, is White or even, Black, I guess. Even like, the one time we do get in, it’s like, also that sense of belonging, it’s like still missing there. Because it’s like, we’re like sticking out like almost like a sore thumb, like almost. You see like, groups that are just mingling with each other, I feel like the fact that POC kind of like, does play somewhat of a role.

Additionally, Erica, a Posse Scholar, identified fraternities as places that were sometimes “dangerous” to be at and explained she did not go there alone. Farah, a Posse Scholar, considered how her interactions would be at fraternities because she was not White. She also shared fraternity members even treated her male BIPOC friends “more harsh[ly].” She also alluded to the theme of safety of herself and her
friends while attending fraternity parties. Haven, a Posse participant, outright said fraternities were places where she did not feel safe.

It was clear all participants did not feel sense of belonging in Greek organizations and social gatherings hosted by their members. Several Posse Scholars specifically mentioned issues with safety. In Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs, safety and security are the second need from the base of the pyramid. The need for safety and security comes before the middle need of love and belongingness. If students do not feel safe in a setting or in a group of peers, it is impossible for them to feel as though they belong.

Peer group interactions (i.e., informal experiences) was the other part of the social system that both fostered and hindered participants’ sense of belonging. Non-Posse students of color felt a sense of belonging interacting with floormates and roommates in the residential housing environments. Amber, a non-Posse participant, said even though she was the only person of color in her living space, she felt like she belonged because she lived with a “good group” of people. Devin, a non-Posse participant, said they felt comfortable with the girls in their hall. They recounted a time after they intervened in an incident when their floormate needed assistance during a mental health crisis, they felt like they established mutual respect with other girls who were involved in the situation. Gaining mutual respect from other girls in their housing area increased their belongingness in their residential floor community.

Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging in their cohort. Gemma shared she felt supported by her Posse cohort, which made her feel like she belonged. Farah appreciated she never needed to code switch with her Posse cohort; she could communicate authentically with members of the Posse community. Adrian admitted he spent all his time outside the classroom with Posse Scholars. Brittany confessed:

I feel like I’m more connected towards my Posse in a sense than I am towards like kind of like membership as like in the College A community. So, it’s like, I am a member of my Posse who goes to College A. I’m not really like a College A student, but happens to be in Posse.
Brittany’s statement was profound because she clearly delineated her affiliation in College A. For her, she recognized and identified herself as a member of Posse, not as a member of College A. By default, Brittany acknowledged she was a College A student, but she perceived herself more as a member of the Posse community than she did with the college as a whole.

Erica referred to members of her Posse cohort as her brothers and sisters. She felt very close to her own cohort and declared she, like several scholar participants, would definitely not choose College A without Posse. Speaking about her cohort specifically, Erica shared she knew she would “always have a place there.” Carlos described how he had “some sort of connection with everybody” in his Posse cohort. The connection was important because he strongly considered leaving. Carlos did not believe College A supported him, but he shared his Posse mentor and trainer did.

Damien admitted he leaned on his Posse cohort when he was feeling down and that they were a “top-notch, top-tier, best support system.” Although Farah confessed that she was not as close to her cohort as other scholars, she reasoned she was comfortable with this group of peers because of their shared “cultural identity.” Gemma said she felt like a member of her Posse, saying, “We’re the same people, so it makes it easier.” By “same people,” Gemma clarified she meant members of her cohort who were BIPOC and diverse. She also felt supported by her cohort.

Both participant groups felt sense of belonging with other student of color groups, including AOP/HEOP, student athletes, and other BIPOC students. Cade, a non-Posse participant, welcomed the opportunity to interact with Asian students, something he did not do in his nondiverse high school. He said, “[It’s] nice that there are very similar things we experience.” Gian, a non-Posse participant, connected most with his Asian friends and said there was a “disconnect” with the rest of the student body due to “lack of shared background . . . beliefs and values.”

Eva, a non-Posse participant, shared she had very few friends who were not POCs and she felt she most belonged in the POC community, sharing:
I’ve never really thought about it in a sense of like, the greater whole. But if I were to think about it, I feel like I kind of get lost in that greater whole. Just ‘cause like, everything that I felt a member of has been minority based. When you put that into a whole it’s like, it just kind of fizzles out, I guess.

Interestingly, Eva said she felt a sense of belonging at College A in the spaces and people with whom she engaged. Only through answering the interview question did she realize she had sought out mostly “minority-based” experiences. Upon further consideration, outside this bubble, she alluded to her feelings of sense of belonging diminishing.

Brittany, a Posse Scholar, reported most of her friends were in Posse or AOP. She noted:

Mostly all my friends are either Posse or they’re AOP. And it’s not like I like looked for these people. I kind of think we just all gravitate towards each other. I think it’s just like, a safety thing, like we all feel safe around each other. I get to be completely myself.

Erica, a Posse participant, admitted she felt most safe with the Black community on campus, especially following the tumultuous summer of 2020 and the Black Lives Matter movement. Carlos, a Posse participant, said he could relate to experiences of BIPOC students, saying, “You have more of a sense of respect for people that you can identify with.” Finally, Haven and Adrian, both Posse Scholars, simply stated they belonged more with BIPOC students at College A.

Participants also reported peer group interactions (i.e., informal experiences) that hindered sense of belonging. Both groups felt a lack of sense of belonging with their non-BIPOC classmates in the classroom environment. Students found classroom interactions with non-BIPOC classmates challenging and uncomfortable. Damien, a Posse Scholar, lamented that minority students needed to put in effort to branch out and talk to their White peers. Damien stated:

I feel like us minorities really have to put in the effort. As heavy as that is to really branch out for themselves. And at least talk to like, White individuals and stuff like that. Because they don’t normally like, come to us. Like, they don’t approach us.

Many participants said they did not feel sense of belonging while in class with their peers because, most of the time, they were the only POC in the room. Cade, a non-Posse participant, shared his political science class consisted of mostly White, affluent students, which made him exclaim in his head at the
time, “This is very out of place!” In addition, Brittany, a Posse Scholar, shared being the only Black student among her classmates was “a lot” for her to handle and it made her feel “small” and “isolated.”

Other students explained being in a class among peers who did not look like them made them question if they even belonged in the class altogether. Adrian, a Posse Scholar, shared his experience in an upper-level Spanish class:

It’s like, all like White students. I’ve been questioning whether or not I kind of want to be in class. It’s never the content or anything. I think it’s just the feeling that you’re learning a new language. But then, you’re also in a place where you don’t even know these people, they don’t look like you. They don’t have any common interest. I don’t know if I’m losing my interest in the language or it’s just because of the demographics of the class. That’s been in my head throughout the last couple of classes.

In these instances, students felt uncomfortable sitting in a classroom among a sea of classmates who did not look like them. Adrian questioned if he should be in the class and acknowledged it was not about the content, it was about the people he was learning alongside with. He was second guessing his place in the class, not based on academic ability, but more based on how or if he fit in. Brittany shared that she also felt insignificant while attending class.

Finally, several Posse students shared they did not feel sense of belonging among other Posse cohorts. Some students attributed this disconnect to the COVID-19 global pandemic because it was more difficult to have social gatherings, but others did not think they connected much to their other Posse peers based on lack of interests. Farah characterized the lack of belonging among Posse students as something due to a “disconnect.” Erica believed she ultimately felt valued in the eyes of upper-level Posse students but was not close to them because they did not socialize together. Brittany also shared she was not close to any upper-level Posse Scholars either but said they would naturally gravitate toward each other and be cordial if they were to run into each other at a social event.

Although there was not a strong sense of belonging between cohorts, to some extent there was an underlying connection that Posse Scholars acknowledged and appreciated. This underlying connection among scholars supported what Isaiah spoke about in his interview. He explained that
although scholars were typically connected to their individual cohorts, they were less connected to other cohorts on campus. Isaiah said administration was pushing for more large-scale Posse programming events that would include all cohorts to form sense of belonging.

In conclusion, Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars felt a sense of belonging through both the academic and social systems at College A. In the academic system, academic performance (i.e., formal experiences) hindered sense of belonging for both groups of participants. In addition, in the same system, staff interactions (i.e., informal experiences) fostered sense of belonging but faculty interactions (i.e., informal experiences) hindered sense of belonging for Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars. In the social system, both extracurricular activities (i.e., formal experiences) and peer group interactions (i.e., informal experiences) fostered and hindered sense belonging for both groups of participants.

Both participant groups felt sense of belonging when engaging with individuals who looked like them or people with whom they could identify, most commonly through their race and ethnicity. Through interactions with people with whom they could identify, Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars felt social support, connectedness, and felt they mattered and were cared about, which increased their sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). Participants did not feel a sense of belonging when they interacted informally and formally with people who did not look like them or when they were the only person of color in the room.

Research Question 2

The second research question was: In what ways do Posse Scholars exhibit sense of belonging beyond their Posse cohort? This question was partially answered in the discussion of Research Question 1. Posse Scholars felt sense of belonging beyond their cohort in the academic system through staff interactions (i.e., informal experiences). Scholars indicated College A administrators fostered sense of belonging. In addition, scholars shared the OIA and its staff fostered sense of belonging for them as well. Posse Scholars also felt sense of belonging in the social system, specifically in their extracurricular
activities (i.e., formal experiences). Through participating in multicultural organizations and clubs, and playing sports, scholars felt sense of belonging at College A. In addition, leadership and campus employment also fostered sense of belonging for Posse Scholars. In peer group interactions (i.e., informal experiences), scholars felt a sense of belonging toward other students of color, including AOP and HEOP students.

Non-Posse scholars also said College A administration, participation in multicultural organizations and clubs, competing in sports, and engaging with other students of color—including AOP and HEOP students—fostered sense of belonging. Two items in the social system that non-Posse scholars exclusively reported fostered sense of belonging were theme houses and floormates/roommates. These items came from the extracurricular activities and peer group interactions categories respectively.

Two items in the social system that Posse Scholars exclusively reported fostered sense of belonging were in the extracurricular activities (i.e., formal) sphere. Namely, scholars reported feeling sense of belonging by participating in leadership pursuits and campus employment. Many scholars identified themselves as leaders on campus. In addition, many scholars worked on campus through work-study opportunities.

Posse Scholars found pursuing leadership opportunities fostered sense of belonging on campus. Oftentimes, Posse Scholars shared they had a leadership role in a club or organization on campus. As discussed in Chapter 1, the foundation was characterized by its founder as “a youth leadership development and college diversity program that connects student leaders to the best colleges and universities in the country” (Bial & Rodriguez, 2007, p. 22). The foundation’s first goal was “to expand the pool from which top colleges and universities can recruit outstanding young leaders from diverse backgrounds” (Posse Foundation, 2018, para. 2). It was evident student leadership was valued by the
Posse Foundation. As such, many scholars were also leaders in high school. Brittany said being a leader solidified her sense of belonging in Posse and the greater College A campus community. She shared:

I honestly felt connected with my Posse because of like, my leadership skills and our need to always like, you know, be people who like are active in our community. . . . Like, that’s why I feel most connected to my Posse because we’re always down to like, help people . . . in the [College A] community, um, I think it’s reflected as well with that. I think a lot of people on this campus are leaders in itself. . . . So, I feel like that’s what my biggest like, sense of belonging is on [College A’s] campus as well. With like, my leadership skills.

Brittany’s quote is emblematic of Strayhorn’s (2019) definition of sense of belonging because it relates to feeling important to the campus community. Through her leadership skills, Brittany was proud to support and help members of College A’s community. Leadership for Brittany provided sense of belonging in both her Posse and College A as a whole. Additionally, Haven found her involvement on campus as a way that she felt more like a member. She was proud of contributing to College A in different ways. Being involved made Haven feel valued on campus.

Erica also reported leadership was one way she belonged in the greater college community.

Erica stated, “I feel like College A is full of so many student leaders. . . . For me, I feel like that’s where I fit in.” Erica found being a leader helped her feel a sense belong in her institution. Interestingly, she wondered if College A valued her leadership and activism for the right reasons. Erica said:

I feel valued, but I’m unsure if it’s like, a value that’s coming from a good place. Like I actually like, contribute to these things, and like it’s a value for me, as a person or it’s like a value of like, oh I’m being valued as like, the token Black person that’s always involved in leadership. That’s always good at this and always good at that. Sometimes it’s kind of hard to like, navigate those channels. To figure out like, how you’re seen in other people’s eyes, I question whether it’s like, support that you know, I want to do it so like, they want to do it because they like, support in what I want to achieve, or just like they’re supporting me in a sense, is like kind of like a token figure. I get really involved with a lot of what’s going on and like, a lot of the time it’s like, “Oh! We need Erica to do this.” Or “we need Erica to do that.” So, it’s like [I’m] almost the face of diversity.

Although Erica enjoyed being a leader on campus, she wondered from what place her leadership was celebrated, perceived, and valued by the college. Erica worried if she was genuinely valued or if it was a performative act, which did not sit well with her. Erica’s worry caused her some confusion and
frustration at times. In her interview, Erica mentioned feeling like the token figure twice. Although she gained new opportunities as the only Black person in the room, Erica grew weary of whether she was being used as a token figure. Sincere, genuine support and value is part of Strayhorn’s (2019) definition of sense of belonging; however, these components cannot be insincere and disingenuous. Students see through them and then question if they belong in their campus community.

Farah shared that overall, she somewhat disagreed that she belonged at College A and strongly agreed she considered leaving. However, she did say her involvement with leadership roles in clubs and organizations (e.g., president of African Student Association) and admissions made her feel as though she belonged. Farah was also a leader in high school, serving as class president. Farah admitted, “I think it makes me feel more like a member because, in a way, I do contribute to what’s going on campus.” Through this statement, it was clear membership she gained through holding leadership positions was important to her. Farah was proud to be making a difference on campus. Brittany was the secretary of BSU and was proud to discuss the different events she helped organize for Black History Month. She was proud to put on events and welcome members of the community to them. She said, “It gets me motivated to like, keep making kind of like change, and like, do good here at [College A].”

Finally, campus employment fostered sense of belonging for Posse Scholars. Many scholars discussed how being employed through a work–study role or an on-campus job made them feel as though they belonged in their work environment and the greater College A community. Carlos identified his work–study job in the OIA as a place where he felt comfortable and was able to be himself. He stated, “I don’t feel restricted or like . . . I don’t feel like I’m kind of, you know, in a foreign place.” Carlos shared he had strongly considered leaving College A and connecting with the OIA office helped him. Erica said she definitely had a place in the writing center where she supported her peers. She felt supported by her supervisor, who was also a faculty member, and was the instructor of one of her courses over the recent academic year.
Gemma felt a sense of belonging in the language center where she worked and used her native language, French. Gemma was born and raised in France before coming to the United States. One of her majors was French and she reported she was somewhat satisfied with her major. Gemma’s connection to France and the language was part of her identity and seeking opportunities where she could engage with these components of herself were important to her.

Farah and Haven were both residential advisors (RAs) and found pride in being in this role as an authority employed by the college. Farah reasoned being an RA was the only way she felt belonging in College A as a whole because, “I’m like, basically an official of the college so like, I kind of relay any information the higher ups give me.” In this instance, Farah appreciated feeling respected and important to the campus community, one of Strayhorn’s (2019) sense of belonging definition components.

Damien held a work–study position in the residential life office at College A and had recently applied to become an RA. Sometimes, he felt other students on campus stared him down even when he was not doing anything to provoke them. In these instances, he wished he could say to them:

Just know, I’m just like you. I’m also a student here. I’m not just like random [city where College A is located] resident that just come in. Like, I go to school here. I go to a dorm. I have a major. I have a work-study.

Damien mentioned his work–study position in his list he would like to communicate to another student to show they were similar, and both belonged at College A. Damien reasoned, just like other students, he also had work–study opportunities and belonged. He would like to share with his peers that he was a typical student like themselves. The work–study program was important to Damien in making that distinction and connection.

Finally, although this category did not fit in one of Tinto’s (1993) institutional experiences, some Posse Scholars shared they belonged at College A based on individual (i.e., internal) factors. Individually, scholars who had a strong sense of self and embraced their racial and ethnic identity felt as though they belonged at College A. Adrian explained:
Sense of belonging kind of comes from just knowing like, who you are but also knowing that you belong here. . . . I feel that, even though we’re not the majority, it still feels good to be a Black student on campus because it’s just something that you’re able to easily be proud of.

In addition, Damien asserted:

As a member of the [College A] community, I’m just like any other student but I’m also the minority category. Yes, the minority category just like what my placement is, I guess. . . . I can show other people or other minorities like myself, show them like, you can do it. And you can pretty much make your mark anywhere you go.

Both Adrian and Damien acknowledged challenges but also a sense of pride and welcomed responsibility being students of color at College A. Not all scholars felt this way. For example, Farah reasoned, “I don’t feel like a member of the [College A] community when it comes to like, identity and like, race because I’m a minority at the school.” Several students found that because College A was a PWI, it was not set up for BIPOC students, so belonging would always be a struggle or nearly impossible to achieve. Gemma, a Posse Scholar flatly lamented, “If I was White, I would belong.” In this way, an external, institutional factor made scholars feel as though they did not belong. Many scholars grappled with College A being a PWI, a school type that made them feel like the other.

Finally, many Posse Scholars felt sense of belonging at College A because they earned their spot or because they were chosen to attend through Posse and College A. Adrian reminded himself, “I think it’s mostly just me, knowing that I belong here. And I worked hard to get here.” Gemma proudly said, “I do belong, because I worked to be here. . . . I earned my spot in terms of I’m here. Like you earn to be here.” Gemma was saying to her peers she had as much right to be at College A as any other student, and she worked hard to make it. Haven remained proud she was selected to attend College A and believed her contributions had been significant. She stated:

I was chosen for a reason. And I would like to think that I am living up to that reason—I hope. Sometimes we joke around, and I say like, “It was just for the diversity plus.” But I think I’ve made a significant impact within the community to know that it was more it was more than just the diversity.
Finally, Brittany shared her stance on why she was proud to be a member of the College A community and why she felt as though she belonged, despite challenges she faced. Brittany stated:

I have to remind myself that like, “I got chosen” like out of like, you know, 2,000, 5,000 kids. Like, you know what I mean, to like to be one of the 10 to represent [College A/Posse Foundation city affiliation] so like, you know, I always put that in the back of my head like, “I belong here. I got chosen by [College A]. I didn’t choose [College A], [College A] chose me.”

Brittany emphasized the point that College A selected her. She viewed this distinction as something that affirmed her belonging at College A. That is, her admissions decision was initially made by the institution and not herself. She was proud she made it through the competitive Posse selection process. All participant accounts illustrated the pride and confidence scholars had in why they deserved to be at College A. Being chosen by and working hard to get to College A created general belonging with the institution.

In conclusion, Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging beyond their Posse cohort in the social system. Posse Scholar participants felt a sense of belonging participating in extracurricular activities (i.e., formal interactions) and through peer group interactions (i.e., informal interactions). Two specific extracurricular activities (i.e., formal activities) that fostered sense of belonging for Posse Scholars outside their cohort were leadership pursuits and campus employment.

Scholars felt a sense of belonging when they were more integrated into the social system of College A. When Scholars assumed positions of leadership and authority, they felt valued, respected, important, appreciated by their peers and campus administrators, and they felt sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). Leadership experiences validated for Posse Scholars that they were part of the campus community beyond their Posse cohort.

Summary

Chapter 4 provided the qualitative data and findings from the study. The chapter began by explaining how I treated and analyzed the data. Following this introduction, I provided a more detailed account as to how I coded the data. Next, the chapter included an overview of the study’s data sets,
including institutional documents and descriptive participant data. After this discussion, I provided data analysis and findings for both research questions. Findings indicated there were institutional experiences in both the academic and social systems that fostered and hindered sense of belonging for Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars. In addition, some individual factors also increased Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging to College A while one institutional factor decreased sense of belonging for them. Both student participant groups’ data were discussed in answering the first research question, but only Posse Scholar data were reviewed for the second research question. Chapter 5 includes the significance of the findings, the study’s limitations, recommendations for higher education practitioners, and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter provides an analysis of this study’s findings, as outlined in Chapter 4. In addition, this chapter includes a discussion of the study’s limitations and recommendations for higher education administrators. I also provide several suggestions and opportunities for future research on Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to answer two specific research questions related to the sense of belonging of undergraduate college students of color while attending a liberal arts institution. Specifically, I was interested in understanding sense of belonging of students of color participating in the Posse Program and students of color who were not part of the program.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked: In what ways do Posse Scholars exhibit sense of belonging to their institution as compared to non-Posse scholars? Chapter 4 detailed the ways in which Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars exhibited sense of belonging at College A. This discussion was facilitated through the lens of Tinto’s (1993) institutional experiences components of the model of college student departure. Posse Scholar reported that, in the academic system, academic performance (i.e., formal experiences) hindered sense of belonging. Non-Posse scholars reported the same experiences with academic performance. In addition, staff interactions (i.e., informal experiences) fostered Posse Scholar participant sense of belonging; however, faculty interactions (i.e., informal experiences) hindered sense of belonging for Posse Scholars. Similarly, non-Posse scholars also shared that faculty interactions hindered sense of belonging while staff interactions fostered sense of belonging. In the social system, both extracurricular activities (i.e., formal experiences) and peer group interactions (i.e., informal experiences) fostered and hindered sense of belonging for Posse Scholar participants. Likewise, within
the social system, extracurricular activities and peer group interactions also fostered and hindered non-Posse scholar sense of belonging.

Although participants from each group reported similar experiences, interactions, and individuals that hindered and fostered their sense of belonging, differences arose. For example, non-Posse Scholars found that engaging with theme houses fostered sense of belonging however, Posse Scholars did not report this. In addition, non-Posse scholars shared that floormate and roommate interactions fostered sense of belonging whereas Posse Scholars did not share the same sentiment. In summary, several non-Posse scholars felt a sense of belonging within the residential component of their college experiences through residential communities and the individuals they engaged with while in these spaces. Posse Scholars did not share the same experiences highlighting a key difference in where and by whom sense of belonging was fostered for each student participant group.

It remains unclear as to why non-Posse scholars reported their residential experiences as ones that fostered sense of belonging, while Posse Scholars did not. While Posse Scholars had ample opportunities to forge connections with their BIPOC peers through the program on campus, non-Posse scholars needed to proactively seek out other spaces and places on campus to foster sense of belonging with individuals who looked like them.

Aside from multicultural clubs and organizations that fostered sense of belonging for both groups of participants, the multicultural theme houses were comfortable environments for non-Posse scholars to build community and congregate with other students of color. Although no participant lived there, these spaces on campus were open environments for formal and informal gatherings for all students. For Hector (non-Posse) the multicultural theme house provided him with feelings of safety, solidarity and validation. All of these sentiments contribute to feelings of sense of belonging.

In faculty/staff interactions (i.e., informal experiences), Posse Scholars reported that engaging with College A staff, including administrators (e.g., dean of students, assistant dean of admissions),
Office of Intercultural Affairs (OIA) staff, and Posse mentors and administrators, fostered sense of belonging. In extracurricular activities (i.e., formal experiences), Posse Scholars reported that being a member in multicultural organizations, playing sports, participating in leadership pursuits, and working on campus through campus employment fostered sense of belonging. Finally, in peer group interactions (i.e., informal experiences), Posse Scholars reported that interacting with their Posse cohort and other students of color fostered sense of belonging.

Among faculty/staff interactions (i.e., informal experiences), non-Posse scholars reported that engaging with College A staff, including administrators, fostered sense of belonging. In extracurricular activities (i.e., formal experiences), non-Posse participants reported that participating in multicultural organizations, playing sports both recreationally and competitively, and frequenting theme houses fostered sense of belonging. Finally, in peer group interactions (i.e., informal experiences), non-Posse scholars reported that interacting with other students of color and their roommates and dormmates fostered sense of belonging.

Both groups of participants found that academic performance (i.e., formal experiences) hindered sense of belonging because many experienced academic major uncertainties or difficulty adjusting to academics, and several participants withdrew from a course or a term. In faculty/staff (i.e., informal) interactions, all participants shared that interacting with faculty members during office hours hindered sense of belonging. In extracurricular activities (i.e., formal experiences), both Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars reported engaging with Greek organizations hindered sense of belonging. Finally, for peer group interactions (i.e., informal experiences), both groups shared that interacting with their peers and classmates in the classroom setting hindered sense of belonging. Specific to Posse Scholars, several participants shared they did not feel a sense of belonging among other Posse cohorts.
Connections Through Shared Experiences

Through analyzing the collected data, I observed that Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars felt a sense of belonging to their institution when they engaged with individuals on campus who looked like them or had shared interests and similar backgrounds to them. Interactions were formal and informal and occurred among peers and administrators. Ultimately, Posse Scholars felt they most belonged when they were interacting with others who they felt they could connect with through a shared experience or identity. Importantly, Posse Scholars felt the more sense of belonging with the Posse organization, and their sense of belonging was fostered by Posse mentors, administrators, and cohort members at College A.

Posse Scholars reported engaging with individuals who looked like them and shared similar interest and backgrounds most frequently through the Posse Foundation. It was evident that Posse Scholars exhibited sense of belonging to their institution through their participation in the Posse Foundation. Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging with Posse mentors, Posse administrators, and members of their own Posse cohort. Several Posse Scholars also mentioned the support they received from the Posse office located in their home city as important in ensuring their success and feeling they belonged.

Connections to Posse

The majority of Posse Scholars shared they felt most sense of belonging with Posse in College A. Furthermore, numerous Posse Scholar participants shared they would not have chosen College A again if it were not for Posse. Many Posse Scholars admitted they would not have stayed at College A if they did not have the support and community of Posse. Thus, Scholars’ overall sense of belonging at College A was low. As previously shared in Chapter 4, Brittany summarized her experience as a Posse Scholar attending College A, stating:
I, myself like, I feel like I’m more connected towards my Posse in a sense than I am towards like kind of like membership as like in the College A community. So, it’s like, I am a member of my Posse who goes to College A. I’m not really like a College A student but happens to be in Posse.

In the previous quote, Brittany was establishing and identifying her membership and sense of belonging in the campus community. Her primary affiliation and identity centered on being part of the Posse Program. Her secondary membership was with College A, an affiliation by default, because College A was the school with which her Posse was partnered. Importantly, Brittany strongly identified with Posse, the prominent community with which she associated.

Interestingly, Posse is a small, micro community in the College A campus. Other scholars went so far as to share that Posse was the only community to which they felt they belonged at College A.

One potential reason why Posse Scholars felt connected to Posse was they had formed a community before arriving on campus. Scholars were selected in the fall of their senior year of high school. After the cohort is established, rising Posse Scholars are required to participate in Pre-Collegiate Training (PCT) in the winter, spring, and summer before arriving on campus. PCT includes workshops in several areas, including team building and group support and cross-cultural communication (Posse Foundation, 2022b). Scholars participate in PCT as a cohort, so they can form a support network and community before starting school.

Damien reflected, “I appreciate Posse because in a way, we already had a connection before going to college. So, it’s still like, if you have a special dynamic, no matter . . . your Posse’s always there.” Brittany echoed, “like the number of like, layers that Posse like kind of makes us go through. . . . We came together, we’re here together.” Erica added, “That [Posse] community in and of itself, it’s like you know you always have a place there. . . . Those people genuinely care for you. They went through the same process as you.” Each participant acknowledged the connections and experiences they had with their Posse cohort prior to arriving at College A strengthened their sense of belonging in a unique and impactful way.
Connections Through Social Systems

Another way Posse Scholars engaged with individuals who looked like them and shared similar interests and backgrounds as them was through participation in extracurricular activities, including participating in multicultural organizations and playing sports, both formally and informally. Extracurricular outlets were opportunities for Posse Scholars to seek out peers on campus to interact with socially and athletically. Participation in extracurricular activities helped to foster Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging at College A.

In addition, Posse Scholars found that interacting with peer groups of students of color who were not part of Posse (e.g., Academic Opportunity Program [AOP] students, Higher Education Opportunity Program [HEOP] students) fostered sense of belonging. Interactions happened in various formal and informal settings. Formally, Posse Scholars interacted with other students of color in their multicultural organizations. Informally, Posse Scholars interacted with other Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) students in places like the Unity Room, which is an extension of the OIA. The Unity Room was considered safe and comfortable for BIPOC students on campus, and it was the hub where Posse Scholars could regularly count on seeing their friends outside of the classroom.

Posse Scholars sought social support from those who looked like them, including administrators and peers. Posse Scholar participants found they more easily connected, or as Strayhorn (2019) described, experienced “a sensation of connectedness” (p. 4), to individuals on campus with whom they had a shared identity. Most times, the initial shared identity was based on race and ethnicity. Posse Scholars felt most seen and heard when engaging with staff and students who looked like them as well. Posse Scholars felt that other BIPOC campus community members cared about them and demonstrated care through support and relationship building. Posse Scholars knew they mattered to others in the BIPOC community of staff and peers because of the shared connection and bond. All these components helped Posse Scholars feel like they belonged at College A.
There are specific components of Strayhorn’s (2019) definition of sense of belonging related to the way Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging to their institution when engaging with individuals on campus who looked like them or shared similar interests and backgrounds to them. Strayhorn’s (2019) components included, “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff and peers” (p. 4). Posse Scholars sought each of these components in their pursuit to belong at College A.

Strayhorn’s (2019) definition relates to Tinto’s (1993) model of college student departure because Strayhorn emphasized the importance of students integrating and making connections in both the social and academic systems of the institutional experience. Tinto reasoned students drop out because they fail to successfully make meaningful connections with others and integrate fully into the campus community (McCubbin, 2003). Tinto (2017) attributed a student’s ability to achieve sense of belonging as one form of commitment that helps solidify a students’ membership to a group, such as communities in a college, both large and small.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, Adrian discussed how playing basketball allowed him to connect with his peers on campus:

None of it’s about like, worrying about if you belong because you’re Black. It’s mostly just you belong, because you all have that common interest of basketball. It makes it easier for everything. It’s easier to interact with them because of that. It kind of breaks the wall.

Adrian used basketball as his vehicle to make connections with others on campus. The common thread of basketball as a mechanism to unite players was more powerful than their race, which typically divided them. Although inconsequential, pick-up basketball provided a “sensation of a connectedness” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 4) that Adrian craved.

Similarly, as mentioned in Chapter 4, Erica shared that her participation in Black Student Association (BSU) meetings solidified “perceived social support” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 4). She confessed,
“Um, when we have [BSU] meetings where we’re talking about issues that like, pertain to our lives, like I know I’m not the only one that feels a certain way in the room.” Erica shared this example with a level of relief, knowing she had friends and peers in a specific organization on campus that she could relate to and confide in.

**Summary**

Related to the first research question, results from this study provide a better understanding of how Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging at their institution. In conclusion, my findings revealed that Posse Scholars felt a sense belonging to their Posse and the greater College A community. Scholars felt a sense of belonging through faculty interactions (i.e., formal experiences), extracurricular activities (i.e., formal experiences), and peer group interactions (i.e., informal experiences). Although their sense of belonging was strongest in the Posse community, when they engaged both formally and informally with individuals on campus who looked like them and could connect with them, Posse Scholars felt sense of belonging at College A as well. Interactions with others who looked like them and could connect with them allowed Posse Scholars to feel socially supported and connected on campus. They also helped Posse Scholars feel as though they mattered and were cared about. The experiences of the Posse Scholars were components that are all important pieces of Strayhorn’s (2019) definition of sense of belonging.

Strayhorn’s (2019) definition of sense of belonging can be connected to Tinto’s (1993) model of college student departure. Specifically, Strayhorn acknowledges the importance for students to have positive social and academic experiences while attending college. These components are integral to Tinto’s (1993) model of college student departure. Strayhorn posits, students’ involvement within the social and academic spheres of campus life influences sense of belonging (2008b). Conversely, Tinto’s (1993) model can be connected to Strayhorn’s (2019) definition. Tinto acknowledges the impact of sense of belonging on student departure, as championed by Strayhorn. Tinto (2017) attributed a
student’s ability to achieve sense of belonging as one form of commitment that helps solidify a students’ membership to a group, such as communities in a college, both large and small. Forming membership influences departure decisions. In these ways both scholars’ work relates and connects to one another.

Through his model, Tinto (1993) suggests students leave college because they are unsuccessful in making meaningful connections with individuals in academic systems (e.g., with faculty/staff) and social systems (e.g., with peers; McCubbin, 2003). Similarly, Strayhorn’s (2019) definition of sense of belonging mentions the necessity for students to believe they receive social support and experience feelings of connectedness by all members of the campus community, including faculty, staff, and peers. Thus, Strayhorn’s definition of sense of belonging and Tinto’s (1993) complement and connect to one another.

Tinto’s (1993) model of college student departure indicates that students’ successful integration, in both academic and social systems, influence their decisions to depart or stay at their institution. I specifically situated the data findings in the components of the institutional experiences portion of Tinto’s model because that is how I interpreted the data were most appropriately categorized and organized. It should be noted, the focus of this project was on sense of belonging, not college departure decisions, although participants did share whether they had considered leaving school.

The findings showed that components of both the academic systems (e.g., faculty/staff interactions), and social systems (e.g., extracurricular activities, peer group interactions), positively influenced sense of belonging for participants in this study. For example, in faculty/staff interactions, all participants felt sense of belonging toward some members of College A administration. Although faculty and staff are both included within the academic system, faculty are more tied to this system than staff. In general, both groups of participants did not feel much sense of belonging to the academic systems at play within College A. The components within the academic system including academic performance and faculty hindered participant sense of belonging.
Under the extracurricular activities categories, both groups of participants felt that engaging in multicultural organizations fostered sense of belonging. Although there were several experiences in each system that hindered sense of belonging (e.g., engaging with faculty in office hours, Greek organizations), results were overall positive in fostering sense of belonging.

All participants reported negative experiences related to the academic performance portion of the academic system, experiences that hindered participants’ sense of belonging. Negative experiences included academic major uncertainty, difficulty adjusting, and course or term withdrawal. Results may be due to participants’ preentry attributes. According to Tinto (1993), preentry attributes include: (a) family background, (b) skills and abilities, and (c) prior schooling. Half of Posse Scholars were first-generation students, and many attended under-resourced urban high schools in urban settings. Only one non-Posse scholar was a first-generation college student. Several participants from both groups came from one-parent households. Preentry attributes could have contributed to having experiences in the academic performance category that hindered sense of belonging.

Related to preentry attributes, the Posse Scholar selection process is different than the typical admissions processes employed at selective institutions. As detailed in Chapter 1, the Posse Foundation utilizes a Dynamic Assessment Process (DAP) to evaluate potential Scholars (Posse Foundation, 2021a). This process focuses more on candidates’ leadership abilities, teamwork skills, and determination to succeed. Although academic standards are taken into consideration, the DAP focuses more on soft skills when determining Scholar nominees’ potential for success in the program and in college. The foundation focuses more on students’ potential for success rather than traditional success metrics (i.e., standardized test scores). Because of this alternative process, Scholars may not be at the same academic level as their peers when they matriculate into their Posse partner institution.

Conversely, non-Posse scholar participants in the study were selected and admitted to College A through the traditional application process. Each participant submitted a complete application including
transcripts, college essays, letters of recommendation, among other required materials. Applications were evaluated by College A admissions officials. Leadership, resiliency, and communication skills are explicitly emphasized when reviewing Posse Scholars’ candidacy through the DAP however, these characteristics may not be prioritized for applicants who apply via the traditional method.

So, because Posse Scholars were evaluated on different metrics when considering their candidacy for College A, the group of Scholars who arrived on campus brought with them a unique set of characteristics valued by the Posse Foundation and College A. Traditionally admitted students like the non-Posse scholars who participated in the study gained admission via a potentially different set of criteria which could be influenced by their preentry characteristics. Through the eligibility criteria I created and the selection process I employed, I attempted to recruit two groups of students who shared many similar characteristics however, differences occurred which could have influenced the study’s findings. Ultimately, each group of participants were selected to attend College A but through different means. These distinctions must be acknowledged as they could directly impact participants’ preentry attributes.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked: In what ways do Posse Scholars exhibit sense of belonging beyond their Posse cohort? As described in Chapter 4, Posse Scholars exhibited sense of belonging beyond their Posse cohort in the academic and social systems of Tinto’s (1993) model of college student departure. In the extracurricular (i.e., formal) component of the social system, Posse Scholars exclusively shared that engaging in leadership pursuits and participating in campus employment fostered sense of belonging in the College A community beyond their Posse cohort.

Leadership

Through analyzing the collected data, I observed Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging to College A beyond their cohort when they held positions of leadership and authority. Beginning with
leadership, many Posse Scholars considered themselves leaders before arriving to campus and shared they led in different capacities and ways at College A. Isaiah attributed leadership as a mechanism for Posse Scholars to thrive and build supportive networks. He shared students who were most involved on campus were most likely to thrive. As discussed previously, a pillar of the Posse Foundation is leadership, so it makes sense that Posse Scholars are innately leaders and choose to lead on campus. As such, many were leaders before joining the program. In addition, they may have been selected into the Posse program because of their leadership qualities.

Posse Scholars found that being a leader at College A made them feel as though they belonged. Brittany and Erica shared being a leader made them fit in more because College A was filled with so many leaders. Being leaders themselves allowed them to feel more like members of the campus community, when oftentimes they felt like outsiders. Farah and Haven were proud to contribute to the campus community through their leadership pursuits. Erica shared leadership was a critical personal value for her and that being able to live this value in the college was important to her.

The leadership finding from this study is consistent with and supports literature that documents that student-held leadership positions on campus positively impact college student sense of belonging. For example, Maestas et al. (2007) conducted a longitudinal study of students attending a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in their 1st and 2nd years on campus and found that holding a leadership position positively influenced student sense of belonging. Ribera et al. (2017) found first-year students who served in leadership roles in student organizations or groups experienced stronger peer belonging than students who did not hold a formal leadership role. In addition, holding a leadership role positively and significantly impacted first-year students’ “institutional acceptance” (Ribera et al., 2017, p. 557). Ribera et al. noted that students who assume leadership positions are introduced and connected to important campus individuals and resources, which are connections and networks that may bolster sense of belonging. Although assuming a leadership role is not an official high-impact practice as defined
by Kuh (2008), the work by Ribera et al. (2017) suggests its inclusion may be warranted given its influence on positive student outcomes.

**Campus Employment**

Holding campus employment also increased Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging beyond their Posse cohort. Several Posse Scholars were employed on campus in areas that played to their strengths and interests. Erica, a strong writer, was a writing center tutor. Gemma, a native French speaker, worked in the language lab on campus. Both scholars felt a sense of comfort and belonging in their work environments. Farah and Haven were both residential advisors (RAs) and appreciated being part of College A staff because they were in positions of authority and felt as though their peers respected them in their roles.

Damien believed his work–study role made him feel as though he belonged at College A because it was a typical part of being a student on campus. He felt it added to his authenticity in being a member of the campus, when sometimes he did not feel like a member. Damien, a gregarious and talkative student, worked the front desk of the residential life office. He enjoyed interacting with people who stopped by, considered himself a “connector,” and always sought ways to grow his network. Being the face of the residential life office allowed him to use his strengths and meet more people. He looked forward to the RA selection process hoping he’d be offered a position.

In addition, being student employees on campus made Posse Scholars feel more integrated with the school. Through their campus employment, Posse Scholars enjoyed holding some authority and earning respect from peers and staff. Finally, working on campus made scholars feel important, something they did not always feel as minority students attending a predominantly White institution (PWI). Posse Scholars found their peers valued the work they did to support others while attending College A.
Students who are employed by the college are more integrated into the institution, which is an important component of sense of belonging. They have the opportunity to work with administration and network with professionals. In addition, through working, they are supporting the mission, values, and goals of the college, which could also allow them to strengthen ties to their school (Paynter, 2021). Student workers are employees and stewards of the institution in meaningful and sometimes powerful ways (Paynter, 2021). Being a student worker allows students to expand on their leadership skills and learn new skills (Paynter, 2021). Posse Scholars were proud to represent College A in the capacity of student employees.

Research has shown college student campus employment increases and positively impacts students’ sense of belonging (Furr & Elling, 2000; Museus & Chang, 2021; Paynter, 2021). Museus and Chang (2021) found working on campus was positively associated with sense of belonging for first-generation students at a public research institution in the Midwest. Paynter (2021) found student employment—specifically working in a campus student union—positively impacted students’ sense of belonging. Furthermore, Furr and Elling (2000) found on-campus employment positively impacted students’ ability to integrate in both of Tinto’s (1993) social and academic systems through engaging with professors and participating in extracurricular clubs and organizations. Furr and Elling’s finding echoed Astin’s (1993) research that revealed on-campus employment had positive effects on student success, because on-campus work “almost by definition enhanced student involvement with their institution” (Riggert et al., 2006, p. 69). Finally, Nuñez and Sansone (2016) found on-campus work helped first-generation Latinx students feel a greater sense of belonging to their institution in which they were the minority.

**Summary**

Several components of Strayhorn’s (2019) definition of sense of belonging relate to Posse Scholars’ sentiments that being leaders on campus and holding campus employment made them feel as
though they belonged at College A. Strayhorn’s (2019) definition components included “feeling . . . respected, valued by and important to the campus community . . . such as faculty, staff and peers” (p. 4). As leaders on campus, Posse Scholars felt valued by both their peers and staff as they contributed to positive things at College A. Many Posse Scholars shared they wanted to make the college a better place, and their leadership endeavors helped realize this goal. Thus, engaging in leadership pursuits helped Posse Scholars feel like they belonged more at College A.

With respect to Research Question 2, the findings provide insights into how Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging at College A beyond their Posse cohort and the general Posse organization. In summary, Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging at College A beyond their Posse cohort when engaging in extracurricular activities (i.e., formal experiences). Specifically, Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging when participating in leadership pursuits and working on campus through campus employment opportunities. Extracurricular activities allowed students to feel accepted, respected, and valued by their peers and other members of the campus community, which are important components of college student sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019).

Tinto (1993) emphasized the need for students to have meaningful institutional experiences because they would produce positive student outcomes, including retention. Tinto suggested experiences in the academic and social systems influence students’ ability to successfully integrate into the institution. The stronger the integration, the less likely students are to depart. As previously established, this study did not focus on retention; rather, it focused on sense of belonging. I used Tinto’s institutional experiences to organize the social and academic experiences participants shared, and I qualified if they fostered or hindered participant sense of belonging.

For Posse Scholars, they felt a sense of belonging outside of their Posse cohort, mostly through engaging in extracurricular activities, including leadership pursuits and campus employment. This finding was in alignment with Tinto’s (1993) model because these two types of outside the classroom activities
yield strong connections to campus. Being a campus leader affords students agency to make decisions and make a difference at their school. Holding campus employment allows students to work professionally at the school and earn money, which provides financial security and permits students to have some level of authority and collegiality with staff on campus.

**Limitations**

As with many research studies, limitations arose that impacted the initial research plan presented in Chapter 3. One limitation impacted the data collection of administrators and students. As previously discussed in Chapter 4, I planned on interviewing a representative at the Posse Foundation itself; however, the Posse Foundation was unable to entertain this request due to policy and organizational stipulations. The purpose of having a Posse Foundation administrator participate in the study was to gain a better understanding and scope of the organization’s goals, mission, vision, and other expectations. For example, I wanted to understand, from a Posse Foundation perspective, what the expectations and goals were for integrating Posse Scholars into their institutions. Because a Posse Foundation administrator was unwilling to be interviewed, the research relied more heavily on Posse Foundation documents and materials found on the Posse Foundation’s webpage. Although the public information was helpful, having the opportunity to interview an individual working at the Posse Foundation would have provided another level of complexity and insight to benefit the aims and goals of the research study.

For student participants, I was able to recruit participants who met all initial goals related to class years and genders for both the Posse Scholar and the non-Posse scholar groups. However, for the Posse Scholars group \((n = 8)\), five participants were sophomores, which presented a lack of cohort diversity. The final three Posse Scholar participants included two juniors and one senior. I did not anticipate more than half of the Posse Scholar participants would be from the same cohort. However, due to the challenge of recruiting participants, I permitted all five sophomore Posse Scholars to
participate in the study. The lack of participant cohort variation limited the perspectives and experiences shared by this group of participants. It is also important to note this group of participants had only experienced College A during the COVID-19 global pandemic, which impacted and influenced, to varying degrees, their feelings of sense of belonging in Posse and the greater College A community.

Limitations related to being the sole researcher of a qualitative study also arose. Because I was the only researcher of the study, coding decisions were limited to my judgment and choices. Furthermore, I did not receive additional feedback in operationalizing the codes I selected when analyzing the data. I also did not have another person to assist in ensuring the reliability, validity, and consistency of my codebook. Finally, as discussed in my statement of positionality in Chapter 3, my position as a researcher is unique and may influence the study unintentionally. To the best of my ability, I put my assumptions, beliefs, aside and approach this work subjectively. Despite my efforts, there is the potential that biases crept into my work which requires acknowledgement.

The potential for the findings of this study to be transferable to other educational settings and groups of students of color is another limitation of the research study. Transferability is the action on the part of a consumer of research to apply findings from one situation to another similar type of environment or situation of which they are familiar (Barnes et al., 2005). The bounds of this research project were very specific and explicit. I interviewed Posse and non-Posse scholars attending a selective, private, northeast, liberal arts Posse partner institution, College A. Furthermore, the cohorts of Posse Scholars that attended College A all resided in the same city and metropolitan area. As of the time of this study, there were over 60 Posse partner schools drawing Posse Scholars from 10 cities across the country, with varying degrees of similarities and differences to College A and its students. All recommendations discussed in the next section specifically relate to data captured from the educational setting of College A.
The findings of this study could potentially be applied to individuals who are not in the study; however, it would be important to apply findings only to students who match the overall description of a Posse Scholar or non-Posse scholar, who live in urban settings, and choose to study at a liberal arts college in the northeast geographic region of the United States. It would be inappropriate to apply study findings to any other college student attending any type of higher education institution. The findings will be meaningful to people who are not involved in the research because sense of belonging is an important construct many colleges attempt to create for its students.

Scholars and practitioners must exercise caution when applying the study’s findings to institutions and student populations that do not align with those studied in this project. For example, although the University of Michigan is a Posse partner institution with a similar student body racial demographics breakdown, the school was vastly different from College A in that it was in the Midwest and it was a large, public, and highly selective than College A. As such, transferability may be limited. Each Posse partner campus has its own culture and group of students and faculty, so transferring findings from one institution and group of students to another may be inappropriate.

**Impact of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic**

I have previously acknowledged that I conducted this study during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Although the pandemic influenced and altered my methodological data collection approach, other implications must also be discussed. As such, it is important that I explicitly place my findings within the COVID-19 landscape.

My study focused on understanding sense of belonging which, as previously established, relates in part to the “feeling or sensation of connectedness” (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 4). Opportunities for collegiate students to create connections among peers, faculty, staff, and their institution were impacted by the pandemic. Due to COVID-19, there was a decline in the types of social interactions for students on campus that may have contributed to and affected their ability to feel a sense of belonging.
to their institution. Were it not for the pandemic, participants’ social interactions and feelings of sense of belonging may have been different.

College A shifted to remote study in March of 2020. In the fall of the same year, the largely residential institution provided students the opportunity to study on campus or remotely. All participants in the study chose to return to campus in the fall of 2020, with the exception of two non-Posse scholars who chose to take a yearlong leave of absence. Classes in the fall of 2020 were offered in-person and online. Participants expressed dislike and frustration towards online courses as the experience was not the same as if they were in an actual classroom. Seven of the 16 participants began their first-year term in the fall of 2020, which was several months after the COVID-19 pandemic began. Student participants from other class years were also impacted however, they all had the opportunity to experience the traditional aspects of college before the pandemic. Many participants’ collegiate experiences were altered as campus-wide COVID-19 protocols changed institutional experiences within both the academic and social systems.

For example, participants shared with me that many club meetings were held remotely over Zoom. Forming bonds and relationships through remote meetings could have impacted participants’ ability to form sense of belonging to other on campus and with the campus as a whole. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a sea change for colleges and universities nationwide. Like many college students across the country, participants in this study were affected, and results of this study should be interpreted with these contextual factors in mind.

**Contributions**

This study is situated in the growing body of college student sense of belonging literature. As colleges and universities grapple with enrollment and retention challenges, administrators must look at all facets of the college student experience and support ways to ensure students persist. Of equal importance, colleges are now enrolling more students of color than ever before as the college going
BIPOC student population continues to increase (Brown, 2019). Thus, it is important for institutional leaders to understand how they can better create communities that improve college student retention for students of color. The literature has shown sense of belonging impacts the decisions of students of colors to persist in school (Gopalan & Brady, 2019).

Sense of belonging research continues to expand as scholars make new contributions. More specifically, the human participants of my study were students of color, and the institutional setting was a liberal arts college. This area of literature is less robust, although new work continues to be published. The most unique characteristic of my study is that I examined sense of belonging of Posse Scholars attending a liberal arts college and compared them to other students of color who were not part of the leadership program.

The findings of this study are framed using components of Tinto’s (1993) model of college student departure. Specifically, the institutional experiences part of Tinto’s model forms the basis of how the findings were interpreted and analyzed. Although often criticized and revised by scholars (see Chapter 2), Tinto’s model of college student departure remains a paramount model and framework in the retention literature.

My findings contribute to both the limited body of Posse literature and sense of belonging of BIPOC liberal arts students. The findings show how institutional experiences, from both the academic and social systems, foster and hinder sense of belonging for non-Posse and Posse Scholars attending a liberal arts college. Most importantly, through my research I found Posse Scholars felt more sense of belonging to their Posse rather than College A. Outside of their Posse, Posse Scholars achieved sense of belonging through leadership pursuits and campus employment.

**Recommendations for Higher Education Administrators**

The results from this study generate several recommendations for higher education practitioners relating to ensuring sense of belonging for students of color and Posse Scholars. It should
be noted once more that, at the time of the study, there were over 60 Posse partner schools that may have shared some similarities and differences when compared with College A. The recommendations presented in the next sections relate most specifically to College A, but may be expanded and adapted to other schools, if appropriate and necessary.

**Institutional Recommendations (College A)**

I suggest several recommendations for both College A and Posse. These recommendations are broken up into institutions recommendations (College A) and organizational recommendations (Posse and College A). For institutional recommendations, I suggest College A increase representation and provide training on campus.

**Representation**

The first recommendation is centered on increasing representation of individuals of color in the campus community at College A, including both students and faculty members. This recommendation is in alignment with one of the aims of the college’s 2020–2025 strategic plan, which emphasizes recruiting and retaining students, faculty, and staff from diverse backgrounds. As of 2022, College A’s student race and ethnicity breakdown was as follows: 67% of its students were White, 9% were Latinx, and 4% were Black (NCES, 2022). The institution was overwhelmingly White, and Black and Latinx BIPOC students made up less than 15% of the student population.

Beginning with students, many participants from both groups shared they would like the school to include more students that looked like them. An overwhelming number of participants shared they struggled with being the “only student of color in the room” while navigating different spaces and engaging with different individuals at College A. The experience of being the only student of color in the room contributed to students feeling a lack of sense of belonging. For example, Brittany, a Posse participant, recalled:
I was the only Black woman in that class and um, I think it was a lot for me. . . . It was just uncomfortable and weird. And I felt kind of small and I don’t know. That’s like, a place where I was just like, I don’t belong in this class. Like I felt completely like, you know, isolated.

Brittany’s response shows that her learning environment was homogenous in nature and a place where she could not identify with other peers who looked like her.

Another interesting perspective came from Erica, a Posse participant. Erica shared:

Representation is a really big thing. You can scream representation from the rooftops and it’s like that’s the one thing that really matters for you to feel like you belong. You can’t be the only person in the room and make it feel like that’s something to be okay about.

Erica’s sentiment highlights the necessity to increase student diversity so students of color can see others who look like them, which impacts sense of belonging.

Students shared it was important for them to see others who looked like them because it influenced their feelings of sense of belonging. For example, Farah, a Posse participant, confessed, “I don’t really feel like a member of the community when it comes to like, identity and like, race because I’m a minority at this school.” Clearly, her race and identity made her feel as though she did not belong at College A. Perhaps she would have felt greater sense of belonging if she were surrounded by more peers and classmates who reflected her own racial and ethnic identity.

In addition to respondents’ accounts, the importance of representation for students of color attending PWIs is also present in scholarly literature. Allen (1992) suggested the lack of a critical mass of Black students, faculty, and administrators impacts Black students’ ability to form a sense of connection and community on campus. Torres (2009) found Black students felt “cultural alienation” (p. 888) while attending a PWI. Alienation is the antithesis of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). During instances of alienation, students will look for support from individuals who they can connect with and receive validation (Tatum, 1999). Sinanan (2012) revealed Black students on a liberal arts campus sought out other Black students for support. Sinanan’s results may explain partially why BIPOC students remain comfortable and gravitate toward those on campus who look like them. Increasing the population of
BIPOC students at College A would increase communities of support and familiarity for students of color who otherwise struggle to find their place while attending school.

In addition to increasing student representation on campus, it is also important for students to be taught and mentored by faculty who look like them. Thus, it is important to ensure colleges recruit diverse faculty. In the 2021–2022 academic year, only 27 (i.e., 12%) of the college’s 230 faculty were domestic people of color. Additionally, 17 (i.e., 7%) faculty were international, and a staggering 186 (i.e., 81%) were White (College A, 2022c). The data showed College A’s faculty was not diverse and diversifying instructors needed improvement. Devin, a non-Posse participant who is Black, discussed benefits they experienced being taught by a Black instructor in a course that focused on Afrofuturism:

> Probably also having that shared experience with . . . growing up Black is something that we can like, relate on sometimes. I think it helps that like, she’s like a person of color to help like, reinforce like saying like “Yeah, this really happens in real life, guys.” You know, like as an example, I think that helps like, make it more convincing.

Through this quote, Devin explained how important shared life experience was for them in a classroom of peers who were majority White. When sharing the quote, Devin almost felt relieved that their instructor for this specific course was Black. It made Devin feel good to have an ally in the room.

Although participants from both groups generally reported that faculty hindered their sense of belonging, in some instances like the one described by Devin, faculty fostered sense of belonging in the classroom setting. It should be noted that Devin’s sentiments were based on shared ethnicity they had with their instructor for a course that was focused on Afrofuturism.

Conversely, Brianna, a non-Posse participant, shared the frustration she had in a course taught by the head of the Africana Studies Department, who was not Black. Brianna shared:

> It’s very, very, very interesting, yeah. Well, so she was a really good teacher. Like, I really liked her. But she can’t really relate to a lot of stuff that she’s teaching because she’s not Black. I get like, she sympathizes with us, but it’s like you never actually have been through like anything that we have.
Both Devin’s and Brianna’s accounts highlight the importance students of color place on being taught by people who look like them and how being able to relate to them is meaningful and important. Being taught by faculty of color also fosters sense of belonging in an environment (i.e., the classroom) where BIPOC students often do not feel as though they belong.

Baker (2013) showed lack of faculty diversity has serious implications for BIPOC students. Baker found Black and Latinx students attending selective schools benefit from having faculty members who match their own racial identity. Faculty–student connections positively influence student academic performance. Connections formed in the academic system make students of color feel valued, which is an important part of Strayhorn’s (2019) definition of sense of belonging. Although Bakers’s study was not explicitly related to sense of belonging, it demonstrated the positive outcome increasing faculty diversity has on students of color attending selective colleges. Thus, I encourage College A to recruit and retain more faculty of color.

**Training**

Although both groups of participants expressed challenges related to lack of representation on campus from both student and faculty perspectives, they also shared peers and instructors were often the perpetrators of microaggressions directed at students of color. Students shared they experienced microaggressions related to their hair, their identity, and their language, speech, or accent. Instances of microaggressions ranged from mild (e.g., a professor called one Black student the name of the only other student of color in the class) to extreme (e.g., White students using the N-word). To reduce mistreatments directed at students of color, the college should provide formal training and education related to microaggressions, implicit bias, and other topics as they relate to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).

At the time of the study, College A had the Coalition for Inclusiveness and Diversity (CID), which offered sessions and workshops focused on DEI topics such as inclusion in classroom teaching and the
workplace (College A, 2022d). Among its activities, CID led new faculty orientations and promoted inclusion and diversity in faculty applicant pools. It is unclear if training on microaggression, implicit bias, and other DEI topics were included in new faculty onboarding; however, adding these topics to the slate of activities may be a valuable addition to ensure faculty engage and interact with students in a respectful and equitable manner.

Failure to engage with students in a respectful and equitable manner can negatively impact a student’s experience on campus. For example, after recounting a painful microaggression, while attending a professor’s office hours, Amber, a non-Posse participant, shared, “Now, I don’t really feel comfortable like, going to office hours because I’m scared that stuff is going to happen again.” That one negative interaction made Amber reluctant to engage with her instructor in office hours in the future. Negative experiences like Amber’s can take away from a student’s ability to feel a sense belonging in the classroom and beyond.

In addition to Amber, other participants experienced microaggressions on campus. Several of the encounters were driven by participants’ identity and racial background. Cade, a non-Posse participant, recounted a time when he was assaulted in front of a group of his peers for being Brown. Haven, a Posse scholar who was born and raised in a developing country, was asked by a peer, “So, how did you make it to College A if your country is a poor country?” Haven found this encounter to be troubling and offensive.

In addition to identity-driven attacks, several female participants were on the receiving end of microaggressions related to their hair. While attending office hours, Brianna, a non-Posse participant, had her academic advisor touch her hair while exclaiming, “It’s just so coil-y. It’s just so interesting!” Brittany, a Posse participant, had hallmates ogle at her hair after exiting the shower. She internally lamented, “I’m not an animal, you cannot pet me.” Similarly, Haven, who proudly donned an afro,
shared many people on campus asked her if her hair was hers. Each of these instances made participants angry and uncomfortable.

First-year students at College A are introduced to campus resources available at College A through first-year orientation. At orientation, students learn from the offices of community standards, OIA, and Title IX, among others (College A, 2022e). The purpose of the orientation sessions is for students to learn about resources available on campus and understand the culture and expectations set forth by the college. Through first-year orientation, College A provides training and resources to students.

Torres (2009) indicated students of color attending PWIs are more likely to experience discrimination. In addition, Black students attending PWIs are often the targets of microaggressions perpetrated by their peers, faculty members, and administrators (Solórzano & Ceja, 2000). As a result, students who endure microaggressions are more likely to feel isolated. Combined microaggression experiences cause Black students to perceive the racial climate at their institution negatively. Yosso et al. (2009) found Latinx students who experienced microaggressions on campus felt lower levels of sense of belonging at their institution. Thus, it is important for College A to conduct meaningful trainings for all members of the campus community to combat the spread of discrimination and microaggressions directed at students of color.

Organizational Recommendations (Posse and College A)

In addition to providing institutional recommendations for College A, organizationally, for both Posse and College A, I suggest to increase sense of belonging among Posse cohorts, and create inclusive spaces exclusively for Posse Scholars.

Increase Sense of Belonging Among Cohorts

Although Posse Scholars reported strong sense of belonging to their Posse cohorts and the Posse organization in general, several Posse Scholars noted they did not feel much sense of community
or belonging to other Posse cohorts. Brittany, a sophomore admitted, “I don’t really like, talk to the [Posse] seniors. . . . We see each other [and] say our hi’s or bye’s. But again, I feel most close to my Posse.” Farrah expanded on what she characterized as a “disconnect among Posse cohorts,” sharing:

But I do feel like at times there is like, a disconnect just between all the Posses. Especially just from like, what I’ve noticed with the younger Posses. Some of them I’m like, pretty cool with, and then the others of them are like, much more distant. Especially like, the first-year Posse. I’m probably only like, cordial with like, two of them. The rest of them like, we act like we don’t even know each other. Honestly, I just don’t know them well enough either. And I don’t even think I know all of their names, which is sad because I feel like there’s only like, less than 40 of us, because every Posse has maybe a little bit less. But yeah, I don’t know. I feel like there definitely needs to be a stronger sense of community within the Posse community—like the larger Posse community—not just within your respective Posse.

Lack of connection between the Posse cohorts may be due to challenges and limitations of social interactions caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Nevertheless, affinity between cohorts was lacking. Like Farah, Haven also noted a “disconnect” between the Posse cohorts on campus. Haven, a senior, admitted to not knowing the younger Posse students well at all when she said, “I’ll probably tell you two names of the freshmen. So, like, I don’t know them at all.” However, Haven admitted to trying to forge connections but said her efforts were not reciprocated. Each Posse Scholar attributed divides among cohorts potentially to the pandemic. Isaiah also noted lack of cohort connectedness was a deficiency the college was aware of and looked to improve upon.

Several Posse Scholars were able to identify why there may have been a disconnect between upper-class Posse cohorts and, specifically, the youngest Posse cohort or “Baby Posse” as many Scholars referred to the first-year Posse Scholars. That is, every winter term, the cohort of newly selected Posse Scholars visit College A in January or February of their senior year. While on campus, the rising Posse cohort is introduced to all Posse Scholars at College A. They socialize and form community during the weekend trip. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these weekend trips had been cancelled, which hindered rising Scholars’ ability to connect with upper-class Posse Scholars. Although on the surface, the
traditional trip sounds inconsequential, it is pivotal in Scholars of all class years forming connections with the newest cohort on campus.

The findings from this study show that Posse Scholars form community and feel a sense of belonging among members of their own cohort. This is important as they traverse through college together. It is unfortunate that Scholars do not have strong bonds or feel sense of belonging among other Posse cohorts, as the program is very small in nature. There are roughly 40 Scholars at College A, so forming connections within this small community seems feasible. I did not have the opportunity to interview a first-year Posse Scholar however, it would have been helpful to hear their prospective and connection (if any) to upper-class Scholars.

To build community and belonging among cohorts, Posse administrators at College A and at the Posse Foundation should consider organizing more frequent formal and informal opportunities to bring cohorts together. Formal gatherings could involve trainings and professional development workshops, but informal get togethers could include sharing monthly meals among all cohorts. Creating community beyond each cohort could assist Posse Scholars in building their networks and gaining critical social capital, something many students lack when first attending college.

In addition to bringing other Posse cohorts together, Posse Scholars also noted there is a need to bring the various formal (e.g., AOP/HEOP) and informal (e.g., student–athlete) groups of BIPOC students together. Brittany, a Posse participant, observed, “You know, there’s so many different BIPOC communities on College A’s campus. Like, what is bringing us together? Like, it’s very hard to just connect with other BIPOC groups on campus.” Opportunities to create community across the important micro communities could increase sense of belonging of an even greater number of BIPOC students, Posse Scholars included.

Increasing opportunities for BIPOC students attending PWIs to build community among themselves is supported by the literature (Museus, 2011; Yosso et al., 2009). Museus (2011) found when
PWIs fostered a culture of strong networking values, BIPOC students found success. Networks were both formal and informal, which allowed students to integrate into different communities in the campus. Similarly, Yosso et al. (2009) found Latinx students completed different stages of integration while attending a PWI, including “rejection, community building, and critical navigation between multiple worlds” (p. 674). Furthermore, Yosso et al. found Latinx students created their own communities or counterspaces to achieve sense of belonging. Thus, it is critical for Posse Scholars to build sense of belonging in and between cohorts because the connection will support their ability to find success on campus.

Create Inclusive Posse Spaces

Finally, it is clear Posse Scholars experience challenges while navigating and traversing many spaces on campus. Many Posse Scholars did not feel like they belonged in most spaces and places at College A. Carlos admitted, “I’ve never been around just in a social space with solely just White people. I don’t know how to move around, I don’t feel like I belong. I think about it a lot.” Additionally, Haven asserted:

I feel like there is not much space at College A for students that look like me, for students that speak like me. I feel like a lot of . . . all of my identities make me feel like I don’t belong, to be honest. And that is because . . . I’m a Black woman . . . I am a woman. And it’s like, [College A] wasn’t set up for women. College A is not set up for a Black woman.

Both quotes illustrated the frustration, struggle, and apprehension Posse Scholars faced simply existing at College A. Carlos and Haven felt like outsiders in many spaces in and situations at their institution. Due to institutional (i.e., external) factors, Posse Scholars oftentimes felt as though they did not belong. Non-Posse scholar participants did not provide this feedback in desiring an inclusive space for BIPOC students. This group of participants embraced existing spaces that they felt were welcoming and inviting for students of color at College A. Specifically, these spaces included the multi-cultural theme house and the Unity Room. Perhaps the reason Posse Scholars wanted a Posse specific space is they knew that HEOP and AOP students had a space that was all their own. Scholars wanted equality in
having their own dedicated place to congregate as their BIPOC peers who were part of different access programs had these spaces available to them.

Fostering and providing more inclusive physical spaces on campus for scholars is an important step both the college and the Posse Foundation can take to increase Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging. Taking these steps will help make scholars feel both seen and heard. Providing more inclusive spaces is especially important for scholars, like Haven and Gemma, who confessed they did not feel as though they belonged anywhere at College A. Many Posse Scholars shared they spent much of their time in the Unity Room, a place they felt they belonged. Brittany exclaimed, “The first image that I thought of like, sense of belonging was definitely in like, the Unity Room. Like, that’s where I definitely go like, ‘Yeah! This is my place. This is where I belong!’”

Although the Unity Room was frequented by Posse Scholars, it was also open to the public and there was no exclusive place for Posse Scholars at the time of the study. As such, several Posse Scholars shared that in the winter of 2022, more White students began spending time in the Unity Room but were disrespectful of the space, causing BIPOC students to not feel comfortable in a room that was meant to be inclusive for them. Additionally, Posse Scholars shared AOP/HEOP students had a lounge, and they would very much appreciate to receive their own recognized space.

Creating a physical space on campus just for Posse Scholars would provide opportunities for socializing and connecting among cohorts. Creating a physical space would also validate to Posse Scholars that administration listens and takes actions on the needs of Posse Scholars. Many Posse Scholars were frustrated with the lack of initiative and action on the part of College A’s administration. Damien lamented, “I wish they’d try to make the initiative. Because they keep asking for like, what do we need to change?” Posse Scholars were attuned to the action and inaction of College A’s leadership. Posse Scholars wanted administrators who provided more than just lip service to the challenges they faced as students of color attending a PWI.
Students of color attending PWIs are constantly negotiating spaces they do not feel as though were meant or built for them, which causes these students to feel isolated. Bourke (2010) identified several cultural spaces on campus students find difficult to navigate successfully, including athletic expectations and campus traditions. BIPOC students often find these spaces unwelcoming. Creating spaces where students of color do feel as though they belong is important. One such space is a campus multicultural center. Many campuses do have multicultural spaces, rooms, and centers that are welcoming and inclusive places for all students. That is, both BIPOC and White students can spend time in these rooms. The Unity Room, the multicultural room at College A, is a space for all students; however, it is where Posse Scholars and many BIPOC students congregate. Weed (2016) found students attending a large, public PWI used its multicultural centers differently, depending on their race. White students found the center as a place to congregate for meetings and carry out programming; however, students of color used the center as a social gathering hub and place to build community.

I found Posse Scholars were looking for a separate space, like the Unity Room, to build community. Scholars would like somewhere on campus that was completely their own. It is clear that building community is important for BIPOC students, so creating a space where this can happen organically and safely for Posse Scholars is a worthy endeavor. Multicultural centers are especially important on PWI campuses. Patton (2010) found that White and students of color utilize these spaces differently. Multicultural centers are places where students of color can build community while White students use these spaces more as a place to gather for events and attend programs. Although a Posse space is not necessarily purely a multicultural space, most Posse Scholars are diverse and are looking to build community and secure a place that is centrally and exclusively for them.

It is important that all students, including Posse Scholars, feel as though they belong on campus. Improvements can be made at the institutional level (e.g., College A) and organizational level (e.g., Posse Foundation and College A). Increasing representation of both students and faculty of color is one
suggestion. In addition, providing DEI training opportunities for all campus community members is another. Suggestions for improvements in Posse include strengthening belonging among cohorts through informal and formal programming for all cohorts together. Finally, allocating specific space on campus for Posse Scholars to congregate is another way to foster sense of belonging for Posse Scholars.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

This study marks the starting point for future research focused on Posse Scholar sense of belonging. As noted previously, most Posse Scholar participants were from the same cohort. A future study could be designed longitudinally and follow a cohort of Posse Scholars through their entire experience attending their Posse partner institution. This type of study would allow for a researcher to understand and uncover growth and change in Posse Scholars’ experiences, feelings, and sentiments as they relate to sense of belonging. Ideally, it would be best to begin with a first-year Posse cohort and follow them throughout their entire 4-year college experience.

Because longitudinal studies are time and resource intensive, a different direction to take is to replicate this study but expanded the sample size of both groups of student participants. I ran into unanticipated challenges recruiting the desired number of participants for this study and recognize that 16 individuals was a small sample size. If possible, expanding the sample size to at least 15 for each group of students and ensuring all student and cohort class years are represented has the potential to provide more robust data to answer the originally posed research questions.

I focused my attention on comparing Posse Scholars to non-Posse scholars in understanding their feelings of sense of belonging while attending a liberal arts college. A future direction for research that warrants attention is comparing Posse Scholars to students who are part of AOP. AOP is a College A-specific program and is a sister program of the HEOP, focusing on providing academic and financial support for first-generation, low-income students (College A, 2022f). For this study, I excluded student participants in AOP; however, in the future, it would be interesting to compare sense of belonging of
Posse Scholars to AOP students. Although there may be differences between the two groups, many Posse Scholars shared they felt a strong sense of belonging with other AOP students; thus, understanding more about the social bridges and networks between the two programs would be interesting to explore.

Prior literature pertaining to the Posse Foundation and its Posse Scholars is limited. At the time of this study, there were only two published empirical articles related to Posse Scholars. First, Epstein et al. (2014) studied how the group model was used to retain Posse Scholars majoring in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. Second, Jones and Were (2008) examined academic integration of Posse engineering students. My study was one of the first research studies and dissertations dedicated to this specific leadership program.

Although the body of literature of sense of belonging continues to expand, comparison studies between groups of BIPOC students remains light. My study fills a gap in the literature because I compared non-Posse scholars’ and Posse Scholars’ feelings of sense of belonging attending a liberal arts school. Further gaps remain and invite additional research. Gaps include the need for longitudinal studies of Posse Scholars, expansion of sample sizes of Posse Scholars, and additional comparative studies of Posse Scholars and BIPOC students participating in other access programs.

This study was not explicitly focused on retention and persistence however, discussions regarding the two important outcomes arose. It is well documented that the Posse Foundation publicizes in its promotional materials and website that Posse Scholars graduate from Posse partner institutions at a rate of 90%. This statistic has remained unchanged for several years and its accuracy and validity may require additional research. It is unclear how the foundation arrived at this number thus a transparent explanation is warranted. From my conversation with Isaiah, the College A Posse administrator, the Posse graduation rate at College A was actually closer to 80%. This illustrates a distinct departure from the foundation’s published statistic. The foundation does not publish retention
and persistence rates for each Posse partner institution however, other schools may exhibit similar
graduation Posse Scholar rates to College A. A future study could examine persistence rates across Posse
partner institutions and delve deeper into the factors, consequences, and mechanisms that could
potentially impact differing persistence rates at each partner institution.

Findings from this study indicated that many experiences within the academic system hindered
sense of belonging for both groups of participants. One such experience was academic major
uncertainty. That is, participants expressing hesitancy with their initial academic major selection.
Interestingly, when asked to rate their level of agreeability with the following sentence, “I am satisfied
with my major,” six out of eight Posse Scholars strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement.
Similarly, five out of eight non-Posse scholars strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement.

Conducting a future study that focuses on how academic major and fit relates to sense of
belonging and identity would be worth exploring. For example, Eva (non-Posse) identified as a biracial
female student double majoring in mechanical engineering and psychology. Most engineers at College A
were White men, which meant Eva was in the minority based on two components of her identity.
Interestingly, Eva shared that she felt less sense of belonging towards her major because she was female
than because she was biracial:

“I think there’s more so differences between the male and female aspect for
engineering than there is of like the people of color versus Caucasian. . .I never felt like I
was different as a person of color, but I did feel different as a woman.”

Although Eva was in the minority as an engineering major, with respect to her second major—
psychology—she was in the majority as many psychology majors are female. Understanding more
experiences like Eva’s in a future project would be worth exploring. Ultimately, students attend college
to obtain a degree in a certain focused discipline so understanding how their academic major relates to
their sense of belonging is a worthy research endeavor.
Finally, the findings from this study indicated that campus employment positively fostered sense of belonging for Posse Scholars. Examining the student campus employment experience more deeply and understanding how and why it positively impacts sense of belonging is worth further exploration. Perhaps student workers are treated differently than non-student workers by administrators and faculty. Student employees may receive special resources or even benefits available to faculty and staff. Typically, students participating in Federal Work-Study—a specific form of campus employment—spend between 10 to 20 hours a week in their position (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b). This time allotment is significant and has the potential to impact a student’s college experience.

**Summary**

The aim of this study was to understand sense of belonging of students of color attending a liberal arts college. I compared Posse Scholars to non-Posse scholars and found the academic and social systems of College A both fostered and hindered sense of belonging for all participants. Posse Scholars reported they felt a sense of belonging on campus when they engaged with individuals who looked like them and could identify with them. Interactions occurred among college administration, Posse staff and cohort members, and other students of color both informally (e.g., staff and peer group interactions) and formally (e.g., extracurricular activities). Beyond Posse, Posse Scholars felt a sense of belonging toward their institution when engaged in leadership pursuits and campus employment.

This study contributes to the body of literature of sense of belonging of BIPOC liberal arts students. Importantly, it is the first of its kind to examine Posse Scholar sense of belonging. The findings were connected specifically to Strayhorn’s (2019) definition of college student sense of belonging and Tinto’s (1993) model of college student departure. Strayhorn’s and Tinto’s frameworks connect to one another because they emphasize the importance of making connections among campus community members who are embedded in the academic and social systems of an institution.
Limitations of this study are centered on participant challenges and transferability. Recommendations were broken down into those pertaining to the institution and those pertaining to the Posse Program. Recommendations included increasing faculty and staff representation, and providing trainings for faculty, staff, and students. In addition, increasing sense of belonging among cohorts and creating inclusive Posse spaces were also suggested.

Finally, suggestions for future research were discussed. I proposed conducting a longitudinal study of scholars, expanding participant sizes, and comparing Posse Scholars to AOP or HEOP students. Each of these potential projects has the potential to uncover new findings that would contribute to the body of literature of sense of belonging of Posse Scholars.
APPENDIX A: LETTER OF COOPERATION FOR STUDY

(College A Liaison/Investigator)

Subject: Letter of Cooperation for College A

Recipient: Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students, College A

Dear Jess Wenger and Dr. Teniell Trolian,

This letter serves to confirm that I am the authorized individual of College A and allow the Ms. Wenger (principal investigator) to conduct her study, Understanding Sense of Belonging of Students of Color Attending a Liberal Arts College, as she has outlined to me. Ms. Wenger may begin engaging in activities related to her study once necessary IRB documentation has been submitted and approved.

- **Study purpose:** The purpose of this study is to examine sense of belonging of Posse Scholars at College A.

- **Study activities:** Study activities include recorded Zoom interviews of college students at College A. These students include those who are members of the Posse Foundation program and those who are students of color but are not part of the Posse Foundation program (excluding Academic Opportunity Program [AOP] and Higher Education Opportunity Program [HEOP] students). In addition, Ms. Wenger will also interview one College A administrator who is affiliated with the Posse Foundation (e.g.: faculty mentor, program liaison).

- **Participant selection:**
  - **Students:**
    - Sophomore, junior, and/or senior year
    - Identify as person of color
    - Member of the Posse Scholars Program (Posse Foundation)
Non.Posse scholars (excluding AOP and HEOP)

Administrator:

- Affiliated with the Posse Scholar Program as a mentor, faculty advisor, or administrator in another capacity
- Involved with the Posse Scholar Program for at least one academic year (within the past 5 years)

*Note:* As the Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students of College A, I have authorization to access all student records and identifiable information (e.g., email addresses). In addition, as the College’s acting Liaison to the Posse Program, I have access to all Posse Scholar and Posse Scholar Administrator contact information.

- **Site support:** In supporting this research project, the site will be responsible for:
  - Providing the principal investigator with Posse Foundation related documents and materials specific to College A
  - Identifying a list of individual students (Posse Scholars and non-Posse scholars) who meet principal investigator’s study criteria for interviewing
  - Communicating to the researcher any questions or concerns the research project possesses

- **Data Management:** The principal investigator will eliminate any identifiable information about the research site and its study participants. All data will be destroyed after 3 years has passed per IRB protocol.

- **Anticipated Study Dates:** Dates of data collection (interviews) are expected to occur in October and November of 2021.

It is understood that participatory activities will only take place (virtually) at College A during the approved period established by the IRB at the University at Albany. All study activities will be terminated after the IRB approval time expires.
Our institution agrees to the terms and conditions outlined above. Any concerns related to this project will be brought to the direct attention of the principal investigator.

On behalf of College A, I agree to and understand the information provided in this document.

__________________________________________  __________________________
Signature                                      Date Signed

__________________________________________
Full Name (printed)                           Job Title
APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT SOLICITATION EMAIL

(Student Participants)

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Study: Understanding Sense of Belonging of Students of Color Attending a Liberal Arts College

A PhD candidate at the University at Albany is conducting a study on how students of color feel belong at and in their college community. #As a member of the Posse Foundation, I am extending an invitation to you to participate in the study.

As a study participant, you will complete a 45–60-minute one-on-one interview with the researcher answering questions about your feeling of sense of belonging at College A. Confidentiality will be maintained and no identifiable information about yourself will be revealed in the final published work.

If interested, you may read more about the full purpose of the study, what and how the interview questions will be used, and the next steps in the process of participation on the two Informed Consent Forms attached (College A’s form and UAlbany’s form).

If you would like to participate in the study, please complete each form in its entirety and return them to the PI, Ms. Wenger (contact information below). Once these forms are received, you will move on to the next part of the consent process which involves completing a Participant Intake Questionnaire (participant screening). Ms. Wenger will send you the questionnaire link when appropriate.

Please note, participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate or to stop participating in this research at any time. This will not affect your class standing, grades, employment, or any other aspects of your relationship with College A #or the Posse Foundation.

Study: Understanding Sense of Belonging of Students of Color Attending a Liberal Arts College (IRB study number 21X198)
Researcher: Jessica Wenger, PhD Candidate, email address
Faculty Advisor: Teniell Trolian, PhD, email address

Thank you,

Name
Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students at College A

*Institutions have permission to edit and rephrase information as appropriate

# This statement will be included for Posse Scholars. It will be omitted for non-Posse scholars.
Study Title: Understanding Sense of Belonging of Students of Color Attending a Liberal Arts College

Principal Investigator: Jessica Wenger

Co-principal Investigator: Teniell Trolian, PhD

IRB Study Number: 21X198

I am a doctoral candidate at the University at Albany, in the Department of Educational Policy and Leadership in the School of Education. I am planning to conduct a research study in which I invite you to take part in. This form has important information about the reason for doing this study, what we will ask you to do if you decide to be in this study, and the way we would like to use information about you if you choose to be in the study.

**Why are you doing this study?**
You are being asked to participate in a research study about your experience as a student at College A or Administrator at College A or the Posse Foundation. The purpose of the study is to understand how students of color feel a sense of belonging while attending a liberal arts institution.

Student participants will be asked about their experiences related to sense of belonging while attending College A. Administrator participants will be asked questions related to their affiliation with an access program at College A and their perceptions of the feelings students of color have related to sense at College A.

Answers to questions will be used for my dissertation document. I will make meaning of responses by coding themes found in participant responses. Participants’ responses may be quoted or paraphrased for clarity in the final report. All identifiable information will be removed in the findings report.

**What will I do if I choose to be in this study?**
You will be asked to participate in a 45–60-minute interview.

Student Participants:
- Participants will receive a Participant Solicitation Email from an administrator at College A inviting them to participate in the study. The PI and co-PI’s contact information will be provided, and they are responsible for answering all question about the study prior to the provision of consent.
- Interested individuals will complete read, sign, and submit this (UAlbany’s) Informed Consent form and College A’s informed consent form to the PI via the PI’s email address provided in the email.
After the two Informed Consent forms are received, the PI will send interviewees a link to completing the Participant Intake Questionnaire (screening process), which is the next part of the consent process. Once the Questionnaire is completed, the PI will send participants an invitation inviting them to schedule the interview.

Administrator Participants:
- Participants will receive a Participant Solicitation Email from the PI.
- Interested individuals will complete read, sign, and submit this form and College A’s Informed Consent form to the PI via the PI’s email address provided in the email.
- After the two Informed Consent forms are received, the PI will send interviewees an email to schedule the interview.

Student and Administrator Participants:
- Eligible individuals will be selected by the PI and sent an email inviting them to participate in the study.
- Interested participants will complete and send back the Informed Consent Forms (this form and one required by College A) prior to the interview. Participants are encouraged to ask the PI any questions they have about the project during any stage of the study.
- Consenting participants will receive a follow up confirmation email outlining the scheduled virtual interview meeting time and date.
- At the start of the interview, participants will be read an Interview Protocol statement.
- During the interview, participants will be asked to answer structured and semistructured questions in a 45–60-minute virtual, recorded interview with the camera on (over Zoom). Participants will consent to the interview being recorded by clicking “Continue” at the start of the meeting when you see the notification “this meeting is being recorded, by continuing to be in the meeting, you are consenting to be recorded.” If the participant is uncomfortable at any time, they may ask to stop the interview or skip a question.
- After the interview, participants will be sent a postinterview email.
- Finally, participants will also be sent an email inviting you to review and edit the transcript (if desired). Participants will be given a window of 1 week to listen/watch recording and read transcript. Participants may submit any edits or revisions. If PI does not hear back from the participant within a week it will be assumed that they consent to the original recording, chat, and transcription.

**Study time**: Study participation will take approximately 2.5 hours. This time includes completing the Intake Form (for student participants, not administrators), the duration of the interview, review of the interview, and completion of interview transcription edits.

**Study location**: All study procedures will take place virtually. All pre and post communications will occur through email. The interview itself will be recorded through Zoom.

The interview will be video recorded to ensure that the PI accurately remembers all the information provided by the participant interviewees. The PI will keep these tapes in a secure location on her password-protected laptop and they will only be used and accessed by the PI. Recordings and transcripts will be destroyed after 3 years (2024) per IRB protocol.
The researcher may quote participants’ remarks her dissertation defense (visual and oral presentation) and dissertation document (written report). A pseudonym will be used to protect participant identity, unless the participant specifically requests that they be identified by your true name.

**What are the possible risks or discomforts?**
Your participation in this study may involve minimal risk:

- Participants may feel emotional answering some of the questions. They may ask the interviewer at any time if they wish to take a break or stop the interview.
- Some of the questions may bring up uncomfortable experiences or memories. If a participant is uncomfortable, they are free to not answer or to skip to the next question.

As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality of the information collected from participants could be breached – the PI will take steps to minimize this risk, as discussed in more detail below in this form.

**What are the possible benefits for me or others?**
You are not likely to have any direct benefit from participating in this research study. This study’s purpose is to learn more about sense of belonging of students of color attending liberal arts colleges. The study results may be used to help other people in the future. College administrators at your institution may consider your feedback and experiences when implementing policies, creating resources, and other programs for students at College A. Hopefully information gained from this study will assist administrators in creating an inclusive campus environment where all students feel a sense of belonging.

**How will you protect the information you collect about me, and how will that information be shared?**
Results of this study may be used in publications and presentations. The information you share (data) will be handled as confidentially as possible. If results of this study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used.

Information and data collection in all stages of the process (email solicitation, Participant Intake Questionnaire, recorded Zoom interview, transcript, notes form recordings, compilation of data) will be protected to the best of the PI’s ability. All electronic information will be securely kept on a password protected computer. Pseudonyms will be replacing your name in all notes and written work.

To minimize the risks to confidentiality, the PI will ensure the Zoom meeting (interview) is password protected allowing only yourself and me to enter the meeting space. The Zoom recording will be stored securely on the PI’s laptop (password protected machines). You are welcome to create an alias as your nametag on Zoom if you wish.

Recordings and transcripts will be destroyed 3 years (2024) after the interviews are conducted. When reporting the data, the PI will use pseudonyms to protect your identity. The identity of the institution you attend will also be protected and is referred to as a College A.

The primary researcher may share the data she collects from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers – if she does share the data that she collects about you, she will remove any information that could identify you before sharing.
If the PI thinks that you intend to harm yourself or others, she will notify appropriate people with this information.

**Financial Information**
Participation in this study will involve no cost to you. You will not be paid for participating in this study.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**
Participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer. If at any time and for any reason, you would prefer not to participate in this study, please feel free to excuse yourself from the study. If at any time you would like to stop participating, please tell the PI. During the interview session, you can take a break, stop and continue at a later date, or stop altogether. You may withdraw from this study at any time, and you will not be penalized in any way for deciding to stop participation.

If you decide to withdraw from this study, the researcher will ask you if the information already collected from you can be used.

You may choose not to participate or to stop participating in this research at any time. This will not affect your class standing, grades, employment, or any other aspects of your relationship with the College A and/or the Posse Foundation.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or concerns about this research study?**
If you have questions, you are free to ask them now. If you have questions later, you may contact us at:
- Jessica Wenger (Principal Investigator): email address, cell phone number
- Teniell Trolian (Coprincipal Investigator, Dissertation Chair): email address, office number

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you can contact the following office at the University at Albany:

**Institutional Review Board**
University at Albany
Office of Regulatory and Research Compliance
1400 Washington Ave, MSC 100E
Albany, NY 12222
Phone: 1-866-857-5459
Email: rco@albany.edu

**Consent**
I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form.

_________________________________________________________________________
Participant’s Name (printed)

_________________________________________________________________________
Participant’s Signature  Date
APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM (COLLEGE A’S FORM)

(Student and Administrator Participants)
Informed Consent Form
Conducting Human Subject Research at College A

My name is Jess Wenger (COLLEGE A, 2010) and I am a doctoral candidate at the University at Albany studying Higher Education leadership. I am inviting you to participate in a research study for my dissertation, Understanding Sense of Belonging of Students of Color Attending a Liberal Arts College (IRB study number 21X198). Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. A description of the study is written below.

Please also review the Informed Consent form from UAlbany for a detailed description of the study. Note: signatures on both this Informed Consent form and UAlbany’s are required for further participation in the study.

I am interested in learning more about sense of belonging of students color attending a liberal arts college. You will be asked to complete a brief participant intake questionnaire, participate in a 45–60-minute recorded Zoom interview, and review the recorded interview to correct or verify your responses. This entire process will take approximately 2.5 hours.

The risks to you of participating in this study are: You may feel emotional or upset when answering some of the questions. In addition, some of the questions may bring up uncomfortable experiences or memories. These risks will be minimized by allowing you to ask the interviewer at any time to if you wish to take a break or stop the interview. If you are uncomfortable, you are free to not answer or to skip to the next question. If you no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time.

All information will be kept confidential, in the case where subjects’ identities need to be retained or can be associated with their responses.

All aspects of the study will be explained to you beforehand. During the debriefing session you will be given information about the research project and can ask questions.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact one of the following individuals:

- myself, the principal investigator: email address
- my dissertation chair and coprincipal investigator, Dr. Teniell Trolian: email address
- the College A faculty liaison, Dean NAME: EMAIL

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator or if you wish to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the College A Human Subjects Review Committee Chair, NAME, PhD (EMAIL) or the Office for Human Research Protections (https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/).

By signing below, you indicate you understand the information printed above, and you wish to participate in this research study.
Signature of participant  
Printed name of participant

Jess Wenger  
Name of principal investigator

Teniell Trolian, PhD  
Name of coprincipal investigator

NAME, PhD  
College A liaison
APPENDIX E: COLLEGE A HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW COMMITTEE STATEMENT OF EXEMPTION

This form is to be used to declare that a human subjects research project is exempt from review. Please type your responses in the fields provided. The grey fields will expand if more space is needed. When completed, please deliver to NAME, Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee, BUILDING, ROOM NUMBER (EMAIL).

1. Researchers:
   A. Name of student researcher (principal investigator): Jess Wenger
      Email address
   
   B. Name of faculty researcher (coprincipal investigator) EXTERNAL: Teniell Trolian
      Email address:
   
   C. Name of faculty sponsor (liaison/investigator) INTERNAL: NAME
      Email address

2. Please briefly describe the research (i.e., who the subjects will be and where will they be located, what they will they experience, and what kinds of information will they provide):

   My research project is titled Understanding Sense of Belonging of Student of Color Attending a Liberal Arts College (IRB study number 21X198).

   Participant Group 1:
   I will be interviewing 6—8 Posse Scholars and 6—8 non-Posse Scholar students of color (excluding Educational Opportunity Program [EOP] and Higher Education Opportunity Program [HEOP] students) about their experiences related to sense of belonging while attending College A. Because the project pertains to sense of belonging, I will not be selecting first-year students as they have just arrived on campus. Prior to the interview, eligible participants will receive a Participant Intake Questionnaire to complete. Interviews will be conducted over Zoom during the fall 21 trimester. Interview sessions will be recorded, and it will be required for participants to turn their cameras on. The interview format will be open-ended and semistructured. Interviews will last approximately 45–60 minutes. Participants will be debriefed immediately following the interview. They will be invited to review the interview transcript and recording for accuracy and to verify information they provided. Participants’ identities will be kept confidential.

   Participant Group 2:
   I will be interviewing 2 Posse administrators: 1 employed by College A (e.g., faculty mentor, College A Posse coordinator/liaison) and 1 who is employed by the Posse Foundation (city) who works with College A’s Posse Program. Interviews will be conducted over Zoom during the fall 21 trimester. Interview sessions will be recorded, and it will be required for participants to turn their cameras on. The interview format will be open-ended and semistructured. Interviews will last approximately 45–60 minutes. Participants will be debriefed immediately following the interview. They will be invited to review the interview transcript and recording for accuracy and to verify information they provided. Participants’ identities will be kept confidential.
3. Will subjects be given an opportunity to agree or decline, in advance, to participate (e.g., via informed consent)? If “no,” please complete an application to engage in research involving human subjects:
Subjects will be given an opportunity to agree or decline in advance to participate via two (2) informed consent forms: One from College A and one from the University at Albany, the principal investigator’s host institution.

4. Will the information collected from subjects be anonymous or confidential? If “no,” please complete an application to engage in research involving human subjects:
The information collected from subjects will remain confidential.

5. Is it likely that this research will cause subjects harm or pain? Is it physically invasive? Is it likely to cause subjects to sustain any significant adverse lasting impact? Is it likely the subjects will find any aspects of the research to be offensive or embarrassing? If the answer to any of these questions is “yes,” please complete an application to engage in research involving human subjects:
It is unlikely that this research project will cause subjects harm or pain. The data collection process is not physically invasive. The research project is unlikely to cause subjects to sustain any significant adverse lasting impact. It is unlikely subjects will find any aspects of the research project offensive or embarrassing. I will still provide student participants contact information for the Counseling Center in a postinterview follow-up email. In addition, I will provide Posse Scholar student participants the contact of their Posse Mentor should they wish to reach out to this individual following the interview.

6. Does the research involve deceiving subjects about the nature or purposes of the research? Does it involve the collection of sensitive information? If yes, please complete an application to engage in research involving human subjects:
The research project does not involve deceiving subjects about the nature or purposes of the research. The research project does not involve the collection of sensitive information.

7. Does the research involve subjects under the age of 18? If yes, please complete an application to engage in research involving human subjects.
Selected participants will be 18 years of age or older.
CERTIFICATION: I certify that:

The statements above are accurate to the best of my knowledge:

__________________________________________________________________________
Name of principal investigator
(Jess Wenger, PhD Candidate)  Date

__________________________________________________________________________
Name of coprincipal investigator
(Teniell Trolian, PhD)  Date

__________________________________________________________________________
Name of College A liaison
(NAME, PhD)  Date
APPENDIX F: STUDENT PARTICIPANT INTAKE QUESTIONNAIRE

Note: Student participants will access this Google Forms questionnaire via the link provided in the Participant Solicitation Email (Appendix B)

Thank you for completing and submitting the two Informed Consent forms (College A’s form and UAlbany’s form) expressing your willingness to participate in the “Understanding sense of belonging of students of color attending a liberal arts college” research study (IRB study number 21X198). As such, you are now permitted to begin the next stage of the consent process, participant screening. The first step of this phase is to complete this Google Form. Please complete this form in its entirety. After you complete this form, the researcher, (Jess Wenger, email address) will email you with additional information.

1. General:
   A. First Name: ___________________________________________
   B. Last Name: ___________________________________________
   C. *Email address: ________________________________________
   D. Phone Number: _______________________________________
   E. *Are you part of the Posse Scholars Program? (please circle):  YES NO
   F. Are you the first person in your family to go to college:
      o Yes
      o No
   G. *Please select the following gender(s) that best describes you.
      o Female
      o Male
      o Nonbinary
      o A gender not listed
      o Prefer not to answer
H. *Please select the following races/ethnicities best describes you.
   
   - Asian or Pacific Islander
   - Black or African American
   - Hispanic or Latino
   - Native American or Alaskan Native
   - White or Caucasian
   - Multiracial or Biracial
   - A race/ethnicity not listed

2. School Information

A. *Please provide your class year (ex: sophomore): __________________________

B. Please list your major(s): __________________________

C. Please list your minor(s): __________________________

D. Please share your approximate GPA (on a 4.0 scale): __________________________

E. Current residence while attending College A:
   
   - Traditional Residence Hall
   - On-Campus Apartment or Theme House
   - On-Campus Residence Not Listed
   - Off-Campus Apartment or Residence

F. Please list any extracurricular clubs or organizations (including athletics teams and/or Greek organizations) that you participate in:

   _____________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________

3. Additional Questions

*Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree (1)</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree (2)</th>
<th>Neither Disagree nor Agree (3)</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree (4)</th>
<th>Strongly Agree (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel like I belong at College A.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have considered leaving College A.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with my current academic major at College A.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*denotes required questions as per agreed upon by Dissertation Committee and approved by IRB.*
(Student and Administrator Participants)

*italicized= for student participants only*

Subject: Invitation to Interview Understanding Sense of Belonging of Students of Color Attending a Liberal Arts College

Hello,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this project *and completing the Participant Intake Questionnaire*. If you are still interested and willing, I would like to invite you to participate in a 45–60-minute interview (to be conducted over Zoom). My availability is [dates and times]. Would any of these dates work for your schedule? If they do not, please provide your availability including days, dates, and specific times.

Please complete the two (2) attached Informed Consent Forms prior to your scheduled interview. Please read and sign the forms and return them to me at your earliest convenience. I must receive these forms prior to our scheduled interview.

I look forward to meeting you and I thank you in advance for your willingness to participate in my study.

With gratitude,
Jess Wenger
PhD Candidate
University at Albany
Email address
Cell phone number
APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Note:

a. a questions are for both Posse Scholars and non-Posse Scholars students of color
b. b questions are for Posse Scholars only

Project: Research Study on Sense of Belonging

Time of Interview: (Time)

Date: (Date)

Location: Zoom

Interviewer: Jess Wenger

Interviewee: Student Participant

Opening:

Thank you again for your willingness to be interviewed today. In effort to make the virtual interview to mirror a traditional in-person interview, it is required that you turn on your video camera. During our time together, we will be discussing your feelings of sense belonging while you are attending College A.

The definition I will use when using the term sense of belonging is from Strayhorn (2019)*:

“Sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff and peers” (p. 4).

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Without any questions, I will begin the interview. I am going to press the “Record” button, by clicking “continue,” you are consenting to having this meeting recorded.

Let’s begin:

Part A: General Sense of Belonging

1. Comfortability:
   a. How do you feel comfortable on the campus of College A?
b. How do you feel comfortable as a member of the Posse Foundation?

2. Supportiveness:
   a. How do you believe College A is supportive of you?
   b. How do you believe Posse is supportive of you?

3. Membership:
   a. How do you feel like you are a member of the College A campus community?
   b. How do you feel like you are a member of Posse?

4. Sense of Belonging:
   a. How do you feel a sense of belonging to the campus community at College A?
   b. How do you feel a sense of belonging in Posse?

5. College Selection:
   a. Why would you (or would you not) choose College A over again?
   b. Why would you (or would you not) choose College A over again (with Posse)?

Part B: Strayhorn’s (2019) Core Elements (3 and 5)

1. Core Element 3
   a. Which environments/situations/places/times does sense of belonging become more salient for you?
      i. What is it about these contexts that make you think more about sense of belonging?
      ii. In which spaces do you feel you belong more and which contexts do you feel like you belong less?
   b. Among which individuals on campus (classmates, friends, teammates, Greek affiliates, administrators, professors) does sense of belonging become more salient for you?
      i. What is it about these individuals that make you think more about sense of belonging?
      ii. Which individuals do you feel you belong more with and which people do you feel like you belong less?

2. Core Element 5
   a. What are some things that come to mind when thinking about who you are at College A?
b. How do you identify yourself as a member of the campus community at College A?
c. How does who you are affect your feelings of sense of belonging at College A?
d. Are there certain parts of your identity that make you feel like you belong or do not belong at College A?

These questions will guide the interview; however, it is possible all questions will not be asked to every participant. The researcher will ask additional probing questions when appropriate such as: “Can you tell me more about that?” or “What do you mean when you by that?” or “Can you explain that more?”

Closing:

Thank you again for talking with me today. I really appreciate the time you took to participate and engage with the interview process. Please know that your identity will be remain confidential. I will be sure to follow up with you shortly and provide a copy of our recorded session (including the transcript and chat) for you to edit. Please be sure to carefully review the recording and supplementary documents.

Thanks again and we will be in touch soon. If you have any questions or concerns before I reach out to you, please do not hesitate to contact me by email (email address) or by phone (number).

APPENDIX I: POSTINTERVIEW EMAIL

(Student and Administrator Participants)

*italicized= for student participants only

Subject: Postinterview Follow-Up

Hi PARTICIPANT NAME,

Thank you again for your full participation in today’s interview. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns following our conversation.

*Some of the topics we discussed may have brought some distressing feelings and emotions. If you would like to talk to a professional, I invite you to seek assistance from the following resources:

- College A Counseling Center Contact Information
- College A Posse Mentor Contact Information (for Posse Scholars)

Soon, I will be sending you a copy of the following interview materials: recorded session, transcript, and chat.

Within 1 week of receiving these data, please review it and provide me with any feedback or updates you see fit to ensure its accuracy. If I do not receive a response from you within a week’s time, I will assume you have reviewed the interview and are completely satisfied with its contents.

With gratitude,
Jess Wenger
PhD Candidate
University at Albany
Email address
Cell phone number
Subject: Invitation to Edit Interview Transcription

Hello,

Thank you once more for participating in my project, Understanding Sense of Belonging of Students of Color Attending a Liberal Arts College. I enjoyed talking to you about your experience [being a student at College A] OR [Posse Foundation Administrator] OR [Posse Foundation Administrator at College A]. Below is a link to our recorded interview. Please listen to it in full and be sure to read the accompanying transcription and chat conversation. Let me know if you would like to make any changes, additions, deletions, or clarifying statements from the conversation. Please send me these items in writing no later than (Date). If I do not receive an email from you by (Date), I will assume you are satisfied with the interview and there are no changes you would like me to make.

- Link address

Please know the recorded video interview will be destroyed after 3 years, per IRB guidelines.

With gratitude,

Jess Wenger
PhD Candidate
University at Albany

Email address
Cell phone number
Hello,

Thank you for completing and submitting the Informed Consent Forms. Now that this form has been received, we can conduct the interview. Your interview is scheduled for:

- Day, Month, Year, Time

If you are unable to make this time, please let me know at your earliest convenience by responding to this email with additional availability.

Below is the Zoom link and additional details for our session. Please ensure you have a stable internet connection and if possible, participant in the meeting on a laptop or desktop computer. In effort to make the virtual interview to mirror a traditional in-person interview, it is required that you turn on your video camera. You may create an alias or different name to be displayed on the screen if you wish.

Interview information:

- Zoom Link
- Meeting ID
- Passcode

I look forward to our conversation. If you have any questions or concern before our schedule time to chat, please feel free to reach out to me via email or phone.

With thanks,
Jess Wenger
PhD Candidate
University at Albany
Email address
Cell phone number
APPENDIX L: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

(Administrator Participant: Posse Foundation)

Project: Research Study on Sense of Belonging

Time of Interview: (Time)

Date: (Date)

Location: Zoom

Interviewer: Jess Wenger

Interviewee: Administrator Participant — Posse Foundation

Opening:

Thank you again for your willingness to be interviewed today. In effort to make the virtual interview to mirror a traditional in-person interview, it is required that you turn your video camera. During our time together, we will be discussing your feelings of sense belonging while you are attending College A. The definition I will use when using the term sense of belonging is from Strayhorn (2019)*:

*Sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff and peers (p. 4).

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Without any questions, I will begin the interview. I am going to press the “Record” button, by clicking “continue,” you are consenting to having this meeting recorded.

Let’s begin:

Part A (General):

A. Tell me about your role as a member of the Posse Foundation.

B. How long have you been involved as a _______ with the Posse Foundation?

C. As a _______ at the Posse Foundation, what is your role in supporting Posse Scholars?

Part B (Student Success and Outcome Measures):
A. How would _____ define student success:
   a. You
   b. Posse Foundation

B. In what ways does College A support Posse Scholars’ success?

C. In addition to retention/graduation rates, what other student outcome measure are important to:
   a. You
   b. Posse Foundation

Part C (Sense of Belonging):

A. How do Posse Foundation administrators facilitate and promote sense of belonging for Posse Scholars?

B. How do you as a _______ with the Posse Foundation support Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging?

C. In what ways (if at all) do you believe Posse Scholars feel a sense of belonging at their Partner Institutions?

D. What does the Posse Foundation do really well in promoting sense of belonging for Scholars?

A. What how can the Posse Foundation improve promoting sense of belonging for its Scholars?

B. What do you believe are the biggest challenges Posse Scholars have with sense of belonging in their college campus communities?

Part D (Policy):

A. If Scholar pauses their enrollment (takes time off) when they return, would they rejoin their original Posse cohort or become part of a different cohort?

B. Are Posse Scholars required to live on campus for the complete duration of their time attending College A?

These questions will guide the interview; however, it is possible all questions will not be asked to every participant. The researcher will ask additional probing questions when appropriate such as “Can you tell me more about that?” or “What do you mean when you by that?” or “Can you explain that more?”
Closing:

Thank you again for talking with me today. I really appreciate the time you took to participate and engage with the interview process. Please know that your identity will be remain confidential. I will be sure to follow up with you shortly and provide a copy of our recorded session. Please be sure to review the recording and let me know if there is any information you would like me to clarify.

Thanks again and we will be in touch soon. If you have any questions or concerns before I reach out to you, please do not hesitate to contact me by email (address) or by phone (number).

APPENDIX M: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

(Administrator Participant: College A)

Project: Research Study on Sense of Belonging

Time of Interview: (Time)

Date: (Date)

Location: Zoom

Interviewer: Jess Wenger

Interviewee: Administrator Participant—College A

Opening:

Thank you again for your willingness to be interviewed today. In effort to make the virtual interview to mirror a traditional in-person interview, it is required that you turn your video camera. During our time together, we will be discussing your feelings of sense belonging while you are attending College A. The definition I will use when using the term sense of belonging is from Strayhorn (2019)*:

*Sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff and peers. (p. 4)*

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Without any questions, I will begin the interview. I am going to press the “Record” button, by clicking “continue,” you are consenting to having this meeting recorded.

Let’s begin:

Part A (General):

A. Tell me about your role as a member of the College A community.

B. How long have you been involved as a ________ (Posse Foundation-College A Administrator)?
C. As a _______ (Posse Foundation-College A Administrator), what is your role in supporting Posse Scholars?

Part B (Student Success and Outcome Measures):

A. How would _____ define student success:
   a. You
   b. College A

B. In what ways does College A support Posse Scholars’ success?

C. In addition to retention/graduation rates, what other student outcome measure are important to:
   a. You
   b. College A

Part C (Sense of Belonging):

C. How does College A facilitate and promote sense of belonging for:
   i. Students of color?
   ii. Posse Scholars?

D. How do you as a _______ (Posse Foundation-College A Administrator) support Posse Scholars’ sense of belonging?

E. In what ways (if at all) do you believe _____ feel a sense of belonging on campus at College A?
   i. Students of color
   ii. Posse Scholars

F. Is there any other information you would like to share with me?

These questions will guide the interview; however, it is possible all questions will not be asked to every participant. The researcher will ask additional probing questions when appropriate such as: “Can you tell me more about that?” or “What do you mean when you by that?” or “Can you explain that more?”
Closing:

Thank you again for talking with me today. I really appreciate the time you took to participate and engage with the interview process. Please know that your identity will be remain confidential. I will be sure to follow up with you shortly and provide a copy of our recorded session. Please be sure to review the recording and let me know if there is any information you would me like to clarify.

Thanks again and we will be in touch soon. If you have any questions or concerns before I reach out to you, please do not hesitate to contact me by email (address) or by phone (number).

APPENDIX N: PARTICIPANT SOLICITATION EMAIL

(Administrator Participant: Posse Foundation)

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Study: Understanding Sense of Belonging of Students of Color Attending a Liberal Arts College

Hello,

I am a PhD candidate at the University at Albany conducting a study on how Posse Scholars feel belong at and within their college community. In addition to interviewing Posse Scholars, I am also interested in understanding more about the foundation from an administrator’s perspective.

As a study participant, you will complete a 45–60-minute one-on-one interview (via Zoom) with the me answering questions about the Posse Scholars Program (goals, mission, policies, Scholars, etc.).

Confidentiality will be maintained and no identifiable information about yourself will be revealed in the final published work.

Please note, participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate or to stop participating in this research at any time. This will not affect your employment, or any other aspects of your relationship with the Posse Foundation.

If you are interested in participating, please complete the attached informed consent form. After you have completed this form, please return it to me in an email and provide dates/times you are available to interview within the next 2 weeks (dates).

With thanks,

Jess Wenger
PhD Candidate
University at Albany
Email address
Cell phone number
Subject: Invitation to Participate in Study: Understanding Sense of Belonging of Students of Color Attending a Liberal Arts College

Hello,

I am a PhD candidate at the University at Albany conducting a study on how Posse Scholars feel they fit in and belong at and in their college community. In addition to interviewing Posse Scholars, I am also interested in understanding more about the program on College A’s campus from an administrator’s perspective.

As an administrator at College A who is affiliated with the Posse Scholars Foundation program, I am inviting you to participant in a 45–60-minute one-on-one interview with the me answering questions about the Posse Scholars Program at College A (goals, mission, policies, Scholars, etc.).

Confidentiality will be maintained and now identifiable information about yourself will be revealed in the final published work.

Please note, participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate or to stop participating in this research at any time. This will not affect your employment, or any other aspects of your relationship with College A or the Posse Foundation.

If you are interested in participating, please complete the attached informed consent form. After you have completed this form, please return it to me in an email and provide dates/times you are available to interview within the next 2 weeks (dates).

With thanks,

Jess Wenger
PhD Candidate
University at Albany
Email address
Cell phone number
Subject: Invitation to Participate in Study: Understanding Sense of Belonging of Students of Color Attending a Liberal Arts College

Hello,

I am a PhD candidate at the University at Albany conducting a study (IRB study number 21X198) on how students of color feel belong at and in their college community. As a [Posse Scholar administrator at College A] OR [Posse Foundation Administrator and Liaison to College A], I am extending an invitation to you to participate in the study.

As a study participant, you will complete a 45–60-minute one-on-one interview with me answering questions about your feeling of sense of belonging at College A. Confidentiality will be maintained and no identifiable information about yourself will be revealed in the final published work.

If interested, you may read more about the full purpose of the study, what and how the interview questions will be used, and the next steps in the process of participation on the two Informed Consent Forms attached (College A’s form and UAlbany’s form).

If you would like to participate in the study, please complete each form in its entirety and return them to me the PI, (contact information below).

Please note, participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate or to stop participating in this research at any time. This will not affect your employment or any other aspects of your relationship with College A and/or the Posse Foundation.

Study: Sense of Belonging of Students of Color Attending a PWI (IRB study number 21X198)

Researcher (PI): Jessica Wenger, PhD Candidate, email address

Faculty Advisor/Chair (co-PI): Teniell Trolian, PhD, email address

Thanks for your consideration!

Jess Wenger
PhD Candidate
University at Albany
Email address
Cell phone number
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