

# IDENTIFICATION AMONG FIRST-GENERATION CITIZEN STUDENTS AND FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS: AN EXPLORATION OF SCHOOL SENSE OF COMMUNITY

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*The current study explored the relationships within a higher education institution between school sense of community among first-generation U.S. citizen students and first-generation college students compared to students of non-first generation studentship and citizenship ( $N = 3,025$ ;  $M$  age = 27.21), and of varied racial backgrounds. Students at a large, urban, and faith-based university completed a measure of belongingness on campus. In terms of generational status, results found a significant interaction such that students who were both first-generation U.S. citizen students and first-generation college students reported the highest school sense of community. However, the combined first-generation U.S. citizen students and non-first-generation college student group reported the lowest scores. Despite these significant findings, sense of community scores were very similar with few differences between groups, which is further discussed in the discussion and limitation sections. Significant racial differences were not found. Implications for community psychology and higher education policy are discussed. © 2015 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

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The United States will move from a majority White population to a largely minority nation by 2037, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (Cooper, 2010), with about 30% of young adults who are immigrants or have foreign-born parents (Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010). Caucasian students, however, continue to be overrepresented in gaining access to college and completing a higher educational degree compared to students of color (Pewewardy & Frey, 2002). Minority groups report feeling racial tensions, intolerance and exclusion, pressure to conform to prior stereotypes, perceive less equitable treatment by faculty and staff, perceive less policy and practice commitment toward diversity, and perceive university environments as more hostile in terms of ethnicity. In contrast, Caucasian students report more positive perceptions of campus climate and a higher sense of community at a college institution (Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, Alvarez, Inkelas, Rowan-Kenyon, & Longerbeam, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003).

There are characteristics prior to college entry that may deter students from continuing college and lead to higher college attrition: family income, previous high school academic level work and preparation for college level academic responsibilities, lower academic expectations, and types of colleges that are being attended (Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003). The large percentage of students who are inadequately prepared for college and/or cannot afford the high tuition cost is represented by a large portion of low-income and minority students, who also tend to be overrepresented in the poverty rating (Murnane & Steele, 2007). Poverty-stricken areas tend to provide poorly funded public schools that are unable to prepare students for higher education and have a lack of understanding of the college admissions process (Garcia, 2010; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

Additionally, students in immigrant families as well as first-generation college students may have limited time to delegate to school work because of work commitments and family obligations, which research shows leads to lower academic achievement and an interference with gaining a sense of belonging on campus (Sanchez, Esparza, Colon, & Davis, 2010; Davis, 2010). Because tuition rates often increase, low- and middle-income students may find financial burdens a barrier to access and completion in higher education (Fry, 2004), which in turn may interfere with both academic achievement and integration at a social level (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Consequently, challenges related to financial issues and lack of full immersion in the social and academic arenas on campus make college retention and acclimation difficult.

It is important for higher institutions of learning to note that there has recently been an increase in the first-generation college student population (Pascarella et al., 2004), although such students tend not to complete college degrees in a timely manner and have lower college retention rates in contrast to traditional students (Ishitani, 2006). First-generation college students differ compared to the rest of student populations in terms of race ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. First-generation college students tend to be older than traditional students and are more likely from a lower income family (Garcia, 2010; Pascarella et al., 2003).

In addition, first-generation college students often face difficult cultural, social, and academic transitions (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996), with limited familiarity with the dominant culture. While parent support and participation have been shown to have positive benefits for students who attend college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), parents of first-generation college students generally do not have adequate time or knowledge to be supportive (Davis, 2010). First-generation college students may not be aware of the rigor of colleges and college dynamics and may become

disillusioned with the daunting tasks related to the academic requirements of universities (Garcia, 2010).

Furthermore, most parents of immigrant populations have limited English proficiency, which makes it hard for them to understand and be involved in the education of their children (Suarez-Orozco, 2009), lower socioeconomic statuses and higher unemployment rates, (Keller & Tillman, 2008), and a significantly lower high school educational attainment compared to U.S.-born parents (Camarota, 2004). For instance, one study found that only about 5% of Latino immigrants entered the United States with a college degree, with over 60% who did not finish high school because of the low access to schooling in their countries.

Conversely, the same study noted that almost 90% of Asian immigrants entered the United States with a college degree, where only 2% did not finish high school, and similar percentages transferring to the second-generation group (Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010). Therefore, despite that many immigrant parents have lower levels of educational attainment, there are varying levels across immigrant groups. As parents are able to provide assistance based on their prior experiences related to obtaining a college degree, children are thus able to feel more connected to a campus and more likely to have higher education expectations and attainment (Sanchez, Esparza, & Colon, 2008).

The belief that one does not belong in a specific society, plus a sense of perceived discrimination from people of different cultures, may lead to stress and lower self-esteem, particularly for immigrant populations (Mena, Padilla, & Maldonado, 1987). Conversely, students of color have more positive campus perceptions and satisfaction when they find positive and supportive faculty and peer relationships, interactions with students from diverse backgrounds, and positive campus climates, including perceptions of fair treatment and acceptance (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000).

Similarly, for first-generation college students, social and peer network engagement not only has been shown to be beneficial academically but also lends to a greater sense of control over students' college lives (Pascarella et al., 2004). However, one study found that first-generation college students, compared to traditional students, perceive less faculty concern and interest toward their student development and less encouragement from friends toward college enrollment (Terenzini et al., 1996). When students have a lack of campus interactions and negative experiences related to college, they are more likely to drop out of college (Garcia, 2010).

### *Sense of Community*

A sense of belonging includes the perception of inclusion within college climates along with welcoming, affirming, and supportive interactions and environments from the institution. Hagborg (1994) found that a sense of belonging among faculty and peers and a strong sense of community lead to better academic outcomes and college retention (Jacobs & Archie, 2008). Research notes that minority ethnic populations have less of a sense of belonging compared to Caucasian students on college campuses (Johnson et al., 2007; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002; Ancis et al., 2000). Another study noted how a group of Latino students prepared for high college achievement reported variability in terms of a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). A sense of belonging is lowered and college persistence decreases with negative racial climates, negative peer and faculty interactions, and perceptions of discrimination (Johnson et al., 2007; Ancis et al., 2000).

### ***Purpose of Study***

A key focus for educational institutions will be on the factors that keep minority populations from academic achievement and successful college degree obtainment (Arbona & Nora, 2007). While barriers to college persistence include precollege characteristics, family contexts, community environments, and school atmospheres, Fry (2004) noted that prior school preparation may not be the leading issue but how well schools integrate students and motivate them to succeed. Research is needed to understand the sense of belonging, perceptions of engagement, and campus involvement by minority students to see how they are being affected (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). While research notes that there are racial differences in perceptions, there is limited research that looks at other important variables, although individual experiences are expressed as highly important in campus perceptions (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003).

We investigated how students are influenced by the educational system, as navigation of educational institutions will likely affect students' future occupations and economic success (Ishitani, 2006; Suarez-Orozco, 2009). The present study examined school sense of community (SSOC; specifically, belongingness in school environments) among student groups who may feel marginalized and disempowered on an urban university campus in the U.S. higher education system to determine whether there is an identification with school life. More specifically, we compared between first-generation U.S. citizens with non-first-generation U.S. citizens. Also, we compared first-generation college students and non-first-generation college students. We wanted to explore whether first-generation U.S. citizens and first-generation college students from minority racial groups have a lower SSOC compared to traditional students.

## **METHOD**

### ***Participants***

Participants in the current study were students at a large, urban, and faith-based university. A total of 3,025 participants (1,799 women; 1,220 men; mean [*M*] age = 27.21 years, standard deviation [*SD*] = 8.88) completed relevant psychometric scales. Most participants (31.4%) self-identified as Caucasian, as opposed to 28.7% other/multiple, 17.5% Hispanic, 11.3% Asian, and 11.1% Black/African American. Additionally, 10.2% of this population stated that they were first-generation U.S. citizens and first-generation college students, whereas 57.5% stated they were non-first-generation in either case.

Also, 15.1% of the participants stated that they were first-generation U.S. citizens but not first-generation college students, whereas 17.2% of the sample population reported being the first in their immediate family to attend college but not first-generation U.S. citizens. Table 1 lists the group demographics for students who were first-generation college students and first-generation U.S. citizens, students who were only one or the other, and students who were neither first-generation college students nor first-generation U.S. citizens.

### ***Psychometric Measures***

*School sense of community.* Participants completed Hagborg's (1994) 11-item unidimensional Sense of School Belongingness (SSOC), a shorter version of the 18-item

**Table 1. Participant Demographics Separated by Groups**

Demographics	Groups			
	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen col/ 1 <sup>st</sup> -gen cit	Non-1 <sup>st</sup> -gen col/ 1 <sup>st</sup> -gen cit	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen Col/ Non-1 <sup>st</sup> -gen Cit	Non-1 <sup>st</sup> -gen col/ Non-1 <sup>st</sup> -gen cit
<i>n</i> (percentage):	310 (10.2%)	457 (15.1%)	520 (17.2%)	1,738 (57.5%)
<i>M</i> age ( <i>SD</i> ):	25.8 (7.93)	26.18 (7.98)	28.33 (9.55)	27.40 (8.90)
Gender M/F:	121/189	196/260	198/321	705/1,029
<i>Ethnicity:</i>				
African American	4.5%	7.7%	15.2%	11.9%
Hispanic	49.7%	21.7%	18.8%	10.2%
Other/multiple	15.5%	23.9%	31.5%	31.5%
Caucasian	14.5%	16.4%	27.7%	39.5%
Asian	15.8%	30.4%	6.7%	6.8%

Note. 1<sup>st</sup>-gen col = first-generation college student; 1<sup>st</sup> gen cit = first-generation U.S. citizen; M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

\* $p < .05$ .

Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (Goodenow, 1993). The SSOC inventory assessed a person's sense of school belongingness along a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*completely false*) to 5 (*completely true*). Hagborg reported an overall PSSM-Brief mean sum score of 37.07, (*SD* range = 0.46 to 0.85), and internal consistency alphas that ranged from 0.71 to 0.94 across grade-level samples. With the present population, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.90 (*M* sum score = 38.18; *SD* = 8.50). Sample items from this scale include "I feel proud of belonging to ... University" and "Other students here like me the way I am."

*Social desirability.* Also, participants completed Reynolds' (1982) Marlow-Crowne (M-C) Form C, a shortened version of the original 33-item Marlow-Crowne social desirability scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). The M-C Form C, a unidimensional measure, included 13 true/false items (true = 1, false = 0) that were highly correlated with the original 33-item scale ( $r = 0.93$ ; Reynolds, 1982). Ferrari, Mader, and Milner (2010) found that social desirability tendencies might bias responses related to school sense of connectedness. Therefore, we included Reynold's M-C Form C version to determine whether students tended to respond in a socially desirable manner. Reynolds reported a mean score of 5.67 (*SD* = 3.20;  $\alpha = 0.76$ ). With the present population, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.69 (*M* sum score = 5.10; *SD* = 2.80). Sample items included "I am always courteous, even to people who are disagreeable" and "I'm always willing to admit it when I make a mistake."

*Demographic information.* We also included various demographic questions to ascertain descriptive information on participants. More specifically, all participants reported their gender, year in college, age, and ethnic identification.

### **Procedure**

Data were collected through an online administration of the questionnaire during the autumn 2010–2011 academic year. University administrators sent an e-mail message to all students that requested participation and provided a link to the online questionnaire, which was posted online for 3 weeks. Participation was voluntary. After the first two weeks

**Table 2. Main Effects for School Sense of Community**

Variables	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>
Generational status:			2.69*
1 <sup>st</sup> -gen col:	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen cit:		
Yes	Yes	305	38.82 (0.64) <sup>a</sup>
Yes	No	516	37.59 (0.43)
No	Yes	451	37.16(0.44) <sup>a,b</sup>
No	No	1,714	38.35(0.25) <sup>b</sup>
Ethnicity:			1.86
African American		329	36.52 (0.72)
Hispanic		526	37.99 (0.38)
Other/multiple		854	38.51 (0.42)
Caucasian		941	38.69 (0.45)
Asian		336	38.19 (0.54)

Note. *M* = mean; 1<sup>st</sup>-gen col = first-generation college student; 1<sup>st</sup> gen cit = first-generation U.S. citizen. Values in parentheses are standard deviations. Similar superscript letters indicate significant SSOC mean differences between the two groups (such that, in terms of SSOC: superscript a = the non-1<sup>st</sup>-gen col and 1<sup>st</sup>-gen cit group significantly differed from the 1<sup>st</sup>-gen col and 1<sup>st</sup>-gen cit group; superscript b = the non-1<sup>st</sup>-gen col and 1<sup>st</sup>-gen cit group significantly differed from the non-1<sup>st</sup>-gen col and non-1<sup>st</sup>-gen cit group).

\* $p < .05$ .

of the initial launch, a second reminder was e-mailed to students requesting participation in the study. To promote participation, students who completed the questionnaire were eligible to win a prize (such as an iPad or a book store gift certificate). Participants completed all survey items within 15–20 minutes, and the scales were presented in counterbalanced order to control for order effects.

## RESULTS

### *Preliminary Analyses*

Preliminary analyses determined whether social desirability scores significantly correlated with SSOC scores. Intercorrelates found social desirability scores were significantly negatively correlated with SSOC ( $r = -0.12$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The magnitude of the coefficient was not large; nevertheless, social desirability was statistically controlled in all ensuing analyses.

A 4 (generation status; first-generation U.S. citizen and first-generation college student, first-generation U.S. citizen and non-first-generation college student, non-first-generation U.S. citizen and first-generation college student, non-first-generation U.S. citizen and non-first-generation college student)  $\times$  5 (ethnicity; Black/African American, Hispanic, other/multiple, Caucasian, Asian) analysis of variance, controlling for social desirability, was conducted to determine whether there were differences across generation statuses and racial background pertaining to SSOC scores. Pairwise comparisons ( $p < .05$ ) determined where differences occurred.

Mean sum scores for SSOC by generational statuses and ethnicity along with main effects are displayed in Table 2. Results indicated a significant main effect for generation status  $F(3, 2985) = 2.69$ ,  $p = .045$ . Pairwise comparisons ( $p < .05$ ) for significance indicated that the first-generation U.S. citizen and non-first-generation college student group ( $M = 37.16$ ,  $SD = .44$ ) reported significantly lower scores than the combined non-first-generation U.S. citizens and non-first-generation college students ( $M = 38.35$ ,

$SD = .25$ ), and also reported significantly lower scores than the combined first-generation U.S. citizen and first-generation college student group ( $M = 38.82$ ,  $SD = .64$ ). However, no significant main effect for racial background was found. Additionally, no significant interaction for generation status x ethnicity was found.

## DISCUSSION

The current study explored the relationships within a higher education institution between SSOC among first-generation U.S. citizens and first-generation college students, with varying racial backgrounds. While no main effect or interaction effects for racial background, results found that students who were first-generation U.S. citizens and first-generation college students (the group with the highest SSOC scores) reported significantly higher levels of SSOC than students who were first-generation U.S. citizens and non-first-generation college students. The dual non-first-generation group also reported significantly higher SSOC scores than the first-generation U.S. citizen and non-first-generation college student group, the group with the lowest SSOC scores.

Contrary to our expectations, first-generation college students and first-generation U.S. citizen students did not report lower SSOC scores, suggesting that there are multiple variables that are affecting the outcomes. For instance, the scores on the SSOC measure are very similar with relatively small differences found between groups, and therefore the significant results may have been affected by the large sample size. Furthermore, the measure itself may have led to the narrow range of scores, as the scale may not have captured varying views or definitions of SSOC.

On the other hand, one study (Portes & Fernandez-Kelly, 2008) found that, for first-generation college students, family background and even the ease of incorporation into American society may have an effect on student success and integration. Such acceptance of some minority groups over others may be similar to immigrant parents with varying education levels and occupations. Whereas, on the other hand, some students who are first-generation college students or first-generation U.S. citizens may have bonded with specific groups on campus that cater to their needs and help them feel more positive notions toward their university.

With the pluralistic and diversity views of the current university campus, found via the urban, Catholic, and Vincentian values, it is possible that a plethora of students feel engaged through focusing on incorporating varying and pluralistic views on campus and in community service values manifested through top service learning opportunities, courses, and campus groups (Current University, 2012). The dynamics of small class sizes, a largely diverse campus including multiple ethnicities, backgrounds, and students from all geographic areas, and acceptance of views may help to affect the results of this study. Moreover, the current campus specifies its high rate of low-income students, high retention rates, and portrayed mission and value expressions through a myriad of clubs and diverse campus groups for student engagement, which may have also led to the unexpected SSOC results (Current University, 2012).

### *Implications for Higher Education Policy*

Studying SSOC will contribute to not only community psychology, in terms of social justice and a sense of community, but also institutional research. Institutions should pay particular attention to varying groups of students to better understand their connection

to the university and assist in facilitating positive perceptions and a strong affinity toward the school environment, which may affect retention in college students (Jacobs & Archie, 2008). Research suggests that welcoming campuses that target multiple learning styles and have faculty of varying backgrounds are crucial for minority students (Pewerdy & Frey, 2002).

Schools should focus on being more accommodating to students who are likely to feel less of a sense of belonging and at risk of struggling to survive in college. As research suggests for first-generation students, it will be important for students to have assistance in maneuvering family as well as work demands while attending college (Tseng, 2004). It will be necessary for institutions to work with students and families to demystify college and the requirements and necessities involved (Davis, 2010). Information on barriers to educational attainment can assist programs in aiding students of varying generations and backgrounds through the educational ladder toward an effective obtainment of academic potential and achievement.

Furthermore, multicultural experiences and awareness, valuing diversity, and interactions for diverse students, as a result of institutional support via programming, services, and accepting policies, lead to improved campus experiences and education (Rankin & Reason, 2005; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Pewerdy & Frey, 2002). Therefore, it may be beneficial to include educational initiatives and integrated culturally sensitive programming geared toward improving educational aspirations for several student populations (Portes & Fernández-Kelly, 2008). Such institutional efforts may help to prevent campus discrimination and racial issues, reduce attrition, and allow marginalized students to feel more welcome.

Targeted programs and curriculum along with academic, advising, and mentoring services may be viable sources of support for disadvantaged students who may not be familiar with campus life and occurrences (Arbona & Nora, 2007). It will be necessary to continually gauge students' campus environments and experiences to determine how their campus perceptions are being affected and for campus stakeholders to get a better understanding of the factors that enhance or limit positive campus perceptions, in turn affecting college retention and degree completion.

### ***Limitations***

Some limitations of the current study need to be considered despite the contribution to knowledge that may have been made. For instance, only certain demographic variables were used in the present study, namely, generational statuses and racial background, while other grouping variables such as gender, age, school year, parental citizen status, socioeconomic status, religion, and housing situation were excluded. The present study was limited in the scope of varying groups in which it provides information, as the ethnic groups are very broad, which may prevent small differences between groups from being found.

Additionally, without including information related to the length of residence, it is uncertain what percentage of the sample were students of recent or young immigrants, which may confound results as well. Significant effects may also have been caused by the large population size and power. On the other hand, some of the interactions may not have produced significant results because of the limited number of participants within specific grouping variables, which may increase the chance of a Type I error. Some of the racial groups, for example, represented less than 15% of the participant population.



Another possible limitation focused around the survey construct components, namely, how SSOC was operationalized. While the present study included a sense of belonging measure (Hagborg, 1994) to add to the gap in the literature, Hurtado and Carter (1997) note that how constructs are assessed and defined is important, particularly for varying student groups that may hold differing definitions of SSOC. Because campus membership and identification includes varying roles of participation and multiple affiliations, it should therefore be addressed subjectively by individuals in academic and social forms (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Additionally, the population for this study was a bit older than the average undergraduate and graduate population. Furthermore, generalizability is uncertain as the present study was conducted with students at a large, urban, and faith-based university in the Midwest. It may also be difficult to tease apart whether the campus dynamics affected the results of the study or if precollege characteristics were most at play and, as such, further research is warranted.

### ***Future Research***

While a sense of belonging has rarely been studied in terms of higher education as a theory and has varying definitions, it is important to further research SSOC, as it has been related to student persistence in college (Johnson et al., 2007). The current study provided information portraying the importance of racial backgrounds, college generational status, and citizen generational status in terms of SSOC. Future studies may benefit from incorporating other demographic variables in the analyses that were not included in the study. For instance, it may be worth looking further into age group differences, differences between second- and third-generation groups, and acculturation and language status. Socioeconomic status is an important issue to take into consideration as differences in socioeconomic status may have an affect on students' campus perceptions and involvement. Therefore, college campuses need to be aware of the perceptions and experiences that students encounter through continuous evaluations of campus environments.

It would also be worthwhile to tease apart which components have been most influential, such as a particular subgroup of students who are attending campus club events or who live on campus and thus feel a stronger sense of belonging. Research should pursue how types and lengths of memberships to university clubs or other sources of social support may affect results for instance. Thus, research should pay particular attention to the social interactions on campus that lend positive perceptions for students to continue attending college (Ishitani, 2006).

In addition, it would be interesting to look at the varying dynamics related to 2-year versus 4-year schools and how these settings may play a role in SSOC. Research noted that 2-year colleges might be more accommodating for first-generation students with less threatening environments, cheaper prices, and accessibility (Pascarella et al., 2003). Perhaps 4-year universities would benefit from exploring ways that help first-generation students who are less aware of college environments and may not feel that they fit in to recognize the potential benefits they can attain.

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