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CREATING BELONGING FOR MINORITY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS THROUGH
MULTICULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS

by

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THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
The University of Houston-Clear Lake
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements
For the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in Cross Cultural and Global Studies

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-CLEAR LAKE

MAY, 2019

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Dedication

For my dear friend Hugo, who was devoted to finding a school where he belonged.

Acknowledgements

Foremost, I would like to thank my advisers Dr. Kovic and Dr. Woldu for their patience, enthusiasm, support and guidance through this project. Your insight and encouragement helped take this project to new heights. Besides my committee, I would like to thank my partner Ray. You stood by my side through all the late nights, proofreading, table formatting and constant thesis discussions. Thank you for your enduring love and support through this process. Last but not least, I would like to thank my work family: Megan, Stephanie, Marisa, Jose and TJ, you all supported me with your flexibility, encouragement and open hearts.

ABSTRACT

CREATING BELONGING FOR MINORITY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS THROUGH MULTICULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS

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This study explores how minority students who participate in multi-cultural student organizations find belonging on their university campuses. This study employed focus group with students across the University of Houston system and institutional demographic information. The results from this study demonstrate that students believe that their involvement with a multicultural student organization helped them to find belonging at the university and that belonging extends to other parts of a student's identity besides race or ethnicity. It also found that difficulties for many of these students lie within their university's administration and representation in faculty, as well as the vocalization from their institutions to youth and new students about the opportunities on campus and diverse groups available to help them transition from high school to college. The research concludes that while the University of Houston has a minority-majority population in terms of race and ethnicity, the system would benefit from evaluating ways to create belonging in an intersectional manner, connecting all parts of a student to campus.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the 2016 academic school year, the University of Houston school system served over 70,000 students across its four campuses located in Houston and Victoria, Texas. Sixty-two percent of the students across these four campuses come from minority populations including Hispanic, Asian, African American and Native American communities. Scholars have documented that a sense of belonging is essential to the success of minority college students. (Murphey and Zirkel 2015, 2-5) Given this, universities that take concrete efforts to support student belonging can better serve minority students. Campuses across the country have tried to help their minority populations feel more of a presence on campus through changing the curriculum to be more inclusive to minority students as well as supporting diverse student organizations and diversifying staff and faculty. (AASCU 2007, Winkle-Wagner 2014) This study investigates if and how the University of Houston system serves minority students through fostering a sense of belonging by supporting multicultural student organizations. This study also assesses the effectiveness of actions taken throughout the University of Houston System to foster belonging for minority students and how other higher education institutions can reproduce these actions or make improvements upon current actions to further help minority student populations.

For the purpose of this study, multiculturalism is defined as “acknowledging [and] including multiple differences in the group, it is a process enacted through their recognition and appreciation.” (McCabe 2011, 531) Simply put, in examining multiculturalism this study will explore not only how differences are recognized but also how those differences are respected within different facets of multicultural organizations. Belonging will be defined according to Terrell Strayhorn's definition as " a students'

perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about accepted, respected, valued by and important to a group ... or others on campus.” (Strayhorn 2012, 3)

This study focuses on Hispanic, Asian, Native American and African American students as minority populations across the University of Houston system. The great diversity in the University of Houston system provides the opportunity to explore the role of multicultural student groups and belonging for college students. Table 1 shows the ethnic make-up of the four UH campuses. While the percentage of ethnic groups by campus varies, all four are majority- minority, meaning the minority groups compromise more than half the student body.

Table 1
Ethnicity of Students Across the University of Houston System

Fall 2017 Student Ethnicity				
	University of Houston Clear-Lake	University of Houston Downtown	University of Houston	University of Houston Victoria
White	41.2%	15.5%	24.5%	33%
Black	7.7%	20.2%	10%	16%
Hispanic	38.5%	51.2%	29.3%	40%
Asian	6.6%	9.6%	20%	6%
American Indian	0.2%	0.4%	0%	0%
International	1.6%	1.9%	8.9%	2%
Unknown	1.2%	1.2%	2.6%	1%
Native Hawaiian	0.1%	0%	0%	0%
Multi-Racial	2.9%	0%	3.7%	3%

This study used mixed methods for data collection, consisting of focus groups with students currently active in a multicultural student organization and institutional demographic data collected from across the University of Houston system. This provides the study with qualitative and quantitate data to analyze and assess the overall impact of

multicultural student organizations on minority populations and express individual impacts on students.

The key question for this study is if and how multicultural student organizations foster a sense of belonging on college campuses. The secondary question is what limitations inhibit the fostering of belonging for multicultural student organizations. When looking at the diverse population of the University of Houston System, it is important to see if and how minority students' cultures are represented and celebrated. With all the campuses of the University of Houston system having majority- minority populations, the system provides an excellent setting to examine the impact of one type of multiculturalism for university students. This study will be able to further investigate if and how different multicultural student organizations create belonging on their campus as well as how the student's unique cultures are represented and celebrated on campus through their organization.

The city of Houston serves as an excellent site for this study due to its highly diverse population. According to a study conducted by the Migration Policy Institute, Houston is the most diverse and rapidly growing major U.S. metropolitan area. Houston does not have any racial majority and has an immigrant population growth rate nearly double the national rate. (Capps et. Al, 2015) Due to this great diversity in Houston and the diversity of students in the University of Houston system, this area serves as an ideal setting for the purpose of this study.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies around the sense of belonging on a college campus, focus on barriers minority students face, different internal struggles of students and how universities can help assist students to find belonging on campus. Review of this literature led to crafting the questions for the student focus groups and assisted the researcher in having deeper understanding of the struggles minority students face on college campuses and how universities are trying to combat this. This chapter provides an overview of these two areas of research: barriers for minority students and how minority barriers are addressed on university campuses. It concludes by noting one area where future research is needed and how can university campuses foster a sense of belonging.

Barriers for Minority Students

Barriers to college completion for minority students can include college readiness, microaggressions, campus policy and curriculum and lack of campus involvement. Some barriers begin even before minority students step foot on campus. College readiness, “the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution” (Conley 2008) is one of the students first predictors of the colleges and university’s accessibility to the student and impacts where the student can attend. (Strayhorn 2014) With these barriers already holding them back in terms of college preparedness, it is understandable that students will face several other barriers as they embark upon college. For example the application process or even being “college” ready reflects structural racism in our society Terrell Strayhorn found significant statistical differences in readiness for underrepresented and first generation students compared to their white and Asian and multigenerational counterparts (981) White and Asian students scored higher in reading, writing and math college

readiness exams due to a higher opportunity for college readiness preparation classes.(982) He found five main factors that predicted and affected a college student's readiness: "sex, socioeconomic status, college prep programs, time spent studying, and frequently discussing college with parents"(984). Analyzing these factors across various studies, Strayhorn found that white and Asian students are more college ready compared to Latino, Black, and Native American students and that there are clear and drastic racial discrepancies when it comes to college readiness. (988) This opportunity gap experience by Latino, Black and Native American students makes visible barriers that exist for minority student groups in their journey through the college application process and while studying at a college or university.

Minority Students and the Barrier of Microaggressions

One of the most commonly experienced barriers for minority students comes in the form of microaggressions, which are "subtle, innocuous, preconscious, or unconscious, degradations and putdowns." (Yasso et al. 2009) According to Yasso et. al, these can fall into three categories: interpersonal microaggressions, racial jokes, and institutional microaggressions. (667) Each of these categories plays a role in how microaggressions reinforce the message to students of color, especially toward? Latinx and African American students, implying (or stating?) that they do not belong at the university.

Interpersonal microaggressions are "verbal or nonverbal racial affronts directed at [minority] students, faculty, teaching assistants, or to indirect individuals in academic or social spaces." (667) Examples include comments such as, "You're not like the rest of them, you're different," "I don't think of you as Mexican," "You speak such good English." (661) A second type of macroaggression is racial jokes which are "offensive verbal remarks with questionably humorous intentions expressed in social contexts in the

company of, or directly to, [minority] students.” (669) Microaggressions, especially racial jokes, cause a lot of internal conflict for many minority students. Racial jokes leave minority students with the hard choice to either speak up against their antagonists in fear of seeming too sensitive or whiny or remain silent and feel unable to break the cycle. Many students remain silent to refrain from receiving more verbal abuse or being taunted. (671)

A third type are institutional microaggressions, which consist of “racially marginalizing actions and inertia of the university evidenced in structures, practices, and discourse that endorse a campus racial climate hostile to people of color.” (Yasso, 673) Many of these aggressions appear to be “collectively approved and promoted” by the university power structures. This can lead to “Cultural Starvation,” which is an “apartheid of knowledge [that] effectively marginalizes, discredits, and devalues the scholarship, epistemologies, and other cultural resources.” (Yasso, 672) Cultural starvation can cause students to feel that they do not belong on campus. This negatively impacts a student’s emotional state and also can affect their academic work, achievement, and retention. (Yosso et al. 673) Cultural Starvation stimulates the already negative campus racial climate for minority students and can be seen empowering other institutional microaggressions. (Yosso et. al 2009) Cultural Starvation happens in day - to - day interactions on a campus from meeting with other students and faculty and in campus policy which alienates minority students by constantly putting forward a negative campus climate reinforcing that minority students are not welcome.

Cultural Starvation leads minority students to feel segregated from their campus as it strips away their cultural identity in order to acclimate to the campus norm. (Yasso 2009) Many minority students come from hometowns and schools of people who look and share cultural beliefs similar to their own. (Jehangir, Williams, and Jeske 2012) For

many students, going to college is the first time they are surrounded not only by white students but also white faculty and administration. This can create culture shock and can lead to a feeling of not belonging. Although it may not be the aim of a college or university, their structures may not be set up to be culturally accepting or involved in diversity and cultural expansion for all students.

While the study conducted by Yosso et. al focused primarily on barriers faced by Latino/a students, Hughey's study focused on barriers experienced by Hispanic, Asian and African American non-white (minority) students involved in traditionally white Greek life. Many of the non-white students were told to lead the community service events since they were seen as "perfect fits" and were told that being black provided them with "insight into poverty." (Hughey, 661) Many non-white members of sororities and fraternities saw this as a reinforcement of negative stereotypes about non-whites. The students felt they were in an awkward position and stereotyped. Just because they are black did not mean they grew up experiencing poverty, and at the same time they did want to give back to their communities. Members who were Hispanic were lumped into the same category as the black students continuing the struggle of the non-white members being seen useful for only philanthropic roles and not having the opportunity to branch out. While maybe not meant to be blatant, these are institutional microaggressions within their white sororities and fraternities.

Similarly, Minikel-Lacocque used interview data on college campuses across the United States to help understand how "racialized and other discriminatory experiences can have a deep impact on the ways in which underrepresented students perceive and interact with their college environment." (434) Minikel-Lacocque used Critical Race Theory (CTR) to understand the "experience of White European Americans as a normative standard" but not to victimize students of color. They wanted to show how

there is a dominating structure that these students fight against, but that through CTR and other methods they are looking through cultural lenses, much like the Hispanic students, to understand aggression on campus and coping methods. Minikel-Lacocque studied six Hispanic students, each of whom experienced different microaggressions on campus. One of the students struggled due to lack of representation, even within places she was encouraged to find others like herself. The student stated: “I was trying to integrate myself -but there were no other Latinos there- not one. So I wasn’t even represented. I really wanted to leave, so I left.” (446) This student attended a minority alumni event with no one that looked like her: Hispanic. The lack of representation instilled her feeling of not belonging. In short microaggressions, whether intentional or not, can cause minority students to feel that they do not belong in college.

Addressing Minority Barriers on University Campuses

Previous studies have shown that the feeling of belonging is essential to a student’s performance and retention in college and that being different on campus can affect a student’s experience at a university. (Austin 1993, Cuyjet & Cooper 2012, Jones 2012, Murphey and Zirkel 2015, Strayhorn 2012, Swail et al. 2003, Winkle-Wagner & Locks 2014) Belonging for many previous studies has been considered a social experience for students at universities, and the impact of this social experience greatly affects the ability of minority students to remain in college. (Yasso et al. 2009, Layous et al. 2016, Murphey & Zirkel 2015) This social experience of belonging can be difficult for minority students to obtain due to cultural starvation and other barriers. In today’s secondary schools we see a push to increase the numbers minority students obtaining a college degree, and in turn are pushing minority student are applying at high rates to college. (Layous et al 2016, Swail et al 2003)

Students are told that a college degree provides potential higher socioeconomic status and lower unemployment, which makes many students and their families eager to obtain a college degree and enter the job market. (Swail et al. 2003) Due to the push for a college education and current changes in the United States population, minority students are entering college at higher rates (NCES 2017) With this increase, the demographics of student ethnicity on college campuses is changing, and this may impact their feeling of belonging. Give this, higher education institutions must (or need to?) find out how to better serve their minority populations as they begin to become majority populations on campus.

Many universities have begun to adopt multicultural education programs bringing Asian, Hispanic and African American studies to several campuses across the United States, not only to promote diversity on campus, but to help give students a sense of belonging and inclusivity on campus. (Winkle-Wagner and Locks 2014) Many institutions have tried to do this through multicultural student organizations. These organizations help promote diversity on campus and give students the ability to take pride in their cultural or ethnic groups.

Alexander Astin gathered data from 82 different student outcomes to measure the impact of multiculturalism and diversity on college campuses through growing campus diversity in the student body along with the addition of multicultural classes added to the curriculum. (Astin 1993) The study found that stressing the importance of diversity as a matter of institutional policy and campus culture helped students address racial and multicultural issues which in turn showed positive benefits towards their student's development on campus. (47) This led to students who were exposed to multicultural educational environments to be more open about "promoting racial understanding" (47) on their campuses. This not only helped to promote racial understanding but also led to

protest on campus for different interest groups. Student groups were able to express themselves and bring awareness to issues around race and multicultural issues they faced by being vocal on campus and showing their solidarity for their issues. While protest may have been seen in a negative light by some, this gave students the ability to speak openly about changes that they wanted and needed on campus. This study demonstrates how multiculturalism on university and college campuses can create spaces for minority students to have a stake in what happens and how with administrative support from the institutions towards inclusions of multicultural curriculum can help to educate and empower minority and non-minority students to make changes on their campuses to benefit all students.

The literature provides an overview of the key barriers that exist for minority students on college campuses and the ways these barriers impact student well-being and success. In addition, it shows how universities are making efforts to assist minority students by fostering a sense of belonging. To further investigate how universities foster belonging this study will look at how multicultural student organizations assist minority students in finding belonging. This study will focus on direct impacts towards belonging from the student's involvement in their multicultural organization and how that involvement has impacted their experience on campus.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

For this thesis data was gathered through analysis of publicly available institutional research data from each campus of the University of Houston and through ethnographic research collected from focus groups conducted at University of Houston Downtown, University of Houston Clear Lake and University of Houston Victoria once approval was received from the Committee for Human Subjects at UHCL.

Regarding the methodology for the focus groups, I collaborated with Student Life Offices across the campuses and faculty sponsors of multi-cultural student organizations in order to find volunteers for focus groups and received approval from the Committee for Human Subjects at UHCL. Focus groups were an effective method of research for this study because they allowed students to openly share their experiences, attitudes and beliefs when it came to how their campuses fostered a sense of belonging. In total three focus groups were held: one at University of Houston Downtown with three participants, one at University of Houston Clear Lake with six participants and one held at University of Houston Victoria with six participants. Using open-ended question, students were able to add to each other's statements and have conversations about the questions asked by the researcher. (Appendix A)

From August to October of 2018 the researcher collaborated with each university in order to locate students to participate in the study. For students to be included in the study they needed to be an undergraduate currently involved with a multicultural student organization. Multicultural student organizations were located on each campus by reviewing each student organization's information on the campus web pages. For student organization to be considered multicultural for this study meant that they promoted education sessions or activities about race, ethnicity or nationality; worked to promote

understanding of other cultures on their campus, were classified by multicultural by their university or were a part of the multicultural Greek life. Multicultural Greek life consists of fraternities? and sororities that serve minority populations and one of their goals it to help promote and educate about their ethnic group. The student organizations considered for this study are listed in Appendix B. University of Houston Main campus had 53 groups, downtown had 15, Clear Lake had 11 and Victoria had 5 groups that met the multicultural criteria.

With this list of multicultural groups, the researcher contacted Student Life Offices and Faculty advisers to send email communications to the student members of the organizations. Emails where sent out on all campuses with a flyer stating the days and times focus groups would be offered and that students would be compensated with a meal for their participation. Students at University of Houston Clear Lake also had a Google Form included in their email for students to sign up according to their best fit. All other campuses had students sign up through email with the researcher. Having students sign up on their own accord helped to prevent students from being pressured into being a part of the study. Since students could have been pressured by the Student Life Offices or faculty advisers to participate, the independent sign up with the researcher allowed them to freely sign up. In order for students to maintain their anonymity, they were asked only for a point of contact such as an email or phone number rather than their names of any other identifying information.

Once students had volunteered for the study, they were sent an email thanking them and asking if they had any dietary needs. The day before each focus group the respondents were sent reminders the day before stating the time and place on campus to meet up for the study. For the focus groups all informants were given a human subjects form and asked to please fill out the form and if they were okay with being recorded. The

length of focus groups ranged from 45 minutes to 60 minutes. The focus groups were audio recorded and detailed notes were taken. At University of Houston Victoria there were six participants for the study, including one black male student and four Hispanic and one black female. University of Houston Downtown had three participants, one Hispanic female, one Asian and one Hispanic male. University of Houston Clear Lake had six participants, five Hispanic females and one Hispanic male.

The University of Houston Victoria was the first campus scheduled for focus groups because it is the furthest campus to travel to and also the campus who had students very eager to be in the study. UHV had the smallest population of all the campuses in the study only serving 3,880 students Fall of 2017. University of Houston Downtown served 13,919 and Clear Lake served 8,542 Fall of 2017. Their focus groups were held the following weeks and the University of Houston Main Campus was unfortunately unable to be a part of the study. This will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Ethnographic data was collected from student answers to open ended questions (Appendix A) from the focus groups and examined for common themes among the responses. Focus groups were an effective research method due to the fact that it allowed for a wide sampling of the students at each university allowing for feedback from students in different multicultural student organization as well as different gender, racial and ethnic backgrounds. The students were able to share their own opinions as well as rebuttal and contribute to each other's opinions and experiences. Qualitative analysis was employed to identify words and "hidden subtext" (Bernard 2013) to develop common themes among the student's experiences. Once these themes were recognized they were analyzed to identify if students are finding belonging through multicultural student

organizations and their opinions on their campuses and what further actions the universities could take in order to help them find belonging.

Institutional demographic data was used to further to investigate and affirm or negate student observations and opinions, serving as a quantitative? perspective to the campuses efforts to fostering belonging. Institutional Research or Institutional Research and Effectiveness offices on each campus provide public data, all available online, giving statistics on a variety of different demographics on each campus based on yearly state reporting including number of students, number of faculty, graduation rates and ethnic and gender make up of student and faculty. This study analyzed data regarding each university's total headcount, ethnic and gender make up, faculty ethnic and gender break down and faculty experience. Using this data not only provides a better picture of what each campuses composition in comparison to the small focus groups but also allows analysis of how universities may better serve their student populations. When looking at the student and faculty demographics to analyze in which ways the campus make up can contribute or retract from students feeling represented on campus; the representation of faculty to students can play a large role in the sense belonging on campus. This is important because the "lack of teacher diversity [can imply] that people of color do not have what it takes to succeed in academic profession." (Poloma 2014) The lack of representation can lead to students not feeling as though they belong or an antique to pursue a higher education.

CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The university students who participated in this study answered questions about belonging and how to make their campus more inviting to students of diverse populations. While all the UH campuses are all minority majority, the responses were extremely similar. Students from all three campuses shared similar struggles in finding belonging on campus and helping to improve campus for others. The researcher transcribed the audio recordings from the focus groups and analyzed them together with the detailed notes from these sessions to locate common themes in relation to student belonging on their campus. Students addressed differences between the location of the school versus the environment on campus, how different student types may feel left out, finding their identity on campus, and many ways to improve their campuses for future students including; recruiting diverse population, administration being more open minded and more representation on campus. After identifying these common themes, the institutional demographic research gather was used to help support the student's opinions.

What Does It Mean to Belong?

When asked "what does it mean to belong," student responses centered mostly around family, bonds we have with others, their organizations and the idea of creating one's own belonging. Sixty percent of the students attributed belonging to be in conjunction with a social group. This finding is similar to a study by Easterbrook and Vignoles they determined that "feelings of group belonging have different antecedents depending on the type of group involved." (456) Indicating that we have different perceptions of what belonging is depending on the group we have associated as being part of which was interesting in this study because students identified several groups to which they belonged including family, friends, racial/ethnic groups, their student

organization and their campus. So depending on which group you are talking about at a specific moment, may impact how you identify belonging and how you may change your interactions to obtain belonging. This is very similar to the social theory of code switching. Depending on our interactions, our behaviors, mannerisms and even language can alter from person to person in order to be our most ambiguous self.

Here is one example of a response from a male student at University of Houston Downtown:

Well, I guess it really just depends on the context too because the way you belong maybe with your family that's something that's your born into whereas, something like an organization here it's something that you choose, you choose to belong in this organization. You choose these people. You choose these friends and that decision is your own.

This student brings up an interesting and abstract way of thinking about belonging. If we think about how we make social deductions and code our interactions, then can belonging in a sense be what we make it? Can we just choose to belong as though it is a right and not something we seek socially from other?

A female student from University of Houston Clear Lake commented:

People that you feel like you can share an experience or other experiences in the future with I would definitely say that just the welcoming and have if you guys are like that and welcome shared experiences.

Eighty percent of the students shared similar results in using the words commonalities, shared, community, or family. Purpose and involvement seemed to have high impact for students regarding how they felt or if they felt accepted. The one male participant from University of Houston Victoria shared that his involvement in the Black Student Union had “changed my life and made me feel like I belonged.” This student

had lived in a predominantly white community and was the only black student who attended his high school. Going to UHV gave him insight into what it was to be black outside of his hometown. In previous studies “people who have made salient identity commitments and have a more coherent sense of who they are tend to be better off [in college”] (Hardy et al 2012) This study was specific to identity commitments made by college students and showed that having a set identity does help students with mental stability in college. Having this personal insight to themselves and being able to identify themselves and others like them can help as students begin to navigate how to find belonging on a college campus.

Finding Belonging

Students found belonging on the campuses in different ways, some intentional and some in unexpected ways. Common themes discussed by eighty-seven percent of the students include identity, involvement on campus, leadership on campus, advocating, and surrounding themselves with other successful students. Responses from students had positive and negative feedback talking about what they had been through or are currently still trying to navigate to find belonging on their campus.

When asked have you found belonging on campus and how so, a female student from University of Houston Downtown (UHD) replied:

I do feel like I belong so I feel like I'm part of the vast demographic of students here or not just a minority in you know race gender but also first time in college first time. To be able to come here well there's so many other people here who identify with who are in similar not the same because every situation is unique but in similar situations. It's really welcoming to realize that others who may have a similar since of purpose, and that these are people in charge of our organizations. We are able to look up to them and realize that it's okay because this is kind of

small university because many students will speak up for those who can't really speak for themselves.

This student saw herself enter into UHD as a first generation, Hispanic female with the cards stacked against her. Once she sought out different ways to become involved on campus and saw the opportunities available to her, however, she saw how she could then become a leader and influential person on campus through those roles.

She elaborated upon her response:

I've been here since 2016 and I probably have not experienced belonging until I joined [my student organization.] This semester in particular its impacted [me] a lot because there's not a lot of representation on this even though it's a Hispanic Serving Institution, it's affected my confidence, it's affected my trust. It starts with the administration and faculty. I think I actually had a conversation about that prior to this, being a student and as a commuting student, I would come here and see organizations and school activities that were going on and if I did find out it was just by passing by but it was never anything that was catered that I felt that was catered to me or my culture. I only joined because, by chance, you know it was one member who reached out and wants to say okay we have this group like we're doing these we're doing these events and this is what we're trying to do as far as at the school. I wanted to see those things.

Some non-traditional students (thirteen percent of the participants in this study) face even more barriers compared to those of their counterpart students. Nontraditional students “experience differing levels of motivation, campus involvement, and participation in social activities from their traditional counterparts which related to time management issues and lead to differing levels of stress and methods of coping.” (Forbus et al 2011) Most non-traditional students are older and have more life experiences.

Ironically, this can lead to having a harder time adapting to college climate and finding belonging. (Forbus et al 2011) For this student in the example she at first did not really see anything that spoke to her or made her feel like she was represented on campus. Being a commuter student and having other responsibilities outside of her academic life led her to feel a little out casted from campus and that she was not getting the support or representation that she would have liked from faculty and administration.

Another male student from University of Houston Downtown had a much different idea on how to find belonging:

I feel like I've been surrounding myself with like successful people. When people that you just want to go out and have fun with a special Habitat for Humanity set is really fun. That's really one thing that I decided to do this mess with my network so I definitely feel like I belong on campus and so I feel bad answer again reactive here, but on campus I don't know for me if that equates is belonging like if I feel like home into my other organizations and stuff. I don't know if I have found belonging on campus and by that, I mean specifically for me it's definitely been with the people that I've seen the most pulling my own like undergraduate program and then in my student organization.

This once again relates to the coding within groups and how belonging can change from our different interactions within our selective groups. (Paloma 2014) This student was able to not only find belonging within multicultural and community service student organizations but also create bonds within his area of study. He has been more proactive in his approach to adapt to his campus environment and made belonging for himself.

A female student at UHD found belonging when she following the guidance of upper classmen:

I did not at first, I unfortunately was in a program connected me with so many other people. Those connections with them led me to other organizations on campus. I saw seniors, seniors with opportunities like founding their own organizations. They became President and Vice President. I speak with them and they can talk to me and I know okay so someone who I can rely on this is someone and I can be like that. I have that group and there I have the ability to say I can help you with this and it'll work out. I found by embracing who I was embracing my you know identity as you know Hispanic and all these other things like first time in college, that by embracing that I'm so proud. I'm no longer feel the shame of having to like of having to hide my parents didn't graduate high school. I didn't have anybody that accomplished at what I have done. I kind of grew to learn about the gaining some sort of leadership experience from one of the seniors. Being a secretary for one (student organization) grew my courage to along with that the ability to bring others up.

This student experienced many barriers face by minority first generation students such as questioning her identity and whether it is acceptable. This contributes to Strayhorn's concerns about cultural starvation and that the replacement and pushing away of your own culture, into a new more accepted one will "help" you assimilate to the college environment. Thankfully being put into a learning community forced her to network and make connections from which she was able to build up her confidence and find bonds with other students from similar backgrounds.

Creating Belonging

When asked about how students would alter the university to create more belonging for incoming students, their answers were almost identical across the three campuses. The main areas of change they named were administrative support towards

diverse student activities and student initiatives, faculty representation and teaching experience and qualification and campus outreach to younger and more diverse populations.

Regarding approval for different events or activities on their campuses, many students felt that their school's administration claimed to support and stand by their diverse populations but that students were actually just being patronized into thinking that they mattered. Students felt that the more conservative views of administration or board of directors/regents needed to be upheld regardless of the student's requests.

The ways campuses can be patronizing is revealed in this response from a UHV student:

I think it's because they're from a conservative town and the university is going to be conservative and the generation that were part of, it is open to try new things to establish new things. To do all that you want to do and whatever necessary to bring more students. It's not a matter of the it's not like ethnicity kind of issue it's more of the higher-ups, yeah exactly you know and I don't see like you (referring to another student) said we split the whole generation thing they all feel like this is a whole different that's why it's so hard to get things approved. I yeah, I think that university markets itself as being diverse and having a diverse student body but it's not a diverse and that affects a lot how decisions are made because they have the most power, they don't reflect the student body.

Due to the administrative differences in opinions as to what was the right way to move forward with multi-cultural events or sponsored events for students, there was a great power struggle and loss of confidence that the higher ups involved in decision making really wanted to have impactful changes towards more diverse populations and their needs created into campus policy.

This was the same when it came to race/ethnic and gender demographics of faculty and staff in comparison to student populations. Each campus is extremely disproportionate regarding minorities in faculty compared to students. Tables 1 and 2 show the vast gaps in representation across the ethnicity spectrum. The student populations are predominantly minority- majority while the faculty is predominantly white at each institution.

Table 2
Ethnicity of Students Across the University of Houston System

Student Ethnicity by School				
Ethnicity	University of Houston Clear-Lake	University of Houston Downtown	University of Houston	University of Houston Victoria
White	41.2%	15.5%	24.5%	33%
Black	7.7%	20.2%	10%	16%
Hispanic	38.5%	51.2%	29.3%	40%
Asian	6.6%	9.6%	20%	6%
American Indian	0.2%	0.4%	0%	0%
International	1.6%	1.9%	8.9%	2%
Unknown	1.2%	1.2%	2.6%	1%
Native Hawaiian	0.1%	0%	0%	0%
Multi-Racial	2.9%	0%	3.7%	3%

Table 3
Ethnicity of Faculty Across the University of Houston System

Faculty Ethnicity by School				
Ethnicity	University of Houston Clear-Lake	University of Houston Downtown	University of Houston	University of Houston Victoria
White	62.4%	55.3%	65.7%	59%
Black	8%	17.1%	5%	6.6%
Hispanic	3.4%	11.6%	8%	9.5%
Asian	16%	13.5%	12.9%	12.6%
AM Indian	0%	0.5%	0%	0%
International	5.7%	1.9%	5%	11.3%
Unknown	0%	0%	3.4%	0%
Native Hawaiian	0%	0%	0%	0%
Multi-Racial	2.3%	0%	0%	1%

Thirty percent of students also complained that they felt like many of the faculty were not qualified when it came to their level and ability to teach. Student did not feel that the faculty was held to the university standards and that the faculty in many cases did not want to teach. After the researcher examined public data from each of the university’s institutional research departments, the students were proven to be uncannily insightful about the great lack of representation and level of teaching status held by their professors. Table 4 shows that for all of the University of Houston campuses that the majority of the faculty teaching are not professors but other faculty members and teaching assistants. Other faculty consisted of faculty on non- tenure tracks, and other faculty members.

Table 4
Faculty by Rank Across the University of Houston System

Faculty Rank by School				
	University of Houston Clear-Lake	University of Houston Downtown	University of Houston	University of Houston Victoria
Professor	68	67	451	29
Associate Professor	105	114	358	33
Assistant Professor	94	73	256	33
Instructor	N/A	2	N/A	3
Other Faculty	289	494	1620	115
Not Reported	N/A	N/A	N/A	12
Teaching Assistant	240	N/A	N/A	N/A

Studies have shown that “students’ ability to identify a faculty or staff mentor may serve as an important pathway to broad-based sustainable leadership growth for students.” (Rosch and Clinton 2017) When students see faculty that look like themselves or reflect diverse populations, it gives minority students sense of belonging and can also lead to mentorship opportunities between faculty and students and inspire future generations of minority students to join into higher education careers including becoming professors. (Paloma 2014, Austin 1993, Cuyjet & Cooper 2012, Jones 2012, Murphey and Zirkel 2015, Strayhorn 2012, Swail et al. 2003, Winkle-Wagner & Locks 2014)

Using previous studies to determine if professor quality mattered, gave mixed results with different take-away. Some studies found that there is an impact on the student’s achievement while others concluded that there is not a big enough impact from the instructor type to affect the student. (Kendall and Schussler 2012) When looking across the University of Houston System and its faculty quality we can see that students expected more from their staff and wanted more quality educators held to university

standards. They wanted more diversity in faculty when it came to race/ethnic and gender representation of their faculty.

The last area that students wanted to expand upon was the outreach to high schools and younger children around the surrounding areas of their schools. Many students mentioned all the opportunities they had at the university (?) and that in high school they didn't know that most of them existed. One student from University of Houston Downtown commented:

When I was in high school there was not a lot of outreach, I didn't see colleges except when they did outreach of athletics. They need to help students, high schoolers with fast tracks paths to help with their interests. We need to increase outreach to the students and to the workforce. Age is but a number and you never stop learning. We need high school and beyond outreach.

Studies have shown that outreach to 7th and 8th graders and through high school can serve as building blocks for continuing a college bound mindset. (Perna, Walsh, Fester 2010) In Texas, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Texas Higher Education Board (THECB) have begun to add college readiness curriculum from elementary school through high school to not only ensure more Texans are college ready but also that student are completing some kind of continued learning after high school and/or graduating with a skill labor certificate to contribute to the workforce. For the students involved in the study there may not have been such a big push for college when they were transitioning in school but college outreach in the sense of showing potential future college students the diverse opportunities on campus like student organization and study abroad could be a great outreach to keep future students intrigued in college. If we could show them ways, they could belong before they attend, we could great improve

minority relations on campus as well as adjust for future demographic changes on campus.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The largest limitation was accessibility to students and participants. Initially, the researcher had planned for larger sample sizes for the focus groups to more effectively represent the student population as well as the whole school system, however due to constant rescheduling to accommodate student's needs, it was not possible to recruit participants from the University of Houston Main campus. While missing one campus for this study was a setback, there is still validity behind the study due to the almost identical input from students across the other minority majority campuses University of Houston Downtown, Victoria and Clear Lake. When analyzing data on representation of student population and faculty, the University of Houston Central Campus follows the trends of the other campuses of highly disproportionate numbers of minority faculty compared to minority student populations and also gender inequalities. In addition, when looking at the ranking of faculty, there is a disproportionate number of minority to white faculty with the title professor and tenure. (Appendix C). If this study were to be expanded in the future, it would be suggested to have focus groups in the Spring semester. During the Fall semester student organizations are being vetted to return for the school year and with the several holidays in the Fall semester, it is difficult to find a convenient time to meet with students. In addition, recommendations for asking for assistance from faculty adviser for student organizations would be preferable to assistance from Student Life offices because they are busy planning new activities for the school year such as open houses, home coming and other events to get students involved on campus.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

This study aimed to understand if and how multicultural student organizations created belonging for minority students throughout the University of Houston school system. Fifteen students involved in various multicultural student organizations from University of Houston Downtown, Clear Lake and Victoria participated in focus groups discussing what it means to belong, how belonging is found and how they could help create belonging for future students.

Belonging on campus is essential to a student's success and their navigation to graduation. This study reveals that some students create their own belonging consciously by joining organizations and others found a sense of belonging from situations forced onto them by friends or coincidence that belonging comes out from. It is important for students to find this belonging not just for their mental health and wellbeing but also their experience as a student. (Hardy et. al 2013, Murphy et. al 2015)

Finding belonging for students can be vary when looking at different campuses but many can find it through their involvement in different groups and how they code themselves to their surroundings among those groups to find similarities with others. This networking leads to belonging and give students the opportunity to take on leadership roles and to help other diverse populations feel welcome on campus or advocate for more representation.

Creating belonging can fall back on the student as well as the university. Students must be open to the idea of being themselves and proud of their heritage to stop the cultural erosion that can happen on a college campus. For some, finding themselves and accepting themselves opened doors to provide them to others with similar experiences. When it comes to the university, administration must take every student type as an

important student type to ensure that everyone not only is represented but had a stake in the university and can educate and impact their peers. They also must create more diverse teaching staff in order to potentially create more bonds between students and faculty and to also help continue minority student into positions within high education.

Looking forward there are many recommendations that could improve not only the quality of experience for minority students at the University of Houston System but also for non-traditional students. Many of the ideas students had to improve and create more spaces of belonging revolved around changes in ways administration looked at the process of approving and supporting different programs and ideas put forth by their multicultural student organizations. Their goals were to not only help represent their own cultures or identities, but to also improved for others whom were less represented on campus. It is imperative that administration stay involved in student trends, population growths and have a diverse body of students involved in the making of decisions that impact the way that students can express their culture or identity on campus. In addition, it is important to have active student voices on campus so that students feel not only involved in the process but that they have a stake in their university. Additionally, universities must bridge the gaps in the representation of diverse populations in their faculty. Part of promoting diverse learning experiences should include a diversity in professors across all programs and colleges. Universities need to promote not only the hiring of diverse populations but also the conferring of degrees from diverse populations whom could further serve as faculty. Through this, universities can create a level playing field of opportunity to learning, mentorship and representation.

In addition, as a student at the University of Houston Clearlake for three years, and a current employee at another college, I have observed that universities must support our student researchers at college and university campuses. In efforts to communicate

with students across the university system, each campus had an array of challenges from being transferred through multiple departments to lack of accessibility of basic student demographic information. We must fill in data gaps that exist within our institutions and our reporting. Everyone should have equal accessibility to student demographics and faculty demographics. Each university had different challenges that would likely discourage many students from wanting to do this type of research or find basic resources on their campuses such as finding out more information about student organizations and contacting them. This is greatly needed because our students deserve a voice and should be a part of making our institutions more efficient, accessible and welcoming for all. If it was hard for a graduate student with previous research experience and that is a current employee of a local college to navigate the University of Houston system schools and resources, imagine what difficulty our undergraduate students are experiencing in seeking out resources and organizations on campus.

So, when addressing the purpose of thesis to understand if and how multicultural student organizations create belonging for minority students, we can affirm that multicultural student organizations do create belonging for minority students but have some limitations. Although a student may feel empowered by their student organization, they may still feel a lack of belonging outside of their organization in relation to the rest of their campus. As noted by Easterbrook and Vignoles (2013) belonging can be coded differently among different social groups meaning that a student could feel very comfortable and heard within a multicultural student organization but not on other places on campus. This was especially seen in the more non- traditional students who were part of this study, who also were full time employees, adult learners and had children. As for the secondary purpose of this study, investigating what limitations inhibit the fostering of belonging, students were open about ways that their administration could drastically

improve their campus in order to help foster student belonging. Improvements in faculty representation in comparison to the student population both along gender and race/ethnicity lines is needed, as well as, qualified and more knowledgeable faculty members. Students also would like to see a push in earlier recruitment of student to expose them at an earlier age to the great opportunities that are available for them in college, especially to disadvantaged populations.

This topic of belonging and how we can create spaces of belonging on our campuses should be further investigated to address constantly changing student demographics. First for future studies I would suggest addressing the needs of non-traditional learners such as adult learners, parents, night students and online students. In addition, to non-traditional students, it is important to understand what ways besides multicultural student organizations assist minority populations in finding belonging? How can universities create a place where everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, sexual orientation or age feels welcome and invited to learn and strive for their futures? With growing numbers of contemporary students and their needs varying from student to student, universities need to ensure that all students are given the opportunity to be successful.

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APPENDIX A:
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

- 1) What does it mean to belong?
- 2) What impact has your identity had on your feeling of belonging on campus?
- 3) Have you found belonging on campus? How so?
- 4) If you could alter the university in one way to help others find belonging on campus, how would you?

APPENDIX B:
MULTICULTURAL STUDENT ORGANIZATION FROM ACROSS THE
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON SYSTEM

University of Houston – Victoria

African Student Association

Black Student Union

Hispanic Student Association

Women’s Empowerment

Jaguar Activities Board

University of Houston – Clear Lake

Black Student Association

Chinese Student Association

Cricket Student Association

Delta Xi Nu

Hispanics advancing culture, education, and Rights

Indian Student Association

Muslim Student Association

Samanvay Cultural Group

Taiwanese Student Organization

Vietnamese Student Association

Women’s Studies Student Association

University of Houston – Downtown

Asian Student Organization

Black Student Association
Iranian-American Student Association
Multicultural Club
UHD Dragon Boat Team
UHD Afrique
Alpha Kappa Alpha
Delta Sigma Theta
Gamma Alpha Omega
Kappa Alpha Psi
Kappa Delta Chi
Omega Delta Phi
Sigma Beta Lambda
Sigma Lambda Gamma
Zeta Phi Beta

University of Houston – Main Campus

African Student Union
alpha Kappa Delta Phi
Arabic Club
Bangladeshi Students Association
Black Business Student Association
Black Scholars Collective
Black Student Union at The University Of Houston
Caribbean Students Organization
Center for Diversity and Inclusion
Chinese/American Language & Culture Organization

Council for Cultural Activities
Delta Phi Omega Sorority, Inc.
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Zeta Sigma Chapter
Egyptian Students Association
Filipino Student Association
Friends of Haiti
Gamma Beta Fraternity, Inc.
Gamma Rho Lambda
GCSW Hispanic Student Association
Hillel
Hindu YUVA
Houston Di Shaan
Il Circolo Italiano at the University of Houston
Indian Students Association
Korean Student Association
Lambda Delta Psi
Lambda Phi Epsilon
Lambda Theta Alpha Latin Sorority, Inc.
Lebanese Student Association
Malaysian Singaporean Student Association
Multicultural Greek Council
Muslim Student Association
México at UH
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
Nepalese Student Association at University of Houston-Main Campus

Omega Delta Phi
Pakistan Student Association
Persian Society at University of Houston
Pi Kappa Delta at the University of Houston
Russian United Student Society
Sigma Beta Rho Fraternity, Inc.
Sigma Delta Pi, Gamma Rho
Hispanic Studies Honor Society
Students of East Africa
Syrian Student Association
Taiwanese Students Association
The Nigerian Students Association
The Phi Epsilon Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Incorporated
Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.
Theta Nu Xi Multicultural Sorority, Inc.
Urdu Baithak
Venezuelan Student Union
Vietnamese Students Association

APPENDIX C:
STUDENT AND FACULTY DEMOGRAPHICS FROM ACROSS THE UNIVERSITY
OF HOUSTON SYSTEM

Faculty Rank by School				
	University of Houston Clear-Lake	University of Houston Downtown	University of Houston	University of Houston Victoria
Professor	68	67	451	29
Associate Professor	105	114	358	33
Assistant Professor	94	73	256	33
Instructor	N/A	2	N/A	3
Other Faculty	289	494	1620	115
Not Reported	N/A	N/A	N/A	12
Teaching Assistant	240	N/A	N/A	N/A

Faculty Ethnicity by School				
Ethnicity	University of Houston Clear-Lake	University of Houston Downtown	University of Houston	University of Houston Victoria
White	62.4%	55.3%	65.7%	59%
Black	8%	17.1%	5%	6.6%
Hispanic	3.4%	11.6%	8%	9.5%
Asian	16%	13.5%	12.9%	12.6%
AM Indian	0%	0.5%	0%	0%
International	5.7%	1.9%	5%	11.3%
Unknown	0%	0%	3.4%	0%
Native Hawaiian	0%	0%	0%	0%
Multi-Racial	2.3%	0%	0%	1%

Student and Faculty Gender by School				
Gender	University of Houston Clear-Lake	University of Houston Downtown	University of Houston	University of Houston Victoria
Students				
Male	36%	39%	50.1%	35%
Female	64%	61%	49.8%	64%
Faculty				
Male	61.4%	50.4%	61.1%	51%
Female	38.6%	49.6%	38.9%	49%