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College Students' Sense of Belonging. Reviewed by Eunyoung Kim and John Irwin

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Terrell L. Strayhorn. <u>College Students' Sense of Belonging.</u> New York: Routledge, 2012. 142 pp. Paper: $36.95. ISBN: 978-0-415-89504-0.

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Student persistence and retention have been the chief concern of virtually all higher education institutions over the last several decades, resulting in an abundance of theoretical models of persistence and retention initiatives on college campuses across the country. Critics acknowledge Vincent Tinto's (1993) pioneering work on a theoretical model of student retention while at the same time questioning the ambiguity of the concept of "integration" and the application of Tinto's theory to students of color.

In response to the shortcomings of earlier theories like this one, recent work has paid more attention to "sense of belonging," which Terrell L. Strayhorn defines as the student's perception of affiliation and identification with the university community. Until now, extant literature has lacked a theoretical conceptualization of sense of belonging, as well as systematic and empirical testing of levels of sense of belonging among students. Strayhorn's <u>College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students</u> is a commendable effort to fill such a critical void in the persistence/retention literature.

Strayhorn's text is organized into two parts. Part 1 consists of three chapters that provide an introduction to the research and an inclusive analysis of literature on sense of belonging and conceptual guidance. The following seven chapters, Part 2, are aimed at specifically illustrating how he used the theoretical construct of sense of belonging in his own empirical research on diverse student populations including Latinos, gays, STEM students, Black male students, graduate students, and first-year students of color. In his introduction, Strayhorn comments that he wrote this book because he often noticed how frequently research data identified "fitting in" or "sense of belonging" as the key to staying in college.

He begins all of his chapters with an epigraph. The quotation for Chapter 1 quotes psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs to suggest that "belongingness" is essential to one's individual growth as a person and existence within a community. Strayhorn comments on his own experiences growing up as a Black male in predominantly White institutions of higher education and talks about how President Obama's "Back-to-School Address" made it clear that the President had a similar history. He contends that the President's commentary provides the "backdrop" for his book (p. 1).

In Chapter 2, Strayhorn carefully defines "sense of belonging" by providing a thorough review of literature on the concept. He points out that a sense of belonging is a basic human need located within Maslow's framework, and organizes his discussion of sense of belonging into three categories: "belongingness as a concept, circumstances that engender (or thwart) belonging, and the relation between belonging and other outcomes or behaviors" (p. 11). The concept of belonging becomes the key to a person's sense of self and the feeling that his or her efforts are valued, both of which in turn impact student persistence and success in college. Conversely, Strayhorn quotes Robert S. Weiss's observation that "an absence of sense of belonging leads to decreased or diminished interest and engagement in ordinary life activities" (p. 9).

In Chapter 3, Strayhorn builds a conceptual model for sense of belonging by outlining its core conceptual elements. They include a sense of belonging as a basic human need, a fundamental motive to drive human behavior, as well as a discussion of its importance in certain contexts and among certain populations, its relatedness to mattering, its relationship with social identities, its association with positive outcomes, and the fluidity and dynamics of perceived belongingness, which depends on time, context, and circumstances. Strayhorn's conceptual model again draws on Maslow's hierarchy to keenly point out that students' fundamental needs and motivations (physiological necessities, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization) depend on social spaces and the college environment, which in turn lead to outcomes that can manifest into either positive or negative experiences.

In subsequent chapters, Strayhorn seeks to empirically prove the utility of his sense of belonging model among diverse student subpopulations in various college environments. For instance, in Chapter 4, he looks at the role that sense of belonging plays in Latino students' collegiate experiences at predominantly White institutions. Drawing on data analysis from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) and in-depth interviews with a sample of 31 Latino undergraduates, he argues that Latino students in postsecondary education often experience isolation, marginalization, self-defeatism, feelings of obligation to family, and constant challenges to their limited English language skills. In some cases Latinos will commit "cultural suicide," which is the act of severing oneself from one's cultural heritage to blend in with the campus community (p. 33).

In Chapter 5, using data from his ongoing study of gay men of color at predominantly White and historically Black colleges and universities, Strayhorn points out that it is especially difficult for black gay men to 'come out,' not only because this act has its own inherent challenges, but because men of color often feel obligated to hide their sexual orientation from family and friends. These students often end up making unhealthy choices and engaging in risky behaviors, such as unprotected sex or drugs. Strayhorn has also co-authored a chapter on this topic for <u>Black Men in College: Implications for HBCUs and Beyond,</u> where he reports similar findings (Strayhorn & Scott, 2012).

Chapter 6 opens with a quick synopsis of how a Black student often feels guilty about being in college, initiating an excellent discussion of variation in student retention achievement rates among first-year college students by race/ethnicity at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. The author revisits Tinto's (1993) college retention theory and argues that academic preparation and family support are critical to first-year college persistence. Students of color often enter college lacking academic preparation and sufficient financial resources; they are more likely to be part of the first generation in the family to attend college and to come from low-income backgrounds. Strayhorn suggests that sense of belonging and academic readiness can be facilitated through institutional programming such as summer bridge programs. However, such remedial education programs need to be planned correctly and deliberately and require continued assessment of their effectiveness.

Chapter 7 specifically addresses issues related to STEM students of color who do not enter college with a level of academic preparation in the math and science comparable to that of their White peers. Researchers have studied a number of factors that cause students of color to struggle in STEM disciplines, such as lack of academic preparation, a lower self-assessment of capabilities, societal stereotypes, a lack of role models among STEM practitioners, family, and peers, as well as the influence of the cultural environment. In response to general concerns about STEM education and diversity in the workplace, this chapter investigates the roles psychological

factors associated with sense of belonging play in academic and social success among students of color in STEM fields. These students often feel that they are not fitting in and eventually drop out of STEM disciplines. Strayhorn suggests that campuses need to improve recruitment and retention efforts and initiatives for students of color in STEM contexts.

Chapter 8 looks at Black men in college and their ongoing low representation and degree completion rates. Despite high aspirations to attend college, Black men comprised less than 6% of the entire U.S. undergraduate population in 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012) and lag behind their female counterparts and other racial and ethnic groups in key educational outcomes (Harper, 2006; Strayhorn, 2010).

To explain this disparity, Strayhorn analyzes media representations of Black males in higher education. Black men in films like Spike Lee's <u>School Daze</u> are frequently assigned derogatory names that coincide with their personas and are often "portrayed negatively" (p. 79). By presenting empirical data on academic performance and completion rates, Strayhorn concludes that a heightened awareness of basic student development and involvement in extracurricular activities such as clubs, sports, and other organizations can lead to a successful college experience for Black men.

Chapter 9 focuses on how socialization affects graduate student persistence and the process of working toward a professional field. In this case, socialization in graduate school refers to "the process through which individuals gain the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for successful entry into a professional career requiring an advanced level of specialized knowledge and skills" (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001, p. iii). Drawing on multiple studies, Strayhorn examines the relationship between sense of belonging and levels of socialization among graduate students. Because most research concerned with a sense of belonging has focused on undergraduate student retention, this chapter provides a fresh look at the theoretical importance of the concept by extending it to the graduate student population.

In Chapter 10, Strayhorn looks at Alexander Astin's (1999)] student involvement theory and how it relates to sense of belonging. Environment, experiences, socialization, and feeling like a valued member of society facilitate a sense of belonging in academic and social life on campus and thus ultimately contribution to student retention. The role of the Student Government Association (SGA), clubs, the University Center, libraries, sports teams, and recreational facilities can play a positive role in helping students study, learn, grow, and stay in school because these organizations all engender a sense of belonging.

Sense of belonging has always been a part of human experience. Maslow's hierarchy of needs points to the simple fact that all human beings need to feel valued, indicating that success is dependent on the feeling that one fits in. Throughout this book, Strayhorn successfully ties basic concepts associated with human needs and transformation to a conceptual model of sense of belonging, providing empirically tested, rich data to account for the significance of a sense of belonging in the college experiences of various student groups, but particularly those who are at risk, marginalized, and vulnerable.

The book opens up discussions among researchers, administrators, student affairs educators, and students about the importance of sense of belonging in student persistence decisions, clearly indicating that all college campuses should work to become places of inclusion and awareness. Without doubt, the field can benefit from continuing to contemplate a refined conceptualization of sense of belonging. Many student subpopulations are not recognized in this book, and not all can be, but the text provides a good point of departure for developing a more

comprehensive theoretical model of sense of belonging. The relevance of this conceptual model to community college students warrants future research, for example.

As Strayhorn recapitulates in his epilogue, this hypothesized model of college student sense of belonging still needs rigorous testing on the extent to which social contexts, sense of belonging, and other hierarchies of needs contribute to educational outcomes among various student populations. Overall, though, Strayhorn has done an excellent job of refining the theoretical construct of sense of belonging as well as highlighting the individual uniqueness of students who strive for a sense of belonging.

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