

## Exploring College Students' Sense of Belonging in México

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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 (Strayhorn, 2012). In that regard, recent work has paid more attention to "sense of belonging," which Strayhorn (2012) defines as the student's perception of affiliation and identification with the university community. An absence of sense of belonging leads to decreased or diminished interest and engagement on campus and in ordinary life activities.

In the case of México, there has been two recent projects to explore sense of belonging among college students as a campus issue at two public universities. One of these ventures is an on-going research project held by student affairs professionals from Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán (UADY) and Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (UANL). The objective of this project is to explore college students' sense of belonging through their thoughts and experiences. In March 2015, two focus groups with student leaders from different organizations were held, one at UANL, located in northern México, and the other at UADY, located in the southeast.

The preliminary results indicate four main findings: 1) being part of a student group is key in order to promote sense of belonging, particularly when the university offers some sort of recognition to these groups; 2) students indicated to have a higher sense of belonging, gratitude, and pride to their universities as long as they felt their efforts as individuals and members of students organizations were valued by the institution; 3) students expressed to feel the need to work together with university administrators to promote sense of belonging among all students, particularly with those who do not participate in student organizations; and 4) the schools and colleges that integrate the university are divided by level and field of studies, having most of these schools a unique identity. This creates confusion in regards to sense of belonging.

The last finding mentioned refers to the fact that most schools and colleges that integrate the university, particularly the UANL, have their own logos, mascots, and other symbols of identity. This often makes students feel they belong to their schools, but not always to the university as a whole. This issue was extensively explored and addressed at a different project which resulted in a publication from Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (UANL, 2015) called "*Vida estudiantil: La construcción de una imagen universitaria a través de sus símbolos e identidad*" (Student life: Building a university image through its symbols and identity). According to UANL, institutional symbols are the elements that motivate to increase sense of belonging at the university. In UANL these symbols take on a particular significance, as these denote the enthusiasm of student effervescence and institutional support over more than 80 years of academic life.

Having so much diversity in symbols for each school generated a transcendent impact on the university as a whole, but also demonstrating the need to unify the image and symbols across the institution. In that regard, there have been recent efforts to increase the university identity by promoting campaigns in social media and other outlets using the university's vision, colors, and mascot. In addition, there is a proposal to be held by the Office of Student Activities in UANL to integrate efforts in student affairs across the institution in order to be more effective in the process of promoting sense of belonging and

university pride among students. It can all be summarized through the words of a student who participated in one of the focus group: “you belong to the places that have a profound impact in your life.”

## **References**

Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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