

FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS' NAVIGATION OF BELONGING AND  
CONNECTEDNESS WITH THEIR UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

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By  
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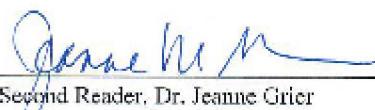
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## **Abstract**

The first-year of college has been identified as the most critical year of a student's higher education experience, in that it determines how students will interact and integrate within academic and social circles that contribute to their college experience, and, navigates their decision towards degree persistence (Hagedorn & Castro, 1999; Hausman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007, as cited in Ribera, Miller and Dumford, 2017, p. 545). The purpose of this study sought to gain an understanding of how roommate experiences of residential students impact their sense of belonging with the university and how this relationship influences academic and social development during the first-year of study. Seven first-year residential students' stories guided this project through their shared experiences, which exposed three essential themes that often navigate a successful roommate relationship: (1) importance of knowing the person; (2) conflict avoidance; and (3) belongingness within the living environment. The focus of feedback that emerged through the interviews concentrated on how the impacts relational issues influence with the overall college experience. The theoretical framework includes, Vincent Tinto's (1993) *Theory of Individual Student Departure from College*, Alexander Astin's (1984) *Student Involvement-Environment-Output Model*, and, Terrel Strayhorn's (2012) *Theory of Integration*. All three theories contributed diverse understandings of how first-year students navigate their campus experience. The research questions that guided this study included:

- What impacts does the roommate experience have on first-year students' sense of "belongingness" to the university?
- What are the impacts of the roommate experience on first year students' academic and social development?

This was a qualitative study conducted at a four-year public Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) located in Southern California within a university student housing community. The overall purpose of this study sought to inform housing administrators about improved efficiencies and strategies that can be implemented to support the processing of successful roommate matches which have a direct influence on students' interaction with their college experience during their first-year of study.

## Dedication

To  
*Brie & Kat*

My God, thank you for always loving me Psalm 45:5

To my family - thank you all of the sacrifices you extended to support my journey. There are not enough “thank you’s” that I can say to express my gratitude for you. I am awed by your selfless love in allowing this dream to be realized.

Brie & Kat – now is your time to fly, go and spread your wings and keep pushing towards your goals. Remember, anything you aspire to achieve, is possible! The tough stuff in life makes you resilient to achieve beyond the imaginable. Reach beyond what is comfortable, I promise the journey will be bountiful.

Forever & always, I will love you. *Matthew 19:26*

Patrick- thank you for leading us on this journey together. There were many times I thought I could not go on, but you stood by my side extended a steadfast faith, patience, and an amazing love. I am so very grateful for you. Thank you for being my amazing life partner. Here's to many more wonderful journeys together side-by-side 8 sidewyz. I love you. *Exodus 14:14*

Michelle – thank you for being my lil’ big sis, my number one fan and encouraging me every step of the way. I am so very grateful for you, your strength is astounding and can move mountains because of who you are and yet to become. I aspire to be like you in all my educational endeavors. I love you. *Matthew 13:31*

Mom & Dad, thank you for your sacrifices and belief in me. I love you.

Kaia – thank you for your amazing support, unwavering patience, encouragement, and above all belief in me. Your authentic support is appreciated beyond enough words can ever express!

Ed Leadership Faculty & Staff – I have learned so much from all of you. Thank you for your selfless dedication to education and your students you have paved the way for. I am a better person because of the knowledge and encouragement you have richly extended.

Ed. Leadership colleagues – thank you for your amazing support!!  
Along this journey you have become family.

JS and CD – thank you for all of your support in allowing this goal to be achieved. I am forever grateful for your support, encouragement and leadership. I aspire to be as wonderful a role model to others, as you have been for me!

Family, Friends, & everyone in between who loved us unconditionally during such a critical time of our lives. Our survival and this goal would not have been realized without you. Thank you for all of your support especially during our darkest hour. Our gratitude for your love is immeasurable.

May the blessings you've extended be returned tenfold;

To the participants who shared a glimpse of their college journey, thank you for allowing me to learn from you. I truly am inspired by your “yes”. I encourage you to keep discovering the person you are and yet to become. The courage you've extended to share your stories has helped pave a partnership for those who are to follow. Keep striving towards your educational goals and continue to share your voices this will allow others to learn from you and the importance of your journey.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

The relationship between first-year students' academic success and their living accommodations is pertinent for administrators when assessing students' progress during the critical years of the undergraduate program. Students who have difficulty navigating their feelings of belongingness often suffer from adverse effects, which is realized in retention statistics (Li, McCoy, Shelley, & Whalen, 2005, p. 179). The challenges first-year students face create real dilemmas for them to continue their educational pursuits because of the stresses with assimilation to their college environment, which is sometimes significant enough to alter their decision towards degree persistence. In a study conducted by Li, McCoy, Shelley, and Whalen (2005) related to first-year students and belongingness, students' overall satisfaction level with their residential experience was found to positively contribute to their successful academic and social transitions, resulting in enhanced academic involvement towards degree persistence. These and other researchers found increased engagement with social integration amongst first-year students who became involved with their immediate living environment, resulting in enhanced opportunities for networking and the creation of community which positively contributed to students' feeling of belongingness with their educational experience (Blimling, 1993; Li, et. al, 2005). In addition, positive student experiences in residential housing directly influence how residential students respond to their own campus experience.

Given such findings, students' living environments must be of critical concern to campus housing administrators for those students living on campus (Association of

College and University Housing Officers-International/Educational Benchmarking, Inc., 2001). Madgett and Bélanger (2008) reinforce the need for this kind of attentiveness, noting:

First-year students' difficulties with integrating their interest with degree programs or navigation of campus life has increased the need for support services to help students transition with academics, social integration and homesickness. Difficulty navigating these emotions can often play a significant role in a student's decision to continue their educational journey resulting in adverse effects with student retention. Thus, it is important for the support of first-year experience programs to improve retention among first-year students, especially those at risk for departure due to lack of integration with campus programs. Therefore, when supportive factors are implemented to help students navigate their campus experience this allows universities to acknowledge and appreciate the varying needs of first-year students as they navigate this new phase in their lives. Accordingly, when students feel supported through academic and social belongingness, they are more inclined to embrace academic achievement. (pp. 91-92)

When efforts are invested in understanding the varying reasons student attrition and retention occur, students' unique needs related to pursuit of their academic goals are recognized and honored. Toward these ends, during the 1960's many institutions adopted the "Housing Theory" model that transformed the function of student housing to serve as a program to promote "effective living-learning centers" (Broido, Campbell, and Palmer, 2008, p.90). Since then, many student housing programs and facilities have progressed

towards intentional residential living environments that promote growth and development. Broido, Campbell, and Palmer (2008), after reviewing a number of studies that analyzed residential life experiences, concluded that “students who live in living-learning communities are more likely to persist towards degree completion, have stronger growth and development with their college experience, and are more accepting towards diversity in relationships with others” (p.91).

My study builds on prior research that identified influences of the living environment on academic achievement during the first year of study. A specific focus of this study is to understand how residential students’ roommate experience impacts their sense of belongingness and connectedness with the university and how this relationship influences students’ academic and social development. By addressing these areas of focus, this study seeks to inform housing administrators’ efforts to assess and improve residential services for first year students in effort to enhance their education and living experience in residential housing.

One aspect of significance for this study lies in the reality that there are different levels of educational and navigational capital brought to the university experience by first-year, first-generation students in comparison to first-year undergraduate students coming from more educationally-advantaged backgrounds who tend to maintain higher retention rates towards degree persistence. For the purpose of this study, first-generation college student (FGCS) “implies the possibility that a student may lack the critical cultural capital necessary for college success because their parents did not attend college” (FirstGen@NASPA, n.d.). Some differences between these two categories of student (i.e., first-generation and non-first-generation) typically include the cultural capital,

educational experiences, and often, the economic supports that parents are able to share with their students in helping them to navigate their educational journey successfully in the college environment. First-generation students often arrive to campus without such supports and must navigate their own educational journey through available campus resources. Given the complexity of transitioning to and navigating within the higher-education environment, first-generation students can face a lowered sense of expectation for persisting through to degree achievement (K. Tollefson, personal communication, March 6, 2019; Collier and Morgan, 2007).

In a study conducted by Collier and Morgan (2007) the “college student role” is defined as successfully understanding and fulfilling varying expectations of this specific role according to different academic and social circles established by faculty and peers alike. The term is considered to be essential in understanding student success at the university level through varying expectations of the role. Collier and Morgan (2007) focused specifically on the difference of expectations maintained by first-generation students in comparison to the traditional first-year undergraduate college student experiences and the differences in retention rates between these two student populations. They cited data from National Center for Educational Statistics indicating that first-generation students are less likely to graduate in comparison to college peers with educated parents who can support navigation of their college experience (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 426).

Through this study, I wanted to find out how first-year students residing in student housing navigate their college experience. Further, I wanted to learn if and how students’ varying levels of access to academic and social resources and other supports impact their

university experience. By analyzing first-year student's university experience as it relates to roommate relationships, the feedback of this study will allow for improvement of residential services applicable to the application and navigation of the roommate search process. Through evaluation of these experiences, early interventions for students can be identified to support improvement of interpersonal skills, which encourage engagement and integration with their living environment to enhance the first-year college experience and promote retention efforts towards degree persistence.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to Tinto's (1975; 1993) Theory of Student Departure, in order for a student to persist in degree attainment, there must be a connection with the campus environment which allows for integration of academic and social development. The theory further explained the need for first-year students to feel accepted to the institution through academic performance, navigation of student services, relationships formed with campus personnel and peers, and integration with the campus culture through participation in extracurricular activities. Additional examples of acceptance include personal, emotional and educational support during the transition of first-year students to the campus community which result in retention and a successful college experience.

Researchers suggest that if positive connections are established in both academic and social environments, students are more likely to have successful transitions within the institution and campus community (Davidson, Beck & Milligan, 2009, p. 375; Metz, 2004, p.193). In contrast, poor transitions to the college environment can contribute to premature departure of students during their first year in college (Metz, 2004, p. 193). When successful transitions into the college environment occur, this can serve as a forecast to how students will integrate into their new college experience. This period of adjustment attempts to predict how students will integrate into their college experience and serves as a prelude to either continuance or early departure from the university. This period of transition between familiar and new is described as students' attempt to

successfully manage separation from the norms of the communities they come from, which include the familiar comforts of family and friends, to new campus life environments. Incorporation occurs when students work towards conforming to their new college environment through the acceptance of a new culture and experiences within their college community. When students are successful with incorporation, they are considered to have been successful at integrating into their new college environment through acceptance of new norms, behaviors and culture of a different belief and value system from what they arrived to college with. The attainment of separation is considered essential in order for a student to be immersed and accepted into their new college environment. However, when difficulties with transitioning into the campus environment occur either through separation or navigation of student services, this can be viewed as a lack of administrative effort to promote adequate support networks and opportunities that encourage student participation to effectively navigate their college experience (Milem & Berger, 1997, pp. 388-389; Tinto, 1993).

First-year students arrive to college with different needs according to the varying levels of transition they find themselves attempting to navigate in order to successfully integrate into their college environment. For example, in a study conducted by Collier and Morgan (2007) the “college student role” is defined as successfully understanding and fulfilling varying expectations according to different academic and social circles established by faculty and peers alike. The term is considered to be essential in understanding student success at the university level. Collier and Morgan (2007) focused specifically on the difference of first-generation college students in comparison to traditional undergraduate college student experiences and the difference in retention rates

between these two student populations. Traditional undergraduate college students are identified by the cultural capital their parental influence contributes to their experience and exposure with the college environment. It is assumed that traditional college students are better able to effectively respond to the demands of college expectations due to the navigation their families can afford to support through monetary value or personal navigation of the rigorous demands of the college student role (Collier and Morgan, 2007). This study referenced the necessity of pre-college exposure as it applies to first-year students and the significant impact it has on their ability to navigate their new college environment and persist towards degree attainment. When comparing these two student populations, it is important to understand the distinction between conventional student theories and the multitude of navigational needs non-traditional or first-generation students bring with them to their college experience due to lack of prior college exposure; these students are often considered exceptions to the norm in their efforts to navigate a successful transition towards degree attainment. First-generation students are considered to be less likely to graduate in comparison to their peers with college-educated parents who can help to support the navigation of their college experience through inherited cultural capital (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

## **Overview of the Literature Review**

My initial research question was “How do students’ university experience and their feelings of belongingness and connection to the university impact their academic and social development?” However, as the study progressed, I realized that it was the connections that students make within their roommate experiences in residential housing and how those connections impact their sense of belongingness and connection that I was

curious about. The research question for this study, then, is “How do roommate experiences impact students’ sense of belonging and ability to successfully navigate their first-year experience in the university?”

This review examined the research literature relevant to my research question. The different sections of this literature review fall under three overarching themes which include:

- Integration of academic and social influences, through this first theme, the direct influences on how students become involved, both academically and socially, with their university and how they integrate themselves into their living environment on campus is explored. This theme probes the experiences of students influenced by pre-existing attributes, values, and prior educational experiences and how these influences directly affect how they integrate with their social and academic environments.
- Student belongingness, the second theme of this literature review is about the importance of the residential experience which offers students the opportunity to become engaged with the on campus experience that consistently promotes applied learning, both in the classroom and in social settings (Pike, 1999).
- Living environment and the campus experience, this third theme has to do with the support services that either promote or impede the progress of first-year students navigating their transitional experiences as they become acquainted to campus life. Research regarding the effects of support service resources was examined.

Overall the literature on first-year students' navigation of their academic and social experiences focused on the challenges with transition this student population encountered, which often result in elevated attrition rates during their first-year of college.

### **Integration of Academic and Social Influences**

Positive social relationships have been demonstrated to have a direct influence on first-year students' academic performance and retention rates (Megan, Huser, Elva, Sollenberger, Befort, & Robinson, 2007). In contrast, the difficulties first-year students experience during their initial year of study is often a direct reflection of their inexperience with academic and social preparedness (Collier & Morgan, 2007), and a perceived lack of belonging:

Students who develop positive social relationships also experience positive academic performance and are more motivated to engage and persist with their college experience. On the contrary, the result of most student attrition is directly related to a lack of sense of belonging with the college environment. (Megan, et al., 2007, p.345)

The support first-year students arrive to college with is considered to be instrumental in their successful navigation of the campus environment. Challenges experienced by first-year students who do not possess the same support system as the "traditional undergraduate college student" can often be overlooked when considering the broad lens of most student developmental theorists (Sandoval-Lucero, 2014, p.48).

Collier & Morgan (2007) analyzed Tinto's Student Departure Theory and suggested correlation of the overall transition of new students' campus experience and student departure. It is suggested through research that lack of integration with the campus experience amongst first-generation college students applicable to academic and social programs has proven to be impactful towards student retention and considered to have a direct impact on students' persistence towards degree attainment. The result of a successful transition is demonstrated by students' integration with their academic career influenced by prior exposure to academic and social experiences. Thus, the expectation and interaction with their academic environment is thought to have a direct impact on their decision to persist towards degree achievement. Social integration amongst first-generation students is thought to also serve as motivation towards degree achievement, as it applies to how a student fits into their living environment. These combined areas of integration are thought to be main predictors of first-year students' ability to persist towards degree achievement (Collier & Morgan, 2007).

Research conducted by Collier & Morgan (2007) helped to gauge contributing factors of attrition that occur amongst first-year students as largely attributed to difficulties with social assimilation in comparison to issues with academic integration. The result of this research correlated deficiencies in academic progress substantiated by students' grade point averages to a lack of campus integration. In support of their study, Theoretical Perspective of Sociological Role Theory (p.427) was used in an attempt to differentiate students from varying academic and social backgrounds. For example, a main difference between first-generation and the traditional college student role is best explained in The Differentiated Model of Identity Acquisition Theory (p.427) which

states, individuals function under several social roles according to different social structures they find themselves expected to demonstrate efficiency as it applies to academic and social competence. It is important to note both roles do not hold the same value across social circles. Thus, by having a clear understanding of the context of the “college student role” in both structures this can support expectations students should maintain to remain successful with their college experience” (Collier & Morgan, 2007, p.427).

For example, the “college student role” as exemplified through interactions within the academic environment requires students to be successful with academic integration. The value of this role focuses on the importance of attaining proficiency when differentiating between “role playing” and “role making.” The difference between the two roles is in how an individual responds when faced with new circumstances. When a student “role makes,” they work towards an untraditional version of an undefined role open to revision, whereas “role playing” conforms to the norms of an existing standard necessary to be met in order to fit into a particular setting. The differentiated model is described as a detailed version of role mastery according to varying aspects of a social role an individual is attempting to conform to (Collier & Morgan, 2007).

This parallels to Pierre Bourdieu’s (1973, 1977, 1984) Theory of Cultural Capital which stated, “cultural capital is defined by a students’ family social status. It seeks to understand how the individual level of social status fits into the dominant culture and is applied to academia” (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 428). For the purpose of this study, one’s proficiency level is applicable to the skills of academia and social relationships. Thelin (2011) maintained a similar significance of “cultural capital” as, the clout that

college students maintain by their social class and monetary contributions to society. Thus, higher education's history was originally profiled for the elite student expected to be a leader in their community. During a period in history, admission to the university was limited to a particular type of student who fit a specific profile: serious about academia and elite in social status. The previous focus of higher education was to differentiate elite students from their socially disadvantaged peers, who were labeled as "common students" (Thelin, 2011). In present day, similar stereotypes still exist and are identified by varying criteria such as a student's academic grade point average (GPA) and families' monetary contribution. Collier & Morgan (2007) stated, "in order for proficiency with academia to be achieved, students must assimilate to the prestigious values of the academic environment" (p.428). This notion of cultural capital is thought to be inherited through family influences and largely determined by social class. Students who have familial support to navigate the higher education environment are thought to be "role experts" due to their family's educational background. Cultural capital was thought to give traditional students an advantage in the existing social order of academia which supports navigation with the university experience in order to fulfill academic expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2007). In comparison, non-traditional students or first-generation students who do not have such capital are expected to navigate their college experience and assimilate to similar responsibilities of the "college student role" through adherence to rigorous academic requirements at the university level. Understandably, navigational mastery of university expectations is not always attained by first-generation students, and neither is degree attainment. This disconnect can often result in increased attrition amongst this population of students due to their lack of role mastery with the

expectations of the college student role. In order to improve retention rates for this student population, it is necessary for individual academic abilities to drive students' success, instead of fulfilling societal expectations of a certain profile of the college student role (Collier & Morgan, 2007).

In a study by Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella (2012) regarding first-generation students and challenges of the first-year of college, it was presumed that difficulties by this population of students are often experienced due to limited knowledge of available resources accessible in their immediate college environment. This study observed the type of familial support these students arrive to campus with and concluded due to lack of a stable support system, these students are often placed at a disadvantage because of inadequate knowledge regarding the rigorous academic level requirements and navigation of the campus life environment. This study ascertained that first-generation students are often challenged with not only trying to navigate their own way through the college experience, but also by endeavoring to help their support system understand unfamiliar territory in attempt to create a successful college experience.

Although research presented the difficulties of assimilation with first-generation students, these experiences are specific to the lack of supportive integration with academia and social expectations these students often find difficult to navigate. Research suggests most student development theories often fail to take into account the breadth and depth of challenges experienced by first-generation students due to models based on the traditional college student (Sandoval-Lucero, 2014). However, with adjustment of viewpoint that views this diverse student population as an asset to the campus community that arrive with unique needs this can help to foster the support of student-centered

communities that cultivate a support network where diverse students can obtain guidance in navigating their college experience through varying social and cultural endeavors. Thus, inclusion of these factors for future research can help to account for varying support networks necessary to foster supportive environments where diverse students can be successful in their pursuit of higher education and career aspirations (Sandoval-Lucero, 2014).

In order to support the first-generation students' college navigation experience, it is important to recognize signs that lead to attrition. Metz (2004) suggested that the conception of varying student development theories targeted at specific students populations created in response to the foundation that Tinto's (1975) Student Departure Theory contributed to academia through a narrow perspective regarding reason attrition occurs amongst first-year students due to lack of acclimation with their immediate academic and social environment. Retention was explained as a unique factor that is not universal, rather necessary to serve individual student needs. Thus, in effort to reduce attrition among first-generation students, the recommendation was made to invest in effective interventions to better understand the varying reasons students decide to leave institutions of higher education (Metz, 2004).

### **Student Belongingness**

A sense of belonging is best described as the "psychological dimension of student integration" which supports the assimilation of students into their college environment (Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo, 2015, p.62 as cited in Ribera, Miller, Dumford, 2017). The first-year of college has been identified as the most critical year of a student's higher education experience, in that it is the most distinctive year for determining how students

interact with their college experiences and integrate within academic and social circles (Hagedorn & Castro, 1999; Hausman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007, as cited in Ribera, Miller and Dumford, 2017). If students feel unwelcome within their immediate environment, this can contribute to early departure from the campus environment and relocation to a different institution, or even more regrettably, lead to the decision to not return to college altogether due to lack of belonging (Hagedorn & Castro, 1999; Hausmann, et. al., 2007 as cited in Ribera et. al, 2017). A sense of belonging is an essential ingredient for students to be successful in their college endeavors, especially among first-generation students. For this reason, intentional relationships created early in students' college career with peers and campus personnel are critical to influence a successful transition to the campus environment (Berger & Milem, 1999; Hausmann et. al, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh, 2005; Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008 as cited in Ribera et. al, 2017). Research about student belonging and integration within the campus environment conducted by distinguished researchers such as Tinto (1993), Astin (1993), Pasccarella, & Terenini (2005) suggested the following: in order to enhance persistence and positive interactions within academia and social relationships it should be considered an essential responsibility of campus programming to cultivate an interactive campus connections among first-year students (Hausmann et. al, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997 as cited in Ribera et. al, 2017).

Hurtado and Carter (1997) were among the first researchers to study the significance of students' sense of belonging, which is considered to be a precursor to student involvement. They challenged Tinto's (1993) Student Departure Theory, stating, "students feelings of belongingness within their campus community often were not

accounted for and should be considered an essential factor of connectedness by which students integrate themselves with their campus experiences” (Ribera et. al. 2017, p.549). Since the conclusion of Hurtado and Carter’s (1997) study, other researchers have concurred about the importance of integrating first-year students with their campus experience through early exposure to academic and social connections, which support the importance of feeling like one belongs within the campus community. However, first-generation students were discussed by Ribera, Miller, & Dumford (2017) as a population to be less likely to self –initiate their own integration within their campus experience and too often have a less than favorable connection with peers and with the institution. In order to change this, these researchers recommended for diverse others (e.g., peers, faculty, and other campus personnel) to serve as an essential council of change to promote integration of service learning for this population of students. Such interactions were found to have a positive effect on first-generation students and their feelings of institutional acceptance (Ribera et. al., 2017).

In Ribera, Miller, & Dumford’s (2017) study they sought to differentiate the importance between peer belonging and institutional acceptance from varied student population perspectives, specifically first-year students. For example, it focused on differentiating the methods between the two student populations and how they integrate themselves into their campus experience in an attempt to connect and achieve institutional acceptance through association with faculty, administrators, and other key personnel who they felt connection with to support their feelings of belonging with the institution (Hurtado & Carter, 1997 as cited in Ribera et. al, 2017).

Research conducted by Berger and Milem (1999) on early interactions with peers and campus involvement suggested positive connections as having a significant influence on student persistence. This is based upon first-year students' perception of institutional support and feeling of belonging which has been considered to positively affect their sense of satisfaction and commitment to their institution. In contrast, students who lack feeling of connection with a peer network and faculty involvement are suggested to suffer from a decreased sense of belonging during their first semester of study; if these students decide to extend to the second semester they are often likely to depart from the institution after their first-year of study (Milem & Berger, 1997, p. 392). Milem & Berger (1997) suggested it is necessary to acknowledge the distinct difference of student belonging between traditional college students and first-generation students, and how these two student populations interact and integrate with their campus experiences. By acknowledging these differences, the cookie cutter mentality of generalizing first-year students' successful navigation of their college experience can be avoided since each student arrives with a unique background that influences their level of interaction and involvement with their immediate environment. Thus, by acknowledging the differences of these two student populations, this honors the uniqueness that first-year students contribute to their new college environment with a similar goal they arrive to the university with in pursuit of degree achievement (Milem & Berger, 1997, p.398).

### **Living Environment and the Campus Experience**

In the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) report of the model college environment, it is suggested that "college environments should consistently promote student engagement opportunities through applied learning which encourages

academic achievement and integration with the campus culture" (Pike, 1999, p.269). This finding parallels to Chickering's (1975) Student Learning and Development Theory, which is promoted as a model of learning that integrates students with their living environment through student engagement. This exposure is relatively common among residential students who engage with their immediate environment and consistently apply learning techniques gained in the classroom to their interactions with others. Research conducted by Pike (1999) suggested this type of interaction promoted intellectual development and lends to the enhancement of the college experience. This comparison, based upon Chickering's Student Learning and Development Theory, suggested Living-Learning and Themed Community Housing within residential communities as a successful approach to integrate students with the campus community, resulting in overall satisfaction with first-year students' college experience.

Research conducted by Pascarella and Terenini (2005) regarding the educational impact on the residential experience, the living environment was evaluated and suggested to successfully contribute to the growth and development of student engagement encompassing an enriching college experience, which fosters academic and social integration. Thus, it is important for the residential experience to be intentionally designed to encompass a blend of learning with living communities focused on the integration of first-year students with their campus experience. Therefore the living environment is thought to have a dominant influence on the overall growth and development of student engagement, both academically and socially (Broido, Campbell, & Palmer, 2008). The purpose of these communities was to help foster engagement in academic and social environments, both of which promote persistence towards degree

achievement. By understanding the foundation that living -learning communities contribute to first-year students' feeling of belongingness with their institution, this emphasizes the need of collaborative programming with campus personnel to support involvement and integration with the campus community considered to be a significant contribution in promoting persistence towards degree achievement (Broido, Campbell, & Palmer, 2008).

The importance of student satisfaction among residential students was discussed by Strange & Banning (2001) as providing positive correlations between the residential and academic environment which often affects students' retention with the institution (Broido, Campbell, & Palmer, 2008). Living-Learning environments have been defined by Pascarella, Terenzini & Bliming (1994) as, "bringing about a closer integration of the student's living environment with their academic or learning environment" (Li, McCoy, Shelley & Whalen, (2005), p.177). In research conducted to measure residential student satisfaction residing in student housing, successful measures defined by assessment of students' satisfaction with their living environment was suggested to be supportive with academic and residential programs which promote persistence towards academic achievement and increased social interaction with peers. The analysis of students' satisfaction with the living environment sought to not only benefit retention efforts, but also overall improvement with participation in campus programs and services geared towards supporting student success beyond the first year of college (Li, McCoy, Shelley & Whalen, (2005).

## **Belongingness in Roommate Relationships**

Shook & Clay (2012) conducted a study of intergroup contact applicable to roommate relationships with diverse students at a Primary White Institute (PWI) that sought to analyze and evaluate the difference in campus integration and feelings of belongingness amongst residential students. The focus of this study occurred with interracial roommate relationships within an on-campus housing setting, considered to be most beneficial for minority students who research suggested often experience more difficulty with adjustment to college life both socially and academically in comparison to their majority peers who often experienced positive effects of belonging within the university community. The findings of this research discussed varying effects of belongingness as they were experienced differently among a diverse group of students. Some distinguishing factors considered to contribute to differences in the first-year experience included socioeconomic status, prior interracial exchange, and pre-college exposure to the college environment. Historically, socioeconomic differences status, has been considered to be a main factor relative to first-year students' success in their college experience, both academically and socially. These research findings suggest that more diverse friendships support students' increased level of satisfaction with the college experience as expressed through enhanced feelings of belongingness with their institution. In addition, pre-college exposure amongst this population provided an enhanced level of social satisfaction and comfort with the college environment. In comparison, minority students who did not experience prior exposure to the college environment often reported an expectation of rejection based on their racial identity. This research suggested that students who arrive to college with this anticipation appear to

experience more adversity transitioning to their new college environment. In addition, students who experience these struggles are considered to also be more vulnerable to an increased level of difficulty integrating into their new academic environment.

The most common intergroup contact evaluated in this study occurred with random roommate assignments living in on-campus housing. The roommate relationship is considered to be one of the most intimate experiences students will share with an individual in the same living space. Thus the benefit of this relationship is to establish collaboration towards mutual goals in effort to foster a comfortable living environment.

Research conducted by Shook & Clay (2012) on belongingness sought to examine the effects of randomly assigned minority roommates and the resulting impact of the relationship as it applied to a sense of belonging in the university, both academically and socially. The benefits of the study suggested roommate relationships among minority students to be most influential resulting in an increased level of integration with the college environment. The study suggested diversity promoted among roommates as an essential factor to how students achieve a sense of belonging with their college experience which result in positive contributions to peer connections and successful integration within the university community.

### **Trust Development and the Roommate Relationship**

Dirks (1999) (as cited by Whitmore & Dunsmore, 2014) investigated trust development in roommate relationships and suggested the merit of trust as a “crucial component of social functioning described as the hallmark of an effective

relationship”(Whitmore & Dunsmore, 2014, p.233). It is explained as a vital tool for interpersonal relationships and essential to the functioning of groups and organizations.

In analyzing the physical space shared among roommates in order for a cohesive relationship to develop, interdependence between peers was identified as a necessity. This type of connection is considered to be critical to a roommate relationship due to the influences the college environment has on students’ sense of belonging (Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Tinto, 1997 as cited in Whitmore & Dunsmore, 2014). The roommate relationship is thought to maintain significance on how first-year students adjust to college life. By working to understand and improve how trust is developed in roommate relationships, research can support programs designed to improve peer relationships, which influence sense of belonging and integration with the university community resulting in persistence towards degree achievement (Foldger, Carter, & Chase, 2004; Tinto, 1997 as cited in Whitmore & Dunsmore, 2014). Research conducted on the importance of roommate relationships among first-year students established that social connections positively contribute to students’ feeling of belongingness and have a positive impact on their academic success. Conversely, students who fail to make social connections often report a lack of belonging to the university environment, which can often result in their decision to depart from the university (Whitmore & Dunsmore, 2014).

Research has been conducted to designate the characteristics of a trusting roommate relationship which seeks to contribute and foster a sense of belonging within the university community. The characteristic of trust is thought to reflect and influence the treatment of others through an attitude that seeks to, “treat others fairly, provide

support as needed, and avoid taking advantage of others" (Flanagan, 2003; Khodyakov, 2007 as cited in Whitmore & Dunsmore, p.234). These characteristics were discussed in Whitmore & Dunsmore's study as being necessary attributes for a college roommate relationship to be functional.

This research unveiled three areas of support to foster development of trust in roommate relationships which include, parental attachment and similarity with trustee.

**Parental attachment.** Research suggests that the more secure students' parental/guardian relationship are the better equipped they are to confidently explore new peer relationships. This statement is supported by work conducted by Hannum & Dvorak (2004) which suggests first-year students' emotional and social wellbeing is determined by their level of parental attachment during their college transition. The relationship college students have with their parents or guardians is suggested as essential and has a significant influence on how students transition to adulthood as they develop their own independent identity. This relationship is suggested to be a vital resource for students to reference and connect with in order to feel confident navigating new relationships within their college environment (Faas & Tubman, 2002; Samuolis, Layurn, & Schiaffino, 2001 as cited in Whitmore & Dunsmore, 2014).

**Perceived similarity with trustee.** Similarity to the self was also described as an essential characteristic which influences trust development between roommates. Research conducted by Martin & Anderson (1995) suggested likeness in personalities among roommates increase the certainty of cohesion and development of trust in the relationship. This connection in similarities also sought to identify safety in a new

relationship, which the study suggested as essential to create an environment for favorable interactions between roommates.

### **Social Exchange**

The social exchange process between roommates was also suggested as significant in relationships during periods where early influences accumulated trust development. Research conducted by Ainsworth (1991) suggested, “Parental attachment and perceived similarity combined with a trust-mistrust basis can emerge and be reciprocal in a roommate relationship” (cited in Whitmore & Dunsmore, 2014, p.236). A particular study on trust development amongst first-year college students’ new roommate relationships in residence hall room assignments and the link to trust development to peer rejection/acceptance as represented by Coie’s (1990) Theory of Peer Rejection, sought to analyze peer socialization, the patterns of social behavior, competencies and expectations, all of which affect and influence peer relationships. This particular model suggested the way students interact with their peers based upon the skills they arrive to campus with have an influence on their peer relationships. Thus, in order to nurture and develop peer relationships, evaluation of how their connection is perceived typically occurs with their roommate interactions and how they view their personal similarities with social exchange (Coie, 1990 as cited in Whitmore & Dunsmore, 2014).

### **Support of Student Services**

The effectiveness of social support resources during the first-year of students’ college experience is considered to be essential to promote feelings of belonging within the college environment and encourage retention towards degree persistence (Madgett & Bélanger, 2008). Some influencers that are essential to student persistence but often have

a negative influence as it applies to student attrition include issues related to socioeconomic status, lack of integration both academically and socially, and lack of familial support. All these factors have a considerable influential impact on students' decision to persist towards degree achievement at the university and are often factors which contribute to increased dropout rates after the first-year of study (Madgett & Bélanger, 2008). The importance of the living environment and the supportive atmosphere it cultivates is essential for students to feel as though they fit into their college community. Students who prematurely leave the institution stated, "they often feel as though they are victims of an administration who do not offer sufficient positive reinforcement or opportunity for engagement towards degree persistence" (Madgett & Bélanger, 2008, p. 90).

A study among first-year college students at Arizona State University (ASU) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics during 2003 sought to evaluate the effects of social support influences and how students relate to their social and academic environment. This study was compared to Tinto's (1993) Theory of Person-Environment Fit, which sought to examine the social support of relationships and how they are a reflection of a person's value system. More specifically, the study found that students who develop positive social relationships are also considered to excel in academic performance and be motivated towards making the best of their college experience through social engagement. The research conducted made direct inference to factors of, "social support, social integration, and positive relationships with instructors" which all extend positive contributions to foster student retention beyond the first year of study (Foley, Huser, Blanks, Sollenberger, Befort, & Robinson, 2007).

Another study evaluated college students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds and analyzed their individual degree aspirations (Osegura & Rhee, 2009). This research focused on students from low SES backgrounds who often do not have the support structures needed to succeed within the college environment. It was found that these students typically enter their first-year of college academically and mentally unprepared to excel through the rigorous college course demands and lack the social exchange resources to connect with their college experience, both academically and socially. Thus, in order for first-year students to be successful and persist towards degree achievement, these researchers recommended for students to identify with faculty and cultivate peer relationships in efforts to promote their sense of belonging within the college environment (Osegura & Rhee, 2009). These guideposts can promote healthy feelings of belongingness and impact students' decision to persist towards degree achievement. In addition, they can serve as a main support for first-year SES students to attain success towards academic expectations, accessibility to faculty, and integration with social environments to foster their sense of belonging with the university environment. Overall, how students relate within and navigate the campus environment promotes their engagement with belonging to the campus community, which is often considered a determining factor of student retention beyond the first-year of study (Osegura & Rhee, 2009).

This review of literature reviewed some of the struggles of non-traditional first-year students who come to the university with a lack of familial support to help navigate their campus experience. The next chapters will define the methodology and theoretical framework for this project.

## CHAPTER 3

## METHODOLOGY

### **Research Design**

This qualitative study was conducted to understand the impacts that roommate experiences have on academic and social development for first-year students in a traditional residence hall facility. The following question was explored throughout this study,

How do roommate experiences impact students' sense of belonging and ability to successfully navigate their first-year experience in the university?"

This research study was conducted to assess the level of satisfaction of first-time students with their roommate relationships. The focus concentrated on the impacts of relational issues students experience and their impact on academic and social connections while living in student housing. This study sought to analyze the current student experience as it applies to first-year students and their roommate experience. Student participants were recruited and interviewed in search of a better understanding of the common characteristics students seek in a roommate relationship and how the current application process influences the overall navigation of successful roommate matches. The student stories shared will provide insight to current campus housing practices in order to enhance the roommate experience and positively contribute to the residential students' academic and interpersonal relationships while living in student housing.

### **Participants**

The study was conducted at a four-year public Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) located within a Southern California student housing community that is 70% female and

30% male, with 60% of the total campus population self-identified as first-generation college students. For this study, first-generation college student (FGCS) “implies the possible lack of critical cultural capital a student may arrive to college with because their parents did not attend college” (FirstGen@NASPA, n.d.). Prior to initiating outreach efforts with first-year students residing in student housing for participation in this research project, necessary steps were taken to obtain gatekeeper approval from the Associate Vice President for Student Affairs, Housing and Residential Education, and Associated Students, Incorporated. After approval was granted, introduction of the research study to first-year student housing residents was sent via email correspondence requesting voluntary participation. Students who responded were invited to attend individually-scheduled meetings arranged in a confidential interview setting to share their residential experience specific to roommate relationships.

Seven first-year residential students responded to the emailed invitation to participate in individual one-on-one interviews. Five of the participants were female and two were male averaging in age of 18 years. Of the five female participants, four identified as Latina and one identified as mixed race (Latina/Filipina). Of the two male participants, one identified as Caucasian and the other identified as Asian. Four of the seven identified as first-generation college students, meaning that they were the first in their families to attend a four year university. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to assure confidentiality of their experiences shared. The pseudonyms and demographic data for each participant is represented in Table 1. Further detailed introductions to my participants will be shared in chapter four.

Table 1

*Participant demographic overview: Age, Gender, Ethnicity, First-Generation Student*

	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>First Generation Student</b>
Ali	18	Female	Latina	Yes
Beatriz	19	Female	Latina/Filipina	No
Celia	18	Female	Latina	Yes
Doris	18	Female	Latina	Yes
Esmee	18	Female	Latina	Yes
Frank	19	Male	Caucasian	No
Gil	18	Male	Asian	No

## **Data Collection**

Three common methods of research study were used to collect data that informed this study. These included: (1) qualitative data obtained through one-on-one interviews with each of the seven participants, (2) the results of document inspection of the entire freshmen residential population residing in student housing who participated in roommate mediation by a professional student housing staff member due to reported issues with roommate conflict. The analysis of data attempted to account for reasons students sought a room transfer during the first semester of the academic year and patterned effects of GPA and unit load for students who completed a room transfer due to roommate conflict, and (3) a researcher's journal used to document potential themes as they emerged throughout the study. The purpose of the methods used was to gain students' perspectives regarding how the on-campus housing experience can be improved beginning with the housing application and exposure to academic and social programs intended for first-year students to engage in opportunities of involvement which promotes connectedness and integration with the campus experience. As these experiences relate to feelings of belongingness and connectedness during the first-year of

study, what is learned through this study can positively contribute to overall student retention and degree perseverance for our diverse student body population.

### **Direct Interviews**

Creswell (2012) described one-on-one qualitative interviews as a meeting between a researcher and participant where open-ended questions are asked and information exchanged is recorded. The researcher transcribes the interview into data and analyzes information collected (Creswell, 2012).

For the purpose of this qualitative research study, direct one-on-one interviews were conducted over a period of thirty to sixty minutes in length with seven first-year students living in student housing. Interviews strategically took place in the sixth week of the spring 2018 semester for several reasons. This specific time frame was considered ideal given the opportunity the first semester extends for students to navigate the campus environment and gain a sense of connection with various social and academic programs offered in the classroom and campus community. All interviews took place in a safe and secure private office located in the main Student Housing office. This was done in efforts to gain trust of the participants and the stories they were sharing being received from the perspective of a researcher in comparison to my working title as an administrator. Prior to the start of the interview, a blank set of profile questions was shared; these questions were taken directly from the student housing application. After review of the blank profile questions, participants shared their profile responses, which demonstrated the ideal characteristics they initially selected in search of a preferred roommate.

During the course of the interview a semi-structured protocol was used to support the flow of conversation with individual one-on-one meetings. A voice recorder to

digitally record each interview was used, along with manual transcription of notes to ensure information shared by the participant was documented as intended. I utilized both methods of instrument in effort to error on the side of caution should the recorder have failed to capture the participant's story or if my reporting of information missed a significant piece of information. Throughout the interview participants were encouraged to discuss their experience with roommate relationships and how they felt that relationship contributed to "belongingness" with university connections, both academically and socially. The semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix A) offered the opportunity for the interviewee to elaborate on their residential experiences. As information was shared through these interviews, probing questions were used to encourage participants to expand upon their responses. Some examples of probing questions included, "tell me more about your experience, please explain your response, and paraphrasing participants' responses to help guide and elaborate on their shared stories" (Creswell, 2012, p. 222). In analysis of interviews, data was transcribed word for word, examined and coded to allow themes to emerge through patterns of similar occurrences participants shared during individual interviews. This was completed through line-by-line coding. This type of qualitative coding as described by Creswell (2012) is an examination of the text database which attempts to analyze data and gain a clean understanding of participants' stories, by assigning a code label to the text segment.

### **Document Inspection**

Document Inspection is explained by Creswell (2012) as the opportunity to compare valuable sources of data which help researchers understand the central phenomena of the research being conducted. In addition, it helps to support the

trustworthiness of data collected from direct participant interaction. An important way to validate information shared is through triangulation of document inspection compared to literature review. Triangulation in qualitative studies is explained by Creswell (2012) as the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, varying types of data, or methods of data collection which are similar in descriptions and themes.

### **Researcher's Journal**

A Researcher's Journal, also known as field notes, is described by Creswell (2012) as, "recorded data during an observation" (p.217). Maintaining a researcher's journal allowed me to capture ideas and themes as they emerged through participant interviews or observations which involved first-year students and their interaction with the campus community. This method of triangulating data helped me to maintain a clear focus on my research question while comparing data collected through participants' interviews, document inspection, and review of my own field note observations as ideas and themes emerged throughout this study. It was out of a personal desire to learn from students' experiences, specifically first-year students and their navigation of academic and social belongingness at the university level, and how administration can better support their success towards degree persistence that caused me to pursue this project.

During participant interviews, I took field notes as interview questions were asked in efforts to help recollect expressions, tonalities, and body language exhibited by participants. These notes helped me to recollect observations as it related to outward emotions displayed as they reflected upon roommate experiences and how it contributed to their feelings of belongingness. By taking note of these observations it helped me to interpret participants' expressions of content or disappointment as they reminisced on

their experiences in response to questions which guided this study. Taking field notes during participant interviews also served as a safety measure in the event issues occurred with the audio recording of interviews.

### **Assumptions**

Self-reported data shared by participants interviewed in this project are assumed to be accurate and reported to the best of each student participant's ability. While self-reported data may not always be truthful, the accuracy of data from interviews in this study is supported by triangulation with other data sources, which validated information received from participants. An initial assumption that I held at the beginning of this research project was the difference in roommate connection patterns between traditional first-year students and first-year, first-generation students. In review of interview data from participants, this assumption did not bear out. As suggested through previous research studies which discuss the term First-Generation College Student (FGCS), information cannot be assumed to specify individuals' needs based on their FGCS/Non-FGCS status. Rather the phrase, "first-generation college student" should not encompass the experience of the individual due to most first-year student experiences not being differentiated between the two student populations (FirstGen@NASPA, n.d.).

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed, word for word. An inductive reasoning approach was taken in the analysis of the collected data in order to gain perspective of how roommate connections are formed and how these interactions compare between first-year students and how they impact a student's integration with campus life. Creswell (2012) explained inductive reasoning as "taking interview

information and compartmentalizing it into codes and themes to support the broader picture of the research being conducted” (p.238). Three iterations of data review were conducted: (1) transcription from audio tape, (2) review and analysis of transcriptions using a set of codes that emerged from the interviews, and (3) identification of three broad themes that encapsulated participants’ roommate experiences.

The coding of data occurred through an in vivo method. This is explained by Creswell (2012) as a form of coding specified by use of participants’ actual words, which is helpful for ensuring that findings are trustworthy, emerging from the data collected rather than from the researcher’s premature interpretation of those data. After coding interviews, phrases were grouped based upon commonality of experiences in effort to reduce redundancy. This process helped to identify common use of words by participants. During my initial review of interview data, 50 codes emerged (see Appendix B). In continuation with this process, text segmenting was used to bracket certain phrases by highlighting, coding, and finally labeling the themes that eventually emerged. Creswell (2012) explained text segmenting as the process of bracketing phrases and labeling codes to describe a segment of text to characterize an idea (Creswell, 2012).

After transcribing participant interviews, I used the research program, HyperResearch to aid in identifying the frequency of words or phrases expressed through participant interviews using in vivo and text segmenting as described above. This program helped to ensure data was validated through common themes which naturally emerged and spoke to participants’ experiences, rather than being prematurely informed by my own interpretations.

An additional review of participant interviews allowed for codes to be organized based upon commonality in comparison to frequency identified through HyperResearch. Through this process, I was able to condense my list of 50 initial codes to 12 codes (see Appendix B). Additional iterations of this process allowed for broader level of themes to emerge best representing participants' experiences as first-year students living in student housing. Creswell (2012) explained themes as collective codes grouped together to express a major idea as it relates to research being conducted. Three broad themes emerged through data collected for this study that will further discussed in Chapter 4. These include: (1) Belongingness in the Living Environment, (2) Importance of Knowing Person, and (3) Conflict Avoidance.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is defined by Creswell (2012) as a qualitative researcher's goal to ensure that quality research is reported through the accuracy of findings. The outcome of a trustworthy study produces reliable and credible evidence confirmed through strategies such as member checking, triangulation, and auditing of data (p. 259). In order to ensure trustworthiness by honoring information shared by participants, the method of bracketing was used in order to keep my own bias in perspective while maintaining neutrality as a researcher. Bracketing is described as a method of self-awareness as a researcher by putting aside personal partialities when engaging in experiences shared by participants (Tufford and Newman, 2010 as cited in Mertens, Heylighen, Declerq, Hannes, Truyen, Denier, & Dierckx, 2017, p.314).

**Triangulation of data.** Creswell (2012) defined triangulation as "the process of using supporting evidence considered to be both reliable and credible. It allows for the

use of different data sources to strengthen the accuracy of information presented throughout the study” (p.259). The method of triangulation I put into practice was coding of interview data through an in vivo approach which documented actual words of participants to emphasize the importance of their experiences as it applied to this study. Through this process line-by-line coding of interview data was implemented, which allowed themes to emerge through patterns of similar experiences shared by participants. This process attempted to share the significance of participants stories through labeling and coding conducted through text segment. I delayed assigning themes to codes in efforts to allow for participant experiences to emerge through their own spoken stories.

**Role of the researcher.** At the university where I conducted this study, I work as the Associate Director of Housing Services. Since this study relates to my professional position and the population of students with whom I have direct contact, it was necessary for me to completely remove myself from role as administrator who maintains the functionality of the housing application and the output of roommate matching, and confine myself solely to the role of graduate student and researcher throughout the investigation of this study. Students who communicate compatibility issues with their roommates or who proceed with a room change due to irreconcilable differences with their roommate, are typically the same individuals with whom our office works during the academic year to support adjustment of a room change. In an effort to be transparent with participants regarding the purpose and intention of this study, prior to the start of the interview participants were informed our meeting would strictly serve as informational regarding their individual experiences with the application process and experience with their immediate room environment. My role as researcher with this study offered the

opportunity for me to be an active listener to participants' college experiences living in student housing and apply minor adjustments mentioned as areas of significance to improve the transparency of the application and assignment process for the successive academic year. Semi-structured interviews were used in efforts to allow for participants to clearly share their experience without influence of my interpretation as a researcher conducting qualitative research.

**Confidentiality and pseudonyms.** The confidentiality of participants was maintained by use of pseudonyms to protect their identity without obscuring the depth of contribution each added to this research. All pseudonyms were carefully selected for each participant with an attempt to accurately represent the individual and honor their individual contributions.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study involved not having the opportunity to member check the data collected from participants due to the timing of when the interviews occurred towards the latter part of the spring semester prior to preparation for finals week. Member checking is explained by Creswell (2012) as a method of validating findings in order for the researcher to validate the accuracy and credibility of information collected through interviews. The method of validation used with my project was through triangulation of data which draws on multiple sources to ensure information collected is accurate and credible (Creswell, 2012, p.259). Although my project sought to gain perspective of the student experience of first-year students, the opportunity to interview an equal number of participants who were first-year students and first-year, first generation students would have been optimal. In addition since most of my participants

were female, this limited my access to a more diverse perspective of student belongingness both academically and socially from participants who shared their existing roommate experiences.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Because my theoretical framework impacted every aspect of this study, from the research question that I asked through the methods I selected for conducting the study, I am including information about the theories that shaped this research study in this chapter on methodology. Given the complexity of student belongingness the three theories used to make sense of this project are identified as follows,

- Vincent Tinto's Student Departure Theory (Tinto's (1975; 1993);
- Astin's The Input-Environment-Output Model (1984); and
- Strayhorn's Theory of Integration (2012)

Tinto and Astin's theories were maintained as theoretical frameworks with my project due to the foundation they have created analyzing varying factors that affect student persistence in Higher Education. Both their works are relevant to this study as they help to provide understanding of how first-year students navigate their campus experiences through academic and social interactions. Therefore first-year students who engage themselves within the campus environment and extra-curricular activities have exhibited more signs of belongingness, and, are expected to be more likely to persist towards degree attainment resulting in a successful college experience (Astin, 1984).

Whereas Strayhorn (2012) helps to fill in the gaps of Tinto (1993) and Astin's (1999) theories through his Theory of Integration that seeks to understand how marginalized students work to gain a sense of belonging and persist towards degree

attainment in college. He broadened the spectrum that Tinto and Astin excluded from their lenses working to include his research on the difficulties experienced by minority students especially amongst populations to include, “Latino/as, gays, STEM students, Black male students, graduate students and first-year students of color” (Kim, 2013, p.120).

All three theorist contribute different viewpoints that support my research questions through their varied lenses and maintain limitations that require improvement to be inclusive of a diverse student body who continue to evolve and contribute to breaking down barriers in Higher Education.

To begin Vincent Tinto’s *Student Departure Theory* (Tinto’s (1975; 1993) attempted to understand the varying external factors that affect the process of student persistence at the university level based upon varying influences students arrive with to campus (Tinto, 1993). Through his study, it was concluded that students’ departure from the university was often influenced by a lack of integration with the campus community both academically and socially considered to be necessary for students to commit towards degree persistence (Longden, 2004, p.126). Berger and Miliem (1997) explain that Tinto’s model of Student Departure Theory is a process of integrating into the new college environment through academic and social circles, and that it requires the ability to successfully navigate separation from former environments students attempt to detach from. The use of this helped to provide understanding to Tinto’s perspective of students’ feeling of belonging and how they relate to their new college environment both academically and socially considered essential for student persistence to occur. From this study, findings applicable to social integration proved to be a prominent contributor to

students' feeling of belonging and influence persistence based on involvement at their institution.

Tinto (1993) he stated,

“There appears to be an important link between learning and persistence that arises from the interplay of involvement and the quality of student effort. Involvement with one’s peers and with the faculty, both inside and outside the classroom is itself positively related to the quality of student effort and in turn to both learning and persistence” (Tinto, 1993, p.71 as cited in Milem & Berger, 1997). Further, “learning is linked to persistence given that the more students learn, the more likely they are to persist” (Tinto, 1993, p. 131 as cited in Milem & Berger, 1997).

This theory demonstrates the importance of students’ social integration with their college experience considered to be a determining influencer with student persistence compared to academic integration (Megan et al., 2007). The use of this theory regarding how students interact with their university experience through academic and social connections supports the evaluation of retention issues applicable to academic and social assimilation deemed necessary for intervention to occur with the navigation of support services to foster student success within the campus environment (Metz,2004). In result, Tinto stated, “student attrition occurs in most cases based on students’ lack of sense of belonging with their college environment”. Some key signature terms coined by Tinto (1993, 1997) were used to describe students’ integration with the college environment. The first term, “academic integration,” focused on students’ expectation or desire to

persist towards degree completion. The second term, “social integration,” focused on students’ desire to attain a degree at a specific institution.

Prior research on Tinto’s model of student persistence has found many limitations, which include the theory being limited to a 4-year undergraduate student perspective of a traditional undergraduate college student. There was only one type of departure considered to explain student departure from the university system coined by sociologist Durkheim (1953) as, “egotistical in nature” (as cited in Metz (2004), p. 192). This theory suggested that students arrive to college with certain expectations as it applies to integration, either they feel integrated with the college environment or not, the former leading to affects towards their degree attainment (Tinto, 1975 as cited in Metz, p. 193). Tinto’s theory was suggested to be too broad as it did not apply to all student populations, specifically it excluded the cultural aspects for minority students. Further Tinto asserted that students leave college due to lack of integration into their college community. Thus misinterpreting that students’ departure from college hold different meanings for varying groups of students. However, acknowledging that departure most often occurs among students who have difficulty disassociating themselves from the communities they attempt to leave behind in order to integrate into their new college environments. This theory did not take into account additional limitations as it applied to external factors that included parental involvement, finances, and peer support that all play a vital role with the influence of student persistence (Metz, 2004, p.198).

Similarly Astin’s (1984) Input-Environment-Output Model is used in relation to students’ ability to integrate into their college environments. Astin stated, “it is not so much about the individual’s feelings about their environment, rather it is more about how

they interact which defines their involvement in their immediate environment" (Astin, 1984, p. 298 as cited in Milem & Berger, 1997). This theory focused on variables that affect student persistence in college and suggested involvement of students while in college occur at varying intensities that ultimately affect their willingness to persist. Astin's involvement theory stated, "students learn by becoming involved" (Astin, 1985, p. 133 as cited in Metz, 2004). On the contrary, student departure has been linked to students' noninvolvement at the college level (Milem and Berger, 1997, p.387). Astin introduced five basic assumptions as it applies to student involvement with their immediate college environment which included (Astin, 1984, p. 298 as cited in Milem & Berger, 1997),

involvement refers to investment of physical and psychological energy in varying objects and degree of specificity, involvement occurs along a continuum with varied student experiences, involvement includes quantitative and qualitative components, the amount of student learning and personal development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement and the effectiveness of any educational practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice that affects involvement.

The model contends that assessment on students' involvement with their immediate college environment is integral to provide an accurate and inclusive evaluation of how the environment impacts their response and accounts for input differences (Astin, 1993). Further, this model attempts to measure student interactions with their environment and perception about their institutions analyzing the outcome of involvement and behavior towards integration and persistence with the university (Milem & Berger, 1997, p.392).

Thus Astin stated, “student involvement with the institution affects their perception about fit and feeling of belongingness with the institution” (Milem & Berger, 1997, p. 390). Finally, the level of student involvement at the university plays an influential role of perception as it applies to institutional support through academic and social experiences. In result, students who are more integrated with involvement of their educational experience were inferred as being more involved and successfully integrated socially and academically. Thus Astin postulated students’ level of involvement has an effect on their decision to persist at the university. The main significance of Astin’s research suggested when students become involved in college, the intensity of their involvement typically affects their potential and willingness to persist towards degree achievement. Astin suggested that, “students learn by becoming involved” (Astin, 1985, p.133 as cited in Metz, 2004, p. 193). Astin’s Input Environment Output Model (1993) sought to explain how the environmental impact on students ultimately controls the output placed into their college experience. The IEO Model is explained as follows:

*Input* is defined as the character of the student at the point of entry to the institution. It includes variables such as demographic, education experience, degree and life aspirations.

*Environment* refers to the experiences the student is exposed to which impacts the outcomes measured, and includes experiences involving roommates, friends and extra-curricular activities.

*Output* is associated with the change of the student’s character after being exposed to the environment they are most responsive to. This involves “outcome indicators” which can result in a change to students’ achievement as it applies to their grade

point average, class performance, retention and overall persistence towards degree completion.

For the purpose of his study, Astin (1993) defined involvement as, “the amount of physical and psychological energy devoted to the college experience and measured by the level of learning, participation, and intensity of student involvement with their campus experience” (p. 518). Astin (1987; 1999) examined in his study the Four Critical Years (as cited in Dunkel and Baumann, 2013) how student involvement in campus organizations and activities has one of the most significant impacts on student engagement with the campus community that result in constant learning and development of the individual student. Thus the overall outcome of engagement has resulted in an increased level of student satisfaction with their college experience (Dunkel & Baumann, 2013). These positive effects of student involvement with campus activities is explained as one of the most powerful and influential types of engagement a student will experience during their college years (Astin, 1996).

Comparable to many limitations that Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure maintained, Astin’s Involvement model also focused on like populations of first-year traditional college students at four-year undergraduate institutes of higher education.

Lastly, Strayhorn’s (2012) Theory of Integration discusses students’ sense of belonging and connectedness to the campus community through participation in programs that promote integration with the campus environment specifically amongst minority student populations. He defined *sense of belonging* as, “students’ perception of affiliation and identification with the university community through the social support received on campus that translates to being a valued member of the campus community”

(Kim, 2013, p. 120; Means & Pyne, 2017, p. 908). The theory explained integration of students in their college environment as an important experience for all students, but most importantly marginalized students based on their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or socioeconomic status (Means & Pyne, 2017, p.907). Strayhorn (2012) went on to argue that, “some of the most essential positive outcomes of students’ sense of belonging relate to achievement and retention” (Means & Pyne, 2017, p.908). Thus in order to support this student population and their integration with the campus environment, it was emphasized as essential for minority members of the campus community who students feel they can easily identify with, to support a cultivation of sense of belonging through intentional interactions. These opportunities are intended to encourage integration of students into the campus community through participation in programs specifically directed towards marginalized first-year students (Means & Pyne, 2017, p.908). Strayhorn stressed the state of students’ sense of belonging as unique to the individual and something that is not static. He emphasized that in order for inclusive environments to be fostered and cultivate a sense of belonging where students persist towards degree attainment beyond the first year of study, it is necessary for higher education administration to consistently work at creating supportive environments where all students of varying social identities and intersectionality feel as though they belong (Means & Pyne, 2017, p.910).

This theory identified the concept of belonging as essential to students’ sense of self-worth and value they contribute to the community in order to support self-efficacy towards degree persistence in college. The framework for this theory was based on Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs that focused on, “the concept of belonging as essential for individuals’ sense of value and worth dependent on feeling as though they

belong to their community in order to be successful with their higher education experience” (Kim, 2013, p. 120). Strayhorn (2012) categorized sense of belonging into three main ideas which included, “sense of belongingness as a basic human need, fundamental motive that influences human behavior and importance in certain contexts among specific student populations” (Kim, 2013, p.120).

This theory is appropriate for my study because of the diverse population of students it focuses on who do not arrive to campus with the “rooted privilege of cultural capital”, rather arrive to college attempting to navigate their own journey of success at the university level. Further it supports the research of integration that emphasized involvement with campus organizations as essential in effort to cultivate a successful college experience for marginalized students (Means & Pyne, 2017, p.916).

Through this theory the viewpoint of marginalized individuals and the importance of accessibility to campus resources to navigate their educational success was brought into focus. Strayhorn suggests students must attain a feeling of belonging in order for a student to be successful in their college endeavors (Means & Pyne, 2017). Thus, areas of campus support that students seek out are essential to provide them the opportunity that they matter. Such interactions are considered to be very influential in supporting their sense of belonging and well-being that eventually leads to academic achievement and retention amongst first-year students. In contrast, if negative interactions occur this can have a detrimental effect on students’ decision to leave the institution (Tinto, 1975, as cited in Means & Pyne, 2017). Therefore, as a best-predictor model of retention it is important to encourage all students’ abilities to persist towards degree achievement through extension of support services that offer the opportunity for inclusive

environments towards academic and social success to be created and fostered (Means & Pyne, 2017, p.910). The limitation of this theory include the address and experience of all student subpopulations, such as community college students who are not addressed. Further, Strayhorn suggested that future research should consider intersectionality approach to first-generations students and how this work would help to gain a better understanding of how oppression and institutional types can influence students' sense of belonging especially among first-generation college students (Means & Pyne, 2017, p. 922).

Throughout this project, I sought to evaluate how students navigate their feelings of connectedness as a first-year student through their roommate experience, and how these experiences effect how they integrate themselves both academically and socially into the campus community. The results of my methodology sought to support literature that validates the impact roommate experiences contribute to students' retention beyond their initial year of study at the university. In an attempt to align my research question with my selected theoretical framework to best represent my participants' roommate experiences, the semi-structured questions asked during individual interviews sought to address my research question:

How do roommate experiences impact students' sense of belonging and ability to successfully navigate their first-year experience in the university?

As a result, the interview data collected intended to serve as an assessment piece to better evaluate the functionality of the student housing application design and overall experience with the roommate selection process.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

*“But the thing is, there are certain things you will not know until you start living with someone” – Gill*

Prior chapters have provided review regarding the need for students to feel as though they belong and connect to their university experience in order to persist towards degree completion. If students are unable to make such connections during their first year of study, research suggests they are more prone to drop out or relocate to a different institution where a better connection with their university experience appears more attainable (Tinto, 1993). The research question central to my study is:

How do roommate experiences impact students’ sense of belonging and ability to successfully navigate their first-year experience in the university?

Astin (1984) and Tinto’s (1993) works, which focused on student persistence with measures of academics and social integration specific to four-year undergraduate institutions, formed the theoretical framework for this study. Astin’s Input Environment Output Model focuses on the variables which affect student persistence in college and student involvement through the learning of their immediate living environments (1984). Tinto’s Departure from College Theory focuses on the contributions which affects students’ persistence to progress through college based upon their integration into a new environment (1993).

This chapter has been organized to share the main themes that emerged about roommate experiences as they were explained in interviews that I conducted with first year students who were navigating their sense of “belongingness” within their college environment. Throughout the individual experiences shared, it is necessary to keep in mind

that each student arrives with a unique set of experiences which have prepared them for college and a range of levels of openness to being molded by academic and social connections created at the university level. The study was conducted within a student housing community at a small, public, four-year, Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) located in Southern California. All of the participants involved with this study were first-year students residing in the residence halls of the campus' student housing facility.

## **The Participants**

The study was conducted within a student housing community at a small, public, four-year, Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) located in Southern California. All of the participants involved with this study were first-year students residing in the residence halls of the campus' student housing facility.

### **Participant introductions.**

**Ali:** a first-generation, first year student from a large metropolitan city in California.

**Beatriz:** a first-year student with high expectations of her roommate becoming her best friend and their friendship lasting beyond their college years.

**Celia:** a first-generation, first year student dedicated to her family, excited about the opportunities she has embarked upon with involvement in a *Living-Learning Community*<sup>1</sup>. She is most proud of her involvement in an LLC and the opportunities she has introduced her roommate to become involved with the campus community.

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<sup>1</sup> Living-learning programs are defined as a residence-based learning community in which students "partake in coordinated curricular activities, and also live together in a specific residence hall where they are provided with academic programing and services" (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003, p.335 as cited in Kranzow, Hinkle, Muthiah, and Davis, 2015) .

**Doris:** a first-generation, first year student shares her interest in involvement with the campus community, but often travels home after weekday classes instead of fulfilling her interest with immersion with campus involvement.

**Esmee:** a first-generation, first year student excited about her first year at the university and proud of her involvement in a sorority.

**Frank:** a first-year student who believes he has hit the jackpot with his assigned roommates and who is excited to attend college with people outside of his usual social circle norm.

**Gil:** a first-year student without high expectations of his first-year experience other than the opportunity to fit in.

### **Emergent Themes**

Out of individual participant interviews which described roommate and campus experiences and contributed to feelings of belongingness, forty-one codes emerged which were consolidated into three broad themes:

- Theme 1: Importance of Knowing the Person
- Theme 2: Conflict Avoidance
- Theme 3: Belongingness within the Living Environment

#### **Theme 1: Importance of knowing the person**

Each participant explained their personal perspective regarding the importance of knowing the person they are paired with in order to feel comfortable as they acclimate to their new living environment. This theme is characterized by the ways in which participants reflect on their lived roommate experiences and share the importance of compatibility with one of the most significant living arrangements they will encounter in their lifetime. During

this new journey, not only are first-year students attempting to navigate residing with roommates, which to some is unfamiliar territory; they are also trying to navigate a sense of belonging in a new environment through success with their academics and social acceptance into college life.

Participants expressed the importance of truthfulness in response to the profile questionnaire, which asked students to describe their personality as part of the student housing application in order to help successful pairings to occur. The most salient issue had to do with the varying meanings that profile elements held for each individual student (e.g., cleanliness). Thus, participants expressed the importance of being assigned with other students who have similar living habits or expectations. Beatriz explained,

I filled my application out to, like, how truthful I thought I would be, but I realize now there is a bit of leeway with, like, how true my answers are compared to how I answered back then because I now realize how I thought I was, perhaps was an ideal of what I wanted to fit into.

Other participants extended similar sentiments. Gil described his experience completing the profile questionnaire as follows:

I do not know how accurate it [application survey responses] is. But, like, my mom was telling me just put you are really clean and you want someone who is also really clean. But I feel, like, it's kind of dishonest. So I didn't do that, but I'm pretty sure there are people who do. So it is questionable how accurate it [responses to the profile questions] could be.

Ali explained the most drastic change from her original profile response included the time she goes to bed. She stated, "As a freshman, you really don't plan out what your

whole sleep schedule will look like. That whole plan is altered when you come into college.” Other participants explained the roommate contract helped to initiate communication between roommates regarding standardizing schedules and setting communication guidelines to support an agreeable living environment.

Esmee recounted her experience as it applied to interacting with her roommate and establishing common courtesy guidelines navigated with the help of a roommate contract. A roommate contract is established by all residents within the immediate living environment approximately two-weeks after move-in to help facilitate a cooperative living environment where roommates can coexist. After the agreement is created amongst the roommates, a meeting is scheduled with the Resident Advisor to ensure all residents within the unit agree to living standards established by all residents within the room assignment.

She said:

There are definitely a lot of positives, I think, for me personally, like, you had to pick out the negatives once you live with a person for too long. But for the most part, we get along very well. I think when working with our individual schedules having the roommate contract did help to kind of standardize a time. And then we just kind of verbally talked about it, I’m going to stay up a little later these days and then I’m going to go to bed a little earlier. So we communicate pretty well on those type of things.

She continued with recalling her impression of the most important profile responses when being compared to other students with similar profiles, and her thoughts of what constitutes a successful roommate match.

I think definitely the study and maybe, like, the cleanliness habits are most important when assigning roommates. Study habits is a very important response because people study differently so it would depend on how your roommate studies versus how you study, and whether you are going to study in or outside of your room. And then for housekeeping, you definitely do not want to be a clean freak and then have a total messy roommate. I think it is important to allow the opportunity to get to know each other a little beforehand, so you gain a feeling of the other person and what each can contribute to the roommate relationship. This definitely helped to begin our stay together on the right foot.

When asked the question, how can the existing profile questions be improved to enhance the roommate experience, Esmee responded,

I think adding more personality type questions, because they [student applicants] do not really put that in their bio, or they choose not to complete a bio [brief description used when searching for similar roommates], and you do not really know much about them [future roommate] except their responses to the generic profile questionnaire. It would be nice to know, like, how they live type of questions, and maybe, like, a picture. Because I was not able to find any of my roommates on social media.

Both Ali and Beatriz extended similar feedback describing the ideal roommate relationship and the importance of matching commonalities in order to establish some sort of connection with their roommates. Each identified the personality questions as an essential factor which contributes to the comfort of the living environment. They explained the Housing Office can support matching similarity of roommates by encouraging students

to share a brief bio about themselves which describes their personality. This would be helpful to support the compatibility of roommates and encourage agency among first year students to make thoughtful decisions when selecting a roommate compared to random room assignment through matching of the profile questionnaire.

In response to the importance of matching future roommates based on similarities with the profile questions or based on comparison of students' bio descriptions, Beatriz described her perspective regarding the importance of roommate compatibility,

It would be nice to sort of be a bit more compatible with my roommate. To know she likes the same kind of stuff as I do, and we are compatible to the point where we can study and do homework together. In exchange, we would have more of a friendship than a living arrangement. You want someone you can like as a person. If I could pick my roommate, I'd want someone who has the same likes as me compared to dreading seeing my roommate when I open the door to our room. It is sad because I want to be in a roommate relationship where I can feel close to my roommate and it not be awkward to the point where we both dread coming back to our room seeing one another.

Another participant, Frank, extended similar feedback regarding the importance of roommate matching based on the percentage of compatibility between applicants. He implied his thoughts of essential questions to roommate match responses, which included the makeup of the room environment, whether a room is often active or quiet, and personal cleanliness habits. He emphasized personality of roommates being the key aspect to a successful roommate match. When asked if he selected his roommate, he responded, "I was assigned with my roommates through random selection. This is always a fun surprise

for about a week until you realize you have a long way to go before you can re-roll those die." He stated when personalities clash from the very beginning due to differences, such experiences can be hard to overcome and adjust to. His responses to the importance of compatibility echoed other participants who stated that actually liking the person roomed with is essential. He affirmed,

It is important to find more than just a room on campus, but actually know you and your roommate get along and want to potentially carry a connection beyond college.

You want a relationship where other circles can be formed through your roommate by possibly getting to know other hobbies or interests both on and off campus, which in itself is invaluable. You cannot replace that, so I think this is very much a worthwhile pursuit in terms of making it [roommate relationship] work fluidly. As it applies to the comfort of the living environment my roommates and I are all neutral, so nothing ever sways us from being one way or the other. In terms of our personalities, we are all very clearly separate individuals, but most importantly we can all live comfortably and coexist with each other without problem.

Gill agreed with the viewpoints expressed about personality being an essential aspect of the overall compatibility match with like roommates and asked his own question of what constitutes the perfect roommate match.

How can you really know until you live with someone? There is no way to really tell. Even if you interview someone, right? You might get to know them more. But the thing is, like, I don't know, there are certain things you will not know until you start living with someone. So it is kind of like a dice roll.

The analogy of “rolling the dice” was compared to the gambling game of “craps” often played with two die. A lucky roll can leave the player happy with a successful outcome, whereas a bad roll can leave the player out of luck with a not so great outcome. Throughout participant interviews, this analogy was most often referred to by the two male participants in this research project.

### **Theme 2: Conflict Avoidance**

The theme Conflict Avoidance focuses on the ability to live comfortably, both physically and emotionally, in a roommate relationship without fear of confrontation and with respect for boundaries. Chickering & Reisser (1993) conducted a study regarding the importance of friendships and student communities. Their findings suggest that “a student’s most important teacher is often another student” (Chickering & Reisser p.392 as cited in Wilson & Rigg, 2013). Thus, when meaningful relationships are formed across similar interests and through which significant interactions are shared, individual student identity development occurs. This theory, introduced by Chickering & Reisser (1993) and explained through the vector of Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships, states, “the development of intercultural and interpersonal tolerance and appreciation of differences is necessary to maintain healthy and meaningful relationships” (p. 509). The theory is explained as “acceptance, respect of differences and the ability to appreciate commonalities of others” (Chickering & Reisser p. 509 as cited in Wilson & Rigg, 2013).

Participants expressed the importance of positive interactions with roommates as an essential factor of getting to know who they are roomed with in order to maintain a harmonious living environment beyond the honeymoon phase of the roommate assignment. In order to support this relationship goal participants expressed the necessity

for authentic communication through the pairing of similar lifestyle interests to take precedence in order to support a cohesive roommate relationship.

Beatriz explained the comfort of the living environment as important in order to maintain cohesion in a roommate relationship. She described a couple of incidents with her roommate which involved lack of respect for boundaries, which she thought contributed to a heightened level of sensitivity when the two roommates attempted to work through their differences. Beatriz believes these incidences created an elevated environment of conflict resulting in an irreconcilable level of animosity, and that the incidents occurred because they had avoided important, difficult conversations in which they could have acknowledged and discussed their differences. If she could revisit the difficulties she had experienced with this roommate, Beatriz stated she probably would have been more transparent with her roommate regarding issues of conflict. She owned avoiding confrontation as a way to prevent further roommate problems from escalating. If given the opportunity to get to know her roommate prior to agreeing to room together, additional time would have been taken to discuss mutuality and differences in their personalities, interests, and levels of extracurricular involvement. Although she views that roommate pairing as an incompatible match with regards to their personality and living habits, the one area of interest they were able to connect through was their commonality of extracurricular activities which involved running. This was used as common ground between the two roommates which included healthy eating and regular practice routines for their sports team which motivated them to foster a supportive living environment.

In contrast, Celia, who selected her roommate, declared that if she were given the opportunity to adjust her roommate assignment, she would not make a change even though

she and her roommate have two different personalities; she is more outgoing compared to her roommate. She believes their relationship is supportive for the two of them and provides encouragement for each of them to create new friendships within the Living Learning Community in which they both live. She expressed her opinion about the importance of having the opportunity to meet prospective roommates in person to confirm a successful match. She explained that, although she attempted to use the online housing application roommate matching tool and the University's New Student Facebook community page, the communication exchange via social media was not a method she found helpful with her roommate search. It actually appeared to make her pursuit more challenging than it actually was to find a decent match with common viewpoints on academic and social interests. Her preference of meeting in person at Freshmen Orientation proved to be the most successful method for her, where she was able to meet her current roommate.

Doris implied, "some people don't realize the way they actually live, until somebody else points it out to them." She went on to add that, "sometimes people think they live one way, but others actually have a very different opinion." She expressed the importance of communication through intentional interaction with roommates, which can be actions as small as engaging in simple pleasantries to larger efforts to support a harmonious living environment beyond the honeymoon phase of a roommate relationship when true personalities often peak. When asked about her current roommates and the importance of taking the time to get to know them prior to assignment, she stated that, although it is nice to get a feel for the person and how personalities would work together, it is equally important to be honest about similarities and habits which can often leave the

other with a false impressions of compatibility. Other participants inferred similar sentiments of taking the time to meet an individual prior to being assigned as roommates, a preferred method for most participants over random room assignment. In search of the perfect roommate, participants conveyed mixed opinions regarding use of social media to gain information about future roommates. Regardless of the method used, participants expressed the importance of making a connection with their future roommates prior to move-in day.

### **Theme 3: Belongingness within the Living Environment**

The belongingness within the living environment is important for a first-year student to feel connected to their community according to Tinto's Theory of Departure (1987; 1993). This theory states that students who often leave college because they do not feel a part of their college community are either unable or unwilling to establish membership there. An example from a participant in this study who attests to this theory was described by Doris. When asked about her roommate relationship, she stated that, if given the choice, she would not be alone. The dynamic of her room was configured as a triple, with accommodations set up for three residents. She explained her two roommates arrived to college as a packaged pair with an already established relationship. More often than not, she found herself in scenarios as the third wheel with this duo. Although her roommates were cordial, she expressed the struggle of trying to fit into an already established relationship. In order to avoid feeling lonely when her roommates were not around, Doris alluded she would leave her room door open, offering the opportunity for peers passing by to drop in and visit, which helped to counteract her loneliness.

Esmee revealed her perspective of being on the receiving end of a third roommate assigned to a triple room currently shared with only one other roommate. The discussion of adding a new roommate was viewed as a potential challenge for a new person to feel comfortable working their way into an established relationship between the two roommates.

Frank, who also resides in a triple room, entrusted his opinion of residential life, which reflected on fitting in and belonging to a community. He stated the feeling of anxiousness should never peak to an overwhelming sense of uneasiness just by punching in the numbers on a keypad, only to dread what awaits on the other side of the door. Rather, the sentiment of belonging should always be a sense of home, where one can truly unwind, let their hair down, and be their true selves in the comfort of their own living environment.

A finding that emerged as it relates to belongingness included how students interacted with their campus experience through integration in their living environment and how it served as a powerful influence on individual development during the first-year of study (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

The importance of student involvement is evident in the experiences disclosed by my interviewed participants. For example, Beatriz's involvement in club sports helped to expose her to other students outside of her room environment and contributed to her development of social belongingness. She described her roommate relationship as functional based on their similar enjoyment of running. In order to cultivate similar lifestyle habits while being away at college, she was able to connect with other students with like interests. She expressed that being part of a running club supported her feeling of

belongingness through peer connections which encouraged her to meet new people and helped facilitate involvement with other campus activities.

Celia declared her participation in a Living Learning Community (LLC) helped her to engage in her academics through peer connections established in the community in which she lives. Students who opt to reside in student housing have the opportunity to select, as an option of interest, assignment to an LLC. This is initiated through voluntary response to a supplementary essay embedded in the student housing application. This opportunity is only available to first-year students, and, who are typically assigned with other students participating in living learning communities. Many of the LLC activities are strategically staged to help students transition to college life and support their persistence towards degree completion.

Celia described her LLC as a supportive community that helped her with connecting to the university, both academically and socially, through collaborative academic work and campus activities. Although her academic course load was laborious, as a first-year student she advocated there was not a moment when she felt alone due to the amount of support extended by faculty and peers who she became acquainted with through participation in an LLC. She explained one of the major benefits about living within an LLC is being part of a community with many of her class peers. She described it as similar to being part of a big study group; whenever support was needed with one of her courses, obtaining help was as simple as walking down the hall and asking for support. She characterized her living community as an interconnected, tight-knit group. Each LLC is assigned a Resident Advisor (RA) who works closely with faculty to collaborate on programming according to the learning community assigned. The RAs also helps to support

their residents' transition to university life by extending help in navigating various campus resources and nurturing peer relationship skills. Celia expressed the RA assigned to her floor had been extremely helpful, especially in helping first-year students learn how to navigate campus resources. She explained when she initially arrived to campus and attempted to navigate herself to enroll in certain classes and adjust her course load; she was very overwhelmed trying to make the best decision to enroll in meaningful courses that count towards her overall course requirements. However, after asking for help from her RA, they were able to recommend connecting with support of Academic Advising, which she did not initially consider to seek help from due to her lack of knowledge about the resource. Her RA also helped her LLC with an in-depth explanation of campus resources and provided direction on when to seek help and how to ask questions of various service areas. Although she participated in a campus tour during Freshmen Orientation, she felt more confident with the information shared by her RA which she felt provided a better sense of direction regarding how to navigate her way around campus. She shared that the community she is involved with helped her feel connected to the campus, like she actually belongs. The support provided by both her RA and the peers in her LLC have proven to be very helpful in her quest towards having a successful first year. She stated that she felt academically well prepared to stay on track towards degree achievement due to her participation with the LLC. Although she maintains a very busy schedule, she does not regret involvement and feels lucky to be a part of this community.

Esmee related that the easiest and first connection she made on campus was with her roommate because they live together. However, she has since increased her social connectedness with the campus due to her association with a sorority. Her introduction to

this organization was through a peer who encouraged participation in Rush Week activities. Since becoming a member of the sorority, she attributes her openness with feeling confident enough to step out of her comfort zone and participate in campus activities to meet new friends because of her Greek Life involvement. In addition, being part of this organization has helped expose her to campus connections beyond her roommate relationship and has supported a smooth transition with her feeling of campus belongingness.

When participants were asked about satisfaction with their roommate assignment, Frank described his roommates' relationship as "flat neutral", meaning there were no complaints he had about his roommates to feel extreme one way or another as it applied to the level of connection he developed with them. He felt fortunate to call them friends by the comfort level they have created hanging out with each other. Overall, he was content with the sincerity of the relationship created among his roommates and attributed the success of his first year of college to the various friendships and memorable experiences gained through participating in campus activities.

In discussing the residence hall set-up for first year students, Doris affirmed that each floor has a family room designated as an intentional meeting space for residents to interact. The residents of each floor are able to use the family rooms as a retreat space outside of their assigned rooms. The configuration of the floor with its community atmosphere was suggested as helping to contribute to the opportunity for her to connect with and meet new friends beyond her roommates and classroom peers.

Gil's perspective on the setup of the residence hall and how the family room is situated was explained as a communal place where residents are able to retreat outside of

their bedrooms and make new friends. This is a place he likes to frequent because there is always someone to connect with. This room is often used during residents' monthly floor meetings facilitated by assigned RAs. He implied that his RA helped to ease the transition of the first-year student newness through intentional connections attempted with his residents. He shared this was done by integrating ice breakers with the floor meetings as a way for residents to feel comfortable branching out and getting to know their peers who live on the same floor. Gil affirmed he felt his RA has did a great job of building trust amongst his residents to encourage connection within the overall residence hall community.

Celia indicated she enjoyed the configuration of the residence hall floor and explained connecting with peers was as easy as knocking on the door of your neighbor to see if someone was there to hang out with. She described the floor set-up as helpful in the transition of being introduced to new friends beyond her immediate roommate relationship.

### **Overview of findings**

This chapter introduced the study's seven participants: Ali, Beatriz, Celia, Doris, Esmee, Frank, and Gil. These participants' words were used to represent the three themes that emerged through the processes of interviewing, self-transcribing, coding, and identifying themes. These themes included:

**Importance of knowing the person.** Interviews allowed participants to share their personal perspective about the importance of knowing the person they are roomed with in order to feel comfortable and better acclimated to their new living environment. This fits into the theoretical framework of Strayhorn (2012), who explained and related the importance of belonging to "a basic human need" in order to feel connected to the

campus environment.

**Conflict avoidance.** Interview data on this theme focused on participants' ability to comfortably coexist in their roommate relationship without fear of confrontation. Some examples of difficulties experienced include, variance of communication styles resulting in avoidance of confrontation and conflicting comfort level of the living environment. These findings were explained through the theoretical lens of Astin's (1993) IEO Model, which support how students respond to their immediate environment and how these interactions influences the output placed into relationships formed and interaction with first-year students' overall college experience (Astin, 1993, p.7). When students feel out of place with their roommate assignments due to experiences with roommate conflict resulting in a room transfer, this can create other arenas of student's well-being as it pertains to academics and social integration. For example, in analysis of room transfer data of first-year students who completed a room change due to roommate conflict, an interesting discovery transpired, which entailed out of seven roommate changes that occurred during the analysis of this study, five students improved their GPA percentage by a point or more. On the contrary in two instances, a room change resulted in a decreased GPA by 1/10 point. Findings suggested, difficulties with belongingness can have a detrimental effect in maintaining academic success and retention among first-year students. An example of triangulation occurred with the analysis of a participant's interview responses which discussed their feeling of belongingness and the impact on their academics. They attributed this connection through engagement with their living arrangement. This kind of association is important to recognize due to the social implications of academic success experienced through participation in a Living Learning

Community. The importance of social belonging as cited through literature connections regarding belonging and persistence towards degree achievement and academic success is validated through participants' interviews. Further, it is interesting to note through the review of data a validated connection between students' satisfaction with their assigned roommates and feeling of belongingness can be established.

**Belongingness within the living environment.** Findings were explained through all three theoretical lenses that contribute to the framework of this research project. Astin's IEO Model supports student engagement with their immediate environment based on the interactions they placed into their college experiences (Astin, 1993, p.7). The experiences students encounter as it applies to feelings of belongingness are explored through Tinto's (1993) Departure from College Theory, which attempt to analyze and explain the reason why students decide to depart from college due to lack of connection with the campus community, which often result in a lack of integration and persistence during the first-year of study. This lack of integration with the campus environment can result in a potential loss of the student in succeeding semesters due to lack of integration with the campus community that typically cultivates feelings of belonging. The feeling of belonging as explained by Strayhorn (2012), is nurtured by feelings of connectedness and value within the campus community extended by level of support services students experience. When students feel supported by the campus community they are more likely to feel as though they belong and attempt to foster this feeling through social and academic achievement.

Overall, each participant contributed to this section whether individual experiences correlated with or challenged the emerged themes. This study sought to give

voices to the students who participated in this study allowing them to speak to how their roommate experiences contributed to feelings of belongingness and connection to their university experience as a first-year student.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*“The sentiment of belonging should always be a sense of home, where one can truly unwind, let their hair down, and be their true selves in the comfort of their own living environment” - Frank*

### Discussions and Conclusions

The prior chapter offered the opportunity to share the voices of participants and their residential experiences that contributed to feelings of belongingness and connectedness with the university, and to explain how these experiences influenced their individual growth both academically and socially as a first-year student. Three main themes that resonated through participants’ interviews included (1) the importance of knowing the person, (2) conflict avoidance, and (3) belongingness within the living environment. Each theme emerged through the stories shared by participants as they recounted their residential experiences that contributed to their individual college journey during their first-year of study.

This qualitative study was conducted at a four-year public Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) located in Southern California within a university student housing community that is 70% female and 30% male, with 60% of the total campus population self-identified as first-generation college students. The study included a total of seven participants, two male and five female.

The research question that guided this study was: How do roommate experiences impact students’ sense of belonging and ability to successfully navigate their first-year experience in the university?

## **Significance of the Study**

This study sought to solicit feedback from participants that would help university housing staff to improve the housing application process, specifically in terms of roommate selection. As noted in chapter two, previous research supports the claim that students who reside on campus are more likely to persist towards degree completion and to experience significant personal and educational growth (Tinto, 1993). The residential experiences of student participants in this study were analyzed to identify key areas that supported feelings of connectivity and belongingness with their college experience. This study was conducted with the idea in mind that soliciting first-year residential student feedback on the housing application process, as an effort to contribute to roommate compatibility, would help to support the processing and effectiveness of future roommate assignments. Additionally, through this study I attempted to understand how residential students' roommate experience impacts their sense of belongingness and connectedness with the university, and how this relationship influences academic and social development. I also sought to identify whether there is a difference between first-generation and traditional college student participants in terms of how they navigate their first-year residential college experience. The overall purpose of these goals for the study was to provide information that could inform housing administrators about efficiencies and strategies that could support first-year students' navigation of the college experience.

Residential experiences shared by participants provided information that university housing staff can use to make systematic adjustments to help ensure that first-year students' roommate matches will be compatible. For example, use of feedback received from participants' has already helped staff to revise housing profile questions in

an effort to create a clearer roommate selection process and better facilitate compatible roommate matches. Participant Gil made the importance of this improving the roommate selection process evident:

I don't know how accurate responses to the profile questionnaire really is. I was influenced to exaggerate my own profile, but I knew it was dishonest. So I didn't do that, but I'm pretty sure there are people who elaborate on their responses that do not reflect their actual person. So it is questionable how accurate [responses to the profile questions] really are (Gil, participant).

## **Limitations**

One limitation of this study is that it was a small number of participants who offered to share their roommate stories. However, qualitative research is not meant to say what is true for everyone. There is value in even one student's story. Through their stories, the participants in this study provided opportunities for me to learn from them and for housing staff to improve upon the processes and functionality of the housing application and roommate selection processes.

An additional limitation is that participants could have been influenced by my position as an administrator in student housing, even though I assured them that my professional position was placed to the wayside and that my gathering of information was as a graduate student conducting this study. A question I thought about after the fact of my data collection processes was whether all participants truly felt comfortable in sharing their honest feedback as it pertained to their lived roommate experience. In hindsight, it would have been better to conduct two focus group interviews, with one group consisting of first-year students who did not complete a room transfer during their first semester,

and the other group being first-year students who completed a room transfer because of roommate conflict. This approach may have provided a broader perspective regarding whether students feel engaged after experiencing difficult roommate issues and the future impact those difficulties may have on student belongingness.

After reflecting on this study and my findings about the housing application and roommate assignment processes, it is my opinion that students and administrators should engage in strategic collaborations to encourage belongingness and social development through engagement within our campus community. Allowing our students to provide feedback helps to validate their experiences and to learn strategies for improving their transitions within the college environment. Additionally, it is important for administrators to understand how students make solid connections with their peers and with varying experiences that support their feelings of belongingness with their campus. Validating students' experiences will be likely to help to support retention of our student body.

Further, students should be introduced to fundamental workshops which support relational skill building opportunities. These workshops could teach effective communication skills which could support a successful transition in a new living experience, which most residential students will have embarked upon for the first time in their lives in college. Most important, diversity training should be a required course or workshop for first-year students. Some students may be paired with a roommate who is not like them, and they may lack experience in connecting across their differences. Introducing students to each other and exposing them to a diverse campus community can help to educate residential students about the importance of embracing opportunities to interact with differing others.

In relation to campus experiences and support services, as administrators, we cannot assume students who do not have a navigation guide as it applies to higher education understand everyday terminology used in the university setting. Thus we need to be cognizant of the young adults we are working with and truly support their navigation of services sought in order for them to be successful with their higher education journey. Students who are not familiar with the resources available to them often seek the assistance of administrators to help support their successful college experience. As housing professionals, we need to be aware that these students are trying their best to navigate an environment unfamiliar to them and need our support to help empower their progress and degree attainment. This can strategically be implemented by cultivating an inclusive environment where all students feel as though they do belong.

In search of answers by the professionals in the student housing industry, I traveled to various student housing conferences across the United States to gain an understanding of what other universities have implemented to create supportive environments to help their students succeed in the immediate living environment.

I learned that it is very important to keep up with the technology of the student populations we are serving by tailoring services to the way they receive and use information. For example, housing administrators should be knowledgeable of the technological advances college students use and update online services to market and connect with the student population they are attempting to serve. It is necessary to keep up with the evolving student through “generational perspectives” that focus on the needs of the student in order to maintain their enrollment at our universities (Molina, Heiselt, & Justice, 2015, p.107).

In addition, it is necessary to continue to create inclusive environments where students feel as though they belong. When students feel as though they can connect with their university through relating to others they connect with they are more apt to continue their enrollment. This was explained in Strayhorn's Theory of Integration, which stated, "Institutional support structures that enhance students' sense of belonging are important for students to feel connected to their university experience (Means & Pyne, 2017, pp.912-913).

Lastly, as a housing professional it is important to continue learning about the student populations we are serving and the varying needs they arrive to campus with in order to help them navigate their success while in college. Students will continue to look to housing professionals for answers to guide their comfort and safety in the communities they join as their home away from home. It is up to housing administration to continue to create inclusive environments where students feel comfortable to share information about how they can be supported as they navigate their college experience (Molina et. al, 2015, p. 114).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

It is important to understand the experiences students are having, and how they are coping with the struggle to belonging. The support they need to be successful in creating and maintaining critical relationships requires them to share a significant portion of their life with a stranger, whom they call their roommate. Based on what I have learned through this study, additional research questions have emerged:

- Do changes to roommate assignments support academic achievement and social integration with the campus experience?

- How do students that experience roommate conflict recognize it and seek support, especially if they are first-generation students trying to navigate their first-year experience?
- How many issues of roommate conflict go unnoticed and result in first-year students deciding not to return to the university due to an experience gone wrong? Is this the fault of housing administration who were not attentive to issues presented? Is this due to a lack of training of Resident Advisors who serve as the department's front line between students and staff? What kinds of educational experiences for housing administrators and staff can help them to be proactive in identifying and effectively addressing roommate conflicts?
- What indicators can help housing administrators and staff to identify issues occurring within the roommate relationship that can have a detrimental effect on student success at the institution?

It is necessary for housing administrators to continue to learn about the population of students they are serving in order to contribute to their success towards degree completion. This can be achieved by cultivating environments that seek to best serve our increasingly diverse student populations. In order to learn about how students feel most comfortable and confident to thrive in their living communities, it is essential to maintain a flow of communication with our students. We need to understand their needs and learn how the environments that are created specifically in student housing can nurture residential students' feelings of belonging and connectedness with their university. Through interviewing, transcribing, coding and interpreting themes, I was inspired by the stories shared by participants to support change to the housing application process by

improving opportunities for students to find compatible roommates and extend agency to support resolution with common issues experienced through the incorporation of relationship tools, which cultivate a conducive living environment supportive of academic and social success. In order to achieve this goal, functional adjustments with the housing application and room assignment process can continue to evolve through our efforts to support students as they seek to succeed and thrive on the journey toward graduation.

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## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**INTRO:** The first few questions speak to your roommate preferences completed via your student housing application prior to selection.

**(A blank copy of the student housing application profile questionnaire will be shared with interviewee).**

**Review student housing application,**

- Are the questions listed relevant to the selection of the qualities you look for in a roommate?
  - Which question on this application is the most important element when searching for a roommate?
- What did you like about the housing application process?
- What did you not like about the housing application?

***APPLICANT'S ORIGINAL PROFILE QUESTIONS SHARED:***

- By review of your profile questions, do you think this is a fair depiction of your preferences at that time?
- Since your application was originally completed, how has your opinion of yourself changed?
  - If you had to change your preference, which would they be and why?
  - Would you attribute this to your interaction with your roommate?
  - How do you and your roommate interact with each other? Are most interactions positive or not?
  - Please share an example that characterizes how you and your roommate interact, either beneficially or not.
  - Based on your experience with a roommate, which of the original housing application questions would have been the most important element that you would have preferred to be matched from?

**IN GENERAL:**

- What constitutes a successful roommate match?
- What constitutes an **unsuccessful** roommate match?

**AFTER REVIEW OF APPLICATION DISCUSS ROOMMATE EXPERIENCE:**

- Were you randomly assigned a roommate?
- Based off your own roommate experience with the process of picking a roommates, is there or would there be anything that you would want to change or improve when selecting future roommates?
- If you were able to do this whole roommate process over again, would you want to keep the same roommate process and same roommate(s)?
  - If not, what would you change (or keep) to the roommate process in order for you to be content with future roommates?
- Have your roommate experiences contribute to your overall connectedness to the University (i.e. do you participate in programs together, either residential or overall university programs)?
- What are ways that you have been able to interact with other students besides your roommate? Has it been easy to connect with others or not?
- How do you and your roommate(s) handle conflict?
- What is your room set up (double/triple)?
- Do you think the setup of the room contributes to how you interact with your roommate(s)?

**Feedback Questions**

- What would you offer as feedback for the housing office when conducting roommate placement for first-year freshmen?
- Are there other areas of feedback for the housing department that you can contribute outside of the roommate process that can be improved?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **List of Codes Used to Code Interview Data**

Accuracy of responses over time  
Comfort of living environment – Sense of Belonging  
Compatibility  
Conflict avoidance  
Convenient schedules  
Culture over college  
Don't handle conflict very well  
Importance of details  
Importance of knowing the person  
Interpersonal connection  
Know person  
Truth of application answers