The following executive summary offers an abbreviated overview of the findings of the Commuter Student Sense of Belonging Study conducted by Commuter and Off-Campus Life. Please read on to learn details related to the study's purpose, structure, analysis, findings, and implications. Note: This summary highlights key findings of the study but it not intended to serve as an exhaustive account of what we learned. Future documents expanding on select themes may be made available in the future. This document is designed to provide highlights of the study for practitioners with limited time.

COMMUTER STUDENT SENSE OF BELONGING AT UIC

In an effort to better understand how Commuter and Off-Campus Life can support commuting students' engagement and retention at the University of Illinois at Chicago, COCL coordinated a study featuring human subjects. This data collection was part of our planned departmental assessment for the 2018-2019 academic year. However, as there is limited research exploring how non-residential students experience sense of belonging on their campuses (Bloomquist, 2014; Pokorny, Holley, & Kane, 2017), we secured Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to expand future uses of this data beyond standard department operations.

WHY SENSE OF BELONGING?

According to Strayhorn (2012), “sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (p. 3). Research indicates that students' sense of belonging within a collegiate institution can positively influence students' decisions around engagement and persistence to graduation (O'Keeffe, 2013). However, researchers have noted that commuter students are more likely to experience difficulty becoming involved on campus (Burlison, 2017; Jacoby, 1989; Yearwood & Jones, 2012) and performing well academically (Jacoby, 1989). It is this understanding of the integral role of sense of belonging in college students' experience along with the unique challenges commuting students face that prompts this underexplored intersection of research: commuter student sense of belonging.

GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do undergraduate, commuting students experience sense of belonging at a large, minority-serving institution in the Midwest (UIC)?
   a. What non-university factors positively or negatively influence commuter students' sense of belonging at UIC?
   b. What University institutional factors positively or negatively influence commuter students' sense of belonging at UIC?

STUDY SCOPE

For the goals of this study, we centered our examination to the experiences of undergraduate commuter students of junior or senior level class status at UIC. Though the experiences of graduate and professional students are significant – we recognize that this study is foundational in nature as there currently is limited research exploring this specific population's experience of sense of belonging (Bloomquist, 2014; Pokorny, Holley, Kane, 2017). As such, we limited our scope to undergraduate students who – as of Fall 2018 – comprised 65.6% of the University's total enrollment (University of Illinois at Chicago, 2018).

Furthermore, with regard to Commuter and Off-Campus Life's Commuter Student Resource Center (CSRC) student traffic, undergraduate students comprise 97.7% of weekly visits on average (University of Illinois at Chicago, 2019). We perceive this study to be a starting point to understanding commuter students' experiences of sense of belonging at UIC. As such, we limited this initial inquiry to focus on non-residential undergraduate students with opportunities to explore additional populations in future research.
RECRUITMENT

Recruitment of study participants was completed using multiple avenues of communication: (1) E-mail announcement; (2) social media announcement; and (3) snowball sampling referral. As an incentive to encourage student participation, all recruitment materials highlighted that food would be provided to focus group participants and that participants could enter a drawing to receive a $50 Dragon Dollars Card (one winner was selected from each focus group).

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection for this study included:

- **Participant Interest Form**
  - This form is part of a preliminary vetting process that aided in establishing participant eligibility and collected participants' demographic and travel information.

- **Artifact**
  - Participants were prompted to bring a personal item or artifact that they perceive as reflecting their relationship with UIC. This artifact served to aid in inspiring dialogue and acted as an additional source of data.

- **Three 60 Minute Focus Groups (comprised of 3-8 students in each group)**
  - A focus group interview design was utilized to create space for commuting students to convene and discuss their experiences with sense of belonging. This interview structure was intended to allow students attending the same institution to convene and jointly respond and reflect upon their experiences with sense of belonging.
  - Questions centered on specific aspects of sense belonging, encouraging students to share stories and experiences of when and where they connected to peers and university community members and instances where they felt they mattered to the wider community.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 11 students participated in this study. An overview of their demographic information is provided below:

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THEMES:
A total of five themes emerged as a result of this study.

1. “COMMUTER IQ”

_Nearly all students indicated that their adjustment to navigating the day-to-day realities as a commuter student directly influenced their ability to connect with the UIC community_. Students expressed that as they improved their commuting skills (time management, knowledge of public transportation, and general “life hacks”), they felt they were more adept at finding new opportunities to engage with others and connect to campus. This is largely as commuting students need to account for several shifting variables including travel, energy, and work/family commitments. Similarly, nearly all students also indicated that external factors such as safety and weather shaped their decisions around involvement. Multiple students also highlighted the unexpected added costs of commuting and spending extended hours on campus. Though they had elected to commute to save money, multiple students shared that they found themselves unexpectedly spending more money on food when access to stable storage and refrigeration might not be readily available throughout the day.

**NOTABLE QUOTES:**

“When you’re a commuter, you can’t really be in the moment. You have to keep thinking ahead.” - Steven

“Cause everything … revolves around that commute, honestly, everything. Everything. Like, even down to the scheduling of my classes.” - Jonathan

“It’s like you have to pay for food. The longer you stay - the more you have to pay.” - Fabiola

2. COMMUTER AS OUTSIDER

_Nearly all participants indicated that they experienced a lack of connection to UIC due to their identity as a commuting student_. In particular, students shared that they felt they were perceived by peers and the wider university as different because of their commuter status. Multiple students mentioned receiving tacit messages that specific student organizations were not designed for commuting students. Participants cited experiences with student organization leaders where they appeared to lose interest in them once they learned they were commuters or that their organizations’ events took place late into the evening. Additionally, approximately four students directly referenced their experience with orientation where they were required to reside on campus overnight as further perpetuating this feeling of “outsider.” Namely as they were required to reside on campus for orientation even though they would not have access to that type of residential experience once the semester began.

**NOTABLE QUOTES:**

“I just feel like when I get called a commuter like at [a student] event, it just kind of feels like a dirty word almost. I’m just kind of feels like a dirty word almost. I’m just like - I’m not any different from you guys, it’s just the way that I get here - get to campus.” - Elena

“There’s students and then there’s commuter students. Like those students are different than other students.” - Mike

“Commuting means like not being on campus and not participating in as many events as on campus students. You know because I have like obligations outside of school.” - Queen

“You feel bad getting involved with something because you felt like you weren’t participating as much ‘cause you have to commute, and so I feel like for me like how do I get involved with programs that are so late and probably demand a lot. It’s like - I can’t give them that.” - Fabiola
3. SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS

Nearly all participants shared how key interactions with peers, faculty, and staff proved to positively or negatively influence their sense of connection and mattering at UIC. In particular, one-on-one formal and informal conversations with UIC community members (and moments where a community member offered support or a kind gesture) positively contributed to their sense of connection to UIC. Multiple students highlighted positive interactions with peers (from classes and student organization involvement) and direct conversations with faculty, teacher assistants, and staff members as positively influencing their experience. Three students directly referenced positive experiences with academic advisors and representatives from select academic support programs as being supportive.

**NOTABLE QUOTES:**

“So it was good to have that mentor that got me around and showed me like where to go - where certain food is. Just someone that’s there and that’s supportive of me. That was like really cool.” - King

“[They said] “Look at these work opportunities that you could do, um why not do them?” So they just pushed me to do more and I really appreciate that. I feel really supported. Like they genuinely believed in me as a person so that’s great.” - Fabiola

4. INSTITUTIONAL INVESTMENT

Multiple participants directly referenced how UIC’s investment in their individual success and needs as commuters as positively influencing their feelings of connection and mattering. Participants indicated that they felt that they mattered most when they were needed by the university and included in decision-making. Additionally, their feelings of connection were further supported when they felt as if they were valued by the university through supportive mentorship positions and scholarships. Participants also expressed that they viewed commuter-specific resources as supporting their sense of connection to campus as their unique needs as commuters were being acknowledged and validated.

Examples that positively influenced their connection included:

- Scholarships/fellowships
- On-Campus Employment Opportunities
- Access to microwaves, storage, refrigeration, and comfortable/quiet lounge spaces
5. THE COST OF COMMUTING – A LOOK AT “FORAGING”

Findings from this study prompted us to re-conceptualize the physical costs of commuting on college students. Optimal Foraging Theory (often referred to as OFT) is a model within behavioral ecology that examines the optimal conditions for animals to maximize their foraging for food (Ritvo, 2018). This model is focused on examining energy gained from food versus energy spent. We found that understanding this behavioral ecology theory can help us in examining the decision patterns of commuting students – particularly how they decide to expend energy in their navigation of campus. All participants in the study shared experiences and stories that highlighted their negotiation of time management and physical strain. Additionally, they shared examples of how they would measure whether or not a particular experience or task was worth the time and energy spent (in addition to the time and energy they regularly expend as part of their commute).

Optimal Foraging Theory allows us to reimagine decisions around commuter student engagement not just in terms of students’ intrinsic motivation but as a negotiation of their basic energy/strain as a living organism.

NOTABLE QUOTES:

“So my mind’s already going like a mile-a-minute thinking about how fast do I need to walk to be able to make this or to make that. So…instead of me just saying ‘you know what, class is done now. I can go to the gym with my friends,’ or you know ‘now I can go to the study group with my friends at the library that’s going on. I’m focused on all this commuting.” - Mike

“I’m really tired and it’s like I don’t know where I can just find somewhere to relax or somewhere or anything of that sort. So those are also factors so it’s like, the sooner I go home - the sooner I can eat. The sooner I go home, the sooner I can take a nap. The sooner I go home, the sooner I can just de-stress.” - Fabiola

UNIQUE CONSIDERATIONS

Being Acknowledged vs. Being Labeled as “Different”

The data suggests a unique tension around when and where to acknowledge and affirm a student's identity as a commuter student. The data suggests that students found it beneficial when faculty and staff acknowledged and supported their identity as a commuting student – with some making accommodations for them or being flexible as they experienced challenges with travel. However, multiple students indicated that when their identity as a commuter was highlighted by peers, they felt distanced and excluded. This may be attributed to how these implicit or explicit references to their commuter identity were delivered however it is a key question to consider.

Finding a Space to Land

With regard to physical spaces, nearly all students identified key spaces on campus where they felt they belonged. These physical spaces spanned campus but typically offered access to storage and comfort. Though multiple students referenced using the Commuter Student Resource Center as this landing space, they also identified the space as challenging due to its high traffic. Namely, nearly all participants noted the need to identify private spaces where they could recharge as they lacked access to space that was uniquely their own.
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

• Encourage departments to consider how they market their experiences to commuting students and clearly communicate what students can gain or take away from their involvement.
  o What is the value added from this program? How will it benefit students? Why is it worth it?
• Create opportunities for students to integrate their family/spouses into departmental/university programs (this can make select experiences more accessible to students).
• Encourage faculty to consider including commuter-specific language in their syllabi – particularly for students who may have particularly challenging commutes. This can demonstrate that their unique needs as commuters are being acknowledged by faculty.
• Identify different delivery methods for programs and services. What can be offered virtually? In person? During different hours?
• Consider how Peer Leaders or student workers are trained. How many members of your student staff are commuter students? How are they being trained to advise students and respond to questions? These interactions can shape how commuting students view their own positionality within the university.
• What practices or policies in your department make life more challenging to navigate for commuting students? Is there anything that you find routinely requires clarification or bouncing from one department to the next? Though this may be a campus wide concern, this is particularly challenging for commuters due to the additional energy they need to expend.

REFERENCES


