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Building a sense of belonging among tertiary commuter students: The Monash Non-Residential Colleges program

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Abstract

Student engagement at university is significantly influenced by sense of belonging. In 2013, our university developed a novel extra-curricular program designed to foster a sense of belonging in students who commute to university – the Monash Non-Residential Colleges (NRC) program. This study examines whether participation in the Monash NRC program changed students' perceptions about their university experience and their sense of belonging to the university community. We show that our NRC program appears to be effective in fostering a more positive university experience for students when compared with non-NRC students. Additionally, we demonstrate that our NRC program influenced students' sense of belonging through increased interaction with peers and staff as well as greater reported attendance on campus.

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Introduction

Highly engaged tertiary students can be defined as those who not only spend significant time and energy on their academic experience, but also regularly interact with peers and faculty (Astin, 1999; Gieg, Oyarzun, Reardon, & Gant, 2016). With the advent of online, blended, and distance education, however, university staff are being increasingly challenged to develop ways of encouraging students to participate in the on-campus experience. Student engagement is influenced by sense of belonging, which in an educational context, can be defined as the student's sense of being "accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). The strong connection between student engagement and sense of belonging has been noted (Krause & Coates, 2008), although engagement can be further influenced by students' interests, and at a deeper level, their life experiences and emotional resilience (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013). It has been noted that sense of belonging can be fostered through increased student interactions with peers and staff, encouraging the development of social support networks (Callcott, Knaus, Warren, & Wenban, 2014; Gieg et al., 2016; Jacoby, 2000; Tinto, 2012).

The benefits of experiencing a sense of belonging to a community have been extensively demonstrated in a variety of contexts, and include increases in students' skill development, perceived self-efficacy, motivation, engagement, involvement, persistence, and academic success (see for example Cahusac de Caux, Lam, Lau, Hoang, & Pretorius, 2017; Crisman, 2014; Ford et al., 2015; Goodenow, 1993; Lord, Coston, Davis, & Johannes, 2012; Pike, 1999; Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997; Priest, Saucier, & Eiselein, 2016; Stassen, 2003; Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Russo, 1994; Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Zheng, Saunders, Shelley, & Whalen, 2002). It is important to note that the benefits of belonging to a community

are not only restricted to the academic learning environment, but also include extra-curricular communities. The establishment of both learning and extra-curricular communities are therefore considered to be high-impact educational practices (Kuh, 2008, 2009).

Universities invariably offer many extra-curricular activities for students, including clubs and societies, university-sponsored events, and student governance associations. There is a considerable body of evidence about the value of involvement in such extra-curricular activities on the positive engagement, retention and academic success of non-residential university students (Daly & Breegle, 1989; Trowler, 2010). Importantly, Lima (2014) reported a strong positive relationship between commuter student involvement in such extra-curricular activities and their sense of belonging at university. Such involvement may therefore be a crucial catalyst in generating a sense of belonging at university for commuting students, many of whom contend with a myriad of issues that limit, or inhibit, engagement in their university studies (Jacoby, 2000; Tinto, 1993).

Monash University in Melbourne, Australia has a large student cohort (more than 70,000 students) enrolled across several campuses (Monash University, 2017a). Consequently, our students are culturally, linguistically and socio-economically diverse, and include full-time and part-time local and international students (Monash University, 2017a). While residential programs are available at most of these campuses, a large proportion of our students do not live on campus and therefore commute to attend their classes. It has been noted that commuter students are more likely to limit their on-campus time to class attendance (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). This reduced on-campus attendance decreases students' opportunities for social interaction with peers and faculty, leading to fewer campus support networks and a decreased sense of belonging (Jacoby, 2000; Jacoby & Garland, 2004; O'Shea, 2014). In order to increase campus engagement and foster a

sense of belonging for our university's commuter students, the novel Monash Non-Residential Colleges (NRC) program was developed. While similar programs exist at other Australian universities (e.g. The University of Melbourne), and at post-secondary colleges and universities elsewhere in the world, these are often small in scale, have limited resourcing, and commonly exist as subsidiary elements of the primary residential programs.

In this study, we describe the Monash NRC program and evaluate whether participation in this program affected students' perceptions about their university experience and their sense of belonging. We show that our NRC program appears to be effective in fostering a more positive university experience for students when compared with non-NRC students. Additionally, we demonstrate that our NRC program influenced students' sense of belonging through increased interaction with peers and staff, as well as greater reported attendance on campus.

The Monash Non-Residential Colleges (NRC) program

The Monash NRC program was established in 2013. It was based on the model used by our university's residential services, and aimed to provide similar levels of pastoral and social support for students not living on campus (Monash University, 2017b). Initially two colleges were created, one on each of the university's largest campuses. Each college was allocated 250 places for commuter students, as well as 20 places for College Advisors (Monash University, 2017b). These advisors (higher level students who volunteered to act as mentors) were provided with training in group facilitation, Mental Health First Aid, respectful relationships and cultural competency (Monash University, 2017b). In addition to these peer mentors, the colleges also included a leadership team at each campus, comprising a College

Coordinator (a paid administrative staff member) and Heads of College (academic or professional staff members with an interest in student development and community whose college roles are voluntary, Monash University, 2017b). After the first year, the demand for places in our NRC program, as well as the high satisfaction rates from members, allowed the program to be expanded. Currently, there are seven colleges split across three of the university's campuses (see Monash University, 2017b), comprising 1,675 members and 127 advisors.

Previous research has demonstrated that a sense of belonging is fostered when students spend time together at both formal and informal events (Callcott et al., 2014; Gieg et al., 2016; Tinto, 2012). The current Monash NRC program is designed to foster community through a series of college-based major events (such as formal balls and dinners), as well as competitive events (such as inter-college sporting competitions) to cultivate a collegial identity. Each college has its own logo, values, and motto which were chosen by the first cohort of members in that college (see Monash University, 2017b). Banners featuring these logos are prominently displayed at events. Additionally, each advisor is responsible for mentoring the students in their assigned cohort (1:13 advisor to student ratio) through small group and individual meetings (Monash University, 2017b). The small group meetings are designed to foster friendship and engagement, while the one-on-one meetings (in person or online) are designed to provide individualised pastoral care, highlight university support services, and provide referrals as required.

Little has been reported in the literature regarding the effectiveness of non-residential college programs in enhancing commuting students' transition, engagement or sense of belonging during their first year of university study. Given the relative uniqueness of the Monash NRC program, together with this gap in

the scholarly literature, we set out to evaluate the value of the program by comparing the experiences of commuting NRC and non-NRC students after their first four weeks at university.

Method

Research aim

The aim of this project was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Monash NRC program in improving students' perceived university experience and sense of belonging. Consequently, this project aimed to investigate the following two research questions:

- 1) Does participation in the Monash NRC program change students' perceptions about their university experience?
- 2) Does participation in the Monash NRC program change students' perceived sense of belonging?

Research design

A mixed-method research design was used, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data. This design allowed us to include data from a variety of sources in order to provide a more in-depth understanding of the students' lived experiences. The design, data collection and analysis procedures were approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee.

Study participants

This study consisted of two groups: commuter students who were members of the Monash NRC program (termed NRC) and commuter students who were not part of the program (termed non-NRC). The NRC students were recruited from three colleges on the university's largest campus. As mentioned previously, the NRC students were allocated into small groups that aimed to foster a sense of belonging, and were likely to have attended at least one small

group meeting before the survey was administered. The NRC students also already had the opportunity to participate in at least one college-based event before the survey was administered (a welcome dinner), and may have also attended an optional movie night. The non-NRC students were recruited from a first-year biology core unit. This unit was chosen as it has a high enrolment, and requires that students spend a significant amount of time on campus in lectures and practical classes. Furthermore, students completing this biology unit also spend time in small groups as part of the laboratory component of their studies. Consequently, students in this unit provided a relevant comparison to students who were part of our NRC program. It is important to note that eight first-year NRC students indicated that they studied a science-based degree (12.7% of the NRC cohort). It is therefore likely that a small number of the students in the NRC cohort also studied the first-year biology core unit.

Survey design

A Google Forms-based survey, to collect quantitative data including a qualitative component by closed approach, was provided to students after the fourth week of semester one, and was open for responses during weeks five and six of semester. This time point was chosen as it was directly after a campus-wide student engagement event ("SummerFest", Monash University, 2017c), designed to encourage students to come to campus and feel a sense of belonging with the wider university community. The survey was publicised online through Facebook and the University's online learning system (Moodle). All responses were anonymous and were de-identified prior to analysis.

The qualitative component of the survey presented the students with 29 adjectives and asked them to choose the five words they felt best identified their experiences at university (Table 1). The adjectives were selected to describe the spectra of students' experiences

associated with five key facets: comfort, support, challenge, knowledge, and social support (Table 1). Additionally, five words were included to represent the affective domain (i.e. students' feelings, attitudes and motivations, Krathwohl, 2002; Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1999). Within the survey, these words were presented in a randomly ordered, single-column list generated individually for each participant. Students were able to choose more or less than five words if they desired. The incidence of each word was counted for both the NRC and non-NRC groups.

The quantitative component of the survey asked students to respond to a variety of statements about their university experience (complete survey is available from the corresponding author). A Likert scale was used to classify responses as follows: Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Neutral = 3, Agree = 4, and Strongly Agree = 5. Results are presented as mean \pm standard error of the mean. Data from the surveys were analysed using GraphPad Prism 7 (GraphPad Software Incorporated, 2016) and Microsoft Office Excel 2013. We determined statistical significance by conducting unpaired t-tests between responses from NRC and non-NRC students. A p-value of less than .05 was considered significant.

Results

Survey respondents

A total of 163 responses were received (NRC n=63, non-NRC n=100). This represents a minimum response rate of 8.6% and 7.3%, respectively. It is important to note, however, that this response rate was calculated using the total membership of all the colleges based at the chosen campus and the total enrolment numbers for students enrolled in the first-year biology core unit at the same campus. It was not possible to calculate how many students received and read the advertisements for the survey, so exact response rates could not be determined. The responses were predominantly from students who had studied at university for one year or less (NRC 68.8% and non-NRC 96.0%). As students' responses within each cohort were similar regardless of year of study, their responses were combined for data analysis. There was a slightly higher representation of international students in the NRC cohort compared with the non-NRC cohort, while self-identified mature-aged, first-in-family, non-English speaking, and rural students were similarly distributed in both the NRC and non-NRC groups (Table 2).

Table 1: Adjectives provided to students in the survey to describe their experiences at university after four weeks of study.

Facet	Negative →		Adjectives Neutral	→	Positive	
Comfort	Unsafe	Uncomfortable	Familiar	Comfortable	Safe	
Support	Bureaucratic	Hurdles	Help Available	Supportive	Caring	
Challenge	Overwhelming	Difficult	Easy	Challenging	Exciting	
Knowledge	Confusing	Complex	Knowledge	Learning	New Ideas	
Social Support	Isolating	--	Inclusive	Friendly	Community	
Affective Domain	Boring	Tedious	Average	New Start	Escape	

Table 2: Characteristics of survey respondents.

	Mature-Aged	First-In-Family	Non-English Speaking Background	International	Rural/Regional
NRC (n=63)	12.7%	23.8%	12.7%	14.3%	7.9%
Non-NRC (n=100)	15.0%	20.0%	13.0%	6.0%	7.0%

Note: Participants could be represented in multiple categories, depending on individual demographics.

NRC students perceive their university experience more favourably than non-NRC students

As previously discussed, students were asked to choose five words to describe their experiences at university so far. Several questions in the quantitative part of the survey also investigated students’ personal experiences at university. Compared with non-NRC students, students from the NRC group more frequently selected terms classified as positive to describe their university experiences (see Table 3), including “Friendly” (58.7% vs. 40.0%), “Community” (38.1% vs. 19.0%), “Comfortable” (28.6% vs. 21.0%), and “Supportive” (23.8% vs. 12.0%). NRC students also less frequently chose terms classified as negative (Table 3), including “Challenging” (42.9% vs. 54.0%), “Overwhelming” (25.4% vs. 40.0%), “Confusing” (17.5% vs. 30.0%), “Difficult” (11.1% vs. 21.0%), and “Isolating” (4.8% vs. 14.0%). Words describing the affective domain were similar across both groups, except “New Start” which was more frequently chosen by non-NRC students (Table 3). These qualitative findings were also corroborated in the quantitative component of the survey. NRC students were significantly more likely to indicate that they found university “exciting and fun”, and less likely to indicate that they felt isolated or overwhelmed (Table 4).

NRC students report increased time on campus and larger social support networks, suggesting they experience a greater sense of belonging

The second part of this study investigated students’ perceived confidence in a variety of competencies. A summary of students’ responses (see Table 4) highlights a number of significant differences between NRC and non-NRC students. Importantly, NRC students interacted more with peers from other degree programs in the university and were more likely to belong to another social community in the university (Table 4). Furthermore, NRC students were also less likely to leave campus after classes were finished and more frequently spoke to their teaching staff than non-NRC students (Table 4). There were no statistical differences between NRC and non-NRC students in terms of awareness of support services and learning support staff available at the university (Table 4). Interestingly, NRC students were also markedly more likely to report that they thought about ways to increase their employability, compared with non-NRC students (Table 4).

Table 3: Adjective incidence for NRC (n=63) and non-NRC (n=100) students to describe their experiences at university after the fourth week of semester one.

Adjectives	Incidence NRC	Incidence Non-NRC	Percentage NRC	Percentage Non-NRC
Unsafe	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
Uncomfortable	1	7	1.6%	7.0%
Familiar	6	7	9.5%	7.0%
Comfortable	18	21	28.6%	21.0%
Safe	6	14	9.5%	14.0%
Bureaucratic	4	9	6.3%	9.0%
Hurdles	9	21	14.3%	21.0%
Help Available	7	17	11.1%	17.0%
Supportive	15	12	23.8%	12.0%
Caring	3	4	4.8%	4.0%
Overwhelming	16	40	25.4%	40.0%
Difficult	7	21	11.1%	21.0%
Easy	0	5	0.0%	5.0%
Challenging	27	54	42.9%	54.0%
Exciting	29	47	46.0%	47.0%
Confusing	11	30	17.5%	30.0%
Complex	7	19	11.1%	19.0%
Knowledge	17	32	27.0%	32.0%
Learning	20	43	31.7%	43.0%
New Ideas	5	20	7.9%	20.0%
Isolating	3	14	4.8%	14.0%
Inclusive	7	12	11.1%	12.0%
Friendly	37	40	58.7%	40.0%
Community	24	19	38.1%	19.0%
Boring	0	6	0.0%	6.0%
Tedious	6	11	9.5%	11.0%
Average	9	11	14.3%	11.0%
New Start	21	47	33.3%	47.0%
Escape	2	1	3.2%	1.0%

Table 4: Students' perceived confidence in a variety of competencies after the fourth week of semester one.

Statement	NRC (n=61-63)	Non-NRC (n=99-100)
I am confident I will be able to succeed in my studies	3.7±0.1	3.8±0.1
I feel out of my depth at university	2.7±0.1	2.8±0.1
I know where to find useful services on campus	3.7±0.1	3.6±0.1
I have thought about ways I can improve my chances of employment	3.8±0.1	3.3±0.1**
I regularly interact with students who are not in my course	3.8±0.1	3.0±0.1***
I am comfortable interacting with students from different cultural, social and economic groups	4.2±0.1	4.2±0.1
I feel isolated when I'm at university	2.3±0.1	2.7±0.1*
I only visit the campus for important classes, then leave straight after	2.4±0.1	2.8±0.1*
I know at least one person at university who I can speak to when I'm not sure what to do	4.2±0.1	3.9±0.1
I feel overwhelmed by the demands of university study	3.2±0.1	3.6±0.1*
I am part of one or more social (non-academic) communities at the university	4.2±0.1	3.2±0.1***
I have helped another student with a problem (academic, social, logistical, personal)	3.7±0.1	3.6±0.1
I think of university as exciting and fun	3.9±0.1	3.5±0.1*
I struggle to fit in university study around my other activities	2.7±0.1	3.1±0.1*
I am confident to discuss my ideas with other students (in person or online)	3.8±0.1	3.5±0.1
I know where to find assistance with my learning	3.8±0.1	3.5±0.1
I have spoken to the lecturers for each of my units	2.5±0.1	2.1±0.1*
I speak to other students in my units	4.1±0.1	4.1±0.1
I follow a study schedule (i.e. scheduled time for private study with time allocated to specific tasks)	2.6±0.2	2.6±0.1
I am comfortable using university computer systems	4.2±0.1	4.2±0.1
I have a good idea of the expectations on me as a student	3.9±0.1	3.6±0.1*
I discuss my university experiences with other students from my classes	3.7±0.1	3.7±0.1
I discuss my university experiences with other students who are not in my classes	3.8±0.1	3.6±0.1

Results are presented as mean ± standard error of the mean. A Likert scale was used to classify responses as follows: Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Neutral = 3, Agree =4, and Strongly Agree = 5. *indicates p<.05 ** indicates p<.01 *** indicates p<.001

Discussion

The Monash NRC program is effective in fostering a positive university experience and enhancing students' perceived sense of belonging

Our qualitative and quantitative data both demonstrate that NRC students appear to perceive their university experience more favourably than non-NRC students. This is perhaps not surprising, given that the NRC program is specifically designed to encourage a sense of community through college-based events. NRC students were likely to have attended at least one college event (the welcome dinner), and may have also attended the first movie night before this survey was administered. It is important to note that this study was conducted directly after the campus-wide event “SummerFest”, which included a series of activities designed to celebrate and showcase the campus community including movie nights, dance parties, food festivals, and family-friendly entertainment (Monash University, 2017c). While it would therefore be expected that non-NRC students would also have had a positive perception of university at this point in time, NRC students were still more likely to consider their university experience “exciting and fun” (Table 4). This suggests that on their own, large events are not sufficient to foster a positive university experience. By the time this survey was conducted, most NRC students would have also met in groups and individually with their College Advisor. This more individualised support seemed to further promote a positive university experience, likely because students felt that they knew more people on campus who could provide help or support if required. This can also be seen in the word-association data, showing that NRC students were less likely to choose words reflective of perceived study pressure (such as “Challenging”, “Overwhelming” or “Difficult”, Table 3).

Importantly, these reports of a positive university experience were correlated with a greater apparent sense of belonging among NRC students. It has been previously demonstrated that a sense of community and belonging is dependent on time spent on campus (Astin, 1999; Callcott et al., 2014; Jacoby & Garland, 2004; O’Shea, 2014; Tinto, 2012). Our study found that NRC students were significantly more likely to report remaining on campus after their classes were finished than non-NRC students (Table 4). This is partly explained by the fact that college-based events are scheduled outside normal class hours (usually starting at 6pm). However, given that there was only one college-based event on campus by the time the survey was administered, this increased time spent on campus cannot be fully explained by students’ attendance at these events. We believe that the time spent on campus reflects an increased likelihood that students felt more connected to their peers and therefore felt more comfortable on campus. Previous research has shown that a sense of community and belonging can be fostered by increased student interaction with peers and teaching staff (Callcott et al., 2014; Gieg et al., 2016; Jacoby, 2000; Tinto, 2012). These interactions allow students to develop their own sense of identity, leading to increased persistence at university (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003).

Although NRC students were more likely than non-NRC students to have spoken with their lecturers (Table 4), the low mean scores for this question are of considerable concern. This is not a novel issue, with Snow (1973) finding that up to a third of students, across year levels, reported little contact with their lecturers. Similar findings have been reported consistently over the intervening four decades (see for example Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Terenzini & Wright, 1987). It is likely that our findings reflect various factors, including the timing of the survey early in semester, increasingly large first-year classes, and decreasing face-to-face teaching by lecturers outside of the lecture theatre. These

latter two factors reflect broader trends in higher education, with increasing pressure on academics to publish and gain research grants, and the lesser reward and recognition associated with teaching (Chen, 2015; Knapper, 1997; Walker, Baepler, & Cohen, 2008). As such, the potential value of staff as College Heads in NRC programs cannot be understated, given that it increases academic involvement in student-focussed activities.

An interesting finding was that NRC students were significantly more likely to report that they had thought about ways to improve their employability compared with non-NRC students (Table 4). It is currently unclear why this is the case, given that no specific employability-related activities were included in the Monash NRC program when this survey was conducted. It may be possible that this finding is a result of discussions between students and their College Advisors. These more senior students may have raised the NRC students' awareness of the need to seek opportunities to build employability. Alternatively, it is possible that students were more likely to join a college because they perceived it as relevant to networking for future success. Further research will be required to investigate the mechanisms responsible for this intriguing finding.

Limitations

Some limitations to our study should be noted. Firstly, the data obtained from students in this study are self-reported and optional. Consequently, a degree of response bias is likely. However, given that this study specifically sought students' perceptions of their experiences, self-report data are considered appropriate. Secondly, it is important to note that it is possible that selection effects may be partially responsible for our results, given that NRC students may be more likely to join our NRC program because they are seeking a more involved campus experience. Thirdly, we acknowledge that this

study only examined students' perceptions in one semester of study. Future studies should examine whether these findings are also representative at the end of the students' year of study. Finally, it would have been interesting to evaluate whether participation in our NRC program also improved academic performance, but the researchers did not have access to this data due to privacy restrictions.

Conclusion

The findings of our study demonstrate the considerable value of NRC programs on students' conceptions of belonging at university, through greater connectedness with peers, engagement in social networks and increased on-campus attendance. As one of the very few investigations of the potential value and importance of NRC-type programs, this new knowledge provides valuable insights into the potential of such programs to impact positively on student engagement, retention and academic success. Such issues are of ongoing concern, both in Australia (Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009) and internationally (O'Keeffe, 2013), and it may be that a small investment in an NRC-type program may be of considerable financial benefit to universities, notwithstanding the personal and academic benefits to students involved in such programs.

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