

Belonging Through Culture: Student Wellbeing and Campus Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Student well-being and belonging is a priority on campuses across the country, yet students continue to struggle with loneliness, anxiety, depression and stress, which interferes with daily functioning (Jones et al, 2022 & ACHA, 2023). College is a difficult time as students begin to navigate life outside of home, which makes it important for students to find spaces on campus that help them feel included, understood and supported. Campus culture manifests in many ways including student-faculty relationships (Macari & Pazos, 2012), university structures that promote independence or interdependence (Stephens et al., 2012), students shared experience on poor mental health (Wilson, 2025) and academic and community clubs on campus. Clubs/organizations that focus on culture may aid in students' sense of belonging and well-being because of many cultures, particularly collectivist cultures that prioritize interdependence (the community over oneself) have been shown to have higher sense of well-being and because of the importance of the community promote openness and belonging. This study aims to analyze the relationship between a student's belonging and well-being and participation in cultural clubs.

Empirical Question. To what extent does involvement in cultural and community-based organizations on campus predict students' well-being and sense of belonging?

HR1: Active participation in cultural clubs will be positively correlated with higher scores of well-being.

HR2: Club participation predicts higher sense of belonging

HR3: Higher sense of belonging will be positively correlated with higher scores of well-being

HR4: Club affiliation with cultural group you identify with predicts a higher sense of belonging that those who don't

PILOT METHOD

Participants

Through our survey solicitation, a total of 29 undergraduate students participated in our study. Many ethnic groups and combinations of groups were represented including Euromerican, Hispanic, Asian, Asian & Polynesian, African American & Euromerican and Indigenous & African American.

To evaluate the empirical questions of whether participation in cultural organizations on campus improves well-being and feelings of belonging in students:

Materials

Club Engagement Measure (CLUB). This researcher developed scaled was made to specify if the participant is involved in any club and whether it is a club that aligns with their culture or not. Higher scores indicate higher rates of engagement.

Sense of Engagement and Belonging Scale Modified (SEBSM, Ara et. al., 2022). Perceived inclusion is measured using selected and adapted items from Ara et al. (2022). This is a measure to assess students' connection to their university community. Higher scores indicate a greater sense of belonging.

Student Well-Being Index (WHO-5) (SWBI, Gunuc & Kuzu, 2015). General well-being will be assessed through items adapted from the WHO-5 Well-Being Index and prior campus mental health surveys

(World Health Organization, 2024). Higher scores reflect better psychological well-being.

Cross-Cultural Belonging (CC_Belonging). This is a researcher-developed scale that focuses on the sense of culture on campus and the inclusion of their culture on campus. Higher scores indicate a stronger sense of cross-cultural belonging for students.

Design and Procedure

This mixed quantitative survey and qualitative ethnographic interviews were delivered via Qualtrics, online survey software with a follow-up interview among students willing to meet with investigators.

Interview Protocol. Participants who opt into the qualitative portion completed a semi-structured interview exploring themes of inclusion, representation and well-being within cultural and campus context. Questions were designed to provide depth to quantitative findings that may give insight into how Pacific University may improve student belonging, inclusion and representation.

PILOT RESULTS

The first hypothesis, participation in cultural clubs would be positively correlated with higher scores, well-being could not be interpreted, due to a scoring error through the online survey software.

However, the second hypothesis, which predicted that club engagement will be correlated with belonging, was supported. The results showed that those who are affiliated with cultural clubs have higher scores of Cross-Cultural Belonging ($M=26.9$, $SD=6.9$) than those who are not ($M=23.6$, $SD=9.9$). Results also indicated that the Student Engagement and Belonging Scale and Cross-Cultural Belonging have a strong positive correlation, $r=.80$, $p<.01$. Additionally, the third hypothesis, belonging will be positively correlated with higher scores of well-being, which could not be interpreted, due to a scoring error through the online survey software. Further the assertion that club affiliation would correlate with self-identified cultural group would yield higher scores of belonging, could not be interpreted due to inadequate sample size.

Additional findings included a positive correlation between age is and Club Commitment, $r=.53$, $p<.01$. Club engagement and Club commitment were negatively correlated, $r=-.81$, $p<.01$. Student Engagement and Belonging Scale and Club Commitment were negatively correlated, $r = -.41$, $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to indicate if participation in cultural and community-based organizations on campus is correlated with students' well-being and sense of belonging. Given instrumental error, small sample size, and interview attrition, the predictions were largely unsupported for this pilot. Fortunately, the internal consistency of scores for Club Engagement (CLUB, $\alpha = 0.71$), Student Engagement and Belonging (SEBSM, $\alpha = 0.93$), and Cross-Cultural Belonging (CC_Belonging, $\alpha = 0.92$), were all modest to high, suggesting the measures themselves are appropriate for our college sample, provided we obtain a larger sample size.

Conclusion

By understanding the relationship between cultural inclusion, engagement, and well-being, universities can better support organizations that foster community and a stronger sense of belonging for students on campus.

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