Faculty Belonging at Work: Individual and Institutional Factors

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[Abstract] Belonging at work is an important aspect of faculty values, motivation, and professional identity. The purpose of this study was to explore individual and institutional factors related to belonging and professional identity for university faculty. Two hundred and thirty-six faculty participated in the study through completing a survey with open and closed-ended questions. Data was analyzed using inductive and sentiment analyses. Six themes emerged from the faculty responses, and finding suggest belonging is associated with faculty rank and roles. Implications for policy and practice and suggestions for future research are offered.

[Keywords] belonging, professional identity formation, faculty values, workplace culture, faculty development, transformative learning

Introduction

In a recent study, Hastings et al. (2023) used Schwartz's Theory of Basic Values (2012) to explore how faculty values and priorities were affected by disruption and crisis during the COVID-19 Pandemic. In the study, five of the 10 values identified in Schwartz's theory emerged from the data as themes: achievement, benevolence, security, self-direction, and universalism. In Schwartz's theory, values can be organized visually along horizontal and vertical axes. The horizontal axis ranges from anxiety-based values focused on protection and prevention of loss to anxiety-free values focused on expansion and growth. The vertical axis charts the direction of focus, ranging from personal, inward focus on one end of the spectrum to outward, social focus on the other. For example, the value of security is personally and inwardly focused, e.g. protecting one's own interests against threat, while the value of universalism is outwardly focused, e.g. promoting the welfare of self as well as others/all.

In the study by Hastings et al. (2023), the importance of belonging at work was most prominent in the outwardly and expansively focused benevolence theme. However, it also cut across the other four themes Schwartz' schema, i.e., achievement, security, self-direction, and universalism. Hastings et al. posit that belonging not only influences faculty values, motivations, and behaviors, but it is also an important component of professional identity. Building on these constructs, in this study we explored individual and institutional factors related to belonging and professional identity for university faculty.
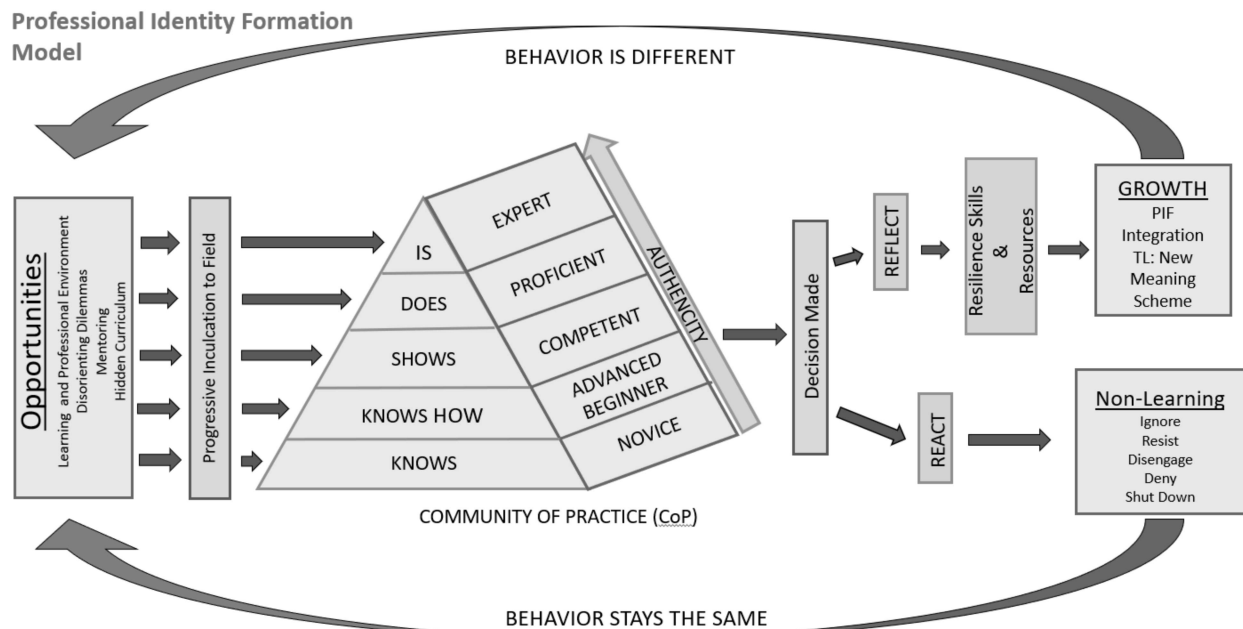
Professional Identity Formation

During the pandemic, some faculty experienced mild to moderate disruption in their lives and professional identities while others experienced significant personal and professional upheavals. Among the latter group, faculty reported that their workloads increased (Tugend, 2020); they felt isolated from their colleagues and communities (Pololi et al., 2021), and they often experienced compassion fatigue, techno stress, and burnout (Boamah et al., 2022; Boyer-Davis, 2020; Cordaro, 2020). Women and faculty of color were disproportionately affected by increased emotional labor in caring for students' needs and familial caregiving responsibilities (Berheide, et al., 2022; King & Frederickson, 2021; Pereira, 2021; Porter et al., 2022). While stressful experiences, such as the ones during the pandemic, may erode professional identity or serve as an impetus to reevaluate one's professional values (Hastings et al., 2023), these experiences are also potential catalysts for change (Cranton, 2016), and in some instances for transformation (Cranton, 2016; Ward, et al., 2019) as well as building resilient professional identities (Carter, et al., 2019).

Professional identities are formed, in part, "by absorbing the values, beliefs, and underlying assumptions of the roles they are to assume in society" (Carter, Boden, & Peno, 2019). People enter their profession with some sort of personal identity. Over time and training, a dynamic construct that is relational, situated, and embedded in relations of power develops one's Professional Identity Formation (PIF) (Goldie, 2012). PIF occurs within a community of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which has its own values and behaviors that are often socially constructed and aligned with the personal identity and professional identities of members (Irby & Hamstra, 2016). Often, to develop a PIF that is resilient, transformative learning (TL) takes place (Ward, et al., 2019).

Transformative learning, first theorized by Mezirow in the 1970s, is a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings and actions, according to Kitchenham (2008). TL theory suggests knowledge occurs in two domains: instrumental, cause and effect or task-oriented, communicative, expressed feelings, emotions, and intentions (Mezirow, 1991, 2012). TL overall is meant to show how adults can learn to revise underlying assumptions, alter dysfunctional belief systems, and become more reflective and open to different perspectives on thinking and acting in the world (Cranton, 2016; Taylor, 2008). Awareness of and engaging in reflection of the meaning behind situations is critical for TL to occur. Perspective transformation yields three changes through completing the TL process: changes in understanding oneself, changes in one's belief system, and changes in one's behavior (Ward, et al., 2019). These changes are not an everyday occurrence, rather a rare experience that is inherently life changing (Clark, 1993).

Not all disorienting dilemmas, such as those introduced as a result of the pandemic, produce transformative learning (Figure 1). Non-learning or growth may occur. Examples of both were apparent among faculty in the study by Hastings et al.(2023), where some faculty reported no change in their values and others articulated how their values, and by extension their professional identities, changed because of their experiences during the pandemic. Changes of values were reported in the domains of Achievement (18%), Benevolence (19%), Security (28%), Self-Direction (24%), and Universalism (1%). Among those who did report changes in values, one of the largest shifts was in "faculty's view of self-direction, holding it higher regard than before the pandemic" (p.13). Several faculty noted that they valued the ability to select work that aligned with their goals and interests and was meaningful to students, the university, or their disciplines.

Figure 1

Professional Identity Formation

Professional Identity Formation
Model

BEHAVIOR IS DIFFERENT

Opportunities
Learning and Professional Environment
Disorienting Dilemmas
Mentoring
Hidden Curriculum

Progressive Inculcation to Field

EXPERT
IS
PROFICIENT
DOES
COMPETENT
SHOWS
ADVANCED BEGINNER
KNOWS HOW
NOVICE
KNOWS

AUTHENCITY

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE (CoP)

Decision Made

REFLECT

Resilience Skills & Resources

GROWTH
PIF
Integration
TL: New
Meaning
Scheme

REACT

Non-Learning
Ignore
Resist
Disengage
Deny
Shut Down

BEHAVIOR STAYS THE SAME

Adapted from: Cruess, Cruess, Boudreau, Snell, & Steinert, 2016; Merriam & Clark, 1993; Mehay & Burns, 2009; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Mezirow 1991; Illeris, 2012

Faculty also noted that self-direction bolstered resilience when they felt empowered to strive for work-life balance and adopt a pace of work that allowed them to honor their commitments to both their careers and their home lives. Self-directed and meaningful work contributed to a sense of well-being, resilience, and belonging.

Belonging at Work
Belonging at work is a critical aspect of employee well-being and organizational success. The literature emphasizes the importance of fostering a sense of belonging in the workplace to impact employee performance. Employees who feel a sense of belonging tend to be more engaged and motivated at work (Hodgkin, 2008; Walton & Brady, 2017). A positive work environment, where individuals feel valued and included, contributes to higher productivity and job satisfaction (Misra et al., 2021). Building an inclusive culture is crucial for fostering belonging. Organizations are encouraged to create policies and practices that promote diversity and equity (Misra et al., 2021; Walton & Brady, 2017). Inclusive leadership plays a pivotal role in ensuring that all employees, regardless of background, feel welcome and appreciated (O'Meara, 2022; Terosky et al., 2014). Effective communication is another key factor in creating a sense of belonging (Malisch et al., 2020). Transparent communication from leadership helps employees understand their role and contributions to the overall goals of the organization. Social connections within the workplace, both formal and informal, contribute to a sense of community and belonging (Painter, 2013).

Belonging at Work for University Faculty
Belonging at work for university faculty is a nuanced topic that involves unique considerations within the academic context. For university professors, professional identity is often developed first through formal education and later sustained through engagement with communities of practice related to their academic disciplines, research interests, teaching, and professional and community service (Carter, et al., 2019). Belonging is a crucial factor in faculty well-being, and social connections related to work, both formal and informal, contribute to a sense of well-being and bolter faculty when they face challenges, such as demanding workloads and pressure to publish or win external funding (Gonzales & Terosky, 2018).

Academic culture is a crucial component of belonging. Creating an inclusive and supportive culture involves acknowledging the distinct characteristics of faculty roles, including research, teaching, and service responsibilities. Ideal academic environments value diverse contributions and recognize the varied pathways to success within academia (Hastings et al., 2023). Belonging is fostered through collaborative research and interdisciplinary work. Universities can promote opportunities for faculty to engage in cross-disciplinary projects, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose. (Trower, 2012).

Belonging is closely tied to tenure and promotion processes. Transparent and fair evaluation criteria are essential, ensuring that faculty members from different backgrounds feel supported in their career advancement (Pifer & Baker, 2013). Mentorship programs can be effective tools for guiding junior faculty through the complexities of tenure and promotion (Pifer & Baker, 2013). In addition to support during the tenure and promotion process, faculty require ongoing continuous professional development, which is also linked to faculty belonging (O'Meara, 2015; Sheltzer & Smith, 2014; Terosky et al., 2014). Universities are advised to invest in faculty development programs that address the evolving needs of educators and provide opportunities for skill enhancement and career growth.

Measuring Belonging
Creating a workplace where employees feel a strong sense of belonging involves cultivating an inclusive culture, fostering open communication, addressing challenges, and adapting strategies to the evolving landscape of work, including the considerations brought about by remote work. Organizations that prioritize these aspects are likely to experience improved employee well-being and overall success (Slaten et al., 2018; Teng et al., 2020). But how exactly to go about measuring whether employees feel like they belong or not? Feedback mechanisms, such as surveys and open forums, are highlighted as tools to gauge and address concerns related to belonging. The General Belongingness Scale (Malone, et al., 2012) assesses achieved belonging linked to well-being and discusses metrics for measuring belonging emphasize the need for organizations to regularly assess employee satisfaction, engagement, and perceived inclusivity.

Methodology

Belonging is a complex construct influenced by numerous individual and environmental factors. This inductive analysis investigated the concept of belonging from the perspectives of faculty members exploring their sense of belonging at their institution and obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board to conduct the study. We implemented a qualitative descriptive study, administering a survey through Qualtrics with closed and open-ended questions.

On closed-ended questions, we used descriptive statistics that summarized the data set for measures of central tendency and dispersion, and MAXQDA was utilized to assist with the analysis of these data. A sentiment analysis was done regarding what differences might appear depending on faculty role at the institution (Dake & Gyimah, 2023; Kaurav et al., 2020).

For the open-ended questions, an inductive qualitative analysis was done on faculty responses (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). Employing an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Miles, et al., 2020; & Saldaña & Omasta, 2016), allowed themes and insights to emerge organically from the faculty members' responses. Rather than imposing predetermined hypotheses or frameworks, this analysis sought to capture the nuances and complexities of belonging as experienced by the participants. Through open-ended survey responses, participants shared their thoughts of what it means to belong and the aspects of their work and institutional environment that cultivate or hinder belonging.

Sample

The survey was sent to 2004 faculty members, and 14% (n = 280) responded. Of these respondents, approximately 11.77% (236) of faculty articulated what *belonging* meant to them. The respondents closely approximated the race and ethnicity demographics of the sample. The majority of the respondents were white (70.7%), followed by self-described or unknown (11.79%), Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin (9.29%), Asian/Asian American (6.07%), Black or African American (1.43%), and less than 1% in other categories (Table 1).

Table 1

Respondent Race and Ethnicity Demographics

	University Faculty	Faculty Respondents	Response Rate
American Indian or Alaska Native	29	2	7%
Asian/Asian American	210	17	8%
Black or African American	73	4	5%
Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin	198	26	13%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	2	0	0%
White	1356	198	15%
foll	136	33	24%
Total	2004	280	14%

The sample included professors (20.4%), associate professors (21.1%), assistant professors (20.4%), full-time non-tenure line faculty, including full-time lecturers and other ranked non-tenure line positions (30%), and part-time lecturers (8.2%).

Table 2

Faculty Role Rank

|	Faculty Respondents	Response Rate
Professor (tenure-line)	58	20.4%
Associate Professor (tenure-line)	61	21.1%
Assistant Professor (tenure-line)	52	20.4%
Non-tenure line full-time (Including research, clinical, faculty or practice appointments)	78	30%
Non-tenure line part-time (Including research, clinical, faculty or practice appointments)	21	8.2%

Findings

In response to closed-ended questions, faculty were asked about their sense of belonging to the campus community among different faculty roles (Figure 2).

　　Tenured or tenure-track professors represented by the red node labeled *Professor (tenure-line)*, appear to have the strongest sense of belonging to the institution or university community. They are directly connected to the central node *I completely belong*, indicating their full-time, permanent affiliation.

　　Non-tenure line full-time faculty members, another red node, also seem to have a relatively strong sense of belonging, as they are connected to the *I strongly belong* and *I moderately belong* nodes, suggesting a significant but somewhat lesser degree of belonging compared to tenured professors.

Figure 2

Relationship Map
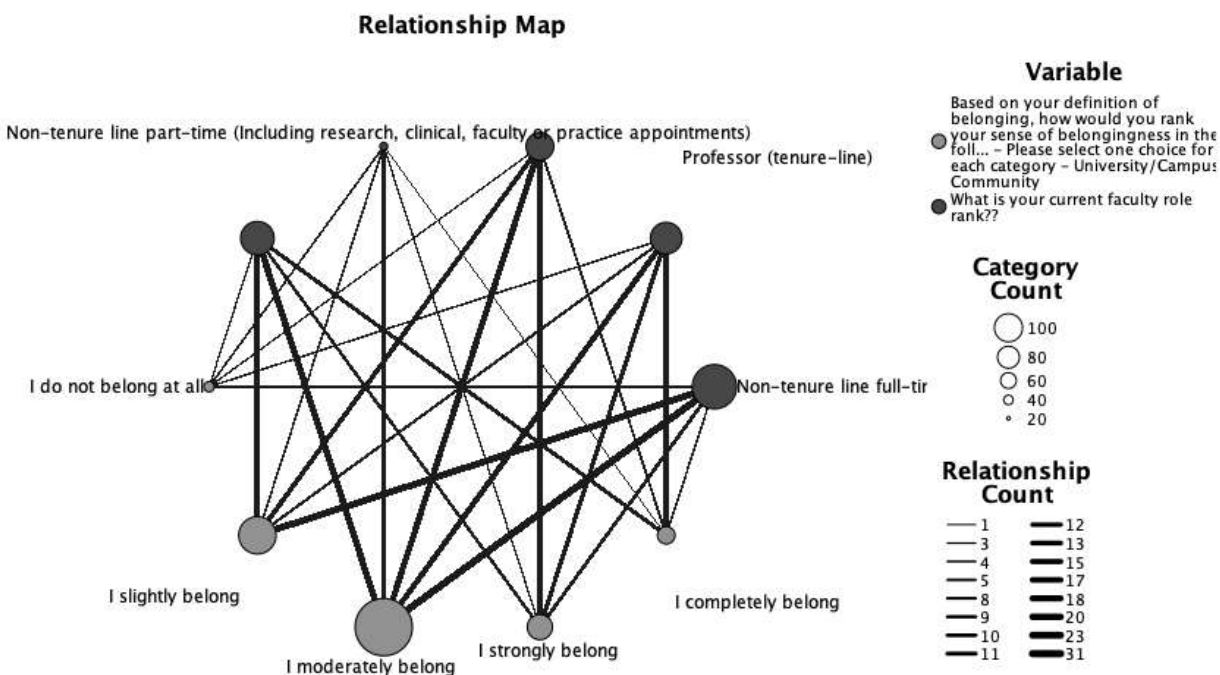
Non-tenure line part-time faculty members, including those involved in research, clinical work, or practice appointments (represented by the blue node), have connections to nodes ranging from *I slightly belong* to *I do not belong at all*. This indicates a more varied and potentially weaker sense of belonging among this group, likely due to their part-time or temporary affiliations with the institution.

In response to open-ended questions, faculty expressed that belonging generally encompassed tangible practices of support, mentorship, and valuing diverse voices as well as underlying psychological perceptions of membership, connectivity, and alignment within one's community. Six key themes emerged from faculty responses and are listed here in order of their prominence.

The first theme, *Having Opportunities to Contribute Meaningfully*, was mentioned by many faculty who expressed the desire to have opportunities to use their expertise, skills, and ideas to contribute to their departments and the university mission. Having their voices heard and their perspectives valued was important. Non-tenure line faculty wanted more opportunities to contribute. One respondent described belonging through meaningful contributions as "reciprocal attachment, consideration as part of whole." Another expressed the importance of "Being a valued member of a department. This means being asked to contribute to the department in some way that uses your expertise, whether in terms of teaching, research, or service." A third pointed out the importance of "Being able to contribute back to the group in meaningful ways; a sense of camaraderie."

For many faculty, belonging was grounded in the theme of *Interpersonal Relationships and Connections*. It was important to them to forge personal relationships and know their colleagues.

Social interactions and bonds were an important foundation. With the pandemic, some mourned the loss of those casual interactions that built community. One stated the importance of "Knowing that the people around you know who you are and what is important to you." Another faculty member stressed the importance of "Engaging with students and faculty to feel I am part of the community."

Feeling Like a Valued, Respected, and Supported Member of a Community, the third theme, was well supported, with many responses explicitly mentioning feeling valued, respected, included, supported, appreciated, acknowledged, etc. within their department, college, or the university community. There was an emphasis on reciprocal relationships, both giving and receiving support. One participant described "Identifying with a group and knowing they will 'have your back'...that you will be safe from criticism and emotional harm when you express opinions." For others, acceptance was key. One participant exclaimed that belonging means "Being able to be me, without judgment. An impossibility in an academic setting since I'm a WASP."

Some faculty discussed having alignment or common interests with the larger university community as an important component of belonging as part of theme four, *Shared Identity, Values, and Goals with the Community.* This encompasses shared visions, missions, and values in order to feel connected to the whole. One person noted that belonging meant "Feeling like people care about my participation and inclusion." A similar sentiment was echoed by other participants, who defined belonging as "Feeling that what I contribute and who I am are valued and influence others in the university community," and ""Feeling like faculty and the university value free speech, academic freedom, and diversity of thought." Shared identity, values, and goals looked like this for one participant, "The group contains me as an important cog in the wheel of its functioning and considers my needs and expertise in making decisions that affect the whole."

In the fifth theme, *Feeling Safe to Express Opinions*, faculty emphasized respect, inclusion, and psychological safety to share ideas openly as critical for them to feel comfortable asserting their perspectives and thereby fully belonging to their community. Faculty expressed the importance to be oneself, "That I don't need to change myself to fit within an expected or rewarded box." Participants also stressed the importance of "Equitable inclusion and open dialogue with proportional action to the voices included" and making sure "Everyone's voice is heard and passions are encouraged" as elements of belonging.

Within the theme of *Equity and Justice*, some faculty noted that belonging requires equitable treatment, policies, and practices that are fair and just. Belonging was hampered when biases or discrimination occurred. Faculty stressed the importance of "Having equal access to opportunities. Being rewarded the same for equal accomplishments." Participants also defined belonging as when "All faculty being included and their identities, voices, and experiences respected and valued" and "Inclusivity, awareness of exclusion of different individuals and groups, ensuring ALL belong, not just some individuals and groups."

Role-Related Findings
In the closed-ended questions (Figure 1), a stronger sense of belonging was associated with more permanent, full-time faculty roles, particularly those with tenure or tenure-track positions, while part-time or temporary faculty roles tended to have a more varied and potentially weaker sense of belonging to the institution or university community. In the open-ended questions, part-time, non-tenure track faculty expressed lower feelings of belonging compared to tenure-track faculty. They desired more inclusion in decision-making, equitable rewards/opportunities, and job stability.

Similarly, faculty working remotely or at branch campuses expressed more isolation and challenges connecting to the central university community. Newer faculty indicated more uncertainty navigating the university networks and politics to experience full belonging.

Discussion

In the closed-ended questions, there were differences among the sense of belonging reported by faculty of different ranks. Tenure-track professors were the most likely to indicate that they *completely belong* while full-time non-tenure line faculty were more like to report they *strongly* or *moderately* belong. Non-tenure line part-time faculty were most likely to indicate that they *slightly belong* or *do not belong at all*. These findings suggest a stronger sense of belonging is associated with more permanent, full-time faculty roles, particularly those with tenure or tenure-track positions. Those in full-time, non-tenure line faculty roles reported a significant, but somewhat lesser degree of belonging compared to tenure-track professors. This indicates a more varied and potentially weaker sense of belonging among this group, likely due to the nature of their affiliations with the institution. Part-time or temporary faculty roles tended to have a more varied and potentially weaker sense of belonging to the institution or university community. This finding is not surprising given that part-time and non-tenure line faculty reported a lack of access to shared governance, professional development, and other important opportunities and resources at the university (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014; Kezar, 2013; Layou et al. 2022).

In response to the open-ended questions, both full-time and part-time faculty sought opportunities to contribute meaningfully to the missions of their departments and the larger university. The ability to use unique expertise and skills was an important aspect of belonging that helped employees feel engaged, motivated, valued, included, and productive (Hodgkin 2008; Misra et al., 2021; Walton & Brady, 2017). Interpersonal relationships and connections, feeling valued, respected, and supported, and sharing identity, values, and goals with the larger academic community were important indicators of belonging for non-tenure line and tenure-track faculty alike. Connections and communities, as well as mentorships and close relationships, accounted for feelings of faculty well-being and were correlated with performance (Gonzales & Terosky, 2018; Hodgkin, 2008; Pifer & Baker, 2013). Contributing, collaborating, and cooperating with other members also bolstered a sense of belonging (Leary et al. 2013).

The ability to safely express options in an equitable environment were notable aspects of belonging. It was important for non-tenure line and tenure-line faculty to be *themselves* or *not be expected to change* at work (O'Meara, 2015; Terosky et al., 2014). While it was important to be authentic and feel free to express options, it was equally important that others were also able to do so in an inclusive environment. Unfairness and inequity were considered obstacles to belonging (Malisch et al., 2020), and equal access to opportunities and equal rewards for work were important (Misra et al., 2021; Walton & Brady, 2017).

Implications

The findings of this analysis hold significance for both academic institutions and individual faculty members, especially during a time of disruption. For institutions, understanding the drivers and consequences of belonging can inform policies, practices, and initiatives aimed at fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for faculty. On an individual level, insights into belonging can shed light on factors that contribute to job satisfaction, productivity, and overall well-being

among academic professionals. In light of our findings, it is important for faculty to have opportunities to make meaningful professional contributions to their institutions. It is important to look at both the interpersonal interactions as well as the role of the faculty position within the institution (Strayhorn, 2023).

Tenure-track and full-time faculty tend to have a stronger sense of belonging compared to part-time and non-tenure-line faculty, who often feel excluded from decision-making, professional development, and other key opportunities. Fostering belonging for all faculty, regardless of rank or position, is crucial for promoting faculty well-being, resilience, and professional identity development, especially during times of disruption. To increase belonging and reinforce professional identities, universities can invest in policies, practices, and programs that cultivate an inclusive culture, facilitate open communication, and address the unique belonging needs of diverse faculty members, including those in non-tenure-track roles.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research
The study produced rich and robust findings; however, some limitations persisted. The survey had a response rate of only 14% (280 out of 2004 faculty). While the respondents closely approximated the overall race and ethnicity demographics, a larger and more representative sample could provide more robust findings. In addition, a limitation is that this study was conducted at a single institution, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other academic settings with different cultures, policies, and practices. Last, this work aims to explore only a single moment in time, and it is known that belonging and professional identities tend to evolve over the course of one's career.

Future studies could aim for a higher response rate and a more diverse sample to increase the generalizability of the results. Incorporating additional qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could prove to be very rich in terms of in-depth stories that go beyond an open-ended survey question and would also allow for triangulation of the findings and provide further credibility of this work. If the desire were to establish transferability, replicating this study across multiple institutions would be the first step in further establishing these themes into a potential conceptual framework. If faculty were able to be followed throughout their careers, additional valuable insights could be gleaned regarding how their identity changed over time and what potential life events or organizational events served as catalysts for these changes.

Conclusion
Personally, and professionally, the pandemic was a challenging time for many faculty. For some, amongst the upheaval, there was also an opportunity to reevaluate professional values, professional identity, and belonging. Unsing a qualitative approach, this study found there were differences among the sense of belonging reported by faculty of different ranks, with established tenure-track professors reporting a stronger sense of belonging than non-tenure line and part time faculty. Faculty reported their sense of belonging was directly linked to having opportunities to make meaningful contributions, forging interpersonal relationships with students and colleagues, and feeling like a valued member of the community. Belonging was also associated with shared identity and goals, feeling safe to express opinions and views, and working in an equitable and just environment. These understandings have implications for individual faculty members and the institutions that support them.

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